ENGLISH 205: GENRE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY (WINTER 2018)

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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, documentary film, 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. This course will also focus on writing skills, with selected class days devoted to improving the writing of literary critical essays. Students will learn to develop a clear thesis for a literary essay, to back up claims with quotation and close reading, to craft a compelling writing voice, and to build a logical argument for a particular interpretation of a work of literature.

TEXTS:
Mary Prince, History of Mary Prince
G.B. Tran, Vietnameraica: A Family's Journey
James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time
Ellen Saks, The Center Cannot Hold
Phoebe Hart, Orchids: My Intersex Adventure (documentary watched in class)

Texts are available in the UO Duck Store, in local independent bookstores (Tsunami, Black Sun, J. Michael's, Smith Family), and through online outlets. Other, shorter works, listed under the reading schedule below, are available on Canvas.
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 January 15**th, please post on your group’s Discussion page on Canvas a 250-word comment on the upcoming readings for the week **every Monday by 8 a.m.** 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 January 29**th (Week Four) because your Remaining the Past exercise is due. 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. 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. I’m not asking you to model your work after the writer’s work, but to make a comparison after you’ve written your piece. Quote from that writer’s text for support. This Reflection part should be 2 paragraphs. Due January 29**th on Canvas by 8 a.m.

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. 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. Presentations will take place during the last week or two of class.
6) **Final essay (6-8 pages)**—Please write an essay on a topic of your choice, focused on 1) one or two texts read in class, or 2) archives used in your presentation. 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.

7) **Note on Attendance**—**Attendance is mandatory.** This course is based on discussion, with brief lectures at the beginning of each unit. The class is an intellectual community that develops over the course of the term through the process of discussing a common body of texts and ideas. Thus each student’s attendance and participation is necessary; every person’s voice is important, as is the listening presence of every participant. **Three unexcused absences over the course of the term** will not affect your grade; further absences (not counting illness or true emergency) may very well affect your grade.

8) **A note on accommodations:** It is my intention to make any needed accommodations in order that all students can participate fully and effectively in this class. Please contact me directly or via Accessible Education (https://aec.uoregon.edu/) to request any accommodations.

Grade Breakdown:
- Attendance and participation: 5%
- Posts and Comments: 20%
- Reimagining the Past Assignment: 20%
- Archive Assignment: 25%
- Final Essay: 30%

**READING SCHEDULE:**

**Week One—Writing, Self, Democracy Betrayed and Imagined**
- Monday, January 8th—Introductions. Poems by Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Joy Harjo read together in class.
- Friday, January 12th—Excerpts from Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, on Canvas.

**Week Two—How is the Self Written into Being?**
- Monday, January 15th—**Martin Luther King Day.** No class.
- Wednesday, January 17th—Excerpts from William Apess, *Son of the Forest*, on Canvas.
- Friday, January 19th—Writing workshop: Writing the literary critical thesis.

**Week Three—How does Slave Narrative Transform Autobiography?**
- Monday, Jan. 22nd—Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*.
- Wednesday, Jan. 24th—Prince, continued, including extra material in the text.
Friday, Jan. 26th—Prince continued. Writing workshop: Textual evidence—Developing and supporting a thesis on *Mary Prince*. Discussion of the Reimagining the Past Exercise, including how to shift from Autobiographer to Scholar and how to develop a thesis about your own literary text.

**Week Four—How do Immigrant Autobiographers Write America?**
Monday, Jan. 29th—Visit to Knight Library Special Collections. **Reimagining the Past Exercise due by 8 a.m. today.**
Wed., Jan. 31st—Excerpt from Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*.
Friday, Feb. 2nd—Groups meet to discuss archive projects.

**Week Five—Writing Race, Racism, and African-American Identity**
Friday, Feb. 9th—Baldwin, continued.

**Week Six—Writing Disability and Difference.**
Friday, Feb. 16th—Saks continued. Groups meet to discuss archive projects.

**Week Seven—Writing Disability and Difference**
Monday, Feb. 19th—Saks continued.
Friday, Feb. 23rd—Writing workshop: Building an argument about *The Center Cannot Hold*.

**Week Eight—Documenting a Life, a Body**
Monday, Feb. 26th—Documentary: Phoebe Hart’s *Orchids* watched in class.
Wed., Feb. 28th—*Orchids* continued.
Friday, March 2nd—Groups meet to discuss archive projects.

**Week Nine—Writing and Illustrating Migration and Exile**
Monday, March 5th—G.B. Tran, *Vietnamerica*.
Wed., March 7th—Tran, continued.
Friday, March 9th—Presentations.

**Week Ten—Presentations**
Monday, March 12th—Presentations.
Wed., March 14th—Presentations
Friday, March 16th—Presentations. Conclusions.

Final essay due on Canvas by midnight on Wed., March 21st.