

# Queer Reading Practices: The American Novel

Professor Merrill Cole

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English 549, Section 001

Spring Semester 2018

Office: Simpkins 109

Hours: M, 1:00-2:00; TTh, 3:15-4:45

Th, 5:30-8:00 p.m.

Simpkins 214

## Texts

Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room*. ISBN: 0345806565

Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. ISBN: 0811216713

Bechtel, Alison. *Funhome*. ISBN: 978-0618871711

Burroughs, William S. *Naked Lunch*. ISBN: 0802122078

Capote, Truman. *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. ISBN: 0679745645

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* ISBN: 978-0679732181

Feinberg, Leslie. *Stone Butch Blues*. ISBN: 1555838537

Larson, Nella. *Passing*. ISBN: 978-0142437278

Rechy, John. *City of Night*. ISBN: 0802121535

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. ISBN: 978-0520254060

Womack, Craig. *Drowning in Fire*. ISBN: 978-0816521685

## Course Description & Objectives

This seminar interrogates what queer reading means, examining American novels that prominently feature non-normative sexualities, as well as non-normative gender identities and expressions. Alternative representations of sex and gender proliferated during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as writers attempted variously to defend, celebrate, problematize, or explain newly visible forms of difference.

This seminar attends to novels strange not only in topic, but also in form. That is to say, novels that are themselves more than a bit peculiar, queerly askew of the narrative norm, stylistically conforming to nonconformist subject material, or twisted by the strange material that they attempt to present objectively. At issue is the extent to which non-normative sexuality and gender influences formal innovation, what unconventional sexualities have to do with new literary practices.

These novels raise important questions about what it means to be a woman or a man, what counts as obscene, what should or shouldn't be hidden, what happens when moral judgments become oppressive, and what human freedom means. We will also consider the intersections of our texts with such historically concurrent narratives as feminism, colonialism, commodity capitalism, and racial otherness.

In this seminar, it is not just a question of interpreting queer texts, but of learning different ways of reading queerly. For this, we will first turn to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's foundational 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*, which launched a distinctly queer mode of reading still being used, developed, and contested today. As we read through the novels (in chronological order), we will look at and develop other queer reading strategies, including those related directly to the novels.

## Requirements

Queer Reading Practices is a research-intensive course. Each student will write a 15-page annotated bibliography in preparation for a 20-page research essay. Before either can be completed, the Research Essay Proposal will have to be approved. In addition, there will be two short creative assignments. Twice in the semester, each student will give five-minute presentations that involve secondary sources and co-lead discussion for half of the class session on that day. Presentations should be sent to me before class begins, and *all work* should be submitted by email as Microsoft Word attachments.

This course involves both primary and secondary texts. The primary texts are the modernist narratives listed above in Texts (except Sedgwick). Secondary texts are critical and theoretical takes on the primary texts, including scholarly articles and books. Locating these texts is the student's responsibility, though I may offer assistance.

Please refer to <http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php> for student rights and responsibilities.

## Grading

Participation:	15%
Presentations:	15%
Annotated Bibliography:	10%
Research Essay:	60%

Plagiarism will result in an "F", and I will report the student for academic discipline. See WIU's Policy on Academic Integrity at <http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php>. Unexcused absences will affect the participation grade, and two of them is an automatic "F" for the course. Do not expect an "A" if you don't talk regularly in class.

## My Office

Please take the opportunity to meet with me in Simpkins 109, during my office hours, or by appointment, to talk about the readings and your writing. If something about the course bothers you, please don't wait until the end, when it is too late to change it.

## Students with Disabilities

In accordance with University values and disability law, students with disabilities may request academic accommodations where there are aspects of a course that result in barriers to inclusion or accurate assessment of achievement. To file an official request for disability-related accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center at 309-298-2512, [disability@wiu.edu](mailto:disability@wiu.edu) or in 143 Memorial Hall. Please notify the instructor as soon as possible to ensure that this course is accessible to you in a timely manner.

## Discrimination Policy

University values, Title IX, and other federal and state laws prohibit sex discrimination, including sexual assault/misconduct, dating/domestic violence, and stalking. If you, or someone you know, has been the victim of any of these offenses, we encourage you to report this to the Title IX Coordinator at 309-298-1977 or anonymously online at: [http://www.wiu.edu/equal\\_opportunity\\_and\\_access/request\\_form/index.php](http://www.wiu.edu/equal_opportunity_and_access/request_form/index.php). If you disclose an incident to a faculty member, the faculty member must notify the Title IX Coordinator. The complete Title IX policy is available at: <http://www.wiu.edu/vpas/policies/titleIX.php>.

## Schedule

*Note: Student presentation topics are suggested, rather than prescribed.*

Week 1: January 18

Introduction to the course. Handout & discussion.

Week 2: January 25

Nella Larson, *Passing*.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction: Axiomatic," *Epistemology of the Closet*.

**Student Presentation(s) on the Harlem Renaissance.**

**Student Presentation(s) on Larsen.**

Week 3: February 1

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, through page 54, including Preface and Introduction.  
 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet," *Epistemology of the Closet*.

**Student Presentation(s) on Expatriate Paris.**

**Student Presentation(s) on Queer Theory.**

Week 4: February 8

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 55-131.

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* through 106.

**Student Presentation(s) on the history of the American South.**

Week 5: February 15

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 132-80.

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 107-234.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Some Binarisms (I)," *Epistemology of the Closet*.

Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny."

**Student Presentation(s) on Barnes.**

Week 6: February 22

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 235-315.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Some Binarisms (II)," *Epistemology of the Closet*.

**Student Presentation(s) on Faulkner.**

**Research Essay Proposal due.**

Week 7: March 1

Truman Capote, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, through 89.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, through 71.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet" and "The Spectacle of the Closet,"  
*Epistemology of the Closet*.

**Student Presentation(s) on Sedgwick.**

Week 8: March 8

Truman Capote, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, 93-187.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 75-169.

**Student Presentation(s) on Capote.**

**Student Presentation(s) on Baldwin.**

*Spring Break.*

Week 9: March 22

William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

(Best to start John Rechy, *City of Night*)

**Marcus' Presentation on Queer Censorship**

**Alison's Presentation on the Beats**

**Dakota's presentation on Burroughs**

**First Creative Assignment due.**

Week 10: Sunday, April 1, 2:00 p.m.

John Rechy, *City of Night*

**Nick's Presentation on Male Prostitution**

Week 11: April 5

Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

**Marcus' Presentation on Life Before Stonewall**

**Nick's Presentation on Feinberg**

**Annotated Bibliography due.**

Week 12: April 12

Craig Womack, *Drowning in Fire*

**Christivel's Presentation on Gender & Sexuality in Native North America**

**Cristivel's Presentation on Womack**

Week 13: April 19

Alison Bechdel, *Funhome*.

**Rhobie's Presentation on Bechdel**

**Tralynn's Presentation on *The Danish Girl***

Week 14: April 26

Readings, TBA.

**Second Creative Assignment Due.**

Week 15: May 3

**Workshop on the Research Essay (we will meet in a computer classroom).**

Final Exam Week

**Research Essays due Monday, May 7, by 5:00 p.m.**