

English 320

Memoir and Autobiography

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MWF 12:00-12:50
McCormack M02-0616

Office Hours: M 1:00-4:00
Wheatley 06/014

Course Description

The reasons anyone might want to read a book in which another person describes his or her own life in detail are hardly obvious. The psychological needs and inner strength that might lead someone to write about his or her life are perhaps easier to understand, but they are also historically conditioned, since they require the writer to believe in the idea of the independent self. Writers also balanced the need to be exceptional individuals with the need to be representative of a group.

In order to understand the development of autobiography, we will look at the circumstances under which life writing could become desirable to a marketplace of readers, as well as an object of literary art. In the service of a project of historical defamiliarization, we will try to get out of the framework of the present-day market, which is inundated with celebrity non-authors denuding their lives for a reading public whose main concern is whether the account is true.

While readers have sometimes turned to autobiographies for confessions or access to secrets, readers haven't always demanded "full disclosure." At some times in our history, they have turned to autobiographies for models to live by or follow ("if s/he became wealthy and powerful, maybe I can, too!"), for ethical guidance ("living by a code, not just listing rules"), and for hope that their lives will get happier someday ("it gets better"). They have read the accounts of despised figures, including criminals facing the gallows, in order to hear "their side of the story." They have read autobiographies in order to get primary access to history, as written from the "inside."

In this course, we will focus on American autobiographies because, for all the ways that American lives were constrained by powerful norms of behavior, these models were debated and contested, probably more than for people in other cultures. Americans were separated from their history (African Americans and Native Americans forcibly, European Americans usually more by choice), which created opportunities and pressures for self-

invention (and self-reinvention ... which could happen through the act of writing an autobiography, for example).

While (of course!) African American and European American texts do not fully represent the range of American life experiences, time pressures mean that we are going to focus mostly on these traditions. Some continuity is good, after all! We will look particularly at social components of identity-formation (class, race, gender, sexual identity, disability).

An assignment will invite you to identify selections from additional autobiographies for the class to read and discuss.

This class will require a lot of reading, with a substantial though not overwhelming amount of writing, both formal and informal.

Some Preliminary Guiding Questions for the Course

- What is life writing?
- What are the historical conditions under which an individual life would be worth writing about in a book? Who has had time and ability to keep a diary? Or bring a book to publication?
- Do autobiographies need to be in prose?
- Why did the author write this autobiography? What have been the classic reasons for writing or reading autobiography?
- How do autobiographers create a particular kind of self for the audience they imagine?
- How may the didactic intention common in many autobiographies shape what the writer decides to hide and reveal?
- If an autobiographical text has political purposes, do we reduce its importance by calling it an autobiography?
- How might commercial ambitions shape the way a writer represents his or her life?
- What in any given autobiography doesn't fit with the autobiographer's purposes?
- How does an autobiographer create an identity representative of a larger group? What is the price of creating a representative identity?
- What is the difference between narrative fiction and autobiography?

- If an autobiographer invents events in his or her life, is the work still autobiography or has it become fiction?
- What is the role of an amanuensis in the recording of a life? Are “as-told-to” narratives autobiographies? What about ghostwritten texts?
- Are journals or diaries autobiographies? Do journals hide or reveal things in the same way that memoirs or “as-told-to” narratives do?
- How do we evaluate autobiographies as literary art? What (or perhaps whose) aesthetic values help us to judge?

Book List

Sayre, *American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writing*, 0299142442

Franklin, *Autobiography*, Oxford, 978-0199554904

Douglass and Jacobs, *Narrative of the Life*, Modern Library, 978-0345478238

Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Dover, 978-0486285122

Alexander, *Creep*, Punctum, 978-1947447103

Course Reader (\$10)*

* A course reader with all required secondary texts will be distributed on the first day of class. You will need to have this reader, or a paper copy of the reading, with you on all class days when we are discussing anything that appears in it. (If you lose it, check with me for extras or go to the course wiki for a PDF.) I am selling these readers below what it cost me to produce them. I accept payment by circulating an envelope in class, and accept cash only via the honor system. No records of payment will be kept—so if you don’t have \$10, you clearly need the money more than I do.

Assignments

Build-the-Canon Exercise 10%

Presentation on Secondary Reading 10%

Short Writings 35%

Final Paper 30%

Class Participation 15%

Build-the-Canon Exercise

For the Assign-a-Reading Exercise, you will fill a blank space on the syllabus. The impulse behind this assignment is my recognition that the field of autobiography is vaster than any course can possibly cover. So I'm asking for your help to shape the course, at least a little.

Your task will be to "pitch" an autobiographical reading to the class. You can either select a reading from our anthology that we are not reading, or scan an excerpt from a book of your choice (no more than 20 pages). What made you choose this piece? What does it teach us about the author, about history, about life?

You will make a brief argument to the class about why we should read your selection. You must make your argument in two minutes. You could base your argument on what you see as the inherent merit of your text, or the interest that surrounds the autobiographer as a real person. Or you could argue that your text expands our sense of the autobiographical genre. Or you could argue that your text echoes and complements our course texts.

In preparation for this assignment, you will name your text well in advance by filling out a webform. (This is in order to prevent another person from picking the same text.)

Since you cannot say much in two minutes, you will also produce a short written paper about the text, following criteria to be handed out later.

The class will vote on three texts (no more than 20-30 pages) that we will read collectively near the end of the term. The winners will get extra credit.

Presentation on Secondary Reading

Because autobiography may seem so directly self-expressive as to preclude criticism and interpretation, I have assigned numerous readings that offer theoretical mediations of our primary texts. With two or three other members of the course, you will hold one in-class discussion of these secondary materials. You'll be encouraged to debate the readings in a sort of "fishbowl" format, summarizing the reading but also staking positions toward the secondary sources (for example, taking "for" and "against" stances, or arguing about the strengths and limitations of the particular approach taken by the critic). These discussions will generally take place on Fridays.

Short Writings

You will write several exploratory quizzes in class. These quizzes are not "trick question" or multiple-choice; instead they will pose open-book questions, where the intention is to get discussion started. These will be collected no later than 10 minutes after the start of class, and no late quizzes may be taken. These will not be "pop" or surprise quizzes. At the class session before one in which a quiz will be assigned, you will be notified.

At other times, you may be asked to write short (1- to 2-page) responses to specific topics at home.

There will be about 10 quizzes and 2 short responses.

For this part of your grade, I will average your grades over the short writing assignments, dropping the two lowest grades.

Final Paper

Further guidance will be provided later in the semester for the final paper. You will have the option to write a critical essay of 10 pages about one or more of our course authors, informed by our secondary sources, and situating your author(s) in historical context. Alternatively, you will have the option to begin your own autobiography. Knowing that the autobiographer begins by recognizing that his or her life could be viewed as raw material for a substantial piece of writing, you might begin thinking about what you plan to build on. What methods of record-keeping do you have: diaries? photographs? recordings? Think about the form this writing might take, looking at our readings as models or counter-models. If you choose this option, you will also need also to write an essay justifying your choice of approach.

Attendance

Attendance is required and will be factored into your final grade. This is not a distance-learning course. Your presence is essential to making this course a success. At the same time, I am aware of the challenges that can come up for attending. COVID means that illness, whether to you or those close to you, can happen at any time. Even with all precautions in place, disruptions can arise. If further disruptions take place, we will discuss making adjustments to the course. Your health and safety is our first priority.

You will not be penalized for missing class due to an excused absence:

- COVID-related (positive test and quarantine, or caring for a loved one due to COVID-19);
- other illness, or a medical condition such as pregnancy.

You are expected to uphold academic integrity in reporting absences and are expected to notify me as soon as possible in the event of these types of absences. Absences due to other reasons may sometimes be excused at the discretion of the instructor; documentation will be requested.

While you will not be penalized for missing class due to an excused absence, you are expected to be responsible for materials discussed in class, and to turn in all written assignments in a timely manner. In-class quizzes and activities generally cannot, however, be made up.

If you have more than three unexcused absences, your final grade will be reduced by one-third of a letter grade for every additional class you miss.

Class Participation

Your active participation in our class discussions is essential. Active participation means many different things, all of which are necessary to the success of a discussion. Some participation is verbal: volunteering the insights you have developed from your reading, citing passages from the text relevant to an ongoing discussion, introducing new wrinkles on an argument, posing questions about the week's lectures and texts, reading a passage aloud when the instructor asks you to do so—these are just a few of the verbal forms of participation that contribute to an ongoing conversation.

Other forms of participation are no less indispensable to a successful discussion: listening intently to the instructor and to your classmates, quietly signaling your support for others as they speak, and looking actively engaged in the class are all valid forms of participation.

It is to be expected that participants in this class will, at different times, do all of these things: that those students who tend to be shy take the occasion to speak when asked to volunteer insights from your reading, to offer their answers when asked about a quiz question, or to read passages aloud when the instructor asks; and that those students who tend to be more loquacious also actively listen to others, and respect the uses of silence, which can be a time for others to gather their thoughts.

In other words, you do not have to speak in class frequently in order to do well in this part of the course. You do need, however, to refrain from doing things that hinder the success of class discussion: texting, listening to music, surfing the web, etc. If you are late for class, enter as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. Cell phones should be muted. Refrain from reading newspapers or any texts that do not relate to this course during class time.

Please come to class with all necessary materials, especially the text. You must print out the texts from the wiki and bring them to class; please do not read them off a computer screen, though tablets and Kindles are ok. I would prefer that you not use a computer with a keyboard at all, but if you must do so for a learning-related reason such as a disability, then you should sit along the wall so that you do not distract the people sitting behind you.

If you engage in uncivil behavior, such as making inappropriate comments to your professor or fellow students in the classroom, out of the classroom, or via e-mail or social networking sites, you can be referred to the Chair of the English Department for sanctions that can include the lowering of your course grade. You can also be referred to the Dean of Students.

One final note: In college, debate is not only expected, but valuable in and of itself. This course calls for tolerance and patience with our writers as well as with another as we approach texts that are often designed to incite controversy and debate. The possibility of intellectual exchange depends on a respectful relationship with one another.

Disability Accommodation

Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 offer guidelines for curriculum modifications and adaptations for students with documented disabilities. Students may obtain adaptation recommendations from the Lillian Semper Ross Center (617-287-7430). They must present these recommendations to each professor by the end of the add/drop period.

**** A note on Academic Integrity ****

Academic integrity is central to the mission of this institution. Without honest effort, a learning community has no substance or validity. All students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty.

I am genuinely interested in hearing you articulate your perspectives; my job—maybe my principal job—is to help facilitate the development of your critical point of view and its expression. Plagiarism distresses me since it prevents me from doing my job. As defined by the University, plagiarism is “An act of academic dishonesty which can include actions such as presenting another writer’s work as your own work; copying passages from print or internet sources without proper citation; taking ideas from the internet, modifying them, and presenting them as your own; or submitting the same work for more than one course.” If you plagiarize, you will fail this course. Plagiarism cases can be referred to the Chair of the English Department. Also note that plagiarism can result in further academic sanctions such as suspension.

I have related but somewhat different concerns about ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence technologies such as Google Bard. These are exciting, ever-changing technologies—and we’ll talk about using them. But so-called “Artificial Intelligence” platforms also interrupt the slow but irreplaceable process of learning to read and write well. There may be a place for AI in gaining a synoptic overview of a lot of new information—though you do so at your own risk, as these platforms may generate misinformation or outright fabrications. In these cases, you’d usually be better served to consult peer-reviewed sources (even Wikipedia, which undertakes processes of human review far superior to those for ChatGPT and the like). You may not use ChatGPT to generate your written work, which is a violation of Academic Honesty. If you use Generative AI on an assignment, I ask that you include a note explaining that you did so—and explaining how. Failing to do so will result in a failing grade on the assignment, just as if you had plagiarized.

Schedule

Week One

W 9/5	Course Introduction
F 9/7	Two Brecht poems about himself (reader); essays by Gusdorf, Kazin, Mansell (reader)

Week Two

M 9/10 from Rowlandson (in Sayre 42-62); from Sewall (Sayre 62-68)
 W 9/12 from Edwards (Sayre 125-138); from Ashbridge (Sayre 99-124)
 F 9/14 Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Stages of Self" (reader)

Week Three

9/17 Franklin, Part One
 9/19 Franklin, Part Two
 9/21 Daniel Shea, "Franklin and Spiritual Autobiography"

Week Four

M 9/24 Franklin, Part Three
 W 9/26 Franklin, Part Four
 F 9/28 Mitchell Breitwieser, "The Demonstration of Character"

Week Five

10/1 Instructor at conference at the Obama Institute (Germany). Meet with your
 Co-Presenters if you haven't already presented.
 10/3
 10/5 Careers Workshop (attendance taken)

Week Six

M 10/8 Holiday; no class
 W 10/10 Byrd (reader); Burroughs (238-49)
 F 10/12 Barnum (338-49); criminal confessions (TBA)

Week Seven

M 10/15 Black Hawk (Sayre 261-72)
 Short Exercise Due: Autobiography in the Third Person
 W 10/17 Equiano (reader)
 F 10/19 Houston Baker, "Equiano"

Week Eight

M 10/22 Douglass, Preface through Chapter 8 (3-60)
 W 10/24 Douglass, Chapter 9 through Appendix (61-119)
 F 10/26 Jacobs, Preface through Chapter 11 (125-201)

Week Nine

M 10/29 Jacobs, Chapter 12 through 28 (202-303)

W 10/31 Jacobs, Chapter 29 through Appendix (304-375)
F 11/2 Hazel Carby, "Slave and Mistress"

Week Ten

M 11/5 Johnson, Chapter 1 through 7 (1-51)
W 11/7 Johnson, Chapter 8 through 11 (51-100)
F 11/9 Roger Rosenblatt, "Life as Death"

Week Eleven

M 11/12 Veterans' Day Holiday
W 11/14 Build-the-Canon Presentations (BTC)
F 11/16 Bourne (in Sayre 459-71); Timothy Barrett, "De-Individualising Autobiography"

Week Twelve

M 11/19 Woolf (reader)
W 11/21 TBA
F 11/23 No Class; Thanksgiving Week

Week Thirteen

M 11/26 BTC #1
W 11/28 Lorde (reader pages 168-222)
F 11/30 Lorde (reader pages 223-295)

Week Fourteen

M 12/1 Alexander, *Creep*, 15-71
W 12/3 Alexander, *Creep*, 73-118
F 12/5 Alexander, *Creep*, 119-167

Week Fifteen

M 12/8 BTC #2
W 12/10 BTC #3
F 12/12 Last Day of Class