

A Variety of Unfreedoms:

20th and 21st Century Narratives of Slavery, Neo-Slavery, and Emancipation

Course Description

Over a century after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment brought a legal end to the practice of enslavement in the United States, African American authors turned with renewed vigor to imagining the lives, perspectives, and realities of persons who were enslaved. This tutorial examines the texts they produced, especially in the novel form, which are now most commonly referred to as neo-slave narratives. We will study the literary histories and theories of the (sub)genre and explore how they help us understand the appeal of thinking about, and with, enslavement—especially after its formal dissolution in a country putatively organized under the liberal democratic ideals of liberty and equality.

Through examination of flagship texts that established and contributed to the genre in the twentieth century, we will consider how neo-slave narratives formally and conceptually address the seemingly intractable experience of unfreedom. What scale of time is necessary to narratively represent this experience, and why has temporality been a perduring concern for the genre? How do certain tropes and recurring figures bring intertextual coherence to the genre or, conversely, instantiate differences internal to it—and perhaps rupture the boundaries of the genre altogether? What counts as freedom or unfreedom: (how) do these narratives introduce important distinctions among what we might call a variety of unfreedoms, such as confinement, bondage, incarceration, detention, slavery, and enslavement? Similarly, what of the relationships and distinctions among liberty, liberation, abolition, emancipation, and freedom? How can and should we relate the genre to broader literary histories and forms, such as the slave narrative or prison writing? Once again, how does the genre relate to some of the most enduring political and theoretical concerns in African American and Black Studies that have emerged since the late 1960s? How do various twenty-first century novels extend, revise, and update the tradition?

Throughout our reading and our writing, we will ruminate on the possibility that African American literary culture is an untimely affair: it demands and denotes forms of freedom the world has yet to provide, and thereby participates in a critical culture that, as literary critic and cultural theorist Hortense J. Spillers noted at the start of the twenty-first century, both has been already and, paradoxically, has not yet arrived.

Course Goals

- **Junior Essay preparation:** the tutorial will prepare students to write a strong Junior Essay, a 20–25-page paper of research and criticism.
- **Learning how to navigate scholarship:** this course will introduce students to the necessary tools to work closely and effectively with various sources in literary studies. We will develop the skills to differentiate among numerous kinds of sources, recognize the relationships among them and how they respond to each other, and understand how these texts and relations constitute literary and critical traditions.
- **Familiarity with literary theories and methods:** Throughout the semester, we will attend to the secondary scholarship on neo-slave narratives, asking what kinds of literary theories and methods are used in the secondary literature and how they support the claims and arguments made by scholars. Furthermore, how can tertiary sources (anthologies, edited volumes of essays, reference works, and so on) be strategically used to complement and complicate the secondary sources? Questions of sources, methods, and theories will be raised in service of preparing students to marshal various and sundry kinds of evidence as they write the Junior Paper.

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- **(Re-)introduction to research services:** we will engage with Harvard’s research libraries and the English Department’s library liaison to survey the array of resources available to you as you begin proposing, researching, and writing the Junior Essay.

Required Texts

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*

Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Margaret Walker, *Jubilee*

Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, *Chain-Gang All-Stars*

Assignments

- **Presentations (10% total):** Each student will provide a 5–10-minute presentation on the “tertiary sources and additional resources” assigned for any two weeks of their choosing.
- **Short Paper (20%):** One 5-page close reading paper that incorporates at least one work of secondary scholarship.
- **Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography 20%):** A proposal for your final paper, the Junior Essay, along with 10 sources that will be used in the paper’s analysis and argument. Each source should be accompanied by 1-3 sentences on why/how its connects to the paper’s topic and your analysis.
- **Final Paper draft and feedback (20%):** A completed draft of the final paper will be shared with the class. All students will provide oral feedback on their peers’ papers.
- **Final Paper (30%):** A completed final paper that incorporates, as useful, the workshopping and feedback conducted in class.

Unit I: Preludes, Precursors, Precedents

Week 1

Primary Text

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)

Secondary Texts

- Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, selections (Intro., Ch. 3)
- Lindon Barrett, Conditions of the Present, selections (“Institutions, Classrooms, Failures: African American Literature and Critical Theory in the Same Small Spaces” and “The Experiences of Slave Narratives: Reading Against Authenticity”)

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- “The rise, development, and circulation of the slave narrative” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007)

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Week 2

Primary Text

Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder* (1936)

Secondary Texts

- Achille Mbembe, “Introduction: Time on the Move” in *On the Postcolony* (2001)
- Cara Louise Shipe, “[I drink, therefore I am: Localized Atlanticism in ‘Black Thunder’](#)” (2009)
- Christine Montgomery, “[Pendulum Time, Collective Freedom, and Rethinking the Neo-Slave Narrative in Arna Bontemps’s Black Thunder](#)” in *MELUS* (2016)

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Deborah E. McDowell, “Telling slavery in 'freedom's' time: post-Reconstruction and the Harlem Renaissance” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007)

Unit II: Origins? Emergence and Establishment of the Neo-Slave Narrative

Week 3

Primary Text

Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (1966), first half

Secondary Texts

- Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, selections (Intro)

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Valerie Smith, “[Neo-Slave Narratives](#)” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007)

Week 4

Primary Text

Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (1966), second half

Secondary Texts

- Phyllis Rauch Klotman, “‘Oh Freedom’ – Women and History in Margaret Walker’s Jubilee” in *Black American Literature Forum* (1977)
- Andrea Wolfe, “The Narrative Power of the Black Maternal Body” in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* (2018)

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Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, "[Slavery and Historical Memory in Late-Twentieth-Century Fiction](#)" *The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature*

Week 5: Research Support and Sources Module

Harvard Library Research Services visit

In-class workshop on "tertiary" sources:

- Audrey A. Fisch, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007)
- Maryemma Graham, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (2004)
- Ezra Tawil, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature* (2016)

Short paper due.

Unit III: Continuations, Elaborations, Expansions

Week 6

Primary Text

Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (1976)

Secondary Texts

- Henry Louis Gates [review of Flight to Canada](#) (1978)
- Timothy A. Spaulding, *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (2005), selections

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, [American Neo-HooDooism in Reed's novels](#) in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (2004)

Week 7

Primary Text

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987), first half

Secondary Texts

- Dean Franco, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Beloved" in *Modern Fiction Studies* (2006)
- Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "[Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the \(Neo\)Slave Narrative](#)" in *Qui Parle* (2016)

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Week 8

Primary Text

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987), second half

Secondary Texts

- Jeffrey B. Leak, *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* (2005), selections
- Darriek Scott, [*Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*](#) (2010), selections

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due. In-class discussion of final paper topics.

Unit IV: Spiritual Autobiographies, Carceral Conditions, Coerced Surrogacy:
Troubling the Tradition with Neo-Slave Religious Narratives

Week 9

Primary Text

- Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963)
- Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), selections

Secondary Texts

- G. T. Couser, "[Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing](#)." *Style* 32, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 334-350.
- Tara T. Green, ed., [From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature](#) (2008), selections
- Simon Rolston, [Prison Life Writing: Conversion and the Literary Roots of the U.S. Prison System](#) (2021), selections

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Redeeming bondage: the captivity narrative and the spiritual autobiography in the African American slave narrative tradition in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*

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Week 10

Primary Texts

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982), first half
Biblical story of Hagar, Genesis 16:1, 21:8-21

Secondary Texts

Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988), selections
Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993), selections

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Lovalerie King, “African American Womanism: from Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (2004)

Unit V: Unfreedom’s Internal Differences

Week 11

Primary Text

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982), second half

Secondary Texts

- Candice M. Jenkins, “Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple’” in *Modern Fiction Studies* (2002)
- Teresa A. Goddu, “[The \(Neo-\)Slave Narrative and the Plantationocene](#)” (2022)

Final paper complete draft due.

Week 12

Primary Text

Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys* (2019)

Secondary Texts

- Carina Antonia Evans, *Loving Blackness: The Neo-Slave Narrative and Contemporary Revisions of Blackness* (2009), selections
- Dagmawi Woubshet, [The Calendar of Loss](#) (2015), selections

In-class final paper workshop.

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Week 13

Primary Text

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, *Chain-Gang All-Stars* (2023)

Secondary Texts

- Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), selections
- Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation* (2021), selections

Final paper due.