ENG 5009-001: The Culture of Race in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

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Eng 5009: The Culture of Race in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

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Fall, 2003
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Required Texts:

Mason Lowance, ed., A House Divided
W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk
Harriet Wilson, Our Nig
Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson
Pauline Hopkins, Contending Forces
Frank Norris, McTeague
Edgar Allan Poe, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym
Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin

Coursepack available at Campus Copy Center in MLK Student Union.

Course Trajectories:

In 1900, W. E. B. Du Bois predicted that "the problem of the twentieth century will be the problem of the color line," but it's hard now to imagine how any American century could be so divided by color as the nineteenth century, which after all culminated in the Supreme Court's 1896 decision to make apartheid official through the doctrine of "separate but equal." With Plessy v. Ferguson, the Supreme Court put its stamp of approval on the numerous practices through which many of America's public spaces had been partitioned along an axis of race, but the decision did not emerge out of an historical vacuum. Prior to the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, the American Constitution countenanced chattel slavery within the borders of the United States. Even after the end of the Civil War and the dismantling of the Southern slave economy, the U. S. underwent a period of reconstruction during which new ways of subordinating African Americans emerged, many of which would persist well into the 20th century. And though Du Bois' turn of phrase regarding the problem of the color line referred first to the American apartheid of whites from blacks, it would be a mistake to think that this color line or the ideologies it instilled ever operated efficiently. Even as many Americans throughout the nineteenth century would recognize the perforability of the color line, the ways in which the very categories "white" and "black" tended to dissolve into one another in frequent and confusing ways, so did the larger culture wrestle with other ways of attending to its obsession over who was white and who was not.
This course will explore the intellectual culture in America that led to the Plessy v. Ferguson decision by focusing on the ways in which American literature written between 1830 and 1900 was shaped by concerns over race. In addition to many of the many works of creative literature we will read, we will also examine historical documents, visual art, music, and recent interventions in the field of critical race theory. The texts we will examine were not chosen because they lend themselves to obvious conclusions or readily apparent, clearly complementary relationships. On the contrary, many of these texts will make our understanding of the culture of race in the nineteenth century not easier but harder. Therein, moreover, lies their value.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & POLICIES:

Two essays, the first five-six pages or 1250-1500 words in length, the second either fifteen pages (or 6250 words) or ten pages (or 2500 words) in length. The first paper is due on October 8 and requires you to formulate an argument about one of the texts we have read prior to 10/8, drawing upon concepts we have been developing in class and using whatever critical approach you like. The main requirement of this first essay is that your argument make use of primary historical materials, taking your reader beyond the expected and through a convincing, carefully-constructed argument based on very close reading of a text you have situated historically. I will talk more very soon about how to gather historical materials on line using the Library of Congress and also the historical archives at Cornell and the University of Michigan, and you are of course also welcome and urged to use other methodologies and resources.

The second paper is due on December 10, may deal with any other work(s) on the syllabus, and requires you to formulate a closely-crafted, professionally-polished scholarly argument that also takes into consideration the critical work that has been done on that text over the past twenty years and/or historical documents from the era of the work’s publication. Students may elect to write their final paper as a conference presentation, in which case the paper must be ten pages long and must also be presented at the English department’s undergraduate/graduate conference held after classes end in December (precise date TBA). Students who decide for this option must submit a proposal and abstract for the presentation to the conference organizer (also TBA) and, optimally, form panels with other students working on similar topics. Students may also decide to write final papers as scholarly articles, in which case the length requirement is fifteen pages.

For the final paper, students are required to use at least five secondary sources, and to turn in a one-page project proposal outlining the scope and purpose of the paper by November 22 at the latest.

Two examinations, one to be held on October 15, and the other to be held during Finals Week (date and time TBA). Each of these exams will consist of an objective section designed to assess the closeness of your reading, along with an essay section requiring you to write extended, well-crafted answers to pointed questions about the readings.
One in-class presentation on an essay- or chapter-length scholarly work I will assign. It will fall to each member of the class to read one such sample of contemporary criticism, critical theory, or literary history, placing it in some configuration with the text(s) under discussion for that week. Presentations should last about twenty to thirty minutes and should include a detailed synopsis and evaluation of the scholarly work. Handouts are always helpful.

Participation in discussion: Ours is a graduate seminar, and so I assume that everyone will appear weekly as good class citizens, prepared and eager to participate in a demanding discussion. As you surely know by now, participating well doesn’t simply mean talking a lot—it means fostering a dialogue, frequently making comments showing that you are engaged in a process of careful reading and reconsideration of that already read, and showing that you are attuned to what others in the class say. Idle talk—the kind that simply does not indicate close engagement with the materials we’ll be studying—does not help move the conversation forward, and hence does not qualify as participation.

Final Grades will be determined by this formula:

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
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<td>1st Paper</td>
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<td>Midterm Exam</td>
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<td>2nd Paper</td>
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Attendance: Don’t miss class.

Late papers: Generally, I don’t give extensions. That said, there are of course sometimes truly unavoidable, unsurmountable circumstances that absolutely prevent a student from completing a paper on time. In such cases, students will provide a full account in writing, and I may then decide to give an extension. But note that in such instances, I will expect to see the extra time reflected in the final draft—papers that have been given an extension are read with an even more demanding eye than those that have not. Lastly: in order to be granted an extension, students must contact me at least two days before the paper’s due date.

Lastly: Many of the materials assigned for this class will be offensive to many people. The assignment of a particular text, image, or film does not indicate an endorsement of the ideas and perspectives indicated therein.
### READING SCHEDULE

**WEDNESDAY 8/27:** Introductions, Course Overview  
Jacqueline Stevens, "DNA and Other Linguistic Stuff" *(Social Text 70: 20 [Spring 2002]*)  
United States Supreme Court, "Plessy v. Ferguson"

**WEDNESDAY 9/3:**  
"O. S. Fowler and Hereditary Decent" *(Lowance pp. 284-297)*  
Josiah Clark Nott, "Types of Mankind" *(Lowance pp. 314-17)*  
Nott, "Indigenous Races of the Earth" *(Lowance pp. 317-320)*  
Nott, "The Negro Race: Its Ethnology and History" *(Lowance pp. 320-26)*  
Nott, from Types of Mankind (coursepack)  
Louis Agassiz, "Evolution and Permanence of Type" (coursepack)  
Thornton Stringfellow, "A Brief Examination of the Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery" *(Lowance pp. 61-67)*  
Alexander McCaine, "Slavery Defended From Scripture ..." *(Lowance pp. 81-87)*

**WEDNESDAY 9/10:**  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Lecture on Slavery" *(Lowance pp. 227-34)*  
Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts" *(Lowance pp. 217-27)*  
Walt Whitman texts *(Lowance pp. 196-202)*

**WEDNESDAY 9/17:**  
Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig*  

**WEDNESDAY 9/24:**  
Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* (coursepack)  
Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*  
Poe, "Hop-Frog" (coursepack)  
Adam Seaborn, "Symzonia, a Voyage of Discovery" (coursepack)
Nativism and Naturalism

WEDNESDAY 11/19: Selections from Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (coursepack)
Sarah Orne Jewett, "The Foreigner" (coursepack)
Jewett, "A White Heron" (coursepack)

Charles Schreyvogel, *Defending the Stockade* (painting)
Frederick Remington, *The Fight for the Waterhole* (painting)

WEDNESDAY 11/26: Thanksgiving break; no class meeting

WEDNESDAY 12/3: Frank Norris, *McTeague*
Selections from Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (coursepack)
In class viewing: selections from *Greed* (Eric von Stroheim, 1924)

WEDNESDAY 12/10: Final paper due, beginning of class
Text TBA
WEDNESDAY 10/1:  Anonymous, “The Differences of Race Between the Northern and Southern People” (coursepack)
Anonymous, “The African Slave Trade” (coursepack)
George Fitzhugh, “The Superiority of Southern Races” (coursepack)
Henry Timrod, “Ethnogenesis” (coursepack)
Anonymous, “The Old Scottish Cavalier” (coursepack)
H. C., “The Sweeper of Dunluce: A Legend” (coursepack)
Edward Porter Thompson, “Leave Me Here” (coursepack)
A. J. Riquier, “Lee” (coursepack)

WEDNESDAY 10/8:  Midterm examination

Reconstruction Sensibilities

WEDNESDAY 10/15:  Paper #1 due, beginning of class
Thomas Dixon, selections from The Clansman (coursepack)
In-class viewing: from D. W. Griffith, The Birth of a Nation

WEDNESDAY 10/22:  Mark Twain, Pudd’nhead Wilson
Kate Chopin, “Desirée’s Baby” (coursepack)

WEDNESDAY 10/29:  Joel Chandler Harris, “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” (coursepack)
Harris, “Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr. Fox” (coursepack)
Charles Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine” (coursepack)
Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth” (coursepack)

Consciousness, Race Consciousness, and Double Consciousness at the Fin de Siècle

WEDNESDAY 11/5:  Booker T. Washington, chaps. 1 & 14 from Up From Slavery
W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk
George Bellows, Both Members of This Club (painting—in-class viewing)
In-class audio: Scott Joplin, The Maple-Leaf Rag

WEDNESDAY 11/12:  Pauline Hopkins, Contending Forces