

**PHIL 4014/6014: Special Topics in Philosophy**  
**African American Political Thought**  
M W 4:00-5:15pm

Spring 2024  
Goodwin 244

This course will explore key themes in the traditions of African American political thought. Through close reading of historical texts and secondary literature we will address questions including: How have Black Americans conceived of and analyzed the injustices to which they have been/are subjected? What does it mean to emancipate oneself from these injustices? What is politics, and how can it be used to achieve emancipation? In what sense, if at all, is there a continuous tradition of African American political thought? We will also reflect on what the category of ‘political thought’ is and how one can engage with it philosophically. Throughout the course, we will practice skills in the history of philosophy, including close reading, rational reconstruction, and critical comparative analysis.

Instructor

Philip Yaure

[philipyare@vt.edu](mailto:philipyare@vt.edu)

Office Hours: Major Williams 224, R 1:00pm-3:00pm

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be better able to:

1. Identify key concepts, claims, and arguments in primary sources, and explicate these in their own words.
2. Identify and articulate (apparent or real) tensions in an author’s concepts, claims, and arguments.
3. Integrate textual interpretation and conceptual analysis in making philosophical arguments.
4. Apply the above skills to defend an original interpretive thesis about a primary source text.

Communication with Instructor

**After seminar:** The instructor is available to talk about course-related issues after class meetings. You are welcome to ask questions about course content or logistics during this time. For personal issues that you wish to discuss in private, please arrange a meeting in office hours or contact me via email.

**Office Hours:** The instructor is available for individual meetings in his office (Major Williams 224) R 1:00-3:00pm. A sign-up sheet for office hours will be posted to the course’s Canvas home page. Drop-ins are welcome, but students who have signed up will get priority during their time slot. Please note that these office hours are shared with my large lecture Morality and Justice course. For longer discussions, I am happy to schedule meetings outside of office hours—email me to arrange.

**Email:** If you are unable to speak with the instructor after class or during office hours, you may contact me via email. I will respond within 24 hours of your email (typically faster during the week). If you do not receive a response within 24 hours, please send a follow-up.

## Required Texts

All required books are available at University Bookstore and online (links included).

Please note: This seminar will be focused on close reading and textual analysis. In order to facilitate good class discussion and ensure that we are all on the same page (literally!), it is important that you obtain the specific editions of the texts listed below.

Baldwin, James. *James Baldwin : Collected Essays : Notes of a Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work / Other Essays*. Edited by Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America, 1998.

<https://www.loa.org/books/121-collected-essays/>

Bois, W. E. B. Du. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams. First Edition. Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997.

<https://www.amazon.com/Souls-Black-Bedford-History-Culture/dp/0312091141>

Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman from the South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

<https://uncpress.org/book/9781469633312/a-voice-from-the-south/>

Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Edited by William L. Andrews. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

<https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=p014109>

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 2nd edition. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

<https://www.amazon.com/Invisible-Man-Ralph-Ellison/dp/0679732764/>

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Edited by Cheryl Clarke. Reprint edition. Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007.

<https://www.amazon.com/Sister-Outsider-Speeches-Crossing-Feminist/dp/1580911862>

Stewart, Maria W. *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Edited by Marilyn Richardson. Blacks in the Diaspora. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

<https://www.amazon.com/Maria-Stewart-Americas-Political-Writer/dp/0253204461>

Walker, David. *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Edited by Peter P. Hinks. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.

<https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-01993-2.html>

In addition, the following book is recommended, but not required:

Rogers, Melvin L., and Jack Turner, eds. *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/A/bo58172054.html>

## Course Requirements

1. Active, constructive participation in seminar (3%)
2. Passage Interpretation Exit Tickets (12%)
3. Presentation (10%)
4. Term Paper (75%) - ~5000 words
  - Paper Proposal (10%)
  - Outline (15%)
  - Final Version (50%)

**Active, constructive participation in seminar:** Philosophy is done best in good company. History of philosophy and political thought is done best in company prepared to reference specific passages from the reading. Students will come to class prepared to discuss the assigned texts. While it is expected that students will come to class ready to raise questions/issues of interest to them, it is even more important to constructively engage with the questions/comments of your peers. We are each other's best resources in this course. Attendance is expected at all seminar meetings. If you are unable to attend a meeting (e.g. due to a doctor's appointment or family emergency), contact the instructor in advance.

**Passage Interpretation Exit Tickets:** On the **Monday** of each week that we cover primary source material, students will bring a 1-page document to class (electronic is fine). This document will have a passage from the assigned reading, and an interpretive question you have about the passage. At the end of Monday's class, students will take 10-15 minutes to free write a response to the interpretive question they've posed. This response will be informed by Monday's lecture & discussion. Your response may answer your question, refine it, or develop it in a different direction. Students will submit these documents as they leave class; the instructor will return them with brief comments in your mailboxes (or email). The instructor will incorporate themes from Monday's exit tickets into discussion topics for Wednesday each week.

**Presentation:** Each student will give one 10-minute presentation during the semester. These presentations will take place on the **Wednesday** of each week. Each presentation will be on the primary source material from one week of class. Presentations will examine a key term that comes up multiple times throughout the reading. See below for example terms. Presenters will make an interpretive claim about the key term, provide passages as evidence for the interpretive claim, and pose 2-3 questions for class discussion. Presenters will provide a **2-page** (strict—no more, no less!) handout with their presentation. (If necessary, multiple students may present on the same reading, addressing different key terms.)

There are two important deadlines in the lead up to your presentation:

- (1) **You must email the instructor with your key term and one sentence describing the main thesis of your presentation the Monday before your presentation.** (After lecture is OK.)
- (2) **Draft handouts are due to instructor 24 hours before class (Tuesday at 4pm).**

Example terms: emancipation, appeal, white supremacy, double consciousness, judgment, citizenship, declaration, gender, race, identity, democracy, (in)justice, hope, despair

Example interpretive claims:

- Author X defines key term Y in terms of the following 3 elements...
- There is a tension in how author X uses key term Y in the following passages.
  - But this tension is really only apparent.
  - Key term Y should really be disambiguated.
  - The tension poses a problem for the following claim/argument that philosopher X makes.
- Author X argues for claim Z about key term Y using the following premises.
- What author X says about key term Y implies a further claim that s/he doesn't explicitly acknowledge.

**Term Paper:** Students will complete a term paper that rigorously analyzes a key concept, claim, or argument from one course reading. In most of your philosophy courses, your goal in your term paper is to make a claim about the world, or to critically evaluate someone else's argument for a claim about the world. In this class, your goal is to make an interpretive claim about what the primary source text means. See above for examples. You will use the same set of philosophical skills you have developed in other courses to argue for your interpretive claim. You will also engage in detail with the text: quotation is encouraged and expected. Remember that whenever you quote from the text, you must also explain what the quotation means in your own words.

We will work towards full term papers in 3 stages. The instructor will provide feedback at each stage. (You may, and I encourage you to, submit these stages EARLY for more feedback.)

1. Paper Proposal: Students will produce an extended abstract, ~500-1000 words, outlining their thesis, main argument, and key textual evidence. Students must also identify 3 pieces of secondary literature that will be incorporated into their argument. **Due Friday 4.12**
2. Outline: Students will produce a *detailed* outline of their paper. Your outline should, at a minimum, cover the main point of each paragraph of your paper. (I won't hold you to this specific outline in your final version of course, but the goal is to produce an outline that you can fill in as your final draft.) **Due Friday 4.26**
3. Final paper: Students will produce a full version of their paper, incorporating at least 3 secondary sources. **Due Wednesday 5.8**  
PHIL 4014 (undergraduates): approximately 4000 words  
PHIL 6014 (graduates): approximately 6000 words

#### Statement on Academic Integrity

Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. Academic integrity expectations are the same for online classes as they are for in person classes. All university policies and procedures apply in any Virginia Tech academic environment.

For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit:

<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations/graduate-honor-system.html>

*Artificial Intelligence Policy:* The use of AI-writing technology (e.g., ChatGPT) is permitted in this course—but see below for an important requirement. Please keep in mind that current AI lacks many of the fundamental elements of graduate-level writing. For instance, GPT generally does not quote or cite text, and has a propensity to make up references when you ask it for them. It is a creative tool, rather than a research tool. You are welcome to explore ways in which these technologies can contribute to your writing process. **If you use AI during your writing process, you are required to inform the instructor of the specific ways in which you have used it and provide documentation of your process (e.g., the prompts you used in ChatGPT).**

*If you plan to use AI-writing technology in this course, you are required to read*

Rodman, Emma. “On Political Theory and Large Language Models.” *Political Theory*, October 17, 2023, 00905917231200826. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917231200826>.

*This paper explains the mechanics of GPT, and provides both big-picture reflections on and concrete suggestions about how you might use AI-writing technology in a generative way.*

#### Statement on Accessibility

I am committed to making this course as accessible as possible. If you require a disability-related accommodation in order to fully participate in this course, please contact Services for Students with Disabilities (<https://ssd.vt.edu/>) so that such accommodation may be arranged. I’m happy to assist where I can.

**Course Schedule** (subject to change)

**Week 1 (1/17) - Introduction**

Syllabus

Rogers & Turner, “Political Theorizing in Black,” in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History* (hereafter, *AAPT*), pp. 1-30

**Week 2 (1/22 & 1/24) – David Walker**

Walker (ed. Hinks), *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America*, (1829/30)

Rogers, “David Walker: Citizenship, Judgment, Freedom, and Solidarity,” in *AAPT*, pp. 52-76

**Week 3 (1/29 & 1/31) – Maria Stewart**

Stewart (ed. Richardson), *Maria W. Stewart: America’s First Black Woman Political Writer*, part 1 (pp. 1-78), (1831-33)

Waters, “Introduction,” in *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought*, pp. 3-16

**Week 4: (2/5 & 2/7) – Frederick Douglass**

Douglass (ed. Andrews), *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Preface and Ch 1-20 (pp. 3-5, 27-202), (1855)

Krause, “Frederick Douglass: Nonsovereign freedom and the Plurality and Political Resistance,” in *AAPT*, pp. 116-141

**Week 5 (2/12 & 2/14) – Frederick Douglass**

Douglass (ed. Andrews), *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Ch. 21-25 and Appendices (pp. 205-307), (1855)

Gooding-Williams, “Douglass’s Declarations of Independence and Practices of Politics,” in *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, pp. 162-209

**Week 6 (2/19 & 2/21) – Anna Julia Cooper**

Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman from the South*, Part First: Soprano Obligato (pp. 1-148), (1892)

May, “‘Life must be something more than dilettante speculation:’ Cooper’s Multidimensional Praxis,” in *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 45-78

**Week 7 (2/26 & 2/28) – Anna Julia Cooper**

Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman from the South*, Part Second: Tutti ad Libitum (pp. 149-304), (1892)

White, "Anna Julia Cooper: Radical Relationality and the Ethics of Interdependence," in *AAPT*, pp. 192-211

Week 8 (3/4 & 3/6) – Spring Break, NO CLASS

Week 9 (3/11 & 3/13) – William Edward Burghardt Du Bois

Du Bois (eds. Blight and Gooding-Williams), *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapters I-VII (pp. 37-116), (1903)

Gooding-Williams, "Intimations of Immortality and Double Consciousness," in *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, pp. 66-95

Week 10 (3/18 & 3/20) – William Edward Burghardt Du Bois

Du Bois (eds. Blight and Gooding-Williams), *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapters VIII-XIV (pp. 37-116), (1903)

Taylor, "W.E.B. Du Bois: Afro-modernism, Expressivism, and the Curse of Centrality," in *AAPT*, pp. 235-259

Week 11 (3/25 & 3/27\*) – Ralph Ellison

Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Introduction and Chapters 1-13 (pp. vii-xxiii & 1-295), (1952)

Allen, "Ralph Ellison: Democratic Theorist," in *AAPT*, pp. 460-480

\*NOTE: 3/27 – either cancel class or self-led discussion

Week 12 (4/1 & 4/3) – Ralph Ellison

Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 14-25 & Epilogue (pp. 296-581)

Nadel, "Tod Clifton: Spiritual and Carnal," in *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon*, pp. 63-84

Week 13 (4/8 & 4/10) – James Baldwin

Baldwin (ed. Morrison), *The Fire Next Time*, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, pp. 291-347, (1963)

Drabinski, "James Baldwin: Democracy between Nihilism and Hope," in *AAPT*, pp. 481-496

Week 14 (4/15 & 4/17) – James Baldwin

Baldwin (ed. Morrison), *No Name in the Street*, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, pp. 349-475, (1972)

Glaude, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. xi-xxix, 3-28)

Week 15 (4/22 & 4/24) – Audre Lorde  
Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, pp. 13-113, (1984)

Turner, “Audre Lorde’s Politics of Difference,” in *AAPT*, pp. 563-59

Week 16 (4/29 & 5/1) – Audre Lorde  
Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, pp. 81-190, (1984)

Bromell, “A Coda for My Colleagues: Fusing Critique and Vision,” in *The Time is Always Now: Black Political Thought and the Transformation of U.S. Democracy*, pp. 145-52