

OB: Plantation Images: Sex and Violence/Society and Selfhood

Dept. of English, Germanic, and Romance Studies

University of Copenhagen, Spring 2010

Thursdays 8-10, 25.0.26

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Office hours: Thursdays 10:30-11:30 and by appt., 24.3.61

DESCRIPTION:

The effect of plantation slavery on the character of both slaves and owners has been the topic of vigorous debate in various periods of U.S. history. Such discussions were particularly acute before the Civil War (in the conflict between abolitionists and slaveholders) and during the late nineteenth century (amid the establishment of racial segregation laws). They have also proliferated over the course of the twentieth century and into the present, influencing debates over social policy and assessments of national culture. In each of these periods, the subject of sex, in various forms, has been significant: depictions of sexual brutality, less overtly violent non-consensual sex, and thwarted eroticism correlate with arguments concerning slavery, southern culture, racial identities and U.S. nationhood. For writers and visual artists, efforts to understand how familial connections, human relationships, and individual development were shaped by plantation life—and whether resulting cultural patterns might still affect U.S. society—have led to extensive formal experimentation, yielding yet more debate. In what ways, as they represent sex on the plantation, do these works resist, exploit, and/or productively reflect on stereotypes, prurience, and trauma? How do they foreground, mask, and/or compensate for the limits of historical knowledge concerning intimacy? As they explore the impact of political structures on personal lives, what possibilities might they disclose for social change, and how might they shape their audience's understanding of politics per se? This course will address such questions by examining texts—both verbal and visual—from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

TEXTS:

Available at the university bookstore (though alternate editions are acceptable):

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Fred D'Aguiar, *Bloodlines*

Rita Dove, *The Darker Face of the Earth: Playscript*

Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*

Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River*

Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*

Other readings will be made available via Absalon, for which *all students must register!*

COMPETENCIES

At the end of this course, student should have developed competency in

- analyzing how, and to what effect, texts position and appeal to their audience;
- examining the relationship between politics and literary form;
- recognizing how ideas of the relationship between past and present influence aesthetic politics; and
- preparing for and participating in seminar discussion of texts and issues (required).

ASSESSMENT:

This course uses exam form A, in which students write a 20-25 page take-home research paper on a course-related topic. International students taking the course at BA level will write a 15-20 page take-home paper. You will develop your own topics for this final paper, but you must consult with me during that process: you are advised to set up appointments before your pensum is due. Though the parameters for this assignment are broad, each paper should feature close analysis of one or two texts and also situate those texts in relation to broader aesthetic and/or historical contexts through consultation of secondary sources. Papers should be thesis-driven: you are required to construct an independent argument, which you should develop and support through the entirety of the essay.

RESOURCES:

To help you prepare for class discussion, and to allow more time for that discussion (by reducing lecture material), study guides will be posted on Absalon. Accordingly, be sure to register for this online resource, and check back often!

SCHEDULE:

Texts in bold-faced type are to be read/viewed before class. Other texts will be screened in class. The due dates for pensum and paper will be announced as soon as they are known!

Week 1/Calendar week 5/4 February: Introduction

Film clips from Oscar Micheaux, *Within Our Gates* (1920),
Victor Fleming, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and
Kevin Willmott, *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* (2004)

Week 2/Calendar week 6/11 February:

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), preface – chap. 17
Recommended: Saidiya Hartman, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" (1996)

Week 3/Calendar week 7/18 February:

Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, chap. 18 – end
Recommended: Annette Gordon-Reed, from *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008)

Week 4/Calendar week 8/25 February:

Charles Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth" (1901)
Kate Chopin, "Désirée's Baby" (1894)
Zora Neale Hurston, from *Mules and Men* (1935)
Eudora Welty, "The Burning" (1955)
Recommended:
Frances Smith Foster, from *'Til or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America* (2010)

Week 5/Calendar week 9/4 March:

Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975), pp. 1-90
Ann DuCille, "Marriage, Family, and Other 'Peculiar Institutions'" (2009)

Week 6/Calendar week 10/11 March:

Jones, *Corregidora*, pp. 91-end

Nell Irvin Painter, from *Soul Murder and Slavery* (1995)

Week 7/Calendar week 11/18 March:

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979), Prologue – "The Fight"

Week 8/Calendar week 12/25 March:

Butler, *Kindred*, "The Storm: – Epilogue

Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (1995): Prologue, "The Pagan Coast," Epilogue

Calendar week 13: **NO CLASS** (university break)

Calendar week 14: **NO CLASS** (LA at Blair Legacy seminar at the University of Arkansas)

Week 9/Calendar week 15/15 April:

Rita Dove, *The Darker Face of the Earth: Playscript* (1994)

Fred D'Aguiar, from *Bloodlines* (2000)

Week 10/Calendar week 16/22 April:

Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), "Notes on the Text" – chap. 48

Molly Haskell, from *Frankly, My Dear: Gone with the Wind Revisited* (2009)

Week 11/Calendar week 17/29 April:

Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*, chap. 49 – Postscript

Images by Kara Walker

Week 12/Calendar week 18/6 May:

Lars von Trier, *Manderlay* (2005)