

English 116 / Swarthmore College, Department of English Literature
A U.S. literature seminar for advanced Humanities students.

Fall 2014

Prof. Peter Schmidt

Literature of the U.S. South. Our focus in the American Literature seminar this year will be on the long, grand, and problematic tradition of U.S. Southern literature, especially fiction in both comic and tragic modes as it developed after the Civil War to the present. The South has given the U.S. some of its greatest writers, while also enacting perhaps more powerfully than any other region the nation's ongoing internal debate regarding the nation's ideals vs. its realities, equality vs. rampant inequities, an obsession with the past and yet also a propulsive drive to seize the future. Most well known for a focus on the paradoxes of "race" in both the individual and national psyche, southern literature also exemplifies imaginative writers' concerns with regional history and memory; oral story-telling as a source of inspiration for textual experiment; and a long tradition of understanding that local, regional, ethnic, and racial identities are always marked by *global* connections and crossings—especially the U.S. South's deep cultural connections to "other" tropical Souths in the Caribbean and Latin American that also experienced plantation slavery, colonialism, civil wars, and nationalism.

The reading load for this seminar will be heavy but as rich and powerful as the Mississippi River itself. Students will be asked before the seminar begins to read *Gone With the Wind* and one or more other texts from the syllabus below of their own choosing. Students will give 3 seminar presentations over the course of the semester on topics from weeks 1-13; with the assistance of Prof. Schmidt they will also lead the ensuing seminar discussions on your presentation's topics.

Aside from the books available in the Swarthmore College bookstore, the other course materials will (usually) be free pdfs or mp3 files posted on the English 116 Moodle website. *Please download all these materials as needed and create a folder on your computer for storing them.* If you prefer, you may print out these texts ahead of time to read them in print form—but be sure to allow plenty of time to do this. *Other course materials will be available as indicated in McCabe Library, the English 116 Honors shelves* (Level 2, the Library's floor with the Circulation desk) or other locations in McCabe.

If you prefer, you may use e-book versions of some of these assigned texts, if available.

Seminar work assignments are of several kinds. All work should be your own and done expressly for this seminar.

1. 3 blog posts on our English 116 blog, giving us a preview of ideas, questions, and passages to discuss in the assigned reading that will be central to your seminar leadership of discussion. Each blog entry must be posted by 8pm on Thursday the night before our Friday seminar. Other seminar members

- should read the posts as they prepare for seminar. For more detailed guidelines on blog posts and leading seminar discussion, see the Guidelines for Posts and Discussion document on the 116 Moodle site.
2. Each student will give a brief presentation on the materials you chose to work on for Week 14 readings: see Week 14 instructions below
 3. Each student will complete a 10-20pp. research paper on a topic of your choice. This paper is due either before you leave campus in December or by Saturday, January 10th. See Week 15 instructions.
 4. For students taking English 116 as part of their Honors program will also take a one-hour "practice" Honors exam and receive feedback. More info on this later in the semester, but see Week 15 for further preliminary details.

English 116 Syllabus: Weekly Assignments

Note: Assignments for all the primary readings are done, and assignments for secondary sources are substantially complete for the first half of the semester. Updates will be posted later in the semester as needed. Download this file to your device and consult it each week, using the live links as needed to connect to some of the online texts that are assigned.

Other course materials will either be posted on the English 116 Moodle site (pdfs, mp3s, etc.), are in McCabe library, or are print books you should purchase. Note: Albert Murray's Train Whistle Guitar (week #11) is out of print, though a few used copies will be available in the Swarthmore Bookstore. If a Bookstore copy is unavailable, please order your own used copy via your favorite online book ordering service. I'm disgusted that this great novel is out of print, but that's the way it is.

Week 1 (Sept. 5): Introduction and Overview: The Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries

Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence"; Jefferson's denunciation of slavery from *Notes on the State of Virginia*; Jefferson's letter to James Madison about the problems that great inequities of wealth and opportunity cause for a new democracy

St. John de Crèvecoeur, excerpts from *Letters from an American Farmer*

Read Prof. Schmidt's brief compilation of recent press coverage on the importance of a single punctuation mark in the Declaration of Independence's most famous sentence, about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Focuses on the detective work of a contemporary Constitutional scholar, Danielle Allen.

Secondary sources to read for this week, to go with the above. Please allow several days to do this work.

- C. Vann Woodward, "The Search for Southern Identity," the opening essay in his *The Burden of Southern History* (1960)

Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (read her Introduction; chapters 1-2, and short excerpts from chapters 3 and 4: see pdfs posted on Moodle). Note: Greeson undertakes powerful readings of Jefferson and Crèvecoeur, but she also gives us a broad frame for us to think historically about how understand the “South” as *different* from the nation helped shape U.S. national identity.

Prof. Schmidt’s 2 guides to some key terms, topics, and discussion points in Woodward & Greeson. Please refer to these as you work your way through Woodward and Greeson in preparation for our first seminar. These notes are NOT meant to preclude students raising their own key summary points and topics for debate, but rather should provide you with a quick guide to help you absorb a lot of reading in Week #1 of our seminar.

We’ll also have an in-class session quickly exploring a Wikipedia page and two books by historians discussing a controversy about Jefferson’s private history: his secret relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Hemings and Jefferson were the parents of six children together, four of whom lived and eventually gained their freedom. I’ll bring the books and other materials needed to seminar; the books will be also available for future use in McCabe. No advance prep needed for this part of the seminar!—but to prepar, read what’s below.

In conjunction with Greeson’s comments that “Gothic” elements appeared in anti-slavery writings that stressed how beautiful consumer goods like coffee, sugar, cotton were shadowed by the bodies of slaves who helped produce them —see the indented quotation in Chapter Four, p. 94)—we’ll also have a seminar member give a report on the contemporary artist Kara Walker’s brilliant monumental Mammy/Sphinx sculpture invoking how we are *still* haunted by nightmarish specters of slavery and slaves’ anger. See Hilton Als in *The New Yorker* discussing Walker’s work:

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx>

The study groups will do a quick scan and summary in seminar of these varied materials and sources, then together we’ll discuss whether the recent academic historical work should change our assessment of Jefferson and, if so, how; we’ll also discuss what this work teaches us about how to study “history.” (Note, for instance, that some of the facts about Jefferson & Hemings now accepted by many academic historians were first explored both in Black oral culture and family stories and in *fiction* by Black authors (first in 1853 and then again in 1979!).

The Kara Walker sculpture that we’ll also discuss was shown in 2014 in an old Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn that will soon have its history erased (it will be torn down and replaced with expensive condos or apartments).

All materials for week #1 will be pdfs posted on the English 116 Moodle website or will be available via the sources listed above. Note: I won’t normally give us a summary of

discussion topics for secondary sources, but I thought they'd be handy for our very first seminar, since we have to cover much reading in a short time.

Week 2 (Sept. 12): Antebellum Slavery and Race Debates; Ex-Slave or Freedom Narratives

Excerpts from Douglass, *Narrative* (1845) and Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)
Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (1861)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction" to *The Classic Slave Narratives*: start your reading of secondary materials with this excellent overview of the "slave narrative" genre and its features. I prefer to call these narratives "freedom" narratives. For reasons we can discuss in class, what we name a genre makes a difference, though I'd concede that these were commonly known among many as "slave narratives" in the nineteenth century.

excerpt from Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America*, "The Metaphysics of Civilization: The Black Race within our Bosom" (108-44)

Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, "How Not To Be a Slave: On the Black Art of Escape" (pp. 20-41, 52-53)

Be sure to allot several days for reading Jacobs' masterpiece. Her "loophole of retreat," an attic crawlspace, is arguably as important for American literary history as Thoreau's cabin in the woods near Walden Pond.

With the exception of Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (print book in the Swarthmore Bookstore), *all other materials this week will be pdfs posted on the English 116 Moodle website.*

Week 3 (Sept. 19): Nine Post-Civil War short stories about the antebellum, Reconstruction, and New South eras

Thomas Nelson Page ("Marse Chan")

<http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/huckfinn/marschan.html>

Joel Chandler Harris ("Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby," parts 1 and 2; plus "Aunt Fountain's Prisoner")

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/memory/text3/harris.pdf>

Paul Laurence Dunbar ("The Case of Ca'line")

<http://readbookonline.net/readOnline/21474/>

Charles W. Chesnutt ("Goophered Grapevine")

http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Goophered_Grapevine

Kate Chopin ("La Belle Zoraïde") <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/kchopin/bl-kchop-labelle.htm>

George Marion McClellan (“Old Greenbottom Inn”) — available as a pdf on the 116 Moodle site

Mark Twain’s novella “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (four chapters):
http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Mark_Twain/The_Man_that_Corrupted_Hadleyburg/Chapter_I_p1.html

read the Wikipedia entries on these 7 authors for general biographical and historical background

read excerpts from Peter Schmidt, *Making and Unmaking Whiteness in Early New South Fiction After the Civil War*, pp. 1-36 (on Harris, Dunbar, and Chopin); and “Lynching and the Liberal Arts: Rediscovering George Marion McClellan,” from *Sitting in Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865-1920*

read excerpt from Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing South Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (pp. 69-87, on Chopin)

three short essays on Chesnut’s career. Two focus on “Goophered Grapevine”; read these first. Then check out the contemporary novelist and memoirist John Edgar Wideman, his short essay on the paradoxes of “double consciousness” and invisibility in regard to Chesnut’s work—particularly his tragic novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, about the white mob that in 1898 destroyed black businesses and homes in Wilmington, North Carolina, and also overthrew a democratically elected city government. That riot marked a key new stage in the rise of white rule, segregation, and black disfranchisement throughout the South. (For quick information on this act of white terrorism, see Wikipedia, under the heading “Wilmington Insurrection of 1898,” which was the *whites’* euphemistic term for what they did!) Chesnut’s *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, though published one year after this riot, were written earlier and take a different approach to the question of postwar relations between whites and blacks. But violence is hidden throughout “Goophered Grapevine” under its “pastoral” surfaces: let’s discuss this.

All materials this week will be available via online links or as pdfs; check the English 116 Moodle website.

Week 4 (Sept. 26): Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (1902), and excerpts from D. W. Griffith’s movie *Birth of a Nation* (1915; scenes available via YouTube).

Dixon’s *The Clansman* may be read for free on the Web:

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/dixonclan/menu.html>

Peter Schmidt, “Hypnotism and Ambivalence in Thomas Dixon,” from *Sitting in Darkness* (151-54, 162-73)

Wikipedia, a brief history of the creation and significance of D. W. Griffith’s 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* as a film: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_a_Nation

Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, “The Genealogy of Lynchings as Modern Spectacle” (203-15, 227-39)

All materials this week will be pdfs posted on the English 116 Moodle website, or they will be available via a Web link: check our Moodle site.

Week 5 (Oct. 3): *Gone With the Wind* v. *The Wind Done Gone*

Re-read as much of you can of Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (1936), while simultaneously reading Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (2001).

Optional additional study: view *Gone With the Wind* the movie (1939) to compare and contrast with Mitchell's novel: treat it as one possible (and hugely influential) interpretation of the novel.

ABC News: *Gone With the Wind* Takeoff Wins Legal Battle:

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=93224&page=1>

Peter Schmidt, "On Eros Crossing the Color-Line in William Faulkner and Margaret Mitchell"

To encounter a very different vision of postwar Atlanta history, read one chapter of Swarthmore Department of History professor Allison Dorsey's book *To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875-1906* (Honors Reserve for History 138). Especially recommended are chs. 1 (on blacks in early Atlanta); ch. 2 (blacks and the postwar economy in Atlanta); or ch. 4 (Black Atlanta and the fight for education). *Please don't check this book out from McCabe but read in the library and return to the History 138 Honors shelves so that others may use the volume.*

Week 6 (Oct. 10): William Faulkner, excerpt from *The Sound and the Fury* (1929); "The Bear," from *Go Down, Moses* (1942)

The Sound and the Fury excerpt will be a pdf posted on Moodle; *Go Down, Moses* is in print & at the Bookstore

Keith Cartwright, excerpts from *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways: Travels in Deep Southern time, Circum-Caribbean Space, Afro-Creole Authority*, including Cartwright's Introduction, pp. 3-17, and his reading of Caddie (Quentin's sister) and the Compsons' obsession with blood and "purity" in *The Sound and the Fury*, pp. 222-30.

Peter Schmidt, "Faulkner and U.S. Plantation Fiction" (a reading of "The Bear")

Philip Weinstein, excerpts from *Becoming Faulkner* (for general background)

FALL BREAK

Week 7 (Oct. 24): Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (essay)

Keith Cartwright, excerpt from *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways*: his Hurston chapter, pp. 159-83

The texts, other than Their Eyes (print), will be available as pdfs or links.

Week 8 (Oct. 31):

James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (1959)

Week 9 (Nov. 7): Selected Twentieth-Century Southern Short Stories

- Katherine Anne Porter (“Old Mortality”), from *The Old Order and Other Stories* (print)
- Richard Wright (“The Man Who Was Almost A Man”)
- Eudora Welty (“A Worn Path,” “Petrified Man,” and “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”)
- Flannery O’Connor (“A Good Man is Hard to Find”)
- Peter Taylor (“In the Miro District”)
- James Baldwin (“Going to Meet the Man”)
- Alice Walker (“Everyday Use”)
- Elizabeth Spencer (“First Dark”)

Keith Cartwright, excerpt from *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways*, his comments on Welty’s “A Worn Path,” pp. 231-39.

All texts except Porter’s are pdfs available on Moodle

Week 10 (Nov. 14):

Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (1962)

Week 11 (Nov. 21):

Albert Murray, *Train Whistle Guitar* (1975)

excerpts from Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (cultural studies)

Kevin Young, *The Grey Album*, “Chorus Two: It Don’t Mean a Thing: The Blues Mask of Modernism”

mp3 files of Bukka White’s “Special Stream Line” (a great example of “train whistle” bottleneck steel guitar blues) and Chuck Berry’s “Let it Rock” (“train whistle” effects on rock ‘n’ roll electric guitar, plus a song telling a story about railroad workers)

Week 12 (Nov. 28):

Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983)

Excerpt from Keith Cartwright’s *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways*, pp. 35-57.

Week 13, Dec. 5 (two novels assigned):

Eudora Welty, *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1972)

Peter Taylor, *A Summons to Memphis* (1986)

Peter Schmidt, “On Optimist’s Sons and Daughters: Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor”

Week 14, Dec. 12: Brief Student presentations

The list of options for this week is long, but the amount of work involved should not be greater than on previous weeks and may in fact be less.

You have three options this week, all of them rich: see below. Choose one. 1) explore a work or two by any of the following Southern authors listed below who are not on our main syllabus, OR 2) read other work by authors we’ve studied so far, OR 3) nominate another Southern author and work for inclusion on your personal English 116 syllabus. Give a brief report to the seminar about the work(s) studied,

with a focus on key issues for interpretation and a close reading of a short scene (1-2pp.) that you make available for us to read ahead of time, before our seminar discussion.

If you think you might like to pursue option #1, first briefly research all of the authors & texts listed below before making your decision. All except the Solomon Northup and Kate Chopin selections are post-World War II authors. Students may also consider further exploration of earlier authors (such as Twain or Faulkner or O'Connor, etc.) for this week's independent study, or you may nominate some other author writing about the South. The books themselves are available from McCabe, from Prof. Schmidt's personal library, or may be purchased by you ahead of time.

Students are required to consult with Prof. Schmidt early in Week 14 before they finalize their topic and approach. Xerox a short passage from the novel (1-2pp. of a scene that's important for you) to hand out, so we can get a sense of the flavor of the text. Plan on about 20 minutes for the presentation and discussion of your research, since all seminar students will be presenting this week.

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1900). With good reason this was one of the first American novels brought back into print after the opening up of the American literature canon caused by feminist criticism in the 1970s.

Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). One of my favorite novels, and McCullers' masterpiece.

Robert Penn Warren, *All The King's Men* (1946). Probably the best novel ever written about American politics (with a special focus on hero-worship, populism, and deceit); inspired by the career of Louisiana's Huey Long in the 1930s. I find it too melodramatic and Freudian-Oedipal for my taste, but judge for yourself.

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). If you haven't read, one of the best Young Adult novels ever published, now is your chance; if this is an old favorite, re-reading it in the context of this course (and now that you are older and wiser) may prove to be a revelation.

Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (a 1966 response to Mitchell reinterpreting slavery and Reconstruction very different from Alice Randall's, though it too focuses on putting the Black experience at the center of the story.)

Relatively recent fiction:

Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* [a unforgettable and terrifying coming-of-age story about abuse and survival, featuring a tom-boy heroine nicknamed Bone]

Ellen Douglas, *Can't Quit You Baby* (about friendship and fighting across color and class lines) or *Truth: Four Stories I'm Finally Old Enough to Tell*

Ernest K. Gaines: especially recommended are *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *A Gathering of Old Men*, or *A Lesson Before Dying*

John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* or a later novel

Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (novel) or *Aunt Hagar's Children* (stories)
Octavia Butler, *Kindred* ["sf" time travel merged with southern fiction—black and white lovers in modern LA are pulled back into time, onto a slave plantation where a la *Back to the Future* the heroine has to work to make sure an ancestor survives]

Karen Russell, *Swamplandia* [Russell's story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" was a hit in my recent short story class. Her first novel is brilliant, strange, and hilarious too.]

Charles Portis, *The Dog of the South* [sort of like an Elmore Leonard comedy about incompetent crooks and con men, but in suth'ron mode. If you like Leonard, or Welty's "Pettrified Man," check this out. You can read plot summaries and samples online.]

Cynthia Shearer, *The Celestial Jukebox* [an important recent novel understanding the U.S. South to be multiracial, not just black & white]

Monique Troung, *Bitter in the Mouth* [a coming of age tale featuring a tomboy, a moving response to and contemporary response to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If you're a fan of that novel, I recommend checking this one out.]

Natalie Baszile, *Queen Sugar* [read info about this book online]

Bill Cheng, *Southern Cross the Dog* [if you liked *Train Whistle Guitar*, you may want to explore this 2013 novel by a New Yorker in love with Southern blues music; I think it isn't completely successful but is definitely interesting.]

Alternatively, you may want to consider a contemporary work that returns to and reworks the genre of the pre-Civil War slave/freedom narrative. Aside from some of the authors listed above, superb other examples include:

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979) [see description above]

Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (1986). [In the absence of her husband, a white woman disgusted with being a plantation mistress helps runaway blacks escape slavery by "selling" them in the day; they escape soon after, rejoin her, and together travel further north on the money earned (!). Based on true events. I have a free copy of this novel to give away.]

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) or *A Mercy* (2008)

Charles Johnson, *The Middle Passage* (1990) [A metaphysical comedy about a black New Orleans rapsallion who mistakenly escapes a forced marriage by hiding on a slave ship heading to Africa (!). Its captain rivals Captain Ahab in monomania; his mission is not just to bring back slaves, but also an angry African deity imprisoned in a crate in his ship's hold. As well as a rollicking homage to Twain and Melville, this critique of Western colonialism and slavery is inspired by the author's deep understanding of Buddhist spirituality and metaphysics. Absolutely fascinating; brilliantly written.]

Lorene Cary, *The Price of a Child* (1995): [This gripping novel based on actual events is set in Philadelphia and written by a Philadelphia author. One of the best novels ever written about the workings of the Underground Railroad.]

James McBride, *The Good Lord Bird* (2013). [Winner of the National Book Award; focuses on the anti-slavery activist John Brown, told from the point of

view of a cross-dressing black adolescent boy (!) recruited to be part of Brown's actions in Kansas and then Harper's Ferry.]
Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853; non-fiction), paired with the 2013 Oscar-winning movie by Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave*

Week 15

Work on and conclude your American literature seminar research paper.

Seminar research paper topics are normally based on one of your earlier in-class seminar presentations and discussion leadership (from weeks 2-14). You may propose a different final research topic on some other topic drawn from our syllabus but before proceeding you must discuss and get approval for this new research topic. All seminar students are required to consult briefly with Professor Schmidt regarding their final research projects.

Your final research paper — ~10-20pp., double-spaced not counting bibliography — is due either before you leave campus for Winter Break or (if you'd prefer) may be completed during Winter Break, so long as you email me the paper by Saturday, January 10th, 5pm. Grade penalty for late papers.

Your final paper must include a complete and accurate bibliography correctly formatted. For models on how to cite books, anthology and journal articles, and other materials, including Internet materials that are used, see the Citations guidelines link on the English Department's webpage; it contains many useful examples. Questions re this? See Professor Schmidt.

Those students taking English 116 for Honors will also write a one-hour "practice exam" essay, on which they will receive feedback. More details later. The practice exam and my feedback will be useful for you in preparation for the Honors exams you will take either in May 2015 or May 2016.