

# Emancipating the Past: Kara Walker's Tales of Slavery and Power



Syllabus compiled by Kiara Hill, Ph.D. student, UMass

## *Literature (Fiction/Non-Fiction)*

- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*- Harriet Jacobs **HS**
  - *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an autobiography by a fugitive slave named Harriet Ann Jacobs. This book documents Jacobs' life as a slave, and her journey towards freedom.
- *Kindred*- Octavia Butler **HS**
  - *Kindred* is a novel that explores the institution of slavery from the perspective of Dana, a 26 year-old African American writer. *Kindred* functions as a slave narrative and time travel tale that grapples with the themes of race, gender, familial bonds, and slavery.
- *Beloved*- Toni Morrison **HS**
  - Inspired by the story of African American slave Margaret Garner, *Beloved* is a novel that interrogates the institution of slavery using magical realism. Morrison uses supernatural themes to highlight the psychological impact of slavery on the enslaved, and their descendants.
- *The Color Purple*- Alice Walker **HS**
  - *The Color Purple* is a novel that focuses on the experiences of African American women living in the South during the 1930s. Walker grapples with the themes of sexism, racism, class, and sisterhood through her depiction of Black non-normative relationships, and her polemical critique of Black patriarchy/misogyny.
- *For colored girls who have considered suicide/When the rainbow is enuf*.- Ntzoke Shange **HS**
  - *For colored girls who have considered suicide/When the rainbow is enuf* is a compilation of choreopoems that detail the experiences of seven African American women, and the ways in which racism and sexism complicate their realities.
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*- Zora Neale Hurston **HS**
  - *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel about self-discovery and retrospection through the eyes of Janie, a biracial woman whose grandmother was a former slave. Major themes include race, gender roles, womanhood, and voice/language.
- *Wench*- Dolen Perkins-Valdez
  - *Wench* is a novel that chronicles the lives of four enslaved women, who are also their masters' mistresses. The women rely on each other for support as they negotiate bodily autonomy, love, and freedom within the institution of slavery.

- *Corregidora*- Gayl Jones
  - *Corregidora* is a novel that explores the gendered implications of slavery from the perspective of Ursula, a blues singer that despises her former slave master for fathering both her mother and grandmother. Major themes include slavery, Black women's bodies, rape, and womanhood.
- *Daughters of the Dust*- Julie Dash
  - Inspired by the film "Daughters of the Dust", this novel grapples with the themes of ancestry, heritage, and womanhood through the experiences of Amelia Peazants, a descendant of the Gullah people. The "Daughters of the Dust" film will also feature at the campus film festival this spring.
- *Paradise*- Toni Morrison
  - Using the narratives of various Black women in an Oklahoma "Convent", Morrison explores the nuanced relationship between Black womanhood, gender roles, and Black patriarchy. Other major themes raised in this novel include colorism, memory, intergenerational conflict, and religion.
- *The Book of Night Women*- Marlon James
  - *The Book of Night Women* grapples with the themes of Diaspora, slave insurrection, power, rape and womanhood as it interrogates the nuances of plantation life from the perspective of Lilith, an enslaved young woman living on a Jamaican plantation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- *A Mercy*- Toni Morrison
  - *A Mercy* explores the complexities of romantic relationships amongst the enslaved, the paradoxical nature of slave maternity, and the convoluted process of performing motherhood within the institution of slavery. This novel grapples with the themes of slavery, freedom, power, and religion.
- *Wild Seed*- Octavia Butler
  - *This Afrofuturistic novel* re-conceptualizes the relationship between race, power, and Post colonialism, as Butler simultaneously engages the themes of slavery, bondage, love, and existentialism. \*Afrofuturism is a literary cannon that encompasses elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, and Afrocentrism to interrogate and critique historical events and systemic racial oppression.
- *Sula*- Toni Morrison
  - *Sula* chronicles the lives of two Black women from Ohio, as they grapple with their paradoxical realities of being born both Black and woman in the early twentieth century. Major themes include Black womanhood and motherhood.
- *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speech*- Audre Lorde **HS**

- Sister Outsider is a collection of essays and speeches by Audre Lorde, a Black feminist poet. Throughout her various essays, Lorde challenges capitalism, sexism, homophobia, and racism. She also interrogates the concept of identity, and the ways in which her social identity complicates her lived experiences.
- *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*- Alice Walker
  - *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* is a compilation of startling short stories that explicate the lives of Black women from various backgrounds, living and at times, surviving in the South. Major themes include Blackness, womanhood, ancestry, and class.
- *Property*- Valerie Martin
  - *Property* is a novel that elucidates the psychological effects of slavery on both the enslaved and their owners. Set on a Louisiana sugar plantation in 1828, Martin explores the interworkings of this horrid institution through the eyes of Manon Gaudlet, wife of the plantation owner, and their slave Sarah. Major themes include slavery, race, womanhood, and power.
- *Celia, A Slave*- Melton McLaurin *HS*
  - *Celia, A Slave* contextualizes the powerful narrative of a slave named Celia that was beaten, raped, and impregnated by her abusive slave owner. Fifteen years later, the Mississippi Supreme Court convicted her for his death. Based on a true story, this passionate novel illuminates the landmark trial of Celia, the slave.
- *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*- Trudier Harris
  - In *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, Harris interrogates the ideology of strength as it relates to popular, twentieth century literary depictions of Black women. Harris contends that the valorization of Black women's strength has the potential to be both dehumanizing and problematic at times.
- *The Warmth of Other Suns*- Isabel Wilkerson *HS*
  - In this epic, beautifully written masterwork, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson chronicles one of the great untold stories of American history: the decades-long migration of almost 6 million black citizens who fled the South for northern and western cities, in search of a better life.
- *The Underground Railroad*- Colson Whitehead *HS*
  - *The Underground Railroad* tells the story of Cora and Caesar, two slaves who make a bid for freedom from their Georgia plantations by heading north.

## ***Historical/ Cultural Texts***

- *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century*- Saidiya Hartman
  - In this profound cultural text, Hartman interrogates the relationship between resistance and Black identity. She examines the many spaces power was performed on slave plantations, and the ways in which the enslaved negotiated that power through various resistance strategies. Major themes include slavery, Blackness, power, and identity.
- *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance-A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*- Danielle L. McGuire
  - In this historical text, McGuire contextualizes the experiences of prominent Black women involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Through the various narratives and court cases she presents, she shows the ways Black women's lived experiences were, and continue to be complicated by their overlapping social identities.
- *Black Feminist Thought*- Patricia Hill Collins
  - *Black Feminist Thought* consists of various Black feminist ideals and thoughts that elucidate the plight and experiences of African American women. Key concepts include controlling images (stereotypes), oppression, and identity.
- *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black America on Race and Sex in America*- Paula Giddings
  - Drawing upon various historical documents, *When and Where I Enter* discusses the pivotal roles Black women played in both race and gender themed movements despite frequent encounters with racism and sexism.
- *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*- Beverly Guy-Sheftall
  - Comprehensive collection of writings that trace the formation of Black feminism from the early 1880s- present.
- *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*- Jennifer L. Morgan
  - In *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Morgan examines the commodification of Black women's bodies and labor within the institution of slavery in the English colonies.
- *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*- Patricia Hill Collins
  - *Black Sexual Politics* interrogates the effects of consuming problematic depictions of Black sexuality in popular culture. Major themes include race, gender, sexuality, and class.

- *The Erotic Life of Racism*- Sharon Holland **HS**
  - *The Erotic Life of Racism* theoretically engages the politics of race and racism, and contends that there is a vital connection between racism and desire. Key concepts include race, violence, and eroticism.
- *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*- Melissa Harris Perry **HS**
  - *Sister Citizen* explores the ways Black women process negative race and gender images, and the effects those images have on their ability to see themselves as citizens living in America.
- *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*- Deborah Gray White
  - *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* is a review of historical scholarship that elucidates the experiences of enslaved women within the institution of slavery.
- *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*- Jacqueline Jones
  - *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* provides an insightful account of Black women as laborers and primary providers for their families after the abolishment of slavery.
- *A Shining Thread of Hope*- Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson
  - *A Shining Thread of Hope* chronicles the lived experiences of Black women from their initial presence in early American colonies, to the victories they worked to secure during the Civil Rights Movement. Key concepts include race, gender, class, and resistance methods.
- *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*- Stephanie H. Camp
  - *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* interrogates, and uncovers the daily resistance strategies of enslaved women living on plantations in the Old South.
- *Birthing A Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*- Marie Jenkins Schwartz
  - *Birthing A Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* interrogates the exploitative interventions of Western medicine in the lives, and reproductive systems of enslaved women.
- *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*- Lisa Farrington **HS**
  - *Creating Their Own Image* is a comprehensive history of Black women artists that sought to combat derogatory racial stereotypes through art.