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Transnational Abolitionist Rhetoric to End Modern Slavery

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2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Framing Rights: Narratives and Advocacy

Presenter: Laura Barrio-Vilar, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Title: Transnational Abolitionist Rhetoric to End Modern Slavery

Abstract:

In his 1998 autobiography, *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*, Jean-Robert Cadet denounces the horrors of modern child slavery as he narrates his life journey. Emotionally, physically, and sexually abused under the *restavek* system, Cadet migrates with his “masters” to the United States, where he pursues a formal education, joins the army, and acquires a middle-class status.

Today, Cadet has his own organization, dedicated to ending child slavery in Haiti through education and advocacy. In this presentation, I analyze how Cadet adopts conventional genre characteristics of slave narratives and U.S. migration literature in order to enter the American literary tradition and take his abolitionist message to a transnational audience. “Writing himself into being” enables him to construct a new transnational identity that helps him at an emotional and at a vocational level.

Legitimized by his current U.S. middle-class status, Cadet goes back to his personal and diasporic roots to inspire others to join his fight against slavery. His story incorporates the conventions of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives: the illegitimate origins of the author; the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of *restaveks*; the cruelty and hypocrisy of the masters; the ramifications of racism and colorism; and education as a means toward freedom.

Cadet also interweaves his process of acculturation into American culture, common to U.S. immigrant narratives, into his journey toward freedom. These themes are all fundamental to Cadet’s commitment to end modern slavery within the American (and international) conceptualization of and resources for social justice.

Finally, I address the following questions: Is Cadet’s adaptation of old abolitionist rhetoric effective in today’s society? Does it captivate modern audiences to the point of generating a new international debate against slavery?

About the presenter:

Laura Barrio-Vilar received her Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky in August 2011. She is an assistant professor in the English department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Her research and teaching interests are African American literature, Afro-Caribbean literature, postcolonial studies, gender and women’s studies, and critical race theory. She has done conference presentations and published articles in peer-reviewed journals at national and international levels. Her work explores black women’s bodies, migration, and neocolonialism in African American and Afro-Caribbean literature. Her

publications target the interconnection of race, gender, class, and citizenship as the main focus of analysis. She is currently working on her book proposal on émigré Afro-Caribbean writers, where she will explore the connections between black literature, public citizenship, and social justice.