

American Studies 430
The South: Old and New
T - Th: 11:00 - 12:30
CAS 228
Roger Williams University
Spring Semester, 2005

Michael R. H. Swanson, Ph. D.
Office: CAS 110
Hours: T, Th 9:30 - 11:00
W 5:30 - 6:30. F 1:00 - 2:00
Phone: 254 - 3230
Email: southamst430@verizon.net

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Texts:

Andrews, William, et al. Editors
The Literature of the American South
New York: Norton Publishers, 1997
This edition includes an *audio companion*.

Cash, W. J.
The Mind of the South
New York: Vintage Books, 1991

Woodward, C. Vann
The Burden of Southern History
Baton Rouge, LA LSU Press, 1993

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

Rather than being pastless, the South is a place that at the end of the twentieth 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

Comments:

The South is one of a group of American Studies courses which explore regional differences in the American National Character. I've thoroughly revised it since the last time it was offered. All 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. For this reason, I've added *The Literature of the American South* to the reading list. Note that this book includes an audio companion. 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, we'll be looking at a series of six 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've had them incorporated into the Monday Night *Penny Arcade* series shown in the large lecture hall of the Feinstein College of Arts and Sciences Building.

Date	Film	Associated URL:
February 7	"Birth of a nation" (1915)	http://www.filmsite.org/birt.html
February 28	"Gone With The Wind" (1939)	http://www.newline.com/sites/gonewind/history/
March 14	"To Kill a Mockingbird" (1962)	http://www.filmsite.org/toki.html
March 28	"Driving Miss Daisy" (1989)	http://www.flickfilosopher.com/oscars/bestpix/drivingmissdaisy.shtml
April 11	"Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" (1997)	http://goodandevil.warnerbros.com/ http://www.all-reviews.com/videos/midnight-garden.htm
April 25	"O Brother Where Art Thou?" (2000)	New York Times Review

This schedule is tentative subject to confirmation.

ABOUT THE BOOKS

First, let me emphasize that we're going to use all these books simultaneously, so buy them at the course's outset. Two of them, *Dixie Rising* and *The Mind of the South*, we'll read in their entirety, while a third, *The Burden of Southern History*, we'll read selectively. These three are all books of interpretation. The fourth, *Literature of the American South* (including its audio companion) is an anthology of a wide variety of different kinds of sources: essays, short stories, poems, songs, and the like. We'll use selections from it as confirming (and challenging) evidence for the assertions made in the other three. I expect we'll read something between a third and half of it, and we may not all read the same things.

As we read the first three we'll have to do two things: First, we will need to keep in mind that each of these books is complete unto itself, and deserves to be considered and evaluated as a major intellectual effort. This is especially true of *Dixie Rising* and *The Mind of the South*. *The Burden of Southern History* is a little different, in that it is a collection of essays written by perhaps the most distinguished student of Southern History in the last half of the twentieth century. These essays appeared across Vann Woodward's professional career, and each is complete in itself. Together, they mark the evolving thought of a person who tried to understand the South his entire life. Second, we will need to juxtapose the ideas from each of these books, striving to create a synthesis of them as we create our *own* interpretations of the South in American Culture. In other words, we will need to make these three 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 a significant number of the class decided to cook, and we had a most enjoyable meal together during the final exam period. Another 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 and Quizzes** **45% of the Final Grade**

The distinction I make here is whether these are done in the classroom or taken home. I expect most of 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. Quizzes will happen if I get the sense that reading is not being done. Fair Warning is Given!!!

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 class looks to be too large to keep track of attendance informally. I will pass around an attendance sign-in sheet each class session. More than four unexcused absences will have a negative effect on your grade.

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.
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.
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. I'm glad to see so many familiar names on the roster, which I take to be a vote of confidence in me (and not just that I'm the best of a series of bad choices). To the "old-timers," welcome back. To the "newbies," I'm looking forward to getting to know you.