

Professor Ryan James Kernan

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Office Hours: Th. 5:00-6:00 and by appointment

# 350:378 African American Literature and Its International Influences

UNDERGRADUATE COURSES | SPRING 2014 - TWENTIETH CENTURY  
01 TTH4 CAC 13275 KERNAN MU-212

In this class will examine canonical African American literary works in terms of their international inspirations and influences. The course aims to lay bare a genealogy that explores the extent to which African American poetry and prose have always constituted an international literature, even in their most nationalist incarnations. Exploring issues ranging from the impact of French Romanticism on African American literature's inaugural moments to the Diasporic awareness that helps to fuel its contemporary literary production, the course will address how international literary movements helped to shape the African American literary canon. In short, the course strays from critical narratives that stress the *sui generis* origins of African American literature in order to emphasize the heterogeneity of a canon whose roots lie both in evolving conceptions of African American artistic and folk culture as well as in the alluvial soil of various international literary movements. This will entail an exciting journey that will expose us to the impacts that: the Indian captivity narrative made on the slave narrative, Victor Hugo's poetry had on early African American poetry written in New Orleans, Charlotte Brontë had on Pauline Hopkins' early articulations of post-bellum African American womanhood, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky had on Ralph Ellison's African American existentialist novel *Invisible Man*. In addition to their engaged participation, students will be required to complete two take-home exams over the course of the semester.

## ***Required Textbooks***

978-0140436716 Women's Captivity Narratives  
978-0312125189 Black Atlantic Writers of the 18th Century  
978-0252071492 Creole Echoes  
978-0226359816 Selected Poems of Victor Hugo  
978-0195067859 Contending Forces  
978-1604594119 Jane Eyre  
978-0375756887 The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky  
978-0679732761 Invisible Man

## *Course Objectives*

To both familiarize you with the seminal texts of literary theory and to help you **read those texts at a college level**. “Read,” in this sense, means a deep engagement with the text where you not only recognize what is explicit on the page, but also formulate your own understandings of how the work conveys meanings. You’ll better learn to think of each work both in terms of its parts and as a whole.

### *Learning Goals (Departmental Website)*

1. knowledge of literatures in English, their historical, cultural, and formal dimensions and diversity
2. strategies of interpretation, including an ability to use critical and theoretical terms, concepts, and methods in relation to a variety of textual forms and other media
3. the ability to engage with the work of other critics and writers, using and citing such sources effectively
4. the ability to write persuasively and precisely, in scholarly and, optionally, creative forms.

### *Close Reading*

This is the “meat and bones” of what we’ll be focusing on all quarter. A close reading pays detailed attention to the particular elements of a text’s language and relates those elements of language to the larger issue of how the text conveys complex meanings to the reader. The elements we will look at include word choice, sentence construction, imagery as well as several other poetic devices and figures of language. Examining these elements helps us to arrive at a deeper understanding of a text and helps us to explore the text’s crucial issues (social, political, philosophical, familial, etc.).

### *Discussion*

Your discussion sections offer you a place for exploration, a space where—if you come prepared—all can benefit from your insights and from those of others. Exploring texts can be difficult, and fascinating discussions depend on a variety of opinions. **You should never be afraid to ask a question. THERE ARE STUPID PROFESSORS, BUT THERE ARE NOT STUPID QUESTIONS.** Discussion is meant to clear up any confusion you might have about lectures, our texts or the essay writing (or test-taking) we’ll be doing. Most of the time, I’ll be able to stay after lecture to answer brief questions, and you should also (in all of your classes for the rest of your academic life) take advantage of my office hours! Office hours allow you to get one-on-one help with any difficulties you may encounter, and your visitation keeps professors from getting too

lonely and spiteful in their offices.

### ***Attendance Policies***

Students are expected to attend all classes; if you expect to miss one or two classes, please use the University absence reporting website <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/> to indicate the date and reason for your absence. An email is automatically sent to me. All absences must be reported through the absence reporting website. Absences must meet Rutgers University standards. Missing beyond two classes or unexcused absences will result in points being deducted from your grade. Extended absences may result in a failing grade.

### ***Grading Breakdown***

Attendance-10%

Participation - 35%

Take Home Exam #1- 20%

Take Home Exam #2- 35%

- 1) January 21<sup>st</sup> Course Introduction  
January 23<sup>rd</sup> Close-Reading Exercises
- 2) January 28<sup>th</sup> Rowlandson. *A True History*....  
January 30<sup>th</sup> Rowlandson. *A True History*....
- 3) February 4<sup>th</sup> Marrant. *A Narrative*....  
February 6<sup>th</sup> Marrant. *A Narrative*....
- 4) February 11<sup>th</sup> Hugo. *Selected Poems*....  
February 13<sup>th</sup> Hugo. *Selected Poems*....
- 5) February 18<sup>th</sup> Selected Poems from *Creole Echoes*  
February 20<sup>th</sup> Selected Poems from *Creole Echoes*
- 6) February 25<sup>th</sup> Brontë. *Jane Eyre*  
February 27<sup>th</sup> Brontë. *Jane Eyre*
- 7) March 4<sup>th</sup> Brontë. *Jane Eyre*  
March 6<sup>th</sup> Brontë. *Jane Eyre*  
March 6<sup>th</sup> **Take Home Exam #1 Distributed**
- 8) March 11<sup>th</sup> Hopkins. *Contending Forces*  
March 13<sup>th</sup> Hopkins. *Contending Forces*  
March 13<sup>th</sup> **Take Home Exam #1 Due**
- SPRING BREAK**
- 9) March 25<sup>th</sup> Hopkins. *Contending Forces*  
March 27<sup>th</sup> Hopkins. *Contending Forces*
- 10) April 1<sup>st</sup> García-Lorca. *The Gypsy Ballads*  
April 3<sup>rd</sup> García-Lorca. *The Gypsy Ballads*
- 11) April 8<sup>th</sup> Hughes. *Shakespeare in Harlem*  
April 10<sup>th</sup> Hughes. *Shakespeare in Harlem*

- 12) April 15<sup>th</sup> Dostoevsky. *Notes from the Underground*  
April 17<sup>th</sup> Dostoevsky. *Notes from the Underground*
- 13) April 22<sup>nd</sup> Ellison. *Invisible Man*  
April 24<sup>th</sup> Ellison. *Invisible Man*
- 14) April 29<sup>th</sup> Ellison. *Invisible Man*  
May 1<sup>st</sup> Ellison. *Invisible Man*  
May 1<sup>st</sup> **Take Home Exam #2 Distributed**  
May 8<sup>th</sup> **Take Home Exam #2 Due**

**Close Reading Practice: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (Ch.5)***

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey’s ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. “You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?” These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled “The Columbian Orator.” Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.