

A Variety of Unfreedom:
20th and 21st Century Narratives of Slavery, Neo-Slavery, and Emancipation

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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 unfreedom, 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.
- **Practice navigating scholarship:** this course will introduce students to the necessary tools to work 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.

- **Greater 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.
- **(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*

Required Tutorial Meetings

All meetings are located in the Thompson Room

- **General Meeting 1:** Tuesday, Sept 12, 5-6pm
- **General Meeting 2:** Tuesday, Oct 17, 5-6pm
- **Junior Essay Conference:** Friday, December 8

Assignments

- **Presentations (10% total):** Each student will provide a total of three presentations during the semester. A 5–10-minute presentation will be given on the “tertiary sources and additional resources” assigned for any two weeks of your choosing. One presentation will be given on a text selected for the Research Support and Sources Module.
- **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 explaining why and how it 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 feedback on a peer's paper during an in-class workshop.
- **Final Paper (30%):** A completed final paper that incorporates, as useful, the workshopping and feedback conducted in class.

Unit I: Preludes, Precursors, Precedents

Week 0

Course introduction: whither enslavement according to Rene Marie, Lauryn Hill, and Jill Scott

Suggested Texts

- Lindon Barrett, [*Conditions of the Present*](#) (2018), selections (“Institutions, Classrooms, Failures: African American Literature and Critical Theory in the Same Small Spaces” and “The Experiences of Slave Narratives: Reading Against Authenticity”)
- Koritha Mitchell, [“I Was Determined to Remember: Harriet Jacobs and the Corporeality of Slavery’s Legacies”](#) (2023)

Week 1

Primary Text

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

Secondary Texts

- Saidiya Hartman, [*Scenes of Subjection*](#) (1997), selections (Intro., Ch. 3)

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*

Week 2

Primary Text

Arna Bontemps, [*Black Thunder*](#) (1936)

Secondary Texts

- Achille Mbembe, “Introduction: Time on the Move” in [*On the Postcolony*](#) (2001)
- 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*
- Cara Louise Shipe, [“I drink, therefore I am: Localized Atlanticism in ‘Black Thunder’”](#) (2009)

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*](#) (1999), selections (Intro)

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

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

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)

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

Short paper due.

Harvard Library Research Services visit

In-class workshop on primary, secondary, and tertiary sources:

- Maryemma Graham, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (2004)
- Audrey A. Fisch, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007)
- Ezra Tawil, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature* (2016)
- [Rinehart, Nicholas. --"Finding Francophone Equiano \(in All the Wrong Places\)."](#) 2014, [Thomas Temple Hoopes prize, Accession 19416, Box 2.](#) --
- [Rinehart, Nicholas T.. --In Human Bondage: Reconsidering the Slave Relation.](#) 2016, [Bowdoin prize, Accession 2017.069, Box 5.](#) --

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, (2005), selections (Intro., Ch. 1)

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, "[American Neo-HooDooism: the novels of Ishmael Reed](#)" in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*

Week 7

Primary Text

Toni Morrison, [*Beloved*](#) (1987/2006), 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)

Week 8

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

Primary Text

Toni Morrison, [*Beloved*](#) (1987), second half

Secondary Texts

- Darriek Scott, [Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination](#) (2010), selections (Ch. 3)

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*](#) (1965/1992), selections

Secondary Texts

- Tara T. Green, ed., [*From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*](#) (2008), selections (“Writing from No Man’s Land” and “Doing Time in/as ‘The Monster’”)
- Simon Rolston, [*Prison Life Writing: Conversion and the Literary Roots of the U.S. Prison System*](#) (2021), selections (Intro.)

Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources

- Yolanda Pierce, “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*
- G. T. Couser, “[Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing.](#)” *Style* 32, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 334-350.

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 (Intro.)

Delores S. Williams, [*Sisters in the Wilderness*](#) (1993), selections (Ch. 1)

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*

Unit V: Unfreedom’s Internal Differences

Week 11

Final paper complete draft due.

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](#)” in *African American Review* (2022)

Week 12

In-class final paper workshop.*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 (Intro.)
- Dagmawi Woubshet, [*The Calendar of Loss*](#) (2015), selections (Intro.)

Week 13

Secondary Texts

- Frank B. Wilderson III, [*Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*](#) (2010), selections (Intro.)
- Rinaldo Walcott, [*The Long Emancipation*](#) (2021), selections (“Moving Toward Black Freedom,” “The Long Emancipation,” “The Long Emancipation Revisited”)

Final paper due.*Course Policies*

Students are encouraged to contact me to discuss any of the policies detailed below:

Content and Care

Reading the literatures of enslavement and emancipation can be emotionally and cognitively onerous. Many texts include representations and depictions of gratuitous violence, harm, and hardship. Alongside the work we will do in class to understand how we relate to and are affected by these texts, students are actively encouraged to care for themselves as needed beyond our class sessions, and I’m available as a partner to strategize what care might look like for individual students. If you have concerns about specific textual content you need to avoid at this time, please contact me early in the course and we’ll devise a plan for how best to engage with our readings.

Attendance

In accordance with Harvard College policy, regular attendance at course meetings and related events is expected of all students. For the purposes of the Junior Tutorial, that includes the “Required Tutorial Meetings” enumerated in the syllabus. However, absences are perfectly acceptable for certain circumstances and unforeseen exigencies, such as illness. If you feel ill or otherwise need to be absent, please notify me before our class meeting. I encourage you to stay home and take steps to support your recuperation, such as seeking professional medical care.

Submissions, Due Dates, and Accessibility

All work for the tutorial should be submitted using the appropriate page on our Canvas course website. The due dates for all assignments are outlined in the syllabus. Because the tutorial

assignments progressively build on each other, these due dates are firm. However, extensions can be granted for certain extenuating circumstances, in which case students should contact me to arrange for an extension before the due date of the assignment. Most course materials have been designed to optimize both affordability and accessibility, and students are encouraged to work with the [Disability Access Office](#) to seek additional accommodations that would support your learning, including a revised schedule for assignment submissions.

Plagiarism and Collaboration (adapted from Harvard College handbook)

All work for the tutorial should be submitted in keeping with the [Harvard College Honor Code](#). It is expected that all homework assignments, projects, papers, and any other work submitted for academic credit will be the student's own. Students should always take great care to distinguish their own ideas and knowledge from information derived from sources. The term "sources" includes not only primary and secondary material published in print or online, but also information and opinions gained directly from other people. Quotations must be placed properly within quotation marks and must be cited fully. In addition, all paraphrased material must be acknowledged completely. Whenever ideas or facts are derived from a student's reading and research or from a student's own writings, the sources must be indicated. We will work collaboratively at various points throughout the semester. When collaboration occurs, students must acknowledge any collaboration and its extent in all submitted work; however, students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.

Generative AI

Certain assignments in this course will permit or even encourage the use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools such as ChatGPT. *The default is that such use is disallowed unless otherwise stated. Any such use must be appropriately acknowledged and cited.* It is each student's responsibility to assess the validity and applicability of any GAI output that is submitted; you bear the final responsibility for the work submitted. Violations of this policy will be considered academic misconduct. Please bear in mind that different classes at Harvard implement different AI policies, and it is the student's responsibility to conform to expectations for each course.