Autobiography in the Muslim World (ISLA 581)

Fall 2013

Location: McTavish 3438, Room 4

Times: Fridays 12.35 to 2.25

Professor: Prashant Keshavmurthy

Institute of Islamic Studies

Office 311, Morrice Hall

Office hour: Thursday 12.00 – 1.00 or by appointment

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In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue).

Description: In this course we will read and open up for discussion what it has meant in different times and spaces in the Muslim world for the self to
write its own life. This will entail a focus on written self-representations ranging from medieval Arabic autobiographies, the early modern diary of a Timurid prince to a contemporary memoir of growing up in Indian administered Kashmir. We will read these texts with an attention to such issues as whether the act of writing plays a constitutive or representative role in the telling of a life, whether the self in question is conceived of as unique or as transpersonal, questions of whether and how the self in question is gendered, of the articulations of individual and public memory and the related one of whether the writing self is unique or metonymic of a group. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of orienting questions, only a suggestive one. At times we will supplement the listed autobiographies with scholarly and theoretical studies of autobiography and selfhood. Students are welcome to devise, in consultation with the instructor, their own topics for class discussions as well as for the final paper.

**Method of Evaluation:** 25% of the final grade will depend on your participation in class discussions, including attendance. A further 25% will be based on a 20 to 25 minute class presentation on one of the prescribed texts. You are welcome to make more than one presentation. The remaining 50% will be assigned on the basis of your final paper.

The remaining texts will be sent to you as PDF files.

**Weekly readings**

**Weeks 1 and 2:** Selections from *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*; ed. Dwight F. Reynolds (University of California Press, 2001)


Two supplementary bibliographies:

1) More autobiographies from the Muslim world:


2) Scholarship on autobiographies from the Muslim world:


*Many Ways of Speaking about the Self: Middle Eastern Ego-documents in Arabic, Persian and Turkish (14th-20th Century)*, Ralf Elger and Yavuz Köse, eds. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).


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-------------------------------, “Yeki Bud, Yeki Nabud,” *Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Olcay Akyidiz,


A bibliography of philosophical studies of selfhood and the soul would be longer than is pertinent for the purposes of this course. However, the following two books will serve as comprehensive and critical introductions to the range of philosophical interest in questions of selfhood and the soul. The first book, by Sorabji, covers these topics with reference to multiple civilizational contexts, including the Islamic, while the second, by Charles Taylor, confines itself to a Euro-American canon: