

HIS/GSWWS 3340G

Reading Black Lives

Winter 2024

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This is a **draft** syllabus updated 14 June 2023. Please see the course site on OWL for a final version.

Course Description

This course examines the history of peoples of African descent in the US through the life stories of ten individuals, some male-identified, others female-identified, and some whom we might today classify as non-binary, genderqueer, or otherwise outside of the gender binary. These people lived from the earliest days of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to the present. Throughout our reading of their lives, we will explore themes important in the history of people of African heritage in North America, such as agency, resistance, intersectionality and identity, freedom, and creativity. These biographies and autobiographies will be our window onto the political, economic, social and cultural context in which each of these people lived.

Students who have already taken an introductory course in African-American or African-Canadian History are encouraged to enroll, but there is no prerequisite for this course.

Antirequisite(s): HIS/GSWWS 3340 (cross-listed versions of this course)

Students should be mindful that biographies and autobiographies tend to be lengthy, and we will be reading one book-length life story every week. We will discuss strategies for skimming and reading for argument, but you should be prepared to spend time reading each book before our class meets. I recommend that you start early and plan to spend several chunks of time reading in order to be prepared.

Methods of Evaluation

Weekly participation in seminar, incl. discussion, pop quizzes, questions:	15%
Reflection essays (4 total)	20%
Discussion leadership (1 time)	5%
Midterm essay, in class on 29 February	30%
Final exam:	30%

Students are expected to be prepared to discuss the readings assigned for each seminar meeting, and each will also lead our discussion as part of a small group once

during the semester. There may be discussion questions, pop quizzes, or other weekly assessments in class, which will be marked as part of your participation grade. Our discussions will be as good, or as bad, as you make them. The tenor, value, and engagement of each seminar depends entirely on the preparation, attitudes, and generosity of each of you.

Students are required to attend class each week, to be on time and to leave when class ends. If you are unable to attend, or if you must be late or leave early, email the professor ahead of time (I will not ask you for explanations, you must initiate this). Every absence will affect your ability to be successful in this course.

We will meet 12 times, so each class meeting will be an opportunity for you to earn up to 1.25% of your 15% participation mark, or 8.33% out of 100%. You will earn all 8.33 points by attending on time, leaving on time, and **listening** and **participating** actively and respectfully in the discussion, being mindful not to dominate or derail it. I will take note each week of who is listening actively to your peers, who has useful and relevant things to contribute, who is distracted by their devices, and who is just taking up space. You will be marked accordingly: each week, half your participation mark is attendance, and the other half is how well you listened, contributed, and engaged. If you feel anxiety about speaking in class, please discuss your options with me as soon as you enroll in the course. I have many strategies that I have used in the past to help shy or anxious students earn their full participation marks, and I will be very happy to work with you.

Please note that missing one class will result in a 0% for participation that week – and thus will reduce your best possible total participation mark to 91.6%, even if you are engaged at every other meeting. Missing two will reduce that best possible participation mark to 83.3%, missing 3 classes will reduce it to 75%, missing 4 classes will reduce it to 66.7%, missing 5 class meetings will reduce it to 58.3% and missing 6 (or half) of our seminar discussions will result in a 50% or lower for participation. Please understand how this math works before you skip class. An excused absence will not affect your grade, but it will change the way your other weekly participation scores are calculated (rather than 12 weeks to earn 100 points, you will only have 11, after 1 excused absence, for example, making each week worth more – 9.1 points rather than 8.3, thereafter).

If you are ill, please do not come to class. If you have a cold, please wear a mask if you are able to do so, and I will do the same. **If you wish to be excused from class**, you must provide evidence to the Academic Counseling office in your home faculty that you were ill, or attending a medical appointment or participating in a University athletics match, or unable to attend due to a personal emergency. Unexcused absences, as well as frequent tardiness, will harm your participation grade and will hamper your ability to be successful in the course. It is up to you to provide explanations and supporting documentation to Academic Counseling, I will not

remind you to provide them and I cannot accept them from you directly (to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and equity).

Every third week, as assigned by your assignment schedule number, you will write a short reflection of the biography or autobiography we are reading that week. These reviews should be 500-600 words and should cover the main ideas, arguments, and themes of each life story, as well as what historical context(s) it helps illuminate and bring to life. You must write 4 of these during the term. They are due when class begins (electronically to lshire@uwo.ca) and **will not be accepted late**. If you are unable to write one in a week when you're assigned to do so, please contact Prof. Shire ahead of time and ask to write in a different week (suggest which one will work for you). You may switch weeks up to 2 times over the semester - if you need accommodation more often than that, please set up a meeting to discuss this with me. Please plan ahead now for these assignments so that you can complete them on time.

Once during the semester, you will lead off our discussion of our biographical subject for that week, probably in a pair or small group (depending on how many students are in the course). Please bring some discussion questions to get your peers thinking and talking about the reading. This is very open-ended and you are free to be creative, and/or to share short videos, memes or other relevant material. But please be sure that your discussion starters are ON TOPIC. This is worth 5% of your mark. If you are absent for an excusable reason on the date when you are assigned to lead discussion, you will be given one opportunity to make it up. If not, you will earn 0%. If you need to switch dates for this assignment, please contact me as soon as possible.

We will have an in-class mid-term examination on THURSDAY 29 FEBRUARY. It will consist of a few short answer questions and 2 short essays. These questions will all be drawn from the first five auto/biographies we will read in the course. If you have read those and attended class discussion, you will not have any trouble earning top marks on the midterm exam.

The final exam will be scheduled during the exam period in April. It will consist of identifications, timelines or chronologies, short answer questions, and one essay question. A study guide will be circulated before the exam, and will be available for discussion in the last class meeting.

Make-up tests, midterms, and exams can only be approved by Academic Counselling. Please see https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for department procedures and requirements involving make-up tests and exams.

Course Materials

All these are available via Western Libraries, online, or for sale at the bookstore.

"Brother/Outsider: The Life of Freedom Fighter Bayard Rustin" free on Kanopy through lib.uwo.ca <https://www.kanopy.com/en/uwo/video/139631>

"My Name is Pauli Murray" on Amazon Prime (if you do not have a Prime subscription, please see the Professor for help accessing this title)
https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0RZYE0RX9SWMQVJ5VMFQR0UUMM/ref=dvm_src_ret_ca_xx_s

Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Chapters on Elizabeth Keye, Anthony Johnson, and John Casor from Kendi & Blain, Eds. *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019*. On OWL.

Dunbar, Erica Armstrong, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*. New York: 37 Ink/Atria, 2017. 1501126393, 9781501126390.

Dunye, Cheryl. "The Watermelon Woman," 1996 film. This is available free online via Western Libraries in the Kanopy collection.
<https://www.kanopy.com/en/uwo/video/110276>

Theoharis, Jean. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Beacon Press, 2013)

Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. Knopf, 1994. 0394577086, 9780394577081

Lewis, David Levering. *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography, 1868-1963*. 2009.

Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. UNC Press, 2003. 978-0-8078-5616-1

Rhodes, Jane. *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* Indiana Univ. Press, 1999 978-0253213501.

Smith, Venture. "A Narrative of The Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America," 1798. Available here: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/venture.html> or you can order a printed copy on Amazon.

Tyson, Timothy B. *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001. 978-0-8078-4923-1

Course Schedule and Readings

11 January - Introductions. On finding a Useable Past. Who gets a biographer, and who does not? Who gets to leave a memoir, and who does not? If you are able, please view Cheryl Dunye's 1996 film "The Watermelon Woman" before our first class.

You will have an opportunity to sign up for the day when you will lead our discussion in this first class, and you will receive your group # for the assignment schedule.

For discussion:

- Dunye, Cheryl. "The Watermelon Woman," 1996 film. This is available free online via Western Libraries in the Kanopy collection.
<https://www.kanopy.com/en/uwo/video/110276>
- Chapters on Elizabeth Key, Anthony Johnson, and John Casor from Kendi & Blain, Eds. *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019*. On OWL.

18 January: Smith, Venture. "A Narrative of The Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America," 1798. Available here: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/venture.html> or you can order a printed copy on Amazon.

Reflection due from All Students (all 3 groups)

Discussion leader(s):

25 January: Dunbar, Erica Armstrong, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*. New York: 37 Ink/Atria, 2017. 1501126393, 9781501126390.

Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 1

Discussion leader(s):

1 February: Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018. Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 2

Discussion leader(s):

8 February: Rhodes, Jane. *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* Indiana Univ. Press, 1999 978-0253213501. Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 3

Discussion leader(s):

15 February: Lewis, David Levering. *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography, 1868-1963*. 2009. Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 1

Discussion leader(s):

22 February (No class, reading week)

29 February - In Class Midterm on the readings/films thus far

7 March: Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. UNC Press, 2003. 978-0-8078-5616-1

Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 2

Discussion leader(s):

14 March: Two documentaries:

- "Brother/Outsider: The Life of Freedom Fighter Bayard Rustin" free on Kanopy
<https://www.kanopy.com/en/uwo/video/139631>
- "My Name is Pauli Murray" which is on Amazon Prime
https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0RZYE0RX9SWMQVJ5VMFQR0UUMM/ref=dvm_src_ret_ca_xx_s

Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 3

Discussion leader(s):

21 March: Jean Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Beacon Press, 2013)

Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 1

Discussion leader(s):

28 March: Tyson, Timothy B. *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001. 978-0-8078-4923-1

Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 2

Discussion leader(s):

4 April: Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. Knopf, 1994. 0394577086, 9780394577081

Reflection due from Assignment Schedule Group 3

Discussion leader(s):

Final exam: TBA (11-30 April)

There is never enough time... Recommended Reading:

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, London, 1789

Carretta, Vincent. *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011). ISBN:0820333387 ISBN13: 9780820333380

Reid-Maroney, Nina. *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1868-1967*, University of Rochester Press, 2013. 1580464475

Stewart, Maria W., and Kristin Waters. *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought*. University Press of Mississippi, 2022.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself*, 1861.

D'Emilio, John. *Lost Prophet: the Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004. 978-0226142692

Alexander, Lincoln and Herb Shoveller, *Go to School, You're a Little Black Boy: The Honourable Lincoln M. Alexander: A Memoir*, 2010

Martis, Eternity. *They Said This Would Be Fun: Race, Campus Life, and Growing Up*. Penguin, 2021.

Cole, Desmond. *The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2020.

Additional Statements

Communication policies:

The best way to reach me is email, lshire@uwo.ca (which pops to profshire@gmail.com). Please feel free to drop in during office hours, which is time set aside for you to come and speak with me about anything related to the course, or to your academic career. I also encourage you to email me to set up an appointment anytime. I am happy to meet over Zoom or in person at a time that will work for both of us.

Classroom behavior:

Please be on time for class, and please be respectful of me and your peers at all times. We will take a break about 75 minutes into class, and if possible please use that opportunity to use the washroom without leaving class while it's in session. You may eat and drink in class, so long as you clean up after yourself, and are not disruptive to the discussion.

Use of electronic devices:

Please do not use electronic devices for tasks unrelated to the seminar discussion during class. If you must access the reading that week on a screen, be sure to stay on task and turn off any notifications or sounds that might distract you and those around you. If you are off task on a device during class, that will be obvious to me and everyone else around you, and you will receive a zero for participation that day. You will not be allowed access to electronic devices during pop quizzes, tests or exams. Do not record audio or video of our class meetings without written permission from me and from your classmates.

Use of generative AI tools: All work submitted in this course must be your own. You may not make use of generative AI tools like ChatGPT for any assignments in this course.

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at:

https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.

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