

American Studies 430  
The South: Old and New  
M - Th: 2:00 - 3:20  
GHH 300  
Roger Williams University  
Fall Semester, 2014

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Hours: W, F 2:00 - 4:00  
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## Course Introduction

### Texts:

Applebome, Peter  
*Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture\**  
New York: Harvest Books, 1997

Wyatt-brown, Bertram,  
*Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South\**  
Oxford University Press 2007

Woodward, C. Vann  
*The Strange Career of Jim Crow\**  
Oxford University Press; Commemorative edition (November 2001)

Daniel, Pete  
*Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s\**  
The University of North Carolina Press (April 28, 2000)

Thompson, Tracy  
*New Mind of the South\**  
Simon & Schuster; Reprint edition (March 5, 2013)

All the above are available in Kindle editions.

*Rather than being pastless, the South is a place that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, amazingly, is still fighting most of its oldest battles-over states' rights, the Confederate flag, integration, the meaning of its own history. Rather than memoryless, it's a place where blacks and whites compulsively reenact their own histories as if to reconfirm Faulkner's famous remark that the South is a place where "the past is never dead, it isn't even past." Rather than neutered, it is still the most conservative part of America, still drenched in religion, still carrying the banners of the antebellum Old South states' rights crusades and the New South booster ideology of the 1890s, still in thrall to individualism in its most extravagant sense. Rather than without identity, it's still shaped by the endless sultry summers, voluptuous foliage and wild, romantic excesses of spring colors and summer monsoons that some historians have cited as the most important factors in molding the identity of the South and creating a worldview at odds with its Northern neighbors.*

Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p. 14

## About the Course

The South is one of a group of American Studies courses which explore regional cultural differences in the American National Character. I've thoroughly revised it since the last time it was offered. Several of the texts are new this time around, though I will be using some of the same supplemental readings which I've used in past versions of the course. My intent is to make the course more broadly cultural and less historical than it was the last time it was offered, though as the quote from Peter Applebome suggests, one cannot understand the South without confronting the region's history. But my intention is to look beyond political history to explore culture and the products of the culture more fully. This will allow us to explore the rich oral and musical traditions of the region. I'm hoping you'll find this facet of the course intriguing.

In addition, I hope we'll be looking at a series of seven films. These represent nearly a century of images of the South in Popular Culture, and we will use them to investigate some persistent southern "types" and also some of the ways these types have evolved. Because these films are works of art in themselves, it seems fairer to me to present them in their entirety as single units, which means that they cannot be shown in the normal class time. Consequently, I'm organizing a film series on Wednesday afternoons from 2:00-4:30. If you cannot attend some of these, you can watch them on your own. More about that later.

## Films

"Birth of a nation" (1915)  
"Gone With The Wind" (1939)  
"Song of the South" (1946)  
"To Kill a Mockingbird" (1962)  
"Driving Miss Daisy" (1989)  
"Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" (1997)  
"O Brother Where Art Thou?" (2000)

## About the Books:

We're going to take a circle tour as we work our way through this course. We'll begin with *Dixie Rising* and conclude with *The New Mind of the South*. Both these books are reasonably contemporary interpretations of the South as a region and its influence on national character. *The New Mind of the South* is also interesting because it attempts to look at the "real" demographics of the South and the "myths" which the South and the Nation as a whole hold as true, even when these contradict the realities.

Once we've completed our reading of *Dixie Rising*, we'll take a look at the historical origins of Southern Attitudes. *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* will look that the beginnings of some of the most central characteristics of the South. We'll have to understand what Bertram Wyatt-Brown (who, incidentally, was my dissertation advisor) means by honor. We'll find the concept just a bit different from or current idea of the word's meaning, and that "honor" was a concept which extended far beyond the upper tier planter class. From there, we'll proceed to *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, and the tragic story of Reconstruction and its efforts to control and segregate Black southerners. Moving closer to the present, we'll investigate the civil rights revolutions of the 1950's and 1960's, through *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*, and conclude with *The New Mind of the South*, with a chapters like "Salsa with your Grits" giving us some ideas of how the South has changed (as well as ways it clings to its interpretation of its own). We

will try to juxtapose ideas from each of these books as well as synthesizing them as we create our own interpretations of the South in American Culture. In other words, we will need to make these sources speak to each other so we can listen in on the conversation.

## What We're Trying to Do

The organizing idea behind this course is the study of certain myths and stereotypes about what the South is and what Southerners are. We'll identify a number of them:

- The Southern Gentleman or Cavalier
- The Yeoman
- The "Cracker" or "Redneck"
- The Southern Belle
- The Faithful Negro (Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima)
- The "Vicious" Negro
- The Mulatto

Once we define the characteristics of these types, we'll look for their origins. How did these characters develop? What personality types were rewarded with public approval and what types were condemned? We'll also look at how these types change across time. For example, we'll see that each of these types can be found in each of the films we'll be watching, but the attitudes towards those types will change across time, and the types themselves will modify. We may also notice a few new types emerge as well.

Finally, we'll look at the degree to which the South remains a distinct region, and the degree to which (perhaps) the rest of the country has come to adopt the Southern point of view. The full title to Peter Applebome's book reflects this particular concern.

## Course Requirements

1. Analysis of the films. Approximately 20% of Final Grade

You'll be required to write a paper analyzing changes in the images of certain "types" associated with the southern region: types such as the "chivalry" and the "redneck" or "cracker". I'll distribute further instructions about this project shortly before we see "Birth of a Nation," but generally I'm looking for your understanding of the images of Southern Culture each film portrays. You will note that the films are presented in chronological order and we'll be looking at how portrayals have changed across the years. We will want to see what is transient and what is enduring in images of Southern character. You will want to work on this project when the films are fresh in your mind, and not wait till the last minute to do it, though the due date won't be until the end of the semester. This paper will be due the date of the Final Examination. You will want to begin working on it much earlier, however, and work on it from time to time as the films are shown.

2. Project 20% of Final Grade

Generally speaking, the project will center on one of the "Major Problems" presented in the texts, or on some unique cultural product of the south (southern folklore, for example). Persons will be able to choose which topics they wish to investigate. Projects can take a number of different forms, and may be either the work of individuals or small groups. The last time I offered this course one of my students traveled south during Spring Break, working on a project to build houses for the homeless in

Mississippi and wrote up his impressions of the town in which he worked. Whatever form the project takes it will encourage you to move beyond the materials in the texts using materials available through the Internet. Projects will be presented to the class.

3. Exams 45% of the Final Grade

These will be take-home exams. I'm leaning toward doing more short ones, rather than fewer long ones-the kind of thing which can be done over a long weekend (handed out on Thursday, due the following Tuesday) rather than the traditional 10 days I usually allow. If so, I'll give three to four of these. I may pop in a quiz if I get a sense that the reading are not being done.

4. Intangibles 5% of Final Grade

Grading is never as scientific as it pretends to be. I'll do my best to assess such intangibles as faithful preparation for class, and active participation in it.

### Attendance Policy

This is a quite small class—small enough to take attendance by counting noses. If you nose (and the rest of you) is absent too often, I may write you a note asking you where you've been. Here or not, you will be responsible for what we cover during your absence. If you must be absent for a "reasonable" cause, send me an e-mail. Reasonable excuses include illness, family emergencies, participation in athletic competitions, or attendance at events scheduled as requirements for other classes. I detail work for this course on a week by week basis. After next week I will not be passing out these weekly assignment sheets in paper form, but will post them to the class website: <http://amst430south.homestead.com>.

### A Final Word (well several, actually)

1. As is the case in all my classes, there is a lot of reading required. Unlike some of the other classes, the texts for this course are not copiously illustrated. I think these books are great books, which is why I chose them. They have literary value. Each is a "good read". However, if you're not a reading person, you're going to find this course a tough slog. I will provide you with illustrative materials and other things from the Internet, and I may ask you to go find some things as well.

2. My courses are never very linear... If you're the kind of student who likes to know precisely where he or she is going and how many steps the journey is going to take you're likely to spend a good deal of time being frustrated. I will often resist requests to be "more precise" in what I'm looking for. This isn't just personal cussedness on my part. I'm after finding what you discover when you're looking around. Some students love this, or at least tolerate it well. Others are not comfortable with it and probably should look for an alternative.

3. I change my mind a lot. This is why I distribute this humongous introduction followed by weekly assignment sheets. I try to gage what's going on in the class and adjust the work accordingly. This requires some flexibility on your part. It also requires keeping current with my communications with you. I'll be using the syllabus and e-mail regularly, as well as anything I may say in class.

4. I'm not a good cop. I rely on students to discipline themselves. I rely on students to be their own timekeepers, as well. I will trust each student until given reason to do otherwise: I expect honest work reflecting personal commitment and values of academic integrity. If I don't get it, I respond as the system requires. Remember the pledge you took as Freshmen:

### **Academic Integrity Pledge**

*We, the students of Roger Williams University, commit ourselves to academic integrity. We promise to pursue the highest ideals of academic life, to challenge ourselves with the most rigorous standards, to be honest in any academic endeavor, to conduct ourselves responsibly and honorably, and to assist one another as we live and work together in mutual support.*

5. (This is the most important word) I hope you'll have a good time in this class. I plan to have a good time teaching it.