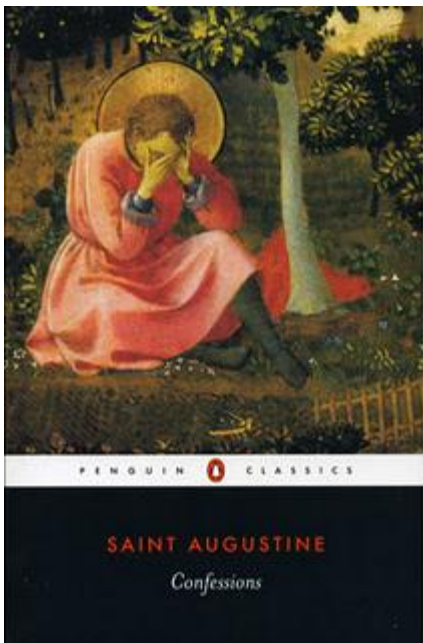


Rhetorics of Conversion: Stories of Becoming

English 461.01: Senior Seminar
Fall 2012
Tuesdays, 4 – 6:45 p.m.
Dr. Barbara Liu

When we think of a "convert," we most often think in terms of religious conversion like that described in the familiar lyrics of "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Indeed, there is a long and rich tradition of public testimony of religious conversion, a tradition that we will examine thoroughly in this seminar. However, we will also look at how religious conversion stories have supplied the language and narrative structure to explain a variety of other identity transformations. How, for example, do recovering alcoholics draw on the religious tradition to articulate their stories of recovery? How do former vegans explain and justify their return to omnivory? Or how did southern whites who had vocally supported and benefited from racial segregation, convince mid-twentieth century readers of their eventual racial enlightenment?



We will begin by reading the classic conversion narrative (and arguably the first autobiography ever written) *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Then we will choose the rest of our primary texts (as a class and individually) from a wide range of autobiography, memoir, and fiction. We will ground our reading in the excellent secondary scholarship that explores the conversion narrative as a rhetorical and literary genre. For their seminar papers (to be completed in the spring semester), students will compose a critically-informed examination of a specific conversion narrative—historical or contemporary, religious or secular—and/or compose a thoughtful and carefully-crafted conversion narrative to describe a transformative experience of their own.