**English 116: the American Literature Honors seminar**

**Fall 2016 Swarthmore College, Department of English Literature**

Prof. Peter Schmidt

“I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.”

–Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Letter to My Son,” (2015)

**Topic: 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 the 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, settler 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*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and several other texts from the syllabus of their own choosing (see more info below). 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 and the work(s) assigned for that week. Students will also complete a final project of their own devising, in consultation with Prof. Schmidt. For Honors students, this final project will be a draft of your Senior Honors Essay for this seminar.

**Note**: for Fall 2016 this course may be taken by English majors to count towards your 18th/19th-century credit requirement. To earn such a credit, some of your seminar presentations and your final seminar project must focus on 18th or 19th century authors and their historical context. See Prof. Schmidt for more details early in the semester to discuss the details of earning such an 18th/19th century credit towards your major. Alternatively, English 116 can count for a major as a 20th-21st century credit, as desired. (This seminar, however, cannot be “double-counted” as both 18th/19th and 20th/21st for the purposes of the English major distribution requirements.)

Aside from the books available in the Swarthmore College bookstore, the other course materials will (usually) be free pdfs or other kinds of files or links 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.

**Weekly 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 Sunday the night before our Monday 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 complete a 10-20pp. research paper (or other suitable final project) on a topic of your choice. This project is due either before you leave campus in December or by Friday, January 13th. See instructions and topic suggestions at the end of the detailed syllabus. For Honors students this final project will be a draft of their Senior Honors Essay for this seminar.
3. 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.

**REQUIRED AND OPTIONAL VIEWING/READING (or re-reading) SUMMER 2016: AT LEAST 5 BOOKS FROM THE SEMINAR’S SYLLABUS, plus:**

***•*  Beyoncé, *Formation* video:** [**http://www.beyonce.com/formation/#**](http://www.beyonce.com/formation/) **and see also the lyrics and commentary on Genius.com:** [**http://genius.com/Beyonce-formation-lyrics**](http://genius.com/Beyonce-formation-lyrics) **. Beyoncé’s hour-long *Lemonade* should also be available this fall, as a 2-CD set (music + video) in Underhill Library. For more info and discussions/debates regarding both these works, explore online.**

***• GONE WITH THE WIND***

***• TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD***

**• Jean Toomer’s CANE or Zora Neale Hurston’s THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD (both will be discussed in the same week)**

**• Octavia Butler’s KINDRED or Toni Morrison’s A MERCY (both will be discussed in the same week)**

**• Eudora Welty’s *The Optimist’s Daughter* or Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You Baby* (both assigned same week)**

**SOUTHERN CULTURAL STUDIES THEORY we’ll study over the course of the semester (not a complete list):**

**C. Vann Woodward, “The Burden of Southern History”**

**Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographical Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (excerpts)**

***Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture* (“Introduction” from this new anthology of essays edited by Eric Gary Anderson et al)**

**Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (excerpts)**

**Keith Cartwright, *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways: Travels in Deep Southern time, Circum-Caribbean Space, Afro-Creole Authority* (excerpts)**

**John Wharton Lowe, *Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean and Southern Literature* (introduction)**

**Thadious M. Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (excerpts from chapter 1)**

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

**Peter Schmidt, essays on Thomas Dixon; Faulkner’s “The Bear”; Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*,” etc.**

**Eric Gary Anderson, “The Fall of the House of Po’ Sandy: Poe, Chesnutt, and Southern Undeadness” and “South to a Red Place” from *Undead Souths***

**Patricia Yaeger, “Southern Women Writers: A Confederacy of Water Moccasins,” from *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing*, pp. 1-27.**