PERSPECTIVES ON THE BODY IN AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

PRELIMINARY DRAFT OF SYLLABUS—SUBJECT TO REVISION

Professor John Kasson  
Monday, 3:00-5:30 pm  
Fall 2013  
Hamilton 523

Course Description and Rationale: This course seeks to explore some of the rich historical materials treating aspects of the human body as it has been viewed, exhibited, analyzed, and objectified in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In recent years scholars in a number of fields bearing upon cultural history have created a veritable industry of writings about the body. We can only sample a small amount of this work, but our readings promise to be both rewarding in their own right and illuminating of larger patterns, issues, and methodologies in cultural history.

The readings are intended not to add up to some tidy thesis, but to raise questions of interpretation and methodology. We will read some key primary works and also a selection of interpretive studies that address and extend issues adumbrated by these texts. Our reading—both primary and secondary—is material that invites argument and demands appraisal. Class discussions will be devoted to consideration of this reading and to questions of cultural interpretation. In addition, on six
occasions each student will prepare a short (2-3 page) critical evaluation of the major reading assignment in advance of class, which will help provide a basis for our discussion. Each student will be permitted to substitute on six other occasions a single-page commentary and evaluation of the reading, which will not receive a formal grade, though it will be evaluated. Not more than two single-page papers may be submitted on consecutive weeks, however. (See the instructions on preparing critical evaluations below.) The final assignment will be a slightly longer paper (4-5 pages), which will also be graded (and count as two critical responses).

Books marked with an asterisk have been ordered at Student Stores. Shorter readings will be available at the Reserve Desk at the Undergraduate Library, through our Blackboard course website, or online.

Course Website: We will use a password-protected website to provide materials, announcements, links, and other aids to the course. Please visit this website at the outset of the semester to familiarize yourself with its contents.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF CLASS TOPICS & READINGS:

1. DIRTY & CLEAN BODIES: HYGIENE, HOUSEKEEPING, AND GENDER IN EARLY AMERICA (August 26)

Required Reading: Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010 ??).

Bibliography:

2. EXTRAORDINARY BODIES: P. T. BARNUM AND THE DISPLAY OF HUMAN ODDITIES Sept. 9)

Required Reading:

P. T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (1855; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), chapters 1, 2, 7, 9, 10, 12, and skim rest.

*The Life of Joice Heth, the nurse of Gen. George Washington, (the father of our country, now living at the astonishing age of 161 years, and weighs only 46 pounds* (New York, 1835). (Available at: [http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/heth/menu.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/heth/menu.html))

“The Joice Heth Archive”


**Bibliography:**


3. **SEXUALLY AMBIGUOUS BODIES AND MEDICAL AUTHORITIES** (Sept. 16)

**Reading:**

**Bibliography:**


4.) **SKULLS AND BONES, BRAINS AND BODIES** (Sept. 23)

**Required Reading:**


**Bibliography:**


5. ANTEBELLUM MURDERERS AND THEIR VICTIMS (Sept. 30)

**Required Reading:**


**Bibliography:**


6. FUGITIVE SLAVE NARRATIVES, PERSONAL TESTAMENT AND BODILY SUFFERING (Oct. 7)

**Required Reading:**
Moses Roper, *Narrative of the Abduction and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery, 2nd ed.* (Berwick-upon-Tweed, UK: Published for Author, 1848), available through “Documenting the American South.”


**Bibliography:**
North American Slave Narratives, full text of nineteenth-century narratives, in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library)


**Required Reading:**

**Bibliography:**

8. ETIQUETTE AND THE BODY (Oct. 21)

**Required Reading:**

**Bibliography:**
Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870 ( New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

N.B.: By Oct. 21 each student should have met with me to discuss and provide a preliminary statement of a proposed subject for our concluding sessions (see below).
9. WHITE WOMEN AND GIRLS ON DISPLAY: THE FEMALE NUDE IN THE VISUAL ARTS (Oct. 28)

**Required Reading:**

**Bibliography:**

10. SURGERY, SEXUALITY, AND THE BODY IN THE WORK OF THOMAS EAKINS (Nov 4)

**Required Reading:**


**Bibliography:**
Michael Fried, “Realism, Writing, and Disfiguration in Thomas Eakins’s *Gross Clinic* with a Postscript on Stephen Crane’s *Upturned Faces,*,” *Representations* 9 (Winter, 1985): 33-104 (available through JSTOR).


11. PERFORMING WHITE MASCULINITY (Nov. 11)

**Required Reading:**


Edgar Rice Burroughs, Tarzan of the Apes (1914), skim. Available online.

**Bibliography:**


12. PERFORMING “THE NEW WOMAN”: WOMEN ON STAGE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY (Nov. 18)

**Required Reading:**


**Bibliography:**


**13. Bodies in the Great Depression (Nov. 25)**

**Required Reading:**

**Bibliography:**

**14, CONCLUDING SESSION: HYPOTHETICAL UNIT PRESENTATIONS (Dec. 2)**

For our last session, each student will give a brief presentation of materials for a hypothetical additional unit concerning the body on display in American culture. This unit should include some primary work or works and secondary or theoretical interpretation. (Please distribute a list of your proposed assignments to each member of the class.) Each student should also turn in a short paper (approximately four to five pages) discussing this hypothetical unit, the subject under scrutiny, the leading historical and interpretive issues, and something of how it relates to other materials we have considered in the course. These last papers are due on December 4.

**PREPARING CRITICAL EVALUATIONS OF THE MAJOR READING ASSIGNMENTS**
Critical evaluations should run about two or three pages (600-900 words), if submitted for a formal grade. They should run 300-500 words if submitted as a shorter response. Please send me a copy of your evaluations as an attachment in Microsoft Word as well as providing a printed copy. Whatever its length, the paper should have a title of its own that indicates its general aim, ideally, with a little flair. As to citation form, all direct quotations should be accompanied by page references. These may be given in parentheses after each quotation or in footnotes, as you prefer. Please identify in the paper any other sources of intellectual indebtedness.

Please observe the Honor Code scrupulously. Both the writing of these papers and their contents must be your own work. If you have any questions about guidelines in a specific case or where the boundaries of academic integrity might lie, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me. I also strongly urge you to review the American Historical association statement on plagiarism, available at: http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/ProfessionalStandards.htm#Statement%20on%20Plagiarism

Again, whatever its length, your critical response should endeavor to engage an issue of significance. This issue may not necessarily link all the readings in a given unit (if there are more than one), but it should not arouse the suspicion that you are cherry-picking from a short, low-hanging bough instead of climbing the tree and gathering a richer harvest. In preparing your critical evaluation, you should feel free to take a variety of approaches and even forms. Strive to go beyond a dutiful and pedestrian “review,” and aim to present a thoughtful, probing (though necessarily condensed) essay. You should not concern yourself with summarizing what a given writer says at any length. Although you may wish to recapitulate an argument or a particular point briefly, do so in order to raise questions or issues that especially concern you. Some of the questions you might think about are:

What is most valuable (suggestive, stimulating, provocative) in a given work or set of readings? Why? What are some of the implications or applications that you see? You might, in this connection, remember the remark of Daniel Calhoun in The Intelligence of a People (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973): “There are times when an inquirer asks not What can we prove? but What if it should be true that all these threads do hang together?”
What are the implications of a given work in terms of methodology? What conceptions of key categories of interest (e.g. culture, gender, class, social change, ritual, etc.) does it contain? What kinds of evidence are used?

What are the thematic or substantive implications of a given work? How does it relate to (confirm, complement, complicate, challenge, undermine) other readings and materials in the course? Does the work enlarge your understanding of a problem in American history in important ways?

I would urge you, in short, to be probing and speculative in your approach to the reading, to ask why it matters or might matter, to ask what may be learned from a piece, even an unsuccessful or only partially successful piece. You may mention minor points if you wish, but subordinate them and go after major issues.

BASIS FOR FINAL GRADE:
Grades on critical evaluations and concluding paper: 80%
Class participation: 20%

Individual consultation, messages, and office hours:
Please feel free to see me during my office hours (or by appointment) to discuss a specific matter about the course, to exchange more general ideas, questions, and concerns— or simply to chat.
Office: Hamilton 473
Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:30-2:30, and by appointment.
E-mail: jfkasson@email.unc.edu