History 601: Faces of Narcissus? Autobiographies, Memoirs and History
Prof. James R. Farr
T 6-9 p.m.
UNIV 319

Contact Information:
Office: 311 UNIV
Office Hours: T 4:30-6
Phone: 532-7523
e-mail: jrfarr@purdue.edu

Description:

Over the course of history men and women have often been impelled to tell their own life story. This telling frequently takes the form of an autobiography or a memoir. As important as these remembrances may have been for the author, they also can be exceptional types of evidence for historians. Historians may interrogate these sources for many reasons. Among them are author intention (why did the author decide to write down his or her life?), and intended audience (did the author hope for others to read his or her life? If so, who? And did audiences read the life in the way the author intended?) Moreover, by placing these sources in historical context, historians can also move beyond intentions and analyze these sources as “unwitting testimony” about a wide variety of historical developments. Students in this seminar will begin by exploring theories of analysis of these kinds of writings, and follow with readings of several autobiographies from history. Each student will be required to write a series of papers throughout the semester and a retrospective essay at the end.

Required Readings:

See Class schedule (most of the books can be purchased in hard copy inexpensively on-line, but several are available free for online reading or download; the books/articles that are not available online have been placed on reserve in the Hicks Undergraduate Library)

Grading:

Two self-narratives (“Just Who Do I Think I Am, Anyway?” 500 words each)—5%
Five analyses* (750 words each) of books from the required readings---35%
One analysis and critique (1000 words) and 15-20 minute in-class presentation of an autobiography selected by each student---10%
One commentary on another student’s presentation—5%
Retrospective Essay: “Historians and Autobiography: Problems and Prospects” (2500 words)---20%
Class Participation. Be prepared to participate in or to lead a class discussion on any given week---25%

Note: see Class Schedule for due dates on all assignments. Writing assignments may be submitted as e-mail attachments.
*An analysis is not a synopsis, nor is it a critique. You will be expected to identify the author’s thesis, explain how s/he develops and supports it (a brief discussion of sources and methodology is appropriate here), and state what the historical and historiographical significance of the book is.

**Class Schedule (Read and be prepared to discuss the assigned readings in class):**

8/21: Introduction

8/28, 9/4: *Hello, it’s me! The Individual and the Autonomous Self*

8/28:


9/4:


9/11: *Whose life is this, anyway? [self-narratives due]*

Evans, Mary. *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography*. Routledge, 1999.[available online][Skip Chapter 3]


9/18:  *Who is ‘I’? Narrative and Identity*


9/25:  *A Different Voice: Women and Autobiography*


10/2:  *Other voices: Postcolonialism*


10/16, 10/23, 10/30, 11/6, 11/13:  *The Faces of Narcissus: Putting it to Work* [write analyses on two of the following autobiographies: Prince, Méneta, Hickey, and McCarthy]

   10/16:


   Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince A West Indian Slave* [available online; free Kindle Edition]

10/23:


10/30:


11/6:


11/13:

Self-narratives

11/27: Get a Life! Student presentations [individual analysis and critique and commentary due on day of presentation]

12/4: Student presentations

12/14: Retrospective Essay Due

****************************

Course and Instructor Evaluation: During the last two weeks of the semester, you will be provided an opportunity to evaluate this course and your instructor. To this end, Purdue has transitioned to online course evaluations. On Monday of the fifteenth week of classes, you will receive an official email from evaluation administrators with a link to the online evaluation site. You will have two weeks to complete this evaluation. Your participation in this evaluation is an integral part of this course. Your feedback is vital to improving education at Purdue University. I strongly urge you to participate in the evaluation system.

Disclaimer: In the event of a major campus emergency, the above requirements, deadlines and grading policies are subject to changes that may be required by a revised semester calendar. Any such changes in this course will be posted, once the course resumes, on the course website or can be obtained by contacting the instructor via email or phone.