

History/African American Studies 393

Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, 1848-1877

Spring 2025

Lectures: Monday and Wednesday, 4:00-5:15 in 1111 Mosse Humanities
Sections: Thursday or Friday (see your enrollment package)
Lectures and sections are in-person only

This syllabus is your guide to the course. Look here first for answers to your questions. The information on this document is also available at <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/440882> which is where you will submit work, find announcements, and receive updates

Teaching Staff

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Goals and Learning Outcomes

First, course lectures, readings, discussions, and assignments offer an in-depth investigation of slavery, the sectional crisis, the Civil War, slave emancipation, and Reconstruction; it also explores these in relation to the transformation and persistence of Native American societies in the context of U.S. conquest and settlement.

Second, the course develops skills that are elements of the [History Department's Goals of the Major](#), including:

- understanding and assessing primary sources
- understanding and assessing historical arguments and debates
- presenting original and coherent written arguments based on primary and secondary materials
- applying historical knowledge and skills to contemporary debates and representations

Third, the course meets the [Ethnic Studies Requirement](#) by investigating:

- the institutions, experiences, and ideas that sustained and justified racial slavery
- how struggles over slavery shaped national politics and led to the Civil War
- the role of enslaved and free Black people in transforming the Civil War into an emancipation struggle
- the creation, course, and destruction of the nation's first broad experiment in multi-racial democracy
- the ways Native peoples shaped and were shaped by this era
- the reverberation of these histories in contemporary U.S. society

In pursuit of these three goals, the course is designed to teach you to think critically about what you have previously been taught about the Civil War and its relationship to the history of slavery, freedom, and the United States; to consider why this history remains contested and controversial; and to learn to recognize what is at stake in these debates.

A Note on Ethical Engagement with Offensive Language, Imagery, and Ideas

Part of studying history is confronting words, images, and ideas that have the power to surprise, shock, and upset us. It is not the aim of the course to provoke those feelings, but, given the subject matter, it's inevitable that some of our texts and other materials (including scenes from films, etc.) contain words and representations that we find unacceptable today. Some of these words and representations were in fact intended to provoke those reactions at the time of their creation; others were unselfconscious expressions of attitudes and beliefs held by some members of the era's society. This course includes materials of this kind when not doing so would distort the history under study-- for example, by minimizing the significance of racist beliefs, structures, and expressions to historical figures' actions and to the outcome of events.

We will do our best to contextualize and interpret these materials without perpetuating their ugliness. We ask you to do the same.

Course Expectations and Policies

Open-book, open-note assignments

All course assignments will be open-book and open-note. There are no timed tests or other exercises other than time-limited in-class exercises, which are graded on a pass/fail basis. We're much more interested in how well you can make sense of what you've read and learned than in what you don't yet know.

Eyes and ears on the material and the people in the room with you

You may use a laptop in this course. If you do, you must turn off the internet connection before lecture (or section) begins. You may not turn it back on unless the instructor tells you to do so. Phones and other devices—watches, tablets, whatever—must be silenced and placed out of sight and out of reach. On iOS and MacOS, use the “do not disturb” setting. The only exception to this policy is for documented accommodations.

The TA will sit toward the back of the lecture hall and monitor electronics use. If you begin using your laptop for non-class purposes, the TA will take note, ask you to shut it down, and inform me. Persistent violation of this policy will have consequences for your course participation grade.

Attendance

Lectures make up the analytical spine of the course. Make arrangements early in the semester to share lecture notes with a classmate; that way, if you do have to miss a lecture, you will know where to turn. Do not ask the professor or teaching assistant to give you a recap of what you missed. If you must miss lecture for a legitimate and unavoidable reason, such as illness or a family emergency, we will make a recording of the lecture available to you. **About 12 unannounced pass/fail writing exercises, administered during lecture, make up 10% of your final grade.**

Discussion sections are where you'll dig deeper into the readings and workshop your writing assignments. **Attendance in section is required**, and more than one unexcused absence will significantly affect your section grade. You must come to section well prepared, having digested the assigned readings and turned in the weekly response. You must have that week's reading assignment with you in a form you can access without a live internet connection (i.e., either printed or downloaded to a laptop or tablet).

Student Credit and Workload Information

This 4-credit course meets as a group for 4 hours per week (2 lectures and 1 section meeting) and carries the expectation that you will spend an average of 2 hours outside of class for every hour in the classroom. In other words, in addition to class time, plan to allot an average of 8 hours per week for reading, writing, preparing for discussions, and/or studying for quizzes and exams for this class. Graduate students taking the course for 3 credits do not attend section and will do written work on the terms agreed upon with the professor at the start of the semester.

Late Work and Missed Exercises

Late midterm essays will lose a tenth of their total possible point value for each day they are late (beginning as soon as the official deadline has passed); i.e., a 20-point essay turned in no more than 24 hours late would lose two points; turned in no more than 48 hours late, it would lose four points, etc. **Weekly responses may not be turned in late.**

Special Needs and Accommodations

We will make every effort to accommodate students' documented needs. Students requiring accommodation for lectures, discussions, or assignments must work through the McBurney Center and must alert their T.A. at least two weeks prior to the requested accommodation. Since there are no timed exams, there is no need to request this form of accommodation for this course.

The Use of “Artificial Intelligence”

Some people find that LLMs (e.g., so-called “AI” chatbots such as ChatGPT) can be useful in thinking through a question, generating ideas, planning an essay, and even writing. However, much is lost when we rely on these technologies for historical analysis and interpretation. LLMs are predictive rather than self-aware, and what we anthropomorphically call their “hallucinations” are simply their algorithms stringing words together without regard to the truth or falsity of what results. (This failure to care about the distinction between truth and falsehood is what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt defines as “bullshit.” Don't @ me; it's a technical term!) LLMs also tend to reproduce broader societal biases and “common sense”; they regurgitate the most common sequences of words and can't easily foster original or creative thinking. Most importantly, LLMs short-circuit the creative process of thinking through a problem for ourselves and developing skills as writers and thinkers. Relying on “AI” to do your writing for this course is not only a violation of class policy but a waste of everyone's time, including your own.

Academic Integrity and Responsibility

All work that you turn in should be your own. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with what constitutes plagiarism, and with the forms of quotation and citation necessary to avoid it. Appropriation of another author's work without citation—whether or not you use direct quotations—always constitutes plagiarism. (Large Language Model “AI” produces text by scraping and re-presenting people’s published work without citation or attribution—that is, essentially by plagiarizing. If you submit work produced in this way, you are not only in violation of class policy but are also likely to be committing plagiarism.) Guidelines for proper citation and attribution are available at http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html.

We will pursue all cases of possible academic misconduct, including but not limited to plagiarism. Almost every semester I am forced to report one or more students for academic misconduct. Please make this one of the happy semesters where that is not necessary.

Course Requisites: Sophomore standing

Course Designation: Meets Ethnic Studies requirement; Meets Humanities or Social Science breadth requirement; Intermediate level; Counts as Liberal Arts and Science Credit in L&S

Assignments and Grading

Course grading scale: A = 92.5+; AB = 87.5-92.4; B = 82.5-87.4; BC = 77.5-82.4; C = 70-77.4; D = 60-69.4

Section attendance and participation	25% of your final grade
First midterm essay (due Sunday, 3/2, before midnight)	10%
Second midterm essay (due Tues., 4/8, before midnight)	20%
Final take-home essay (due Thurs., 5/8, 7:05 p.m.)	25%
In-class writing assignments (12 graded assignments; we will drop the lowest 2 grades)	10%
Weekly reading responses (due Wednesdays at 10pm) (13 graded assignments; we will drop the lowest 3 grades)	10%

Weekly reading responses must be submitted to Canvas no later than Wednesday at 10 p.m. They will be key to your successful participation in that week’s discussion section and must be turned in on time.

To receive full credit, weekly reading responses should be between 50 and 75 words. They should respond directly to the prompt on the syllabus

1. in full sentences that
2. make a clear argument and are
3. based on the assigned reading for that week.

We will spend time in section during the first weeks focusing on how to meet these requirements. If necessary, students will be directed to the History Lab (<https://history.wisc.edu/undergraduate-program/the-history-lab/>) for further help meeting these goals.

Readings

The course has three required books:

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; Dover Thrift edition, ISBN 9780486284996

Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War’s Slave Refugee Camps*; UNC Press paperback, ISBN 9781469661599

Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*, Vintage paperback, ISBN 9780375702747

The rest of our required readings are available in PDF on Canvas. Readings marked with an asterisk (*) may be the basis of in-class writing assignments. You must have a copy of these readings printed or downloaded (prior to lecture) for use in lecture during the appropriate week.

Schedule of Lectures, Readings, and Assignments

Our course week normally consists of Monday and Wednesday lectures, followed by discussion sections on Thursday or Friday (depending on your enrollment package).

Readings should be completed **prior to the lecture to which they are attached**. Certain reading assignments, noted here with a "*", will be part of workshops or other activities during that week's lectures.

WEEK 1 **NOTE: discussion sections begin meeting this week, Thursday, 1/23 and Friday, 1/24**

Lectures:

W 1/22 **Introductions**
Telling Stories about the Civil War Era

Reading: Optional reading: Foner, *Forever Free*, xix-xxx

Response: Which (one or more) of these stories of the Civil War era did you grow up with?

WEEK 2

Lectures:

M 1/27 **Slavery**
What (and where) was slavery?
W 1/29 Antebellum Southern Slave Society

Readings: Douglass, *Narrative* (preface through chapter 9)
Optional reading: Foner, *Forever Free*, 3-40

Response: How does Douglass's assertion that "few slaves could boast of a kinder master and mistress than myself" fit into his critique of the institution of slavery?

WEEK 3

Lectures:

M 2/3 **"Freedom" and "Equality"**
"Free Labor" and the Limits of Compulsion
W 2/5 The Proper Limits of Equality

Readings: Douglass, *Narrative* (chapter 10 - end)
McCurry, "The Politics of Yeoman Households"

Response: What were the "politics of yeoman households"?

WEEK 4

Lectures:

M 2/10 **Territories of Slavery and Freedom**
Where did slavery belong?
W 2/12 Three Ways of Looking at Kansas

Readings: Waite, "Jefferson Davis and Proslavery Visions of Empire" (2016)
Hammond, "Speech on the Admission of Kansas, March 4, 1858"

Response: Identify and summarize one element of Hammond's speech that *confirms* or *challenges* an element of Waite's argument.

WEEK 5

Lectures:

M 2/17 **Existential Threats**
The "Slave Power" and "Slavery National"
W 2/19 Why Secession?

Readings: Freeport Debate, Aug. 27, 1858
*South Carolina "Declaration of the Immediate Causes," 1860

Response: Identify one way in which the debate over slavery between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas differed from arguments taking place between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists.

WEEK 6

Lectures:

M 2/24 **Causes and Causation**
Causes and Causation, pt. 1
W 2/26 Causes and Causation, pt. 2

- Readings:** Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*, Ch. 1 and Appendix (Documents 1 and 2)
Alexander Stephens, "Corner-Stone Speech," 1861
- Response:** In what ways were the "politics of yeoman households" reflected in words of the secession commissioners and/or the Corner-stone speech?

FIRST MIDTERM ESSAY (10 Pts) Due Sunday, 3/2 before midnight

Struggles over slavery's morality, its political implications, and its geography were central to the crisis of the United States in the 1840s and 1850s; the challenge is to explain *how* these factors interacted to produce the crisis of 1860-61 and the war that followed. In an essay of 1250-1500 words, make an argument about 1) how one group of Americans—defined in any way that makes sense to you, but defined carefully—understood the meaning of these struggles over slavery, 2) how that understanding shaped the part that this group played in the crisis of the 1840s and 1850s, and 3) the relationship of their actions to the crisis of 1860-61.

Each section (1, 2, 3) of your essay should begin with a clear and concise thesis statement after the model of your weekly response assignments. Each section should draw on appropriate course readings, offering very brief quotations that support your argument. Cite page numbers parenthetically in the text (e.g., [Douglass, 19]). No bibliography is necessary. **Your essay may only cite and refer to materials assigned on this syllabus or covered in lecture. The specific number of required references to lectures and readings will be discussed closer to the essay due date.**

WEEK 7

Lectures: The Road to Emancipation

M 3/3 The "War for Southern Independence?"
W 3/5 "Who freed the slaves?"

Readings: Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 1-82
*“The War, and Colored American Auxiliaries," *The Liberator*, Sept. 6, 1861, p. 144

Response: Drawing directly on these readings, identify and describe an important unintended consequence of secession.

WEEK 8

Lectures: A War for Freedom?

M 3/10 The War for Emancipation
W 3/12 Gettysburg and the Fog of War

Readings: Foner, *Forever Free*, 41-67
Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 83-139
The War of the Rebellion, Series I, Vol. 14, pp. 298-308.

Response: The document from *The War of the Rebellion* offers a starkly different account of the raid on the Combahee than that offered in lecture. Identify one of the most important differences and make an argument about what accounts for it.

WEEK 9

Lectures: Imagining a Postwar World

M 3/17 Rehearsals for Reconstruction
W 3/19 What Should Freedom Mean?

Readings: Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 140-208
*Reid, *After the War*, pp. 127-129, 1866

Response: How did specific aspects of the history of enslavement, as described in Taylor's book, shape the ways that African Americans seized freedom during the war?

WEEK 10**Lectures: What Kind of Freedom?**

M 3/31 Visions of Freedom
 W 4/2 Restoration and Reaction

Readings: Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 209-248
 Foner, *Forever Free*, 76-100
 *Jordan Anderson writes to his former owner, 1865
 **Laws of Mississippi*, 1865

Response: Draft a thesis statement for the second midterm essay (see below)

SECOND MIDTERM ESSAY (20 pts) due Tuesday, 4/8, before midnight

Over the past century, historians have offered a wide array of arguments about how slave emancipation came about during the Civil War and who (or what) played the central role in that transformation. For example:

- In *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (1935), the historian, sociologist, and activist W.E.B. Du Bois argued that when the secessionists declared war on the U.S., they freed the slaves (although he also pointed out that “it was the last thing [they] meant to do”).
- In Ken Burns' 1990 documentary *The Civil War*, Columbia University historian Barbara J. Fields asserted that during the war “the slaves freed themselves.” This has been called “the self-emancipation thesis.” (This is also a theme of this course, though not its only explanation for emancipation).
- In a 1995 essay, Princeton University historian James McPherson pushed back against Fields’s view, writing: “By pronouncing slavery a moral evil that must come to an end and then winning the presidency in 1860, by refusing to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion or on Fort Sumter, by careful leadership and timing that kept a fragile Unionist coalition together in the first year of war and committed it to emancipation in the second, by refusing to compromise this policy once he had adopted it, and by prosecuting the war to unconditional victory as commander in chief of an army of liberation, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves.”
- In *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (1998), the authors (editors of the celebrated Freedmen and Southern Society Project, based at the National Archives and the University of Maryland) opens with the claim, “Freedom came to most American slaves only by force of arms.”

In an essay of 1250-1500 words, join this debate by making an argument in response to the question “Who (or what) freed the enslaved?” You are free to argue this in any way that is supported by the course material (and only the course material). Where your argument embraces or modifies one (or more) of the four arguments above, you must clarify your argument’s relationship to that argument (or those arguments)—that is, you must say explicitly how you are embracing, modifying, or in some other way incorporating that argument.

You are free to quarrel with the form of the question (“Who (or what) freed the enslaved?”) and to provide an alternative question that, in your view, addresses the underlying issue(s) more effectively; in this case, you should explain (in no more than 50 words) why your version of the question is superior.

You must provide page numbers for published material that you quote or closely paraphrase. Use the shortest possible parenthetical reference, e.g. (Taylor, 84). No bibliography is necessary. **Your essay may only cite and refer to materials assigned on this syllabus or covered in lecture.**

WEEK 11**Lectures: The Meanings of Equality**

M 4/7 The Politics of Reconstruction
 W 4/9 Equality after Slavery

Readings: Foner, *Forever Free*, 107-149
 *Douglass, “Composite Nation” (1869)

Response: Based on Foner’s discussion, was Southern Reconstruction a continuation of enslaved people’s pre-war and wartime struggles under new conditions, or was it something essentially new?

WEEK 12

Lectures: Reconstruction's Reverberations

M 4/14 Land
W 4/16 Wage Dependency

Readings: Kantrowitz, "Not Quite Constitutionalized"
*Pellew, "Pauperism in the State of New York," 216-220 (1879)

Response: Why did Timothy Howe describe the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk as "not quite constitutionalized," and what was the significance of that assertion?

WEEK 13

Lectures: Reconstruction's Limits

M 4/21 Terror
W 4/22 Crises of Citizenship

Readings: Foner, *Forever Free*, 159-180
*Williams, "Wounds that Cried Out"

Response: Based on the readings by Foner and Williams, what were the limitations of "rights" in ensuring equality in the postwar era?

Week 14

Lectures: After Reconstruction

M 4/28 The World the Counter-revolution Made
W 4/30 Final lecture

Readings: Foner, *Forever Free*, 189-213
*Smith, *How the Word is Passed*, 85-117

Response: What would have been necessary for democratically elected governments to persist in the former Confederate states in the 1870s and 1880s?

FINAL TAKE-HOME ESSAY DUE THURSDAY, MAY 8, 7:05 PM