

G41.3536: The Black Atlantic & American Literature to 1855

Professor Bryan Waterman

Mon 3:30-5:30pm

Spring 2009

This seminar explores the ways in which recent study of the Black Atlantic has reshaped literary studies, especially the field of early American literature. Combining a readings course in recent criticism and cultural history with an examination of newly recovered texts and canonical cornerstones, we will venture into recent discussions on the place of literary scholarship in the study of the Atlantic World more generally. (See the spring 2008 forum cross-published in *The William and Mary Quarterly* and *Early American Literature* for one such starting point.) We will also examine ways in which Black Atlantic experiences and representations shaped writing from a range of authors and helped produce transatlantic cultures of sensibility and “American literature” itself from its earliest incarnations. In what comparable ways has the study of the Black Atlantic reshaped Spanish, British, and French literary studies? What happens when we redirect literary critics’ attention from the nation to the transnational? From nationalist rhetoric to commercial and imperial interests? In what ways is the Black Atlantic different when considered as a social imaginary rather than as a set of material conditions? A metropolitan versus a colonial or postcolonial enterprise? In what ways has the Atlantic slave trade both haunted and confused American literary and performance traditions? And how do genres of American writing often associated with slavery -- the fugitive slave narrative of the nineteenth century, for instance, or discourses of liberty associated with the American Revolution -- read differently in a Black Atlantic context?

Our critical and historical readings will include Ian Baucom, *Spectres of the Atlantic*; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*; David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America*; Sybille Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*; Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Color*; Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York*; as well as selections from work by Paul Gilroy, Laura Doyle, Christopher Miller, Marcus Rediker, W. T. Lhamon, Michael Warner, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Joanna Brooks, Jill Lane, and others.

Primary texts (novels, nonfiction prose, drama, poetry) will include works by Ignatius Sancho, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, Phillis Wheatley, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, Thomas Southerne, Mary Prince, William Earle, Leonora Sansay, and Herman Melville.

Seminar members will be able to choose either a rigorous reading response track with a final research proposal or a 20- to 25-page term paper with fewer responses due along the way. Either track will include individual and group presentations.

Students who register for the course without prior experience in the history of New World slavery are strongly encouraged to read, over winter break, David Brion Davis’s *Inhuman Bondage* and Laurent Dubois’s *Avengers of the New World*.