Arabic Autobiography:

Writing and Interpreting the Self

COLT 437, 22073, Spring 2019, Mondays and Wednesdays, 2:30-3:50 pm, THH 214

One of the persistent myths in Arabic studies concerns the modern origins of autobiographical writing. According to this narrative, the emergence of Arabic autobiography coincides with the Arab encounter with (European) modernity and subsequent imitation and assimilation of its literary and cultural, if also political, forms. The beginnings of the autobiography as a genre is thus said to correspond to the advent of a modern Arab subject capable of giving an account of himself (or herself) in keeping with temporal schemes and narrative forms associated with the European tradition.

Expanding the historical and formal boundaries of the genre in Arabic, we will interrogate, in this seminar, the relationship of twentieth-century autobiographical writings with earlier examples of self-writing from the Arabo-Islamic tradition: sira (exemplary life story), tabaqat, (biographical dictionary), and tarjama (biographical notice), among others. Without altogether discounting the historical difference of "modernity," we will examine the rhetorical and stylistic strategies in and through which Arab authors have historically engaged in "self-translation" and "autobiographical acts," that is to say, we will interrogate the complex discursive ways in which they have related to themselves, their others, their time, and their world. In doing so, we will explore what, if anything, is different or modern about twentieth- century Arabic self-writing.

The primary focus of this course is on primary texts as sources for theoretical and comparative insight that can converse with established and revisionist scholarly paradigms, which will be introduced at the beginning of the semester. All readings are in English translation no prior knowledge of Arabic is necessary.

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