

Benjamin Fagan and Derrick R. Spires  
H-185: African American Print Cultures in the Nineteenth Century  
16–21 July, Worcester, Massachusetts

### **Narrative Course Evaluations**

1) *Were the pre-course reading assignments useful? Are there any readings that you would like to see added or removed in future years?*

1. The reading assignments were excellent but we spent very little time discussing them in class.
2. The readings were great but definitely too much/many readings were assigned for any given class period. As a working library professional/administrator it was a bit too taxing to read everything.
3. The reading was too much, and the syllabus posted on the RBS website did not match what we were given much closer to the start of class.
4. The pre-course readings informed what discussions we would have in class and introduced me to a history that I had little knowledge of. We were also provided with suggested and further reading, which was invaluable.
5. Yes. The list was extensive, and while I couldn't access everything before the course, I appreciate having the list as a resource moving forward.
6. The pre-course reading assignments were useful in understanding the material. I think a refresh each year of new scholarship would be helpful.
7. The reading assignments were excellent. They were well-chosen and I plan to keep the reading list so that I can return to some of the selections in the future.
8. Absolutely! I will continue to return to them in the future. The syllabus alone is a gift.
9. The readings were marvelous—but they should have been made available to us sooner. Not only because six weeks is not enough time to read the voluminous materials but because I went to the trouble to track down and download/scan all the articles in April/May. I could have saved myself a lot of time.
10. Some of the readings were useful, but there were just so many. I would suggest two changes: 1) Black Print Culture Studies is by nature an interdisciplinary field, so I thought it was odd that we were asked to read only work by literature scholars. We could have benefited a lot from reading a more diverse range and then talking about the different disciplinary approaches to the field. 2) The pre-course syllabus kept changing. As a diligent student, I began working through the list in March—this means that my administrative assistant, my work-study students, and my campus ILL staff put in a good bit of labor to obtain scans of readings for me that were later dropped from the syllabus. {private response}
11. All the pre-course readings were very helpful—there were just a lot of them. I tried my

best to get through the material, but was unable to truly read everything closely, which was a bit stressful for me. However, once in class, it became clear that the expectations were not as rigid as the binary Required/Not Required heading of the syllabus seemed to indicate. Because I tend to take instructions rather seriously and I am not an English/History/&c. academic, I would have appreciated a short sentence or two on the expectations, with maybe some hints to help frame my reading. On the flip side, I truly feel that getting my eyes on all the materials really helped my constructive thinking and ability to participate in the class. Plus, now I have an amazing bibliography and readings to go back to and share with others.

2) *What are your thoughts on the course workbook and/or other teaching materials distributed during class? Was the content appropriate and useful? Will it continue to be useful for you after the course?*

1. It indeed will, but again, we need more granular engagement with the materials during class discussions.
2. Yes.
3. N/A?
4. {no response}
5. Yes, 100%.
6. We did not have a workbook, but I would have loved to have had more concise notes of lectures from the instructors' thoughts on materials.
7. The materials we looked at in class were always thought-provoking.
8. {no response}
9. The materials that DS & BF, along with the AAS staff, pulled were great. But I was often unsure what to be doing with them or what to look for in them. We're all smart folks and made use of the materials, but some more direction would have been welcomed.
10. We did not have a workbook. I may return to a few of the pre-course readings.
11. I appreciated all the teaching materials, especially the ease of access via the shared drive. Due to the quantity of reading and difficulty of accessing some of the physical books, I would suggest releasing the resources and/or reading list a little earlier next time, if possible, to give people a head start. But I recognize not everyone will take advantage of that.

3) *Which aspects of the course were most intriguing and relevant for you as an individual? Did you walk away with any new insights, ideas, or project plans?*

1. The ability to access and discuss primary materials. I have already started working on a journal article based on materials I perused.
2. I enjoyed our discussions on various formats of Black print culture throughout the

- nineteenth century. It will certainly help me when I return to my institution.
3. I think exposure to primary sources and to other people thinking about these primary sources was relevant and valuable.
  4. {no response}
  5. Engaging with materials from AAS collections was a definite highlight, and being able to do so with DS and BF's insights readily available made the experience more meaningful.
  6. The materials were most intriguing and I had research time on the last day to choose items from the AAS collection to review. Walked away with several new ideas and information to incorporate into instructional sessions with students.
  7. I really enjoyed learning about Black newspapers and about the centrality of Afro-Protestantism to nineteenth-century African-American print culture. I will be combining these two interests into a project on how newspapers attempted to shape the literary tastes of their readers.
  8. Every aspect of the course was intriguing and relevant to me. I left with renewed inspiration for my independent research projects, future collaborations, and collecting/teaching goals.
  9. The course readings were definitely a plus and I will be turning to and using them a lot. I'd have liked us to spend more time working with them. I don't mean quoting from them in the seminar, but the instructors' interventions during our discussions seldom referenced to or drew on the readings that I'd spent a lot of time trying to complete.
  10. I most enjoyed our discussion of scholarly editing, and I may walk away with a new edition to teach with. The best part of RBS is always the opportunity to handle the "stuff," and that was true here. Given that AAS's collections are unparalleled, I would have liked to see and handle many more items. (It seemed like a smaller selection than I am used to in RBS courses.) We did get to see some great things.
  11. I came to the course with an interest in the relationship between content and format, and this course allowed me to investigate that, while also providing a safe space to engage with difficult topics and to learn from others about the complexity of the Black experience. I expect to be teaching in some capacity eventually, and I definitely plan on incorporating many of the ideas and issues we wrestled with here with my future students/fellows/interns.

4) *Did the instructors help you to acquire all the skills and information promised in the course description? Did you learn what you had hoped to learn?*

1. Yes.
2. Yes, the instructors were fantastic and so very knowledgeable in the subject matter. I definitely have acquired some new perspectives and knowledge that will help me in my day-to-day work.
3. I think a lot of our study was categorized by the complexity of our materials. Given

that, there wasn't a lot of concrete knowledge transmission, so much as group discussion. The class felt more like a seminar.

4. {no response}
5. Yes. Truthfully, I would have liked a more formal lecture or presentation of information from course instructors. They are so knowledgeable! Plus, this might have allowed for more and different kinds of discussion to take place during class discussion periods.
6. Yes, the instructors did help to acquire skills in understanding the origins of Black print in different and new ways. I learned exactly what I expected.
7. Yes, I found the discussions very enriching and I'm taking away new ideas to mull over.
8. Everything and more.
9. I was looking for methodological and theoretical framings about Black print culture. I got some of it, but I'd have liked a more intentional and focused direction on these matters. The instructors turned a lot of the discussion sessions over to us—something that can be nice, but in a brief seminar such as this, can be counter-productive. Their interventions or follow-ups to student comments were often not big-picture matters, but anecdotes about various folks involved in Black print and trades.
10. For the first time, I have to say not really. I chose this course because I wanted to delve more deeply into the theory of Black Print Culture Studies and into the ethics of collecting and studying Black print, and we really didn't talk about those elements at all. Having come in already conversant with the period and with many of the key figures, I hoped to leave with new insights, but it's hard to say what those might be. I felt the course was pitched more like a very introductory undergrad course than at the high level of sophistication and depth I am used to from RBS courses.
11. I definitely learned what I hoped to learn, but so much more, and that is all thanks to our instructors and my great classmates. I now feel equipped to ask questions and have a more aware eye as I work with physical materials.

5) *How do you plan to use the skills and knowledge acquired during your time here?*

1. I intend to offer a Black Print Cultures graduate seminar at my institution as well as write a journal article based on some materials.
2. I work with Black print materials on a daily basis so certainly can see this helping in the instruction that we offer.
3. I plan to center Black print in my day to day work with texts.
4. {no response}
5. I will use this in my collecting/acquisitions work, along with scholarly/digital humanities related considerations.
6. Taking the information back to the collections I work with and improving descriptions of the material.
7. I will use them in teaching an undergraduate class on slave narratives in the Atlantic

World. I may also develop a graduate course on Black print. And I will help our special collections librarian to develop an exhibit of material related to slavery and abolition in 2024.

8. I will bring everything I learned back to my home institution and share it with colleagues, which I think will have a significant impact on the institution.
9. {no response}
10. Again, I am disappointed that I am not leaving with a sense that the course was transformative for me. I am glad to have had the chance to see in person some works I knew only from digital surrogates, and to have come across a few specific pieces (Wm. C. Nell broadsides) I may add to my teaching.
11. I plan to continue reading, thinking, and sharing with others. Also, as stated in an earlier answer: "I expect to be teaching in some capacity eventually, and I definitely plan on incorporating many of the ideas and issues we wrestled with here with my future students/fellows/interns."

6) *Who might benefit the most from taking this RBS course?*

1. Librarians and early career academics.
2. Librarians, archivists, curators, and scholars.
3. Literature scholars.
4. {no response}
5. Library practitioners and academics, and anyone with an interest in the Black experience in America.
6. New Librarians in Collections and public historians.
7. People who know nothing about African-American print culture.
8. Everyone—from librarians and curators and conservators who process, collect, and interpret materials, to those in the academy teaching and researching—we didn't have anyone from the book trade in the class, but I think the class would be worthwhile for them as well.
9. Early stage graduate students.
10. This course could be a good basic introduction to thinking about communities of print for someone who has not spent much time in either book history or the nineteenth century. Folks who are already well-versed in African-American history in this period may find (as I did) that the level of the course is a bit frustrating. I do think that folks who haven't had much exposure could really benefit from starting their book history work here, in a course that centers Black print. More courses should do more with these kinds of materials.
11. Everyone!!!

7) *If applicable, what were the most powerful, or otherwise noteworthy educational moments in the course? Were there any "aha!" moments you'd like to share?*

1. The discussion modules on emigration's deep embeddedness in Black print culture.
2. {no response}
3. {no response}
4. {no response}
5. {no response}
6. The "aha!" moment for me was the instructors putting forth that it is not discovery, but acknowledgment that is one of the cornerstones in studying Black print history and culture.
7. {no response}
8. Too many "aha!" moments to share. Compared to other RBS courses I've taken, this class was so important because it has really significant stakes and I feel like there is so much more work to be done. I felt that every participant in the class was a part of that work, and I am excited to see where it all leads.
9. {no response}
10. {no response}
11. Not so much aha as just more confidence in being able to wrestle these topics.

8) *Are there any other ways in which the course could have been improved?*

1. More individual research time and deeper dive into the assigned readings.
2. Just adjusting the required reading a bit to a more reasonable amount; also, I think it would be helpful if the day started out with a brief contextual lecture of the readings for the day.
3. I think that starting from somewhere concrete and THEN complicating or de-constructing it with primary texts might have been helpful.
4. {no response}
5. {no response}
6. More structured lecture.
7. {no response}
8. I would like to see more children's literature/print culture incorporated.
9. I would recommend at least two ways the course could be stronger: (1) a better distribution of participants; seven librarians and four scholars (three of whom were English professors) wasn't a good mix to get diversity and allow for a deep-dive; (2) Building community amongst the cohort. I don't mean socially—we did that just fine ourselves—but intellectually. {private response}
10. I would suggest \*integrating\* the hands-on work with materials into the discussions rather than separating the course into morning segments around "what is a . . ." and afternoons with the stuff. Even (maybe especially) those pretty foundational questions are better answered through looking at the materials than just in the abstract.
11. Nope, I just wish we had more time together, but that is impractical.

9) *Do you feel that you got your money's worth? How likely are you to recommend this course to others? On a 1–10 scale, 1 would indicate that you disagree that you got your money's worth, 5 would indicate a neutral response, and 10 would indicate that you agree that you got your money's worth.*

1. 7
2. 10
3. 8
4. 8
5. 9
6. 10
7. 8
8. 10
9. 2
10. 3
11. 10

10) *If your course made any (virtual) field trips outside of the classroom or had guest speakers, do you feel that they enhance the course experience?*

1. {no response}
2. We had multiple visitors to the class that greatly enriched the class experience.
3. {no response}
4. Yes! We had visiting scholars and it was awesome!
5. {no response}
6. Yes.
7. See comments above about the Wiggins lecture.
8. Our guests were wonderful! From notable scholars to the thoughtful AAS staff—I learned so much from my fellow classmates as well as our guests.
9. Professor Yarborough's talk was brilliant and a real highlight!
10. We were lucky enough to have a drop-in visit from the editors of the two editions of *Incidents* that we looked at, which was great. Drop-ins from AAS staff were also helpful.
11. Yes, very much so.

11) *Do you have any additional thoughts or advice for anyone considering taking this course in a future year?*

1. {no response}
2. Worcester is very difficult to get to, so just plan your travel well in advance and stay in

the hotels and not in the dorms.

3. {no response}
4. {no response}
5. I missed the Sunday tour of AAS, and as a library practitioner, I would have liked the chance to see more of the facility and stacks. In general, additional access to more of AAS beyond the incredible collections would be instructive.
6. Be open to learning and walk into the experience as a sponge with no assumptions. Actively engage in the material deep dives because there is so much work to be done with all of the materials.
7. It might be worth renting a car to get to and around Worcester.
8. Do the readings in advance!!! They are all fantastic and worthwhile and necessary, but it is very difficult to have a full day of class and then try to do the readings for the next. It also cuts into socializing time with classmates!
9. {no response}
10. {no response}
11. Just that I hope you keep doing some version of this course.

12) *If you had to sum up your RBS experience with a single sentence, phrase, or a haiku, what would you say?*

1. Really happy to have done it while working on my book!
2. Phenomenal.
3. {no response}
4. {no response}
5. Learning from collections and a professional community strengthens my praxis as a person and professional.
6. Ashe, It is well!
7. Can't be done.
8. Inspiring and humbling.
9. DS and BF are wonderful folks, very kind and fun.
10. {no response}
11. {no response}