HISTORY & LITERATURE 90BC

WE THE READERS: READING COMMUNITIES IN EARLY AMERICA

THURSDAYS 10-12, BARKER 128

SPRING 2016

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Office Hours: By appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Reading is a practice with which we are quite familiar—and an act, dear reader, in which you are currently engaged—but it also has a history. This seminar looks at a slice of that history by asking not only who was reading and what was read in what would become the United States, but also how reading was practiced, imagined, and used. “We the Readers” is divided into three units that focus on key moments in early America when reading’s potential to bind together nascent and changing communities became a particular object of concern: colonial New England, the final decades of the eighteenth century, and the antebellum years. These years saw the passage of laws that required white male children be taught to read and antiliteracy statues that targeted both African Americans in the South and those who would teach them; they saw a national revolution and many smaller, more personal upheavals; they saw the rise of cities and railroads and the blossoming of new literary genres. In these years, why was novel reading considered a threat to the new nation, and who were the novel’s most threatening readers? Could sensational newspaper articles about New York City’s seamy underbelly help readers to navigate new urban spaces, or would they merely titillate and degrade their readers? How could the mundane act of reading printed sermons, daily newspapers, bestselling novels, political pamphlets, and city signs be understood to have consequences for women, Native Americans, subjects, citizens, and slaves—and through them, a nation? To answer these questions, we will look at texts read (and written) in early America that allow us access to historical practices and representations of reading. Our examinations of primary materials will be enriched by historical and literary scholarship that puts into practice the methods of history of the book, a scholarly field that exists at the dynamic intersection of history and literature. “We the Readers” will introduce students to ways to approach the history of reading and familiarize them with critical episodes from the history and literature of early America.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Short Assignments, 3 pages each
Each of these assignments should pose a central analytical question and use the examination and interpretation of primary sources to explore and propose an answer to that question. Assignments should be 3 pages in length and absolutely no more than 4 pages. Their object is interpretation and analysis, but they do not require central arguments and should not include lengthy
introductions—no more than a short paragraph should postpone turning to the actual work of the response. All students must complete Short Assignment #1 and two additional Short Assignments chosen from options 2-4.

- #1, due Week 3, 2/11: Perform a close-reading of a short passage from Mary Rowlandson’s *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration* or Samuel Danforth’s “Brief Recognition.”
- #2, due Week 6, 3/3: Follow the Footnote, locating and analyzing a primary source from any of our secondary readings up through Week 7. If appropriate, submit a copy of the primary source with your assignment.
- #3, due Week 10, 3/31: Open topic, but the topic must be related to our course readings and you must define what you are doing in the response’s opening paragraph. You may choose to submit this response at any point in the semester up to Week 10.
- #4, due Week 12, 4/14: Identify and compare at least three printed reviews of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Submit images of the reviews—either the review itself or the newspaper page on which it appears—with your assignment.

**Reading Presentation**

Each student will do a reading presentation on a source from the syllabus. Reading presentations begin in Week 4. Sources available for presentation will be circulated in Week 2 and, as you will see, will never be the main text for the week. Instead, an important task for the presentation is to show how the source illuminates, complicates, and otherwise connects to the main text and main ideas for the week. All students will have read the source, so the presentation’s goal is to frame and provoke class discussion. Presentations will occur at variable points during the seminar (sometimes at the beginning, sometimes roughly in the middle) and will last only 5-7 minutes: time limits will be strictly enforced, so students must plan carefully (and practice!) what they will say in advance of the presentation. In weeks when there are multiple reading presentations, students should make sure to coordinate their efforts.

With this in mind, in the presentation the student should first **selectively summarize** what the source says: what are the big ideas that we need to know? The student should then **propose analytical connections**, either as arguments or questions, between the source under consideration and other readings for the week. What do we need to learn and consider from this source in light of our discussion topic for that week—or otherwise? Students who want to discuss their presentation with me in advance can do so on Wednesday afternoons between 1pm and 4pm; please make an appointment for that time.

**Short Essay, 5 pages, due Week 7, 3/10**

This assignment asks you to practice skills essential to academic writing and to prepare for the research necessary for your final project. In this paper, you will focus on a single primary text that we have considered together. You will subject this text to close scrutiny, being attentive to language, form, imagery, point-of-view, and other relevant concerns, and then build an original argument from your observations. Your essay also must engage directly and substantively with a work of scholarship that we have read together. Your essay will therefore enter into a critical conversation about the primary text and the concerns of the secondary piece. Prompts will be provided well in advance of the due date, and students will also have the opportunity to propose their own topics.
**Final Research Project**

Multiple options will be provided, but all will entail substantive research and writing. Note that only the final project itself will be graded, but failure to complete the proposal or short draft or to schedule and attend an individual meeting will result in a grade penalty on the final project. Extension days may be used on the proposal and short draft, but not on the final essay itself.

- Week 12, 4/14: Proposal with working bibliography
- Week 14, 4/26: Short draft (4 pages)
- Week 14, 4/27-4/29: Individual meetings
- 5/5: Final project (10-12 pages)

Possible options:

- A research essay on the topic of your choosing
- DIY Poetry Anthology: Assemble a popular poetry anthology from newspapers and periodicals, and provide an interpretive introduction.
- Week 13 Project: Add an extra week to the syllabus: assemble approximately 200-250pp. of primary and secondary readings related to the course topic, and write an essay on how these readings fit into or expand the trajectory and aims of the course.

**Grading Percentages:**

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading presentation</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short writing assignments (3)</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Project</td>
<td>25%</td>
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**COURSE POLICIES**

**Presence and Participation:** I expect you to attend class every week. Students are allowed a single absence, no questions asked. Use this absence strategically, if at all, because each additional absence will reduce your participation grade and therefore your final grade by half a percentage point (i.e., from 19.5 points to 19 points, or from a 92 to a 91.5). Emergencies are the only exception to this rule; interviews, extracurricular engagements, etc., are not. This course is a seminar, and I therefore expect you to engage substantively in class discussion every week. Participation largely depends on preparation: you are, of course, required to do all reading and writing assignments and to come to class with all materials, including assigned texts and hard copies of texts from our course website. You should do your reading well: mark up your book, article, etc.; take notes for yourself in the margins; underline important passages; turn down pages to which you want to return. If you have questions or concerns about your class participation, please feel free to meet with me.

**Written Work:** Students may build on their work throughout the semester if they so choose. A short assignment can be developed into the short essay, the ideas of the short essay can be taken up again in a later short assignment, the short essay can be developed and expanded into the final research essay, etc. In returning to previous work, however, students must substantively revise,
revisit, and otherwise reconsider their initial ideas and prose. Work that does not attempt and accomplish this serious work of revision will be penalized.

Extensions and Late Assignments: Everyone will start with three extension days to be used at your discretion and on any assignment except the reading presentation and final essay. You do not need to ask for an extension, but can use these days as necessary. Your three days may be used in any combination (e.g., one day for the short essay, two days for Writing Assignment #4), but once you have used all three extension days, no more extensions will be allowed except in extreme circumstances. Late assignments will be marked down one level for each 24-hour period they are late (e.g., an A- becomes a B+, a C+ becomes a C, etc.).

Screen Policy: No screens (laptops, iPads, etc.) other than the big one at the front of the room will be allowed during seminar meetings. Readings from the Canvas site should therefore be printed and brought to class. Not having the readings present in class will significantly affect your participation grade.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the instructor’s inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty may contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.

The Harvard College Honor Code, Academic Integrity, and Collaboration:
Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity — that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions.

Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

Plagiarism is presenting someone else’s ideas or language as your own, whether intentionally or not. It is in most cases a serious violation of ethics and policy, punishable by grading penalties and referral to the Honor Council for disciplinary action.

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of writing topics and to read each other’s work. You may find it useful to discuss a topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach. Indeed, you should always take great care to distinguish your own ideas and knowledge from information derived from other sources. Be aware that the term “sources” includes not only primary and secondary material published in print or online, but also information and opinions gained directly from other people. Quotations must be placed properly
within quotation marks and must be cited fully. In addition, all paraphrased material must be acknowledged completely. You are responsible for learning the proper forms of citation. I expect you to be familiar with the *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, which is available at [http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu), and to adhere to either MLA or Chicago citation form. More information on the College’s policies on academic integrity can be found on the Honor Code website, available here: [http://honor.fas.harvard.edu/](http://honor.fas.harvard.edu/).

**RESOURCES OF INTEREST**

**General:**


Harvard Guide to Newspapers and Newspaper Indexes, [http://guides.library.harvard.edu/news](http://guides.library.harvard.edu/news)

**Electronic Databases of Primary Sources:**

- *Accessible Archives* (including African American Newspapers: The 19th Century)
- *America’s Historical Newspapers*
- *American Periodical Series, 1740-1900*
- *Early American Imprints, Series 1 (1639-1800)*
- *Everyday Life and Women in America, c.1800-1920*

**Other:**

- *A Place of Reading: Three Centuries of Reading in America*, [http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Exhibitions/Reading/index.htm](http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Exhibitions/Reading/index.htm)
- *Take Note: An Exploration of Note-Taking in Harvard University Collections*, [http://bookhistory.harvard.edu/takenote/](http://bookhistory.harvard.edu/takenote/)
REQUIRED TEXTS

Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (Warner, revised trade printing, 2014)
Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Dover, 1997)
Mary Rowlandson, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997)
David Walker’s *Appeal* (Hill and Wang, 1995)

***Please purchase the editions specified. All books are available used (and at a substantial discount) on Amazon and elsewhere.***

SCHEDULE OF READING & WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1, Jan. 28—Course Introduction: Scenes of Reading

**UNIT 1: COLONIAL LITERACIES**

Week 2, Feb. 4—The Uses of Literacy in Colonial New England
*The New-England Primer* (read earliest surviving edition from 1727, no. 50082, online through *Early American Imprints: Evans, Series 1*)

Week 3, Feb. 11—Reading in the Wilderness
Samuel Danforth, “A Brief Recognition of New-England’s Errand into the Wilderness” (1670)
Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682)
DUE: Short writing assignment #1
Week 4, Feb. 18—Theorizing Native Literacies, Reading Native Texts

Samson Occom, *A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian* (1772)

**UNIT 2: READING FOR NATIONALISM**

Week 5, Feb. 25—Imagining a Nation through Reading
Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)
Alys Eve Weinbaum, “Nation” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (2007)

Week 6, March 3—American Virtue, British Vice, and Regional Types in the Post-Revolutionary U.S.
Royall Tyler, *The Contrast* (1787)
Versions of “Yankee Doodle” from *American Broadsides and Ephemera*, 1760, 1796, 1827 (same text in 1775 editions)
DUE: Short writing assignment #2

Week 7, March 10—Seduction, Women’s Reading, and the Early American Novel
Hannah Foster, *The Coquette* (1797)
DUE: Short essay

Week 8, March 14-18—SPRING BREAK
UNIT 3: ANTEBELLUM NETWORKS

Week 9, March 24—A Pamphlet from the North Comes South; or, The Threat of Black Literacy
David Walker’s Appeal (1829)
Antiliteracy statutes from Alabama (1831, 1856), Georgia (1829, 1833), Louisiana (1830), Mississippi (1823), Missouri (1847), North Carolina (1830-31), South Carolina (1740, 1800)
Elizabeth McHenry, Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies (Duke UP, 2002), Chapter 1: “‘Dreaded Eloquence’: The Origins and Rise of African American Literary Societies”

Week 10, March 31—The Mysteries of Slave Literacy
Hannah Crafts, The Bondwoman’s Narrative (composed 1850s, published 2002)
Heather Andrea Williams, Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom (2005), Chapter 1: “In Secret Places: Acquiring Literacy in Slave Communities
Preface (2013) and Introduction (2001) to The Bondwoman’s Narrative, pp. x-cxii
DUE: Short writing assignment #3

Week 11, April 7—The Novel as Serial, the Novel as Bestseller
Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851-52), through Chapter 27

Week 12, April 14—The Novel as Serial, the Novel as Bestseller, cont.
Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Chapter 28-end
DUE: 1) Final project proposal and bibliography 2) Short writing assignment #4

Week 13, April 21— City Reading
George Foster, New York By Gas-Light (1850), pp. 65-197
David Henkin, City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York (1998), Chapter 3: “Commercial Impudence and the Dictatorship of the Perpendicular: Signs of the City”
Week 14, April 25-29— Last week of classes and start of Reading Period
DUE Tues., 4/26, by 4pm: Final project short draft

Thursday, May 5: Final Project due by 9AM