


2008

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KaaVonia Hinton

Old Dominion University, khintonj@odu.edu

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Repository Citation

Hinton, KaaVonia, "Following Tradition: Young Adult Literature as Neo-Slave Narrative" (2008). *Teaching & Learning Faculty Publications*. 85.

https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/teachinglearning_fac_pubs/85

Original Publication Citation

Hinton, K. (2008). Following tradition: Young adult literature as neo-slave narrative. In W. M. Brooks & J. C. McNair (Eds.), *Embracing, Evaluating, and Examining African American Children's and Young Adult Literature* (pp. 50-65). Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

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Following Tradition: Young Adult Literature as Neo-slave Narrative

KaaVonia Hinton

They were not slaves. They were people. Their condition was slavery.

—Julius Lester

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987/2004), Sethe tells her daughter, Denver, of the power of memories, of lived experiences that subsist long after the inhabitant of the experience dies. Sethe explains that her experiences continued to be real for her long after she obtained freedom: "if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you" (p. 36). These memories, "the pictures of what [slaves] did, or knew, or saw [are] still out there" (p. 36). Like Sethe, contemporary African American writers are reflecting on the experiences of slaves and (re)telling their stories.

Recently published books for young adults have put slavery at the center, emphasizing the humanity, resilience, and guile of enslaved men, women, and children. These stories constitute neo-slave narratives (Rushdy, 1997; Beaulieu, 1999), a contemporary genre of fiction. Several examples of young adult literature from this genre are examined here. The examples selected are nonclassical or noncanonized works that feature protagonists from age twelve to twenty (Hinton-Johnson, 2003).

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

While original slave narratives are narratives written by people who actually lived during the antebellum period and were enslaved, neo-slave narratives are written by contemporary authors who retell or reenvision the slave experience in America. Often loosely basing their work on historical documents and court cases, the writers of neo-slave narratives create imaginative depictions of the lives of former slaves (Lee, 2001). The genre includes such works as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987/2004), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1998), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991), Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* (1993), and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), to name a few.¹

Rushdy (1999) and Beaulieu (1999) discuss many of the novels mentioned above as neo-slave narratives. In an entry in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Rushdy (1997, pp. 534–535) maintains that the neo-slave narrative exists in at least four forms: (1) historical novels about slavery written in either first or third person (e.g., Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alex Haley's *Queen*); (2) novels about slavery's impact on contemporary society, or "palimpsest narratives" (e.g., Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*); (3) narratives that trace family history to the importation and enslavement of ancestors, or "genealogical narratives" (e.g., Alex Haley's *Roots*); and (4) narratives that adhere to the form of traditional slave narratives, usually written in first person from the perspective of an enslaved person (e.g., Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*).²

Later, in a chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, Rushdy revises his analysis, describing only three forms of neo-slave narratives: (1) historical novels, (2) pseudo-autobiographical slave narratives, and (3) "novels of remembered generations" (2004, p. 90). The genealogical narrative form is omitted in this discussion, as Rushdy (2004) uses what he cites as seminal neo-slave novels, *Jubilee* (1966/1999) by Margaret Walker, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971/2005) by Ernest Gaines, and *Corregidora* (1975) by Gayl Jones, as the basis of his chapter.

Beaulieu (1999) defines neo-slave narratives as "contemporary fictional works which take slavery as their subject matter and usually feature enslaved protagonists." These narratives "depend on the historical reclamation efforts of [antebellum] slave narrative scholars and contribute to attempts to revise history to include the perspective of enslaved Americans" (p. xiv). Though Beaulieu (1999) and Rushdy (1999) argue that slavery has been the subject of fiction since the publication of antebellum slave narratives in every period in literary history except possibly the Harlem Renaissance, in the majority of their books they reach for an answer that will

satisfactorily explain what they call "the emergence" of such stories during the twentieth century. They both attribute the emphasis on slavery in literature during contemporary times to at least two social movements: the civil rights and black power movements. According to both scholars, these movements called for a reexamination of how African Americans were positioned in history books, a return to primary sources such as slave testimonies, and a renewed sense of pride and interest in African heritage. While African American students demanded black studies programs, African American historians and others began to challenge historical texts, which led to the publication of new scholarly historiographies. Rushdy (2004) describes his efforts as a discussion of the "social, intellectual, and institutional transformations in American life during and since the mid-1960s" that created an opportunity for a literary focus on slavery (p. 88).

Beaulieu (1999) focuses specifically on the texts of contemporary women writers and argues that the black feminist movement in conjunction with the civil rights and black power movements created a climate that encouraged the exploration of slavery in fiction. Groundbreaking historiographies that focus on the female slave emerged as a result of black feminist efforts to create a space for the voices of women.

Beaulieu (1999) maintains that Toni Morrison, J. California Cooper, Sherley Anne Williams, and others tell the female-centered slave story, a story that describes circumstances unique to enslaved females. Discussions of neo-slave narratives are incomplete if they are not grounded in an understanding of antebellum slave narratives such as Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861/2000). Jacobs's narrative emphasizes the horrific conditions of women forced to contribute to the longevity of slavery. As Roberts (1997) explains, "female slaves served as both producers and reproducers" during slavery (p. 25). According to the law, slave women's children followed the condition of the mother. Therefore, all children born of slave women were counted as slaves and added to the property of the slave owner. This was the case regardless of whether the children were fathered by free white or black men. Roberts (1997) maintains that slave owners "expect[ed] natural multiplication to generate as much as 5 to 6 percent of their profit" (p. 24).

Further, Roberts (1997) explains that the motive behind raping slave women was not only to increase the economic value of the slave owner's property, but it was also a tool used to deter black women from resisting and failing to remember that they were property. Using the research of scholars and antebellum slave narratives by Harriet Ann Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, for example, to support her claim, Beaulieu (1999) argues that because of the enslaved female's position as mother, the enslaved female's narrative operates under a paradigm that differs from that of an enslaved male's. Thus, Beaulieu's (1999) is a gendered discussion of neo-slave

narratives, a thesis that describes black women's sense of humanity, identity, and epistemology during a time when they were required to be silent and feign complacency.

SLAVERY AND LITERATURE FOR YOUTH

As in literature written in the adult African American literary tradition, slavery has also been an enduring subject in literature for young people. Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave* (1968/2000), named a Newbery Honor book in 1969, is the first noteworthy contemporary young adult work written in the tradition of the neo-slave narrative. Using quotes from actual slaves, the book describes the experiences of enslaved Americans. The book's purpose, to make the voices of enslaved people audible, to present the humanity of those forced to be slaves, and to educate readers about connections between the past and present, is consistent with the work that some of the adult neo-slave narratives take up. *To Be a Slave* is important because of its use of the oral tradition and its "acknowledgement of the authenticity of the slaves' voices and memories" (Rushdy, 2004, p. 92). Neo-slave narratives often value the oral tradition, suggesting that oral stories, lived experiences expressed orally, are superior to "literary documents," "documented research," and academic scholarship (Rushdy, 2004, p. 92).

Virginia Hamilton's *The House of Dies Drear* (1968/2006), with its emphasis on the Underground Railroad, and certainly her *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave* (1988) are also novels following in the tradition of the neo-slave narrative. More recent works such as Mary Lyons's *Letters to a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs* (1996) and Mildred D. Taylor's *The Land* (2001) might also be read as neo-slave narratives, as these books focus on the experiences of blacks during slavery and reconstruction.

In Rita Williams-Garcia's *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1995), the story of the family's lineage—from slavery to freedom, as told by the oldest member of the family before she dies—is so important that it changes the direction of the protagonist's life. As Rushdy (2004) points out, this literary device, ancestral storytelling used to jar the protagonist, is not new: Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937/1990) and Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952/1995) both use it. Like these precursors, Williams-Garcia's use of the family story highlights the connection between past and present. However, unlike novels such as *Corregidora*, a neo-slave narrative similar to *Like Sisters on the Homefront* in that it depicts a black female deeply affected by the experiences of her enslaved female ancestors, memories of slavery passed down by a maternal figure do not "haunt" or "limit the possibilities for the life of the contemporary" characters; rather, such memories empower them (Rushdy, 2004, p. 95).

A number of novels written about slavery by black writers seem to follow the tradition of the neo-slave narrative. Four works in particular are of interest because of the experimental forms and text structures the authors use to tell stories of enslavement. Rushdy (2004) writes: "one of the remarkable things about contemporary African American narratives of slavery is how experimental the authors have been in developing diverse forms to tell a story that many acknowledge as the most difficult in their careers" (p. 90). This chapter examines *I, Dred Scott* (2005) by Sheila P. Moses, *Slave Moth* (2004) by Thylias Moss, *Day of Tears* (2005) by Julius Lester, and *Copper Sun* (2006) by Sharon Draper, which are written in the tradition of the neo-slave narrative. Elements analyzed are the alternative structure of each novel, its emphasis on slave women's stories, and its form as suggested by Rushdy's (2004) work.

I, DRED SCOTT

I, Dred Scott (Moses, 2005) is the fictional account of Dred Scott, a slave born in Virginia. After moving with his master to Missouri, Scott was sold to a doctor. He eventually sued his owners for his family's freedom, arguing that they became free when his owners took them to live in states that prohibited slavery. Of the four novels discussed here, *I, Dred Scott* is more traditional in terms of reflecting the form and narrative structure of antebellum slave narratives. Following the tradition of neo-slave narratives about enslaved women, Moses purposely creates a space for the enslaved woman by developing the character of Scott's wife, Harriett. Though little historical information is available about Scott, and almost none about his wife, Moses chooses to describe Scott's marriage to Harriett, the birth of their children, and Scott's love for his family in an effort to depict them not as slaves but as human beings.

Moses characterizes Harriett as argumentative, shrewd, and resourceful. It is Harriett who learns that slaves are suing owners who have taken them into free states. Angered because their owner will not allow Scott to purchase their family's freedom, Harriett explains the significance of the Missouri Compromise to her husband. Together, Scott and Harriett file a suit against their owner, beginning a legal case that will go on for eleven years. Though Harriett and Scott file the lawsuit together, Harriett's gender and race render her invisible. Scott's view of this seems somewhat anachronistic and feminist: "Slave men had no rights, but slave women had even less. I reckon Harriett's name should have been on every last one of those papers from start to finish," concludes Scott (Moses, 2005, p. 53).

Similar to Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845/1986), Moses's pseudo-autobiographical

account begins: "I was born in Southampton, Virginia, where 'bout 1799" (Moses, 2005, p. 1). Unlike Douglass's book, which Beaulieu (1999) argues follows a literacy-identity-freedom paradigm that allows Douglass to take on a public identity under the auspices of fighting for the abolishment of slavery, *I, Dred Scott* suggests an alternative paradigm. Scott's narrative seems to be more in line with Harriet Ann Jacobs's narrative, which expresses her connection to family, particularly to her children. As Beaulieu (1999) points out, black women writers like Moses "have recreated the [slave narrative], shifting its focus from literacy and public identity to family" (p. 13). The Dred Scott Moses depicts is a family man who is more concerned with obtaining the freedom of his wife and their two daughters, Eliza and Lizzie, than he is concerned with being able to read and write or move north to become an orator for the abolitionist cause.

In fact, Moses suggests that Scott does not go north to join abolitionists because of his commitment to his family and respect for his wife's determination to oppose whites who viewed Scott as a commodity: "Harriett always wanted me to hide when white folks came by. She had heard a lot of white folks talking about taking me north to make money. They believed some whites in the North would pay a whole lot of money just to see the slave whose case went all the way to the Supreme Court. . . . Said they would even pay me a thousand dollars a month. That money did not mean nothing to Harriett as bad as we needed it" (p. 72). Public scrutiny is resisted to the point of Harriett's initial refusal to allow photographers to take Scott's picture.

Reviews of *I, Dred Scott* were mixed. Critic Anne L. Tormohlen (2005) of the *School Library Journal* writes: "Moses fails to give a real sense of her subject; Scott never expresses emotion inwardly or outwardly" (p. 139). It can be argued, however, that Moses purposely depicts a man who is quite emotional and loving in an attempt to counter traditional slave narratives by men such as Frederick Douglass. Douglass (1845/1986) depicted himself as an individual so absorbed with developing his own identity that he had little interest in elaborating on emotional ties or mentioning his marriage to Anna Murray, the woman who helped him escape slavery. Conversely, Scott announces his wedding and explains, "For the first time in my life, I had someone to love me. I had me someone to love" (Moses, 2005, p. 35).

Echoing Tormohlen, a critic for *Kirkus Reviews* (2004) argues, "Scott's narrative voice seems disembodied; there's too little character development and historical context to make Dred Scott seem like a real person. Much is told, but there's no drama in the telling" (p. 1206). In contrast, Hazel Rochman (2004), in a review published in *Booklist*, says of *I, Dred Scott*: "An excellent curriculum addition, this book will resonate with adults as well as teens" (p. 1284). Few critics, however, have recognized Moses's attempt to write a story using some of the conventions of traditional slave narratives, such as

the use of a first-person narrator and an emphasis on the focal character's journey from slavery to freedom. Instead, they read the book as "historical fiction written in journal format" (Tormohlen, 2005, p. 139). The book is much more than that. The novel not only adopts some of the conventions of antebellum slave narratives but also seeks to "fill in the gaps" around gender that are inherent in original slave narratives, textbooks, and historiographies (Aljoe, 2006).

Moses told a reporter for *USA Today* that she saw a plaque with Dred Scott's name on it while in Missouri conducting research for a book she was writing about Dick Gregory. "That little plaque aroused my curiosity," Moses says. "I started doing research, and the more I did, the more I began to think about Dred Scott. Who was he? What was he like?" she told the reporter. "I know he was a father and a husband," Moses says. "He had a heart with a rhythm and a beat just like the people who enslaved him. He must have felt something. That has been left out of the history books. I felt it was my job to tell his story, the story he never got to tell for himself" (Minzesheimer, 2005). These are the types of questions and concerns other neo-slave narrative authors have asked themselves about their subjects, as is implied by Sherley Anne Williams (1986) in an author's note: "*Dessa Rose* is based on two historical incidents. A pregnant black woman helped to lead an uprising on a coffle. . . in 1829 in Kentucky. . . . In North Carolina in 1830, a white woman living on an isolated farm was reported to have given sanctuary to runaway slaves. . . . How sad, I thought then, that these two women never met" (p. 5).

Moses has also written a book for adults about Scott, but according to the article in *USA Today*, she has not found a publisher for it. She did much to prepare before writing *I, Dred Scott*. "To get the voice right, Moses read slave narratives and listened to interviews with elderly former slaves conducted as part of the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s" (Minzesheimer, 2005). It is no surprise that she read one of the most celebrated neo-slave narratives of the 1980s, *Beloved*, as part of her preparation. She also, as evident in the book's author's note, visited Scott's grave and studied legal documents describing the case. Moses also "recalled the stories and voice of her grandmother, Lucy Jones, who was born in the 1880s in North Carolina not far from where Scott was born nearly a century earlier" (Minzesheimer, 2005).

The fact that Moses makes Harriett an important and influential part of her husband's life is significant when considering the book's connection to other neo-slave narratives. Following the tradition of such novels as *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose*, books inspired by the lives of real people, this fictionalized account goes beyond the court case, establishing a context and awareness of events in the Scotts' lives prior to the court battle up until contemporary times, as implied in the foreword written by John A. Madison Jr., Dred and Harriett's great-grandson (Hinton, 2005a). The year after the Supreme

Court decided that the Scotts would remain slaves until death, Dred, Harriett, and their two daughters, Lizzie and Eliza, were sold to their former owners, the Blows, who freed them. This detail introduces another area of focus presented in the neo-slave narrative: the complexity of relationships between slaves and whites. While complex relationships between slaves and whites are alluded to in *I, Dred Scott*, such relationships are depicted rather vividly in *Slave Moth* (Moss, 2004).

SLAVE MOTH

The forms that Rushdy (1997, 2004) discusses are evident in the young adult novels mentioned here, but he admits that the neo-slave narrative is not limited to three or four forms. The forms he cites can be expanded, and other genres set during slavery should be explored. Thylias Moss's *Slave Moth* (2004) allows for such an opportunity. The book might be the first neo-slave narrative written in verse. In sixteen poems, Moss—who has won both a Guggenheim and a MacArthur fellowship—introduces Varl, a witty slave girl living on Peter Perry's plantation in Tennessee. Doris Lynch (2004), a reviewer for *Library Journal*, points out that some of the poems work against the otherwise cohesiveness of the book, as "sustaining a single voice throughout an entire book is difficult" (p. 160). Conversely, Tonya C. Hegamin (2004), a *Black Issues Book Review* critic, applauds the book, claiming that "Moss's outstanding narrative in verse transcends many boundaries of slavery discourse" (p. 54).

Similar to *I, Dred Scott*, *Slave Moth* is written in the first person, as if Varl is offering an autobiographical account of her life, from birth to the moment she decides to seek freedom. Though nonlinear, the book also shares (and revises) a number of the conventions found in traditional slave narratives. Varl's narrative does not focus on the quest for literacy because Mamalee—her mother, who teaches slaves and is a slave herself—has already taught her to read and write.

A sophisticated user of written and oral language, Varl shares with Douglass the uneasiness that literacy causes once someone who is oppressed becomes knowledgeable of an existence larger than her or his own. Throughout the book runs the sentiment Douglass (1845/1986) eloquently describes: "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. . . . Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition" (pp. 84–85).

Slave Moth is an example of a neo-slave narrative that emphasizes "the interiority or psychology of . . . slaves and new world slavery" (Aljoe, 2006,

p. 674). For Varl, cloth becomes the tool she uses to record intimate thoughts. As moths often do, Varl relies on the fabric she wraps tightly about herself, to nourish her insatiable appetite for self-expression and self-ownership. Once her secret is discovered, it fuels her decision to free herself physically.

As in the other young adult books discussed here, the stories of several women, black and white, are intertwined with Varl's. The women's stories both reify and revise depictions of women found in traditional and neo-slave narratives, such as the educated slave woman's experiences as chattel, her journey to freedom, her relationships, and the precarious position of the slave owner's wife, who was also often treated as property. Varl's literacy affords her (and Mamalee) a certain kind of power over Ralls Janet, her owner's wife, who hated "what she took to be the ranking: Peter Perry, Mamalee, / me, Ralls Janet in the hierarchy of intelligence" (Moss, 2004, p. 6). Troubling the notions of freedom and ownership, Varl believes early on in her narrative that she is already free mentally, a freedom Ralls Janet may never experience: "can't read or / write or impress her husband who is also her master / with her own thinking. Won't let her learn. She was placed / above learning" (p. 62). Varl knows that, unlike Mamalee, who stays on Peter Perry's land in order to one day forcefully claim it as her own, she must obtain physical freedom.

If you get up there high enough, high
as the roof, if you hang on
to a bird, bat, luna moth, climb in
a hot-air balloon . . .
(would you be free up there, free in the air
above Tennessee? Or property there, too?),
you see how Mamalee . . .
has shaped the rows of corn
to grow into the letters of her name,
a deed spelled out. Entitlement. . . .
but I don't feel the bond that she feels.

(Moss, 2004, p. 18)

The forced relationships between black women and white slave owners are also explored in *Slave Moth*, particularly concerning Varl's belief that her owner is in love with her and perhaps Mamalee. Varl listens as "two traveling men" tell an intriguing story that involves a slave owner who, rather than pursuing any of the white women in the area, decides to buy a young slave woman, Clarie Lukton, whom he repeatedly rapes. Clarie gives birth to a number of her owner's children before murdering him. The story is reminiscent of the relationship between Alice and Rufus in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. Rufus has "loved" Alice since they were children, so he finds it difficult to accept that she does not want a relationship with him. Refusing to

take no for an answer, he eventually purchases her, forcing her to have a sexual relationship with him. They have children, and Alice tries to convince Rufus to free them, but he uses the children's potential freedom as a pawn to get Alice to willingly have sex with him. Surprisingly, he wants her to love him. When he realizes that Alice does not intend to do this, he tells her he has sold their children. Knowing she cannot run away, she does the only thing she can do to obtain physical and psychological freedom: she takes her own life.

As the travelers tell Clarie's story, Varl is initially puzzled by Clarie's sudden retaliation to ongoing sexual abuse. After further thought, however, Varl surmises that Clarie "found in herself emancipation / that let her act in a way that was hard for her to choose. . . / But as soon as somehow / she saw a self in herself, she refused" (Moss, 2004, p. 75). It is this revelation concerning Clarie Lukton's sense of identity, self-hood, that brings Varl closer to pursuing her own freedom. Of course the pursuit of freedom is an important aspect of neo-slave narratives. Similar to *Slave Moth*, Julius Lester's *Day of Tears* (2005), which won a Coretta Scott King Award in 2006, also troubles the notion of freedom.

DAY OF TEARS: A NOVEL IN DIALOGUE

In an opening letter to the reader, Julius Lester writes in *Day of Tears* (2005), "For most of my life, I have felt that the spirits of slaves were lined up inside me, waiting for me to tell their stories. . . . The characters . . . wanted to talk." *Day of Tears* is similar to what Rushdy (1999) calls an "ambiguously first-person narrative," in which "the author undermines the coherent subject of narration by developing a series of other voices which sometimes supplement and sometimes subvert the voice of the 'original' narrator" (p. 231).

The book reads like a play and begs to be performed. An opening cast of characters prefaces the book's action. There are "stage directions," chapter titles announcing the setting, and interludes similar to soliloquies interspersed throughout the book (Hinton, 2005b). Flashing back and forward from the present, each character gives his or her version of how their lives were forever changed as a result of the day of tears. The book includes thirteen chapters and fourteen interludes. Multiple voices and perspectives give a varied depiction of slavery. There is the voice of the benevolent master or mistress, the abolitionist, the devoted mammy figure, the subversive slave, and the loyal slave who discourages others from pursuing freedom. Yet the central character, Emma, helps to give the book unity. Many of the characters are based on real people, and both the plot and subplots are influenced by real events.

The Day of Tears, an actual occurrence, is the name given to the day a Georgian plantation owner made history by orchestrating the largest slave auction to ever take place. It rained for two days, merging God's tears with those of over 400 slaves who were auctioned and separated from their loved ones forever. The ambitious slave-seller loses his voice during the auction, ruining his career. Jeffrey's master is unable to buy his lover Dorcas, but he remains faithful to her and is devastated after the Civil War when he learns she is married to someone else. The vignettes that make up the novel are important because they are taken from actual slave stories and testimonies, providing information about slavery that was not a part of traditional slave narratives. The presence of vignettes from the point of view of several different characters suggests questions, as many neo-slave narratives do, about authorship, authenticity, and perspective. The question of who has the right to tell stories is an underlying theme in neo-slave narratives.

During the auction, Emma is sold unexpectedly, though she later escapes and eventually finds freedom in Canada. Emma shares the story of the Day of Tears with her granddaughter, who is writing a report on American slavery. In this way, *Day of Tears* is reminiscent of neo-slave narratives that recognize American slavery as a part of a particular family's experiences. Emma emphasizes the goodness of white abolitionists and others, like her slave owner's daughter, for whom her own daughter was named, in an effort to argue that the repercussions of slavery adversely affect blacks and whites. Equally important is Emma's insistence that some white people were quite supportive of blacks. Emma's response to her slave owner's daughter is similar to Sethe's appreciation for Amy Denver in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987/2004). During Sethe's escape from slavery, she goes into labor and is aided by Amy, a white indentured servant. Grateful for Amy's help, Sethe decides to name her newborn Denver in Amy's honor.

Most of the reviews for *Day of Tears* were favorable, though a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* pointed out the intrusiveness of the interludes: "Some of the flashback sections (particularly that of the 'slave-seller') interrupt the flow of events" (2005, p. 63). Blair Christolon (2005) of *School Library Journal* says *Day of Tears* is "A thought-provoking and telling look at the many sides of slavery" (p. 49).

COPPER SUN

Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun* (2006) is already being compared to *Roots* by Alex Haley (1976), though the novel ironically follows in the tradition of books such as *Dessa Rose* (Williams, 1986) and *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987/2004), novels Beaulieu (1999) argues "are responsible for repositioning the black woman in slavery, according her new status as a whole woman with

a gender identity completely her own" (p. 25). As Beaulieu (1999) points out, Haley's *Roots*, "the story of village life, enslavement, and freedom from a male point of view," might have partially influenced black women writers to tell fictional stories about enslaved black women, as the work does little to depict enslaved women's lives (p. 146). *Copper Sun* tells a similar story from a woman's perspective.

In an essay titled "Alex Haley, Me, and a Kid Named Kyrus: A Tale of Cosmic Connections," Draper (2001) describes the influence *Roots* had on her teaching and writing: "I cherished [*Roots*] and all it meant," she writes. "I used excerpts from the book . . . and videotapes . . . in my classroom. We discussed issues of fairness and racism and bigotry and redemption. . . . It was multicultural, cross-curricular teaching and learning at its best, and I didn't even know it. I just knew [the students] were thriving and enjoying the learning process with no pain and much gain. Alex Haley helped me do that" (p. 27).

Interestingly, her description of Haley's story could serve as the description of her own *Copper Sun*: "The film, and the book on which it was based, detailed the horrors of the hold of the slave ship, the shame of the auction block, the pain and confusion of families split apart, and the realities of forced labor under terrible conditions. But it also showed the unquenchable will to live, the determination to survive and overcome, and power of the human spirit" (Draper, 2001, p. 26).

An excerpt from Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen's "Heritage" opens the novel, bringing to mind one of his earliest books of poetry, *Copper Sun*, while illuminating the book's theme: what is Africa to me? Similar to some of the earlier antebellum slave narratives, such as Olaudah Equiano's (1789/2004), the opening chapters reveal Amari's loving community before "milk-faced" strangers ravage the village, killing the very young and old while kidnapping others. Readers follow along as Amari is taken to the Ivory Coast, survives the Middle Passage, and is sold in the Carolinas to serve as a birthday gift for young Clay Derby. Draper abruptly introduces another narrator, Polly, an ambitious white indentured servant purchased haphazardly by the Derbys. In alternating chapters, Amari and Polly tell how their stories connect. When Polly is forced to teach Amari English and appropriate ways to interact on the plantation, the two become close, eventually escaping together (Hinton, 2006). The relationship between Polly and Amari is typical of neo-slave narratives that examine the necessity of "interracial coalitions," such as those seen between Amy and Sethe in *Beloved* and Rufel and Dessa in *Dessa Rose* (Rushdy, 1999).

Copper Sun revises historical assumptions about African culture, enslaved black women, and white free and indentured women. In American society, particularly southern society, mythmaking around race had occurred for some time but seemed to escalate around the Civil War (Dessens, 2003).

Since African culture has been described as barbaric and uncivilized, Draper (2006) depicts Amari's village in a way that counters this misconception. Polly's earlier chapters in the book reveal negative, offensive beliefs she has about blacks, but as her character develops and her relationships with Amari and Teenie, the master's cook, grow in depth, she realizes her assumptions about blacks are ill informed.

Similar to Moss, Draper (2006) chooses to emphasize the lack of rights white women had, particularly indentured servants. Early in the novel, Clay Derby tells Polly, "Let me warn you, girl. Women don't need to be reading, so just keep that ability to yourself" (Draper, 2006, p. 82). One of Polly's greatest struggles is her desire for something unobtainable for a poor, indentured white woman: membership in the "cult of true womanhood" to which Mistress Derby belongs. A blurry, yet simultaneously distinct line exists between the enslaved and the white woman's places in the home. Mrs. Derby has little freedom to do more than what her husband and society deem appropriate if she is to maintain her status as a "lady." When Teenie, Lena, Amari, and other slaves discuss the matter, Lena insists, "but she ain't no slave" (p. 124). Teenie's quick rebuttal is summative: "Pretty close to it. . . . He decide where she go, who she talks to, what she wear—everything. She just sleep in a better bed than you do!" (p. 124).

One of the interesting ideas concerning the neo-slave narrative is the author's freedom to explore topics original slave narrative authors could not, as they were concerned with earning the endorsement of abolitionists (Sekora, 1997, p. 673). According to Beaulieu (1999), "The revival of the slave narrative as genre, freed from its rigid nineteenth-century conventions and its obligation to flatter white audiences, is the most significant development in late-twentieth-century American literature" (p. 143).

Draper (2006) charts territory few traditional slave narratives dared when she explores a consenting sexual relationship between Mrs. Derby and her "bodyguard" that results in the birth of a black daughter. Amari, Polly, and Teenie attempt to hide the baby and, indirectly, Mrs. Derby's relationship with her personal slave, but their efforts are discovered, and Mr. Derby threatens to sell Amari, Polly, and Teenie's son, Tidbit. In retaliation, one of the slaves puts a sedative in Mr. Derby's son's drink while Teenie poisons Mr. Derby, an act of defiance essential in neo-slave narratives.

Throughout the novel, Amari hopes for death: while joined to a coffin headed for the Cape Coast, while smothered amidst the bodies of hundreds of slaves, and while repeatedly being raped on the deck of the ship. It is a woman named Afi who tells her that hope must keep her alive. Amari finds that hope when mere coincidence steps in and the man the Derbys have asked to sell Amari, Polly, and Tidbit happens to be an abolitionist at heart. He gives them money and food and encourages them to run north.

Amari eventually makes it safely south, to Fort Mose in the Spanish colony of Florida. The reason Amari must live rests in her adoption of Tid-bit and in the birth of her own child. In this way, Draper's historical novel is similar to the neo-slave narratives of Morrison (1987/2004) and Williams (1986); it features a young woman representative of "the repositories and carriers of the African American communities' histories and memories" (Aljoe, 2006, p. 674).

Historical texts that put black slave women at the center were scarce when Angela Y. Davis published *Women, Race, and Class* in 1981, but several other books soon followed: Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (1985) and Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1999). According to Beaulieu (1999), "These works challenged prevailing notions of enslaved women as one-dimensional figures capable of little more than rudimentary wifely or mothering roles" (p. 6). As a result of revisionist historical works, a number of contemporary black writers (women and men) began to imagine what life was like for slaves.

I, Dred Scott (2005), *Slave Moth* (2004), *Day of Tears* (2005), and *Copper Sun* (2006) can be read as neo-slave narratives, narratives written during contemporary times that explore slavery in a way that antebellum slave narratives did/could not. These young adult texts share an intertextual relationship with the original slave narratives and neo-slave narratives identified by scholars such as Rushdy (1999, 2004) and Beaulieu (1999). Each of the novels adopts some of the conventions of the original slave narratives while revising the genre in light of recently published revisionist historiographies. Reading select young adult books as neo-slave narratives offers several opportunities for in-depth study, including giving close and critical attention to antebellum slave narratives, examining links between slavery and contemporary society, and exploring the sophisticated ways that texts about slavery written for young people follow in the tradition of books such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Jacobs, 1861/2000) and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Douglass, 1845/1986) as well as recent novels like *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987/2004) and *Dessa Rose* (Williams, 1986).

NOTES

1. While many of these titles are taught in high schools, here a distinction is made between novels adopted for secondary classroom use and those originally (and actually) marketed to young adults.

2. All examples are from Rushdy (1997).

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