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Office hours: M and Th 12-2 p.m., and by appt.

Fall 2017  
M, W 10:30-11:45 a.m.  
Robinson Hall B105

## Honors 130, section 002: Conceptions of Self

Honors 130 seminars examine different conceptions and definitions of the self from diverse cultures and historical contexts. What makes people who they are? Is identity innate or imposed by external forces? Can people invent themselves or reinvent themselves? If so, what might that look like?

This section of Honors 130 explores questions like these through the genre of autobiography. Autobiography is a more complicated genre than the recent "memoir boom" might lead one to believe. Literary constructions of "self" and "truth" also bear a particularly complex relationship to the study of history. This course begins with theoretical readings on autobiography and identity, then examines classic autobiographies that elucidate key themes in U.S. history such as the myth of the self-made man, the paradox of American slavery and American freedom, and the gender dimensions of individuals' struggles for social justice and personal liberation.

**Required books: (available at campus store; see Course Schedule for additional readings)**  
Smith and Watson, eds. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2d ed.  
Andrews, ed. *Classic American Autobiographies*  
Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*  
Coates, *Between the World and Me*

### Course requirements and grading:

- Attendance, participation, and short assignments and readings (20%)
- First essay, 5-6 pages (1500-1800 words), **due Oct. 11** (15%)
- Second essay, 7-8 pages (2100-2400 words), **due Oct. 30** (25%)
- Individual project including oral presentation, **due Nov. 15** (25%)
- Final essay, 4-5 pages (1200-1500 words), **due Dec. 6** (15%)

I will accept late work with a deduction of 3% for every 24 hours past the deadline.

### Course policies and other information:

Participation and decorum: This class will include a great deal of discussion and some lectures and in-class work, possibly including unannounced quizzes on the reading. I expect students to come to class on time and well prepared. That means completing readings and other assignments before class, silencing cell phones and putting them and all other distractions away during class time, listening actively, taking notes, and engaging with the instructor and other students in a thoughtful (both reflective and polite) way. It also means not packing up or leaving early, sleeping, texting, checking email, browsing the web, or talking when the professor or another student has the floor. I consider mutual respect key to a good learning environment, and students' participation grades will reflect this in addition to evaluating their intellectual engagement during class meetings.

Participation also means staying on top of any course news, which will be sent to students' Mason email accounts. Please make sure to check your official GMU email address every day. For privacy reasons, your Mason email address is the only one I will use.

Technology:

No cell phones or other electronic distractions are allowed during class. Laptops and tablets are allowed *for specific, course-related uses*. If I notice that a student has allowed himself or herself to become distracted by a device, I will give a reminder, but frequent distraction will result in points off for participation. Distracting others may result in a ban on electronics altogether. If you require an electronic device as an accommodation, contact me to make arrangements.

Accommodations: Students who require academic accommodations must contact me promptly and make arrangements through the Office of Disability Services (ods.gmu.edu; 703-993-2474).

Excused absences: If you expect to miss class or ask to reschedule a due date because of a University-approved absence (i.e., varsity athletics, religious holidays), you must make arrangements with me by **September 6**.

Honor code: Students in this course are bound by George Mason University's Honor Code, which states: "Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work." I will pursue any concerns about academic dishonesty and will report suspected students to the University's Honor Board for disciplinary action, including a failing grade in the course.

Incompletes: University policy states that instructors should assign an IN only if a student has a very limited amount of work to complete and there is a non-academic reason preventing the work's completion during the semester. An incomplete cannot be used to avoid a poor grade.

Enrollment deadlines and other useful information:

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class using PatriotWeb. Schedule changes must be completed by the following deadlines:

Last day to add or drop classes with no tuition penalty: **Tuesday, Sept. 5**

Last day to drop classes with a 33% tuition penalty: **Tuesday, Sept. 19**

Final Drop Deadline (67% tuition penalty): **Friday, Sept. 29**

After the drop deadline, undergraduates may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal during the period from **Monday, Oct. 2 – Friday, Oct. 27**. For more information on selective withdrawal, see <http://chssundergrad.gmu.edu/forms/withdrawal/selective>.

Writing Center (writingcenter.gmu.edu): A114 Robinson Hall, 703-993-1200

Counseling and Psychological Services (caps.gmu.edu): 703-993-2380

Learning Services (help with organization, time management and other skills): 703-993-2999

**Course schedule:** (subject to revision)

Aug. 28      Course introduction

- Aug. 30 Lecture/discussion: "Identity" in the humanities and social sciences  
**Reading:** Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me"; Bruni, "I'm a White Man. Hear Me Out." (both on Blackboard)
- Sept. 4 Labor Day holiday  
 Sept. 6 Discuss Gleason article; **Reading questions due** (see Blackboard & JStor)
- Sept. 11 Discuss Smith and Watson, eds. *Reading Autobiography*, pp. 1-19  
 Sept. 13 Discuss Smith and Watson, eds. *Reading Autobiography*, pp. 21-61
- Sept. 18 Discuss Smith and Watson, eds. *Reading Autobiography*, pp. 103-25  
 Sept. 20 Discuss research for individual projects; **Short research assignment due**
- Sept. 25 Lecture/discussion on Benjamin Franklin  
 Sept. 27 Discuss *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* in Andrews, ed. *Classic American Autobiographies*, pp. 55-145; **Proposal for individual project due**
- Oct. 2 Lecture/discussion on Frederick Douglass  
 Oct. 4 Discuss *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in Andrews, ed. *Classic American Autobiographies*, pp. 221-323
- Tues., Oct. 10 In-class work on essays  
 Oct. 11 **Essay on Franklin and Douglass due**
- Oct. 16 Lecture/discussion on slavery and abolitionism; **Update on projects due**  
 Oct. 18 Lecture/discussion on Harriet Jacobs
- Oct. 23 Discuss Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*  
 Oct. 25 In-class work on essays
- Oct. 30 **Essay on Franklin, Douglass, and Jacobs due**  
 Nov. 1 Lecture/discussion: Race and Reunion  
**Reading:** Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner*, ch. 3 (Blackboard)
- Nov. 6 Oral presentations on individual projects; **peer responses due**  
 Nov. 8 Oral presentations on individual projects; **peer responses due**
- Nov. 13 Oral presentations on individual projects; **peer responses due**  
 Nov. 15 Oral presentations on individual projects; **peer responses due**
- Nov. 20 Lecture/discussion: The U.S. in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
 Nov. 22 Thanksgiving holiday
- Nov. 27 Lecture/discussion: The Civil Rights Movement  
 Nov. 29 Lecture/discussion: From the Sixties to Today  
**Reading:** Goodheart, "Regime Change in Charlottesville" (Blackboard)

- Dec. 4            Discuss Coates, *Between the World and Me*  
Dec. 6            Course wrap-up; **Essay on Coates due**

**Some insightful words to get us started:**

Perhaps the primary human task is the establishment of a personal identity, a unique style, a signature. Of course, this task contains an irony: one is to attain a sense of self created largely from the materials given one by others: family, community and culture. We so often take it for granted that such an achievement is easy, routine stuff, so to speak. But developmental psychologists are daily describing the ways in which so many millions fail to attain healthy selfhood, or "psychological birth." To know who one is, to be secure, safe and consoled in this knowledge is no easy task or achievement.

--Aaron D. Gresson, "Beyond Selves Deferred: Langston Hughes' Style and the Psychology of Black Selfhood," *Langston Hughes Review* IV (Spring 1985), 47.