COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course will examine the development of autobiography as a literary genre from the spiritual narratives of medieval women mystics to the graphic memoirs of twenty-first century writers. Along the way we will consider a range of autobiographical forms, including slave narrative, immigrant autobiography, disability narrative, personal-political essay, autobiographical novel, memoir, and letters. Questions addressed may include: How did spiritual autobiography enable women mystics to sidestep charges of heresy? Why did former slaves working in the abolitionist movement find the genre of autobiography particularly useful to argue for universal freedom and equality? How have race, class, gender, and citizenship status defined life stories in the American context? How have life stories reproduced, intersected with, and resisted dominant narratives of life trajectories?

GOALS OF COURSE: Students will develop an understanding of the history of autobiography in all its diverse genres. In particular, students will become familiar with the literary techniques and strategies involved in constructing a life story in different historical periods and cultural contexts. They will learn to recognize and identify different cultural and historical understandings of such terms as “self,” “identity,” “family,” and “community,” and to analyze the culturally determined relationship of the individual to body, place, community, and nation.

TEXTS:
Mary Prince, History of Mary Prince
Edwidge Danticat, Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work
G.B. Tran, Vietnamerica: A Family’s Journey
James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time
Kate Bornstein, Queer and Pleasant Danger

WORK REQUIREMENTS:

1)Read!! Please have each work read by the day it’s listed on the syllabus. For longer works, you may divide them up by the number of class days. Be sure to finish each work by the last day it’s listed on the syllabus.

2)Post and Comment—I will divide the class into 6-person groups for the purposes of online discussion. Beginning April 10th, please post on your group’s Discussion
page on Canvas a 250-word comment on the upcoming readings for the week **every Monday by midnight.** Also write a 1-2-sentence comment on another student’s post by this same time. Please comment on each reading for the week, though you may choose to focus primarily on one. This means reading ahead a little, or at least reading one text ahead and skimming the others. **No post and comment on April 24th (Week Four).** You should have a total of 8 posts and 8 comments by the end of the term.

4) **Reimagining the Past exercise plus Reflection (2-3 pages double-spaced)**—Write about an incident from your past that you do not remember 100% clearly. It can be a minor incident if you prefer, or even an incident that happened primarily to someone else. As you write about what happened, feel free to fill in the blanks of your memory or to elaborate on the memory in order to convey what you consider to be important truths. **This part should be 2 pages (500 words).** In the Reflection section, write about how you did, or did not, seek to convey a kind of truth in your 2-page piece. Did you change, fill in, or elaborate on the past? If so, why? In other words, what kinds of choices did you make as a writer and why? **Compare a literary strategy you used in your piece to a similar technique in a work by ONE of the writers read so far for the course.** Quote from that writer’s text for support. **This Reflection part should be 2 paragraphs. Due May 6th by midnight.**

5) **Archive assignment (group presentation)**—Each discussion group of 6 (see above under Post and Comment) will do research on a diary, memoir, journal, or collection of letters in the University of Oregon special collections archives. Your group will choose from a list of texts, then develop a power point presentation or poster board on the text, its contexts, appearance, provenance (where it came from), and possible interpretations. Each group member will take on a specific task. Your group presentation must also have a creative, interactive aspect, such as a short play based on a diary, an interview that reaches from the present into past, a workshop involving the class on reading scrawled cursive, or anything else your group can think up. Each group member will turn in one paragraph describing 1) what the group project entailed and 2) the work that that member did to contribute to the project. You will get two grades averaged together—one for the group project and one for your own work on the project.

6) **Final essay (6-8 pages)**—Please write an essay on a topic of your choice, focused on one or two texts read in class. This essay should have a clear thesis, be free of grammatical and spelling errors, quote from the text for support and illustration of ideas, and provide close readings of language and scenes from the text.

**Grade Breakdown:**
**Attendance and participation:** 10%
**Posts and Comments:** 20%
Reimagining the Past Assignment: 20%
Archive Assignment: 20%
Final Essay: 30%

READING SCHEDULE:

**Week One—Writing, Self, Democracy Betrayed and Imagined**
- Tues., April 4th—Introductions. Poems by Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Joy Harjo
- Thur., April 6th—Excerpts from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, on Canvas.

**Week Two—How is the Self Written into Being?**
- Thurs., April 13th—Excerpts from William Apess, *Son of the Forest*, on Canvas.

**Week Three—How does Slave Narrative Transform Autobiography?**
- Tues., April 18th—Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*.
- Thurs., April 20th—Prince, continued, including extra material in the text.

**Week Four—How do Immigrant Autobiographers Write America?**
- Tues., April 25th—Visit to Knight Library Special Collections.
- Thurs., April 27th—Excerpt from Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*.

**Week Five—Writing Race, Racism, and African-American Identity**
- Thurs., May 4th—Baldwin, second part.

Reimagining the Past assignment due Saturday, May 6th, by midnight, on Canvas.

**Week Six—Unwriting Gender.**
- Tues., May 9th—Kate Bornstein, *Queer and Pleasant Danger*.
- Thurs., May 11th—Bornstein continued.

**Week Seven—Writing the Body—Social, Political, Personal, Transnational**
- Thurs., May 18th—Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously*.

**Week Eight—Writing Migration and Exile.**
- Tues., May 23rd—Danticat Continued.

**Week Nine—Writing Migration and Exile**
- Tues., May 30th—G.B. Tran, *Vietnamerica*. 
Thus, June 1st—Tran, continued.

**Week Ten—Presentations**
Tues., June 6th—Presentations.
Thurs., June 8th—Presentations. Conclusions.

Email me your thesis statement by midnight on Wed., June 7th.

Final essay due on Canvas by midnight on Wed., June 14th.