**Black Atlantic Literature**

This course will explore the literary, historical, and theoretical parameters of the Black Atlantic world. As a theoretical concept and a lived experience, the Black Atlantic follows the histories of the transatlantic slave trade and the resulting African diaspora. We will consider the Black Atlantic as a geographic, economic, political, and socio-cultural entity, formed at the intersections of slavery, racism, empire, and colonialism.

Our texts will emerge from the colonial period that begins with the earliest moments of European exploration of the West African coast in the fifteenth century and continues up through the abolition of Brazilian slavery in 1888. We will also extend our inquiry into the present and consider the cultural, economic, and political legacies of the Black Atlantic in novels, essays, film, and poetry from the 20th and 21st centuries. We will read the words of Black preachers, sailors, activists, entrepreneurs, revolutionaries, intellectuals, and artists. Our authors will include Olaudah Equiano, Victor Sejour, Phillis Wheatley, Juan Manzano, Michelle Cliff, Toni Morrison, Frantz Fanon, and M. NourbeSe Philip.

Along the way, we will also learn some methods that scholars use to understand this history. Writing in 1993, Paul Gilroy theorized the Black Atlantic as an early Black identity and cultural formation that emerges as a transatlantic and transnational phenomenon—transcending British, African, American, and Caribbean nationalities and creating something wholly new. We will consider the texts at hand alongside the concepts of hybridity, créolité, double-consciousness, and modernity.

Our questions will include: What kinds of communities are created in the wake of the disruptions of the slave trade? What forms of identity, selfhood, and belonging emerge from the culture created by these writings? What sorts of agency emerge in the face of the systematic alienation of plantation slavery? How do these works help us understand the seeming paradox of an era that saw both the birth of liberal democracy and the entrenchment of plantation slavery? How do these writings change our understanding of history, and in what ways do black Atlantic cultural and intellectual productions form, in Gilroy’s words, “a counterculture of modernity”?

In considering this body of literature, this class also aims to help you develop your skills as an astute reader—your capacity to analyze and interpret literary works that emerge from a world that is different from your own and your ability to make an interesting argument about a text. You will master literary terms such as the picaresque, the spiritual autobiography, and the sentimental; and you will engage with interpretive frameworks like postcolonialism, critical race theory, and transnationalism. You will practice expressing your insights about a work with clarity in a classroom discussion, as well as persuading a reader of the strength of your written arguments by marshaling textual evidence. You will be able to say not just what happens in a text but how and why it happens the way it does.