

# Slave Narratives and Neo-Slave/Freedom Narratives

## Course Overview:

In 1966 Margaret Walker published *Jubilee*, a quasi-fictional novel that recounts a black woman's experience through slavery, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction. This text would serve as the beginning of a genre of African American writing that Ishmael Reed would later pen *neo-slave* or *freedom narratives*. As Ashraf Rushdy posits in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, neo-slave narratives were not created in a vacuum, but rather are a continuation of African American oral and literary traditions, specifically the slave narrative. In order to understand the tradition by which the neo-slave narrative arose, it will be important to first identify the traditions of the slave narrative. Other than for the abolishment of slavery, what were the purposes of slave narratives? How did African American authors consider issues of violence, agency, authenticity, and sponsorship when crafting their slave narrative? What are the larger themes in slave narratives and how do neo-slave narratives rework those themes?

## Required Texts:

- Henry Bibb – *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849)\*
- Harriet Jacobs – *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)\*
- Elizabeth Keckley – *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868)\*
- Moses Roper – *Narrative of The Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper* (1815)\*
- William and Ellen Craft – *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860)\*
- Margaret Walker – *Jubilee* (1966)
- Ishmael Reed – *Flight to Canada* (1976)
- Sherley Anne Williams – *Dessa Rose* (1986)
- J. California Cooper – *Family* (1991)
- Dolen Perkins-Valdez – *Wench* (2010)

\*denotes full-text available online

## Course Requirements and Grade Distribution:

- **Discussion Leader (10%)**
  - Once throughout the semester you will be required to lead discussion for the chosen texts of the day. The way you choose to lead discussion is up to you. The point is to give the class critical points of departure for discussing that day's texts. It doesn't mean that you have to fill *every* minute. Feel free to be creative. For instance, you can bring in outside texts (historical documents, blogs, current events, films, art, music, literature, etc) or create an in-class assignment. Whatever your "lesson plan" will be for that day, please **email to me by 5pm the Sunday before** the Tuesday you present, your lesson plan that includes **6-8 discussion questions**.
  
- **Journal Evaluation (10%)**
  - You will choose a peer-reviewed journal to research that is dedicated to or frequently publishes African American literary criticism and report your findings to the group. You may want to use the *MLA Directory of Periodicals* to get you started. Find out factual information about the journal including: How often is it published? Acceptance rate? Length of publication process, peer-review etc. Then scan over the last 2-3 years of the journal and write a **one-two page single-spaced** report of the journal to distribute to me, along with a **shorter, bulleted one page document** for the rest of the class. Your handout will be accompanied by a **10-minute presentation** where you report your findings to the class. Some of the questions you might answer are: When was your journal created? Where? Why? Who were the key players? Current editors? Has the name changed over the years? Trace its historical context. Who is the audience? What types of articles would this journal be looking for in terms of African American literature? What have the latest articles/issues been about? What seminal articles are located in this journal? How difficult is it to be published in this journal? Interesting Facts? Upcoming special issues? Most written about authors, texts, time periods etc.
  - Possible options include: *African American Review*, *Callaloo*, *CLA journal*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, *The Black Scholar\**, *South: A Scholarly Journal*, *MELUS*, *South Atlantic Review*, *College Literature*, *American Quarterly*, *American Literature*, *Literature and Medicine*
  
- **Choice Week (10%)**
  - Because there are clearly more slave and neo-slave narratives than weeks of the semester, during Week 11 everyone will be reading a different text. I will assign you the genre (either slave or neo-slave narrative) and then you will choose a text from the prepared list.
  - Assignment: **3-4 pages double-spaced**; Summary of the book (paragraph); place it in conversation with other texts we have read/what we've learned so far; two-three articles that pair well with the text and why; 3-4 discussion questions about the text. You will present your text to the class in a **10-minute presentation**.

- **Abstract and Conference Presentation (10%)**
  - You will craft a **200-250 word** abstract of your conference presentation. Email me your abstract **and a two-sentence biography** by **the Sunday before the presentation at 5pm**. I will then name our conference panel(s) and circulate the abstracts to the class before the panel(s) on Tuesday.
  - You will deliver a **12-15-minute** presentation of your research to the class. You will need to time yourself, but it is generally around seven pages double-spaced. You will receive feedback from your fellow classmates and myself, which will ideally help you in crafting your final paper. Be sure to stay within the time frame.
    - *Notice:* I am not requiring a proposal, but I *highly* suggest you come talk to me about your project in advance.
  
- **Seminar Paper (60%)**
  - Your final seminar paper (**18-20 pages**) will be an extension of your conference paper and will be due **Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup> at 11pm**. Email to me in .doc format.

**Attendance and Participation** – It should go without saying that attendance and participation in a graduate seminar are imperative to your success in the program. However, I do understand that sometimes things happen. If you miss one class (due to extraordinary circumstances) there will be no penalty. If you miss two classes, I will subtract a letter grade from your final grade. Three or more absences will result in a failure of the course.

**Late Work** – Any assignments that are turned in after the due date will be penalized half a letter grade for each day the assignment is late.

**Disability accommodation** – Should you want additional accommodations, please register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/)) and/or feel free to be in touch with me about how I can better accommodate your needs.

### Schedule of Readings

Week 2  
T 8/28      Intro to course; review *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845); assign journal evaluations, discussion leaders

Week 3  
T 9/4      **Henry Bibb--*Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849)**  
James Olney – “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, their Status as Autobiography, and as Literature”  
Keith Michael Green – “‘Am I not a husband and a father?’ Re-membering Black Masculinity, Slave Incarceration and Cherokee Slavery in *Henry Bibb*”

- Week 4  
T 9/11 **Margaret Walker – *Jubilee* (1966)** Chapters 1-35  
Ashraf Rushdy – “The Neo-slave Narrative” in *Cambridge Companion to African American Novel*  
Margaret Walker – “How I Wrote *Jubilee*”
- Week 5  
T 9/18 **Margaret Walker – *Jubilee* (1966)** Chapters 36-end  
Jennifer Williamson – “Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*: ‘Forged in a Crucible of Suffering’” in *Twentieth Century Sentimentalism*  
Hiroko Sato – “The Use of Spaces in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*” in *Fields Watered with Blood*
- Week 6  
T 9/25 **Journal Evaluation Presentations**
- Week 7  
T 10/2 **Elizabeth Keckley – *Behind the Scenes* (1868)**  
Frances Smith Foster – “Romance and Scandal in a Postbellum Slave Narrative: Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes*” in *Written by Herself*  
Michele Elam – “Dressing down the First Lady: Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes*” in *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860-1930* (only pages 28-46)
- Week 8  
T 10/9 **Sherley Anne Williams – *Dessa Rose* (1986)**  
Deborah E. McDowell – “Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom – *Dessa Rose*” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*  
Angelo Rich Robinson – “Why Does the Slave Ever Love? The Subject of Romance Revisited in the Neoslave Narrative”
- Week 9  
T 10/16 **Moses Roper (1815) and William and Ellen Craft-- *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860)**  
Ellen Samuels – “‘A Complication of Complaints’: Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft’s *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*”  
Teresa A. Goddu – “Anti-Slavery’s Panoramic Perspective”
- Week 10  
T 10/23 **Ishmael Reed – *Flight to Canada* (1976)**  
Richard Walsh-- “‘A Man’s Story is his Gris-Gris’: Cultural Slavery, Literary Emancipation and Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*”  
A.T. Spaulding – “Commodity Culture and the Conflation of Time in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*” in *Contemporary Black Men’s Fiction and Drama*
- Week 11  
T 10/31 **Choice Week**  
Slave Narratives: William Wells Brown, Israel Campbell, James Pennington, Sojourner Truth, William Grimes, Solomon Northrup, James L. Smith

Neo Slave Narratives: Jewelle Gomez--*The Gilda Stories*, Edward P. Jones – *The Known World*, Toni Morrison – *A Mercy*, Charles Johnson – *Middle Passage*, Ernest Gaines--*Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Phyllis Alesia Perry – *Stigmata*, John Edgar Wideman – *The Cattle Killing*, Gayl Jones--*Corregidora*

- Week 12  
T 11/6      **J. California Cooper – *Family* (1991)**  
Angelyn Mitchell – “J. California Cooper's Family: Of (Absent?) Mothers, -- (Motherless?) Daughters, and (Interracial?) Relations” in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*  
James Weaver – “Rehabilitative Storytelling: The Narrator-Narratee Relationship in J. California Cooper’s *Family*”
- Week 13  
T 11/13      **Abstracts and two-sentence biography due by Sunday 11/11 at 5pm**  
**Conference Presentations**
- Week 14  
T 11/20      **Abstracts and two-sentence biography due by Sunday 11/18 at 5pm**  
**Conference Presentations**
- Week 15  
T 11/27      **Harriet Jacobs--*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)**  
John Sekora – “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative”  
Loverlie King – “Counter-Discourses on the Racialization of Theft and Ethics in Douglass’s *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents*”
- Week 16  
T 12/4      **Dolen Perkins-Valdez – *Wench* (2010)**  
Trudier Harris – “Does Northern Travel Relieve Slavery?: ‘Vacations’ in Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench*”

**Final Papers due Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup> by 11pm.**