

ENG 383: Black Sexualities

Rethinking “Queer” Through African American Poetics

Th 3:05-4:20 p.m., 2187 Chambers Hall

Professor L. Lamar Wilson

B01 Carnegie Guest House, by appointment, primarily in office on Tuesdays and Thursdays

Contact: 704-894-3065 (during office hours); llwilson@davidson.edu

** Please allow 24 hours for response to email. For email sent after 9 p.m., the 24-hour window begins the following morning.**

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle declares a writer’s role is to relate “not what has happened, but what may happen.” In addition to theorizing humans’ natural inclination to imitate, he also acknowledges individuals’ instinct to reach “special altitudes” of what he calls “Song” and “harmony.” This course, then, builds on Aristotle’s differentiation between history and poetics and reframes African American writing as emerging not solely as an imitative, critical response to whites’ historical oppression and institutional privilege. Rather, it challenges us to parse the “special altitudes” black writers have reached and to find ways, in our own writing, to harmonize with the models they offer as we (re)define a 21st-century poetics of being and writing. In addition, it emboldens us to rethink how these writers trouble the ideals of racial harmony, American identity, and citizenship and blur the lines delineating gender, genre, and the markers of sexual identity.

We will spend the semester investigating two central questions: How did American chattel slavery and the racist views necessary to perpetuate its potency in the Jim Crow mark African Americans as queer¹ objects for white supremacist sexual violence? How might we begin to investigate the queer subjectivity African Americans have worked to fashion over four centuries and shift the discussion of queerness to include both LGBTQ experiences and the ways in which European-American, heteronormative fictions about black masculinity and femininity queer even ostensibly heterosexual experiences?

Predating the nation’s founding, the literature of African Americans, America’s original queer foreigners, has been marked since its inception by its writers:

- 1) affirming their equal humanity in the sight of the divine while being treated as subhuman property;
- 2) expanding the ideals of what constitutes the American body and its cultures; and
- 3) redefining their gender expressions and sexualities outside binaries and laws that render them queer.

In 1903, preeminent scholar W.E.B. Du Bois dubbed black Americans’ fraught state of being as that of a *double consciousness*, an acute spiritual awareness of dual citizenship and ancestry in the United States and in a continent that is at once derided for its link to darker skin and religious and cultural difference and exploited for its wealth of natural resources, including its human capital. This course will complicate that dualism by adding a multivalent dimension recent scholars of color have called *the quare*, or *quareness*, a globally Southern diasporic state of being that allows for more flexible, inclusive discourse on race, gender, and sexuality than the binaries of “gay/lesbian” and “straight.” These concepts share roots with the word *choir* (and thus invokes song) and with *queer*, which has come to define that which is outside society’s accepted norms. In this course, we will take cues from Frederick Douglass and add to the conversation what the “peculiar institution” of slavery has done to *queer* our views of race and of black writers’ thoughts on their quareness.

In recent years, you have been thrust in a moment of intense discourse about the complexities of race, racism, and race relations, gender identity and performance, and sexual identities and human rights, conversations that may be challenging for you and your friends. It is my hope that grappling with the poetics in the course’s primary texts, alongside the philosophies and criticism inspired by Hortense Spillers, Cheryl I. Harris, E. Patrick Johnson, Sharon Holland, and others, will empower you as you articulate your thoughts on historical and contemporary events that are often troubling and difficult.

¹ In this course, we’ll explore the possibilities of this term as it is used by the writers themselves, both in the classical sense of odd and striking deviation from a norm, of cantors in a church (*kwæer*, in the editions of the Middle English Wycliffe Bible, an ancestor to our contemporary *choir*), and of representations of non-heteronormative sexuality and gender performance.

Learning Outcomes

In this course, I aim to serve as a guide as you:

- read the literary and philosophical texts below closely and critically;
- recognize the use of discipline-specific and genre-specific techniques;
- understand and articulate how these techniques make interventions in blacks' relationship to racial identity formation, racism, gender performance, and sexual agency;
- learn the way scholars have historically posited arguments and how they communicate in discourse communities today;
- persuasively craft and revise your own original arguments;
- master the art of making fair and effective use of the work of others;
- build research and writing skills as you examine blacks Americans' historical memory of the dehumanizing systems of chattel slavery and Jim Crow and their assertion of autonomy in the wake of affirmative action legislation, anticolonial multiculturalism, and postraciality.

Required Primary Readings

Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 3rd edition, Vols. 1& 2 (Full text of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, 1845; *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861; *Cane*, Jean Toomer, 1923; *Passing*, 1929; *Sula*, 1973; excerpts from other authors—see Calendar)

Gentleman Jigger, Richard Bruce Nugent (1929)

Another Country, James Baldwin (1962)

System of Dante's Hell, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (1965)

Corregidora, Gayl Jones (1975)

Kindred, Octavia Butler (1979)

Bailey's Cafe, Gloria Naylor (1992)

Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, Randall Kenan (1992)

The Brother/Sister Plays, Tarell Alvin McRaney (2010)

Voyage of the Sable Venus, Robin Coste Lewis (2015)

Honest Engine, Kyle Dargan (2015)

A host of critical essays (See Moodle & Calendar)

Recommended Writing Resources

Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009.

Hacker, Diane. *A Writer's Reference With Writing About Literature*. 6th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015.

Course Writing Requirements

- Weekly Precis (at least four; up to 10)
- Midterm Exam (take-home)
- Final Exam (self-scheduled) or Final Paper (7-10 pages)
- Attendance & in-class participation

More on Weekly Writing

You will complete weekly précis, due each Monday by midnight, in response to the week's primary texts, designed to synthesize your thoughts as you complete each text. Plan to annotate your texts and write after practically every class to concretize your interpretation of each text and each relates to the others with which they are paired, including the critical essay. Think of these as interpretative pieces rather than summary.

Course Conduct & Writing Requirements

1. Because a major portion of the work in this course is done in class, daily attendance is mandatory. **Two** unexcused absences are allowed; all others will negatively impact your final grade. **Excessive tardiness (greater than 10 minutes) and arrival without work will count as an absence.** If you come to class without the day's work (daily journal or draft), you not only will be marked absent, but you likely will be asked to leave class to complete it. **After six unexcused absences, you will**

automatically fail this class. Absences will not be excused without sufficient documentation, and a simple note that one visited the campus health center may not suffice.

2. All printed writing you turn in must be double-spaced in 12-point Times New Roman on pages with standard 1-inch margins on all sides. Make sure you select “No Spacing” in your toolbar before double-spacing your work. Otherwise, you will inadvertently add extra space between paragraphs and throughout your work. Please be mindful to avoid this error. E-mail and Moodle communication don’t have to be double-spaced; all attached documents (Microsoft Word, Works, etc.) transmitted online, however, should be.
3. You’ll be expected to follow the rules MLA (literature/humanities) as they relate to the assignments. You’ll be expected to cite your primary and secondary texts carefully to this end. You also may want to bookmark or purchase a reference text such as *The Penguin Handbook* by Leslie Faigley, Diane Hacker’s *A Writer’s Reference With Writing About Literature*, or *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, edited by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein.
4. Your work should be submitted by class time on due dates to me and/or your peers(s). Late assignments will incur penalty unless we discuss your extenuating circumstances in advance and you provide documentation upon returning to class. (Again, a note from parents/guardians or a note that you visited the campus health center or a hospital will not suffice. You’ll need a more official note from a health center designee.) Back up your work in as many ways as you can (e-mail, USB drive, FileBox, external hard drive, etc.). Loss of work due to technological lapses may not excuse you from penalty.

The heading of every feeder and assignment should include the following, double-spaced successively in the order listed, in the **upper left corner** of each assignment:

Your Full Name

Professor Wilson

Writing 101:C

17 February 2015

In **upper-right corner of every subsequent page**, you should include your last name and the page number (as in Wilson 2) of your work.

- a) Each heading should be followed by a title that summarizes the theme/thesis of your piece of writing.
 - b) Each daily journal should be at least two (double-spaced) pages unless otherwise noted.
 - c) Please **staple** all materials before coming to class. When submitting your unit projects, please put all drafts and workshop handouts in a pocket folder, with your final draft on top.
5. Build a network among classmates so that when you are absent you can find out what you’ve missed. I will be available to help, but it’s important that you build a rapport with your colleagues.
 6. It is my desire and expectation that all will pass this class. For all students who make a D or below on a complete assignment submitted on time, see me about rewriting it to improve your grade.

Writing Center

I encourage you to work with the campus Writing Center. To make an appointment for a specific time and date (or with a tutor who provides support for a specific subject), go to <https://davidson.mywconline.com>. You need to register the first time you visit, after which you can log in and make an appointment. You are also welcome to drop by the center (at the back left corner of the library first floor) to see if a tutor is available;

tutoring hours have expanded slightly and vary by day but are generally Sunday-Thursday, 2-4 and 7-11 p.m. This semester, the center also will have Friday afternoon hours available.

To get the most out of a Writing Center visit, bring your essay prompt, relevant readings, and a draft of your work in progress with you.

Honor Code

Each Davidson student is honor bound to refrain from stealing, lying about College business, and cheating on academic work. Stealing is the intentional taking of any property without right or permission. Lying is intentional misrepresentation of any form. Cheating is any practice, method, or assistance, whether explicitly forbidden or unmentioned, that involves any degree of dishonesty, fraud, or deceit. Cheating includes plagiarism, which is representing another's ideas or words as one's own. Each student is responsible for learning and observing appropriate documentation of another's work. Each Davidson student is honor bound to report immediately all violations of the Honor Code of which the student has first-hand knowledge; failure to do so is itself a violation of the Honor Code. All students, faculty, and other employees of Davidson College are responsible for familiarity with and support of the Honor Code. Any student, faculty member, administrative officer, employee, or guest of the College may charge a student with a violation of the Honor Code. Charges are presented to the Dean of Students and at the Dean's discretion must be signed. If the Dean determines that further proceedings are warranted by the Honor Council, he or she will prepare a formal charge. Hearings, administrative conferences and other proceedings regarding alleged violations of the Honor Code shall be conducted pursuant to the Code of Disciplinary Procedures.

Honor Pledge

"On my honor I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others."

Accommodations for Disabled Students

Full accommodations are the legal right of students with disabilities of all kinds. I am committed to providing accommodations for students with learning disabilities that have been documented by Davidson College. If you are a learning disabled student, please identify yourself to me as soon as possible, so that we can strategize ways to accommodate your needs in this classroom community. Students with other disabilities are also encouraged to self-identify as soon as possible and discuss with me how I can make accommodations that will enhance your learning experience.

Grading Scale

Weekly Precís.....	100 points
Midterm Exam	100 points
Final Exam.....	100 points
Final Paper.....	100 points
Research Presentation.....	50 points
Attendance/In-class Participation	50 points

94-100 = A	93-90 = A-	
87-89 = B+	84-86 = B	83-80 = B-
77-79 = C+	74-76 = C	73-70 = C-
67-69 = D+	64-66 = D	<63 = F

375-400 = A	374-358 = A-	
357-346 = B+	345-330 = B	329-318 = B-
317-306 = C+	305-294 = C	293-278 = C-
277-266 = D+	265-254 = D	<253 = F

Here are some basic standards that should offer insight on what to expect when work is graded:

A: The document is excellent as is, with little or no additional revision necessary. It meets both the writer's and the readers' needs clearly and efficiently. It not only meets the purpose of the assignment, but it does so in a particularly ingenious or elegant way. It is substantially better than the ordinary assignment, and there are virtually no problems with standard grammar and style. It has been organized to meet the needs of its audience and clearly demonstrates an above average level of fluency with written English.

B: The document meets assignment goals with some revision. It contains all significant/required content, but certain elements of organization, focus or writing style need work. Editorial revisions pertain to words and sentences or to one or two small sections. Overall, it meets the goals of the assignment and effectively articulates them in most respects, and it demonstrates a better than adequate level of fluency with written English, with a few grammatical and style errors present.

C: The document requires significant revision before it meets assignment goals; though it contains most of the necessary information somewhere, its content, design, and organization prevent readers from accomplishing the intended goals. Large passages might need to be rewritten or reorganized, or the assignment might contain extensive stylistic problems. It demonstrates an acceptable level of fluency with written English. There are, however, too many grammar or style problems for a professional assignment.

D: The document requires extensive revision before it meets assignment goals. Though it attempts to meet the requirements of the assignment, it is deficient in content, focus and organization, or it may contain extensive grammatical or mechanical errors. Although it shows some evidence of an attempt to apply the principles discussed for the assignment, the attempt was not generally successful. There are so many problems with punctuation and style that the reader has a difficult time gathering the meaning/purpose of the assignment.

F: The document completely fails to meet the purpose and requirements of the assignment; readers cannot accomplish the intended goals. The assignment shows no evidence of application of the principles discussed in the course. There are so many problems with either punctuation or grammar that the focus of the assignment is completely unclear. An assignment that does not meet the length requirement or that is submitted late also may receive a failing grade.

Student Information (please print legibly):

Name: _____

Preferred name or nickname: _____

University email address(es) (indicate which is preferred): _____

Major (Declared or Anticipated) _____

Hometown (Opt.) _____

Birthday (Opt.) _____

Discuss your past English/writing course experiences. What have you been told you did/do well in your writing? With what have you struggled? What was your favorite assignment, and why? What assignment did you enjoy least, and why?

In relation to these experiences, how do you hope to improve or expand upon your strengths in this course?

What do you like to read (and/or write) in your spare time?

How comfortable are you in large groups (full-class discussion)? How comfortable are you in small groups of three or four? How comfortable are you in one-on-one discussion?

(Answer privately.) List any circumstances that I need to know of that may affect your performance in this course.

Your pledge to me:

By signing below, I indicate that I have read and understand the syllabus requirements. I agree to abide by them, particularly the honor pledge.

Student signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Spring 2015 Calendar

(will be adjusted as needed)

Week	Tuesday	Thursday
1 Jan.	12 Introductions & syllabus overview “Notes on Intersectionality and the Quare” (M) N = Norton Anthology M = Moodle	14 Phillis Wheatley, “To Maecenas,” “On Imagination” O’Culley, “Queering Phillis Wheatley” (M) “Whiteness as Property” (M, finish by MLK Day)
2	19 Reading Day: Harriet Jacobs, <i>Incidents</i> (N) Keckley, <i>Behind the Scenes</i> , Chapters 1-3 (N) Douglass, <i>Narrative</i> (N)	21 Discussion Day: Jacobs, <i>Incidents</i> (N), Keckley, <i>Behind the Scenes</i> , Chapters 1-3 (N) Douglass, <i>Narrative</i> (N) Essays: Abdur-Rahman; “The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives” (M) Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (M)
3	26 Toomer, <i>Cane</i> , Parts 1 & 2 (N) Locke, “The New Negro” (M) Toomer, <i>Cane</i> : “A Note,” “Introduction,” “Waldo Frank Foreword,” “Correspondence,” “Reviews: W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, The Younger Literary Movement,” “Langston Hughes: Gurdjieff in Harlem” (xi-lxxviii, 117-119, 139-173, 184-185, 194)	28 Toomer, <i>Cane</i> , Part 3 (N) Williams, “ <i>Cane</i> and the Erotics of Mourning” (M)
4 Feb.	2 Larsen, <i>Passing</i> , Parts 1 & 2 (N) “Foreword” (M)	4 Larsen, <i>Passing</i> , Part 3 (N) Thaggert, “Racial Etiquette: Nella Larsen’s <i>Passing</i> and the Rhinelander Case”
5	9 Nugent, “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” (N) Nugent, <i>Gentleman Jigger</i> (“Foreword,” “Introduction,” “Book One”)	11 Nugent, <i>Gentleman Jigger</i> (Book Two) Cobb, “Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance’s Impolite Queers”
6	16 Baldwin, <i>Another Country</i> (Book One)	18 Baldwin, <i>Another Country</i> (Book Two) Reddinger, “ ‘Just Enough for the City’: Limitations of Space in Baldwin’s <i>Another Country</i> ”
7	23 Baldwin, <i>Another Country</i> (Book Three) Martínez, “Dying to Know: Identity and Self-Knowledge in Baldwin’s <i>Another Country</i> ”	25 Midterm Review Spring Break begins Feb. 27
8 March	1 Spring Break	3 Spring Break
9	8 Baraka/Jones, <i>System of Dante’s Hell</i> Dieke, “Sadeanism: Baraka, Sexuality, and the Perverse Imagination in <i>The System of Dante’s Hell</i> ” (short essay)	10 Baraka/Jones, <i>System of Dante’s Hell</i> Dieke, “Tragic Faith and the Dionysian Unconscious: An Interfacing of Novelist Baraka and Friedrich Nietzsche”
10	15 <i>Sula</i> , Morrison	17 <i>Sula</i> , Morrison Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”
11	22 Gayl Jones, <i>Corregidora</i> Fahy, “Unsilencing Lesbianism in the Early Fiction of Gayl Jones” (203-206a, 213-218)	24 MIDTERM EXAMS DUE Gayl Jones, <i>Corregidora</i> Li, “Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones’s <i>Corregidora</i> ”
12	29 Easter Break	31 Butler, <i>Kindred</i>

13 April	5 Butler, <i>Kindred</i> Robertson, “ ‘Some Matching Strangeness’: Biology, Politics, and the Embrace of History in Octavia Butler’s <i>Kindred</i> ”	7 Naylor, <i>Bailey’s Café</i>
14	12 Naylor, <i>Bailey’s Café</i> / Kenan, <i>Let the Dead</i> (first half) Buehler, “Below the Surface: Female Sexuality in Gloria Naylor’s <i>Bailey’s Café</i> ”	14 Reading Day
15	19 Kenan, <i>Let the Dead</i> (second half) Cannon, “Disturbing the African American Community: Defamiliarization in Randall Kenan’s <i>Let the Dead Bury Their Dead</i> ”	21 McRaney, <i>The Brother/Sister Plays</i> (“Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet”)
16	26 Lewis, <i>Voyage of the Sable Venus</i>	28 Lewis, <i>Voyage of the Sable Venus</i>
17 May	3 Dargan, <i>Honest Engine</i> Evaluations	5 FINAL EXAMS BEGIN EXAMS DUE MAY 12 @ MIDNIGHT