Few English professors weave dance and other performance arts into a course syllabus, but Tayana Hardin enjoys integrating American literature with performance studies in her classes and scholarly work.

Hardin specializes in 19th and 20th century African American literature, gender studies and performance studies. In spring 2015, she taught an advanced seminar (ASEM) course that melded all three disciplines. The course was designed on the premise that bodies—our own and others—acquire meanings that vary across time and context. Philosophical discussions were balanced with in-class activities such as dance, acting and other performance practices.

“It was—hands down—the most challenging class I’ve ever designed as a sole instructor,” said Hardin, who joined DU as an assistant professor of English in 2013. “But the depth of student engagement, curiosity and enthusiasm also made it the most rewarding.”

According to Hardin, the class was the culmination of years of research and writing, which is often centered on her preoccupation with time. Her current book project looks at the way notions of past, present and future co-exist in black cultural forms.

“The coexistence of past, present and future is readily acknowledged in black cultural studies as a key attribute of black culture, and is often recognized in literary and performance works by the presence of an ‘ancestral’ figure,” said Hardin, who strives to move beyond representations of the ‘ancestral’ figure by focusing on the writings of entertainer Josephine Baker, choreographer Katherine Dunham, dancer-poet Ntozake Shange, and author Toni Morrison.

“In these textual instances, the complexities of time are revealed through representations of black bodies in various forms of bodily movement,” she said.

“My hope is that this project can urge the field of literary studies and African American studies to consider more closely their conceptualizations of time, their ties to the field of performance studies, and how bodies in movement can invite us to consider our work as literary scholars in new and exciting ways.”

Hardin has a PhD in American Culture from the University of Michigan. Most of her classes are focused on African American literature.

“In these classes, we typically begin with the slave narrative, which is generally regarded as the bedrock of the African American literary tradition,” she said. “After we establish the historical, social, and political importance of the slave narrative, we then go on to think about the many ways African American authors have used the literary form throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries to explore social relations; engage in national conversations about race, nationality, gender, and sexuality; and contemplate beauty and the human experience.”
“Literature provides opportunities for us to do the critical work of intellectuals, while being reminded that we’re incredibly flawed and beautifully human,” said Hardin, who finds that many of the DU students who take her African American literature courses are seeking a safe place on campus to talk about race and its connections to gender, sexuality and other social categories.

“Literature gives us that opportunity to be still, to be quiet, to be pensive, which, in turn, can have real implications on how we move in the world, understand ourselves, and interact with others,” she added. “This is what I love about teaching literature.”