

English 822: Topics in Literary and Cultural Theory

## Queer Ethics

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Class meetings: R 4:00-6:30PM, 7109 HCW

Office Hours: R 1-3PM, by appointment, 7161 HCW

“Sooner or later, happily or unhappily, almost everyone fails to control his or her sex life. Perhaps as compensation, almost everyone sooner or later also succumbs to the temptation to control *someone else’s* sex life.”

—Michael Warner, “The Ethics of Sexual Shame”

“Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It’s not about the mainstream, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated...It’s about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it’s about gender-fuck and secrets, what’s beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it’s about the night... We come out of the closet, face the rejection of society, face firing squads, just to love each other! Every time we fuck, we win.”

—“The Queer Nation Manifesto: I Hate Straights” (1990)

“The dead seriousness of the gay commitment to machismo...means that gay men run the risk of idealizing and feeling inferior to certain representations of masculinity on the basis of which they are in fact judged and condemned. The logic of homosexual desire includes the potential for a loving identification with the gay man’s enemies...An authentic gay male political identity therefore implies a struggle not only against definitions of maleness and of homosexuality as they are reiterated and imposed in a heterosexist social discourse, but also against those very same definitions so seductively and so faithfully reflected by those male bodies that we carry within us as permanently renewable sources of excitement.”

—Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1989)

“In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness ...[There] is for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into the sunlight against the body of a woman I love...Recognizing the power of the erotic in our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.”

—Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic” (1978)

**Course Description:** Is there a relationship between one’s sex life and one’s politics? Can notions like democracy, collective good, freedom, and equality be worked through in terms of sex, intimacy, desire, and pleasure? In other words, are there ways of living our sexuality that accord with an ethical relationship to others? These are the kinds of questions that have animated queer theory for the last three decades, a field that concerns itself with the social, cultural, and political dimensions of sex, sexuality, and desire. This course explores how contemporary queer theorists working in literature and cultural studies have increasingly turned to political theory and philosophy to make claims for the ethical potential of queer or alternative sexualities, the social communities they produce, enable, and legitimize, and the literary and cultural forms they

create. This turn has been the subject of intense debate within a field that has long prided itself on imagining “queerness” (as a radical, or non-normative relationship to dominant forms of sexuality) as a powerfully negative social force that refuses the mandates of traditional forms of social belonging; if queerness refuses the social world as it is, what possible alternative worlds could it speak for? And what kind of collective good might organize such a world?

This graduate level special topics course provides students a grounding in contemporary queer theory through an exploration of the field’s engagement with questions of sexual ethics, notions of collective good, and forms of queer worldmaking. This is not a survey or overview of queer theory, but a depth assessment of the current state of the field. We will pair key monographs in the field with scholarly essays, literature, and film, both avowedly LGBT fictions as well as putatively “straight” narratives that hold queer potentials or possibilities for reading against the grain of traditional logics of sexuality and normalcy. Our aim will be two-fold: to gain a proficiency in the discourse of contemporary queer theory and to develop a mode of reading, or interpretation, that allows us to think of sex and sexuality as key concepts in the building of social and creative worlds and in the production of knowledge in literary studies.

### Goals:<sup>1</sup>

\* Students who focus on gender and sexuality, in particular, will gain:

- 1) a depth engagement with current conceptual movements and arguments in the field of queer theory, with particular focus on queer theory’s engagement with critical race studies, affect theory, political theory, and contemporary feminist thought.
- 2) a greater understanding of the intellectual and political investments that animate queer theory, as well as skills to question, revise, and rearticulate those commitments for one’s own research agendas.

\* Students of literature with any specific sub-focus, genre or national tradition, more generally, will have the opportunity to gain:

- 1) a grasp of the various ways that sexuality, desire, erotic attachment, and intimacy have functioned as central themes, concepts, and motivations for literary and cultural production.
- 2) a wide ranging set of theoretical tools for analyzing the relationship between sexuality and other categories of difference, including race, gender, disability, and class.
- 3) a greater understanding of the relationship between literary and cultural representations of private life and collective public culture.

### Required Texts:

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subcultures of Barebacking*

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* Parts I & II (*Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*)

Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Disability and Queerness*

Tony Morrison, *Sula*

Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*

Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*

Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Towards a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and*

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve borrowed this format from Nirvana Tanoukhi.

*Carnality*

Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*

Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*

Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*

**Course requirements:** One 20-25 page final paper (a close reading of one or two texts preceded by an extended proposal) and distributed weekly posts and responses to an online forum. Each week, 2-3 members of the class will be responsible for developing a substantive response to a pre-selected question or task related to that week's reading. These are mini-essays of sorts that should be well written and organized in thought and execution. The rest of the class will be required to post short replies that take up and complicate particular ideas, questions, or concepts brought up in the primary posts. Each member of the class will cycle through posting a primary response two times across the semester. Full instructions will be circulated separately.

**Course readings:** Required (and recommended) texts all available through online retailers or the university bookstore. An asterisk \* indicates material available on Learn@UW. All movies will be streamed online or else screened collectively at times chosen by the class.

**Recommended Summer reading:**

—Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes For a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1984)

—Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987)

—Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43 (Winter 1987)

Introduction

**Week 1—Introduction: Five Exercises in Sexual Ethics**

Thursday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>:

**Pre-reading:** Michael Warner, "Preface" and "The Ethics of Sexual Shame," in *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999)

Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," and "Friendship as a Way of Life" (1984), reprinted in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1998)

Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (1993)

Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queers: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3.4 (May 1997)

**Week 2—Coming Undone**

Thursday, September 10<sup>th</sup>:

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (2004). Read introduction, chapters 1-5, 9-11.

**Week 3—Acidic Intimacies**

Thursday September 17<sup>th</sup>:

Film screening: *Stranger by the Lake* (Guiraudie, 2013)

Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (Winter 1987)

Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subcultures of Barebacking* (2009).  
Read Introduction, chapters 1-2 & 4.

Optional reading: *The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory (Forum: Conference Debates)*,  
*PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006)

**Week 4—Queerness as a Utopian Horizon**

Thursday, September 24<sup>th</sup>:

Film screening: *Shortbus* (Mitchell, 2004)

José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009).  
Read introduction, chapters 1-5, 8, 10 and conclusion.

**Week 5—“In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together,” or Longing for Queer Intimacy**

Thursday, October 1<sup>st</sup>:

Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)

**Week 6—Bottom Values**

Thursday, October 8<sup>th</sup>:

Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010). Read introduction, chapters 1, 3, 5, and conclusion.

Selected poems of Essex Hemphill and excerpts from the journals of Gary Fisher.

## Week 7—Sexuality’s Sensorium

Thursday, October 15:

Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014). Read introduction, chapters 1, 3-4 and conclusion.

Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ* 12.4 (2006)

Optional reading: Sarah E. Chinn, “Feeling Her Way: Audre Lorde and the Power of Touch,” *GLQ* 9.1-2 (2003)

## Week 8—“As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life,” or Inventing Sexual Futures

Thursday, October 22<sup>nd</sup>:

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

Optional reading: Kathryn Bond Stockton, “Bottom Values: Anal Economies in the History of Black Neighborhoods,” in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where Black Meets Queer* (2006)

## Week 9—Sex and Disability

Thursday, October 29<sup>th</sup>:

Film screening: *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (Dick, 1997)

Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Disability and Queerness* (2006). Read introduction, chapters 1, 3, 5, and Epilogue.

Optional reading: Abby Wilkerson, “Normate Sex and Its Discontents,” in *Sex and Disability* (2012)

## Week 10—On Being Dispossessed

Thursday, November 5<sup>th</sup>:

Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love, Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (2006). Read all.

Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14.2 (2008)

**Week 11—“People are like planets, you need a thick skin. Things get to me,” or, the Porous Matter of Sexuality Part I**

Thursday, November 12<sup>th</sup>:

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches*

Mel Chen, “Toxic Animacies: Inanimate Affections,” *GLQ*, 17.2 (2011)

Karen Barad, “TransMaterialities: Trans\*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings,” *GLQ* 21.2 (2015)

**Week 12—“Your battered heart, bleeding life in a universe of wounds” or, the Porous Matter of Sexuality Part II**

Thursday, November 19<sup>th</sup>:

*Angels in America Part II: Perestroika*

Ramzi Fawaz, “‘I cherish my bile duct as much as any other organ’ Political Disgust and the Digestive Life of AIDS in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*,” *GLQ* 21.1 (2015)

**Week 13—Feminism and Freedom, Queerly [Class will be rescheduled for earlier in the week]**

Thursday, November 26<sup>th</sup>:

Film screening double-feature: *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991) & *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)

Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2005). Read all (skip chapter 4 if necessary).

Lynne Huffer, “Are the Lips a Grave?” *GLQ* 17.4 (2011)

**Week 14—“I didn’t and don’t want to be a ‘feminine’ version or a diluted version or a special version or a subsidiary version or an ancillary version, or an adapted version of the heroes I admire. I want to be the heroes themselves,” or Becoming Woman Identified**

Thursday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>:

Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975)

**Week 15—On Being Accountable for Sex**

Thursday, December 10<sup>th</sup>:

Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (2012)