

HISTORY & LITERATURE 901:
STORIES of SLAVERY and FREEDOM
Fall 2016 | Tues 10am-12noon | Spindell Room | Quincy House

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Office Hours: Tues 12noon-1:30pm & by appointment



COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Only when lions have historians will hunters stop being heroes”
—*West African proverb*

In the last generation or so, scholars have revolutionized our understanding of slavery and freedom. Challenging the long-held view that slavery was a kind and benevolent institution, wherein enlightened masters would care for enslaved people as if they were their own children—indeed, some were—scholars now see slavery for what it has always been: a brutal, exploitative, and violent system of human bondage, based on and designed to perpetuate rigid hierarchies of status, sex, and skin color. Justified by sacred and secular reasoning—and yet clearly the perverse invention of humans—chattel slavery shaped every aspect of societies that tolerated or embraced it, playing a major role in the emergence and development of what many refer to as “Western culture.”

One of the most hideous and enduring aspects of slavery is its “racial” component. As historians David Brion Davis, Barbara Jeanne Fields, and others have argued, “race”—the idea that skin color difference is a viable indicator and determinant of biological, intellectual and social status—emerged as the basic ideological justification for chattel slavery in the second half of the eighteenth century, the so-called “Age of Revolution.” In other words, the explicit relationship between slavery and “race” is a largely modern, historical phenomenon; it shaped the histories of the British, French, and other European empires, and it achieved its most distinctive and sophisticated form in the United States between 1776 and 1865. In fact, from the American Revolution to the Civil War, the struggle over chattel slavery’s preservation, extension, and abolition dominated American politics and culture. This epic struggle has had an enduring impact: just as the modern world was built on the backs of Africa’s fathers and mothers, modernity itself—the matrix of political ideologies, economic systems, social norms, and cultural symbols in which we are implicated as modern people—has been shaped, indelibly, by the presence and influence of Africa’s sons and daughters in the New World. To paraphrase the great American writer Ralph Waldo Ellison: What would “the West” look like without black people?

The sea change that has taken place in scholarly understandings of slavery and freedom in the modern world has been the result of a simple yet radical methodological shift: to view history through the eyes of enslaved people rather than through the eyes of their masters. With precious few exceptions, until the black freedom struggle of the 1960s, mainstream scholars of slavery wrote their histories from the perspectives of “white” people—that is, principally from the perspectives of those who owned and traded slaves and/or profited from slavery. All of that has now changed. We now have a fuller and richer understanding of where and how enslaved people worked, worshipped, ate, sang, loved, resisted, read, wrote, traveled, fled, and fought, as well as when and why they didn’t. We also know much more about the difficult physical and psychic migration and transition from slavery to freedom. And we have uncovered the many efforts of free black people to create their own communities and to liberate the rest of their brethren in bonds.

Using some of the best revisionist scholarship from the last generation or so, as well as a highly interdisciplinary approach, this seminar examines various stories of slavery and freedom in the modern world. Each week (with a few exceptions), we will ground our discussion in at least one text written or recorded by a person of African descent living in and about what theorist Paul Gilroy has called “the black Atlantic.” In other words, our investigations of slavery and freedom will be guided by enslaved and free black people themselves. We will begin by sampling some of the most important scholarship on race, slavery and abolition in the last generation. Then, we will travel throughout the British and French Empires to understand the complex dynamics of slavery and freedom, religion and law, race and identity, reform and revolution in the eighteenth century Atlantic world. Finally, we will settle on North American shores, where we will read stories of the dramatic tensions over slavery and freedom that gave shape to the modern United States. During the last few class meetings, we will broaden our investigation to include “screenings” of slavery and freedom, as well as modern slave narratives, oral histories of contemporary women and men who have escaped bondage throughout the globe. Using autobiography, fiction, poetry, visual culture, oral histories, court cases, and political writings, as well as scholarship from the fields of history, literature, law, African-American studies, gender and sexuality studies, and cultural studies, this seminar will provide a broader and deeper understanding of the titanic struggle between bondage and liberation—the great moral conflict that occasioned the birth of the modern world.

REQUIRED TEXTS (available for purchase at the COOP):

- Edward Countryman, ed. *How Did American Slavery Begin?* (Bedford/St. Martin’s)
Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (Basic/Civitas)
Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Louisiana State)
Adam Hochschild, *Bury The Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Mariner)
Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Harvard)
C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Vintage)
Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds. *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New Press) **[PoP]**
Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapsansky, eds. *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Writings, 1790-1860* (Routledge)
Yuval Taylor, ed. *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volumes One and Two* (Lawrence Hill) **[IWB]**
Zoe Trodd and Kevin Bales, eds., *To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today’s Slaves* (Cornell)
David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (Penn State)
Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (Vintage)

All required texts are also on reserve at Lamont Library. Additional readings (marked *) are on the course web site.

WEEKLY SYLLABUS

[Week 1, September 6: SHOPPING DAY]

[Week 2, September 13: Origins and Revisions]

Countryman, *How Did American Slavery Begin?*

McCarthy and Stauffer, *Prophets of Protest*, pp. ix-xxxiii, 23-38, 294-296

*Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America"

*Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, ch. 1

*Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery"

*Timothy Patrick McCarthy, "When the Past is Present," *Salon* (January 2016)

http://www.salon.com/2016/01/18/when_the_past_is_present_what_slave_narratives_teach_us_about_our_greatest_human_desire/

UNIT ONE: THE AGE OF EMPIRE

[Week 3, September 20: Geographies of Empire – *student provocations begin*]

Hochschild, *Bury The Chains*, introduction, Parts I and II

Narrative of the Life of James Gronniosaw (1772), **IWB**, pp. 2-28

Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789), **IWB**, pp. 29-180

low stakes (ungraded) writing assignment due in class

[Week 4, September 27: Geographies of Liberty]

Hochschild, *Bury The Chains*, Parts III, IV, and V

*Transcripts of *Somerset* (1772) and *Little Med* (1836) cases

T. K. Hunter, "Geographies of Liberty: A Brief Look at Two Cases," **PoP**, 41-58

UNIT TWO: THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

[Week 5, October 4: Toussaint's Rebellion]

C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins*, Preface, Prologue, ch. 1-2, 4, 6-8, 10-13

*Free Citizens of Color, *Address to the National Assembly* (1790)

*Olympe de Gouges, Preface to *The Slavery of the Blacks* (1792)

*Toussaint Louverture, *A Refutation of Some Assertions in a Speech Pronounced in the Corps Legislatif* (1797)

*Thomas Jefferson, selected letters (1797-1802)

*Toussaint Louverture, from *Constitution of the French Colony of Saint-Domingue* (1801)

**Haitian Declaration of Independence* (1804) and *Constitution* (1805)

*Vincent Brown, “A Vapor of Dread: Observations on Racial Terror and Vengeance in the Age of Revolution”

[Week 6, October 11: Wheatley’s Trials]

*Phillis Wheatley, selected poems and writings

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*

*Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), selections

*Declaration of Independence (including Jefferson’s original draft, 1776)

[Week 7, October 18: The “Black Founders”]

Richard Newman et al., *Pamphlets of Protest*, pp. 1-89

*Selected slave petitions (ca. 1770s)

Richard S. Newman, “‘A Chosen Generation’: Black Founders and Early America,”
PoP, 59-79

Julie Winch, “‘Onward, Onward, Is Indeed the Watchword’: James Forten’s Reflections on Revolution and Liberty,” **PoP**, 80-89

[First Paper due Friday, October 21 by 4pm]

UNIT THREE: THE AGE OF ABOLITION

[Week 8, October 25: Race Men and Women]

*Opening Editorial, *Freedom’s Journal* (1827)

*Maria W. Stewart, *Productions* (1835)

David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829)

*Sojourner Truth, “Ar’n’t I A Woman?” (1851)

Timothy Patrick McCarthy, “‘To Plead Our Own Cause’: Black Print Culture and the Origins of American Abolitionism,” **PoP**, 114-144

Sandra Sandiford Young, “John Brown Russwurm’s Dilemma: Citizenship or Emigration?” **PoP**, 90-113

Patrick Rael, “A Common Nature, A United Destiny: African American Responses to Racial Science from the Revolution to the Civil War,” **PoP**, 183-199

[TBD: Screening and Discussion of Nate Parker’s “The Birth of a Nation”]

[Week 9, November 1: Rebels and Runaways]

The Confessions of Nat Turner (1831), **IWB**, 235-257

*Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave* (1853)

*Walter Johnson, “On Agency” (2003)

Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*

[Week 10, November 8: From Slavery to Freedom]

Life of William Grimes, Runaway Slave (1825), **IWB**, 181-233
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), **IWB**, 523-600
John Stauffer, "Creating an Image in Black: The Power of Abolition Pictures," **PoP**,
256-267

[TBD: Field Trip to "Picturing Frederick Douglass," Museum of African-American History, and Dinner with Prof. John Stauffer: <https://www.nps.gov/boaf/picturing-frederick-douglass.htm>]

UNIT FOUR: THE AGE OF EMANCIPATION?

[Week 11, November 15: From Freedom to Slavery]

Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), **IWB**, 159-317
12 Years a Slave (Steve McQueen, dir., 2013)
<https://lrc.fas.harvard.edu/course-materials/college/403215?date=2016-08-28>
Melissa Harris-Perry and bell hooks, "Black Female Voices: Who Is Listening?"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OmgqXao1ng> (22:00-39:30)
Salamishah Tillet, "Hollywood Finally Catches Up With History"
http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/10/12_years_a_slave_first_hollywood_film_based_on_one_who_lived_it.html
Manisha Sinha, "The Untold History Beneath *12 Years*"
<http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/untold-history-beneath-12-years-article-1.1706946>
Wesley Morris, "The Song of Solomon"
<http://grantland.com/features/the-cultural-crater-12-years-slave/>
Mary Niall Mitchell, "Close Reading: In the Margins of *Twelve Years a Slave*"
<http://harpers.org/blog/2014/02/in-the-margins-of-twelve-years-a-slave/>
Dan P. Lee, "Where It Hurts: Steve McQueen on Why *12 Years a Slave* Isn't Just About Slavery"
<http://www.vulture.com/2013/12/steve-mcqueen-talks-12-years-a-slave.html>

[Week 12, November 22: From Slavery to Freedom?]

Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) – including introduction to Vintage edition by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) – including introduction to the Harvard University Press edition by Jean Fagan Yellin
*Carla L. Peterson, "Capitalism, Black (Under)development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s"
Deborah Gray White, "Revisiting *Ar'n't I a Woman?*" and "Introduction," *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*
*Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation"

[Week 13, November 29: Our Bondage, Our Freedom]

Zoe Trodd and Kevin Bales, *To Plead Our Own Cause*

*Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, Epilogue: “The President’s House, Freedom, and Slavery in the Age of Obama”

[Final Paper due Monday, December 5 by 4pm]

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The course grade will be determined as follows:

Attendance, Participation & Provocation	30%
First Paper (8-10 pages, due Friday, Oct. 21)	30%
Final Paper (12-15 pages, due Monday, Dec. 5)	40%

ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION & PROVOCATION (30%):

Students are expected to attend **all** class meetings. Absences will negatively affect the final course grade. In the event of a medical or personal emergency, students should contact me as soon as possible via email or cell phone to be excused from class. (*NOTE: extracurricular conflicts do not constitute an emergency, and will not be counted as an excused absence.*) For this course to fully succeed, we must all be prepared for and participate in class each week. The average weekly reading load for this seminar is heavy, though it will vary. In terms of participation, I have two expectations: (1) that students complete all reading assignments prior to class; and (2) that students contribute actively to class discussions and debates each week. That said, understanding that different students have different styles of engagement, I am happy to meet with students in office hours to develop strategies for regular and effective class participation.

Starting Week 3, students will be paired to lead class discussion. This will involve two things: (1) student leaders will select a short passage from one of the assigned primary texts for the week, and guide their classmates through a close reading exercise for the first thirty minutes of class; and (2) at the half-hour mark, student leaders will then present a short oral “provocation” (no more than five minutes) to launch our broader discussion of the assigned readings. Provocations can take a variety of forms (dialogue, debate, class exercise, performance, video or media presentation, etc.) but students will be expected to collaborate *and* provoke. This is *not* a book report or comprehensive summary and analysis of all the readings; the provocation should be designed to launch us into the discussion. The goal is to strike a chord, hit a nerve, spark a debate. Each student will be paired for provocation *once* during the term. Every week, **by 5pm the day before class**, the pair of student leaders will send a short email to the entire seminar with the close reading passage as well as any guiding questions or instructions related to their provocation. I am happy to meet with students over a meal or cup of coffee, or during office hours, to help plan their close readings and provocations.

PAPER ASSIGNMENTS (70%): Papers will be described in more detail as the term proceeds. Generally speaking, both graded written assignments will require you to use analytical and close reading skills to interpret and integrate primary and secondary sources in history and literature.

Students are expected to deliver a printed copy of their paper to my Hist and Lit mailbox, 122 Barker Center, by 4pm the day that papers are due. *Papers submitted via email attachment will not be accepted.* Extensions are rarely granted—only in the

event of a genuine medical or personal emergency—and must be negotiated with me *at least 24 hours in advance of the due date*. All unexcused late papers will be docked one-third of a letter grade (A to A-, A- to B+, B+ to B, etc.) per day until the paper is either submitted or reaches a failing grade.

CELL PHONES, LAPTOPS, ETC., are strictly forbidden unless otherwise approved by me. Any student caught texting or using social media during class will promptly be asked to leave and marked absent for that day. Further transgressions of this sort will seriously jeopardize the student's standing—and passing grade—in the course.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: In this course, collaboration on work submitted for formal evaluation (with the exception of “Provocations”) is not permitted. This means that you may not discuss your paper assignments with other students, other than to brainstorm initial ideas. All written work should be entirely your own and must use appropriate citation practices to acknowledge the use of books, articles, websites, class discussions, etc., that you have consulted to complete your assignments. To ensure the proper use of sources while at the same time recognizing and preserving the importance of the academic dialogue, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences has adopted the following policy: “It is expected that all written work submitted for academic credit will be your own. You should always take great care to distinguish your own ideas and knowledge from information derived from sources. The term ‘sources’ includes not only primary and secondary material published in print or online, but also information and opinions gained directly from other people. Quotations must be placed properly within quotation marks and must be cited fully. In addition, all paraphrased material must be acknowledged completely. You are responsible for learning the proper forms of citation. We expect you to be familiar with the *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, which is available at <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>, and to adhere to either the MLA or Chicago citation form.” Plagiarism and other acts of academic dishonesty are taken very seriously at Harvard, and will likely result in some kind of disciplinary action, including required withdrawal from Harvard College. **If you plagiarize an assignment for this course, you will be required to meet individually with me to discuss the violation, and you will receive a failing grade for the term.**

In addition to all this, starting in the Fall 2015 semester, Harvard College adopted an Honor Code as part of its ongoing efforts to promote high standards of academic integrity. The Honor Code is as follows: “*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity—that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgment of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*” For more information on the process and faculty legislation surrounding the Honor Code, please visit **honor.fas.harvard.edu**.

A final note on **DYNAMICS AND CIVILITY**: I trust that all of us will do our part to cultivate a dynamic of mutual respect and civility from the first day forward. This respect goes in all directions: professor-to-student, student-to-professor, and student-to-student. Let me emphasize that **respect does *not* necessarily mean agreement**. Given the content and composition of the course, there will surely be matters on which we will disagree, perhaps vigorously, but we can debate and challenge one another without resorting to uncivil or disparaging behavior. I realize that we come to this material from a variety of backgrounds and critical perspectives, but I believe this kind of diversity strengthens rather than weakens our collective efforts. That said, I'd like this seminar to be as participatory and democratic as possible; I want it to be an enjoyable, rewarding intellectual and personal experience for all of us. I hope you will feel comfortable approaching me with questions or concerns throughout the term—in fact, I encourage it. Welcome!