

**American Autobiography**  
ENGL 480/580 (Seminar)  
Spring 2010  
Meeting: M 1-4 in LIB 211

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**Course Description from the Registration Catalog**

Exploration of twentieth-century American autobiography. Focus on social and theoretical issues such as class, genre, language, marginality, philosophy of identity, constructions of the self, and the implicit contract between autobiographers and readers. Possible authors include Henry Adams, Gertrude Stein, Vladimir Nabokov, Malcolm X, Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, [Frank McCourt,] and Joe Loya (post-1900). Prerequisite, three courses in literature. Open to juniors and seniors only.

**Expanded Course Description**

In a body of national literature whose seminal texts include *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Emerson's "Self-Reliance," *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and Whitman's *Song of the Self*, the argument can certainly be made that autobiography is *the* most American of genres. Not that all of these texts are autobiographies, but they all demonstrate the autobiographical impulse. As a nation of immigrants, also central to American literature are questions of identity, such as those found in texts that challenge monolithic notions of what it means to be an American. In this seminar we will engage deeply with all of these issues. We will also explore the underlying philosophical ideas implicit in some of postures taken by the texts and authors that we will discuss in the course. As a genre, autobiography brings to the surface key debates in literary theory as well: What is the status of the text? When reading a text must we assume "the death of the author"? Is genre just an arbitrary classification scheme—or, perhaps, a necessary fiction? The study of American life writing sharpens one's sense of the importance of these oft-taken-for-granted questions. And thus in unexpected ways, deep immersion in the texts of American autobiography that we'll be reading in this course molds us into more perceptive readers and thinkers.

**Course Objectives**

In this course we will:

- Read, discuss, research, and write about twentieth-century American Autobiography.
- Work toward a definition of autobiography as a genre.
- Engage philosophical issues, such as those revolving around questions of identity.
- Study and debate issues in the field.
- Improve our research and writing skills in the process.

### Course Requirements and Grading Breakdown

Oral Presentations	25%
Annotated Bibliography (10 entries)	10%
Final Paper (15-18pp)	40%
Class participation and attendance	25%

### Required Texts

Strunk, William, and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999. ISBN: 020530902X.

Weston, Anthony. *A Rulebook for Arguments*. 4th edition. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2009. ISBN: 9780872209541.

Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999 [1918]. ISBN: 9780198283694.

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Grove Press, 2005 [1993]. ISBN: 0802141676.

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008 [2007]. ISBN: 978-1594483295.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage International, 1989 [1976]. 0679721886.

Loya, Joe. *The Man Who Outgrew His Prison Cell : Confessions of a Bank Robber*. New York: Rayo, 2005 [2004]. ISBN: 0060508922.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Vintage, 1989 [1951, 1966]. ISBN: 0679723390.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Brown : The Last Discovery of America*. New York: Viking, 2002. ISBN: 01420.00795.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Days of Obligation : An Argument with My Mexican Father*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1992. ISBN: 01400.96221.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory : The Education of Richard Rodriguez : An Autobiography*. New York: Dial Press, 2005 [1982]. ISBN: 0553382519.

Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Vintage Books. New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1933]. ISBN: 067972463X.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy : (American Hunger) : A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1998 [1945]. ISBN: 0060929782.

X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: One World Books, an Imprint of Random House, 1992 [1964]. ISBN: 9780345376718.

### Recommended Texts

Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9th ed. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009. ISBN: 9781413033908.

Lunsford, Andrea A., Paul Kei Matsuda, and Christine M. Tardy. *The Everyday Writer*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. ISBN: 9780312594572 (plastic comb).

### A Note on Text Editions

You must purchase all Required Texts for the course. Unfortunately, I cannot allow anyone to use (exclusively) an online version of any course text. (The principle difficulty is that

this leaves you without an identically paginated—to the edition that the rest of the class is using—copy of the text with which to follow along in class. What's more, it inhibits your engagement with the text if you are unable to write in the margins as you read the text.) For the same reason do try to purchase the particular edition of each text that I have indicated above — the alternate page numbering alone of another edition can impair your ability to follow along and fully participate in class discussion. That said, if you have an alternate edition of the text, bringing it as a supplement to the edition that we are using in the class is a great idea and can greatly enrich our discussion of the text.

### **Books and Films on Course Reserve**

I have placed the following texts on two-hour reserve at the Daniel Burke Library.

#### Writing Books:

*A Writer's Reference* by Diana Hacker

#### Films on Reserve at the Media Library:

*Malcolm X* (2000) BP223.Z8 .L5762 2000

*Vladimir Nabokov* (BBC 2004) PG3476.N3 Z9155 2004

*Smoke Signals* (1997) PN1997 .S558 2000

### **Electronic Course Reserves**

Over the course of the semester I may place new materials on electronic course reserve through the campus library. These materials will be required reading. Whenever an electronic reserve reading—indicated by the abbreviation (E)—appears on the Course Schedule of readings, print it out and bring it with you so that you can follow along in class when we discuss the reading.

### **Readings (Secondary Criticism) On Electronic Reserve**

Bibliography (In Order assigned on course Syllabus):

- Wallach, Jennifer Jensen. "Building a Bridge of Words: The Literary Autobiography as Historical Source Material." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 29.3 (2006): 446-61.
- Butte, George. "I Know That I Know That I Know: Reflections on Paul John Eakin's "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?"" Vol. 13. Ohio State University Press, 2005. 299-306.
- Eakin, Paul John. "Selfhood, Autobiography, and Interdisciplinary Inquiry: A Reply to George Butte." Vol. 13. Ohio State University Press, 2005. 307-11.
- Williams, William Appleman. "Henry Adams and the Education of America." *Nation* 234.9 (1982): 266-69.
- Pardini, Samuele F. S. "The Electric Education of Henry Adams: Inventing the History of Technology." *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 24.1 (2007): 21-35.
- Adams, Timothy Dow. "The Mock-Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas." *American Notes & Queries* 16.1 (1977): 10.
- Bloom, Lynn Z. "Gertrude Is Alice Is Everybody: Innovation and Point of View in Gertrude Stein's Autobiographies." *Twentieth Century Literature* 24.1 (1978): 81.

- Young, Robert. "The Politics of Reading Richard Wright: Black Boy as Ideological Critique." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 29.4 (2005): 694-701.
- Butler, Robert. "Seeking Salvation in a Naturalistic Universe: Richard Wright's Use of His Southern Religious Background in *Black Boy* (American Hunger)." *Southern Quarterly* 46.2 (2009): 46-60.
- Van Horne, Winston A. "From Sinners to Saints: The Confessions of Saint Augustine and Malcolm X." *Journal of Religious Thought* 43.1 (1986): 76.
- Eakin, Paul John. "Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography." *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New Century Views (New Century Views). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993. 151-61.
- Anderson, Quentin. "Nabokov in Time." *New Republic* 154.23 (1966): 23-28.
- Fogarty, Robert S. "In Search of Memory." *Antioch Review: Antioch Review, Inc*, 2003. 197. Vol. 61.
- Shapiro, Elliott H. "Authentic Watermelon: Maxine Hong Kingston's American Novel." *MELUS* 26.1 (2001): 5.
- Madsen, Deborah L. "Chinese American Writers of the Real and the Fake: Authenticity and the Twin Traditions of Life Writing." Vol. 36. University of Toronto Press, 2006. 257-71.
- Rivera, Tomás. "Richard Rodriguez' Hunger of Memory as Humanistic Antithesis." *MELUS* 11.4 (1984): 5-13.
- Rose, Shirley K. "Metaphors and Myths of Cross-Cultural Literacy: Autobiographical Narratives by Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, and Malcolm X." *MELUS* 14.1 (1987): 3-15.
- Ferszt, Elizabeth. "Richard Rodriguez: Reluctant Romantic." *Early American Literature* 43.2 (2008): 443-52.
- Milian Arias, Claudia M. "Brown Is the Color of Philosophy: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez." *Nepantla: Views from South* 4.2 (2003): 269-82.
- DeNuccio, Jerome. "Slow Dancing with Skeletons: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*." *Critique* 44.1 (2002): 86.
- Slethaug, Gordon E. "Hurricanes and Fires: Chaotics in Sherman Alexie's "Smoke Signals" And "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven."." *Literature Film Quarterly* 31.2 (2003): 130.
- Avni, Sheerly. "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind." *Salon.com*.8/25/2004 (2004): 4pp (when printed) pp. Oct. 6, 2009  
<<http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2004/08/25/loya/print.html>>.
- Epstein, Helen. "America's Prisons: Is There Hope?" *New York Review of Books* 56 (10).June 11, 2009 (2009): 8pp. (when printed) pp. October 6, 2009  
<<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22741>>.
- Deresiewicz, William. "Fuku Americanus." *Nation* 285.17 (2007): 36-41.
- Riofrio, John. "Situating Latin American Masculinity: Immigration, Empathy and Emasculation in Junot Díaz's *Drown*." *Atenea* 28.1 (2008): 23-36.

### Course Website

No course website is available at this time. If one is made available later in the semester, you will be given instructions on how to enroll in the site.

## Paper Formatting

All assignments handed in are to be in 12 point font, double-spaced, and paginated. As should go without saying, use normal margins. In the upper left-hand corner should appear, single-spaced, your name, the course number, and the date—each having its own line. Each paper should have a title. Center the title so that it will stand out better.

Use MLA style citation: (<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/printsources.html>). MLA style is compatible with the Hamilton College Style Sheet, which provides additional, indispensable information: (<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/style>). All papers must have a Works Cited.

(You can also use as your guide the model MLA-formatted student paper in the “MLA Documentation” section of Lunsford’s *The Everyday Writer*. These model papers clearly demonstrate everything from the upper left-hand corner layout to what the bibliography should look like. They also demonstrate such principles as organization of the paper and the method and style of writing literary criticism.)

Buy a stapler. Any paper that you hand in should be stapled together in the upper left hand corner. Unstapled sheets get lost, and this may cause me to assume that you have only written half a paper.

**Assignments must be handed in *in class* on the day that they are due.** Late assignments lose one letter grade for each day that they are late. Keep copies of all your work.

Expect work you submit to be shared with other class members for peer editing, group projects, and/or class discussion. Student papers might also be shown to other instructors, writing advisors, and the like. I will ask your permission first if using your work as a model paper to show students in other courses.

A word about content: your paper should offer your own unique ideas, insights, and arguments. Don’t just repeat what we discussed in class. You can start with a topic that we discussed in class but your thesis must be your own. It should present the reader with *your* argument. This is one of the key differences between class discussion (or even different types of writing, such as reading responses or pre-discussion notes) and the writing of a formal paper. Good class discussions are those in which everyone engages with what their fellow classmates have said in class. In a formal paper, the way to engage with the larger scholarly and other conversations about the text is through citation. In class discussion our ideas often merge together. In a formal paper, particularly of literary criticism, written sources are usually privileged over oral ones. Generally, you will want to err on the side of caution by citing any sources that have directly influenced your own thinking. But bear in mind that in the MLA style only works that are quoted from or directly referred to in citation form should be included in the Works Cited (as opposed to a Bibliography) at the end of the paper.

In your formal papers you will want to cite and interpret primarily passages from the literary text that you are writing about, and secondarily from sources such as academic journals in the field. Thus, the most compelling—not to mention most original—papers tend to explore topics and themes beyond those covered in class. That said, bear in mind that in this class you will always be writing about a particular literary text, and this will impose some natural boundaries on the both the scope of the paper and your choice of paper topic.

As experienced writers, you already know that the secret to writing success is to start early. If you wait until the night before a paper is due before committing anything to paper, it will invariably not be a very good paper. Also know that you do not have to wait until we finish discussing a text in class before you can start writing about it. Rather than relying on class

lecture for your ideas, read the text on your own and start writing about it early. You can then use class discussion of the text as a tool to refine your thinking about what you have already written in drafts of your paper.

### **Oral Presentations**

On the first day of class you will sign up for a date on which to give your oral presentation. Your presentation topic will be on whatever text and secondary reading(s) (critical essays) are assigned for that day in the course reading schedule. We will spend the first 75 minutes of each class discussing the primary text, followed by a 15 minute break. Upon convening again, that day's presenter will give us a 20-30 minute presentation on any secondary readings for that day. We will spend the remainder of the class session discussing the material from the presentation and how it informs our reading of the text. Bringing in additional historical, biographical, and other contextual information that would inform our reading of the text would also be helpful. Presenters who wish to do so should feel free to avail themselves of the computer in the classroom for showing images or slides on PowerPoint, and so forth.

Presenters should also bring a **1-2 page handout** outlining the main points of their presentation, the argument made in the critical essay(s), their evaluation of the critical essay(s), and so forth. Bring a copy for everyone in the class, including me.

### **The Final Paper**

Your final paper will be 15-18 pages of literary criticism on one of the autobiographies read in class. You will choose which text you most want to write about, **but** you cannot choose the text on which you did your presentation. This is a research paper, and you are expected to cite other scholars in addition to the primary text. The week before Spring Break an annotated bibliography is due. The annotated bibliography will consist of critical essays about the primary text that you will be writing your final paper on. You will not be required to cite all of the articles in your annotated bibliography in the final paper itself. But you will most certainly cite the most appropriate essays. Strive to situate your paper in the academic conversation about the text that you are writing about. (Having researched the topic and read the secondary criticism in compiling your annotated bibliography, you will have a good sense of how to situate your own arguments and enter the academic conversation about the text.)

### **A Note on Evaluation**

You might find the following breakdown helpful in orienting your expectations about what letter grades represent on all assignments in this course:

A—excellent overall

B—good with some excellent aspects

C—adequate

D—mostly adequate with some unacceptable aspects

F—unacceptable overall

### **Class Participation**

This is a reading, writing, and discussion seminar, not a lecture course. Come to class prepared to talk about the text. Read the text closely, engaging in mock dialogue with the text as you read. Do so and you will always come to class brimming with questions, observations, and

arguments about the reading to share with the community of literary critics, readers, and writers that the class will provide.

Note that the model of class discussion that we are striving for is one in which you engage not only with the readings, but also with each other's ideas. Keep in mind that mere volubility is no substitute for apt, substantive, and well thought-out comments. In fact, since there is seldom enough time to do justice to each text or topic, brevity is often as important as clarity and precision whenever speaking to the rest of the class. That said, most students speak too little rather than too much. What we will strive for in this course is vibrant and robust class discussion in which everyone is fully engaged and participating.

I may occasionally require that you write 150-200 word pre-discussion notes to hand in before class. Or I may ask you to bring to class one or two discussion questions about the reading. In-class writing (such as impromptu reading responses or group projects) might also be assigned. And sometimes you may be asked to prepare a brief presentation (either for later in the class, or for a subsequent class), either individually or in small groups.

As a seminar, attendance is critical. The first absence will not be counted against you but all subsequent absences will negatively impact your grade in the course. The **free absence should** easily cover medical, family, or other emergencies in most cases, so there is no need to present the instructor with a medical note for absences. In the event of an extended absence due to illness, a family emergency, or the like, you should notify the Registrar's Office, which will in turn notify all of your professors about your situation. *Missing a total (cumulative, not just consecutive) of **three weeks** or more of class constitutes a failing grade in the course.* All students are responsible for announcements made in class as well as material covered in class. So if an absence is unavoidable, make arrangements with another student to find out what you missed in class.

Tardiness and leaving class early are disruptive to your fellow students. Realize that either may be counted as a full absence, particularly if the problem becomes excessive over the course of the semester. If you absolutely cannot complete the class without leaving for a drink of water, to use the restroom, or whatever, I only ask one thing of you: don't re-enter the classroom. Instead, in consideration of your fellow students, quietly collect all of your things and take them with you when you leave. This will likely be counted as an absence.

As a discussion class, open laptops are not allowed. Cell phones should be silenced and put away before class and may be confiscated for the duration of the class if used (including for texting) during class.

### **Office Hours and Email**

I'd much rather see you and get to know you in person than as an email. As such, I encourage you to take full advantage of my office hours, whether for simple queries or more substantive questions and discussion. Email is a poor substitute for live interactions, which are both more fun and more productive. (And of the two, only office hours are appropriate for discussing paper ideas and thesis statements.) Feel free to drop by without an appointment anytime during scheduled office hours.

### **Documentation and Plagiarism**

Obvious cases of academic misconduct such as plagiarism, cheating, or collusion constitute violations of the Hamilton Honor Code. In such cases the student will be referred to the Dean of Students.

A few words about plagiarism and documentation might be instructive. Though there are gray areas as to when one should cite and when a paraphrase is adequate, we all recognize blatant plagiarism when we see it. As for the gray areas, cite your sources. That is the simplest advice I can give you, and the hallmark of scholarly work. We all stand on the shoulders of giants; we all benefit from the ideas of others. Many of our best ideas are common knowledge, societally and globally shared. It is hard to imagine an idea that does not owe something to someone else's brilliant thoughts too. A class like this is partly about finding your own voice. When you write about the great ideas that others have undoubtedly thought before you, you should do so in your unique voice. If your great idea (or your agreement with some great idea, or the realization that somebody else has stolen your idea before you even thought of it) was inspired by a passage in a book you just read two days ago you will have to be more mindful of your wording. Your thinking and writing should be your own: make sure it hasn't been supplanted by the thought and phrasing of the book's author. **When in doubt, cite.** If your paraphrase is not clearly in your own words and voice—perhaps because the kernel of truth you wish to glean gets lost as you deviate from the original wording—then cite your source.

Documentation is particularly important when using online sources. Academic journals accessed online need to be cited. Ideas taken from other online sources also need to be cited. As information available online ranges so widely from the reliable to the utterly unreliable, it is particularly important that you offer complete transparency as to your online sources. In addition to duly crediting your sources, proper documentation allows readers to evaluate the strength and reliability of the evidence that you are providing. Papers that rely excessively on superficial web searches (such as simply paraphrasing websites that come up on a Google Search) are likely to receive a very low grade. Papers that engage in such shoddy scholarship without citing their sources are even more at risk.

### **Writing Center and Writing Resources**

The Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center is an academic support service available to all Hamilton College students. The Writing Center is an indispensable resource whenever writing papers for this course. In addition to a library of helpful writing books, the Writing Center offers one-on-one assistance with writing. Check their website (<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing>) for hours, policies, and contact information. I also encourage you to take advantage of the extensive writing resources available through the Writing Center website. Here is one good starting point: ([http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/tips\\_guides.html](http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/tips_guides.html)).

Another indispensable resource is the Hamilton College Library. In addition to print resources, many literary resources are available online. To explore some of these, click on “Academic Search Premier” or “LexisNexis Academic” from the library's homepage (<http://onthehill.hamilton.edu/library/home.html>).

### **Special Accommodations**

If you have a documented disability requiring academic adjustments or accommodations please bring me your documentation and speak with me during the first two weeks of class.

### **Course Schedule**

The date that an item appears on the syllabus is the date that it is **due in class**. *Email submissions are not accepted without the prior approval of the instructor*, which will only be granted in extenuating circumstances. Readings are sometimes referred to by their title, and



sometimes just by author name. “(E)” designates readings on electronic course reserve that are not critical essays.

- Week 1      Introduction to American Autobiography  
 1/18      **Sign up for Presentations**  
             “Student Questionnaire” (E)
- Week 2      Theories of Autobiography  
 1/25      **Weston** pp. 1-7, 59-79  
             e-reserve: Wallach; Butte; Eakin “Reply to George Butte”
- Week 3  
 2/1      *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907, 1918)  
             e-reserve: Williams; Pardini
- Week 4  
 2/8      *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933)  
             e-reserve: Adams (4pp.); Bloom
- Week 5  
 2/15      *Black Boy* (1945 [1991])  
             e-reserve: Young; Butler
- Week 6  
 2/22      *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964)  
             e-reserve: Van Horne; Eakin “Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography”
- Week 7  
 3/1      *Speak, Memory* (1966 [1951])  
             “Mid-Semester Check-Up” (E); “Ten Keys to a Clear and Graceful Style” (E)  
             e-reserve: Anderson (7pp. rev. of *Despair*); Fogarty (1p.)  
             [Presenters: these are short pieces, so focus on the primary text & Nabokov’s themes.]
- Week 8  
 3/8      *The Woman Warrior* (1976)  
             e-reserve: Shapiro; Madsen  
             **Annotated Bibliography due.** (10 entries, all critical essays about the text that you will be writing your final paper on. Each entry should have a paragraph or two. Think of each entry as essentially a mini-essay that summarizes the arguments made in the essay, and also offers your critical judgment about the essay.)
- Week (Break)  
 3/15      SPRING BREAK. No class.  
 3/17      SPRING BREAK. No class.

## Week (Break)

3/22 SPRING BREAK. No class.  
3/24 SPRING BREAK. No class.

## Week 9

3/29 *Hunger of Memory* (1982)  
e-reserve: Rivera; Rose

## Week 10

4/5 *Days of Obligation* (1992)  
e-reserve: Ferszt

## Week 11

4/12 *Brown* (2002)  
e-reserve: Millian

## Week 12

4/19 *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1994)  
e-reserve: DeNuccio; Slethaug

## Week 13

4/26 *The Man Who Outgrew his Prison Cell* (2004)  
e-reserve: Avni; Epstein

## Week 14

5/3 *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)  
e-reserve: Deresiewicz; Riofrio

Final Exam Date (**check exam schedule**):

**Final Paper Due** (15-18pp. Literary criticism, topic of your choice, on any one of the primary texts (except that the one that you presented on) that we've read in class. The Final Paper is due on the day—and at the beginning of the scheduled hour—of the final exam. The Final Paper can be thought of as a “take home final exam.” Check the Registrar's schedule for final exam date, time, and location.)