Abstract:
A woman pregnant with her grandchild; a hamster in a state of suspended animation; human cells reproducing into eternity. These are some of the biotechnological innovations that seemed to blur the line between science and science fiction in the decades following the Second World War. Public accounts of these innovations emerged against the backdrop of debates in social and political thought surrounding the atrocities of two global conflagrations and, more broadly, colonialism. This talk will draw on legal cases and policy debates, the mainstream media and popular fiction and film to show how scientific innovation and geopolitical transformation converged in narratives that challenged conventional definitions of the human—and of life itself—in the decades following the war. Flashing up as a memory in a moment of danger, these narratives featured the “slippery slope of bioslavery” as a cautionary tale of where biotechnology might lead. This talk will show how, in turn, narratives of bioslavery shaped the public response to biotechnology and with what consequences.

Biography:
Priscilla Wald works on U.S. literature and culture, with recent focus on narratives of science and medicine, science fiction, and environmental studies. The author of Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form (1995) and Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative (2008), she is currently at work on a book-length study entitled Human Being After Genocide, which chronicles the changing conception of “humanity” in the wake of World War II. She is Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Duke University.