English 741:
Slavery in American Memory
Wednesday, 7:00-9:50
223 Colson Hall

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Office Hours:
Tuesday, 2:00-3:00
Wednesday, 3:00-4:00
and by appointment
(or just stop by)

On November 14, 1847, William Wells Brown delivered a lecture to the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Massachusetts, and announced that his subject would be American slavery "as it is," including "its influence on American character and morals." Having said that, though, Brown quickly asserted that "Slavery has never been represented; Slavery never can be represented." Any attempt to represent the system of slavery, Brown noted, could only fail; and if he were to try to represent it, he stated, he would need to whisper it to his audience, "one at a time." Brown then goes on to represent slavery in a masterful performance that includes definitions of slavery, examples of its intimate violations, commentary on the white press and commercial interests involved in the maintenance of the national system of slavery, remarks on the legal system required by slavery, and observations on the extent to which slavery has corrupted white American character, including the political and religious ideals to which white Americans claimed devotion. It was a system, as Brown's opening remarks indicated, at once so extensive and so intimate as to both resist and require representation--and the representation that could only fail would somehow need to be both general and individualized, both a grand dissertation and an intimate communication, whispered to individual ears but finding the one in the many, the many in the one, in its approach to the system that provided the underlying but unspeakable unity to a nation all but lost in its own mythology and degradation.

In this course we will read various attempts to represent the unrepresentable realities of the system of slavery in the United States. Our readings will extend from the nineteenth-century to the twentieth, from Ellen and William Craft to Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed. In addition to various literary treatments of slavery, we will consider plantations, heritage trails, and other sites of memory and historical tourism, and we will consider as well such significant historical/legendary narratives as the Underground Railroad (itself an organizing framework for historical tourism).

Words of Wisdom to Guide Our Journey This Semester:

Truth, in my belief, is something which occurs when actions take place: not when phrases are contrived. Truth is not a word which represents correct response to an examination, nor a well-written piece of prose. Truth is not a "right word" which can be printed. It is (it is only) a "right deed" which can be done.

--Jonathan Kozol. *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*

Academic institutions offer myriad ways to protect ourselves from the threat of a live encounter. To avoid a live encounter with teachers, students can hide behind their notebooks and their silence. To avoid a live encounter with students, teachers can hide behind their podiums, their credentials, their power. To avoid a live encounter with one another, faculty can hide behind their academic specialties.

To avoid a live encounter with subjects of study, teachers and students alike can hide behind the pretense of objectivity: students can say, "Don't ask me to think about this stuff--just give me the facts," and faculty can say, "Here are the facts--don't think about them, just get them straight." To avoid a live encounter with ourselves, we can learn the art of self-alienation, of living a divided life.

This fear of the live encounter is actually a sequence of fears that begins in the fear of diversity. As long as we inhabit a universe made homogeneous by our refusal to admit otherness, we can maintain the illusion that we possess the truth about ourselves and the world--after all, there is no "other" to challenge us! But as soon as we admit pluralism, we are forced to admit that ours is not the only standpoint, the only experience, the only way, and the truths we have built our lives on begin to feel fragile.

If we embrace diversity, we find ourselves on the doorstep of our next fear: fear of the conflict that will ensue when divergent truths meet. Because academic culture knows only one form of conflict, the win-lose form called competition, we fear the live encounter as a contest from which one party emerges victorious while the other leaves defeated and ashamed. To evade public engagement over our dangerous differences, we privatize them, only to find them growing larger and more diverse.

If we peel back our fear of conflict, we find a third layer of fear, the fear of losing identity. Many of us are so deeply identified with our ideas that when we have a competitive encounter, we risk losing more than the debate: we risk losing our sense of self.

Of course, there are forms of conflict more creative than the win-lose form called competition, forms that are vital if the self is to grow. But academic culture knows little of these alternative forms--such as consensual decision making--in which all can win and none need lose, in which "winning" means emerging from the encounter with a larger sense of self than one brought into it, in which we learn that the self is not a scrap of turf to be defended but a capacity to be enlarged.

If we embrace the promise of diversity, of creative conflict, and of "losing" in order to "win," we still face one final fear--the fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives. This is not paranoia: the world really is out to get us! Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and theories and values but also to new ways of living our lives--and that is the most daunting threat of all.

--Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*

Yet if the discussion about the profession's contemporary status seems especially heated and confused, perhaps it is because we have never discerned so many intersecting, mutually implicating crises at one time. As we question the institutional practices by which literary canons

are constructed and maintained, we also question, more broadly, the university's role as producer of knowledge and as reproducer of a social order in which knowledge is power and information is commodity. We question the relation of critical intellectuals to popular culture, as well as the relation between intellectuals and their institutional matrices of power. We question the relation of literary theory to pedagogical practice, as well as the relation of academic, professional criticism to the nonacademic literary culture around it.

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But precisely because I am located within these various debates, I don't believe we can talk very long about the social mission or legitimation practices of criticism without distorting, by totalizing, the very positions and practices we hope to illuminate. The "institution of literary criticism" is no longer (if it ever was) one solid, monolithic thing; its practices and positions are multiple and contradictory; its canons are diachronically, historically variable (like everything else) and synchronically, socially variable as well. It is true that we can discern, even amid these variables, some of the historical tendencies of academic criticism, and we can contest some of its contemporary practices; but I sincerely hope that the moment for describing "*the* function of criticism" has passed forever.

--Michael Berubé. *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon*

One has the feeling that nights are becoming sleepless in some quarters, and it seems to me obvious that the recoil of traditional "humanists" and some postmodern theorists to this particular aspect of the debate [she's talking about the debate over the literary "canon"], the "race" aspect, is as severe as it is because the claims for attention come from that segment of scholarly and artistic labor in which the mention of "race" is either inevitable or elaborately, painstakingly masked; and if all of the ramifications that the term demands are taken seriously, the bases of Western civilization will require re-thinking. Thus, in spite of its implicit and explicit acknowledgment, "race" is still a virtually unspeakable thing, as can be seen in the apologies, notes of "special use" and circumscribed definitions that accompany it--not least of which is my own deference in surrounding it with quotation marks. Suddenly (for our purposes, suddenly) "race" does not exist. For three hundred years black Americans insisted that "race" was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted "race" was *the* determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as "race," biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it.

--Toni Morrison. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"

Society has other uses for us than those we have generally chosen. It uses schools and colleges to sort out young people for various kinds of work. English teachers must do that and use literature to help in the sorting. Society needs help from the schools to justify its present divisions, including much inequality. There is pressure--indirect but heavy--on teachers of literature to join in this effort. The ruling classes want a culture, including a literature and a

criticism, that supports the social order and discourages rebellion, while it sanctions all kinds of nonthreatening nonconformity. It we want to teach literature, we had better adapt it to this task, too.

How do these urgencies get transmitted to teachers and students of literature? I think that people are most malleable when they are advancing from one station in life to a higher one and trying to do so. The ideas that play a part in rites of passage make more of an impression than those ideas of smaller practical consequence. The values that inhere in rites of passage will be influential values. And the styles that are rewarded at initiation tend to become the styles of the initiates.

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We train young people, and those who train young people, in the skills required by a society most of whose work is done on paper and through talk, not by physical labor. We also discipline the young to do assignments, on time, to follow instructions, to turn out uniform products, to observe the etiquette of verbal communication. And, in so doing, we eliminate the less adapted, the ill-trained, the city youth with bad verbal manners, blacks with the wrong dialect, Latinos with the wrong language, and the rebellious of all shapes and sizes, thus helping to maintain social and economic inequalities. Most of these are unwilled consequences, and, since they also run counter to the egalitarian ideology of the larger culture, it is not surprising that the English department fails to point them out when justifying its pay.

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Quite aside from the use of the humanities--of high culture--within universities to harden class lines and teach the skills and habits of mind that will serve the industrial system, the humanities have a flourishing existence outside the universities. When Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, and Amoco spend millions of dollars in television advertising to cash in on their altruistic leadership in the war on pollution and the search for new forms of energy, they are using rhetoric, drama, and visual design to maintain their power over the future and proclaim the health of the free enterprise economy. Given the stakes, it seems fair to say that the oil companies' use of the humanities is the reverse of liberating. Think of other parts of our humanistic culture: music, in the romantic tradition of Engelbert Humperdinck (the younger), assuring entranced listeners that their basic needs are personal and erotic rather than social; fiction, in confession magazines, pornography, and many other profitable forms of literature, maintaining sexual and social stereotypes; history, available publicly in the form of myths about the white man's sovereign rights over darker people and their land, and of traditional American freedom threatened by the cold war enemy; architecture and design, in a thousand suburban developments, creating the illusion of independence (home, the electronic castle), denying the existence of the other half of society, and forcing complete dependence on cars, appliance, and other profit-yielding artifacts. What are the connections between these exploitative, well-financed uses of the humanities and our high culture? "Teaching literature in a discredited civilization," to repeat Grossman's title, we either teach politically with revolution as our end or we contribute to the mystification that so often in universities diverts and deadens the critical power of literature and encysts it in our safe corner of society.

--Richard Ohmann. *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*

In my belief, few books on education published in the past ten years are ethical books. They are not ethical because they are not invocations to lived visions. They *tell* of challenges, *refer* to agonies, *comment* on difficulties. They do not ask an answer in the form of action from the reader. Their power begins and ends within the world of words and paragraphs alone.

If the present book does not compel transformed behavior, in the life of its own author and in that of its authentic reader too, then it does not merit the expense of labor which it now commands and has commanded for the past five years; nor can it justify the pain and anguish I would wish it to provoke within the conscience of an undefended reader.

People who are looking for "a lot of interesting ideas," and hope to dabble her for little more, offend the author and degrade themselves. They would do well to stop right now. Those who read in order to take action on their consequent beliefs--these are the only readers I respect or look for. Atrocities, real and repeated, proliferate within this social order. The deepest of all lies in our will not to respond to what we see before us. When we declare that we are troubled by the lockstep life that has been charted for us by the men and women who now govern and control our public schools, what we are doing is to state our disavowal of an evil and unwanted patrimony. We are not living in an ordinary time, but in an hour of intense and unrelenting pain for many human beings. It is not good enough to favor justice in high literary flourish and to feel compassion for the victims of the very system that sustains our privileged position. We must be able to disown and disavow that privileged position. If we cannot we are not ethical men and women, and do not lead lives worth living.

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Prison bars do not need to be made of steel and concrete. They can be fashioned also out of words and hesitations: an "interesting seminar on hunger," "a reasonable exchange of views about despair." The language that we learn in public school is one of ethical antisepsis and of political decontamination. It is the language of an intellectual cease-fire while the victims are still dying. It is also a language which, by failing to concede real oppositions, denies a child or adult right or power to make strong, risk-taking choices. The student learns to step back and to steer away from moral confrontations. He learns to ascertain the quickest highway and the best approach to middle places of inert compassion and dysfunctional concern: places where choice does not reside and anger does not threaten.

If the child studies hard, if he assimilates the language well, and if he should grow up by any chance to be a writer, teacher, commentator or a critic even of such areas as social justice in this nation, he will have learned by then the proper means by which to make himself provocative, but not unsettling: fashionable and delightful, but not feared. He will have become, by grotesque sequences of North American recirculation, a perfect item in the same machine that polished him to size. At worst he will be somebody like Moynihan. At best he may be somebody like Galbraith. There is no danger he will be Thoreau.

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There are these words in the Bible: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." In my view, it is the business of the school to neutralize the dream and to indemnify the child against the dangers that may otherwise be inherent in his future decency. To institutionalize ecstasy, universities channel poets into the explication of their metaphors. To rectify zeal and to contain the vision of a generous or impassioned child, we construct school systems. . . . We teach children

to adjust to evil carried out in their own name. We teach children to look on at misery without rage. We teach children *not* to vomit up the lie that poisons their own soul. The first moment in all of this process is to plant in each of us a simple and straightforward bias against ethics.

Even in the Intellectual Left, a lifetime of indoctrination sinks in deeply. Few, if they can possibly avoid it, will admit to doing something out of motives of compassion. Instead, we try to fabricate a good, "hard-headed" reason for our actions. To do something because "it makes sense" is a more attractive reason than because someone is in great pain. The U.S. government, in much the same way, used to justify the Job Corps on the grounds that it is easier to "train" an eighteen-year-old black man than to pay for his electrocution or incarceration in a prison. This is the tough, no-nonsense logic that the U.S. Congress finds unsentimental. Well-indoctrinated students learn the lingo too.

In preference to the child who predates, by his rebellion, someone like John Brown or Malcolm X, we look for models of acceptable behavior to those who are prepared to understate their ethical intentions, imply a kind of quiet sense of decency that they do not like to boast of, and demonstrate instead a "realistic" capability for candid deprecation of their own worth. In intellectual terms, the highest goal is taken to be adept articulation. Cogency, even in the service of injustice, is granted more esteem than open advocacy of fair play. The ideal mix within the social setting is a certain quality of good intent, watered with realism, spiced with a drop of cynicism, stated with humor, believed in only with graceful reservation, and enacted only if absolutely necessary at pistol-point or in the full face of public desperation.

I suspect that many people who have had their education in the same time period as I, will recognize the sense of personal defeat I have in mind. We learn to tolerate, like a low flame on the fire or like a low fever in the body, a reasonable temperature-level of admitted cynicism. We learn to feel that it is not intolerable to "be" self-compromised if one is open and amusing in discussion of the matter; or, again, that cynicism, charmingly admitted-to and interestingly described, in some sense cancels itself out. It is not corrupt to "be" corrupt as long as a person is perceptive and articulate concerning his corruption. At this point, as we know, the word itself becomes a distant and quite bearable designation, one scarcely having to do with our own being any longer, but a label identified rather with some interesting character of our late-at-night imagination.

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There is, in 1975, a standard form of this postponement tactic. Weeks of research into that large area of human desperation, still so timidly referred to as "The Racial Situation," lead out, after all the obstacles have been transcended, into a "class report" which states that "some black people seem to favor integration, while others favor separatist development under community control." It is, in all respects, a serviceable conclusion; one which grants entire amnesty to those who, if they had been told which option of the two the largest numbers of black people choose, would still not dream of turning their own day-to-day existence upside down to *act* upon it.

"White people," says the final paper, "now must gather further information from all sources to determine which of these directions will receive the best acceptance in the black community . . ." In such a manner, child or adult (for it is done in very much the same way at both levels) is spared the anguish of a direct confrontation with the painful fact that either option, put into immediate effect, would make a massive difference in the lives of millions of black

children and that the only thing white people ought to dare to "research" in this day and age is how best to raise enough Hell to bring *either* of these options into operation.

The purpose of research, however, as we know too well, is not to teach young people how to raise Hell. The purpose is to teach them how to sit still in their places, how to be "good children," how to be benign, inactive, terrified, respectable. The purpose is to teach them how to gather information, not in order to take action but in order to increase the body of material that they possess already. The goal of research in this context is not ethical action based upon reflection, but a self-perpetuating process of delay.

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In high schools, as in university circles, there is far more talk right now of "how we learn what we perceive"--still worse, of "how we learn to find out what we think we feel when we perceive"--than of the real thing which is somehow still there, at the long, long end of the extended telescope of our disjoined and neutralized perception. "Interesting things about the state of being known as RADICAL, LIBERATED, FREE" become far more important than those things that we are radical *about*, or liberated *for*. Little by little, we learn to remove ourselves from the immediate field of forces, actions, options or intentions, on which we have briefly stood, but always and forever at its indecisive margin, and situate ourselves instead upon a safe and sober ledge from which to look down on the action. It is as if the explication of the text were to precede the composition of the poem: still worse, as if *we* were to be the explicators. When we end up at the point of explication of the poem we have not written, and no longer dare to write, we have come to that point of ideal alienation at which we qualify for academic tenure, intellectual respectability and decent income.

--Jonathan Kozol. *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*

It may have been this contact [with white women active in the feminist movement] or contact with fellow white English professors who want very much to have "a" black person in "their" department as long as that person thinks and acts like them, shares their values and beliefs, is in no way different, that first compelled me to use the term "white supremacy" to identify the ideology that most determines how white people in this society (irrespective of their political leanings to the right or left) perceive and relate to black people and other people of color. It is the very small but highly visible liberal movement away from the perpetuation of overtly racist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of black people which often masks how all-pervasive white supremacy is in this society, both as ideology and as behavior. When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.

--bell hooks. "Overcoming White Supremacy: A Comment"

We are living in one of the most frightening moments in the history of this country. Democracies are quite rare and usually short-lived in the human adventure. The precious notion of ordinary people living lives of decency and dignity--owing to their participation in the basic decision making in those fundamental institutions that affect their life chances--is difficult to sustain over space and time. And every historic effort to forge a democratic project has been undermined by

two fundamental realities: *poverty* and *paranoia*. The persistence of poverty generates levels of *despair* that deepen social conflict; the escalation of paranoia produces levels of *distrust* that reinforce cultural division. Race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely because it forces us to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair and distrust. In short, a candid examination of *race* matters takes us to the core of the crisis of American democracy. And the degree to which race *matters* in the plight and predicament of fellow citizens is a crucial measure of whether we can keep alive the best of this democratic experiment we call America.

--Cornel West. *Race Matters*

To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society--flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as black people are viewed as a "them," the burden falls on blacks to do all the "cultural" and "moral" work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American--and the rest must simply "fit in."

--Cornel West. *Race Matters*

The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

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When we view living in the european mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what our white fathers told us were precious. . . . But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, noneuropean consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.

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I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean--in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

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For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.

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The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us--the poet--whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

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Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from

within ourselves--along with the renewed courage to try them out.

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In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.

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For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive.

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If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core--the fountain--of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds.

--Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"

I used to think that I talked to the reader and in a sense perhaps that was true but it is really the work that talks to the reader as it was the work that talked to the writer. The work and the artist say each other as I think lovers do and, in later contact, it is the work and the reader that say each other. Or the work may be mute and the reader stone deaf.

Insofar as there can be anything about me worth writing about it would have to be the work and the importance of the work can only be to the reader who has entered into a relation with it. This is at variance with the generally--not only academically--held idea that works of art can be examined, described and assessed as though they were precious stones. Or houses. But the importance of houses is lost in their selling price. We live in them. Or we don't.

--William Bronk

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are--until the poem--nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

--Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"

Required Texts
(in order of appearance)

Mills, Charles W. *The Racial Contract*. Cornell. 0801484634
Blight, David. *Race and Reunion*. Harvard/Belknap. 0674008197
Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection*. Oxford. 0195089847
Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Norton. 0393963039
Brown, William Wells. *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*. Bedford. 0312152655

Brown, Henry Box. *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*. University of North Carolina Press. 0807858905
Craft, William. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. Copley. 158390011
Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. University of California Press. 0520228383
Bontemps, Arna. *Black Thunder*. Beacon. 0807063371
Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. Penguin. 9780425103371
Styron, William. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Knopf. 9781400033416
Greenberg, Kenneth, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. Oxford. 0195177568
Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Knopf. 9781400033416
Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Houghton Mifflin. 9780807083697
Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. Simon & Schuster. 9780684847504
Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. Scribner. 0684855887
Jones, Edward. *The Known World*. Amistad/HarperCollins. 0060557559
Horton, James and Lois, ed. *Slavery and Public History*. The New Press. 139781565849600
Blight, David, ed. *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*. Collins. 006085118X

Requirements:

1. A presentation on scholarship in the field (15%)

Part of the purpose of this seminar is to give you some sense of what it means to be a scholar in the field of African American literary and cultural studies. Unless your education has been somewhat unusual, you probably have not received much instruction in or exposure to African American history, and much of what you have been taught in this regard has likely included a number of misrepresentations, a great deal of misinformation, and faulty conceptual frameworks. Scholars devoted to African American Studies necessarily deal with these misrepresentations, and we work in a field that is constantly in a state of (re)construction. It is important, then, for us to cover a wide range of intellectual and cultural territory, and it makes sense to divide the labor and to rely on one another as we go.

Accordingly, each day we will have a reports on an important work of scholarship that addresses history, memory, and commemoration. Many of these texts are not specifically works of African American scholarship, but all of them raise questions that have been or should be important to the field. For your report on scholarship, I'd like you to summarize the book's argument and offer some commentary on it, focusing on how it might be useful in our discussions. I do not expect you to have a detailed understanding of the texts or of their historical or scholarly contexts. We'll use this assignment as an entrance into a field of concerns that we can discuss, and for which I can provide background in class. For this assignment, you will need to practice that fine academic art of "layered reading" or skim reading.

As part of your report, you should prepare a one- to two-page handout for the class. Include on this handout the book's author and title, the publisher and year of publication, a brief

overview of each book's purpose (the sort of thing that one finds on the back cover or in the book's introduction), an overview of the central argument of each chapter, and perhaps one or two quotations from the books that you find particularly intriguing. For the brief overview, it is acceptable to reprint passages from the text or even from its back cover, as long as you are careful to note the source. But you should give the class some sense of how the book's argument is organized (chapter overview) and how the author defines her or his approach to the subject (theoretical or otherwise).

Since you will be *handing out* your handout, **you shouldn't read it for the presentation**. Indeed, you should give the other scholars in the room your handout **at the end of your presentation.** Your audience is a group of scholars interested in learning more about the subject, and you should talk to them. Your tone should be informal (since you are talking with peers). Naturally, you will not master this subject in a short time, so in your presentation, you can talk of what you've learned so far and also lingering questions you'd like to address if you could have more time. **This report should last about 10 minutes. If it runs longer than 10 minutes, I will not say anything in class, but I will lower your grade for the assignment.**

Let me emphasize that your talk should be structured, focused, and interesting. **Do not present a chapter-by-chapter overview of the book.** Find another, more interesting, way to summarize the book's overall argument and method.

2. A presentation on a scholarly journal (15%)

This course leads to a seminar essay, and it is useful to think of this as an essay that you are preparing for publication--that is, an essay containing research and an argument that you want to share with a broad scholarly audience. You want publishers to accept the essay so that your intended audience can read the essay, and you want to have some influence on those readers. Accordingly, you should therefore think about (and study) the conventions of the genre.

That's what you'll do for this assignment. You will examine and then describe in an oral presentation a prominent journal in the field. Look at the editorial board or advisory committee for the journal. Find out what the journal's acceptance/rejection rate is. Identify the range of articles in a sampling of the journals (three or four recent issues). Identify specific conventions of the articles in the journals. What kind of introduction do you encounter in those essays? Where do you encounter the thesis, and how long does it take for the author to present the thesis? Does the author offer an overview of the scholarship on the subject--and, if so, where and how? Often, for example, one will encounter that sort of overview in the main text, close to the beginning, of a *PMLA* article; in an *American Literature* article, one is likely to encounter the relevant scholarship not through a focused overview but through various endnotes. In what other ways do the articles deal with the relevant scholarship--and what is the range of that scholarship (archival, historical, cultural, literary)?

For your presentation, you should give advice to the other scholars in the room about what they should think about if they are planning to submit an essay to this journal. Again, do not read from your handout, and **hand out your handout at the end of your presentation.** The handout (probably, one page will be enough) should include the essential information for someone interested in submitting something to that journal.

3. Four "Occasional Responses" (due as the occasions present themselves to you, as long as

they present themselves to you once each month) (5% each)

This assignment is intended as an opportunity for you to try out ideas, ask questions, challenge assumptions, reconsider texts, or just rant about the infuriating complexity of it all. Anything, in other words, is fair game here. You can address any subject--perhaps especially those you don't feel comfortable addressing in class. I'll respond as helpfully as I can. If I don't have the answers to your questions, I'll try to figure out where we can find them.

Too often, I think, younger scholars are asked to present an argument in which they claim authority over the subject--in the form of a definite thesis and absolute conclusions. In my view, this practice encourages intellectual dishonesty, for you are asked to be certain about something about which you might feel very uncertain. There is much to learn about African American history, literature and culture--and there is a great deal of misinformation that you will need to sort through. It is simply good scholarship to note as much, and to recognize that although you can do some preliminary research and thinking this semester, you will hardly be in a position to claim ultimate authority over this subject. If all goes well, you will be in a position by the end of the semester to write a strong essay. That is, you'll know the kind of information you need to question, the kinds of questions you need to ask, the kinds of conceptual frameworks you will need to develop over time, and the kind of essay you can honestly write in the meantime. It is good scholarly practice, in short, to recognize that you are involved in a process of understanding that will develop over time. Use this assignment to talk about where you are now, and where you are trying to go.

This assignment will provide me with an opportunity to help you prepare for the major course essay. Please keep that in mind as you write these responses, and let me know if there is anything in particular you would like me to attend to in my response to your comments.

Length on this one is up to you, though it should be at least two pages (typed, double-spaced). Don't be worried about writing too much: I love long responses. You should hand this in as questions or ideas occur to you--but since this is a process-oriented assignment, I'll need one response from you each month. There is no grade for this assignment; just be sure to hand in one each month, and at least four (more if you want) by the end of the semester.

4. 25-page (minimum) Seminar Essay (50% of final grade).

This is the standard analytical/research essay--the kind you will study in the presentations on scholarly journals. I recommend that you devote the essay to a single text or to a narrowly-defined set of concerns, but I'm open to all possibilities.

As you explore literary and cultural history, it is good to remember that what *and how* you see can depend significantly on what you know. You will need some historical and cultural background. I expect you to support any assertion you make about the past. I recommend that you begin by gathering the conventional wisdom on the subject, which you can do by consulting specialized encyclopedias and other texts in the library's Reference section.

I've included in the syllabus the "Guide for Papers" that I give to my undergraduates, which I hope will be helpful and not an insult to your intelligence and abilities. Although the document is designed to guide undergraduate writing, the advice is still useful at the graduate level. In my own work, I run into trouble whenever I stray from the guidelines I've put together in this document.

As soon as you are ready (or perhaps sooner), you should check in with me about your

plans for the essay. Send me ideas, a prospectus, an outline, if that is the way you work--or just come in to talk with me about your project. This will give me an opportunity to help you bring your topic into focus, define and refine your thesis, identify the sources you will need to consult, and plan the strategy for your argument. Accordingly, the more you can tell me along the way, the more I can help you prepare for the essay. When you have a rough draft, I will be happy to skim-read the draft to look for potential problems or to evaluate the general shape and strategy of your argument. Although I'll read the opening paragraphs closely, I will use the draft only to comment on broader concerns. In other words, you'll need to proofread for the details (style, grammar, etc.) on your own.

For our final class, you will bring in, for discussion, copies of your essay's introduction. For a 25-page essay, the introduction should probably be about three pages long, and it should cover the essay's subject, topic, and thesis, as explained in the Guide for Papers. For examples of good introductions in essays devoted to literary criticism, you should consult articles published in *American Literature* or *PMLA*. If your paper is primarily historical, you should look at articles in *American Historical Review* or the *Journal of American History*.

Although this essay isn't due until the end of the semester, please start your work on it as soon as possible. You should make good use of the informal responses to prepare for this essay, which means that you should identify your topic for this assignment as soon as possible. I expect detailed research and a finished essay that has benefitted from careful proofreading and revision.

Reading Assignments

1/14 Introductions and Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*

1/21 1. David Blight, *Race and Reunion*
2. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*
3. David W. Blight, "Introduction: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)
2. *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*

1/28 1. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
2. Ira Berlin, "Coming to Terms with Slavery in Twenty-First-Century America" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public Memory*)
3. David W. Blight, "Why the Underground Railroad, and Why Now? A Long View" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:
1. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)
2. *American Literature*

2/4 1. William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*
2. Lois E. Horton, "Avoiding History: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the Uncomfortable Public Conversation on Slavery" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public Memory*)
3. Deborah Gray White, "Simple Truths: Antebellum Slavery in Black and White" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:
1. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds., *History & Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)
2. *American Literary History*

2/11 1. Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*
2. William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*
3. David W. Blight, "If You Don't Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public Memory*)
4. Lois E. Horton, "Kidnapping and Resistance: Antislavery Direct Action in the 1850s" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003)
2. *PMLA*

2/18 1. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
2. James Oliver Horton, "Slavery in American History: An Uncomfortable National Dialogue" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public Memory*)
3. Bruce Levine, "Flight and Fight: The Wartime Destruction of Slavery, 1861-1865" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
2. *American Quarterly*

2/25 1. Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*
2. John Michael Vlach, "The Last Great Taboo Subject: Exhibiting Slavery at the Library of Congress" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public Memory*)
3. James Brewer Stewart, "From Moral Suasion to Political Confrontation: American Abolitionists and the Problem of Resistance, 1831-1861" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)
2. *African American Review*

3/4 1. Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose*
2. Joanne Melish, "Recovering (from) Slavery: Four Struggles to Tell the Truth" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public Memory*)
3. John Michael Vlach, "Above Ground on the Underground Railroad: Places of Flight and Refuge" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. William A. Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004)
2. *The American Historical Review*

3/11 1. William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*
2. Kenneth Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*
3. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., "A Sacred Drama: 'Exodus' and the Underground Railroad in African American Life" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005)
2. *The Journal of American History*

3/18: Spring Break

3/25 1. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
2. Dwight T. Pitcaithley, "'A Cosmic Threat': The National Park Service Addresses the Causes of the American Civil War" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public History*)
3. James Oliver Horton, "A Crusade for Freedom: William Still and the Real Underground Railroad" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)
2. *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History*

4/1 1. Octavia Butler, *Kindred*
2. Bruce Levine, "In Search of a Usable Past: Neo-Confederates and Black Confederates"
3. Catherine Clinton, "'Slavery is War': Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad"

Presentations:

1. Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002)
2. *Slavery and Abolition*

4/8 1. Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*
2. Gary B. Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll? From Controversy to Cooperation" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public History*)
3. R. J. M. Blackett, "'Freemen to the Rescue!': Resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. Michael S. Roth, *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995)
2. *Arizona Quarterly*

4/15 1. Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*
2. Marie Tyler-McGraw, "Southern Comfort Levels: Race, Heritage Tourism, and the Civil War in Richmond" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public History*)
3. Jane Landers, "Southern Passage: The Forgotten Route to Freedom in Florida" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000)
2. *MELUS*

4/22 1. Edward Jones, *The Known World*
2. Edward T. Linenthal, "Epilogue: Reflections" (in Horton, *Slavery and Public History*)
3. Diane Miller, "The Places and Communities of the Underground Railroad: The National Park Service Network to Freedom" (in Blight, *Passages to Freedom*)

Presentations:

1. Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003.
2. *Legacy*

4/29 Discussion of course essays. Bring in copies of your introduction for your seminar essay.

Seminar Essays are Due by the end of the day on Monday, May 4

Professor John Ernest's
Handy
GUIDE FOR PAPERS

Part 1: Evaluation

I will evaluate your performance in three basic categories of concern: structure, content, and presentation. Each category will count for approximately one third of your grade for the paper—though, of course, poor performance in one category inevitably will affect the success of the others. That is, don't assume that I can or will "just read for the ideas" in a poorly presented or illogically constructed essay. I am particularly dismayed when I see errors that are repeated from one draft to the next, so make a special effort to apply criticisms of earlier drafts to later writing assignments in the class. Please remember that I would love to talk with you about your paper at any and all stages of its development.

I've indicated throughout this Guide my standards for evaluation, but I will summarize a few points here, which I've adapted from similar summaries put together by friends and colleagues.

An"A" essay:

(1) has a clearly indicated thesis (or working hypothesis) to which all elements of the essay are relevant;
(2) has focused topic sentences that announce the central argument of each paragraph, connecting this new stage of the analysis to that of the previous paragraph;
(3) supports its argumentative claim with evidence from the text, and avoids being simply mechanical in citing evidence;
(4) attends to the implications of the central argument;
(5) is thoughtful and deliberate in its use of language, essay structure, and evidence;
(6) considers, if only implicitly, the evidence and arguments that might undermine or challenge the essay's argument, and doesn't ignore important evidence or complications;
(7) is free of recurring surface errors or errors of fact;
(8) is professional in its presentation—including the title of the essay, page numbers, works-cited format, and other issues of manuscript form;
(9) makes no unsupported claims about history, and demonstrates that the essay's author is aware of larger cultural and ideological concerns that might distort her or his judgment;
(10) is equally attentive to detail and to the big picture;
(11) is compelling in its intellectual and ethical commitment to the essay's subject.

Here is another way to think about these concerns–this time with greater emphasis on your

responsibilities as a scholar:

1. Focus. You should narrow down your concerns to a reasonably focused set of questions and/or concerns, and then use the essay to explore those concerns.

2. Specificity. You should be as specific as you can about the questions you have. If you have questions about religion, for example, you should focus on specific historical periods, specific situations, and perhaps even specific denominations or manifestations of religion. If you have questions about the system of slavery, push yourself to look beyond the abstract level and at specific issues within the system.

3. Literary Skill. You should include in your paper a discussion of at least one (and, depending on the length and complexity of the work, perhaps more) work of literature. We are reading literature as part of our effort to "read" U.S. history and culture. Present examples of literature that pertain to questions you raise about history and culture, and think about how the author's handling of the work of literature provides insights into, for example, how to interpret the workings of culture.

4. Use of Information. The various texts we are reading provide a great deal of useful information. I expect you to make use of this information in your papers. Moreover, when you raise questions that can be answered by a quick look at an encyclopedia (especially specialized ones–for example, the *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*), I expect you to look at that encyclopedia. In other words, I expect you to do basic research on matters of simple information (people and events in history, for example)

.

5. Complexity. These papers should be challenging, for we are reading about and discussing challenging issues. I expect to encounter a certain intensity of thought in your essays, and I will be critical of any tendency to simplify the issues.

6. Grammar and Style. Your writing should be clear and correct, and I should be able to follow your line of thought without using a map.

7. Presentation. Remember to cite your sources, both in the body of the essay and in the bibliography or "works cited" page. For essays on literature, scholars generally use the Modern Language Association (MLA) or the Chicago format for citing sources.

Part 2: Manuscript Form and Presentation (and other important details)

Your paper *must* meet the grammatical and formal standards of academic prose. Leave yourself time to revise, and revise with a grammar handbook close by. Type carefully, and double-space the lines. For conventions concerning the proper handling of quotations, the presentation of titles of works, and the documentation of sources, see the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. A copy should be available in the library, or you could borrow mine. If you are an English major (or planning to be one) and do not yet own a copy of this book, buy one.

Remember also that academic conventions of clarity and formality are important. Avoid hazy generalizations and other forms of vagueness. A good way to check for this problem is to look at the main verbs and nouns in your sentences: do they tend to be abstract and general, or specific? If the former, change the noun or verb to something more specific rather than adding adjectives or adverbs. One source of ambiguity can be pronouns: make sure that your reader clearly knows what "this" and "that" refer to or, better yet, include clarifying nouns along with the pronouns ("this idea," "that action"). "This" or "that" should not be the subject of any sentence in your essay.

Avoid also cliches, jargon, reductive expressions, and hollow modifiers like "interesting," "positive," "negative," or "successful." Please use gender-neutral language: he or she, hers or his, etc. Remember that there is nothing that warms a professor's heart so much as the carefully, memorably turned phrase or well-written passage. Good writing simply gives your argument more authority and weight and demonstrates your care as an scholar (as well as stylist). All the elements that make for good creative writing also make for good academic writing, so show some creativity and care in your prose. Working within the formal conventions of academic writing does not need to be restrictive; working with and against those conventions—fulfilling them, following the rules (and knowing when, how, and why to break the rules at times), while also speaking with an individual voice—can be a very creative process.

You are required to follow MLA format for citing your sources. I have used this format in this guide so that you will have a model to follow. At the end of this guide is a sample "Works Cited" page.

The following are special instructions or reminders—which means that ignoring them might have a special effect on your grade. **If you do not follow these guidelines concerning spacing, citation, and/or page numbering, then the best grade you can get on your paper is an "A-".**

1. Your essay must be typed, and double-spaced. You should have standard 1-inch margins on the top, bottom, and sides.
2. Note the proper form of parenthetical citation demonstrated in this guide. Remember to indent long quotations. Remember also to provide page numbers for all quotations.
3. Your essay should have a title. An intriguing title can actually add to the power of an argument.
4. Number the pages of your paper (upper right-hand corner; include your last name).
5. Please do not present your paper in a plastic cover. Simply staple the pages once, on the upper left-hand corner.
6. Keep a copy of your paper. I've never lost a paper, but you are required keep a copy just in case. Even if I lose your paper, you are still responsible for it.
7. **Proofread your paper before you submit it.** Correct errors before you hand in the paper. If you spot some at the last minute, when it is too late to print a new copy of the paper, please correct the errors neatly with a pen. Spelling and grammar count.
8. Use brackets when you insert something into or change something in a quotation.

   example: At first, Douglass seems optimistic, for his "new mistress [proves] to be all she appeared when [he] first met her at the door . . ." (77). In this case, I use brackets to

indicate changes I have made to fit the quotation to the grammatical structure of *my* sentence.

Part 3: Assignment

You are required to write an analytical essay, not an informal discussion of or response to literature. An analytical essay presents an argument about how and why an author does certain things in his or her work; it examines the work's thematic, conceptual, or rhetorical infrastructure (infrastructure means "the basic, underlying framework or features of a system"). Textual analysis is not limited to discovering "what the author intended"; often, the purpose of textual analysis is to explore the cultural, historical, and/or philosophical implications of the text's apparent or implicit design–the patterns of ideas, images, language, and/or themes in the text, and the gaps or breaks in those patterns. In this way, reading a text is a way to learn how to be a better reader of one's world, of the cultural forces that shape one's thinking, one's personality, even one's adopted role in life. Textual analysis can make one conscious of all those things that one sees and does unconsciously on a daily basis; it can help us defamiliarize and thereby *see* and think about our familiar customs and surroundings.

I expect you to write a formal analytical essay even if you have not done so before. If you have never written this kind of paper, and if you have no experience reading texts analytically, I recommend that you look at Mortimer J. Adler's and Charles Van Doren's *How to Read a Book*, an excellent book (and not as simplistic as its title suggests). If you are an experienced analytical reader, and if you would like to develop your skills by thinking about theoretical approaches to literary criticism, I recommend that you look at *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Finally, if you would like to increase your critical vocabulary, develop your understanding of terms that I mention in class, familiarize yourself with literary genres and periods, and read introductions to various critical theories, look through M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (especially the sixth edition). All of these books are listed in the Works Cited at the end of this guide, and all should be available at our library, or you could order your own copies.

Remember that textual analysis is a formal academic discipline and that every paper you write will test your mastery of its principles. Let me stress that point: the papers *are* tests. When you write, then, your task is to demonstrate your ability to present a persuasive analysis, as well as to present your analysis in a coherent and grammatically correct format.

If you are not sure that you know how to write the kind of paper I am requiring, please don't hesitate to ask for advice or help. I will be happy to help you with each stage of the writing process.

Part 4: The Introduction

Your introductory paragraph should have three stages (three stages but only one paragraph). In a longer essay (20 pages or more), you would cover these same stages but in three or more paragraphs. The three stages are as follows:

1) **Subject**. In the first stage, you introduce your subject—the text itself. In a few (2-4) sentences, you should present the author and title of the work, along with a general overview of the work's plot, outstanding themes, or general achievement. The shorter the paper, the shorter this introductory passage should be; and in a very long essay (25-30

pages), the first few pages might well be devoted to this introductory passage.

2) **Topic**. In the next stage, you present your topic—the interpretive issue to which your paper is devoted. In a sense, you need to show that there is cause for confusion and misunderstanding, or that there is a dimension of the work that is not clear unless one looks at it a certain way (for example, by viewing it within its historical context). You might establish the interpretive problem or issue in a number of ways:
   * explain the problem or issue for the reader.
   * open with a question which you develop in the opening paragraph.
   * use a passage from the work to illustrate the problem or issue.

3) In the third stage, you present your thesis—your answer to the questions or issues you raise in stage 2. Your thesis should be explicit and specific. Consider carefully the following discussion of the thesis.

Do not begin your essay from the beginning of time. Postpone your comments about your personal feelings or response to the work, and postpone also your comments on the twentieth century when writing on literature from previous centuries. Usually, you can present material like this in your concluding paragraph, as you indicate the implications of the argument you have just presented. Get to the point elegantly, gracefully, directly, and quickly.

Part 5: The Thesis

An argument demonstrates the justice, value, and logical coherence of a *thesis*. Remember that a thesis is different from a subject or topic. The subject is the text you are analyzing. The topic is the interpretive issue you are trying to address. **The thesis is the stand you take on that issue.** A subject is what you are talking about; a topic is why you are talking about it; a thesis is what you are trying to say about that topic. A thesis is debatable; a topic is not, for a topic simply identifies—notes the existence of—grounds for debate or cause for confusion. A topic is something you can mention to a professor without feeling nervous; a thesis keeps you up at night.

This is not a thesis: "Melville uses symbolism in *Moby-Dick*." What kind of symbolism? How does he use it? To what purpose? Will you examine *all* examples of symbolism in the novel? Again, this is not a thesis: "Hawthorne examines history in *The Marble Faun*." You might develop this observation into a thesis by establishing the specific issue and taking a clear stand. Consider, for example, this statement from a published essay:

> When Hawthorne says that those who object to the unresolved mysteries of *The Marble Faun*'s ending do "not know how to read a Romance," he means, as his work itself shows, that insofar as they expect definite answers to their questions or an unambiguous moral to the story, they do not know how to read history either. (Michael 150)

True, this is a *long* thesis; and, true, it makes the idea behind it sound more complicated than it actually is. Still, this scholar's purpose is clear, and one can anticipate what he will argue in the rest of the essay, and why.

* If you present your topic in the form of a question, your topic and thesis might look like this:

> What are we to make of Melville's emphasis on "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*? Although it is tempting to assert that this "whiteness" has nothing to do the complex and contested racial landscape of the nineteenth-century United States, the novel offers significant evidence that race is indeed the issue to which all other concerns in this novel must be related.

* If you present your topic by quoting a sentence from the text, your topic and thesis might look like this:

> In his appendix to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Douglass seems to worry about the implications of his comments on religion throughout the body of this text. "I have," he notes, "in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion." But as he explains his distinction between "the Christianity of this land" and "the Christianity of Christ," Douglass reapplies his concerns and suggests that the white Christian reader is actually the one who should worry about being considered an opponent of all religion.

Part 6: Structure

Academic writing is very basic and straightforward. It is designed to allow one to read subtle arguments quickly. Accordingly, the structure of your argument is very important. Each paragraph should present a unified block of thought, a clear and significant stage of your argument. You should therefore avoid paragraphs that are too long (in a short essay, page-long paragraphs are too long, often a sign of unfocused thinking) or too short. As a general rule, each paragraph should have at least five sentences. Paragraphs with fewer sentences often indicate undeveloped or unsubstantiated thought. Each paragraph should build on what you have done in the previous paragraph, and should prepare your reader for what you will argue in the next paragraph. If you can move your paragraphs around without disturbing the nature of your argument, then you have not paid sufficient attention to the structure of your argument or have simply repeated yourself in the course of your paper.

My term for the structure of an academic essay is the "intellectual matrix" of the essay. The "intellectual matrix" is what you get when you read only the thesis statement and the topic sentence of each of your paragraphs (normally the first sentence of the paragraph). Just as your thesis indicates clearly the argumentative purpose of your paper, so should the first sentence of each paragraph, the topic sentence, indicate the argumentative purpose of that paragraph. I should be able to read only these sentences to determine the logical design of your argument. In other words, I should be able to summarize your argument from those sentences alone. Roughly one third of your grade will be based on the extent to which the "intellectual matrix" of your paper provides me with an accurate overview of your argument, and also on your ability to construct a systematic, unified argument that builds from one stage (one paragraph) to the next.

Part 7: Content

Remember that your assignment is textual, historical, and/or cultural analysis, not plot summary, and not simply general or subjective historical commentary. In textual analysis, your task is to show the connections between *what* the author says and *how* she or he says it—in other words, to identify and examine the implications of the author's strategies (style, themes, images, patterns of thought and of argument, etc.).

Remember that your reader has read and thought about the text to which your paper is devoted, and therefore does not need to be reminded of the plot. **Do not simply summarize the plot.**

Historical commentary is useful, usually even necessary (in small doses), but use it wisely, make sure you know what you are talking about, and do not allow it to distract you from your main task: informed analysis. Typically, the more general and abstract the historical context, the less useful it will be. Keep in mind that all people in a given time period did not think the same way, even if there are issues and ideas that did preoccupy many. Be attentive, in other words, to conflicts, differences, and changes among groups within a period, and never claim that "nineteenth-century Americans believed that . . .". Even more important, if you introduce historical commentary, you must take care that you provide some evidence for your historical claims and that you establish your historical context efficiently and succinctly. If you are using elements from an author's biography, for example, choose those elements that are relevant to your thesis and make sure that you establish why those elements are important *for understanding the work*.

Grades for papers based primarily on plot summary or on general historical commentary will begin somewhere in the area of a "C"—and they will go down from there.

You must present your argument carefully, methodically. In the early part of your paper, explain carefully the interpretive problem you intend to solve, and then proceed to solve it in stages. At each point of your paper, think about what your reader needs to know if he or she is to understand what is coming up in the next stage of your paper. At each stage, quote from your sources or from your primary text to show the basis for your interpretation. Show your reader that you are analyzing your topic or text and not just talking about it.

Focus is the key to success. You cannot hope to analyze an entire book, an entire century, or an entire social movement in a short paper. Therefore, you must isolate a representative portion of your topic. If you are writing about a literary text, for example, you might focus on a character, a scene, a rhetorical or ideological pattern, a pattern of allusions, or some other aspect of the author's techniques and strategies. Find something you can examine in detail and explain your interpretation carefully. Justify your choice at the beginning of your essay; at the end of your essay, indicate how your conclusions can enable readers to understand other aspects of the work.

Part 8: Research and Support—A Reminder

It is important to remember that you must support your claims, and that you must not make any claims that you are unable or unwilling to support. When you present an interpretation of a sentence or passage or episode in a text, you must explain carefully how the text supports that interpretation. If you make a point about history, then you must do the necessary historical research, and you must refer to that research in your essay (see me on how to do this if you have not done this before). If you say something about an author, then you must

support that point with biographical research. If you say something about how critics have viewed a certain text, then you must support that with research. Avoid making claims about how readers respond to a certain text, for you cannot support such claims.

Part 9: Using Quotations

To present a persuasive argument, you must quote from the text you are analyzing, and you must explain carefully how the evidence you present leads to and supports your interpretation of the work. This is not to say that you should be blatant about this. That is, you shouldn't lead into a quotation by saying, "This interpretation is supported by the following quotation." Consider the following guidelines:

1. I should be convinced of the significance of the textual evidence (quotations from and allusions to the works) you present. In other words, don't just quote. Prepare your reader for the textual evidence you will present; present that evidence briefly (avoid long quotations); and then explicate, analyze, or otherwise explain the significance of that evidence. Never assume that a passage is self-explanatory.

2. Don't just present a quotation without introduction. I shouldn't suddenly encounter a quotation at the beginning of a new sentence, and you should never present a free-standing quotation (that is, a sentence that contains nothing but a quotation); always lead into the quotation in your own words, and then follow it with commentary.

3. Never end a paragraph with a quotation. Always follow with commentary, so that you conclude each of *your* paragraphs with *your* own words.

4. Avoid long quotations. Whenever possible, integrate (with quotation marks) significant phrases from the text in your own sentences as you present and explain your interpretation.

5. Whenever you use a significant word or phrase from the text, use quotation marks to indicate that you are in fact using someone else's words.

The following is taken from one of my essays, "From Mysteries to Histories: Cultural Pedagogy in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*." I present this so that you can have a model for using quotations, but I do not expect you to simply imitate my style. Indeed, I wish you the good fortune of avoiding my overly complex style. Still, I hope you will find it useful to examine (and, perhaps, question) my use of textual evidence.

From the essay:

Harper establishes the terms of this argument, and begins the novel, by confronting her white readers with their inability to interpret culturally-familiar discourse. In the first pages of the first chapter, Harper draws readers into a "shadow" culture—that of the slaves—and introduces her readers to the discursive network of that culture, the "mystery of market speech." Her depiction of slaves talking enthusiastically about "splendid" fish, and about butter "just as fresh, as

fresh can be" (7-8) invokes images of the stereotypical Black characters who inhabited the pages of white supremacist fiction gaining popularity at the time. On the novel's second page, though, the narrator wonders at this "unusual interest manifested by these men in the state of the produce market," and raises the question that many readers might well have forgotten to ask: "What did it mean?" (8). The answer is that, during the war, "when the bondman was turning his eyes to the American flag," "some of the shrewder slaves . . . invented a phraseology to convey in the most unsuspected manner news to each other from the battle-field" (8-9). The "mystery of market speech" is thus solved by learning this phraseology, this cultural discourse that appropriates authorized, and in that sense, legal language for illegal but moral ends.

The primary point here is not that this particular mystery is now clear, nor is it merely that the slaves had to formulate their own language to circumvent the will of the dominant race; rather, the point lies in the discursive nature of the mystery itself, the extent to which one's ability to understand is controlled by one's cultural training. As one reads, one encounters other such mysteries, each of which reveals the cognitive and moral limitations inherent in and enforced by the dominant cultural system. Consider, for example, Dr. Gresham, whom the reader first meets in a field hospital, and who is clearly attracted to Iola Leroy, whom he believes to be a white lady generously lowering herself to serve the needs of the Northern soldiers. Initially, Dr. Gresham cannot understand how Iola can bring herself to kiss a black patient; and as he explains this to Col. Robinson, the reader discovers the terms of his confusion:

> I cannot understand how a Southern lady, whose education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good breeding, could consent to occupy the position she so faithfully holds. It is a mystery I cannot solve. (57)

This description is essentially a circular equation of cultural identity. If one is a Southern lady, then one must have the advantages of education and good breeding which provide the manners and fine culture that are, by definition, the qualities of a Southern lady. The perfect circle of definition represents the cognitive closure that is the *raison d'etre* of any culture system. When this closure leads to culturally exotic behavior, those within the cultural circle are faced with a mystery they cannot solve. When Col. Robinson provides the essential information, that "Miss Leroy was a slave," Dr. Gresham can relocate her in the cultural formula, and he says revealingly, "What you tell me changes the whole complexion of affairs" (58). Dr. Gresham, in other words, is able to relocate Iola according to existing cultural categories and stereotypes.

Note on using quotations: In the example from my own writing, note how the material from the work is integrated with my own words, and how I combine both block quotations and in-text quotations to incorporate the evidence into the prose. The idea is to make sure that yours is the dominant voice in your writing, that you prepare your reader for the quotations, and that your essay is as smooth as possible. Try these techniques in your own work.

Part 10: A Sample Works Cited Page (MLA format)

Note: Different academic disciplines (Literature, History, etc.) require different approaches to documentation; most do not use the MLA format. Always check your syllabus, or check with your professor, to determine what form you should use.

Works Cited

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