

# “Inter-American Literature: Finding Yourself in America: Personal Narrative in the New World”

**Instructor:** Sophia A. McClennen

## **Course description**

Even before the first Europeans set foot on the American hemisphere they had already begun to imagine the New World as a place to fulfill dreams and to realize personal goals. And these dreams and imaginings typically took written form. This course traces the history of personal narrative in the Americas focusing especially on texts that intertwine individual identity with the history of the Americas. Beginning with colonial texts, this course links the colonial project with the urge to narrate the exploits of extraordinary individuals. After pausing to examine Ben Franklin’s autobiography as a foundational text of American identity, we then read a series of nineteenth century texts by voices that have been omitted from the grand narrative of American history and that complicate the linking of the personal with the national. Some of the questions we will consider are: How do the voices of African, Asian and Native Americans challenge the American Dream? Is there a Latin American Dream? How have women’s texts participated in defining the identity of the Americas? The second half of the course is dedicated to texts from the twentieth century that reveal a twin impulse to, on the one hand, define the self as a mirror of America and America as a mirror of the self, and, on the other hand, to break down these connections. Via works by Ralph Ellison, Alejo Carpentier, Che Guevara, Ariel Dorfman, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Audre Lorde we will ask how the literature of the New World has been shaped by the desire to both describe and deconstruct identity in relation to an imagined America.

## **Required reading:**

Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives by [Sidonie Smith](#), [Julia Watson](#)

Invisible Man by [Ralph Ellison](#)

The Lost Steps by [Alejo Carpentier](#), [Harriet De Onis](#) (Translator)

The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey by [Ernesto Che Guevara](#)

Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey by [Ariel Dorfman](#)

Confessions of an Economic Hit Man by [John Perkins](#)

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts by [Maxine Hong Kingston](#)

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name by [Audre Lorde](#)

## **Optional:**

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself by [Frederick Douglass](#)

## **Course Outline**

Week 1 **Description of course**

**Founding Fathers**

- Christopher Columbus: Extracts from Journal
- John Winthrop: *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630)
- *Reading Autobiography* Chapter 1

### Week 2 **From Captivity to Celebrity**

- Full Text of John Smith's *True Relation*
- Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca

### **Feminist Alternatives**

- Sor Juana Ines de La Cruz *The Answer*
- Introduction to Catalina Erauso's Autobiography

### Week 3 **Ben Franklin**

- Ben Franklin's Autobiography
- *Reading Autobiography* Chapter 2
- *Figuring Benjamin Franklin in American Cultural Memory*. Carla Mulford.

### Week 4 **Frederick Douglass**

- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*
- About Slave Narratives: <http://guweb2.gonzaga.edu/faculty/campbell/enl311/slave.htm>
- *Reading Autobiography* Chapter 3

### Week 5 **Narratives of Identity and Difference I**

- Zitkala Sa, *The School Days of an Indian Girl*
- Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa) (Sioux) (1876-1938) at Heath
- *Reading Autobiography* Chapter 4

### **Narratives of Identity and Difference II**

- Edith Maud Eaton (Sui Sin Far) *Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian*
- Edith Maud Eaton (Sui Sin Far) at Heath
- *Reading Autobiography* Chapter 5

### Week 6 **Ralph Ellison: When Difference Becomes Invisibility** *Invisible Man*

### Week 7 **The Search for Roots**

Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*

### Week 8 **Mid-Term**

### Week 9 **Spring Break**

### Week 10

Che Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*

### Week 11

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*  
*Reading Autobiography* Chapter 6

Week 12  
Audre Lorde *Zami: Another Spelling of My Name*

Week 13  
Ariel Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*

Week 14  
John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*

Week 15 **Conclusions**