English 6330 (Spring 2018)
Haunted by History: The Deep Eighteenth Century
Assignment Prompt: Discussion Provocation and Leadership

Due Date: (circle yours)

- Wednesday, January 17 (The *Oroonoko* Legend): Blake
- Wednesday, January 24 (*Oroonoko* in Performance): Rebecca
- Wednesday, January 31 (The Slave Trade, Financial Capitalism, and *Robinson Crusoe*): Emily
- Wednesday, February 7 (*Crusoe*, continued): Brady
- Wednesday, February 14 (Robinsonade and Colonialism: *The Female American*): Gemma
- Wednesday, February 21 (*The Female American*, continued): Jessica
- Wednesday, February 28 (Crusoe and Postcolonial Literature: *Foe*): Moira

Length: around 1000 words (about 1.5 single-spaced pages)

Submission Format: Typed, labeled with your name and a descriptive title, emailed to Dr. Burkert before class and printed out – one copy for each member of the class (7 total)

Assignment Description: Each of you will be responsible for leading the first half of one class session during the early part of the semester. You will begin class by reading aloud a brief piece of your own writing that synthesizes some of the main points of our shared readings, draws out threads you find particularly interesting, and poses questions to start of our discussion. I call this piece a *provocation* because it is meant to *provoke* thought; your questions should be open-ended and complex enough to create space for an illuminating conversation. Throughout the discussion that follows, you will be responsible for following up on or responding to points your peers make that you find particularly interesting, drawing connections between their comments, and maintaining the momentum of the conversation so that it continuously builds towards a more nuanced and layered understanding of our readings. In short, you'll be the teacher during the first hour or so of class that day.

Goals:

- Synthesize complex material and generate sophisticated questions about it (useful for research)
- Practice reading your academic writing aloud to peers and colleagues in a setting that is both formal and conversational (useful for conferences)
- Practice leading a discussion of shared readings (useful for teaching)

Assessment: You will receive a score out of 100 points, divided equally between the quality of your written provocation—its sophistication of thought and clarity of expression—and a measure of your enthusiastic and effective leadership of the discussion. This total score will constitute 10% of your course grade.

Sample: Attached to this handout is a provocation Dr. Burkert wrote for our Week 1 discussion of the PBS documentary *Hamilton's America*, Coates's "The Case for Reparations," and the assigned sections from Roach's *Cities of the Dead* and *It*.

Provocation: The Deep Eighteenth Century and the Legacies of Slavery
By Dr. Burkert

In *It*, Joseph Roach introduces the term "the deep eighteenth century"—a spin on the academic periodization of a "long eighteenth century" that begins as early as 1660 and ends as late as 1820—and he defines the deep eighteenth century as "the one that isn't over yet" (13). He challenges us to engage with the troubling residues of that moment in ways that complicate our sense of history as progress. Likewise, in *Cities of the Dead*, he replaces the common historical focus on the "trans-Atlantic" world bridging Europe and the Americas with the idea of a "circum-Atlantic" world, a move that "insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity." This geographic demarcation, then, is once again a way of thinking about history and time, one that shares with the "deep eighteenth century" a sense of how the present shapes and is shaped by our understanding of the past. Taken together, Roach's opening salvos in these two books help to define the scope of this course: we are looking at how circum-Atlantic exchanges (of texts, bodies, goods, and ideas) from hundreds of years ago continue to resonate in our present, and we are exploring the ways that we as thinkers, artists, and citizens should engage with these legacies.

One way to approach this reckoning is through adaptation, which is why in this class we are examining texts from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that adapt and remix materials from the long eighteenth century. I have been wondering lately whether we can understand the work of artistic adaptation through the lens of another concept Roach offers: "surrogation." Roach argues in *Cities* that "culture" can be defined as "the social processes of memory and forgetting" (xi), and he highlights surrogation as the process through which a community attempts to perpetuate itself by filling the roles of the dead with imperfect substitutes. For Roach, this process often takes place through performance, in the stories a culture tells itself about itself. Likewise, Miranda acknowledges in *Hamilton's America* that his characters are as much "who we want them to be" as they are accurate representations of historical people. To what extent is it useful to think of a play like *Hamilton* as an act of surrogation? As a circum-Atlantic text? As an artifact of the deep eighteenth century? Roach calls for attention to how people have "invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others" (*Cities* 5). Does *Hamilton* do this? If so, whom does it invent? For what "others" is it staged? Whose forgetting? Whose memory? Whose history? (Or, in the words of the musical's final song: "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?")

One possible argument is that Miranda's decision to cast people of color as the founders is an act of surrogation that claims American history as belonging equally to the people whose contributions and full citizenship it long tried to erase. This interpretation raises a question, though: in claiming the history and ideals of the Revolution, does the play fail to sufficiently question or criticize the ways that the founders leveraged those ideals to suppress and exploit Native Americans, enslaved people, women, and other groups? Can the ideals of the Enlightenment be reclaimed unproblematically?

Alongside Roach's surrogation, we might consider reparation as an alternative or perhaps complementary mode of reckoning with the past. Coates makes a strong case that systemic economic inequality between white and black Americans are the "grim inheritance" not only of slavery but of Jim Crow segregation and discriminatory housing and lending policies that have continued to make themselves felt into the present, even shaping the effects of the 2008 subprime

lending crisis. Because the accumulated and passed down property of white Americans was built on the unpaid labor and oppression of people whose descendents continue to experience disadvantages, he argues, these crimes cannot simply be relegated to the past, as they continue to shape lives in the present: "Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising, 'Never again.' But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us." His statement here that we are "haunted" is echoed later in the piece, when he refers to the proposed process of reparations as "a settling with old ghosts." I'm fascinated by how this idea of the past as a ghost haunting the present comes up here as well as in Roach; is this a useful image? Or is there some better metaphor we might use to understand the persistence of the past in our own experiences, and the ethics of how we engage with that past?

Like Miranda, Coates considers the stakes of remembering and representing the founders: "If Thomas Jefferson's genius matters, then so does his taking of Sally Hemings's body. If George Washington crossing the Delaware matters, so must his ruthless pursuit of the runagate Oney Judge." He argues that it is "patriotism à la carte" to celebrate the democratic ideals of America without acknowledging fully its foundation on the denial of freedom and democracy to so many. Does *Hamilton* fall into this trap? Or does it do enough to represent both the good and the bad in its protagonists? The documentary starts to address this question in really interesting ways towards the end of the section; the segment about Washington and Jefferson as slaveholders is juxtaposed with Leslie Odom Jr.'s discussion of the play's casting in a way that is suggestive but ultimately seems to beat around the bush. Surely, the casting is more than just playful and imaginative, as Odom says—it clearly signals some kind of attempt to reckon with the racist legacy of American history. Yet the documentary steers clear of defining or even directly addressing the significance of that decision. Why do you think that is? How would you describe the effects of the casting on the play's larger meanings?

And finally, a broad question: How would you compare Coates's proposal for reckoning with the past to that enacted by Miranda's play? What similarities and differences do you see between their projects for addressing the ongoing effects of slavery and colonial history in our present?

Word count: 1,071