

Harvard University
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Fall 2021

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MW 10:30-11:45 & 12:00-1:15

Expository Writing 20 – Slave Narratives

Written from the late 18th to the late 19th century in the United States, slave narratives recounted the harrowing story from slavery to freedom, the escape from the South to the North, and the intellectual journey towards literacy and public speaking. This course examines some famous representatives of this genre as well as post-Civil Rights modifications of such narratives. In the first weeks, we will analyze what roles literacy and rhetoric played in the popular *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). We will hone in on the complex relationship between black American writers of slave narratives and their white editors, who oversaw what was published, edited the narratives, vouched for their truth-value, and appended them with documents. In our second unit, as a point of comparison and continuing dialogue, we will examine the neo-slave narrative, a modification and updating of the genre after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In particular, we will look carefully at one of its most famous examples, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and address the following questions: How do African American authors rewrite the slave narratives and their conventions? How does their language of slavery differ from their predecessors? How do they understand the lasting legacy of slavery and trauma, seeking to make sense of past injustice and atrocity? Finally, this course will examine a contemporary iteration of the neo-slave narrative, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016). Specifically, we will examine how this next generation of African American writers experiments with the genre. What role does fantasy play in the representation of slavery and its history? And, in light of recent cinematic adaptations of slave narratives, how may the market influence these texts? Our primary readings will be accompanied by seminal essays on the literary genres of the slave and neo-slave narratives, their historical development, and their high political and cultural stakes.

Required Texts:

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life* (Norton Critical Edition, ISBN: 978-0393969665).

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Norton Critical Edition, ISBN: 978-0-393-97637-8).

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage edition: ISBN: 978-1400033416).

Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (Anchor Books Edition, ISBN: 978-0345804327).

All other course readings will be available via our course website.

Unit 1: The Antebellum Slave Narrative

This unit introduces two crucial examples of the genre and examines the conventional literary elements that make up a slave narrative. We will investigate the importance of literacy, education, and mastery of literary tropes in the slaves' struggle to become accepted as equal human beings – and how some slave narratives manage to question these conventions.

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).

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

James Olney, "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slave's Narrative*, 148-174.

Response Paper #1 (1-2 pages):

Close reading of one passage or sentence from either Douglass or Jacobs.

Essay #1 (4-5 pages):

For this assignment, you will practice the art of close reading, the interpretive process of analyzing the language and structure of a text. You will focus on two to three passages and textual details in either Douglass' or Jacobs' narratives and learn to forge an argument out of your textual observations.

Unit 2: The Neo-Slave Narrative: Remembering Slavery After the Civil Rights Movement

This unit hones in on the neo-slave narrative, a genre arising in the post-Civil Rights era when the slave narratives were rediscovered as a source of the black American literary tradition. We will examine how Toni Morrison continues and complicates the question of the mastery of language, white literary conventions, and the problem of finding a language adequate to represent the atrocity of slavery.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987).

Peter J. Capuano, "Truth in Timbre: Morrison's Extension of Slave Narrative Song in *Beloved*," in *African American Review* 37 (2003), 95-103.

Response Paper #2 (1-2 pages):

Please present two scenes (one from a slave narrative, one from Morrison's *Beloved*) you would like to compare or contrast through a lens of your choice.

Essay #2 (5-7 pages):

I would like you to analyze *Beloved* through the lens of a slave narrative you previously read in Unit 1. How does this historical novel serve (or doesn't serve) as a modernization of and contemplation on themes or problems raised in the slave narrative, such as rhetoric, literacy, intimacy, memory,

violence against women, etc.? You are expected to develop new ideas that differ from those you explored in essay #1.

Unit 3: The Contemporary Neo-Slave Narrative

The final third of the semester builds on your knowledge of the development of the genre and asks you to develop your skills and experience with these sources by doing research and engaging with secondary sources. We will analyze how Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) experiments with the (neo-)slave narrative. You will recognize many references in *The Underground Railroad* to the (neo-)slave narratives you have read, even to a secondary source you have encountered in this course. How does Whitehead's novel use its predecessors? How does the role of the fantastic change the understanding of history, and how does this treatment deviate from established representations of slavery? How does his novel play with the tropes employed in the history of the genre that Whitehead has inherited from his predecessors? You will also learn what an academic research paper looks like, what parts it consists of, and how to position your argument in relation to an existing body of scholarship.

Response Paper #3 (2 pages):

For this response paper, you will summarize the argument of either of these scholarly articles:

Stephanie Li, "Genre Trouble and History's Miseries in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *Melus* 44.2 (2019): 1-23.

Madhu Dubey's "Museumizing Slavery: Living History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *American Literary History* 32.1 (2020): 111-139.

Essay #3 (10-12 pages):

Your paper for the third unit will be an academic research essay. You can focus exclusively on Whitehead's text or choose to write a comparative lens essay that places into dialogue one of the narratives we have discussed in class and *The Underground Railroad*. In other words, I am inviting you to deepen your own interests sparked by any of the texts, which you can re-discover in Whitehead's novel. You will present your own argument and situate it in the scholarly discussion on Whitehead's novel. The research will therefore require you to master the fundamentals of research: you will need to find, learn, and evaluate what other critics have to say about your topic.

Some suggested secondary literature:

Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*(Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*(New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Audrey Fisch (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). (This title contains an extensive bibliography.)

Course Policies and Requirements

Grading:

I will grade only the revisions (that is, the last version) of your essays, not the drafts or response papers. Course grades will be determined as follows:

25% Participation (in-class discussion, exercises, conferences, and workshops)

25% Unit 1 Essay

25% Unit 2 Essay

25% Unit 3 Essay

Your participation grade includes credit for turning in each of your assignments. You are expected to submit all response papers and drafts on time, and failure to do so will affect your participation grade.

Harvard College Writing Policy on Attendance:

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. *If you are absent without medical excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the college can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean, as you will also be required in the case of protracted or repeated illness. *Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences.* If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

If you are late for class, your participation grade will be lowered. If your lateness exceeds ten minutes, it will be counted as an absence.

Completion of Work:

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course—not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

Lateness:

For *all* assignments promptness is *mandatory* and part of the grade so please schedule your work accordingly. *YOU WILL NOT RECEIVE FEEDBACK ON YOUR RESPONSE PAPERS AND DRAFTS IF YOU TURN IN THESE ASSIGNMENTS LATE.* Regarding your revisions, the penalty for late written work will be a deduction of 1/3 of the final grade for each day that it is late. (So if you were three days late in turning in an essay that would have received an “A-”, you would receive a “B-” for it.) Please note that weekends are included in the deduction of a grade for late work. Late work any more than 5 days after the due date will not be accepted. While I do not offer any extensions, please contact me if you have a medical reason or family emergency that will prevent you from turning in your work on time.

Collaboration:

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students, and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook*, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

Academic Integrity:

Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. *All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment.* Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

Electronic Submissions:

You will submit at least some of your work electronically this semester. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with Microsoft Word doc or docx. It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.

Electronic Devices:

No electronic devices are allowed during class. Please be prepared to make Xeroxes of essays and academic articles for in-class discussion.

Communication:

When you email me, please allow 24 hours for a response. Weekends are not included in this time, so if you email me on Friday at 3:00pm, you can expect a reply by 3:00pm on Monday.