

English 101-6, section 26: Freshman Seminar
Slavery and Freedom, Past and Present

Spring 2010 / T, TH 2-3:20 PM / University Hall 101

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Office Hours: T 12:45-1:45 PM; TH 3:30-4:30 PM; & by appointment
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Like our slaves, the freedom of the negro has no birthday... The chains of slavery with us were loosened by degrees... In 1862 we had the conditional promise of a proclamation of emancipation from President Lincoln, and, finally, on the 1st of January, 1863, we had the proclamation itself—and still the end was not yet. Slavery was bleeding and dying, but it was not dead, and no man can tell just when its foul spirit departed from our land, if, indeed, it has yet departed....

—Frederick Douglass, from an 1880 speech

Overview: Issuing the lines quoted above in a speech delivered nearly two decades after the abolition of black bondage in the United States, Frederick Douglass expressed a skepticism about the possibility of marking the “end” of racial servitude in a single date, not merely for fear that to do so would reduce the horror of the institution but out of an awareness that the legal termination of slavery in 1865 did not necessarily signal its conclusion. In what ways does slavery endure in the era of freedom? Taking this question as a point of departure, this course investigates racial slavery, both as historical fact and as a metaphor for varying states of unfreedom from the nation’s founding to the present day. After defining slavery’s constituent elements and reading Douglass’s famous 1845 slave narrative, we will focus on scenes of slavery’s recurrence in postemancipation works by a range of American authors, both black and white, asking what it means to call antiblack violence or sociopolitical subjugation a “second slavery,” as W. E. B. Du Bois does, and thinking about how such an assertion might challenge us to reconfigure our standard conceptions of time, history, and progress. In the final unit of the course, we will turn our attention to current examples of slavery’s afterlife, such as debates about reparations and instances of blackface performance. We also will ask how we might understand racial servitude in relation to modern-day human bondage and the traffic in persons, which, although not race based, are nonetheless forms of slavery that are alive and well, even in the United States.

Required Texts (available at Norris Bookstore; please purchase the specific editions ordered for this class):

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (Norton Critical Edition)
- W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Norton Critical Edition)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Plume)
- Course reader (available at Quartet Copies, 825 Clark St., Evanston)

Recommended Texts & Resources (available in the library and/or online):

- Free the Slaves (information on modern slavery): www.freetheslaves.net
- Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th ed.)

- *The Oxford English Dictionary*: <http://dictionary.oed.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/entrance.dtl>
 - Slavery and the Making of America (information on the history of racial slavery in the United States): <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/index.html>
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Key Objectives: In this course, you will:

- study slavery and its relationship to freedom in the United States, past and present, as theorized by a number of academic disciplines (literary studies, sociology, philosophy) and as represented by a variety of media (literature, film, music);
- practice skills of critical reading and analysis, honing the written and oral articulation of your ideas about course texts, topics, and themes; and
- emerge from the seminar better equipped to understand the complexities of—and, should you wish, to engage with—the real-world problems of racial inequality, human exploitation, and social injustice at the core of slavery and its persistence.

Methods & Requirements: In accordance with the course objectives, this seminar requires you to do three different kinds of work. First, it asks you to complete readings on the class theme, critically assessing the arguments put forth in the assigned nonliterary texts and analyzing the relations between content and form in the literary works on the syllabus. Second, you're expected to engage in a lively discussion about the assigned readings, and to consider carefully and respond to the positions and ideas of your peers (more about this crucial component below). Finally, this course asks you to write early and often about slavery and freedom, past and present. In addition to completing a number of informal writing assignments, you will compose three formal papers throughout the term: a definitional essay (3-4 pp.); a close reading of a passage from one of the literary works on the syllabus (4-5 pp.); and a final paper of your own design on a representation of slavery and freedom, past or present (5-6 pp.).

Communication: E-mail is an official mode of correspondence for this class. As such, you are responsible for all communiqués I send to your Northwestern e-mail address as listed on our Blackboard site. E-mail is also the best way for you to contact me. Should you ever want to meet with me in person, feel free to come to my office hours. If you're unable to make my office hours because of scheduling conflicts, simply let me know, and we can arrange another time to meet.

Blackboard: Announcements, questions to guide your reading of the assigned texts, electronic versions of course documents, and other useful information will be available on our Blackboard site, which you can access at: <https://courses.northwestern.edu/webapps/login/>. Please check this site regularly.

Participation: This seminar requires your active, informed, and energetic participation. Please arrive on time. Participation counts for twenty-five percent of your final grade (as much as a single paper assignment), and as such it will have a significant impact on your overall course performance. You will receive feedback about your class participation at the midpoint of the term. Besides attending all class meetings, completing a note card for each session for which there is no writing assignment due (more on this below), to receive a strong participation score you also must contribute to the discussion during each class session. To “contribute” means to answer a question, ask an informed question, respond to a colleague’s point, or put forth your own idea. Your comments should emerge

from your engagement with the readings, and thus you should be able to refer to specific page numbers to support your points. Be sure to bring the appropriate materials (e.g. readings, essays) to class so that you can fully participate. So that we can engage in genuine face-to-face discussions, laptops are prohibited unless required for a documented disability. The informal writing assignments I ask you to complete throughout the term will be assessed as part of your participation grade.

Note Card Reflections: You will be required to prepare a note card reflection for every class session unless there is a writing assignment due on that day (i.e. you will submit 12 note cards by the end of the term). Your note card should include a short statement about the assigned reading. Your statement can take any number of forms: you might offer a brief response to the guiding question posted on Blackboard; or, you might pose a probing question of your own, draw attention to a key detail or paradox in an argument, or offer an interpretation of a central passage in the reading. Regardless of the route you choose, you should always cite the specific page number of the text to which your statement refers. You are only permitted to write on the front side of a 3x5 inch note card; please remember to put your name at the top of the card. The purpose of this exercise is to help you focus your thoughts for class discussion and to give me a sense of your interests. These note cards will count toward your participation grade. Note cards are due at the start of each class; late cards are not accepted, and you may not submit a note card for a day you are absent from class (unless your absence is prearranged and excused).

Midterm Meeting: At the midpoint of the course, each student will schedule an individual meeting with me. We will discuss your progress in the course thus far, focusing in particular on your second informal writing assignment and your class participation, and we will chart out goals for improvement in the second half of the class. While you are only required to meet with me on this one occasion, I hope you will visit my office hours regularly throughout the term.

Course Connections: While not required, finding connections to the ideas we study in class in sources such as songs, popular culture, current events, news articles, etc. is highly encouraged and will only help your participation grade. Post your contributions to the Course Connections forum, located in the Discussion Board area of our Blackboard site.

Attendance: Because active participation is essential to your success in this course, and because it's impossible to participate if you're not in attendance (at least as far as I've seen), any unexcused absence from class will negatively impact your participation grade. If you accumulate more than three unexcused absences, you will receive a failing grade for the course. Should you need to miss a class for a valid reason, please contact me as soon as possible, but at least one day in advance, so that we can discuss possibilities for make-up work.

Assessment: Your performance in this seminar will be assessed based on the quality of your three formal essays, as well as on the strength of your class participation, which includes attendance, note cards, contributions to class discussion, and the short writing assignments that you will complete throughout the term. In evaluating your written work, I will focus on the *clarity, complexity, and precision* of the *argument, evidence, and analysis* you put forth. Your final grade for this course will be calculated according to the percentages outlined below.

Grading Breakdown

Essay 1 (3-4 pp.): 20%

Essay 2 (4-5 pp.): 25%

Essay 3 (5-6 pp.): 30%

Participation: 25%

Reading Assignments: Reading assignments outlined below on the course calendar will be discussed in class on the day on which they are listed. Please read the assigned piece(s) by this date, review the guiding questions posted under the Announcements section of our Blackboard site, mark up key passages in the text, complete your note card, and come prepared to engage in a lively discussion about the text(s). All reading assignments can be found in the books ordered for this seminar or in the course packet.

Writing Assignments: All written work is to be submitted **in hard copy form** at the **beginning** of the class session in which it is due. Late assignments will be penalized. Because of the frequent writing assignments required for this course, and so that I can return your graded work promptly, extensions will not be granted except under extraordinary circumstances (e.g. severe illness, personal emergency, etc.). Only typed papers will be accepted; please double space your essays, set your margins to one inch, and use a standard font (such as Times New Roman) at the 12-point size. Number your pages, only print on one side of each page, and staple your essay before turning it in. Be sure to give your paper a provocative title that speaks to the essay's argument (not "Essay 1"). Finally, you should employ parenthetical citations, as per the guidelines set forth in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, to incorporate textual evidence into your essay and to create a list of works cited. For details, please see the English Department Style Sheet, posted in the Course Documents section of our Blackboard site.

Academic Integrity: Your work for this course must be your own. Plagiarism can result in failure of the class and possibly removal from Northwestern. Please review the official policies on academic integrity at: <http://www.wcas.northwestern.edu/advising/academic.html>.

COURSE SCHEDULE**I. Slavery and/vs. Freedom**Slavery and Freedom, Past and Present: Some Definitions

T, 3/30

Introductions

Nas, "N.I.*.E.R. (The Slave and the Master)"

Kanye West, "Spaceship" sequence

TH, 4/1

Walter Johnson, "Slavery"

Orlando Patterson, "The Constituent Elements of Slavery"

Kwame Anthony Appiah, "What's Wrong with Slavery?"

Newspaper articles in groups: Ira Berlin, "Overcome by Slavery"; Clarence

Page, "Apology, at last, but with an escape clause"; Orlando

Patterson, "A Job Too Big for One Man"

Due: Example of slavery/freedom

Declarations of Independence

T, 4/6 Thomas Jefferson, draft of the Declaration of Independence
Orlando Patterson, "Slavery as Human Parasitism"
Due: One-page paper on definition of slavery/freedom

"The Pathway from Slavery to Freedom"

TH, 4/8 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (pp. 3-42)

T, 4/13 Douglass, *Narrative* (pp. 42-80)

TH, 4/15 **Due: Essay 1**

II. Slavery after Abolition

"No Reparation"

T, 4/20 Stephen Crane, *The Monster*

The "Present-Past"

TH, 4/22 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (pp. 5-6, 9-33, 46-54)

T, 4/27 Du Bois, *Souls* (pp. 119-134, 154-164)

Due: One-page close reading

TH, 4/29 Individual meetings (No class. Begin *Beloved*, reading as much as you can but at least pp. 3-19.)

"Not a Story to Pass On"

T, 5/4 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (pp. 3-105)

TH, 5/6 Morrison, *Beloved* (pp. 106-199)

T, 5/11 Morrison, *Beloved* (pp. 200-275)

TH, 5/13 Morrison, "A Bench by the Road"

Due: Essay 2

III. Slavery Today

Blackface Minstrelsy

T, 5/18 Eric Lott, "Introduction" to *Love and Theft*
Steven C. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture"

Rebecca Olles, "Forum Opens Race Conversation"

Due: Recent example of "symbolic slavery"/blackface

TH, 5/20 *Bamboozled*, directed by Spike Lee (Class screening to be scheduled; film available on Blackboard, under Course Documents)

Reparations for Slavery and Jim Crow?

T, 5/25 Robin D. G. Kelley, “A Day of Reckoning’: Dreams of Reparations”
John McWhorter, “Against Reparations”

Modern-Day Slavery

TH, 5/27 Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, “The Old Slavery and the New”; “Eating, Wearing, Walking, and Talking Slavery”; and “A Future without Slavery”
Due: Primary text and question for final paper

Final paper proposal due via e-mail to g-laski@northwestern.edu by 4 pm on Friday, May 28

**Final paper due by 4 pm on Tuesday, June 8
(Submit paper to English Department Office, University Hall 215)**