

# Sentimental Matters: Race, Embodiment, and Affect in 19th-Century America



**Kara Walker**, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, a life-sized piece of artwork by Kara Walker. Cut paper on wall, cyclorama. Whitney Museum. 1995.

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**Course Description.** Nineteenth century America is an age of surplus: cheap paper and ephemeral binding; spectacular showmanship and sensational marketing; innumerable commodities and disposable knick-knacks. In this advent of stuff, things, and matter, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) harnesses the messy power of American sentimentality — the belief a reader's feelings and sensations can change the course of the national affect. There is a darker side of sentimentality. A century later, James Baldwin ardently decries the novel's political and performative limits under a rubric of sentimental excess: "Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty." How, then, do our feelings orient the ways we experience — and, indeed, *read* — the world? Do sentimentality, and the politics of feeling, have an insurgent role in the production of public and private space? Building on recent interventions in the new materialisms and Black and feminist studies, this junior tutorial examines the long history of sentimentality in American literature and culture. Focusing on the nineteenth century but exploring afterlives as they resonate in the present day, we will be sampling elite cultural forms (like novels, poems, and art installations) and popular genres (such as broadsides, picture books, and ballads). Authors include Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Wilson, Evie Shockley, and Saidiya Hartman. In the end, we will engage sentimentality as a *genre category*: the accumulative product of social history and the ways race and gender are reflected in our art.

**Goals.** We will prepare and polish a substantial work of academic research (20 – 25 pages). We will be writing and working together throughout the semester. To that end, we will learn how to:

- ❖ Design a research question
- ❖ Identify possible frameworks (theoretical, historical, or otherwise) that speak to that question
- ❖ Engage and synthesize secondary criticism and primary source material
- ❖ Revisit, refine, and revise drafts accordingly
- ❖ Articulate an original and provocative thesis statement
- ❖ Write a consistent, clear, and compelling argument, while also being mindful of counterevidence to those claims
- ❖ **In short, engage with the recursive nature of academic research, and write a sophisticated piece of critical writing!**

**Assignments.** The tutorial is designed to make students better thinkers. I emphasize process over product. Articulating complex and original ideas matter above else. Over the course of the semester, students will be evaluated based on:

Informed *class participation* and regular *attendance* (10%). Students are allowed two absences, no questions asked. Three or more unexcused absences will severely affect your grade. If you find yourself having to take time off for medical or family reasons, I strongly advise that you reach out to me and your dean.

A set of *research questions* (5%) and an *abstract* (5%) due the third and fourth week of class, respectively. I require that I meet with all students during those weeks.

A *draft of the final paper* (15%) due the tenth week of class. At this stage of the writing process, I require 10 – 15 pages; students should expect written feedback a week after their submission.

A *presentation* (25%) on one or more of the optional readings (i.e., the secondary criticism) for a session. For the presentation, students must write 5 – 7 pages summarizing the argument. Students must also send me that paper 24 hours before the session, so I can circulate it to the class. When writing the final paper, students may reuse as much material from the presentation as they wish.

A *final paper* (40%), due after the reading period, of 20 – 25 pages.

**Readings.** The texts center on the sentimental matter of feeling in public. Most of the primary texts will be made available at the Coop. Artifacts (e.g., primary historical texts) and secondary readings (e.g., literary criticism or critical theory) will be made available on Canvas.

Books to Purchase:

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Norton Critical Edition, 2017; ed. Elizabeth Ammons) (Amazon List Price: \$20.00)

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables* (Norton Critical Edition, 2020; ed. Robert S. Levine) (Amazon List Price: \$19.38)

Harriett Wilson, *Our Nig* (Vintage; Illustrated Edition, 2011; ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr and Richard J. Ellis) (Amazon List Price: \$14.88)

Optional Books:

Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Norton, 2022; Updated edition) (Amazon List Price: \$17.99) (**Selected readings are on Canvas. But please pick up the 25th-anniversary edition at the Coop, should you elect to engage with Hartman's book in its entirety!**)

Herman Melville, *Melville's Short Novels* (Norton Critical Edition, 2001; ed. Dan McCall) (Amazon List Price: \$19.33) (**"Bartleby, The Scrivener" is available on Canvas; book version is available for purchase at the Coop.**)

Evie Shockley, *semiautomatic* (Wesleyan UP, 2017) (Amazon List Price: \$14.04) (**Shockley's "topsy suite" is available on Canvas; book version is available for purchase at the Coop.**)

**Policies.** Please be mindful of the policies as outlined below. Please feel free to contact me, should you have any questions regarding the expectations for the class.

*Submissions.* Please submit writing electronically ([wyattsarafin@g.harvard.edu](mailto:wyattsarafin@g.harvard.edu)) 24-hours before the session. I allow short extensions, but please get to me sooner rather than later. For extensions longer than two days, please get a note from HUHS or your dean.

*Technology.* I allow the use of laptops or tablets in the classroom. I just ask that students do not abuse this privilege — students who do abuse that privilege will lose points for class participation.

*Office Hours.* Mondays 2-4pm, or by appointment. I am always delighted to talk — for any reason whatsoever!

*Academic honesty.* Please do not take credit for work or for ideas that are not your own. Please refer to [The Harvard College Honor Code](#): “Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity — that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.”

I require that you use the Chicago Manual of Style (17th edition) or MLA (9th edition) for all submissions. If you are confused about how to use that citation style, or if you are not sure what constitutes plagiarism, then please come and see me or write an email to me. I would much prefer that we iron out these problems together before the assignment is formally submitted.

*Diversity & Inclusion.* We want to make sure everyone feels welcome in the classroom. I take this very seriously, and as such, I do not tolerate discrimination of any kind (based on racial or ethnic identity; sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity; socioeconomic status; and disability, to name but a few examples).

*Disability accommodation.* I am always happy to accommodate students with disabilities. Please refer to Harvard’s [Accessible Education Office](#): “Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term.”

*Title IX.* I do not tolerate sexual harassment, dating stalking, or gender discrimination. Please refer to Harvard’s [Title IX policy](#): “Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in the University’s programs or activities; relevant sections of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act; Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in employment; and Massachusetts laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity.”

## Schedule

### Week 1. *Welcome!*

#### Introduction:

Distribute syllabus and outline the theories and methods of the tutorial.

#### Readings:

James Baldwin, "Everybody's Favorite Protest Novel"

Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, Introduction

Saidiya V. Hartman, Introduction in *Scenes of Subjection*

### Week 2. *The Ballad.*

#### Readings:

*Primary:* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline* (1847) (Canvas)

*Artifact:* Francis James Child, "Ballad Poetry" (1875)

*Secondary:* Meredith L. McGill, "What is a Ballad?"

### Week 3. *The Gothic.*

#### Readings:

*Primary:* Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), chapters 1-10

*Artifact:* Children's book, *Dame Trot and Her Comical Cat* (c. 1801)

*Secondary:* Lea Anderson, "The Ontology of Open Mouths: The Scream and the Swallowing"

### Week 4. *The Gothic, part 2.*

#### Readings:

*Primary:* Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables*, chapter 11-21

*Artifact:* Louisa May Alcott, "The Candy Country" (1885)

*Secondary:* Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "'Hearty and happy with a lively, yeasty soul:' feeling right in Louisa May Alcott's *The Candy Country*"

**\*\*Close-reading essay due (4-5 pp.)**

**Week 5.** *Sentimental Fictions.*

Readings:

*Primary:* Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), chapters 1-12

*Artifact:* Selected engravings by Edward Clay (*The Fruits of Amalgamation*, et al) (c. 1839)

*Secondary:* Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism"

Hartman, "The Burdened Individuality of Freedom," in *Scenes of Subjection*

**Week 6.** *Sentimental Fictions, part 2.*

Readings:

*Primary:* Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, chapters 13-24

*Artifact:* Aunt Mary's Picture Book, *Little Eva: Flower of the South* (c. 1853)

*Secondary:* Robin Bernstein, "Scriptive Things," in *Racial Innocence*

**\*\* Class visit to Houghton Library (Theatre Collection, Wilson, Walker, et al)**

**Week 7.** *Sentimental Fictions, part 3.*

Readings:

*Primary:* Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, chapters 25-36

*Artifact:* Images from *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (digital archive, 1998-2012)

*Secondary:* Sianne Ngai, "Animatedness," in *Ugly Feelings*; Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power"

**\*\*Final proposal due (1-2 pp).**

**Week 8.** *Sentimental Fictions, part 4.*

Readings:

*Primary:* Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, chapters 36-45

*Artifact:* Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom* (1995)

*Secondary:* P. Gabrielle Foreman, "'This Promiscuous Housekeeping': Death, Transgression, and Homoeroticism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*"

**Week 9.** *Sense and Insensibility.*

Readings:

*Primary:* Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853)

*Artifact:* G. Thomas Tanselle, "The Sale of Melville's Books" (1969)

*Secondary:* Kyla Schuller, "Sentimental Biopower," in *The Biopolitics of Feeling*

**\*\*Annotated bibliography due (2-3 pp.)**

**Week 10.** *Race and the Domestic.*

Readings:

*Primary:* Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig* (1859)

*Artifact:* Introduction (Gates and Ellis); Appendix 2

*Secondary:* Fred Moten, “Preface for a solo by Miles Davis”

*Optional:* Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4-6

**Week 11.** *The Afterlives of Sentiment, part 1*

Readings:

*Primary:* Evie Shockley, “the topsy suite” in *semiautomatic* (2017)

*Artifact:* Alison Saar and Evie Shockley, *Alison and Evie Broadside* (2018)

*Secondary:* Shockley, “On Seeing and Reading the ‘Nothing’: Poetry and Blackness Visualized” and “ex patria”

**Week 12.** *The Afterlife of Sentiment, part 2*

*Primary:* Hartman, “The Plot of Her Undoing” (2019)

*Artifact:* Torkwase Dyson, *set/interval/enclosure* (2022)

*Secondary:* Zakiyyah Iman Jackson interview with Saidiya Hartman (2023)

**Week 13.** Finis!

Informal presentation and siesta!

**\*\*Final paper due (20-25 pp.)**