Welcome to ‘Our Mentors, Our Students, Ourselves: Writing Memoirs and Festschrifths’,

This letter outlines our purpose and goals, gives directions, and frames the readings that are also linked or listed below. We conceived of the session as fostering “breathing room” for the production and exchange of reflective life writing, while also advancing the conference’s themes of exploring legacies, genealogies, origin stories, and narratives. We are glad you signed up!

The purposes are to provide models for feminist commemorative writing (in the required and recommended readings), to guide participants in both drafting a short piece of writing and in responding to peers’ drafts (via the writing prompts and workshop procedures), and to conduct a Creative Writing Program-style workshop in which to exchange drafts and reflect on the process (at the conference).

What to expect.

1. In advance please,

- Read and use the prompts and procedures below (adapt them to suit your own purpose and audience)
- Draft a 700-850-word piece (poetry and experimental forms are as welcome as prose)
- Read approximately 10 pages (popular and academic examples/analyses of feminist and other life writing)
- Submit by email your 700-850-word draft by June 1st (achrist@uh.edu)
- Organizers will then collate and send the collected work to the entire group. Ideally, we will read each writer’s piece before June 18. Nothing more is required at this time.
- N.b. You may, of course, revise up until we meet in Milwaukee.

2. In the workshop,

- Bring 3 copies of your own current draft.
- Leaders will very briefly outline the rationale and invite members to introduce themselves.
- The rest is a writing workshop. Participants will work in small groups. We will exchange and comment on the drafts of one or more peers, to ensure that each writer gets at least two readers per draft.
- In closing, we will discuss the unique problems and opportunities inherent in feminist life writing and in the academic memoir, as well consider the theoretical and practical implications of such writing. We will address such questions as “How is memoir regarded in the academy?” “What may be useful about such labels as ‘post-critical,’ ‘creative non-fiction,’ or ‘personal narrative?’ “Are memoir, advice, and commemoration feminist issues?” “How might we create space for celebrating our mentors in a climate that produces very few traditional festschrifths?” “Do we need a new genre for writing general advice to our (feminist, female?) students?”
Develop a response to one of these prompts, adapting as much as suits your needs, audience, and purpose:

- **“Mini memoirs”** Write about being a feminist academic now or at various stages in your career: as teachers and researchers; trailblazers, first-, second-, or third-wave feminists; as adjunct, tenured, tenure-track, and hopeful professors; as independent scholars and students. What do you remember as significant and what will these memories convey to others?

- **“Flash festschrifts.”** Write to commemorate your feminist mentors, organizations, institutions, book clubs, communities, or students. Write about early modern women artists, musicians, and authors in a different way than you do as a scholar. You have always wanted to celebrate these people, now is your chance.

- **Legacies.** Write to advise students (your own or hypothetical ones) on the feminist approaches to early modern studies that you have found useful, or invent a “commencement address” kind of speech for students, graduates, or junior faculty. Write about your relationship with the women writers you work on. What do you hope for the future of your field; what do you wish for junior women in the profession?

**Required reading**

1. This is a series of pithy pieces of advice and tips for Salon.com by such memoirists as Anne Lamott (*Operating Instructions, Grace Eventually*) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (*The Beautiful Struggle*). Kathryn Harrison advises, for example: “Know thyself. Lean toward discomfort.” We hope you find some inspiration here.

   http://www.salon.com/2013/01/20/salons_guide_to_writing_a_memoir/

2. This is the short introduction to *Changing subjects: the making of feminist literary criticism* by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Routledge, 1993), 1-3. The authors talk about the impetus to gather these pieces together: “a way of saying ‘I’ that is also a way of saying ‘we’” (1). We invite your responses about the relevance of institutional histories like this and whether we need a new installment.

3. This is a review of Susan Gubar’s 2011 collection, *True Confessions*. We assign it because it provocatively raises questions about the canon of “important women,” the intersections of the personal and the professional, and it also shows the reviewer’s relationship with a classic feminist text, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

   http://womenst.library.wisc.edu/publications/feminist-coll/FC_334_Bowles.pdf

3. Handout: **Peer Review Workshop Procedures** (1 page)
Peer Review Workshop Procedures.

Policies. The purpose of participating in a workshop is to hear an audience respond to your work. Consequently, we'll kick off the workshop, dividing writers into small groups. Groups will talk about the work's driving questions, its structure and form, the voice and persona of its author, and the work's overall effect on the readers, its audience. Only then will we give prescriptive feedback, the goal of which is to be empathetic to the author’s purpose. It’s not our job to re-write the text as we want it to be. Rather, our task is to understand the work for what it seeks to do and to help it do that effectively.

Submitter Guidelines

At the beginning of the workshop, writers should distribute copies of a text to others in their small groups. The submission should be typed, double-spaced in a standard 12-point font; its pages should be numbered, and it should not exceed 850 words (roughly 3 pages). You should include a frame, in which you briefly introduce the work (i.e., is it part of a larger project? are you preparing it for a specific occasion, conference, or audience? etc.) and identify any pressing questions you have for the group (e.g., I’m trying x, y, z strategy; is it working?). During your workshop, you will be discouraged from talking, especially from clarifying, explaining, or arguing. Just take notes. After the workshop is over, you can ask the group specific questions.

Reader Guidelines

Your job as a reader is to read carefully. Make notes in the margins. Point out how you interpret specific language. Celebrate useful metaphors and particularly vivid images. Compliment the music. Take a few moments to consider the overall structure of the work and its driving questions.

Commenting

Given the short time during which we have to work, we will focus our attention on providing verbal feedback to other writers in our group. Begin your comments with a simple, friendly description of what you believe the text was about. Not just a summary, but also a sentence or two that gestures towards the writer’s larger goals. After you describe the text, begin making comments (also friendly) that focus on things you liked about the text. Your critical comments (friendly!) should focus on questions you have about the piece. Conclude your comments with any answers to the author’s questions you haven't already addressed. Thank the author for sharing with the group. At the end of the workshop, all copies of the text, with or without handwritten notes, should be returned to the writer.
Suggested reading:


Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar, “Carolyn Gold Heilbrun: Important feminist literary critic and theorist who, as Amanda Cross, was also a much-loved writer of detective stories”


Gold, Barbara. Remarks for the Domina Illustris Panel. “How to Edit a Festschrift for a Friend with two other Friends and Remain Friends Throughout the Process” 4 pp. This is a PDF from a talk about the process of a commemorative project.


Miller, Nancy K. and Victoria Rosner, Guest Editors, S&F Online - Issue 4.2, Writing a Feminist's Life: The Legacy of Carolyn G. Heilbrun, 2006. This links to a number of excellent resources concerning Heilbrun and includes models for commemorative writing.


*New York Times* article about Carolyn Heilbrun’s early retirement

[http://www.itri.brighton.ac.uk/~Christy.Doran/Wellesley/Alum/heilbrun.html](http://www.itri.brighton.ac.uk/~Christy.Doran/Wellesley/Alum/heilbrun.html)