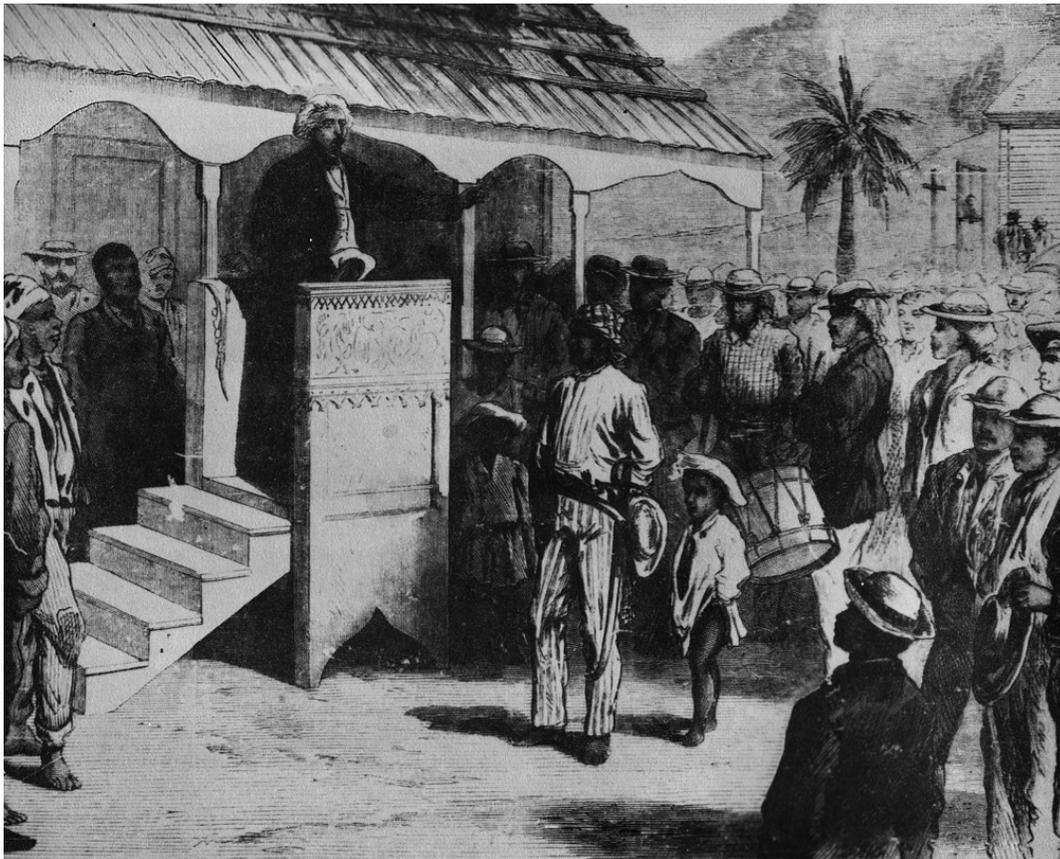


Expos 20
BLACK AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Sever 101
Tu/Th 1PM & 2PM
Spring 2018

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Office Hours: M 3-5PM in 1 Bow St. #234 or by appointment



The abolitionist Frederick Douglass delivering a speech in Samaná, in what is now the Dominican Republic, in 1871.

Why is autobiography so key to the black literary tradition on both sides of the Atlantic? In this course we will search for answers by working our way through black autobiographies from a number of different genres. We will begin in the United States by reading excerpts from the “narratives” of former slaves, including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Solomon Northup, whose memoir was the basis for the award-winning film *Twelve Years A Slave*. What did the autobiographical truthfulness of these accounts accomplish? Why were they so important for the abolitionist movement? What do their popularity and political importance say about the nature of black suffering and its consumption as literature? We will then broaden the scope of our inquiry to consider narratives of blackness and suffering from elsewhere in the African diaspora. Our touchstone will be the Martinique-born philosopher Frantz Fanon, whose autobiographical

engagement with racial trauma in *Black Skin, White Masks* remains one of the most important critical texts on blackness in the modern world. We will grapple with Fanon's account of realizing – quite late in life – that he was black and what that meant. This will help illuminate the broader world of postcolonial African and Caribbean politics and literature, including the poetry of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor and the fiction of Ama Ata Aidoo. In the final section of the course, we will return to the United States to engage with the #blacklivesmatter movement and some of the provocative music, film and prose in dialogue with it: Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*, Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. What do these new black autobiographies have in common with their antecedents? How has the conversation about black life and black suffering changed? Or, has it changed at all?

The primary goal of this course – like all other Expos courses – is to help you to gain a greater facility with college-level academic writing. That said, I do hope that you will leave this course with a deeper appreciation of the literature, philosophy, music and film of the African diaspora and their profound implications for our present moment. Whatever your politics, there is something in these texts that will challenge you to change and grow.

On that note: virtually all of the materials with which we will grapple this semester deal with the many traumas engendered by anti-blackness throughout its long, difficult history. Several contain visceral descriptions or enactments of violence. As the nature – and the political utility – of black suffering is at the heart of the work we are doing this semester, we will confront these traumatic moments head on. If you feel you need to take special steps to ensure your own emotional well-being as you work with these texts, please feel free to do so. I am available to speak at any point in the semester about how best to support you. More broadly, I ask that you ground your engagement with this material, in class and beyond, in a spirit of generosity and goodwill; that you respect your classmates and their experiences; and that you challenge yourself and your peers to be better than you've learned to be.

Course Materials

The required out-of-class reading for this course will be drawn from the following texts:

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

Léopold Sédar Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*

Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

All of these readings will be available on Canvas, except for the Fanon and the Aidoo. Because we are reading Fanon and Aidoo at some length, and because their work is protected by copyright, I am unable to simply scan their books for you. I ask that you purchase those two titles (at the Coop or elsewhere) or read them in the library. I will put as many copies on reserve at Lamont as I can.

Additionally, we will work with the following films, which I will screen outside of class, and which are also available online:

Beyoncé, *Lemonade*

Ryan Coogler, *Fruitvale Station*

Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*

Assignments & Grading

Your grade for this course will be determined according to the following rubric:

Participation in Class Discussion & Activities:	10%
Unit 1 Essay Revision:	25%
Unit 2 Essay Revision:	30%
Unit 3 Essay Revision:	35%

As you can tell, in this course you will be evaluated largely on the basis of three essays. For each of these essays, you will complete a sequence of preparatory exercises (otherwise known – in Expos and elsewhere – as response papers), followed by a draft of your essay, followed by a revised final draft. Only this last iteration of each essay will be graded. I will provide detailed feedback along the way – most intensively in a one-on-one or group conference for each unit essay that we will schedule outside of class time after you turn in your draft.

I will distribute detailed instructions for each unit as it comes along, but here is a brief overview of the work you will be doing.

Unit One: For Unit One, you will write a 4-6-page essay that investigates in detail a scene of your choice in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* or Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave*. The emphasis here is on close reading and on producing an incisive argument based on a single text.

Unit Two: For Unit Two, you will write a 6-8-page essay that brings Frantz Fanon's ideas into dialogue with a literary text. Here I am asking you to weigh two different kinds of writing against one another and – more specifically – to work with theory in the analysis of literature.

Unit Three: For Unit Three, you will write a 8-10-page research paper that locates Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*, Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* or another text of your choice in its historical, social and political context. The challenge here, of course, will lie in managing a wide variety of sources without losing track of what it is *you* want to say.

Course Policies

Communication: The best way to get in touch with me is via email or Canvas. By their very nature, these channels of communication are best for giving me information (i.e. informing me you are ill) or asking straightforward questions that can be answered in five minutes or less. Please don't write

or message me with questions that could easily be answered by looking at the syllabus or the unit assignments. I generally try to respond to all emails and Canvas messages within 24 hours but may take longer on weekends. If you have a more complicated question, would like to talk through an idea you are exploring, are having difficulty with the reading, etc., please come to my office hours or make an appointment to see me one-on-one. Your draft conference needn't be the only time you see me outside of class.

Technology: Laptops and tablets are allowed in class for you to refer to readings. I will also allow you to take notes on your device but would strongly recommend that you take notes on paper if that is an option for you. The research shows that all of us are more likely to retain information we write out by hand than information we type on a keyboard. The bottom line, however, is that if you can contribute actively to class with your laptop or tablet open, you are welcome to do so. However, the *first* time I notice someone checking email; going on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.; or doing anything else that is not related to our work, I will ban laptops and tablets for everyone for the rest of the semester. This is a seminar-style course, not a large lecture, and it is disrespectful to me and to your fellow students – not to mention inimical to your own learning – for you to be electronically elsewhere during class. Cell phones are not allowed at all, except in case of emergency.

Electronic Submissions: All assignments for this course should be submitted through Canvas. Please use only .doc or .docx file formats so that I can use Word's track changes function to comment on your work. It is your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay may be subject to a late penalty.

Late Submissions: I expect that you will turn in all assignments on time. If for some unforeseen reason you need an extension, please contact me as early as possible so that we can see what may be possible. If you haven't secured an extension and you turn in work late, it will be graded down by half a grade each day it's late – i.e. an A paper will receive an A/A- if it's one day late, an A- if it's two days late, and so on.

Disability Accommodations: Everyone is welcome in my classroom. If you have any concerns about any issue, great or small, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. However, please know that I am not able to make any special disability-related accommodations without official word from the Accessible Education Office. If you have questions, please visit their website: <http://aeo.fas.harvard.edu>

Official Expos Attendance Policy: Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. *If you are absent without medical excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course. Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact me before class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean. *Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences.* If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact me beforehand if you will miss

a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Official Expos Completion of Work Policy: Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course—not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

Collaboration: The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook*, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own. Writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

Academic Honesty: Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this important issue. *All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment.* When outside sources are required (i.e. for the Unit Three research paper) please follow the guidelines for citation that I provide. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action. Remember, too, that academic honesty is not simply a question of avoiding plagiarism; it is the bedrock principle of this and all university communities, intimately tied to the values of integrity and respect this course seeks to foster.

Resources: I will introduce you to many on- and off-campus resources for your writing and learning over the course of this semester. At the outset, however, I would like to mention the following two:

The Harvard Writing Center. At the Writing Center, you can get feedback from a tutor on a draft-in-progress. If grammar and sentence-level mechanics are an issue for you, I highly recommend working with their dedicated English Language and Grammar tutor.

<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu>

The Harvard Guide To Using Sources. We will work with *HGUS* extensively over the course of the semester. It is worth familiarizing yourself with it at the outset. <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>