This course explores African American literary history from its beginning in the eighteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century, interpreting major works in the context of slavery and its aftermath. We will reflect on the complex relationship between literature and political activism by examining the genres and formal devices through which African Americans responded to the demand for individual and collective self-representation. Course themes include authorship and authenticity, captivity and deliverance, law and violence, memory and imagination, kinship and miscegenation, passing and racial impersonation, dialect and double consciousness. Required works by authors such as Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and W. E. B. Du Bois are supplemented by reading in history, theory, and criticism.

READING

All required reading is available on the course website. Optional materials listed under “Related Works” on the schedule are also on the website. Optional materials listed as “Background” are held on reserve in Moffitt Library. Be sure to read the required works before turning to the supplementary materials.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

This course is subject to university policies governing academic integrity, nondiscrimination, disability accommodation, and sexual harassment. Links to these policies are available on the course website.

EVALUATION

Your grade will be determined as follows:

25% Weekly Questions and Classroom Participation
20% Midterm Exam: Identification and Interpretation
20% Final Exam: Identification, Interpretation, and Synthesis
35% Final Essay: 10 pages, including Preparation Assignments
WEEKLY QUESTIONS

Before 11pm on Monday nights, you will submit 2-3 questions about the week’s reading. Questions are to be entered under “Assignments” on the course website. All late submissions will receive half credit. Be sure to explain your questions in sufficient detail, using quotations and other examples as needed. Work hard to formulate real questions—questions, in other words, to which you do not already have answers. When writing your questions, please keep in mind the following criteria:

**Good questions are debatable.** When a question is debatable, it is possible to imagine several reasonable answers. This means that we won’t all agree right away about the answer to a good question. It also means that a good question cannot be answered simply by recalling a fact or pointing to a sentence on the page. Good questions make for long conversations. They can’t be answered in a few words. You know you have an especially good question if you think that we will continue to disagree about the answer even after we have made our best arguments.

**Good questions are precise.** When you’re asking a good question, you know the answer will not seem like mere personal opinion. When you’re responding to a good question, you know you need evidence to convince others to accept your answer. Frequently, good questions point to specific passages and ask about their significance. Sometimes, they use technical language to communicate clearly—this may be necessary, for instance, in describing formal conventions or accounting for the theoretical presuppositions we bring to the study of literature and culture.

**Good questions are significant.** People care about the answers to good questions. When you hear a good question, you are willing to spend some time to answer it. When a good question is asked, there is something immediately at stake for the listener as well as the speaker. However, it is the speaker’s responsibility to explain exactly what is at stake in asking the question.

EXAMS

There are two comprehensive exams in this course, covering all material up to the date of the exam.

The midterm has two parts. The first half of the exam occurs during class on October 16. It asks you to identify passages (author and title) and to explain their importance to the works in which they appear. The second half of the midterm is completed outside of class. It is open book. It asks you to compare and contrast specific works. It is submitted under “Assignments” on the course website on October 17.

There is also a take-home final exam. It will ask you to respond to two broad questions about African American literary history. It is due under “Assignments” on the course website on December 14.
ESSAYS

Essays are 10 pages, double spaced, plus bibliography. Essays are due before December 10. I do not provide prompts for essays. You will compose the question that you attempt to answer in your essay. When writing your question, make sure it meets our criteria for a good question (debatable, precise, and significant). The scale of your question may need be adjusted so it is appropriate for a ten-page essay. This is to be expected. You are encouraged to refine your question during the writing process.

Essays are anticipated by three preparation assignments.

1. **Annotated Bibliography.** Before you formulate your essay question, it is helpful to explore additional sources related to the general topic you are planning to address. These may include contextual materials as well as recent works of theory, history, and criticism. Your annotated bibliography should include at least six entries, formatted correctly according to your preferred system. Each entry should be followed by three to four sentences, summarizing the work and evaluating its potential relevance to your research. The bibliography is due on November 5.

2. **Essay Proposal.** Essays are also anticipated by formal written proposals, which you are to submit before November 19. Your essay proposal should include the following parts:

   - **One Good Question,** and a list of potential answers. Be sure your question satisfies our established formal criteria (debatable, precise, and significant), and be sure to explain your potential answers in sufficient detail, using examples to make your ideas as clear and concrete as possible. If you are able to identify only one reasonable answer to your question, you should ask yourself whether it merits an essay-length investigation.

   - **Draft of the Introduction,** laid out in the following sequence. First, the introduction should explain the question your essay answers and indicate why it is worth asking. Second, it should summarize a common-sense answer to your question, an answer that most people are willing to accept at face value. Third, it should identify a problem with the common-sense answer, perhaps a contradiction in its reasoning or an overlooked detail that it cannot explain. Fourth, it should provide a new-and-improved answer to your question that resolves or accounts for the problem that you have just described. This new-and-improved answer is the thesis statement or main claim of your essay.

   - **Catalog of Evidence,** including at least ten examples to support your argument. These may be quotations or your own descriptions of chapters, scenes, or other aspects from the text under consideration. Your catalog should include bits from secondary sources, ideally drawn from the works you have already included in your annotated bibliography.
3. **Close Reading**: Choose a prose passage or complete poem that is important to the question that you are considering in your essay. Likely, you will want to choose an example included in the catalog of evidence from your proposal. Your close reading should be submitted under “Assignments” on the course website by November 30. It should include the following parts:

**Detailed Description**, laid out as a list of attributes. What is the literal meaning of the passage? Who are its characters, where is its set, what events are presented, and how and why are these events taking place? Can the passage be separated into sections or segments? How do these sections relate to one another? What are the most important words in the passage? Why? Look them up in the Oxford English Dictionary (oed.com). What kind of verbs are used in the passage? What kind of nouns? Is there any pattern? Are other things implied or suggested in the passage in addition to its literal meaning? Are there important things left unsaid? What about its style? Its syntax? If it is a poem, does it have regular meter and rhyme? If so, what are they? Does the passage include dialect? Figurative language? Metaphors or other devices? Is there irony? Is the irony stable or unstable? Are there allusions? Who is speaking in the passage? From what point of view? Does the passage tell us things about its narrator or other characters? How does the passage relate to the plot or the larger themes developed in the work?

**Acknowledgement and Response**, in which you consider how your passage might appear to readers inclined to think differently about your essay question. Begin by looking at the potential answers to your question listed in your essay proposal. How would someone committed to one of these common-sense answers see the passage? What might they miss or misunderstand about the passage? In what ways does your answer to your essay’s question provide a better or more complete perspective on the passage? Answer these questions by writing a paragraph in which you acknowledge how others might read the passage before responding by explaining how your perspective accounts for aspects of the passage that others have failed to notice or comprehend.

**Close Reading**. Type or paste your poem or passage as if you were using it as a block quotation in an essay. Drawing information from your detailed description and your acknowledgement and response, write a paragraph explicating your passage, paying close attention to its form as well as its content, interpreting both obvious and more subtle aspects of the passage in light of the question you are addressing in your essay.

**IMPORTANT DATES**

- Mondays 11pm
- October 16-17
- November 5
- November 19
- November 30
- December 10
- December 14

**Weekly Questions**

- Midterm Exam
- Bibliography
- Essay Proposal
- Close Reading
- Final Essay
- Final Exam
INTRODUCTION

Slavery is often imagined as a static and primitive institution. This is wrong. Slavery varies by time and place. It is basic to economic and political modernization. Slavery does not reflect ancient prejudice; it helped to shape the modern idea of racial identity. “Bars Fight,” the earliest extant poem by an African American, raises essential and still unresolved questions about authenticity, authorship, and tradition.

Reading: Lucy Terry, “Bars Fight” (ca. 1746)

Background: David Brion Davis, Inhuman Bondage (2006)
Stephanie Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery (2007)
Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning (2016)

GENIUS IN BONDAGE

Skeptics doubt Wheatley's authorship and originality. Questions are posed in a trial scenario in which the humanity of the enslaved turns on evidence of imagination. Wheatley inserts the slave's voice into received forms of the neoclassical ode and elegy. Her tropological interpretation of the Book of Exodus characterizes the Middle Passage as a fortunate fall. Slavery is a unique problem in literary history.

Reading: Phillis Wheatley, Poems on Various Subjects (1773)

Related Works: Somerset v. Stewart, 98 ER 499 (1772)
James Albert Gronniosaw, Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars (1772)
Jupiter Hammon, “An Evening Thought” (1761) and “An Essay on Slavery” (1775)

Equiano offers his life story as eyewitness testimony in the debate over the slave trade, establishing a prototype for the slave narrative by adapting conventions familiar from captivity writing and spiritual autobiography. These precedents determine plot as well as passages where retrospection is enacted through dramatic irony and the experience of astonishment. Because Equiano remains indispensable to historical knowledge of the Middle Passage, questions about his reliability take on special urgency.

Reading:  
Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life* (1789)

Related Works:  
Briton Hammon, *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings* (1760)  
John Marrant, *Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings* (1785)  
Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery* (1787)

Background:  

The *Appeal*'s form of address is shaped by the communication network that facilitates its distribution and reception. Across Walker's jeremiad, themes and approaches from black abolitionist newspapers (moral self-improvement, immanent critique of revolutionary republicanism) are combined with the evangelical eschatology expressed by slave rebels like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Controversy over slavery becomes increasingly polarized in the wake of Walker’s pamphlet and Turner’s revolt.

Reading:  
David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829)

Related Works:  
Robert Alexander Young, *The Ethiopian Manifesto* (1829)  
Martin R. Delany, *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859-61)

Background:  
Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton* (2014)  
SEP 18-20  AMERICAN LION

Douglass both instantiates and transcends the formula of the slave narrative. Standard characters, incidents, and settings are expanded through rhetorical tropes such as apostrophe and chiasmus to include memory and imagination. Consciousness diminished by destitution and family destruction is revived through deductive reason and manly self-assertion. The Narrative anticipates and resists the interpretation proposed in Garrison's preface, illustrating a tension within the abolition movement.

Reading: Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life (1845)

Related Works: Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (1855)
Frederick Douglass, “Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall” (1852)
Henry Highland Garnet, “Address to the Slaves of the United States” (1843)

Background: David Blight, Prophet of Freedom (2018)
Robert Levine, The Lives of Frederick Douglass (2016)
Manisha Sinha, The Slave's Cause (2016)

SEP 25  VENGEANCE

The earliest extant work of fiction written by an African American, Victor Séjour’s “Le Mulâtre,” employs incomplete frame narration, a shifting point of view, and the trappings of gothic melodrama to reflect on the trauma of miscegenation and turn to revolutionary violence in the family system of slavery. The story contrasts with Frederick Douglass's portrayal of slave revolt in his only published work of fiction.

Reading: Victor Séjour, “The Mulatto” (1837)

Related Works: “Theresa; a Haytien Tale” (1828)
Armand Lanusse, Les Cenelles (1845)
Frederick Douglass, "The Heroic Slave" (1853)

Background: C. L. R. James, The Black Jacobins (1938)
Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World (2004)
Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death (1982)
Sojourner Truth was a leader in social movements for abolition, women's rights, temperance, suffrage, and prison reform. Her career illustrates the overlapping purposes of these movements as well as the conflicts among them. Truth's most famous address has been transcribed in several different versions, revealing the power dynamics that condition the self-representation of ex-slaves in a variety of genres.

**Reading:** Sojourner Truth, “Address at the Woman's Rights Convention” (1851)

**Related Works:** Frances D. Gage, “Sojourner Truth” (1881)
Harriet Beecher Stowe, “The Libyan Sibyl” (1863)
Maria Stewart, “Address at the African Masonic Hall” (1833)

**Background:** Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word* (1995)

Taking up the rumor—now seen as fact—that Thomas Jefferson fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings, *Clotel* uses a disavowed genealogy to investigate the legacy of revolutionary republicanism. The tragic mulatto persists as a character type. Brown's recycling of passages from a range of sources raises questions about the functions of testimony and genre classification in the abolition movement.

**Reading:** William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter* (1853)

**Related Works:** William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860)
Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is* (1839)
Lydia Maria Child, “The Quadroons” (1842)

OCT 9-11 SOMETHING AKIN TO FREEDOM

Jacobs revises the slave narrative by adapting conventions from domestic fiction to focus on sexual predation and the preservation of family relationships. She questions the sentimental identification encoded both thematically (the topos of child loss) and formally (variations on direct address) in the rhetoric of leading abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe. Understood by some readers as a novel and by others as autobiography, genre classification is again a telling problem in reception history.

Reading: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)

Frances E. W. Harper, “The Slave Auction” (1854)
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)


OCT 16-17 MIDTERM EXAM

The midterm has two parts. The first half of the exam occurs during class on October 16. It asks you to identify passages (author and title) and to explain their importance to the works in which they appear. The second half of the exam is completed outside of class. It is open book. It requires you to interpret, compare, and contrast works. It is submitted under “Assignments” on our website on October 17.

OCT 18 BLACK RECONSTRUCTION

Reconstruction was an experiment in government that granted ex-slaves equal protection and political representation on the heels of emancipation. Black writers forecast the transition from a traditional society based on inherited status to a modern society based on the liberty to contract. Reconstruction was cut short when white supremacists took over state and local governments, and African Americans faced a new wave oppression. Voting rights were stripped. Segregation codes were passed. Criminal prosecution fed the convict lease and chain gang. Agricultural workers were bound in debt peonage.

Reading: Frances E. W. Harper, “National Salvation” (1867)

Related Works: Frances E. W. Harper, “We Are All Bound Up Together” (1866)
Frances E. W. Harper, “The Great Problem to Be Solved” (1875)
John Mercer Langston, “Equality Before the Law” (1874)

**OCT 23-25  LIFTING AS WE CLIMB**

Harper narrates stages of progress after slavery. Characters are introduced as familiar types (the loyal slave, the tragic mulatto) only to be transformed by their commitment to racial uplift. Passing is shown as a moral dilemma in which loyalty and self-interest are opposed. Emancipation leads to the reunion of the black family separated by slavery. Family reunion interrupts then subsumes the marriage plot.

**Reading:** Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892)

**Related Works:**
- Frances E. W. Harper, “The Reunion” (1872)
- Joel Chandler Harris, “A Story of the War” (1880)
- Anna Julia Cooper, “What are We Worth?” (1892)

**Background:**

**OCT 30-NOV 1  WE WEAR THE MASK**

Dunbar adapts themes and nonstandard orthography from the plantation tradition and blackface minstrelsy to appeal to magazine and book publishers. His dialect poems are valued for their racial authenticity, but they are better understood as black imitation of white imitation of black expression. This irony destabilizes the pastoral representation of labor and subsistence. At the same time, dirges meditate on the poet's alienation. Dunbar's success comes at the height of the lynching epidemic.

**Reading:** Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896)

**Related Works:**
- Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Compromise Address” (1895)
- Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Lynch Law in Georgia* (1899)

**Background:**
NOV 6-8 DIALECT AND DESCENT

Chesnutt engages the legacy of slavery through the oral tradition. Frame narration contrasts the world of slavery as depicted in dialect stories with the post-emancipation world in which the stories are told. Elements from oral tradition (enchantment, tricksterism) are repurposed as allegories about property and exchange. The vernacular storyteller's vexed relationship to his audience models the predicament faced by black authors like Chesnutt and Dunbar working in the established magazine and book trade.

Reading: Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman* (1899)

Related Works: Thomas Nelson Page, “Marse Chan” (1884)
Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth” (1898)
Charles W. Chesnutt, “Superstitions and Folklore of the South” (1901)

Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977)

NOV 13-15 THE NADIR

Chesnutt tests Booker T. Washington's prediction that property accumulation will lead to political recognition. The Wilmington Riot is the setting for a forensic investigation of lynching, segregation, racist propaganda, disfranchisement, and mass violence under circumstances of urbanization and industrialization. Formal devices like flat characterization and melodramatic coincidence, labeled aesthetic flaws by critics such as E. M. Forster, prove indispensable to Chesnutt's historical novel.

Reading: Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)

D. W. Griffith, dir., *Birth of a Nation* (1915)
Oscar Micheaux, dir., *Within Our Gates* (1920)

NOV 20  WRITING WORKSHOP

We will be discussing a few essay proposals. We will think together about how they demonstrate representative challenges involved in writing about works of literature. We will also take the time to address the particular claims made in the proposals—applauding strengths, asking for clarification, suggesting alternative evidence, and raising objections in order to advance the writing process.

NOV 27-29  WITHIN THE VEIL

Du Bois draws on history, literature, philosophy, psychology, and sociology to provide a multivalent interpretation of the so-called Negro Problem. Double consciousness is defined for our purposes as a negative state of self-awareness suggested by the statement: “I know who I am only because I know I am not who they say I am.” Documentary approaches to the Black Belt turn melancholy. The spirituals suggest a cultural kinship that spans the Middle Passage. Combining the concerns of previous writers, Du Bois sets the terms for the development of African American literature in the twentieth century.

Reading:  
W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903)

Related Works:  
Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)  
William James, “The Consciousness of Self” (1890)  

Background:  
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Anna Julia Cooper, “What are We Worth?” in *A Voice from the South* (Xenia, Oh.: Aldine Printing House, 1892), 228-285.

Ottobah Cugoano, Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery: and Commerce of the Human Species (London: Published by the Author, 1787).


Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855).

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845).

Frederick Douglass, Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall (Rochester: Lee Mann, 1852)

Philip Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown (New York: Random House, 2002).

Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393 (1857)


Jupiter Hammon, *An Evening Thought, Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries: Composed by Jupiter Hammon, a Negro belonging to Mr. Lloyd of Queen's Village, on Long Island, the 25th of December, 1760* (Hartford: Printed for the Author, 1761).


Oscar Micheaux, dir., *Within Our Gates* (Chicago: Micheaux Film and Book Company, 1920).


*Somerset v. Stewart* 98 ER 499 (1772)


David Walker, *Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829* (Boston: Printed by the Author, 1829).


