

Writing 101:M

Quare Harmonies, National Bodies: Rethinking “Queer” Through African American Poetics

TTh 9:40-10:55 a.m., 1096 Chambers Hall



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In his *Poetics*, Aristotle declares that the poet'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.

Predating the nation's founding, the literature of African Americans, America's original queer¹ 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.

But this is ultimately a writing course, and I assert that writing isn't a “gift” a select few possess. Rather, it is a skill that can be developed and with which we can all thrive, if we embrace our strengths, learn the tools that will shore up that which challenges us, and listen carefully to feedback. In the past few years, each of you has been thrust in a moment of intense dialogue about the complexities of race, racism, and race relations, gender identity and performance, and sexual identities and human rights, a dialogue that may be challenging for you and your friends. It is my hope that grappling with the poetics that Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Jean Toomer, and Natasha Trethewey posit in their writing, alongside the philosophies of a diverse lot from Aristotle and Horace to Audre Lorde and Sharon Holland, 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 for analytic and rhetorical inquiry;
- recognize the use of discipline-specific and genre-specific techniques;
- understand and articulate how these techniques produce a literary effect and produce meaning;
- learn the way scholars have historically posited arguments and how they communicate in discourse communities today;
- draw upon multimodal and archival resources (visual, auditory, textual, digital) to develop arguments and present them in written and multimedia/electronic formats;
- 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 skill as you examine Americans' historical memory of racial identity formation, racism, and the dehumanizing systems of slavery and Jim Crow.

Required Primary Readings

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). New York: The Modern Library, 2004. (also online [here](#) and at a link on Moodle)

Toomer, Jean. *Cane: New Authoritative Edition* (1923). Ed. Rudolph Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: Liveright, 2011.

Trethewey, Natasha. *Thrall*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

Wheatley, Phillis. *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (1773). Ed. John Shields. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Required Secondary Readings

Aristotle. *Poetics* (350 B.C.). *Classic Writings on Poetry*, Ed. William Harmon. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 31-62. (Excerpt on Moodle and at a link there and [here](#))

Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Forethought," "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "Of the Sorrow Songs" (1903). *Bartleby.com*. (also linked on Moodle)

Holland, Sharon. "Foreword: 'Home' Is a Four-Lettered Word." *Black Queer Studies*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. ix-xiii. (Excerpt on Moodle)

Horace. "Ars Poetica" (18 or 19 B.C.). *Classic Writings on Poetry*, Ed. William Harmon. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 63-74. (Excerpt on Moodle at a link there and [here](#))

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926, *The Nation*). *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000. (Excerpt on Moodle or [here](#))

Hume, David. "Of National Characters" (1754). *Philosophical Works of David Hume*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1854. (Excerpt on Moodle and focused excerpt [here](#))

Kant, Immanuel. "Of National Characteristics" (1764). *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Trans. John T. Goldthwait. Oakland: University of California Press, 1961, 2003.

Lorde, Audre. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (1978). *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Eds. Maria Damon and Ira Livingston. Urbana/Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 355-358. (Excerpt on Moodle and online [here](#))

Walker, Alice. "Womanist" (1979). *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Boston: Mariner Books/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2003. (Excerpt on Moodle)

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

- 4 unit projects (three essays, one essay and multimedia/Tumblr site)
- Daily journal writing assignments
- Attendance & in-class participation

Writing Workshop

You will complete four essays in response to aforementioned texts, and you will have shorter writing exercises, or “daily journals,” that will synthesize your thoughts as you complete each essay. The class is designed as a workshop, a learning community in which you will get feedback from one or more peers on each assignment. Expect to write practically every class, as you and your peers share your writing and hone your projects based on constructive criticism you offer one another using the rubrics that we develop.

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

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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 our class Writing Fellow, Meg Mendenhall, and to visit 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.mynwonline.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.

Here is Meg's schedule of availability.

Sunday, 2/8, 2-4 p.m.
 Monday, 2/9, 7-8 p.m.
 Sunday, 2/15, 2-4 p.m.
 Monday, 2/16, 7-9 p.m.
 Wednesday, 3/11, 7-9 p.m.
 Tuesday, 3/17, 7-9 p.m.
 Wednesday, 3/18, 3-5 p.m.
 Wednesday, 4/1, 2-4 p.m.
 Sunday, 4/12, 2-4 p.m.
 Monday, 4/13, 7-9 p.m.
 Sunday, 5/3, 2-4 p.m.
 Monday, 5/4, 7-9 p.m.

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

- Daily Journals.....80 points
- Writing Project No. 1100 points
- Writing Project No. 2100 points
- Writing Project No. 3.....100 points
- Writing Project No. 4100 points
- Attendance/In-class Participation20 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

470-500 = A	448-470 = A-	
447-433 = B+	432-418 = B	398-417 = B-
383-397 = C+	368-382 = C	348-367 = C-
333-347 = D+	318-332 = D	<317 = 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: _____

Writing Assignments

Writing Project No. 1: Defining Blackness and Queerness/Quareness

4 weeks; at least five double-spaced pages; draft and one revision

Throughout the past month, we have read early thinkers consistently focalizing a lens of difference on the state of being black. First, students will be asked to summarize Aristotle's foundational elements of poetics in order to appreciate the complexities of *summary* as a fair representation of others' ideas, inevitably impacted by the summarizer's interests. In their summaries, students should make clear a delineation of what Aristotle defines as normative or acceptable and non-normative and unacceptable in writing and being. Then, compare Aristotle's foundational elements of poetics with those of at least two other thinkers we have read, one centuries-old, one from the past century (Horace, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, W.E.B. Du Bois, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Sharon Holland). Undergirded by these summaries and definitions, students must argue in a paper whether black American writers fit into Aristotelian norms of poetics or are inherently marked queer by his and other thinkers' lenses on difference. If students deem that Aristotelian poetics and blackness jibe, explain in what ways they do. If students deem blackness inherently un-Aristotelian, how do his successors castigate, lament, embrace, and even celebrate this outsider, queer space and offer alternative ways of aligning blackness with a different kind of poetics?

Draft No. 1: Feb. 10

Draft No. 2: Feb. 12

Final Draft: Feb. 17

Writing Project No. 2: Blackness and the Divine

4 weeks; at least five double-spaced pages; draft and one revision

In a nation simultaneously founded upon the ideals of "liberty and justice for all" and the contradictory exploit of captured Africans living with what Phillis Wheatley calls the "diabolic die" of the "mark of Cain," African American writers consistently articulate what W.E.B. Du Bois calls, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "the strange meaning of being black." Simultaneously, however, from Wheatley onward, they call themselves a divinely chosen people, made all the more peculiar by what Frederick Douglass underscores, in his *Narrative*, as the South's "peculiar institution" of chattel slavery. Using evidence from either Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* or Douglass' *Narrative*, navigate a close reading of at least two poems or two key poetic prose passages alongside Du Bois's theories of "double consciousness" in the selections from *Souls* we have read. Take into account how Wheatley or Douglass articulates her/his queer (or quare) body relationship to American citizenship and national identity, to cisgendered roles and binaries, and to the sexual mores and codes of his/her day. How does s/he comport himself or herself in relationship to the divine and these markers of identity?

Draft No. 1: March 10

Draft No. 2: March 12

Final Draft: March 19

Writing Project No. 3: Blackness, Music, and Queer/Quare Harmonies

4 weeks; at least five double-spaced pages; draft and one revision

With the dawn of the 20th century, blacks began fashioning themselves "New Negroes" and enjoying a newfound freedom outside the Jim Crow South with its Reconstruction violence and neo-slavery laws and codes. Jean Toomer's 1923 prose-poem, *Cane*, emerged contemporaneously at the height of that artistic, urban renaissance, making use of the fragmentation and lyricism in African American vernacular, folk culture, and that century's great new fusion of gospel, blues, and ragtime: jazz. Through a close reading of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, examine how the musical artform shapes Toomer's syntax, narrative structure, and characterizations. Engage theorists we have read as you make your arguments about the queerness/quareness of black music in *Cane*. Find innovative ways to use the music in *Cane* in your own critical work.

Draft No. 1: April 2

Draft No. 2: April 9

Final Draft: April 14

Writing Project No. 4: Decoding ‘The Typology of T’aint/Taint’:

The Future of Blackness and Queerness/Quareness in the Era of Multi-Ethnicity

3.5 weeks; at least five double-spaced pages and a visual interpretation of a poem from Thrall; draft and one revision

In *Thrall*, Natasha Trethewey interrogates her own biracial identity and deconstructs Euro-American cultures’ centuries-long documentation in paintings and other visual art of “the typology of t’aint/taint” that children born in violation of miscegenation laws represent. In a WordPress site or Tumblr page, visually narrate one of Trethewey’s ekphrastic poems in *Thrall*, and in an accompanying argumentative essay, elucidate the quare/queer future of blackness and liminal multi-ethnic identity that Trethewey represents in the poem you select. Put Trethewey’s poem in conversation with at least one theorist and one other creative writer we have read that you also see similarly complicating the markers of racial, gender, and sexual binaries that she critiques.

Draft No. 1: April 28

Draft No. 2: April 30

Final Draft: May 5

Spring 2015 Calendar

(will be adjusted as needed)

Week		Tuesday	Thursday
1 Jan.	13	Introductions & syllabus overview	15 <i>Aristotle</i> , “Poetics”; <i>Horace</i> , “Ars Poetica”
2	20	<i>Aristotle</i> , “Poetics”; <i>Horace</i> , “Ars Poetica”	22 <i>Hume</i> , “Of National Characters”; <i>Kant</i> , “Of National Characteristics”
3	27	<i>Du Bois</i> , “The Forethought,” “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” “Of the Sorrow Songs”	29 Visit Little Library Rare Book Room; view film on Douglass or Du Bois
4 Feb.	3	<i>Lorde</i> : “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”; <i>Walker</i> : “Womanist”; <i>Holland</i> : “Foreword: ‘Home’ Is a Four- Lettered Word”	5 Synthesis of thoughts in journals
5	10	Writing Project No. 1 Draft 1 Due <i>Wheatley, Collected</i> : Prefatory letters, “To Mæcenias,” “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” “On Imagination”	12 Writing Project No. 1 Draft 2 Due <i>Wheatley, Collected</i> : “To S.M., a Young Painter ...,” “A Farewel to America,” “America” ; O’Culley, <i>New Essays</i> : “Queering Phillis Wheatley”
6	17	Writing Project No. 1 Final Draft Due <i>Douglass, Narrative</i> : Appiah Introduction, “Preface ‘Letter,’” “Chapters 1-4” (xi-38)	19 <i>Douglass, Narrative</i> : “Chapters 5-8” (39-98)
7	24	<i>Douglass, Narrative</i> : “Chapters 9-Appendix” (99-119) ;	26 “ ‘The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives,” <i>Abdur-Rahman</i> ; synthesis of thoughts in journals Spring Break begins Feb. 27
8 March	3	Spring Break	5 Spring Break
9	10	Writing Project No. 2 Draft 1 Due Revisiting thoughts in daily journals	12 Writing Project No. 2 Draft 2 Due
10	17	<i>Locke</i> , “The New Negro” (on Moodle) <i>Toomer, 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)	19 Writing Project No. 2 Final Draft Due <i>Toomer, Cane</i> : Part 1 (“Karintha” to “Blood-Burning Moon,” 5-37)
11	24	<i>Toomer, Cane</i> : Part 2 (“Seventh Street” to “Bona and Paul,” 41-78)	26 <i>Toomer, Cane</i> : “Kabnis” (81-115)
12 April	31	Synthesis of thoughts in daily journals, <i>Charles Scruggs</i> , “Textuality and Vision in <i>Jean Toomer’s Cane</i> ”	2 <i>Jennifer D. Williams</i> , “ <i>Cane</i> and the Erotics of Mourning” Writing Project No. 3 Draft 1 Due Easter Break begins April 3
13	7	Easter Break	9 Writing Project No. 3 Draft 2 Due LRC Session w/Peter Carolla to learn technology; Conferences Friday-Sunday
14	14	Writing Project No. 3 Final Draft Due <i>Thrall</i> : “Elegy” to “Rotation” (3-55)	16 <i>Thrall</i> : “Thrall” to “Illumination” (59-78)
15	21	LRC Session w/Peter Carolla to work on sites Writing Project No. 4 Draft 1 Due	23 LRC time to work on sites Synthesis of thoughts in journals Writing Project No. 4 Draft 2 Due
16 May	28	Course review & evaluations	30 LRC time to work on sites
17	5	Writing Project No. 3 Final Draft Due	7 Optional make-up class; good luck with your exams!