

201Q Cross-Cultural Women's History Core Seminar, 1998: Biography

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Office hours: W 9-11 a.m., or by appointment 4207 SSH (752-8576)

This seminar will examine biography as a genre of historical writing, using gender as a category of analysis and taking a cross-cultural perspective. Most readings will come from the three world cultures where biography has played a significant role in historiography and historical literature: "the West," China, and Islamic cultures in what are now the Middle East and South Asia. Our approach will be to focus on biography as a narrative form and on its relationship to the historiography of each of these cultures; and to examine the various ways in which character sketches and chronology have been combined in the biographical traditions of these three world cultures, with particular attention to biographies of women and their distinctive characteristics. Problems with cross-cultural perspectives will lead us to critical encounters with Orientalism.

Readings:

Copies of all articles and readings (except books listed below, which are available for purchase at the UCD Bookstore, or on reserve) are available xeroxed in the box in Debbie's office labeled "201Q." Please sign the checkout sheet and return promptly. Make your own copy if you wish. Because the Waltner reading is long, please check out a chapter at a time or read it all at once quickly.

Books (required):

- Davis, Natalie Zemon. Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. 06749552198 \$14.95
- Erikson, Erik. Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993. 0393310361 \$10.95
- Flanagan, Sabine. Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life. New York: Routledge, 1998. 0415185513
- Nelson, Cynthia. Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996.
- Racine, Josiane. Viramma: Life of an Untouchable. New York: Verso, 1997. 1859841481 \$19.00
- Schipperges, Heinrich. Hildegard von Bingen: Healing and the Nature of the Cosmos. Preface by Barbara Newman ; translated from German by John A. Broadwin. Princeton [N.J.] : M. Wiener, 1997. 1558761381 \$18.99
- T'ai-t'ai, Ning L. [Ning Lao T'ai T'ai]. A Daughter of Han. Transcribed by Ida Pruitt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1945. 0804706069 \$11.95
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. A Midwife's Tale. New York: Random House, 1991. 0679733760 \$13.00

Course requirements.

Each participant in the seminar will prepare a course project, for which there are two main options. Projects will be presented orally in class during the last two meetings of the quarter. A short (one-paragraph) description of what you intend for your own project is due mid-way through the quarter (on or about November 3). The amount of time allotted for the oral presentation in class will depend upon the number of students enrolled. The project will be completed when you turn in a finished paper. Optimal length of such a paper is 20-30 pages. (See also the final page of this syllabus, which describes other kinds of projects one could link to a course on biography.) Final papers are due on December 18 by 5 p.m.

- 1) A paper on the place of biography in the historiography of her/his particular field. The paper will include a preliminary character sketch and bibliography on a biographical subject relevant to the student's own research. The paper should reflect a critical comparative perspective derived from readings in the course.

OR

- 2) A paper on one of the critical problems in biography and historiography examined in the course and in course readings. The subject and scope of this paper should be determined in consultation with the instructor. The main requirement is that the paper present a comparative perspective.

Schedule of classes

- 10/6 Introduction: Gender and Genre (or, Biographies of Men and Women)
- 10/13 Biography and hagiography in the classics
Reading: Liu Xiang, Biographies of Eminent Women (selections, translated by Albert Richard O'Hara in The Position of Woman in Early China)
Plutarch, Mulierum Virtutes (selections, translated as "The Bravery of Women," in Moralia)
Margaret Smith, Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints (selections)
- 10/20 Hagiography: Lives of the saints (2 biographies of Hildegard of Bingen)
GUEST: PROFESSOR JOAN CADDEN
- 10/27 Hagiography: Lives of the saints (cont.)
Reading: excerpts from Ann Waltner's biography of Tanyangzi (in manuscript form, titled The World of a Late Ming Visionary)
GUEST: PROFESSOR WALTNER
- 11/3 Classics of male biography: Boswell's Life of Johnson and Erikson's Young Man Luther
Reading: Boswell is on reserve; look at it. Read Erikson
GUEST:
- 11/10 Classics of contemporary women's biography: Ulrich, A Midwife's Tale and Davis, Women on the Margins
GUEST: PROFESSOR ALAN TAYLOR
- 11/17 Subaltern lives recorded by Ida Pruitt and Josiane Racine
- 11/24 Biography in the postcolonial age: Doria Shafik
- 12/1 Class presentations/workshop
- 12/8 Class presentations/workshop

Additional research possibilities (for future reference or for teaching).

When I designed this course originally, I had imagined class projects that would enable students to work broadly on topics related to the course, but beyond the course readings. In a ten-week quarter, this proved impossible to integrate into my course design. However, I'm providing you with a description of possible projects to stimulate your imagination and to give you some ideas about where such a course might go were we to add another quarter's worth of research and writing to it.

This course lends itself well to topical projects on one of the following: famous individuals (women whose lives have inspired whole publishing industries can be the subject of a rich critical analysis; examples include: Sacagawea, Eva Peron, Hildegard of Bingen, Virginia Woolf, the Empress Dowager Cixi); saints (the lives of saints appear to raise common problems inviting cross-cultural analysis, particularly with regard to disciplines of the body, especially fasting); feminist leaders (lives of many women who led feminist movements in countries throughout the world have been chronicled in English, and the intersection between feminism and internationalism invites analysis); subaltern studies (these include not only the texts we have read but also countless anthropological life histories based on oral interviews and participant observation); the colonial gaze, or, traveling women (these include biographies of missionaries and travelers, especially European women traveling to the colonies). Finally, for those who read Spanish, there's a range of possibilities, including Eva Perón and a whole genre of 'testimonial' autobiographies, among which the best known is by the Nobel-prize-winning Rigoberta Menchu.

A few examples are listed below. The format of such a project will be worked out in discussion with the instructor. It might consist of a comparison of two works. It might involve a critical historiographic essay. It might turn into a bibliographic essay.

- a) Famous individuals: Women whose lives have inspired whole publishing industries can be the subject of a rich critical analysis. Examples are: Sacagawea, Eva Peron, Hildegard of Bingen, Virginia Woolf, the Empress Dowager Cixi, Marilyn Monroe, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and – dare I say it? -- Princess Diana. Requirement: demonstrate a “publishing industry” before commencing. See, for inspiration, Donna J. Kessler, The Making of Sacagawea: A Euro-American Legend (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996) [F592.7/S123/K47/1996].
- b) Saints: the lives of saints appear to raise common problems inviting cross-cultural analysis, particularly with regard to disciplines of the body, especially fasting. Promising subjects include the biography of Tanyangzi by Ann Waltner (other chapters available in manuscript), Caroline Bynum and others' work on fasting and the body, other biographies (one especially attractive option is: Sherry M. Vélasco, Demons, Nausea, and Resistance in the Autobiography of Isabel de Jesús, 1611-1682 [Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1996]). Not to mention the myriad additional biographies of Hildegard of Bingen. C.f. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, trans., Holy Women of the Syrian Orient (Univ. of Calif. Press,

1998); Kathryn Ann Tsai, Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to the Sixth Centuries (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

- c) Feminist leaders: lives of many women who led feminist movements in countries throughout the world have been chronicled in English, and the intersection between feminism and internationalism invites analysis. One could start with Cynthia Nelson's biography (assigned in class) and move on to a comparison with one or more of the countless biographies of U.S. and European feminist leaders, including Kitty Sklar's biographies of Catherine Beecher and Florence Kelley, Gerda Lerner on the Grimke sisters, Ann Lane on Charlotte Perkins Gilman.
- d) Subaltern studies: these include not only the texts we have read but also countless anthropological life histories based on oral interviews and participant observation. Because these kinds of studies involve special problems, they invite analysis as a body. Examples I saw that look promising include (in addition to our own readings): Susan M. Kenyon, Five Women of Sennar: Culture and Change in Central Sudan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Ellen Kuzwayo, Call Me Woman (London: Women's Press, 1985); Sarah Mizra, ed., Three Swahili Women (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- e) The colonial gaze, or, traveling women: these include biographies of missionaries and travelers (especially European women traveling to the colonies). A couple of choice examples: Dea Birkett, Mary Kingsley: Imperial Adventuress (New York: MacMillan, 1992); Alison Blunt, Travel, Gender and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa (New York: Guilford Press, 1994).
- f) For those who read Spanish, the following are recommended by Professor Francesca Miller. On Eva Perón alone: five 'historical' films of her life, a posthumous (probably apocryphal) autobiographic statement, 'official' biographies, and two recent biographies by Dujoven Ortiz and Eliot Martinez. Octavio Paz recently published a biography of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, a 17th-century Mexican nun and one of the great poets of the Golden Age.