When William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) that “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” he had in mind the way Americans of all sections and all races tend to reimagine the American Civil War in ways that serve the conflicts of the present day. The conflicts of the Reconstruction era, over race most of all, but also over the nature of political rights, the roles of local, state, and national governments in enforcing those rights, and the cultural preconditions which make respect for rights a living possibility, not only re-staged the conflicts of the just-ended Civil War, but introduced new themes that continue to be in play in our own day. The legacy of Reconstruction was bitterly contested even as it happened, and the reputation of Reconstruction has risen or fallen with optimism or pessimism about whether the United States will ever be able to demonstrate its commitment to the proposition articulated in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address that all men are created equal. In eras of retreat on racial issues scholars have expressed skepticism about the aims of Reconstruction and the motives of its agents and have emphasized the flaws and blind spots of its execution. The Civil Rights movement prompted a re-evaluation of Reconstruction which continues to this day.

Conflicts over Reconstruction do not turn only on views about racial equality. Fifty years ago the historian Kenneth Stampp showed, for instance, that the sympathy for the opponents of Reconstruction that spread among the dominant orders in the North in the 1870s and 1880s had to do with their own hostility to newly arrived immigrants and to unionizing industrial workers, who seemed to them to be as “other” to them as African-American slaves had been to their masters, and whose demands threatened them in ways that might have reminded them of the masters’ fears of slave insurrection. (The analogy could be turned the other way too: speaking at the dedication of a memorial to John Brown at Osawatomie, Kansas, in 1910, President Theodore Roosevelt pointedly compared the robber-baron opponents of his Progressive-era economic reforms to the slave-owners Brown had fought.) Conflicts over Reconstruction entangled gender politics as well, leading many important advocates of women’s suffrage, among them Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had in the Civil War era favored abolishing slavery, to oppose the Fifteenth Amendment, since it granted to vote to (male) former slaves, but not to women of any race.

This course will consider literary texts written during the generation after the end of Reconstruction (literary texts written about Reconstruction as it unfolded are quite rare). The authors are both White and Black, both supporters and opponents of (and those with
tangled feelings about) Reconstruction. But Reconstruction was chiefly a political event, not a literary one, and for that reason for the research paper which will be among the requirements for this course you will be required not only to take some account of the critical history about these texts, but also to touch base with the political events to which they respond. To this end, I include in the “suggested readings,” some ancillary texts (such some important legal opinions) and some second texts (such as works of later historians), and we will be working through Eric Foner’s great recent history of Reconstruction as we go.

**Texts**


**Schedule of Readings and Assignments**

**Week 1**: (August 29) Thomas Wentworth Higginson: *Army Life in a Black Regiment*

Higginson was a major figure in the Abolition movement. A Unitarian minister from Worcester, Massachusetts, he was involved in the failed attempt to rescue the fugitive slave Anthony Burns from prison in Boston in 1854, and was among the “Secret Six,” who funded John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry. During the Civil War he served as colonel
of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally authorized African-American regiment. He is mostly known to English majors as the editor who didn’t understand Emily Dickinson’s poetry when she sent them to him, although he and Mabel Loomis Todd later edited her first three volumes.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 1

**Week 2:** (September 5) Albion Tourgée: *A Fool’s Errand: A Novel of the South During Reconstruction*

A wounded United States veteran of the Civil War, Tourgée was a judge in Reconstruction North Carolina, where he fought the Klan and helped reform the laws. He later was Homer Plessy’s attorney in the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. His later novel *Bricks without Straw* considers Reconstruction from an (imagined) African-American point of view. His 1879 book *The Invisible Empire* is a non-fiction treatment of the Ku Klux Klan.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 2

**Writing Assignment:** Commentary 1,

**Week 3:** (September 12) *A Fool’s Errand: A Novel of the South During Reconstruction* (continued)

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 3

**Writing Assignment:** Commentary 2

**Week 4:** (September 26) George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life*

A child of Louisiana slaveholders and a Confederate veteran, Cable first came to prominence writing romantic “regionalist” stories about New Orleans’ Creoles. He came to oppose Jim Crow and was driven from the south for his pains. His novel *The Grandissimes* is set just after the Louisiana Purchase and concerns whether the Francophone Creoles will accept rule by the United States, but it is very clearly an oblique novel about Reconstruction. Like Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!* its plot partly turns on whether its white protagonist will acknowledge his mixed-race half-brother (who turns out to have exactly the same name). The novel’s complicated (indeed tangled) perspectives on gender, class, and (most of all) race, should give it a wider readership than it has had.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 4

**Writing Assignment:** Commentary 3

**Week 5:** (October 3) *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (continued)

Cable, continued.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 5

**Writing Assignment:** Commentary 4

**Week 6:** (October 10) Mark Twain: *Huckleberry Finn*

Although set in the antebellum era, the novel reflects the mindset and the contradictions of the Reconstruction era. Twain was a border-state citizen who had served both the Confederacy and the United States. The first half of the novel (particularly its portrayal of the relationship between Huck and Jim) reflects both hope and wishful thinking about racial and sectional reconciliation, although its portrayal of some of the white characters, such as Pap Finn, the Grangerfords, and for that matter Tom Sawyer, represents a clear-eyed
view of some of the difficulties, especially difficulties concerning class, that Reconstruc-
tion would face even in an idealized world. Twain reached a creative impasse at a cru-
cial point during its composition, and could not resume work on the novel until after the
Compromise of 1877, which Twain was bitterly disappointed by, had brought an end to
Reconstruction. The problematic last third of the novel perhaps reflects some of that dis-
appointment.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 6

**Writing Assignment:** Commentary 5

**Week 7:** (October 17) Henry James: *The Bostonians*

*The Bostonians* is set mostly in Boston and New York City, and concerns Women’s Su-
frage, not racial equality. But the novel’s feminist characters think of their feminism as
a belated commitment (relative to their heroic past as abolitionists), and its antifeminist
male protagonist is a Confederate veteran with an axe to grind about both slavery and
race. The main conflict of the novel, in which the male and female protagonist compete
for the chance to liberate (and dominate) Verena Tarrant, whom both love and both pity,
also seems a not-very-oblique reflection upon Reconstruction politics. James’ cynicism
about Reconstruction is particularly striking, since he came from a reform-minded family,
and his brother Wilkie, an officer in the famous Massachusetts 54th regiment, was dan-
gerously wounded in the attack on Fort Wagner.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 7

**Week 8:** (October 24) Henry James: *The Bostonians* (continued)

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 8

**Research Proposal Due October 24**

**Week 9:** (October 31) Francis Ellen Watkins Harper: *Iola Leroy*

Once considered the first African-American novel, *Iola Leroy* is the paradigmatic “tragic
mulatta” novel. But it is also a complex novel of gender and race which stretches from the
antebellum era to Reconstruction.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 9

**Week 10:** (November 7) Booker T. Washington: *Up from Slavery*

A classic text, now somewhat out of favor. We will look at it both as a post-bellum slave
narrative (a genre which has different rhetorical tasks and different themes from the ante-
bellum slave narrative), and as a (contested) approach to some of the problems of the
Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. Students may wish to look also at Washington’s famous
(or notorious) Atlanta Exposition speech of 1895.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 10

**Week 11:** (November 14) W. E. B. Du Bois: *The Souls of Black Folk*

Often seen in pointed contrast with *Up from Slavery* in its approach to the problems of the
Jim Crow era, or seen as looking forward to the Civil Rights era, this classic text reflects on
the legacy of Reconstruction as well. Students may wish to look also at Du Bois’ much later
(1935) history of Reconstruction, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History*
of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880, which disputed the hostile (and racist) critique of Reconstruction that prevailed in the era, led by the work of William Archibald Dunning and his students.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 11

**Annotated Bibliography Due November 14**

**Week 12: (November 28) Charles W. Chestnutt: The Marrow of Tradition**

Although the Wilmington Insurrection, the political event at the center of this novel, did not take place until 1898, the cast of characters and the political positions available to them harken back to Reconstruction-era politics. By that time, the Reconstruction governments in the former Confederacy had all been gone for two decades, and the Populist Revolution had largely overthrown the Bourbon governments that succeeded them, and had begun to impose formal racial segregation and complete disenfranchisement of African American voters (which the Bourbon regimes had hesitated to bring to completion). The overthrow of the cross-racial Fusionist government in Wilmington, the only successful coup d’état in American history, was the last gasp of Reconstruction-era politics anywhere in the country. Chestnutt’s novel sees this political violence not only against the complicated relationships of disowning and connection in a complicated interracial family, but also against the background of complex class politics in the white community.

ALSO: Foner, Chapter 12

**Rough Draft due to Writing Groups December 5**

**Week 13: (December 5) Thomas Dixon, The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan**

This problematic (well, vile) book, popular on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, not only solidified the Jim Crow era orthodoxy about Reconstruction, but also revived the Ku Klux Klan, which had been crushed by the Grant administration. The revived Klan’s habit of burning crosses was invented by Dixon; the Reconstruction era Klan did no such thing.

ALSO: Foner, Epilogue

**For Further Reading**

Here are some starting points for your term paper research:

- **Other Literary Works**
  - Walt Whitman, *Drum Taps*. Whitman’s war poems, very different from Melville’s. You might also consider his elegy for Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” or his critical look at Gilded Age culture, *Democratic Vistas*
– John W. DeForest, *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*. An underrated but superb novel, largely set in wartime New Orleans. By far the most realistic fictional account of what it was like to fight in a Civil War battle, by a veteran.

– Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. His third autobiography, useful for what it says about his postwar career.

– Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*. Given how much this book has to say about Gilded Age politics, and about science and everything else, and given who its author was, it is strange how little the book has to say about Reconstruction. But the chapters about antebellum politics are fascinating, as are the chapters about Civil War era diplomacy.

• Political and Legal texts
  – Lincoln Second Inaugural Address (1865)
  – Lincoln Reconstruction Speech (1865)
  – The Slaughter-House Cases, 83 U.S. (16 Wall.) 36 (1873)
  – United States v. Cruikshank, 92 U.S. 542 (1875)
  – The Civil Rights Cases, 109 U.S. 3 (1883)
  – Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)

• Historical Interpretations
  – C. Vann Woodward *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955)
  – Kenneth Stampp *The Era of Reconstruction 1865-1877* (1967)
  – Allen W. Trelease *White Terror; the Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (1971)

**Requirements**

1. **Oral Presentation** Each of you will give a 15 minute or so oral presentation at the beginning of a class period, and lead the discussion which follows for another 15 minutes or so.

2. **Short papers** There will be short (two pages or so) writing assignments due every Tuesday for 5 weeks. You will pick a passage of about 250 words from the reading for that
day or the next and type it out. Be sure to pick a passage which strikes you as rich and interesting and full of a significance that might not be already obvious to every reader of that text. In other words, I don’t want you to pick a passage that will enable you to repeat some point I have already made in the lecture, but rather some passage which will enable you to bring a new reflection into our conversation, some passage that casts some new light upon the conversation we have already been having, some light that we might not have seen were it not for you. You will write a two page (or so) commentary on that passage, giving what you take its point to be, noting its context, and developing in cogent detail the claim it leads you to make about the text. Imagine that you are writing for someone who has some knowledge of the text but who does not know what precisely is your point of view about it—someone rather like the other members of this class, for instance. I will not give particular papers letter grades, but I will comment upon them and give them either a check, a check plus, or a check minus.

3. **Research Paper** The principal assignment for this class will be a research paper, of 12 pages minimum, concerned with one of the texts this course will examine. To prepare this paper you will need to start with an overarching paradigm from literary study. Some overarching studies of southern literature might give you a starting point. Literary theory might provide you with paradigms to discuss issues of racial conflict, cultural conflict, colonialism, or gender and sexuality issues. You should also make yourself familiar with the critical literature on your chosen novel, which you can access using *The MLA International Bibliography* or *JSTOR Language and Literature*.

You will develop the papers in stages, which will include

- A one-page research proposal, giving your topic, developing your take, and outlining the stakes of your project, due on October 19
- An annotated bibliography, outlining what is to be learned from your key sources, due on November 9
- A conference with me, which will take place during the week of November 12
- A rough draft, which will be due to a writing group of your peers on December 4
- A completed research paper, due on December 15

**Learning Goals**

1. Develop the habit of independent critique, intellectual self-reliance, and self-confidence from the perspective of attentive reading and collaborative discussion.

2. Become conversant with the major questions, concepts, theories, traditions, and techniques of humanistic inquiry about fiction of the reconstruction era.

3. Reflect on quality peer-to-peer interaction.

4. Develop and sharpen writing skills through rigorous assignments.
Policies

1. **Disability** If you are a student with a documented disability at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the course instructor immediately.

2. **Attendance and Participation** Attendance in this course is required. A student with more than two unexcused absences should expect to fail the course. Participation in the class discussion is required, so come to class prepared to speak. There may well be classes at Brandeis in which you can coast for much of the term and recover yourself by heroic efforts at the end, but this isn’t one of them. It’s best to plan to work steadily.

3. **Extensions** You must contact me no later than the class before a paper is due to receive an extension. I will not grant extensions on the due date of the paper. Late papers will be docked in proportion to their lateness.

4. **Academic Honesty** You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. The University policy on academic honesty is distributed annually as section 5 of the Rights and Responsibilities handbook. Instances of alleged dishonesty will be forwarded to the Office of Campus Life for possible referral to the Student Judicial System. Potential sanctions include failure in the course and suspension from the University. If you have any questions about my expectations, please ask.

5. **Electronics** You are not allowed to have an open laptop in this class. Please turn off your cell phones for the duration of the class.

6. **Four-Credit Course (with three hours of class-time per week)** Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

7. **Communications** The course will have a mailing list on LATTE. Information about snow days, changed deadlines, and so forth will be broadcast on that mailing list. We may make use of LATTE discussion forums as well.

**Assignment Weights**

I view calculations using these values with suspicion, and I will not accept arguments about your final grade based on calculations from this table, but I include this table to give you a rough idea of how much each assignment is worth.

- Short Papers and Oral Presentation 15 %
- Research Proposal 5 %
- Annotated Bibliography 10 %
- Research Paper First Draft 10 %
- Research Paper Final Draft 35 %
- Participation 25 %