

Queer Theory: sexualities, genders, politics

Course Description

This class aims to familiarize students with the core texts and key debates that have shaped queer theory. We will trace the expansion of the term “queer” from its early contestation with LGBT identities and politics to its current use as a broad framework that designates non-normative modes of knowledge, cultural practices, and political activism. Central to our investigation are the intersections between queer theory and feminism and critical race theory. Weaving analyses of foundational queer and feminist texts, we will explore an expansive and radical contemporary queer politics, pushing beyond narrow constructions of identity politics, anti-discrimination policy, and rights-based reforms. This class will ultimately engage Queer Theory by means of a rich philosophical and political interrogation of the meaning and content of “queer.”

Course Objectives

The primary goal of the course is to familiarize students with the core texts and debates that have shaped the overall development of the field. In the process, students will develop a critical understanding of identity and how it is constructed (and re-constructed) by individuals and groups over time and in different contexts. They will also become conversant in queer, feminist, and critical race theory, thereby honing advanced analytic and critical thinking skills (both written and verbal). Just as importantly, however, the course will introduce students to the expansive agenda of contemporary radical queer politics, which goes beyond the narrow confines of identity politics, anti-discrimination policy, and rights-based reforms. Thus, students will not only learn about Queer Theory in this course in an institutionally accountable way, but will also engage in a deep philosophical and political interrogation of the meaning and content of “queer,” particularly as it relates to politics and political activism.

Required Texts

- *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*, ed. Ryan Conrad (Lewiston, ME: Against Equality Collective, 2010)
- *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Michel Foucault, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage, 1990)
- *Black Queer Studies*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Duke University Press, 2005)
- *Queer Injustice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States*, eds. Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012)
- *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, David Valentine (Duke University Press, 2007)
- *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler (Routledge, 2004)

Assignments and Course Expectations

- **Participation** (15% of final grade)

Attendance in this course is mandatory. As well, because this course will be run as a seminar, your active intellectual presence and full engagement with class discussion each week are expected.

- **Weekly Writing Assignments** (30% of final grade)

For 10 of our 13 classes, you are required to write a short analytic paper on two of the assigned readings (or, if a single book is assigned for that week, on two chapters of the assigned text). This paper should have two parts: first, state the main argument being made in each of the two readings you have chosen. This will require you to state not only the thesis (or main, overarching idea that synthesizes the author's primary claim) but also the evidence the author provides in support of this thesis. Second, raise a set of critical questions about and/or engage in critical reflection on these two pieces and their convergences or dissonances with one another. Feel free to connect these readings with others assigned in the same week and/or to the themes and discussion questions elaborated for this particular week in the syllabus.

Weekly writing assignments will be posted to the course website and are due by Sunday at midnight. It is our expectation that, on Monday, you will read over your classmates' papers as well so as to better prepare yourself for class.

These assignments will not be graded, but rather evaluated on the basis of credit/no credit. If you turn in your paper on time, it meets the assignment requirements as specified above, and is done in good faith, you will receive credit for it; if not, you will receive either half credit or no credit, depending on the level and number of insufficiencies associated with the paper. If your work falls below our level of expectations regarding either substance or effort, we will discuss this issue with you directly. If your work does not improve after this point, your assignments may receive half-credit or no credit at all.

- **Abstract or Proposal for Seminar Paper + working bibliography** (15% of final grade)

Write an introductory paragraph that defines and maps your topic, area of inquiry, and goals. You should also describe the limits and/or significance of your study and the guiding logic of your examination. You might wish to include a short essay, if your reading has carried you to that point, or you could offer several tentative theses or crucial questions raised by your inquiry. Please include a section that gives an example of the kind of issues/texts/cultural moments you plan to study and that suggest how they will be used in the essay. Try to think in terms of a question or series of questions you want to investigate, rather than simply an area or topic. A beginning bibliography should accompany your proposal, although it will of course expand as your research deepens. Provide a title at the top of the first page (not on a separate title page); choose the title by which the largest numbers of persons are likely to recognize your work.

- **Final Seminar Paper** (40% of final grade)

A final seminar paper of approximately 25 pages is also required, to be undertaken under the continued supervision of your faculty mentor. This paper is your opportunity to "claim an education" by applying the concepts, theories, and methodologies you have learned in this course to an intellectual project of your own design. Crucially, however, it should also deal with the substantive and critical issues raised in this class. The essay should be interdisciplinary in nature and potentially publishable in quality. It should also give a clear sense of its aims and methodology.

- 1) The paper should be written in an engaging, concise, thoughtful prose that is free of grammatical and typographical errors. Prior to submission, the paper must be carefully proofed and edited. It must include footnotes/end notes, and a complete bibliography.
- 2) If you are unfamiliar with the methods of scholarly research, please consult a librarian for research assistance.
- 3) All papers, regardless of subject, must engage with material covered in class in addition to relevant *outside* theoretical sources. I expect papers to have solid theoretical underpinnings and to pursue a “topic” by asking a question with a sharp and nuanced analytic focus about that topic (and, ideally, offering answers to that question).

I. Genealogies

WEEK 1: Untold Histories

What does the history of heterosexuality tell us about the history of homosexuality? How does reading this earlier feminist work impact the way you imagine the project of “queer theory?” What is the specificity of *lesbian* identity and sexuality here and how might we “think” it through the narrative we tell of the relationship between feminist theory and queer theory? (and feminist politics and queer politics?)

- Cheryl Clarke, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983)
- Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984):
 “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving”; “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”; “An Open Letter to Mary Daly”; “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”; “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich”; “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”; “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”
- Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (W. W. Norton, 1986)
- Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (article)
- John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson (Monthly Review Press, 1983)
- Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind: And Other Essays* (Beacon Press, 1992)
 “One is Not Born a Woman”; “The Straight Mind”
- Radicalesbians, “The Woman-Identified Woman”

WEEK 2: Feminist Disputes

This week we take a quick tour of some of the more influential texts of what have come to be termed the feminist Sex Wars. In the late 1970s and 1980s, U.S. feminism underwent a thoroughgoing critique by

women of color feminists, transsexual and transgender feminists, and bisexual, lesbian sadomasochist, and sex radical feminists, all of whom argued in different ways that feminism subscribed to a hegemonic understanding of gender that was coercive, exclusionary, and/or presumptively heterosexual. Some of the women of color critiques were addressed during Week 1; here, we address many of the others.

- Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, “What We’re Rollin’ Around in Bed With,” in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme/Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992)
- Pat Califia, “Feminism and Sadomasochism”; “A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality”; “Public Sex”; in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, 2nd ed. (Cleis Press, 2000)
- Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Politics of Sexuality” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance (Routledge, 1984)
- Janice Raymond, “Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian Feminist” in *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Teacher’s College Press, 1994)
- Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Seal Press, 2008), Chapter 2, “The Difficult Years”

WEEK 3: AIDS, ACT-UP, and Queer Nation

Our work this week is to link histories and practices of AIDS activism with the emergence of queer theory. Our primary questions include: How did the AIDS epidemic shape the lives, identities, and political agenda of the LGBTQ community? How does gender figure in early AIDS activism? How do notions of loss, contagion, and mourning figure in early academic accounts of queerness? Considering equitable access to medical care, suitable housing, and other basic rights of citizenship, might we discern early linkages between the needs of queer communities and impoverished communities of color?

- Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988)
- Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1988)
- Queer Nation, “Queers Read This”
- Zoe Leonard, “I Want a Dyke for President”
- Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Duke UP, 1999) “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” and “How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: The Evolution of AIDS, Treatment, and Activism”
- *United in Anger*, Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman (film)

II. The Queer Canon

WEEK 4: Foucault

In this foundational text of Queer Theory, Michel Foucault challenges the widespread view that the history of sexuality can be characterized as the history of repression. Instead, he suggests that sexuality itself is a distinctly modern phenomenon constituted through a *proliferation* of discourses, not (repressive) silencing.

What are the consequences for his argument on our understanding of (homo)sexuality, much less our theories of power, resistance, and liberation?

- Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage, 1990)

WEEK 5: Foundational Texts

In the early 1990's LGBTQ studies underwent a significant transformation. No longer a theory rooted in and committed to fixed notions of sexual difference, a new and broader formulation, queer theory, offered a general critique of normative identity. This week covers some of those founding texts of queer theory. How might we locate sexual definitions in the project and practices of Western modernity? How does historicizing sexual taxonomies undermine the homosexual/heterosexual binary? What are the theoretical and political promises and/or pitfalls of unhinging sexuality from identity, and vice versa?

- David Halperin, "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality," in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (Routledge, 1989)
- Eve Sedgwick, "Axiomatic," from *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990)
- Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," in *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (Routledge, 1991)
- Michael Warner, Introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

WEEK 6: Butler

What is the difference between "undoing" gender and "ending" gender and how might that difference play out in the project of queer theorizing? How does the "case" of transsexuality foreground particular debates around the relationship between gender and sex? How does Butler revise and amend her own theory of gender performativity here? Why is the idea of "intelligibility" so central here and how does it work with her understanding of normativity AND the desire for a "livable life?"

- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004)
- J. Butler and G. Rubin, "Sexual Traffic: Interview," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* IV:2-3 (1994)

III. Challenges, Emendations, and Expansions

WEEK 7: Queer of Color Critique

Our work this week is to investigate black queer studies and queer of color critique. How is queer theory expanded and reformulated when put in explicit conversation with histories of racial formation and critical race theory? What kinds of theoretical alliances and political allegiances are enabled by linking queerness with other identity categories, like race and class? Do dominant accounts of queer identity – for example, the paradigmatic narrative of "coming out of the closet" – account for the experiences of racialized others? How do intersectionality and queer theory mutually inform each other?

- Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Introduction: “Queer of Color Critique, Historical Materialism, and Canonical Sociology”
- Siobhan Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body,” in *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in America* (Duke University Press, 2000)
- José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Introduction: “Performing Disidentifications”
- *Black Queer Studies*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Duke University Press, 2005)
E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or, (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Theory I Learned From My Grandmother”; Marlon Ross, “Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm”; Phillip Brian Harper, “The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge”
- *Tongues Untied*, Marlon Riggs (film)

WEEK 8: Body Politics

Does Valentine’s methodology allow him to access certain kinds of knowledges? What does it mean to do an “ethnography of a category?” How does “transgender” work here in relationship to “gay” and to “man” or “woman?” How does this book challenge (or does it?) the queer theoretical mantra of the necessary separation of “sex” and “gender?”

- David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Duke University Press, 2007)

****Seminar Paper Proposal + Working Bibliography due this week****

WEEK 9: Powers and Pleasures

How do the formative debates that launched Queer Theory (as examined in Weeks 1 and 2) recur in later, newer formulations of queerness and desire post-canon? Have the terms of the debate(s) shifted? Are the available positions in these debates the same?

- Samuel Delaney, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (NYU Press, 2001)
- Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (U of Chicago Press, 2009), Chapter 1: “Breeding Culture”
- Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sodomasochism* (Columbia UP, 1998), Chapter 1: “Knights in Shining Armor and Other Relations”
- Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Duke University Press, 2011), Chapter 4: “Beyond Vanilla: Public Politics and Private Selves”

IV. Contesting the Canon, (Re-)Politicizing LGBT Politics

WEEK 10: “Against Equality”

What are some of the key contestations between feminist theory and queer theory? How have those broader contestations honed in around the issue of same-sex marriage? What are some of the queer lacunae around race and class that these writers delineate and are they an inevitable product of queer theorizing or are they potentially remedied?

- Bidy Martin, “Sexualities without Gender and Other Queer Utopias,” in *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (Routledge, 1997)
- Dean Spade, “Compliance is Gendered: Struggling for Gender Self-Determination in a Hostile Economy,” in *Transgender Rights*, eds. Paisley Currah, Richard Juang, and Shannon Minter (University of Minnesota Press, 2000)
- Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Future of Queer Politics?” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): pp. 21-51
- Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism” in *Materializing Democracy*, eds. Russ Castronuevo and Dana Nelson (Duke UP, 2002)
- *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*, ed. Ryan Conrad (Lewiston, ME: Against Equality Collective, 2010)
- “Is Gay Marriage Racist?” roundtable, in Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *That’s Revolting! Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (Soft Skull Press, 2008)
- Jaye Cee Whitehead, *The Nuptial Deal: Same-Sex Marriage and Neo-Liberal Governance*, Chap 1 “Marriage Equality Meets Neo-Liberal Inequality” (University of Chicago Press 2011)

WEEK 11: The State and Sexual Surveillance(s)

This week we will examine the conceptual ties among sexuality, citizenship, sexual policing, and the state. We will examine how notions of national identity and national security have become dependent on defining and regulating (homo)sexuality. Our critical questions include: To what extent does sexual policing predetermine and shape the ideal citizen? How do laws governing immigration imply and implicate sexual subjects? How is queerness mobilized to conjure ideas about domestic and foreign threats to nationhood?

- Margot Canady, *The Straight State* (Princeton UP, 2009), Introduction and Chapter 1: “Immigration – ‘A New Species of Undesirable Immigrant’: Perverse Aliens and the Limits of the Law, 1900-1924,” Chapter 6: “Immigration – ‘Who Is a Homosexual?’: The Consolidation of Sexual Identities in Mid-Twentieth-Century Immigration Law, 1952-1983”
- Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Duke UP, 2007), Introduction: “Homonationalism and Biopolitics” Chapters 1: “The Sexuality of Terrorism” Chapter 2: Abu Ghraib and U.S. Sexual Exceptionalism

WEEK 12: Queers and the Criminal (In)Justice System

What is the relationship between queer people and the criminal (in)justice system? Do cops and jails protect us, or subject us to further harm? How might we seek to protect queer people from harm without

reproducing the violence of oppressive and violent systems? How might Queer Theory offer resources to think beyond the prison industrial complex?

- Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock, *Queer Injustice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012)
 - Read as much of this book as possible; most recommended chapters: 3-4, 6-7
- *Toilet Training*, Sylvia Rivera Law Project (film)
- Eric A. Stanley, Introduction to *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, eds. Eric Stanley and Nat Smith (AK Press, 2011)
- Morgan Bassichis, Alex Lee, and Dean Spade, “Building an Abolitionist Trans & Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got,” Chapter 1 of *Captive Genders* (ed. Eric Stanley and Nat Smith) (AK Press, 2011)
- Dean Spade, “Their Laws Will Never Make Us Safer,” in *Against Equality: Prisons Will Not Protect You*, ed. Ryan Conrad (Lewiston, ME: Against Equality Collective, 2012)

WEEK 13: Working Session on Final Seminar Papers