The “Southern Literary Renaissance” took place in cultural and political circumstances that resembled similar flowerings of literary culture in mid-nineteenth century Russia, in late nineteenth century Ireland, and among African-Americans and Jewish Americans in the twentieth century. Literary flowerings are commonly a consequence of modernization, and the writers involved in them contest with each other about the meaning and value of modernization. Our texts argue with each other about the distinctiveness of southern culture, and whether modernity might extinguish that distinctiveness. They also argue about how to grapple with the ugliest features of that distinctiveness, the long history of racism the south shares with the rest of the United States but which took distinctive forms there. They also argue about some of the other traditional consequences of modernization, such as secularization, social alienation, and deracination.

This course will fulfill the English Department’s new research paper requirement, and students will develop a research paper in this course in several stages, with drafts, conferences, and revisions along the way.

Texts

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

**Week 1:** (August 30, September 6) Porter: *Old Mortality; Pale Horse, Pale Rider*
Porter is an undervalued great writer whose short novels stand comparison with the finest short novels in any tradition. *Old Mortality* thinks about the embeddedness of its main character in a network of family stories whose truth the protagonist comes to doubt, while also doubting her skeptical take on those stories. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* takes that protagonist out of the south into the anonymous and alienated world of 1918 Denver, in the midst of wartime repression, and at the height of the 1918 pandemic.

**Week 2:** (September 11, 13) Faulkner: *Absalom! Absalom!*
*Absalom! Absalom!* is the key dynastic tragedy of the southern renaissance, the novel against which every other novel in its tradition is measured. Of particular interest is the way in which it intertwines themes of class conflict and themes about racism. It is also a masterpiece of modernist indirection, in which many tellers grapple with the truth of an inherited story in which they themselves are implicated but whose meaning they do not fully understand.

**Week 3:** (September 18, 20) Faulkner: *Absalom! Absalom!*

**Week 4:** (September 25, 27) Warren: *All the King’s Men*
*All the King’s Men* is the greatest novel about politics in the American tradition, or in any tradition. Not very loosely based on the regime of Huey Long in 1930s Louisiana, it asks key southern questions about race and class, and universal questions about the contradiction between political means and political ends and about the connection between fallenness and moral identity.

**Week 5:** (October 2, 4) Warren: *All the King’s Men*

**Week 6:** (October 9, 16) Welty: *Delta Wedding*
This complex comic novel about a wedding in the 1920s Delta asks searching questions about the relationship between eros and death and about the unacknowledged aspects of a multigenerational family drama.

**Week 7:** (October 18, 23) O’Connor: *The Violent Bear it Away*
A combative novel about prophetic religion in a secularized and alienated culture, told with cruel, ironic humor and a deadly serious consciousness of the stakes.

**Week 8:** (October 25, 30) Styron: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*
This extremely controversial 1967 novel about the 1831 Southampton slave insurrection seeks an inside view of the ways race and gender intertwine in the slavery era.

**Research Proposal Due October 30**

**Week 9:** (November 1, 6) Styron: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*
Week 10: (November 8, 13) Gaines: *Of Love and Dust*
A nuanced and subtle development of two different doomed interracial relationships in 1940s Louisiana.

**Annotated Bibliography Due November 13**

Week 11: (November 15, November 20) McCarthy: *Blood Meridian*
Based on actual events, the story of the Glanton party, who took bounties to take Apache scalps, this novel concerns not only history but the darkest aspects of human nature, and features perhaps the most charismatically evil character since Milton’s Satan.

Week 12: (November 27, 29) Ellison: *Juneteenth*
Ellison worked on the novel of which *Juneteenth* is a selection for more than forty years. Adam Sunraider, a racist U.S. Senator, but also the unacknowledged foster son of an African-American evangelist, is shot on the Senate floor by his unacknowledged mixed-race son. The text is only a draft, but it develops the themes of *Invisible Man* in a number of unexpected directions.

**Rough Draft due to Writing Groups November 27**

Week 13: (December 4, 6) Jones: *The Known World*
A rich magical-realist imagination of the lives of African-American slaveholders in 1850s Virginia

**Requirements**

1. **Short papers** There will be short (two pages or so) writing assignments due every Tuesday for 5 weeks, beginning September 11, and ending October 16. 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.

2. **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 30
- An annotated bibliography, outlining what is to be learned from your key sources, due on November 13
- A conference with me, which will take place during the week of November 13
- A rough draft, which will be due to a writing group of your peers on November 27
- A completed research paper, due on December 11

**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 the southern fiction

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 15 %
- Research Proposal 5 %
- Annotated Bibliography 10 %
- Research Paper First Draft 10 %
- Research Paper Final Draft 35 %
- Participation 25 %