

Ithaca College  
Department of English

**STUDIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**  
**THE SLAVE NARRATIVE:**  
**PAST AND PRESENT**  
Prof. Laura Murphy

**Course Description:**

This course will explore several central works of African American literature through the lens of one of its most prominent genres: the slave narrative. Though very few people recognize it, 27 million people are still enslaved in the world today. Almost from the time of the earliest forms of slavery in the US to today, enslaved people have produced written documents which reflect on their experiences of forced labor. We will focus on the genre of the slave narrative as it has been produced and re-produced since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, discussing at first the early African American autobiographical tradition. We will read each early slave narrative in conversation with several short slave narratives from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century slavery. In the second unit, we will discuss the contemporary African American novel and its reinvention of the slave narrative in fictional form. Towards the end of the course, we will read several lengthier contemporary slave narratives produced around the globe in the last fifteen years. In this final unit, we will read narratives by survivors of slavery in order to understand how rhetorical strategies, stylistic choices, formalistic qualities, and elements of narrative content resonate across the centuries of the slave narrative tradition. Students in this course will discuss the extent to which African American representations of forced labor, oppression, emancipation and escape persist in the U.S. and provide a model for more recent authors all over the world.

**Experiential Learning Opportunities:**

Students have the option of participating in several service/experiential learning opportunities associated with this course. First, Ithaca College (and the larger Ithaca community) has the opportunity to become one of the pilot chapters for an anti-slavery organization called Free the Slaves. Students in this course are invited to participate in the formation of this student-run group. Second, if we can locate interest and support, we might consider turning this course into a mini-conference on slavery and slave narratives at Ithaca College. Students would then have the opportunity to present their writing and research. Finally, students are encouraged to participate in labor organizations around the Ithaca area or to involve themselves in national or international abolitionist organizations and bring what they've learned in that work into the classroom as well.

**Required texts will include:**

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*  
Penguin Classics Edition, ISBN 9780140390124  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/menu.html>

Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd, *To Plead Our Own Cause*  
Cornell University Press, ISBN 0801474388

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*  
Dover Thrift Editions, ISBN 0486419312  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/menu.html>

Olaudah Equiano/Wernder Sollors, Ed. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of...*  
W. W. Norton & Company, ISBN 0393974944  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano1/menu.html>

Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*  
Scribner, ISBN 0684855887

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*  
Vintage, ISBN 1400033411

Jean-Robert Cadet, *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*  
University of Texas Press, ISBN 0292712030

On Ebrary at Ithaca Libraries

Francis Bok, *Escape from Slavery*  
St. Martin's Griffin, 0312306245

And several selections to be handed out in class

**Assignments and Grading:**

Students will be required to write two essays during the semester as well as several short QHQs. There will also be a take home final paper which will be preceded (around Thanksgiving) by an annotated bibliography of the sources to be used in the final paper. Improvement is strongly rewarded; as a result, assignments are weighted more heavily as the semester proceeds to encourage steady improvement in writing and intellectual engagement.

Students will be required to give one presentation during the semester, leading the class in discussion for a portion of the class period. This is often the most rewarding part of the course for many students.

Student will periodically be required to write a short, 1-2 page "QHQ." QHQ stands for question-hypothesis-question. You will begin the paper by asking yourself an analytical question about the text which you have yet to be able to answer. The majority of the paper will be comprised of your attempt to formulate a hypothesis. Your short paper will end with another question that this thinking experiment has led you to. These papers very well may aid in the invention of a larger paper topic. QHQs will be due on blackboard by midnight on the night before the class date on which it will be discussed.

The grading breakdown is as follows:

QHQs 15%

Midterm Paper (5-7p) 20%

Annotated Bib 10%

Final Paper (8-10p) 30%

Participation 10%

Presentation 15%

## CALENDAR

Wed Aug 27 INTRODUCTIONS

Fri Aug 29 Bales, *Disposable People* 1-33 /Lecture: Modern day slavery

Mon Sept 1 **LABOR DAY: NO CLASS**

Wed Sept 3 Olney "I Was Born" from *Callaloo* /Lecture: The Slave Narrative

### ***Discovering Slavery and Freedom***

Fri Sept 5 Douglass, *Narrative*: 33-70

Mon Sept 8 Douglass, *Narrative*: 71-100 **QHQ**

Wed Sept 10 Douglass, *Narrative*: 100-151

Fri Sept 12 Bales, *To Plead* Chapter 3: 137-174

### ***Extraordinary Women and the Peculiar Institution***

Mon Sept 15 Jacobs, *Incidents*: 1-39

Wed Sept 17 Jacobs, *Incidents*: 39-80

Fri Sept 19 Jacobs, *Incidents*: 80-118

Mon Sept 22 Jacobs, *Incidents*: 118-164 **QHQ**

Wed Sept 24 Bales, *To Plead* Chapter 2: 83-136

Fri Sept 26 WRITING WORKSHOP

### ***The Struggle for Freedom***

Mon Sept 29 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*: 19-55 **THESIS DUE**

Wed Oct 1 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*: 55-99

Fri Oct 3 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*: 100-121

Mon Oct 6 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*: 121-149

Wed Oct 8 Equiano *The Interesting Narrative*: 150-178

Fri Oct 10 Bales, *To Plead* Chapter 4: 175-218 **PAPER ONE DUE**

### ***Speaking Out and Defining Slavery***

Mon Oct 13 Brown, "Lecture" and "Narrative" from the Dover Edition of *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*

Wed Oct 15 Bales, *To Plead* Chapter 5: 219-250

Fri Oct 17 **FALL BREAK: NO CLASS**

### ***The Neo-Slave Narrative and Re-membering Slavery***

Mon Oct 20 Johnson, *Middle Passage*: 1-43

Wed Oct 22 Johnson, *Middle Passage*: 44-70

Fri Oct 24 Johnson, *Middle Passage*: 70-119

Mon Oct 27 Johnson, *Middle Passage*: 120-167 **QHQ**

Wed Oct 29 Johnson, *Middle Passage*: 168-209

Fri Oct 31 Morrison, *Beloved*: TBA

Mon Nov 3 Morrison, *Beloved*: TBA

Wed Nov 5 Morrison, *Beloved*: TBA

Fri Nov 7 Morrison, *Beloved*: TBA

Mon Nov 10 Morrison, *Beloved*: TBA **QHQ**

Wed Nov 12 Morrison, *Beloved*: TBA

Fri Nov 14 Morrison, *Beloved*: TBA / FILM TBA

***Narrating New Slavery***

Mon Nov 17 Cadet, *Restavec*: 1-56

Wed Nov 19 Cadet, *Restavec*: 56-108

Fri Nov 21 Cadet, *Restavec*: 108-182 **QHQ**

Mon Nov 24 – Fri Nov 28 **THANKSGIVING: NO CLASS**

Mon Dec 1 Bok, *Escape from Slavery*: 1-46 **ANNOTATED BIB DUE**

Wed Dec 3 Bok, *Escape from Slavery*: 47-96

Fri Dec 5 Bok, *Escape from Slavery*: 97-150

Mon Dec 8 Bok, *Escape from Slavery*: 151-200

Wed Dec 10 Bok, *Escape from Slavery*: 200-263

Fri Dec 12 Bok, *Escape from Slavery*: 264-278/WINDUP