

American Autobiography

This seminar introduces students to a key genre in American literature and culture: the autobiography. Since the publication of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography in 1791 autobiographical writing has become a key mode of expression for authors and readers alike to come to terms with the promises, intricacies, and fallacies of the U.S. republic and its society. This seminar will revolve around many of the major texts in American autobiographical writing since the late eighteenth century, exploring the autobiography as a means to forge national unity and create a sense of belonging, as a political instrument and a force of activist intervention, as a genre of literature and art, and as a narrative medium that communicates the complexities of identity formation in the modern world. These explorations will be accompanied by theoretical discussions of issues such as authorship, autobiographical experience, readerly engagement, media diversity, and, of course, the American myth of the "self-made wo/man" in order to sharpen our understanding of autobiographical writing. Against this backdrop, we will focus particularly on the history of the African-American autobiography, for, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has argued, "Of the various genres that comprise the African-American literary tradition none has played a role as central as has black autobiography" (*Bearing Witness* 3). Aside from an introduction into the history and present of American autobiographical writing, multiple sessions will thus be dedicated specifically to the cultural and literary history of the Black American autobiography as a form of resistance against slavery, systemic racism, patriarchy, and social injustice—from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (published in 1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* (1861) to Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015).

The complete syllabus will be handed out during the first session. Most of the reading material will be provided digitally (on AGORA).

Course requirements:

Regular attendance and active participation;
thorough preparation of the material;
in-class presentation;
term paper of app. 15 pages (1.5 space; Times New Roman 12) to be completed by the end of the semester