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# New Directions in Black Feminist Studies

SPEAKER SERIES CURATED BY GRACE HONG BEGINS ON JAN 29

**N**ew Directions in Black Feminist Studies is a lecture series featuring three scholars who represent the best of contemporary Black feminist scholarship. This series will contribute to the renewed energy around African American studies at UCLA, with the recent departmentalization of African American Studies and Angela Davis's recent residency in the Department of Gender Studies. It is curated by Grace Kyungwon Hong, organized by the Center for the Study of Women and cosponsored by Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, Labor Studies Program, Institute for American Cultures, Department of English, Department of Gender Studies, Department of African American Studies, and International Institute.

The speakers are Amber Jamilla Musser, an Assistant Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Washington University in St. Louis; Talitha LeFlouria, an Assistant Professor of History at Florida Atlantic University; and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, an Assistant Professor of African American Studies at UC Irvine. All these scholars have new books that articulate significant scholarship.



## **Amber Jamilla Musser**

Amber Jamilla Musser is an Assistant Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. Musser obtained her Ph.D. in the History of Science from Harvard University. Prior to that, she obtained a Master's degree in Women's Studies from Oxford University, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology and History and Science from Harvard University. Her work focuses on the intersection of race, sexuality, and affect. She teaches undergraduate- and graduate-level classes such as "Me, Myself, and I: Introduction to Identity Politics," "People, Populations, and Places: Sexuality and the State," and "Thinking Through the Body."

*Masochism is important not for its essence but because it exists as a set of relations among individuals and between individuals and structures. This mobility makes it a useful analytic tool; an understanding of what someone means by masochism lays bare concepts of race, gender, power, and subjectivity. Importantly, these issues converge on the question of what it feels like to be enmeshed in various regimes of power.*

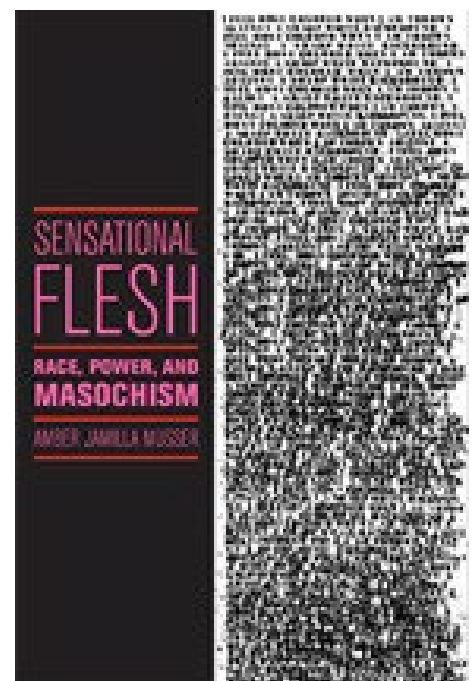
*—Amber Jamilla Musser*

One of her early articles, titled “Reading, Writing, and the Whip” (*Literature and Medicine*, Fall 2008, 204-222), she explores early psychological theories about masochism, and the relationship between some of these early theories and how masochism was written about in the literature at that time. Specifically, Musser looks at the work of Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, an Austrian psychiatrist writing in the late nineteenth century and at how Krafft-Ebing drew upon the work of authors such as Sacher-Masoch and Rousseau.

In a recent article, titled “Objects of Desire: Toward an Ethics of Sameness” (*Theory & Event* 16:2 [2013]), Musser examines “objectum sexuality, an orientation in which people sexually orient themselves toward objects” and “reflects on what constitutes sexuality, the nature of intimacy, and the agency of objects.” In this highly cogent and thoughtful essay, she argues that “there is something more radical at stake in objectum sexuality. While recognizing objectum sexuality as a category of sexual orientation does provide us with the opportunity to think about intimacy as it has been refigured by neoliberalism, I argue that we view Erika’s relationship to objects as a mode of desubjectification, more precisely, as a mode of becoming-object. This notion of becoming-object exploits the discourse of sameness, but inverts it. Instead of asking how are objects like subjects, the question becomes how are subjects like objects. This shift opens a window into what desub-

jectification can mean for questions of relationality and ethics in queer theory.” This insight leads Musser to the assertion that “This embrace of objects, of alterity, threatens to obliterate the subject/object divide and with that reframes anti-relationality as desirable and provides a way to imagine what an ethics of sameness might look like. This valorization of sameness also opens a productive conversation between theorists who advocate anti-relationality, those who work on new materialisms and those who focus on affect.<sup>60</sup> The resonances between the dissolution of the self, an investment in animacy (and its attendant politics of non-hierarchy), and affective attachments provide the ground for this new ethics and illuminate objectum sexuality’s potentiality in a spectrum of life beyond the neoliberal.”

Her new book, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (NYU Press, 2014), uses masochism as a lens to examine how power structures race, gender, and embodiment in different contexts. It has been called “A lively and enlightening contribution to queer studies, investigating affect and embodiment as avenues for the radical reinvigoration of how we experience and think about raced, gendered, and sexualized subjectivities” by Darieck Scott, Associate Professor of African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies at UC Berkeley and author of *Extravagant Abjection*. “In everyday language, masochism is usually understood as the desire to abdicate control in exchange for sensation—pleasure,



pain, or a combination thereof,” says Scott. “Yet at its core, masochism is a site where power, bodies, and society come together. *Sensational Flesh* uses masochism as a lens to examine power structures race, gender, and embodiment in different contexts.... Engaging with a range of debates about lesbian S&M, racialization, femininity, and disability, as well as key texts such as Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, Pauline Réage’s *The Story of O*, and Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Musser renders legible the complex ways that masochism has been taken up by queer, feminist, and critical race theories.”

Jean Walton, Associate Professor of English, Women’s Studies, and Film Studies at the University of Rhode Island and author of *Fair Sex, Savage Dreams: Race Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference*, also lauds the book, noting that “*Sensational Flesh* explores the material aspects of power—how, in a Foucauldian sense, it is “felt” in the

*This bold, brilliant, beautifully written book—a significant contribution to the fields of prison history, southern history, African American history, and gender studies—shows why charting the struggles in convict women’s lives matters for understanding the emergence of modernity in the New South. Talitha L. LeFlouria rejects a recent and popular thesis that convict labor was simply slavery that persisted, while also illuminating how beliefs about race and sex forged in slavery carried on to shape modernity and the prison system.*

—Mary Ellen Curtin,  
American University,  
| in her review of  
Chained in Silence

body—unpacking the bodily, sensational dimensions of subjectivity. Comprehensive and exhaustive in scope, Musser leaves no stone unturned in her consideration of “masochism” in all its different formulations, and in the often-contradictory ways it has been deployed.”

In her talk, “Riddles of the Sphinx: Kara Walker and the Possibility of Black Female Masochism,” she will consider how we can understand black female masochism—the willful and desired submission to another. Masochism is a difficult subject to broach, but black female masochism is even more so because it threatens to produce subjects who embrace myriad systems of historical and cultural forms of objectification. Further, black female masochism is difficult to theorize because masochism as a concept requires an understanding of agency, which has been elusive for black women to claim. Through a reading of some of Kara Walker’s work, this talk looks at how we have traditionally understood black female sexuality and female sexual passivity to think about the ways that discourses of race and sexuality converge and diverge.

Uri McMillan, Assistant Professor in the Department of English at UCLA, who taught Sensational Flesh in his “Queer of Color Theory” graduate seminar in the fall of 2014, will be the respondent for the lecture, which takes place on January 29, 2015, from 4 to 6 pm in Royce 306.



## **Talitha LeFlouria**

Talitha LeFlouria is Assistant Professor of History at Florida Atlantic University where she specializes in the study of Black women and convict labor in the post-Civil War South. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in African-American and African-American women’s history. She received her Ph.D. in History from Howard University. As a graduate student, she worked as a park ranger and a historian for the National Parks Service at the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. In 2009, she authored a booklet titled, *Frederick Douglass: A Watchtower of Human Freedom*, which “weaves together the most intricate and personal facets of Douglass’ life, especially those preserved here at Cedar Hill.”

Her research was featured in the 2012 Sundance-award-nominated documentary, *Slavery by Another Name*, based on Douglas Blackmon’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book on convict leasing in the southern states.

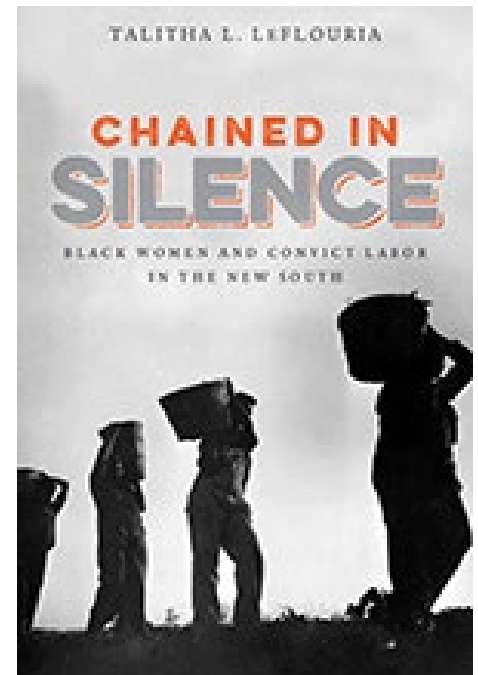


Also in 2012, her article, “The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Cuts Cordwood: Exploring Black Women’s Lives and Labor in Georgia’s Convict Camps, 1865-1917” (*Labor* 8:3 [2011], 47-63) was nominated for the A. Elizabeth Taylor Prize from the Southern Association of Women Historians. This essay examines the historical context and design of Georgia’s forced convict labor system, as well as the women’s responses to the abuses they experienced as prisoners within the system. In the article, she describes how, as Southern states began to rebuild after the Civil War, white politicians and plantation owners attempted to maintain their racial privileges and to obtain cheap or low-cost labor that would allow many Southern industries to continue on as they had before the war. The convict labor system was one way to do this, as African Americans were disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, and could be contracted out to work on major reconstruction projects, such as the Macon & Brunswick, Macon & Augusta, and Air-Line railroads. Black female prisoners, who made up approximately 3 to 5% of Georgia’s prison population, participated in these work projects, in addition to farming, brickmaking, and coal and iron production. The women experienced physical abuse, rape, and disease. In LeFlouria’s words, “The contest waged between black female convicts and their oppressors did not always result in victories. However, these women were willing to challenge encroachments

on their self-worth and fought hard to preserve their humanity within a dehumanizing system built on terror and control” (p. 63).

Her new book *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* has recently been published by University of North Carolina Press and already garnered many positive reviews. “Chained in Silence is a pathbreaking addition to the growing body of historical research on black women and the U.S. justice system,” asserts Kali Gross, Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas-Austin. “Through painstaking, exhaustive research, [LeFlouria] maps black women as sentient beings (humans who had lives, loves, triumphs, and sorrows) and as prison laborers brutalized by the vicissitudes of convict leasing. Moreover, by historicizing the evolution of convict leasing and black women’s plight therein, LeFlouria ultimately provides a much-needed raced and gendered context for the agro-industrial penal complex operating in parts of the South today.”

In a talk titled “Living and Laboring off the Grid: Black Women Prisoners and the Making of the “Modern” South, 1865-1920,” which will take place on February 12, 2015, from 4 to 6 pm in Royce 306, LeFlouria will provide an in-depth examination of the lived and laboring experiences of imprisoned African-American women in the post-Civil War South, and describe how black female convict



labor was used to help construct “New South” modernity. Using Georgia—the “industrial capital” of the region—as a case study, she will analyze how African-American women’s presence within the convict lease and chain gang systems of the “empire state” helped modernize the “New South,” by creating a new and dynamic set of occupational burdens and competencies for black women that were untested in the free labor market. In addition to discussing how the parameters of southern black women’s working lives were redrawn by the carceral state, she will also account for the hidden and explicit modes of resistance female prisoners used to counter work-related abuses, as well as physical and sexualized violence.





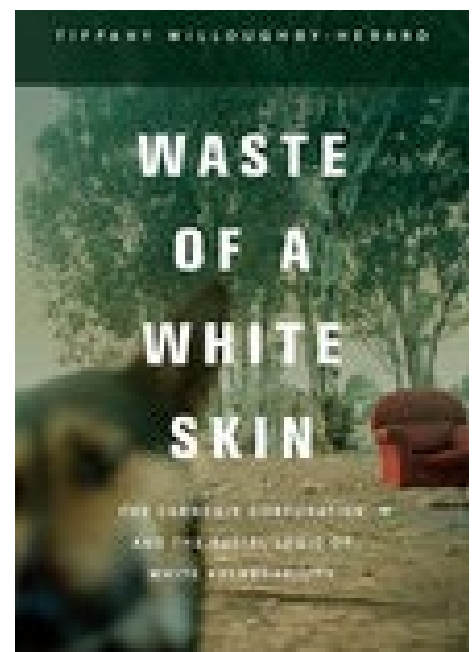
## **Tiffany Willoughby-Herard**

Tiffany Willoughby-Herard is Assistant Professor of African American Studies at UC Irvine, and works on comparative racialization in the South African and North American contexts, Black political thought, and African feminisms. Her book, *Waste of a White Skin: Carnegie and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability*, has just been published by UC Press. The publisher calls it “A pathbreaking history of the development of scientific racism, white nationalism, and segregationist philanthropy in the U.S. and South Africa in the early twentieth century, *Waste of a White Skin* focuses on the American Carnegie Corporation’s study of race in South Africa, the Poor White Study, and its influence on the creation of apartheid.” Using black feminism, black internationalism, and the

black radical tradition, Willoughby-Herard explores the effect of politics of white poverty on black people’s life, work, and political resistance. In particular, this groundbreaking book examines the philanthropic institution of the Carnegie Foundation, contributed to the constitution of apartheid as a process of knowledge production in South Africa. Her manuscript examines U.S. complicity in constructing notions of whiteness, arguing that the Carnegie Commission Study of Poor Whites helped create knowledge production process central to apartheid, in particular scientific racialism. In so doing, she examines the role of this supposedly benevolent U.S. philanthropic organization in the production of social science knowledge as a form of legitimation for the racial violence of apartheid. She thus makes the argument that whiteness is a global phenomenon, one that links white racial formations transnationally, by demonstrating the ways in which the United States not only produced whiteness within its own territorial boundaries, but is implicated in white Afrikaner racial formation as well. As Dr. Willoughby-Herard demonstrates, The Carnegie Commission Study legitimated a number of violent practices that attempted to discipline poor whites into bourgeois respectability. These practices were very much organized around gender and sexual normativity, and included genetic monitoring, sterilization, mental testing, and forced removals and detentions. In this way, this essay demonstrates that

eugenicist tactics were brought into being through deployment not only against non-whites, but on what she calls “contingent” whites as well. In so doing, Dr. Willoughby-Herard argues that whiteness is not a monolithic racial formation, but a complex and internally differentiated one. This project is thus an important contribution to whiteness studies, which tends to situate whiteness as simply privilege. By tracing the violent process by which poor whites were forced to become white, this project reveals the exact process of production and the precise effect of the scientific racialism that would underwrite the system of apartheid.

Willoughby-Herard’s talk, “I Write What I Like”: The Politics of Black Identity and Gendered Racial Consciousness in Meer’s *The Black Woman Worker*,” which takes place from 4 to 6 pm in Haines 135 on February 26, examines Fatima Meer’s *Black Woman Worker: A Study in Patriarchy and Woman Production Workers in South*



Africa (1990), which raised critical questions about how the concept of gendered black consciousness articulated with racial colonialism, segregation, and apartheid. Like other books published in its time, *Black Woman Worker* resulted from a robust confluence of political activity, autonomous research, and careful attention to the politics of publishing. While the radical black feminism of that era was becoming coherent as a set of consistent political philosophies across the Americas and on the African continent, according to Willoughby-Herard, it was anticipating, laying ground work for, and helping to establish the publishing audience that constitutes current interests in comparative black feminist studies, black feminist internationalism, African feminisms, and African gender studies. Our histories of the making of “the working class” and “left” have been shaped forever by the role played by research on black working women as servants, migrant laborers, domestics, and enslaved people. Following Pumla Gqola and Zine Magubane, she will examine and offer an account of how the contested and complex political identity of “blackness” was articulated in this moment, why this set of nested categories was necessary for Meer and her collaborators, and the cultural work that it did to bind together African, Indian, and so-called “Coloured” women in a context of extraordinary state and vigilante violence.


Faculty Curator for the series is Grace Kyungwon Hong, Associate Professor, Departments of Asian

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WINTER 2015

# NEW DIRECTIONS in Black Feminist Studies


FEATURING



**Jan 29 4 pm | Royce 306**  
**Riddles of the Sphinx**  
**KARA WALKER AND THE POSSIBILITY OF BLACK FEMALE MASOCHISM**  
**Amber Jamilla Musser**  
*Assistant Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Washington University in St. Louis*



**Feb 12 4 pm | Royce 306**  
**Living and Laboring off the Grid**  
**BLACK WOMEN PRISONERS AND THE MAKING OF THE “MODERN” SOUTH, 1865-1920**  
**Talitha Leflouria**  
*Assistant Professor of History, Florida Atlantic University*




**Feb 26 4 pm | Haines 138 (Bunche Library)**  
**“I Write What I Like”**  
**THE POLITICS OF BLACK IDENTITY AND GENDERED RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MEER’S THE BLACK WOMAN WORKER**  
**Tiffany Willoughby-Herard**  
*Assistant Professor of African American Studies, UC Irvine*

co-sponsored by Department of English, Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, Labor Studies Program, Institute for American Cultures, Department of Gender Studies, International Institute, and Department of African American Studies

FACULTY CURATOR SERIES  
 organized by Grace Kyungwon Hong, Associate Professor, Department of Gender Studies and Department of Asian American Studies

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American Studies and Gender Studies at UCLA. Her publications include *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and The Culture of Immigrant Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Duke University Press, 2011), co-edited with Roderick A. Ferguson. Recent articles include “Neoliberalism,” (forthcoming in *Journal of Critical Ethnic Studies* 1.1), “Ghosts of Camptown,” (forthcoming in *MELUS*), “Existentially Surplus:

Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism” (*GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 18.1 (Fall 2011): 87-106). Her current book project is currently titled “Between Life and Death: Women of Color Feminism and the Impossible Politics of Difference.”