

## English 466 ~ Colonial American Autobiography: Narratives of Self-Transformation

Fall term 2013  
101 Allen Hall

CRN 17543  
14:00 – 14:50 MWF

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Office hours: 9-11 Wednesdays and 1-2 Fridays in 472 PLC

In this course, a senior-level seminar for English majors, we will read examples of personal narrative or "life-writing" from Colonial America, from the mid 1600s until the early 1800s. The term "autobiography" was not coined until 1808, and so does not appear in the titles of any of the texts we will read, but the genre of individuals' written testimonies of their own lives had important social and spiritual functions and strong literary conventions in America during this period.

The individuals whose life narratives we will read all tell of profound social and spiritual transformations. Some write of religious awakenings or conversions, while others (notably the authors of captivity narratives) recount how they were forced to adapt suddenly to new families, new languages, and new identities.

Autobiography may appear to be a simple and popular literary genre, and memoirs (as they are more often called today) frequently appear on the lists of non-fiction best-sellers in the U.S. However, several recent controversies have questioned the accuracy or authenticity of these memoirs, and once again blurred the distinctions between novel and autobiography.

We will begin by studying the rhetorical conventions of the conversion narratives that were sometimes delivered as a condition of membership in church congregations in seventeenth-century New England. These texts appear to follow a formula, which raises the question of how the formulaic nature of such texts affect readers' assessments of the authenticity of the narrators' spiritual transformations?

We will then turn to *Robinson Crusoe*, one of the earliest and most popular novels in the English language. *Crusoe* demonstrates the fundamental influence of Protestant spiritual autobiography on the ideologies of colonialism. The vision of a solitary English subject besieged by hostile nature and natives provided a powerful theme for colonial literature.

In the second half of the course we will turn to a number of captivity narratives and missionary relations, and consider how these writers tried to convey the American Indian cultures into which they had been adopted. We will also look at narratives by American Indians who used the techniques of the spiritual autobiography and the captivity narrative to appeal for full membership in American communities of individuals.

### Learning Objectives for this course

- To become familiar with several sects of Protestantism important in colonial America, including Methodists, Quakers, and Puritans, and how the theological doctrines of each affected autobiographical writings.
- To perceive how influential forms of life-writing in contemporary America, such as addiction and recovery narratives, have been influenced by older religious genres.
- To understand how the colonization of North America formed colonized subjectivities, both American Indian and African American, whose understanding of self was conditioned by domination.

- To refine critical writings skills commensurate with expectations of senior English majors.

**Books available at the University Bookstore:**

Gordon Sayre, ed., *American Captivity Narratives* (Bedford/St. Martin's)

James Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison* (U. of Oklahoma Press)

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Penguin Classics)

William Apess, *A Son of the Forest* and other writings (U. of Massachusetts Press)

**e-texts from EADA: Early Americas Digital Archive** linked from blackboard

Jean-François-Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont* (pdfs)

Selected confessions by Thomas Shepard [pdf]

Elizabeth Ashbridge **EADA: Early Americas Digital Archive**

Anne Bradstreet "To My Dear and Loving Children" [EADA]

John Woolman **EADA: Early Americas Digital Archive**

John Dane (link to an on-line version from HistoryMatters.org)

**pdf texts** downloadable from the blackboard site

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "talking book" essay

J. A. U. Gronniosaw

Venture Smith

**Attendance**

- Class meetings will be devoted to discussions, lectures, student presentations, small group assignments, and other activities. Attendance is therefore mandatory and fundamental to your success in the class.
- You are permitted to miss three classes for whatever reason, but your grade will be reduced for each absence beyond three. I will distribute an attendance list at the beginning of each class period. Please sign to confirm your attendance, although keep in mind that leaving class early will also constitute an absence. If you need to leave early, please discuss it with me ahead of time.
- If you have to miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain notes and materials. Small group discussion questions and handouts will be posted on blackboard, but lecture notes may not be. Your best source is often a classmate's notes.
- If your absence is due to excusable circumstances, you may meet with me during office hours to review missed materials. Excusable circumstances include: death in the family, serious illness, ill children, observance of a religious holiday, and other university-recognized conflicts, such as athletic competitions. Be prepared to provide documentation.

**Writing assignments:**

- Introductory Personal Narrative, due October 11<sup>th</sup>
- Critical paper on the conversion narrative, 4-5 pages, due October 30<sup>th</sup>
- Critical paper on captivity and transculturation, 4-5 pages, due December 9<sup>th</sup>
- Research or Creative Project (choose one of 2 options below) due November 25<sup>th</sup>

**Grading:**

tests and written assignments will be graded by points, with a total of 100.

20 points	each of the two critical papers
15 points	research/creative project, due
15 points	midterm exam
20 points	final exam
5 points	personal narrative
5 points	homework and classroom activities

Final grades will likely be determined on a scale where 90-100 constitutes an A, 80-89 a B, and 70-79 a C. However, characteristics of each class group and the strength of students' performances can differ, and the curve may bend as a result.

### **Academic Honesty:**

All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented. Please consult *Rules for Writers* for a definition of plagiarism and information on documentation, and refer to the *Student Conduct Code* on the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards website.

### **Research or Creative Project (due November 25th):**

- 1st option: write or revise a wikipedia article on a little-known American autobiographer. You can write an entry for an individual who does not have one, or make substantial revisions and improvements to an entry that is brief or inadequate. The individual may be one whose work is on the syllabus, or one of many others who are not. I can help you choose from among a list of additional autobiographers. For this option you will need to create your own wikipedia account and consult guides for how to write good articles.
- 2nd option: collect or study a narrative by a relative or ancestor. You will notice that Anne Bradstreet and other early American autobiographers addressed their narratives to their children and grandchildren. They had no expectation of publishing their stories, but simply wished to leave a testimony of their lives and faith for their descendants to read and to emulate. You may have relatives or ancestors who have left manuscript accounts of their lives. If no such text is available, I encourage you to seek out an elderly relative and ask him or her to tell you about your life. Then you will have a narrative you can share with other relatives.

### **Schedule of reading assignments**

September 30	Introduction to course; poems by Phyllis Wheatley and James Revel (paper handouts)
October 2	John Dane [link from blackboard] Ann Bradstreet "To My Dear and Loving Children" [on-line EADA]
October 4	Mary Rowlandson in <i>American Captivity Narratives</i> pp 127-176
October 7	selected narratives from Thomas Shepard's congregation [pdf]

- Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus* pp 21-41 [pdf]
- October 9 John Woolman chapters 1-5 [on-line EADA]  
Also: connections between spiritual autobiography and addiction/recovery
- October 11 *Robinson Crusoe* [the novel is a continuous text; read roughly one-fourth of it]  
**Introductory personal narrative due**
- October 14 *Robinson Crusoe*  
October 16 *Robinson Crusoe*  
October 18 *Robinson Crusoe* (final fourth)
- October 21 Olaudah Equiano in *American Captivity Narratives* pp 225-257
- October 23 J. A. U. Gronniosaw's narrative and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "James Gronniosaw and the trope of the talking book" [pdfs]
- October 25 John Marrant in *American Captivity Narratives* pp 203-224
- October 28 William Apess, *The Experiences of Five Christian Indians of the Pequot Tribe*
- October 30 William Apess, *A Son of the Forest*, chapters 1-9 (50 pages)  
**essay on conversion narratives due**
- November 1 Venture Smith [pdf]
- November 4 Mid-term exam
- November 6 Hans Staden in *American Captivity Narratives* pp 18-58
- November 8 Isaac Jogues in *American Captivity Narratives* pp 91-121
- November 11 Intro to French Louisiana and to picaresque autobiography; excerpts from William Moraley (paper handout)
- November 13 Dumont de Montigny, *The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont*, chap. 2  
November 15 Dumont de Montigny, *The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont* chap. 3  
November 18 Dumont de Montigny, *The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont* chap 4 & 5
- November 20 James Smith, "An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and Travels of Col. James Smith" in *American Captivity Narratives* pp 258-347 (read to around p. 300 for today)
- November 22 James Smith, remainder
- November 25 James Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison*  
Author's Preface and Introduction, chapters 1-6
- November 27 James Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison*, chapters 7-16
- November 29 no class, Thanksgiving Holiday

December 2 Student Presentations of Research or Creative projects  
December 4 Geronimo, in *American Captivity Narratives* pp410-443  
December 6 review for Final Exam  
December 12 Final Exam 3:15 - 5:00 pm