

**History/African American Studies 393:
Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, 1848-1877
Spring 2026**

Lectures: Tues. and Thurs., 11-12:15, in Psychology 121 (1202 W. Johnson)
Sections: 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.
You will find materials, announcements, and updates at:
<https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/492205>

Teaching Staff

Prof. Stephen Kantrowitz
skantrow@wisc.edu
student hours: Tues., 1:30-3:30
5119 Mosse Humanities

TA: Jack Hynick
jhynick@wisc.edu
office hours: Thurs., 1:30-3:30
4266 Mosse Humanities

Goals and Learning Outcomes

I: 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.

II: 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

III: 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
- how enslaved and free Black people transformed the Civil War into an emancipation struggle
- the creation, course, and destruction of the nation's first experiment in multi-racial democracy
- the ways Native societies 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 era and its relationship to the history of slavery, freedom, equality, and democracy in 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

Combined Lecture-Discussion Format

Because we are a small group (for a lecture course), Tuesday and Thursday lecture meetings will consist of a mix of lecture, writing, and discussion. This will make it important that you are present and prepared at each course meeting, having done the relevant reading and with a copy of it available for reference.

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; we will do this, ritually, every time we meet. You may not turn the internet back on unless the instructor tells you to do so. Phones and other devices, including internet-connected watches, 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.

Attendance

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. **Most lecture meetings will include an in-class writing assignment; each of these is worth 2% of your course grade, and together they will comprise 40% of your total grade. We will drop your two lowest grades, including absences for any reason.**

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 have that week's reading assignment with you, either printed or downloaded to a laptop or tablet (not phone).

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.

The Use of “Artificial Intelligence”

Some people find that LLMs (inaptly named “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.) Because LLMs regurgitate the most common sequences of words, they tend to reproduce broader societal biases and “common sense,” and they can’t easily foster original or creative thinking. Most importantly, LLMs short-circuit the creative process of thinking through a problem on our own 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. (LLMs produce text by scraping and re-presenting people’s published work without citation or attribution—that is, by plagiarizing. If you submit work produced in this way, you are not only in violation of the class AI 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.

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.

Course Requisites and Designation: Sophomore standing. 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

In-class writing assignments (22 @2%; we will drop the lowest 2 grades)	40% of your final grade
Section attendance and participation	20%
First midterm	10%
Second midterm	10%
Final exam	20%

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

Schedule of Lectures, Readings, and Assignments

Most course readings are available in PDF on Canvas. The course also has one required book:

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

PART 1: How did slavery shape American society and American politics?**WEEK 1** **Starting Points**

T 1/20 Telling Stories about the Civil War Era

No assigned reading

Th 1/22 Origins and Transformations of Racial Slavery

Read: Gordon-Reed, “Jefferson Divided” (2025)

NOTE: discussion sections begin meeting this week (Friday, 1/23)

WEEK 2

T 1/27 Antebellum Southern Slave Society

Read: Douglass, *Narrative* (1845), chapters 1-9

Th 1/29 Enslaved People’s Political Lives

Read: Douglass, *Narrative* (1845), chapters 10-11

WEEK 3

T 2/3 What were the Proper Limits of Compulsion?

Read: McCurry, “The Politics of Yeoman Households” (1992)

Th 2/5 What were the Proper Limits of Equality?

Read: *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention* (1853), pp. 7-19

WEEK 4

T 2/10 “Bleeding Kansas”

Read: Oertel, “Bleeding Kansas: A Call to Arms” (2021)

Th 2/12 The “Slave Power” and “Slavery National”

Read: Freeport Debate (1858)

WEEK 5

T 2/17 Why Secession?

Read: South Carolina “Declaration of the Immediate Causes,” 1860

Th 2/19 MIDTERM #1

PART 2: How did the Civil War become a war of emancipation?**WEEK 6**

- T 2/24 Causation and “The Cause”
 Read: Alexander Stephens, “Corner-Stone Speech” (1861)
- Th 2/26 The “War for Southern Independence”?
 Read: McCurry, “Women Numerous and Armed” (2009)

WEEK 7

- T 3/3 Who freed the slaves?
 Read: McPherson, “Who freed the slaves?” (1995)
 Read: Berlin, “Who freed the slaves?” (1997)
- Th 3/5 The War for Emancipation
 Read: Hahn, “Did We Miss the Greatest Slave Rebellion in Modern History?” (2009)

WEEK 8

- T 3/10 Rehearsals for Reconstruction
 Read: Parten, “The Refugee Crisis of Sherman’s March” (2024)
- Th 3/12 Wartime Struggles over Equality
 Read: Wells, “Inventing *White Supremacy*” (2022)

WEEK 9

- T 3/17 “Getting Right (or Wrong?) with Lincoln”
 Read: Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address (1865)
 Read: Douglass, “Oration” (1876)
- Th 3/19 MIDTERM #2

PART 3: What was “freedom” in the aftermath of slavery?**WEEK 10**

- T 3/24 Freedpeople’s Theories of Justice
Read: Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet* (2003), chapter 3
Read: Reid, *After the War* (1866), pp. 127-129
- Th 3/26 Reconstruction of the National Polity
Read: Kantrowitz, “White Supremacy, Settler Colonialism” (2020)

WEEK 11

- T 4/7 Reconstruction as a Political Revolution
Read: Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet* (2003), chapter 5
- Th 4/9 Reconstruction as a Social Transformation
Read: Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere” (1994)

WEEK 12

- T 4/14 Land
Read: Saunt, “The Paradox of Freedom” (2004)
Read: Barrow, “A Georgia Plantation” (1881)
- Th 4/16 Terror
Read: Williams, “Wounds that Cried Out” (2015)

WEEK 13

- T 4/21 Democracy and Wage Dependency
Read: Beckert, “Democracy and its Discontents” (2002)
- Th 4/23 Crises of Citizenship
Read: Strickland, ““The Whole State is on Fire”” (2009)

Week 14

- T 4/28 The Post-Reconstruction World
Read: Smith, *How the Word is Passed* (2021), pp. 85-117
- Th 4/30 Final lecture