

**Department of Art and Art History
CU Boulder**

**SPRING 2026
ARTH 5939 BLACK QUEER AESTHETICS
DAY/TIME | VAC 303**

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. cam nelson

ZOOM OFFICE HOURS: On Zoom, by appointment, day/time TBD; sign up for a slot at <https://calendly.com/cam-nelson/office-hours>

OFFICE: VAC 329

EMAIL: crystal.nelson@colorado.edu

NOTE: SYLLABUS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

INSTRUCTOR BIO: Dr. cam nelson is an assistant professor of art history whose research and teaching focuses on Black art and Black visual culture(s) as articulated through painting, photography, film/video, and performance. Her other interests include identity and representation, critical pleasure studies, and contemporary Black life. Her current project examines the visual culture of Black pleasure and the aesthetics of Black joy and safe space in the visual representations of quotidian Blackness as depicted by the painters labeled the Black romantic.

COMMUNICATION POLICY: Students are expected to communicate with me via email. Please review the syllabus, Canvas, and/or the assignment rubric before choosing to email me with your question. I will respond to emails within 48 hours (excludes weekends). If you do not hear from me within 48 hours, write again with URGENT in the subject line. Using urgent should be reserved for important issues that require my immediate attention and only after you have already emailed me once and read the syllabus and/or rubric. Please note, I do not respond to emails after 5 pm, M-F or on the weekends.

CLASS DESCRIPTION: This course explores the formation of Black queer aesthetics, primarily in the US. Together we will examine work produced by and about Black queer subjects across media. This seminar will introduce artists and intellectuals of the Black queer world as well as examine Black queer aesthetic practice as a form of theorizing.

COMMUNITY GUIDELINES:

1. We agree to engage fully to the best of our ability.
2. We commit to disrupting dominant discourses of oppression (race, class, gender)

3. We commit to giving speakers our full attention instead of mentally preparing our response or rebuttal.
4. We agree to move up, move up: those who tend to speak a lot will 'move up' their listening; those who tend to hold back and listen will 'move up' their speaking.
5. We agree to be present for each other: no devices, wait for bathroom breaks, and reflected in our verbal and nonverbal behavior.
6. We agree to increase our awareness of the impact of our words and actions on others.
7. We agree to invite discomfort, to challenge ourselves, and to seek opportunities for growth.
8. We agree to take the time we need to understand differences of opinion.
9. We agree to work towards recognizing our areas of privilege and how this impacts how we engage with each other.
10. We agree to focus on our own experience by making I-statements.
11. We agree to attend to hurtful comments and take care of each other.
12. We agree to not repeat personal things that people say in this space. [What is said here, stays here; what is learned here, leaves here.]

SEMINAR REQUIREMENTS:

You are expected to attend all class meetings having read the required reading. You are expected to participate actively in class discussions. More than 3 absences will result in a failing grade.

SEMINAR CO-FACILITATION (25% of the overall grade): You will be expected to co-facilitate 2 seminars over the course of the semester. The schedule for co-facilitation will be made during the second class meeting, and everyone will have an opportunity to participate. Co-facilitation involves preparing a 15 to 20-minute presentation on the readings for the class. Fifteen minutes is the least amount of time allotted, and twenty minutes is the maximum time allotted for the presentation, so please time yourselves accordingly. A good target length is 18 minutes.

Please prepare your presentation in the following manner:

1. Identify a passage from the reading and screenshot that passage
2. Post the screenshot to Canvas Discussion board for the week; identify the page number
3. Draft a response to the passage (can be bullet points)
4. Draft a series of questions about the passage to ask the class
5. Find relevant audio/visual material to share with the class; be prepared to discuss the audio/visual material

READING RESPONSES (25% of overall grade)

ALL READING RESPONSES MUST BE UPLOADED TO CANVAS BY 11:59 PM ON THE SUNDAY BEFORE CLASS

For your 1 to 2-page reading responses, choose one article and answer the following questions

1. What is the author(s)' argument?
2. How do(es) the author(s) make their argument?
3. To what discourses do(es) the author(s) contribute and in what ways?
4. Is the author(s)' argument convincing?
5. What questions arose for you from the readings?

Post your reading response to the discussion board on Canvas.

Read everyone else's reading responses before class.

NOTE: Responses over 2 pages will be docked 5 points for every page over 2. NO LATE RESPONSES ACCEPTED.

KEYWORDS (10% of the overall grade): You are expected to identify two keywords from the readings per class session and post those keywords to the Canvas Discussion by 11:59 on the Sunday before class. Please prepare to discuss the keywords with the class: how they are used in the text and your reason for selecting them. **NO LATE KEYWORDS ACCEPTED.**

FINAL PROJECT (40%): For the final project you will work as a group to curate an exhibition and publish a digital catalogue for which you each will author an essay. More details to come. **NO LATE FINAL PROJECTS ACCEPTED.**

LATE ASSIGNMENTS: All assignments must be completed and turned in on time. Late assignments will not be accepted. With very few exceptions, missed assignments will not be accepted.

GRADING:

Seminar Co-Facilitation: 20%

Reading Responses: 20%

Keywords: 10%

Final Project: 50% TOTAL

 Paper Abstract w/ Bibliography: 5%

 PDF of Selected Images: 5%

 Scalar Outline: 5%

 Exhibition & Catalogue: 35%

Please note: students must complete all assignments in order to pass the course; academic misconduct will result in automatic failure of the class and University disciplinary procedures. For further information on academic integrity, please see: <https://www.colorado.edu/policies/academic-integrity-policy>

Grades will be assigned as follows:

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
94-100	90-93	87-89	83-86	80-82	77-79	73-76	70-72	67-69	63-66	60-62	<60

HONOR CODE: All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the [Honor Code](#). Violations of the Honor Code may include but are not limited to: plagiarism (including use of paper writing services or technology [such as essay bots]), cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty. Understanding the course's syllabus is a vital part in adhering to the Honor Code.

All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution: StudentConduct@colorado.edu. Students found responsible for violating the [Honor Code](#) will be assigned resolution outcomes from the Student Conduct & Conflict

Resolution as well as be subject to academic sanctions from the faculty member. Visit [Honor Code](#) for more information on the academic integrity policy.

ATTENDANCE: Attendance is mandatory to all classes. Please be here and be on time. Students with more than 3 absences will receive a failing grade.

If a student misses a seminar, they are responsible for everything covered that day, including announcements. You are encouraged to exchange information with each other to obtain notes after an absence.

Students formally affiliated with curricular and extracurricular University-related activities are required to communicate in writing with the instructor about potential conflicts within the first week of class or as soon as the student learns of a conflicting event. This deadline is established to provide students with time to change their course schedule if necessary. Instructors are not obligated to accommodate any potential conflicts, but may, at their own discretion, allow reasonable accommodations for these absences.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS: Campus policy requires faculty to provide reasonable accommodations for students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. Please communicate the need for a religious accommodation in a timely manner. In this class, **please notify me by the end of the second week of class of what days you may miss due to religious holidays.**

See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.

CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR: Students and faculty are responsible for maintaining an appropriate learning environment in all instructional settings, whether in person, remote, or online. Failure to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, marital status, political affiliation, or political philosophy.

For more information, see the [classroom behavior policy](#), the [Student Code of Conduct](#), and the [Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance](#).

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT, DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT, AND/OR RELATED RETALIATION:

CU Boulder is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. University policy prohibits [protected-class](#) discrimination and harassment, sexual misconduct (harassment, exploitation, and assault), intimate partner abuse (dating or domestic violence), stalking, and related retaliation by or against members of our community on- and off-campus. The Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) addresses these concerns, and individuals who have been subjected

to misconduct can contact OIEC at 303-492-2127 or email cureport@colorado.edu. Information about university policies, [reporting options](#), and [support resources](#) including confidential services can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and graduate instructors must inform OIEC when they are made aware of incidents related to these policies regardless of when or where something occurred. This is to ensure that individuals impacted receive outreach from OIEC about resolution options and support resources. To learn more about reporting and support for a variety of concerns, visit the [Don't Ignore It page](#).

ACCOMMODATION FOR DISABILITIES, TEMPORARY MEDICAL CONDITIONS, AND MEDICAL ISOLATION: If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. Information on requesting accommodations is located on the [Disability Services website](#). Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or dsinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance. If you have a temporary medical condition, see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) on the Disability Services website.

If you have a temporary illness, injury or required medical isolation for which you require adjustment,

- Notify the instructor in advance of the absence or inability to participate, if possible.
- Submit assignments electronically, to the extent possible.
- Reach out to the instructor if illness will require late submission or other modifications to deadlines.
- If remaining in a class and fulfilling the necessary requirements becomes impossible due to illness or other COVID-related circumstances, contact the instructor to discuss other options.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS: The University of Colorado Boulder is committed to the well-being of all students. If you are struggling with personal stressors, mental health or substance use concerns that are impacting academic or daily life, please contact [Counseling and Psychiatric Services \(CAPS\)](#) located in C4C or call (303) 492-2277, 24/7.

Free and unlimited telehealth is also available through [Academic Live Care](#). The [Academic Live Care](#) site also provides information about additional wellness services on campus that are available to students

PREFERRED STUDENT NAMES AND PRONOUNS: CU Boulder recognizes that students' legal information doesn't always align with how they identify. Students may update their preferred names and pronouns via the student portal; those preferred names and

pronouns are listed on instructors' class rosters. In the absence of such updates, the name that appears on the class roster is the student's legal name.

DEVICES: Because this is a graduate seminar, I allow laptops and tablets in the classroom for notetaking, e-books, and research purposes. However, they can be a great temptation in terms of distraction. Please be respectful of our seminar discussions, of your cohort, and of the precious time we have to focus on the materials at hand by refraining from using your laptops/tablets for outside work during class.

REQUIRED TEXTS: The following books are required for the course. They have been made available as PDFs or EPUBs on Canvas. The additional readings will be made available as PDFs on the course website or via links to external sites.

Jafari S. Allen, *There's a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life* (Duke University Press, 2022)

Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2022)

Marquis Bey, *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* (Duke University Press, 2022)

Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2013)

Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name—A Biomythography* (Crossing Press, 1982)

Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999)

Marlon B. Ross, *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness* (Duke University Press, 2022)

Siobhan Sommerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2000)

C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2017)

RECOMMEND READING

E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* (Duke University Press, 2019)

E. Patrick Johnson (editor), *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Duke University Press, 2016)

Briona Simone Jones (editor), *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought* (New Press, 2021)

Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (NYU Press, 2018)

FILMS: We will watch the following films this semester. Due to the length of some films, we will be required to screen them at home before class meets.

Dirty Computer—an emotion picture (dir. Janell Monae, 2018, 48m)

Looking for Langston (dir. Isaac Julien, 45m)

Moonlight (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016, 110m) **(screen at home)**

Tongues Untied: Giving a Voice to Black Gay Men (dir. Marlon Riggs, 1989, 54m)

Watermelon Woman (dir. Cheryl Dunye, 1996, 85m) **(screen at home)**

RECOMMENDED FILMS

The Aggressives (dir. Daniel Peddle, 2012, 73m)

Brother to Brother (dir. Rodney Evans, 2004, 90m)

Pariah (dir. Dee Rees, 2011, 86m)

TIMELINE: <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/afam-timeline/timeline>

READING AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

PART I: FOUNDATIONS

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

- **INTRODUCTIONS:** Introduction to the course and each other
- **SELECT** seminar-co-facilitation sessions
- **REVIEW:** Black LGBTQ+ timeline
- **TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT:** Defining ‘Black,’ ‘queer,’ and ‘aesthetics’

WEEK 2: BLACK QUEER STUDIES

READ

- Vincent Woodard, “Just as Quare as They Want to Be: A Review of the Black Queer Studies in the Millenium Conference,” *Callaloo* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 1278-1284
- Johnson and Henderson, “Introduction,” *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Duke University Press, 2005), 1-17
- E. Patrick Johnson, “Quare Studies,” or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” *Black Queer Studies: An Anthology* (Duke University Press, 2005), 124-57
- Nicholas Boggs, “Queer Black Studies: An Annotated Bibliography,” *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 479-494

WATCH IN CLASS

Black Queer Studies: A Genealogy | A Masterclass with E. Patrick Johnson

https://youtu.be/6RWt_HAmLfc?si=lbNvNJDcXMNsZ0H5

WEEK 3: BLACK QUEER HISTORIES I

READ

Omi'seke Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic

Siobhan Sommerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2000)

WEEK 4: BLACK QUEER HISTORIES I

READ

C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2017)

PART II: INTERVENTIONS

WEEK 5: TRAINING WORKSHOP

Meet at the library for research workshop & Scalar training

WEEK 6: TOWARD A QUEER OF COLOR CRITIQUE I

READ

José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999)

WEEK 7: TOWARD A QUEER OF COLOR CRITIQUE II

READ

Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2013)

IN-CLASS SCREENING

Tongues Untied: Giving a Voice to Black Gay Men (dir. Marlon Riggs, 1989, 54m)

WEEK 8: TOWARD A TRANS OF COLOR CRITIQUE

ABSTRACTS DUE

READ

- Julian Gill-Peterson, "Trans of Color Critique before Transsexuality," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 2018): 606-620
- C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix* (Routledge, 2022), 66-76
- Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2022)

- micha cárdena, Reina Gossett, Eric R. Stanley (editors), *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (MIT Press, 2022)

PART III: SENSING & IMAGINING OTHERWISE

WEEK 9: BLACK QUEER THEORIZING & A POLITICS OF DESIRE

PDF OF SELECTED IMAGES DUE

READ

- Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984)
- Jafari S. Allen, *There’s a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life* (Duke University Press, 2022)

WEEK 10: SPRING BREAK

March 16-20, NO CLASS

WEEK 11: MINING THE QUEER ARCHIVE

SCALAR OUTLINE DUE

READ

- Rachel Jane Carroll, “Can You Feel It? Beauty and Queer of Color Politics in *Looking for Langston*,” *Criticism*, 60, no. 4, (Fall 2018): 487-509
- Kobena Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1994)
- Jingsheng Zhang, “*Looking for Langston*, Looking for Identity,” *Intertexts* 24, no. 1-2 (Fall 2020): 48-75
- Anthony Paul Farley, “The Black Body as Fetish Object,” *Oregon Law Review* 76, no. 3 (1997): 457-535

IN-CLASS SCREENING

Looking for Langston (dir. Isaac Julien, 1989, 45m)

WEEK 12: QUEER FUTURES

ESSAY DRAFTS DUE

READ

- Lee Edleman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 1-31 & 111-154
- José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), pp. 74-91
- Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (NYU Press, 2019), pp. 53-80

IN-CLASS SCREENING

Dirty Computer—an emotion picture (dir. Janell Monae, 2018, 48m)

PART IV: READING GENDER, READING SEX

WEEK 13: BLACK FEMININITIES

READ

- Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1-14
- Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Crossing Press, 1982)

IN-CLASS SCREENING

Abundance (dir. Amber J. Phillips, 2021, 31m)

AT-HOME SCREENING

Watermelon Woman (dir. Cheryl Dunye, 1996, 85m)

WEEK 14: BLACK MASCULINITIES

READ

- Kobena Mercer, “Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race,” *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1994)
- Marlon B. Ross, *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness* (Duke University Press, 2022)

AT-HOME SCREENING

Moonlight (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016, 1hr 50m)

WEEK 15: TROUBLING GENDER

READING

- Judith Butler, selections from *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990), pp. 33-64 & 153-66
- Marquis Bey, *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* (Duke University Press, 2022)

WEEK 16: WORKING DAY

APRIL 30: FINAL PROJECTS COMPLETED/DUE

MAY 1: EXHIBITION OPENING

