

Undergraduate Research Symposium May 18, 2012 Mary Gates Hall

Online Proceedings

SESSION 1N

MCNAIR SESSION - CULTURE SHIFTS, SOCIAL CHANGE, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: PAST AND PRESENT

Session Moderator: Devon Pea, Anthropology

Mary Gates Hall 295

1:00 PM to 3:00 PM

* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

Pastiche and Humor in the Neo-Slave Narrative

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Mary Gates Scholar, McNair Scholar, Presidential Scholar

Mentor: Sonnet Retman, American Ethnic Studies

The traditional black slave narrative was a political tool used to document the experience of being subjugated and commodified in early America. A revised literature has appeared in the contemporary, post-Civil Rights moment that takes on the pretense of the slave narrative: the neo-slave narrative. Unlike traditional slave narratives, neo-slave narratives' potency does not hinge on veracity—each neo-slave narrative is a synthesis of oral history and the author's imagination. In this presentation, I investigate how narratives go so far as to re-render history, and transform the image of the brutalized slave to a determinist, autonomous figure in exceptional situations using humor. I will close read two neo-slave narratives: *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed and *Oxherding Tale* (1982) by Charles Johnson. Of particular interest to this literary investigation are the novels' respective protagonists who, between them, bear atypical Western educations, cosmopolitan friends, and traverse the landscape of the Antebellum South with wit and manner. I highlight how Johnson and Reed cater to contemporary readers' premonitions of what ought to happen in a treacherous slave narrative by creating comical encounters between the subjected and the empowered. I also discuss how Johnson invokes explicit Western and Eastern philosophical concepts to lend an air of consciousness to slavery's absurdity, and how Reed places deeply stereotyped characters in an anachronistic setting—a time structure that often conflates the events of the Civil Rights moment with the early 19th century—in order

to track how black political progress has and has not changed in the intermediate time. Ultimately, I unearth how the two authors use neo-slave narrative humor as a tool to subvert notions of the slave as a stagnant, brutalized subject and foster discussions of black agency between the signposts of enslavement, emancipation, and progressivism in the black experience through American history.