

# *HEAVEN*

*by* Emerson Whitney

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## A TEACHING COMPANION

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### CONTENTS

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Ground Rules & Guidelines . . . .	1
Discussion Questions . . . .	2
Classroom Activities . . . .	5
Ideas for Research Projects . . . .	8

## Ground Rules & Guidelines



*Heaven* is an adventurous, experimental, and generative text that transcends the boundaries of memoir and cultural and social critique. It is also a brave text: in the investigation of a central question about the origins of the author's selfhood and identity, it also juxtaposes challenging and sometimes traumatic personal memories alongside difficult and nuanced theories from feminism, social theory, and beyond. For this reason, this text challenges learners of all proclivities to find the material, embodied stakes in their own ideas and understandings of the world. That is also why this text is so productive for us as students and educators alike.

Many of the topics *Heaven* encroaches upon are difficult to talk about in any setting, but especially so in the classroom: addiction, abuse, mental health, gender identity, sexuality, trauma, and the potential and limits of self-awareness for younger people coming into their own. These topics are thematically charged and delicate from a purely intellectual and academic perspective; they are doubly so as we are also real people with our own experiences to process and work through on our own schedules.

Facilitating productive classroom conversations about these issues requires a balance of sensitivity, compassion, vulnerability, and mutual consent. You may begin by collectively establishing a set of agreed-upon ground rules, driven in part by your students, in consideration of students' safety, privacy, and intellectual encouragement. Here are some guiding questions to help start this process:

- What do we want to learn here? How will we accomplish this?
- What makes us feel safe, supported, and heard? How do we honor and acknowledge differences here?
- What are our different literacies around issues of gender identity? (For example: are we on the same page about respecting peoples' pronouns? Do we have the language to discuss gender identity beyond biological sex? What are harmful ways of talking about gender identity, and how do we avoid them?) What would it take to get us all on the same page and using the same language?
- What worries us when we have conversations about trauma or other challenging topics? How do we ensure that we all feel safe to speak, but not obligated to disclose our own stories? What do we do when we feel uncomfortable in this space?
- What do we expect from each other in regards to our own stories? What kinds of responses do we welcome, and which are never acceptable?

- What do we expect from our instructor? In what ways do we trust their authority to facilitate conversations around this text?
- How do we handle conflict, disagreement, and antagonism here? Can we establish a protocol that is fair and just to resolve these issues?
- How do we communicate and demonstrate respect and care for each other? How do we hold ourselves accountable for the goals we said we would accomplish together?

## Discussion Questions

### REPRESENTATIONS OF TRANSNESS

- What are ways transness is represented in mass media and popular culture? What about including trans-affirming stories, memoirs, and TV shows and movies (not just problematic representations)? What are common narratives, messages, and themes we see repeated in them (*for example: coming out, victimization, or medical transition narratives*)? Does *Heaven* do this, or something different?
- Whitney writes, "...the word trans will change in my lifetime, it's inevitable." (pg 64.) How did they arrive at this statement, and what accounts for the inevitability of this change?

### LIVING WITH THEORY

- Why are Whitney's memories interwoven with theoretical, "scientific," or academic perspectives? What kinds of insight are produced by this blending?
- What are critiques that we have heard about feminist theory, queer theory, or critical theory more broadly (in the media, in politics, or as students living in the world?) How do these critiques hold up against Whitney's use of theory in *Heaven*? How should we respond to these critiques, now that we've read this book?
- Whitney draws upon a long history of theories from a diverse set of thinkers, particularly those that respond to questions about gender, sexuality, and the body. What do their references in *Heaven* suggest about the ways theoretical ideas are contested, transformed, or invented over time and throughout contexts?

### EMBODIMENT

- What do the descriptions of the author's body illustrate? How do they respond to (or contradict) theorists' explanations for social or physical phenomena?
- List some moments in which the author describes their body. Now, consider how references to fleshy, physical sensations and observations in these passages are written in the context of memory, history, and genealogy. Why does writing about the body matter here--and what does this kind of writing do?
- Whitney describes how their meditation teacher realized "she was queer like an enormous feeling in her chest, yellow, and not knowing what to do," in a "portrayal of revelation happening inside her body" (pg 158.) What does Whitney mean when they write, "my understanding of the world had always stopped at the horizon of [my body]?" (ibid.)
- What is the relationship between an individual's body and the body politic--and the institutions which manage particular bodies? How does Whitney understand this relationship, as detailed in their own encounters with institutions like education, social work, medicine, or law?

## ORIGINS & CAUSALITY

- Why does *Heaven* spend so much time ruminating and recalling the encounters between mothers and their children? How do these reflections fit into the book's thematic questions about origins (the origins of ideas, discourses, identities, politics, etc?)
- What are common tropes, cliches, or mythologies we have heard about motherhood in our own lives, or recalled in Whitney's text? What are the consequences of these ideas?
- On pages 50-51, Whitney recounts a PhD student's research through the psychiatrist Robert Stoller's work about gender identity in the 1950s. What is Stoller's explanation about the origins of transness? How does this compare with discourses we hear about trans identities today, and what historical, cultural, or political developments account for these differences?
- What does Whitney mean when they write, "I grew up knowing fear as an inheritance of femininity" (pg 61)?
- Can we circumvent the question of causality when it comes to our identities? Why is causality (framed in questions like *what made you this way?*) so often questioned when it comes to identity, particularly non-normative sexualities and gender identities? Can we imagine alternative ways of framing identities in language without also inviting speculation about their origins?
- What is the "mythic place before influence, before trauma or whatever" described on page 129? Why is this place, as Whitney describes it, *mythic*?

## NARRATIVE, TIME, & TEMPORALITY

- This book includes memoiristic vignettes of Whitney's childhood, youth, and adulthood--but also includes historical voices, internet search results, and comments from colleagues reading the book's manuscript in the present. When and where does *Heaven* take place, which events are included in its narrative, and what impact does this kind of storytelling make upon you?
- How would you describe the genre of this book? Or, does it blend styles of writing? Why, and what does this experimentation accomplish?
- We generally imagine memoirs and autobiographies as chronological, linear stories. Why doesn't *Heaven* conform to this expectation? What possibilities does nonlinear storytelling afford storytellers of non-normative identities and backgrounds? What possibilities are realized for the reader?

## PATHOLOGIES & DIFFERENCES

- What does Whitney mean by the "anxiety of pathology" (pg 110)? What are places in the text where non-normative, nonbinary, or unclassifiable differences are pathologized? For example: *the description of the DSM's diagnostic criteria for "Gender Dysphoria"* (pg 108); *the categorization of special education and disability in education* (pg 106).
- How do you make sense of Whitney's summary of Eli Clare, who "marks white supremacy, ableism, anti-queer, and anti-transness as abuse in *response* to difference, not as abuse that *caused* the 'difference.'" (pg 23)? Do you see echoes of this explanation in Whitney's own experiences?

## *Classroom Activities*

### GALLERY WALK: WRITING ON THE BODY

Students write and share brief, paragraph-long vignettes about key memories in the history of their own bodies.

#### *Learning outcomes:*

- Learning outcomes:
- Practice writing embodied histories; explore the relationship between our senses, affects, and memories in language
- Contextualize our experiences by sharing and reading narratives with others
- Enumerate ways we are disciplined and subjectivized through our physical experiences in the world; account for our intersectional differences

#### *Procedure:*

1. This activity asks students to write personal, memoiristic vignettes about potentially sensitive subjects; as such, you may want to provide them an opportunity for informed consent before beginning. Advise them that they will share biographical scenes from their lives that will be shared anonymously with their peers, and that their pieces may be read and discussed by others. You may want to offer alternatives (like fictionalizing details, submitting abstract pieces, typing responses to anonymize handwriting, or including non-textual responses) for students who do not want to share their personal stories.
2. Give students a list of prompts (which locate specific embodied memories) to respond with a brief vignette recovered from their own memories. These may be written in class on sticky notes or small pieces of paper, or prepared as homework brought to class. For example:
  - What's your first memory at the doctor's office? What's a time you were uncomfortable at the doctor's office?
  - How did your kids talk about bodies in middle school?
  - Who first taught you about physical differences (sex, race, size, etc)? What did they say, or how did they show you?
  - When is a time you felt comfortable in your own skin? Happy? Content?
  - When was a time you felt awkward in your own body?
  - When was a time your body surprised you? When was a time your body betrayed you?
3. Collect these vignettes and post them around the room, organized by prompt. Ask students to spend some time walking around, reading their peers' responses, and considering how they compare to their own. *Optional: offer students the opportunity to annotate these vignettes with their own sticky note responses of affirmation, validation, or questions.*

4. Afterward, facilitate a discussion about the experience to debrief the gallery walk. We want to understand how social differences and discourses are experienced and expressed physically.

*Some guiding questions:*

- Did any of these responses surprise you? Why or why not?
- Did you identify with any of the responses here?
- Describe the experience of seeing our classroom's vignettes in their totality: all together, are there common themes? Major divisions between our responses? Do some of these responses seem anomalous, or especially particular?
- How do we account for differences in our experiences? What helps explain why we might have had divergent experiences at shared junctures in our lives, like puberty or early childhood?
- What questions does this activity help address? What new questions does it inspire?

*Distance learning alternatives: you may adapt this activity by using a live collaboration tool like Google Slides or Miro.*

## VISUALIZING DISCOURSES

Students investigate non-linguistic dimensions of discourses on social difference by re-interpreting and remixing images.

*Learning outcomes:*

- Understand how social and political discourses are interpreted and embedded into our sensory perceptions, starting with vision.
- Develop critical instincts and creative critique as observers of mass media, social media, and visual culture.

*Procedure:*

1. **Choose a theme for this assignment**, given your individual class and learning outcomes.  
*For example: gender, motherhood/parenthood, queerness, etc.*
2. **Build a visual archive** by inviting students to contribute magazine and newspaper clippings, advertisements, screenshots, or other visual artifacts that address the theme (directly or indirectly). You might ask the students to collect a particular quantity as an assignment before class; collect these as loose, and generally contextless, pieces.
3. **In small groups, redistribute these images and ask students to arrange them into clusters of subthemes or moods.** Students should choose their own organizational schema based

on their own perceptions of the aesthetic and compositional qualities of the images. (Students investigating gender identity may, for example, be inclined to organize the images into categories like “male,” “female,” “non-binary,” etc).

4. **Facilitate a brief discussion of these taxonomies.** Some guiding questions:
  - What visual details embedded within these images prompted us to construct these categories? What aesthetic, visual elements structure our imagination (the ways we clustered differences) about this subject?
  - Are these categories satisfying or dissatisfying to see on our desks/screens, or out in the world? Why? What is left out, or which possibilities are foreclosed when we see these categories?
  - Do we see (optically) a connection between these images and discourses (in speech and writing) about this subject? How are these discourses indexed in the image? How are discourses materialized in the world? What consequences do these discourses have on real people living out in the world?
  - What are alternatives to these discourses that we want to see in the world?
  - In our most utopian imaginations, what do we want this tableau to look like? How would we *visualize* this?
5. **Using art supplies or software, invite students to remix their piles into a collage that addresses their responses to the questions posed in step #4.** You might encourage students to experiment with color, composition, new source material, or other aesthetic interventions to re-visualize and rematerialize their vision board.
6. **Allow students to present their vision boards, alongside an explanation of their intentions and the limitations of their creations.**



# Research Projects

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Autoethnography is a genre within the social sciences and humanities that uses the researcher's memories, emotional responses, and subjective experiences to answer an empirical research question. *Heaven* is an example of a text that also blends autoethnographic, self-reflexive writing in the pursuit of a guiding question. Here, students treat their own biographies as subjects worthy of critical inquiry.

### *Learning outcomes:*

- Recover personal memory as a source material for a research question
- Formalize considerations of positionality, privilege, and our assumptions in the process of seeking and creating knowledge

### *Assignment:*

1. **Present students a topic, book or reading, or other prompt** that advances the learning outcomes of your own class and curriculum.
2. **Introduce autoethnography as a research methodology**, as well as the goals for the assignment. (For more resources, you can download a copy of *Teaching Autoethnography: Personal Writing in the Classroom*, available at the [University of Minnesota's Open Textbook Library](https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/263)\*). Some acknowledgements you might make:
  - Autoethnography is a form of writing that relies heavily on the subjective experiences, perceptions, and worldviews of the writer.
  - It is highly personal; thus, we strive for sensitivity, kindness, and openness when workshopping and sharing our work. We are here to evaluate our writing, not each others' experiences or choices.
  - In the process of describing our observations, memories, and experiences in language, we are also simultaneously interpreting and analyzing them; description is not a value-neutral activity.
  - Autoethnography can also be framed as journaling, diary-writing, or memoir--formats with which students may already be familiar and comfortable.
3. **Students formulate and choose a research question.** Through mind-mapping or outlining, **ask students to address a number of subtopics or themes** (say, three) that will help provide evidence for a clear thesis statement.
4. **Invite students to freewrite on each of their chosen subtopics**; they can set a timer for 10-20 minutes for each, for example. In their freewriting, they can recall and describe a

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\* <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/263>

memory, a conversation, a reaction to a piece of media or literature as they were consuming it, a series of internet searches or social media activity, or any other event that places them and their reactions at the center.

5. Using these fragments of freewriting, have **students code their own texts** with a highlighter or marginal notes, identifying further questions, themes, surprises, patterns, anomalies--anything that captures or sparks interest.
6. Students revisit their research question, their subtopics, and their own annotated autoethnographic writing to **build out a bibliography** of written sources as they would any other research paper. Depending on your class, you may set a requirement for the number or type of sources they will use to develop and support a research argument. Their autoethnographic writing also serves as one of their primary sources; you may also invite them to do additional self-reflective writing during the process.
7. **Ask students to draft a research paper that blends their traditional sources alongside evidence from their autoethnographic writing.**

### *Workshopping Opportunities*

You may choose to integrate collaborative workshops throughout this assignment, including the research question design, outlining, and autoethnographic and essay writing portions of the process. Some guiding questions for peer reviews and discussions of autoethnographic work:

- What are insights that you learned about this subjective from your peers' subjective experiences? What are new questions you have?
- What details about your peers' experiences surprised you? What context or understanding would you still like to discover?
- Do we understand the relationship between events, perceptions, and feelings in these pieces?
- Is it clear how these experiences are networked into the larger research question? What would strengthen the connection between subjective experience (the autoethnographic writing) and the other sources in the paper?
- How do we account for our embodied differences (say, gender identity, race and ethnicity, the neighborhood we live in, etc) in our own writings? Does this inform the questions we ask in our research, or the tools we use to answer those questions?
- How do we balance our subjective writing with the other sources in our bibliography? What analytic work does our autoethnographic writing provide in our interpretation or interrogation of the traditional sources?
- What kinds of insights are generated in this paper? How are these insights different from the ones derived from a traditional research assignment?
- How do we understand *Heaven* now that we've undertaken the challenging--and perhaps messy--endeavor of blending scholarship with memoir and memory?

## INTERGENERATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Students interview parents, guardians, and other formative figures about the conceptual ideas and themes in your class. Then, they compose an essay that summarizes the conversation, and the perceptual differences within their relationship.

### *Learning outcomes:*

- Put theory into practice through conversation with close kin; practice the act of translation from scholarly work into real life
- Consider the ethical implications of representing others, especially intimate others

### *Assignment:*

1. Ask students to write an essay about a key concept, theory, or idea from your curriculum or teaching plan. They'll write this essay by conducting an interview with a parent or other formative figure in their life (you may open up this assignment to include other individuals that are more readily accessible to some students, like older friends, mentors, former teachers, etc.)
2. Before conducting the interview, ask students to do some free-form writing about key moments from their relationship to this person. This might include memorable moments, conversations, or shared events that help address the prompt you've chosen; instruct students to write as many of the sensory details as possible, as well as the emotional and cognitive responses they had at the time.
3. Students translate these moments into open-ended, non-leading questions to hear how these events were experienced and remembered by their interviewees. Caution students not to reveal too much of their own perspective until at least halfway through the interview.
4. Students take notes about their interviewee's responses, and consider asking follow-up and clarifying questions.
5. Using their notes, students draft their essays. Some guiding questions you may include in your assignment:
  - What were the major differences in your respective imaginations of the scenes you discussed with your interviewee? What accounts for these differences?
  - How do these two perspectives (yours' and your interviewee's) help flesh out an understanding of the theme/topic/theory we are exploring in class?
  - What challenges did you encounter when you began narrating your interviewee's memories and experiences?
  - Would you feel comfortable sharing your essay with your interviewee? Why or why not?
  - What has this essay taught you about the difference between subjective experiences and shared reality?
  - What new questions do you have, now that you've conducted this interview?

“A forceful act of writing.”

—Eileen Myles

“An ‘account of oneself’ that questions, if not upends, the very idea of such a thing at every turn.”

—Maggie Nelson

“The book of deepest affections, a harrowing book, a bewitched book.”

—Ilya Kaminsky

“Elegantly poetic, beautiful, brutal, & wise. Heaven is a wonder.”

—Michelle Tea

“An incisive, nuanced inquiry into gender and body.”

—Kirkus Reviews  
(Starred Review)

“Surgical and beautiful, critically affirming as it reflects.”

—Arisa White

“Hundreds of years from now, readers can better appreciate this time and this nation through Emerson Whitney’s extraordinary lens.”

—Caconrad



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