

ENG 660
Bodies, Humans, Persons, Citizens:
Theories of Black Personhood in the 19th Century
Monday, 10:00am-12:50pm
448 PLC

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Office Hours: Wednesday and Friday, 10:30am-noon; by appointment

What is a person? Are “body,” “person,” and “human” synonymous terms? Is “citizen” a subset of one or more of these categories? Why do we reach for some of these terms in specific contexts, and what assumptions or investments do we reveal when we do? How do these terms variously narrate other categories of identity such as race, nationality, gender, and sexuality? Does the very title of this course suggest a hierarchy that we might want to disrupt?

In this seminar, we will examine these questions mainly through the lens of the 19th century U.S. and broader Atlantic world, where legalized slavery, colonialism, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow put particular pressure on these categories. We will read a combination of primary and secondary sources to study competing versions of Black personhood in C19. Students working on personhood in other periods and regions, however, are encouraged to use our theoretical work to develop projects related to their broader research agendas.

This course will examine texts that document, describe, and grapple with issues of racial and sexual violence. The material may be graphic, and class discussions will frequently take up these issues in detail. Please consider whether this content will be disturbing or triggering to a degree that will interfere with your learning in the course. If so, I will be happy to help you select an alternative course.

Required Texts

Laptops are *strongly* discouraged in class, except in cases of documented need for accommodations. You should have the physical text(s) with you in class each week. Note that we are reading extended sections of some books – I will leave it to your discretion whether you want to purchase each book in its entirety (check the schedule for details on each book). The following required texts have all been placed on reserve at the Knight Library.

- Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (ISBN 9780804732185)
- Best, Stephen, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (ISBN 9780226044347)
- Castronovo, Russ, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (ISBN 9780822327721)
- Foucault, Michel, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (ISBN 9780679752554)
- Hartman, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (ISBN 9780195089844)
- Jones, Martha S., *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (ISBN 9781316604724)
- Philip, M. NourbeSe, *Zong!* (ISBN 9780819571694)
- Sharpe, Christina, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (ISBN 9780822362944)
- Walker, David, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (ed. Peter Hinks) (ISBN 9780271019949)
- From time to time, you will also be required to print additional course texts and bring the hard copies to class with you. PDFs or links will be provided to you when needed.

Criteria for Assessment

Weekly Response Papers (15%). Each week you should write a 2-page response paper and bring a hard copy of it to class with you. Papers should be ~500 words long and can take whatever shape makes the most sense to you in a given week. However, each paper should engage (deeply) at least one of that week's readings. Response papers are great opportunities to begin a close reading, to pose questions that you attempt to answer, to identify common patterns or relationships among readings, etc. These papers are intended to be informal but rigorous – they should move your and our thinking forward, rather than simply demonstrating your comprehension/mastery of a text or engaging solely in critique.

Class Participation (15%). Each week, you will be responsible for presenting the content of your response paper informally to the rest of the class. While you need not read your paper aloud, you should be able to summarize the work it does in order to open up a discussion about it. In addition to these weekly presentations, I expect all class members to engage with each other's ideas and work thoughtfully and generously and to contribute to our group discussions. It is appropriate for conversations to range widely and even to become contentious – one of the best things about the seminar space is that it is a chance to germinate ideas in conversation with your peers. We should all be reading, listening, and engaging generously.

Annotations (15%). Over the course of the quarter, you should submit a total of 5 annotations to the shared Further Reading document (link to be provided). These annotations should document and summarize sources from beyond the syllabus that you feel would contribute to our collective work in the seminar. Annotations should be 500 words max; each one should briefly (250 words) summarize the source's content and then briefly (250 words) describe how it intervenes in our ongoing discussions. You may submit these at any time and at your own pace; all 5 must be submitted by week 9 (see schedule for due date). I encourage you to streamline your labor by submitting annotations for sources you have already read, are currently reading in other courses, and/or that you plan to use in your final projects.

Final Paper/Project Proposal and Preliminary Bibliography (15%). In week 8, you will submit a 4-5 page proposal for your final paper/project. At a minimum, that proposal should outline the nature of the project/paper, your tentative argument, a draft outline, key passages you plan to close read/analyze, and a preliminary bibliography.

Final Paper/Project (40%). As a capstone of your work in this class, you will submit a 12-15 page final paper/project. The most common form of this project is a seminar paper. However, I encourage you to think about proposing a paper/project that best serves 1) your current stage in the graduate education process and 2) your anticipated future research/teaching/professionalization trajectory. To that end, I am open to papers/projects that deviate in some way from the seminar paper model, provided that you present a compelling justification for the format you propose. All final projects should be the equivalent in scope and scale of a 12-15 page paper. Please see me as soon as possible to discuss alternative projects (and certainly before submitting your proposal in week 8).

Course Policies

Participation, Attendance, and Late Submissions. As described above, your active participation is mandatory. All readings and assignments should be completed by the dates listed on the syllabus. Missing more than one class meeting will result in a 1/3 letter grade deduction from your final course grade for each such additional absence. All late assignments will receive a full letter grade deduction for each day that they are late (assignments handed in **anytime** after the due date are automatically considered at least one day late).

Academic Honesty. Academic dishonesty in any form undermines your integrity, mine, and that of the course. If you have particular questions or concerns about an issue of academic dishonesty, please contact

me. I take very seriously our shared obligation to academic integrity, and all of your work in this class—including informal papers and paper proposals—should be entirely your own.

Access. The Accessible Education Center (uoac@uoregon.edu) handles requests for accommodation of disabilities. I and the University want this class to be an inclusive learning environment. Please notify me as soon as possible if aspects of the course are creating barriers to your participation or if you need to share an accommodations letter from the AEC.

Technology. As described above, laptop use is *strongly* discouraged except in the case of documented need for accommodations. Phones and other electronic devices should be OFF at all times during class.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (Jan. 7): Introductions; Race and Citizenship in the Early U.S.

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (excerpt on Canvas, in “Files”)
David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*

Week 2 (Jan. 14): Sovereign Bodies

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (1-29, 71-74, 81-86, 91-103)
Stephen Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties* (1-28)
Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>)

Week 3 (Jan. 21): Personhood and the Slave Narrative

NO CLASS MEETING – MLK DAY

Although we are not meeting this week, please read at least one of the following slave narratives and post your response paper to the Canvas discussion thread by 8:00pm on Tuesday, Jan. 22. You are not required to comment on each other’s papers, but you are welcome to do so! All texts are available at docsouth.unc.edu, or you may procure a bound edition if you prefer.

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860)
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)
Henry “Box” Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (1849)
William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860)

Week 4 (Jan. 28): Fungibility and Fugitivity

Stephen Best, *Fugitive’s Properties* (29-90)
Tiffany Lethabo King, “The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly)” (on Canvas)
Fugitive Slave Act (<https://analepsis.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/fugitive-slave-act-1850.pdf>)

Week 5 (Feb. 4): Subjection

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (3-14, 49-78, 125-163, 183-206)

Week 6 (Feb. 11): Constituting Personhood Through Death

Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery" (on Canvas)
Colin Dayan, "Civil Death" (from *The Law is a White Dog*) (on Canvas)
Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship* (1-23, 45-54, 151-168, 204-215)

Week 7 (Feb. 18): Poetics and the Politics of Memory

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Read "Notanda" first)

Week 8 (Feb. 25): Black Life as an Assertion of Personhood

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (11-17, 25-100)
Martha Jones, *Birthright Citizens* (1-34, 89-127)

*****Final paper/project proposal due by 8:00pm on Feb. 27*****

Week 9 (Mar. 4): Surveillance and Punishment

Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* (1-31, 135-169, 195-230)
Mississippi Black Codes (<https://sharetn.gov.tnsosfiles.com/tsla/exhibits/aale/pdfs2/1865%20Mississippi's%20Black%20Codes.pdf>)
Charles Chesnutt, "Courts and the Negro" (on Canvas)

*****All 5 annotations must be submitted by 8:00pm on Mar. 8*****

Week 10 (Mar. 11): Property and Personhood

Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property" (on Canvas)
Imani Perry, "Occupying the Universal, Embodying the Subject: African American Literary Jurisprudence" (on Canvas)

*****Final Paper/Project due by 8:00pm March 20*****