

## ***The History of African American Autobiography***

Monday October 24 at Swarthmore College, 9:00-3:00 pm

Monday November 7th, optional Zoom follow-up after school hours

This TAS seminar will survey the history of Black autobiography in the United States for the past two centuries. While various forms of testimony, witnessing, and self-presentation have been crucial as historical documents, giving us a window into the complexities of Black lives, autobiography has also been crucial to a larger historical contest over the meaning of race in America. By examining the history of the form from slavery through the Jim Crow period into the post-Civil Rights era, we can appreciate how African American autobiography has been critically engaged in a larger struggle for recognition and respect.

In addition to becoming more familiar with this history through readings taken from significant texts, we will also consider a series of important questions raised by Black autobiography:

How have the dominant themes, concerns, strategies, and purposes of Black autobiography changed over time?

How have the stories of individuals been mobilized as forms of racial representation?

How have Black autobiographers spoken *for* or spoken *as* members of a larger community?

How have Black autobiographers registered or resisted larger discourses of race and citizenship?

How have African American autobiographers sought to shape the image of Black people?

We will consider the longer history of Black autobiography from the nineteenth century through the 1960s and then we will focus more closely on recent developments, including the shifting themes of narratives published during the Black Lives Matter era.

**Anthony Foy** is Associate Professor of English Literature and a longstanding member of the Black Studies Steering Committee at Swarthmore College, and he teaches a broad range of undergraduate courses in African American literature and culture. Professor Foy's research focuses on the postslavery development of Black autobiography from the nineteenth century to the present. In addition to articles on boxer Joe Louis and explorer Matthew Henson, he has also published on the meaning of photographs in Jim Crow-era autobiographies, the historical significance of sexuality and criminality in Black men's narratives, and the rise of autobiographies by Black celebrities after World War II. He graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles with a BA in English; he earned both his MA in African American Studies and his PhD in American Studies from Yale University.

