

# Undisciplining The Victorian Classroom

Peer-Reviewed Syllabus

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## *Black (Im)mobilities*

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**Course Description and Goals:** This writing-intensive, upper-level undergraduate seminar explores forms of Black mobility (human trafficking, diaspora, im/emigration, settlerism etc.) forced, encouraged, or made possible in the global economy of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. The central aim of this course is to decenter progressive, liberal narratives focused on upward mobility, self-help, and the consolidation of white, middle-class domestic security. Some of our key questions include: How and why do Black people, ideas, labor, and stories become moveable, portable, and exchangeable? What individual and social patterns of movement—and countermovement—are created and sustained by the shifting spaces and demands of global capitalism? How do we read and write the story of Black mobility? What moves and is moved by Black people, Black stories, and Black histories?

Readings foreground the voices (both extant and missing) of mobile Black subjects of empire (e.g. the murdered passengers on the ship *Zong*, Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, Mary Seacole, and others). Alongside primary texts, we will engage a handful of twenty-first century critical and theoretical frameworks including “the wake” (Christina Sharpe), imperial “intimacies” (Lisa Lowe), queer “crosscurrents” (Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley), the “undercommons” (Fred Moten), and urban Black “waywardness” (Saidiya Hartman). Most of the texts we read will be by Black authors. This upper-level course is also a writing intensive course, which means that participants agree to invest daily effort not only in extensive reading but in writing and rewriting as active modes of learning and critical thinking. There are five major writing assignments in this course: (1) a revised close reading, (2), a comparative report and critical review of a set of archives on a topic of the student’s choice relevant to Black life and experience, (3) a two-part Autobiographical Reflection and Oral History (4) a 15-page innovative paper on a topic developed with guidance, and (5) a mini-conference-style presentation and Q&A.

### Required Readings:

- M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*: As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng
- Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*
- Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*
- Mary Seacole, *Mrs. Seacole’s Wonderful Adventures in Wonderful Land*
- Additional readings/viewings made available by PDF or e-text

### Assignments:

- Participation, Presence, and Engagement (10%)
- Weekly Writing (10%)
- Close Reading (10%)
- Critical Archive Report (15%)
- Personal Essay and Oral History (15%)
- Mini-Conference (10%)
- Final Paper (30%)

\*See detailed descriptions below

### Reading and Assignment Schedule:

#### Week 1:

- M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*: As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng; “Manifest,” “Notanda,” and selected poems
- Ian Baucom, *Spectres of the Atlantic*; “Chapter 1: Liverpool, a Capital of the Long Twentieth Century”

#### Week 2:

- Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*; Chapter One “In the Wake” and Chapter Two “The Ship”
- Michael Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*; “Introduction” and “Transatlantic Moment”

#### Week 3:

- Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*
- Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*; select entries: “Subaltern” and “Agency”
- Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, “Preface” and “Chapter One: The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity”

### \*First draft Close Reading due

#### Week 4:

- Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African (Continued)*
- Jafari S. Allen, “Black/Queer Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture”
- Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage”

### Week 5:

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”
- William Wordsworth, “The Banished Negroes,” “Humanity,” and Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)
- Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*; “The Distanced Imagination” and “Distance and “Distance Diseases: Yellow Fever in Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’”

### \*Second draft Close Reading due

### Week 6:

- P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al. “Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help”
- Read/listen to at least three of the following critical reflections on archives and archival methods:
  - Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of Archive”
  - Randall C. Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives"
  - Marisa J. Fuentes, "Fugitive Women: The Body in the Archive"
  - Jean-Christophe Cloutier, “Not Like an Arrow, but a Boomerang,” or The Lifecycles of Twentieth-Century African American Literary Papers
  - Roderick Ferguson, “The Bookshop of Black Queer Diaspora”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cAhYRWGqSI>
  - Toni Morrison, “A Humanist View” (talk delivered at Black Studies Center Public Dialogue)
  - Jessica Marie Johnson, "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads"
  - Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney, "The Question of Recovery"

### Week 7:

- Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*
- Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*; selections
- Selected readings on 19<sup>th</sup>-century political economy and colonial economic policy (excerpts from John Stuart Mill, Edward Gibbons Wakefield, and Karl Marx)
- Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, selections.

### Week 8:

- Excerpts from Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* and Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*
- Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*; “Chapter One” and “Chapter Two: Autobiography out of Empire”
- Mary Seacole, *Mrs. Seacole’s Wonderful Adventures in Many Lands* (just read the first chapter)

### \*Critical Archive Report due

**Week 9:**

- Mary Seacole, *Mrs. Seacole's Wonderful Adventures in Many Lands* (Continued)
- Edward Braithwaite, *The Arrivant: A New World Trilogy*, selections
- *Recommended Additional Reading*: Selected Reviews of Jackie Sibbles Drury's play *Marys Seacole*

**Week 10:**

- Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*; "Debt and Study" and at least two other essays of your choice

**\*Personal Essay and Oral History due**

**Week 11:**

- Saidya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*; selections

**\*Final Project Prospectus due**

**Week 12:**

- Saidya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* and *Wayward Lives* (Continued)

**\*Final Project Consultations**

**\*Optional Half Draft of Final Project due**

**Week 13:**

- Mini- Conference Presentations

**Week 14:**

- Mini-Conference Presentations

**\*Final Project due**

**Assignment Descriptions and Expectations for the Course:**

**Participation, Presence, and Engagement (10%):** Your verbal engagement is expected in every class meeting. Speak often. Please do not hold back, whether out of shyness or fear of expressing the "wrong" idea. The eloquent expression of ideas takes time and practice! Some of us will find this work more challenging than others. We will extend patience and understanding to each other as we try to think through challenging texts and ideas together. Discussions, like essays and our written work, will often be drafty, incomplete, or in need of revision. We will commit to the work of discussion, being mindful of our shared responsibility in creating and maintaining an environment where we feel recognized and safe both to speak and to learn. At the same time, we are also accountable for what we say, and how our words affect others.

Participation and classroom presence complement one another. In addition to the verbal contributions you make, be mindful of how you are listening and responding to others (e.g. not dominating conversation; not dismissing or marginalizing the ideas of others; refraining from excessive breaks that take you out of the stream of conversation, not engaging in disruptive behavior). We will take time at the beginning of class to learn one another's names and pronouns, and we will learn more about each other through our engagement with the readings and through our writing.

Your participation, presence, and engagement grade will be assessed twice during the semester, once at the midterm and again at the end of the semester. You will receive written feedback on participation, just as you receive written feedback on major writing assignments. If you are struggling to speak up or feeling uncomfortable in class for any reason, please reach out.

**Related Issues: Attendance, Tardiness, Materials, and Electronic Devices:** It goes without saying that we need time and regular contact with one another to form our intellectual community. Attendance is essential. If you miss more than two class periods, the highest grade you can receive for Participation, Presence, and Engagement is a "C." Please also take care to bring the materials you need to work and stay focused (texts, a notebook etc.) to class and to arrive on time. Please contact me if you have any concerns about attendance or need an accommodation.

You are welcome to use electronic devices to write and take notes during class. Beyond using your phone or computer for quick tasks (e.g. looking up a word or doublechecking a date), I would prefer that you do not use our class meetings to conduct additional research (googling, reading the Wikipedia page on the topic we are discussing, searching out additional readings). These activities are best done before class as a form of preparation or after class as a form of follow-up and deeper engagement. Class discussion is time for being present with others and engaging the texts together. If your device regularly becomes a distraction, you will be asked not to use it. All devices should be silenced, but if there is a good reason that you need to have your phone visible or on vibrate mode during class time, please get in touch.

**Statement on Content:** Our course readings and classroom discussions will focus on difficult and disturbing topics including but not limited to racial and sexual injustice and violence, mental illness, death, murder, enslavement, and trauma. Readings and discussions about these topics are likely to elicit strong feelings—anger, sadness, discomfort, and anxiety. We will have both intellectual and emotional responses to the readings, and perhaps also to our peers' understandings of the readings. As a general rule, no content/trigger warnings will be issued for readings or discussions. If you are concerned about being affected negatively or surprised by course content, please read the syllabus so that you are prepared in advance. Please ask if you'd like more information about a topic or reading. If you think a particular reading or topic might be especially challenging or unsettling, you can arrive to class early and take a seat by the door so that you can easily exit the classroom as needed. If you have any questions, concerns, or wish to propose an alternative assignment or reading to replace one that you will need to skip, please get in touch with me as soon as possible.

**Weekly Writing (10%):** In addition to the major writing assignments, you will be asked to respond informally in writing to pre-circulated discussion questions and various in-class freewriting prompts. You will never have to turn in your weekly writing (although you can do so at any point in the semester if you want additional feedback). However, you will be asked to share (or read) written work regularly in class discussions. Weekly writings serve multiple purposes. First, they function as a laboratory or sketchpad for experimenting with and testing your ideas in direct response to the readings; writing helps you think about the readings. Weekly writings will also serve as a springboard for class discussions. Finally, you may also use weekly writings to develop first ideas about major assignments.

You may keep weekly writings in whatever format you like (a digital file, a Google Doc, a physical notebook, whatever), so long as they are accessible and organized. Make sure you have your weekly writings on hand for every class meeting.

**Close Reading (10%):** In this assignment, you will compose a 1500-word essay on a topic of your choice relevant to any of the readings.

Your analysis should illuminate the implicit meaning in a **very narrow passage (or a couple of connected passages)** in either *Zong!* or *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Dig deeply into the meaning and importance of the text's language, tone, audience, structure, and purpose to uncover something interesting, troubling, surprising, contradictory, baffling, or compelling about the quoted passage(s).

Our in-class discussions and your weekly writings may be a good starting point for your analysis but avoid retreading ground we have covered in class. Your goal is a probing and unique analysis. Account for subtext, nuance, and ambiguity. Linger in gray areas. Explain your claims with adequate detail to let the reader follow your train of thought. Provide enough evidence to support your interpretation, but don't be afraid to be bold or arrive somewhere unexpected. It may be beneficial to read against the grain. If the passage is anomalous or odd, explain how and why meaning is loosened or rendered strange by the author (and to what intended or unintended effect). Consider how the passage(s) you are examining contribute to (or disrupt) patterns of meaning in the text as a whole. A traditional "thesis statement" may or may not emerge in your essay; if you find yourself writing yourself into difficulty rather than out of it, that is a good sign.

Copy the passage(s) to which you are responding to in full at the top of your paper (note: the quoted materials do not contribute to the total word count). You are encouraged to put your Close Reading into conversation with the critical and theoretical texts we have engaged so far, but please do so intentionally and selectively in ways that benefit your explication of the quoted passage. You should not need to consult any additional secondary sources (i.e. do further research) to complete this assignment, but consult me if your analysis leads you to beg an exception. Cite the text you are close reading accurately in MLA format with in-line citations and a works cited page. If your prose is elegant, well-organized, and enjoyable to read, all the better. Proofread, at least a couple times. This assignment will be revised after you receive detailed written feedback. Your final grade will be based both on the quality of the final draft and your effort in the revision.

**Critical Archive Report (15%):** In this project, you will write a 3,000-word critical report on a set of archives (2-3 of your choice) relevant to the experience, history, and literary records of

Black life. “Archive” can be defined creatively and broadly as a digital or physical collection, database, or repository of historical records, artifacts, or texts. Begin by closely reading *at least three* of the assigned essays from Week 6. You should then explore archival holdings (digital or physical) and begin narrowing your search to a specific topic relevant to Black life that you would like to explore in depth. For example, you might focus on archives related to the life and legacy of Black women writers, or you might focus on archives addressing the economics of enslavement and abolition in the United States. I encourage you to search widely and follow your curiosity. There is no shame in Googling. The websites below collate (just some!) of the archives you could consult to get started:

- <https://blackfeminisms.com/resources/archives/>
- <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/digital-archives/>
- <https://blackculturalarchives.org/>
- <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/black-history/>
- <https://coloredconventions.org/>
- <https://web.northeastern.edu/nulab/the-early-caribbean-digital-archive/>
- <http://blackpressresearchcollective.org/about/>
- <https://blackbritishhistory.co.uk/resources/links/#Archives>

Once you have settled on a topic and a set of archives to review, you can begin writing your report. Your report should be part expository (descriptive) and part analytical. The first half of your essay should be devoted to explaining *what* is included in each of the archives you are examining, and *how* each archive recovers, preserves, curates, and makes artifacts of Black experience available for viewing and consumption. A partial list of questions to address in this part of the essay include: How long has the archive been in operation? Who founded it? How is the archive funded and maintained? What kinds of artifacts does the archive focus on? What is the archive’s “mission statement,” vision, or intention? Who works in the archive? Who is the intended audience of the archive? How is the archive promoted, disseminated, or marketed to its users?

The second part of your essay should engage in deeper comparison and reflection on what is similar and different among the archives. Consider relative strengths and weaknesses of the archives in relation to your topic. Offer an informed assessment (rather than just personal opinion about what is “good” or “bad” or what you like or don’t like about the archives) and critical evaluation of the archives, drawing on *at least three* key ideas and concepts from Week 6’s readings. Your essay must include *at least two direct quotations* from these essays.

While the focus of your report should stay on a description and evaluation of the archives as a whole and as an epistemic space, it may be helpful to discuss a couple of specific artifacts/texts/images, etc. from the archives under review by way of example. To complete this assignment, it is not necessary to visit the archive physically (and many of the archives you will work with will be at least partially digitized). But if you are working with a local archive, and you have access to the physical holdings, I strongly encourage you to schedule an in-person visit.

We will discuss the academic genre and citational style of the critical review in class, and we will set aside for a peer workshop of your working drafts. Critical Archive Reports will be

uploaded on Canvas and made available to all students in the course as a resource. You are encouraged to make use of the Archive Reports in your Final Project (see below).

**Autobiographical Movement and Oral History Essay (15%):** One of the things Mary Seacole’s *Wonderful Adventures in Many Lands* documents is, in her own words, “**how hard the right woman had to struggle to convey herself to the right place.**” This assignment asks you to reflect on your own story of socioeconomic mobility, attending, as Seacole does, to questions of **struggle** and **place** as they intersect with race and with other social structures of sex, gender, class, and national identity.

Begin by selecting a “place” to which you feel you have *arrived*. Place may be conceived from a variety of angles as a geographic location, (say, the city in which you are currently renting an apartment, the university you are currently attending, the table on which you are writing or eating a meal someone has served you, the line you are waiting in to pick up your kids, etc.). For example, Christina Sharpe begins *In the Wake* with a vivid description of where she is (both geographically, and in her professional working life) when she learns that her sister has died. “Place,” as Sharpe suggests, can pertain to a particular social or organizational position you currently occupy (e.g. in your family’s first generation of college education, the middle class, the primary wage earner in your household, a member of a particular club or organization). It might take a while to settle on a good place to focus on for this assignment. Make sure you test a few possibilities out before deciding.

Your Autobiographical Reflection should explain where you have arrived, how you have arrived, and where you have come from in relation to intersecting structures and histories of race, sex, gender, class, and national identity. What did it take to get here, how did you move into or find yourself positioned in this particular place? The temporal and geographical parameters of this assignment are up to you. Depending on how you tell the story, it might have taken you twenty minutes or two centuries to arrive at a place like the ATM where you are depositing your paycheck or the drinking fountain where you are refilling your water bottle. Similarly, you might have travelled 50 feet from your dorm to the library or 5000 miles from the coast of West Africa to the East Coast of the United States to arrive at the desk where you are writing this essay.

It is difficult to tell the story of how we have moved without acknowledging other people’s movements and other people’s struggles. Others might have impeded or assisted your arrival. Or there might be missing people or missing stories that you need to celebrate, mourn, or account for in some way in order to explain how you arrived at this place. In recounting how you came to be here, you might also wish to reflect on where and how you *didn’t* struggle. What made your movement from Point A to Point B difficult, easy, possible, inevitable, or impossible? An Oral History will accompany your Autobiographical Reflection as a way of grappling with some of these issues. You will conduct a recorded (audio or video) interview with another person of your choosing (a family member who holds a piece of the story you don’t remember or didn’t witness directly, a friend who has a similar or different trajectory to or perspective on this place than you do, etc.) The person you interview and the questions you choose to ask them are up to you. Consider whose history will productively augment or complicate the story you are telling about your arrival at, and struggle to reach, this place. The interview should last at least half an hour. Before the interview, draft a handful of questions connected to the ideas of **place** and **struggle** to

guide your discussion. Take notes during and after the interview. Official IRB clearance is not currently required for oral history interviews, but you should obtain written or oral consent to record your interviewee and explain how you intend to use the interview for this assignment. Transcribed quotations from the Oral History should be selected and interwoven throughout your Autobiographical Reflection (rather than inserted as a stand-alone full transcription at the end of your essay). In other words, your goal in this assignment is to put your Autobiographical Reflection and your Oral History into meaningful conversation as a way of reflecting on your story in direct relation to the memory of another person. You will turn in the recording of your interview and the full list of questions you asked along with your final essay. We will devote time in class during to learning about the history and ethics of oral history in relation to Black archives and to the current formatting and transcription styles that guide this kind of work. Finally, you will include a one-page reflection essay on the process of writing this essay and recording your interview. How did you get started? What did you find most challenging? Are you satisfied with the “story” your final draft tells? Why or why not? If you had more time, what would you add, do differently, etc.?

**Final Project (30%):** The final assignment for this course is a 15-page project. This is an explicitly open-ended assignment. I invite you to innovate a meaningful and unique topic and approach. Feel free to draw on any of the readings for models or inspiration. Your final project may take many directions and may incorporate both traditional and non-traditional scholarly methods and forms of inquiry. That said, your Final Project must:

- Focus directly on one or more of the poems, autobiographies, or literary texts we have read this semester. Be mindful of taking on too much.
- Articulate a clear thesis statement (or equivalent expression of a critical or creative “argument,” “position,” “take,” or “working hypothesis” on a concretely defined issue, problem, or question)
- Demonstrate textual evidence and literary analysis (e.g. engage in some form of close reading)
- Cite or meaningfully respond to at least 3 critical/theoretical readings from the course
- Include a works cited page and proper formatting suitable for your project

We will begin thinking about Final Projects after the midterm. You will have several weeks to refine and develop your thinking, begin writing, and revise with feedback and support. The Final Project is worth 30% of your grade in this course. The project comprises the following parts:

- Final Project Prospectus (5%)
- Final Project Consultation with your instructor (5%)
- Optional Half Draft (written feedback, no grade)
- Final Project (20%)

*How this works:*

First, you will write a prospectus, answering the following 6 questions (2-3 pages).

1. A working title that conveys your focus, research question, or initial idea. Your title is your first argument; expect to revise frequently.
2. A brief discussion of the text(s) you want to use and how you want to respond to it or them.

3. A brief critical reflection on the archive you will use for this project (how you have selected your texts/sources—and why). You are encouraged to consult the Critical Archive Reports in making your determination. You may use both required readings and additional sources discovered in the archives you and your classmates studied.
4. A provisional thesis statement or guiding question.
5. Keywords (5-6) that you plan to use when framing your argument.
6. A description of who else might care about this topic or an overview of why the topic is so interesting/worth looking into further.

After receiving feedback on your prospectus, you will sign up for a 20–30-minute one-on-one consultation with your instructor to discuss your goals, process, and plan for the project. You will have the option of turning in a Half Draft to receive preliminary feedback (no grade) on your final project before turning in the final draft at the end of the semester. You are encouraged to meet with your instructor often throughout the process of completing the final project. We will also set aside time for writing and workshoping together in the final weeks of class. Your Final Project will also form the basis of the Mini-Conference presentations (with Q&A) in the final two weeks of class (see below)

**Mini-Conference (10%):** At a designated time in the final two class meetings, you will briefly present the argument and findings of your final project. Your presentation should be approximately 10 minutes long. It should be coherent, organized, and clear, but it may be informal. The purpose of this assignment is to share your final work with your classmates. Your presentation must:

- Be between 8-12 minutes long (excluding Q&A)
- Contain a clearly stated thesis statement (or equivalent expression of an argument)
- Provide evidence and textual support for your reading (analysis)
- Articulate the critical stakes/ critical intervention of your argument in relation to key terms and ideas explored in the class

You may accompany your presentation with slides, handouts, or other visual or audio aids if you like, but please set up ahead of time to respect the time of others.

The Q&A: Each presentation will be followed by a short period for questions and answers. ***To receive credit for your Mini-Conference Presentation, you must ask at least three questions during the two class sessions devoted to presentations.*** Open-ended questions are best. Some suggested formats for framing your questions. Comments are also fine but please keep them germane and useful to the presenter and their project.

***\*Note to the reader of this syllabus: institution-specific content including an indigenous land statement, disability resources, writing center resources, Title IX resources, student codes of conduct, and other university and campus policies have been omitted in this version of the course syllabus.***