

*Stories of Slavery and Freedom*  
Timothy Patrick McCarthy, Ph.D., Harvard University

**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 in the modern Atlantic world. Challenging the long-held view that slavery was a kind and benevolent institution, wherein enlightened masters would care for their slaves 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 class, sex, and color. Justified by sacred and secular reasoning—and yet clearly the perverse invention of man—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 we share as modern people—was 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 blacks?

The sea-change that has taken place in scholarly understandings of slavery and freedom in the modern world has been the result of a major methodological shift: to view history through the eyes of slaves rather than through the eyes of masters. With precious few exceptions, until the black freedom struggle of the 1960s, scholars of slavery wrote their histories from the perspectives of “white” people—that is, 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 slaves worked, prayed, ate, sang, loved, resisted, read, traveled and fought, as well as when and why they didn’t. We also know much more about the difficult physical and psychic migration 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 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 Atlantic 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 slaves and free blacks 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 our last class meeting, we will broaden our investigation to include two modern forms of slave narrative: interviews of former American slaves recorded during the 1930s; and oral histories of contemporary slaves who have escaped bondage across the globe. Using autobiography, fiction, poetry, film, oral histories, court cases, and political writings, as well as scholarship from the fields of history, literature, African-American 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 Atlantic world.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS**

- 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, Volume One, 1772-1849* (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)

Additional readings (marked \* below) will be distributed in class and via the course web site.

## WEEKLY SYLLABUS

### [Week 1: Introduction]

### [Week 2: 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

## **UNIT ONE: THE AGE OF EMPIRE**

### [Week 3: 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

### [Week 4: 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: Toussaint's Rebellion]

C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins*

J. R. Beard, Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and *Autobiography* (1863), selections

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/beard63/beard63.html>

### [Week 6: 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: 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]**

**UNIT THREE: THE AGE OF REFORM**

**[Week 8: 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)

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

**[Week 9: Runaways]**

*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

**[Week 10: Rebels]**

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

Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave* (1853)

\*Sojourner Truth, "Ar'n't I A Woman?" (1851)

Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*

**UNIT FOUR: THE AGE OF EMANCIPATION**

**[Week 11: Divided Houses, Part One: The North]**

Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859)

\*Carla L. Peterson, "Capitalism, Black (Under)development, and the Production of the  
African-American Novel in the 1850s,"

\*Abraham Lincoln, "House Divided" Speech (1858)

**<http://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/abrahamlincolnhousedivided.htm>**

**[Week 12: Divided Houses, Part Two: The South]**

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

\*Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation"

\*Emancipation Proclamation (1862, 1863)

\*Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address (1865)

**<http://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/abrahamlincolnsecondinauguraladdress.htm>**

**[Week 13: Modern Stories of Slavery and Freedom]**

Selections from WPA Narratives, **<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>**

Trodd and Bales, *To Plead Our Own Cause*, selections

**[Final Paper Due]**

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

The course grade will be determined as follows:

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| Classroom Attendance and Participation | 20% |
| Student Provocations                   | 20% |
| First Paper (8-10 pages)               | 20% |
| Final Paper (12-15 pages)              | 40% |

**CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION:** This will consist of lively, engaged, contentious but always civil debate based on a learned familiarity with weekly course assignments. The average weekly reading load for this seminar is approximately 200pp. I have two major expectations of students: (1) students will be required to complete *all* the assigned reading *prior* to coming to class; and (2) *every* student will make *at least one* contribution to class discussion *each* week. In other words, I'll call on students who are not speaking. In addition, starting the third week of class, two students will begin seminar by presenting a 5-10 minute oral provocation based on the assigned readings. Provocations can take a variety of forms (dialogue, debate, class exercise, performance, new media presentation, etc.) but students will be expected to collaborate *and* provoke. This is *not* a book report or summary of the readings. Each student will be paired for provocation twice during the term. The day before their provocation, the provocateurs will send an email to the entire seminar with 2-3 questions and a short list of specific passages from the assigned reading to help guide our class discussion the next day.

**CLASSROOM ATTENDANCE:** Students are expected to attend *all* seminar meetings. Absences will negatively affect the final course grade. In the event of medical or personal emergency, students must contact me immediately *via email* to be excused from class.

**PAPER ASSIGNMENTS:** Papers will be described in more detail as the term proceeds. Generally speaking, both writing assignments will require you to use analytical and close reading skills to interpret and integrate primary and secondary sources.

Students are expected to submit one hard copy of their paper 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. Papers will be returned, with my feedback, within two weeks of their submission.

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

A final note on **DYNAMICS AND CIVILITY:** I trust that everyone will do her or his part to cultivate a dynamic of mutual respect and civility from the first day forward. This

respect goes in all directions: students-to-instructor, instructor-to-students, and student-to-student. Let me emphasize that *respect* does *not* necessarily mean *agreement*. There will 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 personal backgrounds and critical perspectives, and 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 experience for all of you. I hope you will feel comfortable approaching me with questions or concerns throughout the term—in fact, I encourage it. Welcome!