HISTORY 75500
SOJOURNERS, SULTANS, AND SLAVES:
SLAVERY AND FREEDOM IN NORTH AMERICA AND THE INDIAN OCEAN

Spring 2020

Instructor: Gunja SenGupta
Room 5212, 4:15-6:15
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

As the 19th century dawned, global systems of capitalism and empire knit the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds into international networks of trade and travel, and conquest and colonization, of labor and capital, and politics and ideology. The controversies over slavery, colonialism, and freedom’s meanings that resulted from this integration, offer U.S. scholars an analytical framework for “cross-fertilizing” national histories, historiographies, and epistemologies, with the burgeoning scholarship on the Indian Ocean. This course introduces students to transnational and comparative perspectives that illuminate the interoceanic scale of the Anglophone contexts in which Americans engaged with the politics and representations of slavery, abolition and empire.

Such engagements emerged in a moment of transition between empires in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds during the 18th century. The backdrop against which they occurred, however, was shaped by developments that date as far back as what European historians would consider early modern periods in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. So we will begin there, reflecting, as we proceed to the 19th century, on questions like: how exceptional was “American” slavery, and its relationship with notions of freedom? How did British colonial traditions of legal pluralism translate in the Indian Ocean world? How do we theorize “agency,” “diaspora,” and “difference,” in African diasporic history, and evaluate scholarly debates over the boundaries between law and practice, family and the market, and nation and empire within that history? In what ways did “subaltern” migrations remake identities and produce change? How did free labor experiments in British Asia influence debates over sectionalism in the U.S.? What do the struggles of American slaveholders in Indian Ocean Sultanates over land, labor, cultural politics, and international power rivalries tell us about comparative slavery histories?

We will grapple with these questions by placing U.S. historiography in dialogue with scholarship and multinational archival materials on slavery and freedom in the Indian Ocean, comparing, for instance, the Atlantic slave trade with human trafficking on the Trans-Saharan and Arabia Sea routes; considering the ways in which tropes of difference (race, religion, class, caste, gender, sex) and ideas about dependence (especially kinship) shaped ideologies and practices of “master-slave” relationships; discussing the workings of the state, law, political economy, religious institutions, and demography, in constructing systems of bondage, hierarchy and patronage; considering how formal institutions and informal customs influenced marginalized people’s
material conditions, and regulated their access to community membership/citizenship; examining
the dynamics of “subaltern” family, culture, community, and resistance; tracing the transoceanic
circulation of debates over slavery and poverty, and abolition and empire; and contextualizing
emancipation in the U.S, within the framework of comparative chronicles of freedom.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will: 1) contextualize U.S. slavery and abolition histories and historiographies
within comparative and transnational frames of reference, especially in relation to the Indian
Ocean; 2) develop a critical understanding of the ways in which context influences concepts
central to African diasporic history (“agency,” “difference,” “diaspora,” “freedom,” etc); 3) reflect
on the relationship of the past with memory, identity, and representation in literature, popular
culture, and sites of public commemoration (like museums); 4) analyze and synthesize scholarly
works; 5) frame research questions, and build arguments from a spectrum of primary and secondary
sources.

CLASS FORMAT:

Each class will consist of seminar-style discussions and debate over the assigned readings.
We will read and interpret scholarly pieces, in juxtaposition with a variety of other sources on the
same themes. Such sources may include archival documents and audiovisual materials that prompt
us to think critically about the ways in which historians use primary sources. Students will take
turns introducing and leading class discussions on selected readings assigned for each period.
Details of these requirements follow.

COURSE MATERIALS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

1) Required readings: E-book links and pdf copies of articles, book chapters, primary documents,
and images will be posted on Blackboard [hereafter BB, and available through
https://cunyportal.cuny.edu/]. These materials are listed in the schedule of readings below.
2) Film clips/podcasts/images: will be supplied by instructor in class, as per schedule.
3) References: The required readings for each week are followed by supplementary bibliographies,
listing works which you are NOT expected to read for class discussion purposes. These materials –
not posted on BB -- are designed to give you overviews of the topics under discussion, help you
with more specialized research in areas that interest you, and on occasion, to help you place the
required readings in historiographical context.


COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and class participation: You are required to attend class regularly, complete reading assignments carefully and according to schedule, and participate in class discussions. All absences MUST be excused.

Leading discussions in rotation: Students will take turns leading discussions on selected readings, with one student-led discussion scheduled for each class period for much of the semester. Each student will lead discussions of TWO required readings (essays or book chapters) in the course of the semester, picking their selections from lists distributed in class. The lead discussant of each reading must introduce the piece and pose questions for class discussion that address the main ideas, arguments, supporting evidence, historiographical context (where appropriate), and connections with other readings assigned for that class period.

Journal: Please maintain a journal that helps you to engage with the readings and our class discussions. For each journal entry – one per class period starting with the second week of class—reflect on the arguments, supporting evidence and historiographical context where appropriate – of any TWO pieces assigned for the day. Each entry should be between one to two pages long (typed, double-spaced). Please submit the journal entries to me three times in the course of the semester: March 11, April 7, and May 17, either in hard copy or via SafeAssign on BB.

Research paper or historiographical essay or dissertation/thesis chapter: Submit a 10 page research paper (typed, double-spaced) or historiographical essay on any topic related to the themes of slavery/abolition/freedom that interests you or is related to your dissertation/thesis project. If you choose to write a research paper, you must identify and draw on primary sources, in addition to secondary works. All papers must be accompanied by notes and a bibliography, citing all sources of information used in the paper. Details will be supplied in class. The paper is due no later than 11 pm, on May 24, via SafeAssign, on BB.

GRADING:

Your course grade will be computed according to the following percentages: Attendance and general class participation: 15%; leading discussions: 30%; journal: 25% (10% each); term paper: 30%.

COURSE PLAN AND SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Week 1 (Jan 29)
Topics: 1) Syllabus
       2) Introduction: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Slavery, Abolition, and Meanings of Freedom

Overviews for your reference (optional, not posted on BB):

Week 2 (Feb 5)
Topics: 1) Historiography, Contexts, and Concepts
       2) Memory and Diasporic Consciousness
Readings: PDF/E-Book Links on BB:


**Film Clips:** Daughters of the Dust; Rue cases nègres

**Recommended background reading on survey of slavery and freedom in the Atlantic World (posted on BB):**


**References**


Week 3 (Feb 19)

Topics: 1) The Atlantic Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective; Debates over Reparations.
2) Reading the “Black Atlantic”: History and Literature.

Readings: E-book link/PDF on BB:

**Film:** Scenes from *Wonders of the African World: The Slave Kingdoms* (1999)

**References**

**Week 4 (Feb 26)**
**Topic:** 1) Emergence of Slave Societies: Diaspora and Difference in the United States
Readings (E-book link/PDF on BB):


References

Week 5 (March 4)
Topic: Reverberations: Revolution, Nation, and Empire

Readings (E-book link/PDF on BB):


2) Mia Bay, “In Search of Sally Hemings in the Post-DNA Era,” Reviews in American History 34(December 2006), 407-426


4) Van Gosse, “‘As a Nation, the English Are Our Friends’: The Emergence of African American Politics in the British Atlantic World, 1772-1861,” American Historical Review 113 (October 2008): 1003-1028

5) Tiya Miles, Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom

6) Documents from British colonial archives on the rise of a new Orientalist discourse of “Slavery in the East,” versus “Slavery in the West.”

References

Weeks 6, 7, 8
Topics: 1) “Mammy,” Magnolias and Mint Juleps: Old South Fantasies amid “War Capitalism”
2) Global Capitalism, Empire, and Transoceanic Debates over Slavery as “Poor Law.”

Readings (E-book link/PDF on BB):

Week 6 (March 11)

1) Excerpts from George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Richmond, VA: A. Morris Publisher, 1854), electronic edition, “Documenting the American South,” or “DocSouth,” a digital publishing project of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (http://docsouth.unc.edu)
4) Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: Norton, 1985), 1-61

Film: Scenes from Gone With the Wind (1939).

FIRST SET OF JOURNAL ENTRIES DUE.

Week 7 (March 18)
References:

Weeks 8,9,10

Topics: 1)“From Sundown to Sunup”: Enslaved Communities, Culture, “Creolization.”
2) Resistance and the Problem of Agency

Readings (E-book link/PDF on BB)

Week 8 (March 25)


OR


Week 9 (April 1)


Week 10 (April 7)


3) Documents on subaltern engagement with formal institutions of empire in the Indian Ocean.

Film: Scenes from Amistad (1997); Scenes from Beloved (1998)

SECOND SET OF JOURNAL ENTRIES DUE

References:

Norman R. Yetman, “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery,”

Week 11 (April 22)
Topics: Kinship, Labor, and the Market
A) Households in the American South and Ghana.
B) Courtesans, Concubines, and Eunuchs in the Indian Ocean

Readings (E-book link/PDF on BB):
1) Letter by Louisa S. McCord to an abolitionist Englishwoman, the Duchess of Sutherland, and published in the newspaper, the Charleston Mercury, 1853.
4) Documents on “slaveholding” courtesans in 19th century South Asia from the British colonial archives.

References

Week 12 (April 29)
Topic: How Space, Mobility, and Migration Made Meaning in Local and Imperial Contexts
Readings (E-book link/PDF on BB):

References

Week 13&14 (December 4, 11)
Topics: 1) Diverse Paths to Abolition and Emancipation
2) U.S. Connections with Indian Ocean Slavery after the Civil War
Readings (E-book link/PDF on BB):
Week 13 (April 6)

**Film:** Scene from *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

**Week 14 (May 13)**

   OR
4) Documents on American slaveholders and African fugitives in the Indian Ocean

**THIRD SET OF JOURNAL ENTRIES DUE**

**References**