



EN 8553
American Literature to the Civil War
Wednesdays, 3:30-6:20
Dr. Bonnie O'Neill

Selfie Nation: American Life Writing

Biography, autobiography, spiritual autobiography, journals, captivity narrative, slave narrative: in a culture obsessed with the individual, life writing is perhaps the quintessential literary genre. It is also extremely varied in its forms and purposes. In this seminar, we will read widely in early American biographical and autobiographical writings.

What is the purpose of memorializing past lives? What qualifies an individual life as “great” or worthy of commemoration? How might memoirs and biographies establish, reinforce, or intervene in prevailing narratives of national and cultural identity? These are just some of the questions that will guide our reading, as we consider the cultural as well as personal uses of life writing for readers and writers.

Readings may include the following works:

Spiritual autobiographies, such as those of Thomas Hooker, Anne Bradstreet, and Jonathan Edwards

Captivity narratives, such as those of Mary Rowlandson, John Williams, and Hannah Duston

Diaries and Journals, such as those of Samuel Sewall, Sarah Kemble Knight, Ralph Waldo Emerson

Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (selections)

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*

Elizabeth Ashbridge, *Some Account of the Early Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge*

William Apess, *A Son of the Forest and Other Writings*

Black Hawk, *The Life of Black Hawk*

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*

Margaret Fuller, “Autobiographical Sketch”

P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*

Walt Whitman, *Calamus*

