

History 283

Honors Seminar: Slave Revolts in the Americas

Prof. Steve Kantrowitz
Wednesdays, 1:20-3:20
Humanities 2251
Spring 2011

Introduction

This seminar will introduce you to the methods and questions of modern history through an exploration of slave revolts and conspiracies in the Atlantic world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These dramatic events, real and imagined, shaped the development, crisis, and collapse of the New World slave system.

Students who work hard will leave the seminar with the foundations of an education in history. Even those who never take another history course will come away with crucial skills for any future work in the humanities.

Readings

Reading is the most essential aspect of this course. Unless you do the readings thoroughly and thoughtfully, you will not be able to write good essays or participate effectively in discussion. Most of our common readings, listed below, are available at Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 W. Gilman:

- Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (LSU Press)
- Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard)
- Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Harvard)
- Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in 18th-century Manhattan* (Knopf)
- Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" (Dover Thrift)
- Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave* (Wilder)
- Kenneth Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Bedford)
- Edward Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (LSU Press)
- Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Politics in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Harvard)

Other required readings (articles and primary documents) will be available via the "Content" tab on learn@UW.

Writing Assignments

Unless specifically stated otherwise, all writing assignments are to be submitted via the dropbox or discussion list on the page for this course at <http://learnuw.wisc.edu>, **no later than 8 p.m. the day before the class meeting**. These must be double-spaced, 12-point Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) or RTF documents. I cannot decode Wordperfect or other word-processing formats unless they are seamlessly interconvertible with Word.

Short assignments

The assignments for most meetings of the seminar include short essays or other formal responses, each worth 5% of your final grade. Of these:

- you **must** do the assignments for weeks 2, 3, 10 and 13; and
- you may omit **one** of the other assignments.

You will therefore do 12 short assignments, for a total of 60% of your final grade. You are responsible for the reading even when you are not writing an essay.

Final essay

At the last class meeting you will receive a document on which you will base a slightly longer final essay, due at the end of the scheduled exam block. This essay will be worth 15% of your final grade.

Academic Responsibility

All work that you turn in should be your own, and you are responsible for knowing what constitutes plagiarism; claiming ignorance will not help you after the fact. If you repeat someone else's words, you must use quotation marks and must cite the relevant author, work, and page numbers (either in parentheses or in a footnote). Likewise, if you closely paraphrase another writer or rely on his or her ideas, you must acknowledge your debt with an appropriate citation. Appropriation of another author's work without citation—whether or not you use direct quotations—always constitutes plagiarism. I pursue all cases of possible academic misconduct. Some clear guidelines are available at http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html.

Participation and Engagement

The remaining 25% of your grade will be based on your degree of engagement in the course-- your participation in our discussions, measured not by the number of minutes you spend talking but by your willingness to think about and discuss the questions and sources we are considering. This means learning to trust your ideas enough to present them to others, learning to listen to what others are saying even when it does not match your assumptions or conclusions, and learning to take part in a group conversation that respects individuals while subjecting ideas and assertions to critical scrutiny. These are difficult tasks even for professional historians, and I do not expect perfection--but I do expect you to do your best.

Schedule of Meetings and Assignments

Week 1: Jan. 19 - Introductions

Who we are, why we are here, what we will be doing.

Unit 1: Making and Unmaking Slavery in the Americas

Week 2: Jan. 26 – Slave Revolts in Hemispheric Perspective

read: Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*

write: Write an essay of no more than 250 words explaining how the nature of slave revolts changed between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. **5% [required]**

Week 3: Feb. 2 – Making Slaves

read: Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*

write: Write a 250-word reflection on the following question: how did the circumstances of the Atlantic slave trade shape the possibilities for captives to rebel? **5% [required]**

Week 4: Feb. 9 – Making U.S. Slavery

read: Johnson, *Soul By Soul*

write: Write a 300-word essay answering the following question: What was the indigenous antislavery ideology of American slaves, and what was its relation to master-class paternalism?

5%

Week 5: Feb. 16 – Narrating a Shipboard Revolt

read: *U.S. Senate Documents* No. 51, 27th Congress, 2nd Session 1841-42] "... mutiny on board the brig Creole, and the liberation of the slaves..." (posted at [Learn@UW](#))

write: a narrative account of the revolt on the *Creole* of no more than 300 words. **5%**

Unit 2: Making Meaning out of Slave Revolts and Conspiracies**Week 6: Feb. 23 – Slave Conspiracies in Early America**

read: Lepore, *New York Burning*

think: What is the overall argument of this book?

write: Lepore writes that "slaves suspected of conspiracy constituted both a phantom political party and an ever-threatening revolution." In no more than 500 words explain what she means, offering brief and well-chosen examples. **5%**

Week 7: March 2 – A Revolution Echoes in the United States

read: Douglas Egerton, "Gabriel's Conspiracy and the Election of 1800" (posted)

James Sidbury, "Saint Domingue in Virginia: Ideology, Local Meanings, and Resistance to Slavery, 1790-1800" (posted)

David Geggus, "The Enigma of Jamaica in the 1790s: New Light on the Causes of Slave Rebellions" (posted)

write: In no more than 500 words, assess the relative merits of the arguments by Egerton and Sidbury in light of David Geggus's arguments about Jamaica. **5%**

Week 8: March 9 – Slave Revolts in the Literary Imagination

read: Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*

Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno"

write: What do each of these authors think is most important to communicate about shipboard slave revolts? Post two well-crafted reflections of at least 100 words, one on each of the two texts, to the **discussion** list at [learn@UW](#) (**not** the dropbox, as with other assignments). **5%**

In class: Introduction to online searching for document exercises in Unit 3

Week 9: March 23 – Nat Turner's Rebellion

read: Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*

write: To what extent or in what way(s) was Turner's rebellion part of the various Atlantic traditions and/or histories we have studied so far? 250 words. **5%**

view: *A Troublesome Property*

Unit 3: The Question of Slave Revolt in Antebellum America**Week 10: March 30 – The U.S. in the Americas**

read: Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*

find: one document that sheds light on the dynamics Rugemer describes

write: Write a 250-word essay explaining how this document relates to some aspect of Rugemer's argument. **5%** [required assignment]

Week 11: April 6 – The Politics of American Slaves

read: Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, first third

write: What were the politics of American slaves in the last three decades before the Civil War, and how did they encourage or discourage slave rebellion? 300 words. **5%**

Week 12: April 13 – Black Northerners and the Question of Revolt

read: Steven Hahn, "Slaves at Large"

Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States" [1843]

Convention of the Colored Citizens, from *The Liberator* [1858]

write: Write an essay of 250-300 words exploring one or two major forces or dynamics that shaped free blacks' understanding of slave revolts. **5%**

NO CLASS MEETING APRIL 20

Week 13: April 27 – Was the American Civil War a Slave Revolt?

read: Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, second third

write: Write an essay of no more than 500 words exploring this question: In what ways did the history of slave revolts in the Americas prior to 1860 shape the post-emancipation history of the United States? **5% [required]**

Week 14: May 4 – Show and Tell

find: a document that reveals an important dimension of the history of slave revolts

post: a pdf of this document to learn@UW

bring: a copy of the document to seminar with you.

write: an introduction to the document of 250-300 words, explaining the larger dynamics it reflects. **5%**

Final Assignment: due 4:45, Sunday May 10 (scheduled exam block for this course)

Write an essay of 1200-1500 words that explains the ways this document reflects the history of slave revolts in the Americas. Do not try to do everything; instead, choose the aspect of the document you find most interesting and manageable. **15%**