

History 283
Honors Seminar: Slave Revolts in the Americas
Prof. Steve Kantrowitz

Spring 2009
Tuesdays, 1:20-3:20
2611 Humanities

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.

Some of our common readings, listed below, are available at Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 W. Gilman.

- * Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*
- * Jill Lenore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in 18th-century Manhattan*
- * Laurent Dubois and David Geggus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*
- * Frederick Douglass, "The Heroic Slave"
- * Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" (available at NetLibrary via MADCAT)
- * Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*

One work is no longer in print; you should make sure to obtain this from a used book store, Amazon.com or another source.

- * Kenneth Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*

Other readings will be available via Learn@UW or the library e-resources gateway.

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 11:59 p.m. Monday before the class. These must be submitted as Microsoft Word or RTF documents, double-spaced, in a 12-point font. I cannot decode Wordperfect documents.

Reflection and short essay assignments

The second through twelfth meetings of the seminar include short essays or other formal responses, eleven in all, each worth 5% of your final grade. Of these:

- you must do the first two writing assignments (weeks 2 and 3); and
- you may omit **one** of the other assignments without penalty.

Collectively, the ten assignments you must do are worth 50% of your final grade.

Final essay

During the last three weeks of the semester each student will work on a substantial essay of historical analysis or interpretation. See below for details. This essay will be worth 20% of your final grade.

Participation and Engagement

The remaining 30% 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 hard things 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. 20 - Introductions**

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

Unit 1: Shipboard Revolts**Week 2: Jan. 27– The Atlantic Context, pt. 1**

read: Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 1-186 (including endnotes)

write: Post three questions and one reflection to the discussion list on Learn@UW by Monday at midnight. **5%**

Week 3: Feb. 3 – The Atlantic Context, pt. 2

read: Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 187-355 (including endnotes)

write: Write a 250-word reflection on the following question: under what circumstances was violence *not* an inevitable aspect of the Atlantic slave trade? **5%**

Week 4: Feb. 10 – 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. **7.5%**

Week 5: Feb 17 – Slave Revolts in the Literary Imagination

read: Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*
 Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno"

think: What do each of these authors think is most important to communicate about shipboard slave revolts?

write: Post two questions and two reflections to the discussion list by Monday at midnight. **5%**

Watch: *Amistad* (selections)

Unit 2: Rumors and Revolutions

Week 6: Feb. 24 – 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. **7.5%**

Week 7: March 3 – The Haitian Revolution

read: Laurent Dubois and David Geggus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, entire book

write: In no more than 250 words, explain what Dubois and Geggus believe were the most important divisions among the residents of Saint Domingue, and how these led to the rise of Toussaint L'Ouverture. **7.5%**

Week 8: March 10 – 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. **7.5%**

Unit 3: The Question of Slave Revolt in Antebellum America

Week 9: March 24 – The Politics of American Slaves

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

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. **7.5%**

Week 10: March 31 – Nat Turner's Rebellion

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

write: To what extent was Turner's rebellion part of the various Atlantic traditions and/or histories we have studied so far? 250 words. **7.5%**

view: *A Troublesome Property*

Week 11: April 7 – Black Northerners and the Question of Revolt

read: Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States" [1843] and other readings, to be posted to Learn@UW in March.

write: What forces shaped free blacks' understanding of slave revolts? Write an essay of 250-350 words that presents one or two major forces or dynamics. **7.5%**

Week 12: April 14 – Was the Civil War a Slave Revolt?

read: Hahn, second half

write: In what ways did the history of slave revolts in the Americas prior to 1860 shape the post-emancipation history of the United States? **7.5%**

visit: WHS for introduction to microfiche and the *Slavery* pamphlet series.

Unit 4: Contextualizing and Interpreting Primary Sources**Week 13: April 21 – Pamphlets**

read: four pamphlets discussing slave revolts from the *Slavery* microfiche series.

Choose two whose content you find both compelling and interpretable.

write: 1) Using MADCAT, JSTOR, and your wits, produce a bibliography of at least three scholarly books and/or articles providing context for each of these two pamphlets.

2) What connections can you draw between these pamphlets and the major themes and questions of the course? Come prepared to discuss this for each of your pamphlets.

Week 14: April 28 – Independent Work

read: Choose the pamphlet you find most compelling and interpretable. After consultation with Prof. Kantowitz, read the items on your bibliography or other important works.

Week 15: May 5 – Wrap-up and Pamphlet discussion

write: Begin to formulate possible arguments about the salience of your pamphlet to the history of slave revolts in the Americas. Come to class prepared

1) to explain how various readings help to explain, interpret, or contextualize the pamphlet, and

2) to share several possible thesis statements about this with the rest of the group.

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 your pamphlet reflects the history of slave revolts in the Americas. Do not try to do everything; instead, choose the aspect(s) of the pamphlet you find most interesting and manageable.