

## Staging Black Queer Lives (THET608Q)

Spring 2019

Professor T. Chester (they/them)

*“Not queer like gay. Queer like, escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like...and pursue it.”*

—Brandon Wint

This course centers dramatic texts and performances that stage and explore the histories, experiences and stories of Queer Black people in the United States. The study of Black Theatre is often dominated by plays written by and/or about cis-heterosexual Black men. This course seeks to disrupt this imbalance by focusing on plays, playwrights and performances that are often marginalized in the study of Black Theatre. The course will be arranged chronologically and thematically. We will juxtapose dramatic texts with historical and theoretical readings, giving students the space to engage critically and creatively throughout the course. This course is created in the tradition of Elmo Terry-Morgan’s *Black Lavender: A Study of Plays with Black LGBTQ Content* first taught in the Spring of 1998 at Brown University. The purpose of this course is to contribute to the archive of Black Queer stories. It is assumed that students come to this course with some knowledge of Queer Theory and/or Black Feminist Theory. This course is not an exhaustive history of Black Queer Theatre but should serve as an entry point to exploring the archive.

### Course Objectives:

- To provide opportunities to explore representations of Black Queer bodies on the stage.
- To encourage students to examine the broad contexts in which Black Queer performance takes place.
- To offer opportunities for students to address the absence of Black bodies and narratives from Black/Queer/Performance Studies.
- To offer opportunities to engage critically and ethically with works for and about the lives of Black Queer bodies
- To explore the ways in which Black Queer bodies and stories have been disappeared from historical accounts and archives.
- To place Black theorist and cultural writers in conversation with historical and contemporary representations of performances by and/or about Black Queer folk.

- To celebrate the ways Black Queer people reinvent, remix possibilities, transform and create throughout Black experiences
- To explore the ramifications of Black figurative death on Black Queer and gender-variant people.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- To demonstrate a familiarity with a range of Black queer productions, dramatic texts, theorists and artists.
- To recognize and appreciate the aesthetic, social and political dimensions of Black queer performances and events.
- To identify, analyze and compare major issues, methodologies, and paradigms of Black queer performance and queer theory.
- To evaluate and apply a variety of critical and theoretical approaches to the study of Black queer performance.
- To foster an understanding of reconstructing knowledge, creating an archive and dealing with figurative death.
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**Required Texts:**

- *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris (email [AaronM@nytw.org](mailto:AaronM@nytw.org) to obtain the script)
- *For Black Trans Girls Who Gotta Cuss A Mother Fucker Out When Snatching An Edge Ain't Enough: A Choreo Drama* by Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi
- *The Brother/Sister Plays* by Tarell Alvin McCraney
- *Wig Out* by Tarell Alvin McCraney

\*All other readings/viewings will be available on ELMS or via hyperlink\*

**Campus Policies**

It is our shared responsibility to know and abide by the University of Maryland's policies that relate to all courses, which include topics like:

- |                                    |                                       |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| ● Academic integrity               | ● Grades and appeals                  |
| ● Student and instructor conduct   | ● Copyright and intellectual property |
| ● Accessibility and accommodations |                                       |
| ● Attendance and excused absences  |                                       |

Please visit [www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html](http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html) for the Office of Undergraduate Studies' full list of campus-wide policies and follow up with me if you have questions.

## Activities, Learning Assessments, & Expectations for Students

- Classroom Community
  - I expect you to be present in *body and mind*. Participation in class discussion is crucial-thus, if you are physically present but not active in the class, your grade and the classroom community will be affected. This does not mean you must be talking at every turn. It does mean you are expected to be intellectually present, paying attention to whomever is speaking and actively involved in the progression of the class. *ALWAYS BRING THE TEXT WE ARE DISCUSSING TO CLASS. You will be asked to leave if you have not adequately prepared for class -read and attempted to understand the material (and have the materials with you).*
  - By nature of the course, we will be discussing performance and art that challenge conventions, question authority and cross boundaries. Be advised, I expect that we all will contribute to an atmosphere of respect. Aggressive, insensitive or judgemental behavior will not be tolerated. Should you, for any reason, feel disrespected please feel free to consult with me directly, or contact me anonymously.
  - Attendance: The first absence will incur no penalty. Excessive lateness will result in an unexcused absence. Excessive absences will affect your final grade. (i.e. B to B-)
  - Course Materials: All readings will be shared through the course ELMS site. It is always your responsibility to access and read the material before class. Films that will not be streamed on the course website will be denoted with an (\*) on the syllabus.
  - Communication: You must use your UMD email for this class. I will send emails via the course website and/or gmail regarding assignments and requirements. If there are problems with your email account, in that you are not receiving emails, or cannot post properly on the course website, you must resolve these issues. I can be contacted by email and telephone. Email is the most reliable way to reach me. Please keep all email correspondence professional and concise. I will respond to emails within 48 hours of receipt. Before and/or after class is not the appropriate venue to approach the professor with questions concerning your grade, please make an appointment.
  - Appointments: You are always welcome to drop in during my office hours, but if you can make an appointment, it will make my availability more certain.
  - Late work is not accepted. If you are having trouble with an assignment/ timely completion, it is your responsibility to contact me BEFORE the due date.
  - All assignments should be submitted in MS Word or PDF readable files.

### Course-Specific Policies:

Expectations. I also expect you to do your part to maintain a class environment of respect, and civility. This includes being on time, staying seated except when asked to form a discussion group, refraining from texting, non-class computer use, or other disruptive behaviors. You have

the right to be treated with respect by me and your classmates, and an obligation to respect others even when you disagree with their views. Failure to conduct yourself appropriately may lead to being asked to leave the classroom.

For this course, some of your assignments will be collected via Turnitin on our course ELMS page. I have chosen to use this tool because it can help you improve your scholarly writing and help me verify the integrity of student work. For information about Turnitin, how it works, and the feedback reports you may have access to, visit [Turnitin Originality Checker for Students](#)

### **Get Some Help!**

You are expected to take personal responsibility for your own learning. This includes acknowledging when your performance does not match your goals and doing something about it. Everyone can benefit from some expert guidance on time management, note taking, and exam preparation, so I encourage you to consider visiting <http://ter.ps/learn> and schedule an appointment with an academic coach. Sharpen your communication skills (and improve your grade) by visiting <http://ter.ps/writing> and schedule an appointment with the campus Writing Center. Finally, if you just need someone to talk to, visit <http://www.counseling.umd.edu>.

Everything is free because you have already paid for it, and everyone needs help... all you have to do is ask for it.

### **Names/Pronouns and Self Identifications**

The University of Maryland recognizes the importance of a diverse student body, and we are committed to fostering equitable classroom environments. I invite you, if you wish, to tell us how you want to be referred to both in terms of your name and your pronouns (he/him, she/her, they/them, etc.). The pronouns someone indicates are not necessarily indicative of their gender identity. Visit [trans.umd.edu](http://trans.umd.edu) to learn more.

Additionally, how you identify in terms of your gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and dis/ability, among all aspects of your identity, is your choice whether to disclose (e.g., should it come up in classroom conversation about our experiences and perspectives) and should be self-identified, not presumed or imposed. I will do my best to address and refer to all students accordingly, and I ask you to do the same for all of your fellow Terps.

### **Grades**

Grades are not given, but earned. Your grade is determined by your performance on the learning assessments in the course and is assigned individually (not curved). If earning a particular grade

is important to you, please speak with me at the beginning of the semester so that I can offer some helpful suggestions for achieving your goal.

All assessment scores will be posted on the course ELMS page. If you would like to review any of your grades, or have questions about how something was scored, please schedule a time for us to meet in my office.

Late work will not be accepted for course credit so please plan to have it submitted well before the scheduled deadline. I am happy to discuss any of your grades with you, and if I have made a mistake I will immediately correct it. Any formal grade disputes must be submitted in writing and within one week of receiving the grade.

### **Assignments:**

**Critical Act (Performance Review) (15%)** Students are required to attend one performance that centers Black Queer bodies and/or stories on stage. Students composed a performance review in the style of TDR's "Critical Acts." "Unlike a conventional performance review, articles in this section include thick description and in-depth critical analysis. Rather than a short report to help someone decide if the performance is something they would like to see, these articles are meant to bring the performance into the historical record and to further examine what the performance is doing in its historical, cultural, and artistic context." Please see [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/journals/dram/sub/critical\\_acts](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/journals/dram/sub/critical_acts) for more information.

Examples Critical Acts will be posted.

Eligible Performances (Check TodayTix and/or the Theatre's website for discounted tickets):

- *BLKS* by Aziza Barnes ([Woolly Mammoth February 3- March 4](#))
- *How to Catch a Creation* by Christina Anderson ([Philadelphia Theatre Company March 22-April 14](#))
- *Choir Boy* by Tarell McCraney ([Manhattan Theatre Club December 12- March 10](#))
- *Daddy* by Jeremy O. Harris ([Vineyard Theatre February 12- March 31](#))

**Embodied Act (20%)** Students will select (2) dates to offer an embodied critical act. The act should include a dynamic presentation that brings life to some aspect of that day's reading. Embodied Acts should not exceed 10 minutes. The student will also be tasked with leading the class discussion. Students should be prepared to offer key terms for definition. Students should be prepared to offer a description of the text, their interpretation of the text, an evaluation of the text, and the ways the text enters into a broader theoretical framework.

**Thoughtful participation (10%)** Each student is expected to be an active participant in-class and to be an engaged peer and colleague for fellow students. Participation also includes in-class activities. Students should come prepared with an offering (quotes, questions, point of engagement, etc.) for each class

**Short paper (15%)** Students should compose a short paper putting at least two performances (no more than three) in conversation with each other. The paper does not require outside research, but should use course texts from the first part of the semester to engage issues pertaining to Black Queer Theatre. Students should meet with me by to discuss their chosen topics. Papers will be due after Spring Break.

**Final project (40%)** Students will choose from several options for a final project/ paper. Guidelines will be given at a later date. Choices include (but are not limited to)

- Producing a stage reading of a play we studied this semester
- Writing a conference paper that engages Black Queer performances
- Creating a dramaturgical project/reading guide for a play that centers the stories of Black Queer people

**Course Schedule**

Date	Week	Topic/Readings
Jan 29	Week 1	<p><b>Course Intro</b></p> <p>Readings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Listening to the Archives: Black Lesbian Literature and Queer Memory” by Matt Richardson</li> </ul>
Feb 5	Week 2	<p><b>Queering (en)Slaved Bodies</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Insurrection: Holding History</i> by Robert O’Hara</li> </ul> <p>Short Story</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Miss Hannah’s Lesson” by LaShonda Barnett</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "Robert O'Hara's <i>Insurrection</i>: Que(e)rying History by Faedra Carpenter</li> <li>● Kinless or Queer: The Unthinkable Queer Slave in Toni Morrison’s <i>Beloved</i> and Robert O’Hara’s <i>Insurrection Holding History</i> by Rebecca Balon</li> <li>● Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Review: ‘Sugar in Our Wounds’ May Make You Cry About the Past, and the Present by Alexis Soloski</a></li> </ul>
Feb 12	Week 3	<p><b>Harlem Renaissance</b></p> <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Brother to Brother</i></li> <li>● <i>Looking for Langston</i></li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem</i> by Eric Garber</li> <li>● “‘That’s the Kind of Gal I Am’: Drag Balls, Lulu Belles and ‘Sexual Perversion in the Harlem Renaissance by James Wilson</li> <li>● “Looking for Langston: An Interview with Isaac Julien” by Essex Hemphill</li> </ul> <p>Suggested Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Smoke, Lilies and Jade By Bruce Nugent</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Brother to Brother: Filmmaker Q+A</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Brother to Brother: Filmmaker's Statement</a></li> </ul>
Feb 19		<p><b>DC’s New Negro Movement</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Carelessness of Love</i> by Michael Dinwiddie</li> <li>● <i>Rachel</i> by Angelina Grimké</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Saturday Night at the S Street Salon” by Treva Lindsey</li> <li>● “‘Lines she did not dare’ : Angelina Weld Grimké, Harlem Renaissance Poet” by Gloria T. Hull</li> </ul>
Feb 26	Week 4	<p><b>Blues Womyn of the 30’s</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Marie and Rosetta</i> by George Brant</li> </ul> <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Bessie</i></li> <li>● <i>Sister Rosetta Tharpe</i></li> </ul> <p>Listen:</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">“Bulldaggers and Lady Lovers” History is Gay Podcast</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Ma Rainey’s Big Black Bottom by August Wilson</a></li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “The Long Wait: August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom” by Sandra G. Shannon</li> <li>● <a href="#">“Bulldykers and lady lovers: the rumors about lesbian blues singers were all true”</a> By Meagan Day</li> </ul>
Mar 5	Week 5	<p><b>Civil Rights</b></p> <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Brother Outsider</i></li> </ul> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Civil Sex</i> by Brian Freeman</li> <li>● <i>Fireflies</i> by Donja Love</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <p>TBA</p>
March 12	Week 6	<p><b>Black Lives Matter</b></p> <p>Plays</p> <p><i>BLKS</i> by Aziza Barnes</p> <p><i>This Bitter Earth</i> by Harrison David Rivers</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>“When My Brother Fell, I Picked Up His Weapons” by Thembi Duncan</p> <p><a href="#">“A HerStory of the #BLACKLIVESMATTER Movement” by Alicia Garza</a></p>
March 26	Week 7	<p><b>Queer Collectives</b></p> <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Tongues Untied</i></li> </ul> <p>Plays</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Fierce Love</i> by Pomo Afro Homos</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Dark Fruit</i> by Pomo Afro Homos</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Pomo Afro Homos' Fierce Love: Intervening in the Cultural Politics of Race, Sexuality, and AIDS” by David Roman</li> <li>● “Attending Walt Whitman High: the lessons of Pomo Afro Homos' Dark fruit” by Jay Plum</li> <li>● “Post-Pomo Hip-Hop Homos: Hip-Hop Art, Gay Rappers, and Social Change” by By Wilson, D. Mark</li> </ul>
April 2	Week 8	<p><b>Sexuality and Religion</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Crying Holy</i> by Wayne Corbitt</li> <li>● <i>Lo, She Comes</i> by Renita Martin</li> <li>● <i>All Who Have Sinned</i> by Jamila Woods</li> </ul> <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#"><u>All Who Have Sinned</u></a> by Jamila Woods</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community” by Kelly Brown Douglas</li> </ul>
April 9	Week 9	<p><b>(Inter)racial Desire</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Daddy</i> by Jeremy O’Harris</li> <li>● <i>The Toilet</i> by Amiri Baraka</li> <li>● <i>Jar the Floor</i> by Cheryl West</li> <li>● <a href="#"><u>Six Degrees of Separation</u></a> by John Guare</li> </ul> <p>Listen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#"><u>Six Degrees of Separation</u></a> by John Guare</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Return to The Toilet” by Melinda Wilson Ramey</li> <li>● “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity by Jose Esteban Munoz</li> <li>● <i>Beyond Loving: Intimate Racework in Lesbian, Gay, and Straight Interracial Relationships</i> by Amy C. Steinbugler <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Introduction” (optional)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Chapter 1: “The Historical Roots of Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Black/White Intimacy “</li> </ul>
April 16	Week 10	<p><b>(homo) African Influences</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Brother/Sister Plays</i> by Tarell Alvin McCraney</li> <li>● <i>orange</i> by Djola Branner</li> </ul> <p>Watch (before and after)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgBY15KSnm0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgBY15KSnm0</a></li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dreaming in Yoruba Land by Randy Gener</li> <li>● African Diaspora Drama by Sandra L. Richards</li> </ul>
April 23	Week 11	<p><b>Ritual/Jazz Theater</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Watch: <u>The Messiah Complex</u></li> </ul> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>delta dandi</i> by Sharon Bridgforth</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interview with Sharon Bridgforth by Anita Gonzalez</li> <li>● Aquanova: Collapsing Time in the Lives of Sharon Bridgforths’s <i>delta dandi</i> by Stephanie L. Batiste</li> <li>● “‘Mens Womens Some that is Both Some That is Neither’: Spiritual Epistemology and Queering the Black Rural South in the Work of Sharon Bridgforth” by Matt Richardson</li> </ul>
April 30	Week 12	<p><b>Slave Play</b></p> <p>Read:</p> <p>“Decolonizing my Desire” by Jeremy O. Harris</p> <p>“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” by Hortense Spillers</p> <p>Plays:</p>

		<p><i>Slave Play</i></p> <p>Listen:  <a href="https://soundcloud.com/off-book-theatre-podcast/tw-slaveplay-the-breakdown">https://soundcloud.com/off-book-theatre-podcast/tw-slaveplay-the-breakdown</a> (Min 00:45:00 to 01:43:00)  <a href="https://soundcloud.com/off-book-theatre-podcast/two-things-can-be-true">https://soundcloud.com/off-book-theatre-podcast/two-things-can-be-true</a> (00:32:45- 01:23:00) optional  <a href="https://soundcloud.com/ontappod/on-tap-031">https://soundcloud.com/ontappod/on-tap-031</a> (optional)</p>
May 7	Week 13	<p><b>Black Lesbian</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How to Catch Creation</i> by Christina Anderson</li> <li>• <i>Clara's Old Man</i> by Ed Bullins</li> </ul> <p>Readings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Signifying Black Lesbians: Dramatic Speculations" by Lisa M. Anderson</li> </ul>
May 14	Week 14	<p><b>Trans and GNC</b></p> <p>Plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Wig Out</i> by Tarell Alvin McCraney</li> <li>• <i>For Black Trans Girls Who Gotta Cuss A MotherFucker Out When Snatching An Edge Ain't Enough</i> by Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi</li> </ul> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Radiant Desire of Jomama Jones</li> </ul>