AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE Course Goals:

- Reconstruct African American Lit Tradition/ Build the Tradition Canon
  - This includes defining the tradition: what accounts for the “African element” in African American Literature? And in what ways does the African American Tradition relate with, signify on, and in specific ways define the American Literary Tradition?
- Understand the key tropes repeating, begin to appreciate the “linkages in the chain”
  - **Resistance**: “The engendering impulse of African American literature is resistance to human tyranny. The sustaining spirit of African American literature is dedication to human dignity.
  - **Freedom**
  - **Talking books** (power of literacy) “making the “text speak” in the full range of timbres that the African enslaved brought to the process of writing became the dominant urge of the ex-slave authors” (xxxviii). African American slaves sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belltristic tradition” (xxxvii).
  - **Black message in white envelope** (attestations for Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, et. al.)
  - **Signifying**

Vernacular: vigorous dynamic expression (folklore, spirituals, work songs, gospel, sermons, jazz, and on and on)

- Richard Wright and Calverton: The Negro’s music and folk art were never “purely imitative”; black vernacular cultural forms were “definitely and unequivocally American, the only “original” American culture yet created (xlv).
- Ellison and Morrison: the vernacular accounts for Black Americans legacy of self awareness and endurance.
- The African American vernacular surrounds the written tradition “like a Mobius strip,” serves as the foundation for the tradition; continues to nurture and sustain it, to comment and signify upon it in a reciprocal relationship
  - Thrives in community and performance
  - Vernacular forms share traits that reflect African background: signifying, call response patterns, group creation, polyrhythmically percussive dance beat orientation not only in musical forms but in the rhythm of a line, tale or rhyme; improvising is highly prized; European, Euro-American and Native American forms reshaped to African American purposes and sensibilities

Slave Narratives: Literature of Slavery and Freedom (1746 – 1865) THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY RENAISSANCE (slave narratives and publication of pioneering experiments in fiction) – “Behind the achievements of individual African American writers during the antislavery period lies the communal consciousness of millions of slaves, whose oral tradition in song and story has given form and substance to literature by black people since they first began writing in English” (161).
- The first African American writers in the US appealed to the traditional Christian gospel “as a way of beginning the discussion with whites that did not directly confront their prejudices” (151).
- First writers contradicted European and US prejudice about the nature of the African Americans humanity/reason/artistic abilities.
- Black message inside a white envelope
- Comparable to that of founding fathers, slave undertook a quest for freedom
- Popularity of narratives while “literary” America is trying to define itself: “The slave who endeavours to recover his freedom is associating with himself no small part of the romance of the time” (159). These narratives qualified as America’s only indigenous literary form, for “all the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man’s novel” (transcendentalis clergyman Theodore Parker, 159).
- Slave narratives were central to the country’s conflict
- Writers of slave narratives launched their careers through this form
- Slave narratives reached epitome with Frederick Douglass’ Narrative. He wrote his own story instead of using a white “editor” and broke with tradition. Resolved to write his own story in his own way, to bear witness to the self awareness, intellectual independence, and literary authority of the slave (159).