Introduction

As you add up the student loans you’ve taken out to be here, how does that awareness of indebtedness affect your sense of personal freedom? How is your sense of selfhood and your political agency tied up in economic relations? And what is the history of those relations?

In this class we will be centrally concerned with how Americans have understood themselves in relation to capital and have given expression to that experience and analysis in literature. Our syllabus will combine readings from history, economics, anthropology, and political science around this core of literary texts to foster discussion and to establish an intellectual context for your inquiries. Readings will range from Aristotle to Patricia Hill Collins, from Olaudah Equiano to Karl Marx, from Herman Melville to Samuel Delany, and from Dave Graeber to Kanye West. We will try to understand the deep-rooted cultural valences of credit and debt in Western culture, the ways in which the very concept of “America” changed Western political-economic thought, and the historical transformations of credit’s and debt’s cultural meanings in the arena of the United States where concepts of race and capital have met each other in explicit and codified ways, producing complex and implicit results.

Whether you are an American citizen or an interloper (like me), you are probably curious about how concepts of personhood and political liberty are shaped by economic forces in this democratic republic, whose founding documents have offered powerful ideological resources for oppressed peoples around the world. How can the enshrinement of inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness emerge from an 18th century slave economy? How can a country with some of the world’s strongest legal guarantees for freedom of expression and conscience also incarcerate more of its population than any other state at the beginning of the 21st century? How have concepts of economic analysis, such as class, intersected with (or been obscured by) categories of race throughout the history of this nation?
Course Goals

This class will ask students to think about the specific ways in which personhood in the United States is defined by one’s relationship to capital. How is an individual’s political and economic power within American culture shaped by access to credit? How does the state of indebtedness—which we enter into when we use credit—alter our sense of selfhood and obligation? What conceptual connections can we make between the bonds we enter into when we contract to repay a debt and the bonds of forced labor? We live in a state whose political and economic foundation integrated chattel slavery and human bondage. At the same time, contract law in the United States is based on a political-philosophical principle that people ought not to have the power to contract themselves into peonage. On the one hand, such a legal system allowed that a person could be contracted as “goods.” On the other hand, it implies that a person’s liberty is so essential to the functioning of the state it must be protected (even from the person him or herself). In light of this inherent tension, what understanding can we arrive at of the contemporary expansion of indebtedness among American citizens? How might the historical legacies of slavery in America make themselves visible in the uneven distribution of credit to different citizens and the differentiated expansion of debt in our contemporary society? As indebtedness becomes normative—a trend that has been interpreted as a move away from a model of capitalist exchange and a return to primitive accumulation—how will the basic assumptions of American democracy be challenged?

Work

This course will ask you to seek tentative answers to the complex questions above by
I: Closely reading literary texts which express or imagine American subjectivities in relation to capital
II: Situating your reading of these texts within both a historical context and a conceptual context (philosophical, political, and economic discourses).
III: Discussing and debating these texts and your ideas in class in a civil and critical manner
IV: Exercising your capacity for coherent, critical thinking in order to articulate research questions
V: Writing coherent essays that interpret our course readings, respond to your research questions, and present intelligent, nuanced, and insightful arguments grounded in textual evidence.

You will be assigned between 60-100 pages of reading each week. You should come to class with these texts, prepared to demonstrate your knowledge of the readings, and to engage in discussion with your colleagues.

In each class you will submit a response paper (2 pages double-spaced) on the reading. These papers should not summarize. They should reflect analytically on the readings, try to link the readings together, and culminate in a discussion question.
You will write three essays over the course of the semester in order to expand and articulate your knowledge. Each essay will be expected to pursue a line of inquiry and to wrestle with a problem that arises from our readings. You will design the inquiry (or problem), that drives each of your essays in consultation with me.

Paper 1 – Due Feb 25.  5 Pages.
Paper 2 – Due Apr 1.  5 Pages.
Paper 3 – Due May 11.  9 Pages.

Attendance: Required. Since we are meeting only once a week and this material is difficult, it is very important for you to come to class. You will need to present documentation in order to have your absence excused.

Grading

Paper 1  30 Pts.
Paper 2  30 Pts.
Paper 3  40 Pts.

Excellent response papers and class participation are taken for granted. Poor work in these areas will lower your grade by at least a half-grade. Especially excellent work will raise it by at least a half-grade. Your performance in these areas in the first third of the semester will be factored into your grade for Paper 1, in the middle third of the semester for Paper 2, and in the final third of the semester for Paper 3.

Academic Integrity – Excerpted from CAS Statement on Academic Integrity

“Students are expected—often required—to build their work on that of other people, just as professional researchers and writers do. Giving credit to someone whose work has helped you is expected; in fact, not to give such credit is a crime. Plagiarism is the severest form of academic fraud. Plagiarism is theft. More specifically, plagiarism is presenting as your own:

• a phrase, sentence, or passage from another writer's work without using quotation marks;
• a paraphrased passage from another writer's work;
• facts, ideas, or written text gathered or downloaded from the Internet;
• another student's work with your name on it;
• a purchased paper or "research" from a term paper mill.

Other forms of academic fraud include:

• "collaborating" between two or more students who then submit the same paper under their individual names.
• submitting the same paper for two or more courses without the knowledge and the expressed permission of all teachers involved.
• giving permission to another student to use your work for a class.

“Since plagiarism is a matter of fact and not intention, it is crucial that you acknowledge every source accurately and completely. If you quote anything from a source, use quotation marks and take down the page number of the quotation to use in your footnote.”

“Consult The Modern Language Association (MLA) Style Guide for accepted forms of documentation, and the course handbook for information on using electronic sources. When in doubt about whether your acknowledgment is proper and adequate, consult your teacher. Show the teacher your sources and a draft of the paper in which you are using them. The obligation to demonstrate that work is your own rests with you, the student. You are responsible for providing sources, copies of your work, or verification of the date work was completed.”

“The academic community takes plagiarism very seriously. Teachers in our writing courses must report to the Director of the Expository Writing Program any instance of academic dishonesty in student writing, whether it occurs in an exercise, draft, or final essay. Students will be asked to explain the circumstances of work called into question. When plagiarism is confirmed, whether accidental or deliberate, students must be reported to the Dean of their School, and penalties will follow. This can result in failure of the essay, failure in the course, a hearing with the Dean, and/or expulsion from the university. This has happened to students at New York University.”

For the full statement and more information on avoiding plagiarism and proper use of Internet citation, please visit: [http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity](http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity)
Course Schedule

***PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS SYLLABUS IS IN DRAFT FORM.***

THE READING LISTS BELOW ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Class 1 – Jan. 28

Credit, Debt, and Freedom

Reading:

Class 2 – Feb. 4

Credit, Debt, and Christendom: Insider/Outsider

Reading:
Aquinas. *Summa Theologicae*. II-II 77-78.
Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Act IV. (c. 1598)

Class 3 – Feb. 11

SUBMIT ESSAY PROPOSAL FOR PAPER 1

New World, New Market

Reading:
Hymer, Stephen. “*Robinson Crusoe* and the Secret of Primitive Accumulation.”
Smith, Adam. *Wealth of Nations*. “Of Colonies” (1776)
Winthrop, John. “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630)
Class 4 – Feb. 18

The Self-Made Man and Man Made Flesh

Reading:

Class 5 – Feb. 25

PAPER 1 DUE IN CLASS

The Try-Works: Rendering Flesh into Capital

Reading:

[Further Reading:
**Class 6 – Mar. 4**

Reform and Reconsolidation

**Reading:**
Twain, Mark. “Corn-Pone Opinions.”

[Further Reading:

**Class 7 – Mar. 11**

SUBMIT ESSAY PROPOSAL FOR PAPER 2

Empires Domestic and Foreign

**Reading:**

[Further Reading:

Spring Recess
**Class 8 – Mar. 25**

Domestic Migration and Uneven Development

**Reading:**
Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. Excerpts.

**Class 9 – Apr. 1**

**PAPER 1 DUE IN CLASS**

Red Lining the Suburbs

**Reading:**
Hansberry, Lorraine. Review of Wright’s “The Outsider.”
Sacks, Karen Brodkin. “How Did Jews Become White Folks?”

[Further Reading:

**Class 10 – Apr. 8**

Counterculturalism and Radical Futures

**Reading:**
Reed, Ishamel. “Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto.”
Class 11 – Apr. 15

SUBMIT ESSAY PROPOSAL FOR PAPER 3

From Neo Hoodoo to Neo Liberal: Hip Hop and Reagonomics

Reading:
Cross, Brian. *It's Not About a Salary... Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles*. Excerpts.
Mamet, David. *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

[Further Reading:
Harrington, Michael. *The Other America*. Chapters 1 and 2.

Class 12 – Apr. 22

Economies of Desire, or, New Slaves

Reading:
West, Kanye. “New Slaves.”
Wilson, August. *Radio Golf*.

[Further Reading:
Class 13 – Apr. 29
Too Pragmatic for Occupy, Too Idealistic for Congress:
Where Next?

Reading:
Atwood, Margaret. Payback. Excerpts.
Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. Declaration.

Class 14 – May 6
Final Seminar Conference
Student Presentations
Concluding Remarks

PAPER 3 DUE ON MONDAY 11 MAY