

# Queerness & Normativity

Professor Merrill Cole

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ENGL 536, Section 001

Critical & Theoretical Movements in Literary Studies

Spring Semester 2019

Office: Simpkins 109

Hours: TTh, 4:00-5:30 p.m.

W, 4:30-5:30 p.m.

Th, 5:30-8:00 p.m.

Simpkins 27

## Texts

*There will also be materials to download from WesternOnline and on my website.*

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter*.

Dean, Tim. *Beyond Sexuality*.

Delany, Samuel. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*.

Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. 9780814757130

Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages*.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*.

Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*.

## Description

Queerness & Normativity interrogates the normal through a variety of related topics, including dissident sexuality, marriage, pop-cultural inclusion, capitalist globalization, and the imbrication of race and class in questions of gender and sexuality. This course first rigorously introduces the discourse of queer theory and queer studies, and then asks students to apply theoretical concepts to specific sites of investigation of their own choosing from a wide variety of media, including contemporary literature, visual art, film, television, and new media. Queerness & Normativity offers an overview of how queer studies operates in different academic disciplines, thereby introducing the field of cultural studies through intensive focus on the queer.

## What are “Queer Studies”?

For cultural conservatives, these words signify at best the decline of humanistic study into the trivial and the obscene, and at worst the recruitment of innocent youth into a life of depravity, despair, and disease. Many self-identified lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgenders, moreover, object to the word, “queer.” Some argue that it has an implicit masculine bias, like the word, “gay,” before it; others find it an ugly term of derogation; still others see it as too inclusive, deeply uncomfortable with the fact that certain practicing heterosexuals have appropriated “queer” as the adjective of choice for their own activities. People outside of Anglo-American contexts object to the imposition of foreign identity terms, arguing that these names erase cultural specificity. Some critics also see “queer” as implicitly white. Often queer activists outside academia disparage “queer studies,” along with its kissing cousin, “queer theory,” as ivory tower mumbo-jumbo, useless to people’s everyday struggles. Even “queer studies” supporters disagree about what this 29-year-old field should become.

There appears to be a broad consensus, nonetheless, that queer studies and queer theory engage in the critique of the normal in all of its political, cultural, moral, and scientific dynamics. “Queer” is used in the course title, rather than any other term, because long lists of identity terms can be tiresome. If the course were titled the unwieldy “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies & Normativity,” someone would inevitably be excluded. What about, for instance, those who identify as “dykes,” “bi-curious,” “questioning,” or “male lesbians”? And “Multiculturalism and Normativity” would be too broad and bland. So why not “queer”? A curt monosyllable with some edge, easily inflected with anger or curiosity, “queer” is versatile enough to serve as noun, adjective, or verb. Once the homophobe’s favorite expletive, “queer” has become the watchword of radical sexual politics.

“Queer” implies a different sexual politics than the older identity terms do, in part because it entails the questioning of selfhood and its norms. Queer studies does not simply affirm non-normative sexuality and fight against oppression, but interrogates the meaning of human eroticism in all of its aspects. Part of the argument I hope to make during the course of the semester is that queer studies, beyond its usefulness for sexual minorities, has a lot to offer *anyone who has an open mind and heart*.

Perhaps this conjunction of sex and study appears nonsensical, or silly. Allow me to interpose the words of Audre Lorde: “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.”

## Requirements

Every student will be responsible, at the end of the term, for 20+ page research essay that engages theoretical texts and a site of investigation of the student's own choosing. There will be several two-page assignments during the semester; and every student will give two in-class, 10-minute presentations. Presentation materials should be emailed to me before class. Ideally, at least one of the presentations will relate to the research essay. There are slots in the schedule for particular presentation topics, but students are also asked to design their own, second presentation. All writing in this class is electronic.

Students will be responsible for bringing discussion questions for each week's readings. These will not be collected, but participation will be carefully measured. Everyone *must* participate. To participate actively means to keep up with the readings and to come to class every session prepared with insights, arguments, and questions. Thus, it is very much to your advantage to take notes as you read.

Please see <http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php> for student rights and responsibilities.

Please take the opportunity to meet with me during my office hours, or by appointment, to talk about the readings, or about your writing. I can help you locate research texts that may be valuable for your research project. *I very much appreciate any kind of feedback about the course, too.*

## Grading

Participation:	20%
First Presentation:	10%
Second Presentation:	10%
Homework:	10%
Research Essay:	50%

Absences will be excused with proper documentation or advance warning (i.e., the student presents a compelling reason not to come to particular class *before* the session meets). However, *more than one unexcused absence means failing the course.* Plagiarism will also result in an F for the course, and I will report the student for academic discipline. Unexcused absences, or arriving late, will affect the participation grade.

## Students with Disabilities

In accordance with University values and disability law, students with disabilities may request academic accommodations where there are aspects of a course that result in barriers to inclusion or accurate assessment of achievement. To file an official request for disability-related accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center at 309-298-2512, [disability@wiu.edu](mailto:disability@wiu.edu) or in 143 Memorial Hall. Please notify the instructor as soon as possible to ensure that this course is accessible to you in a timely manner.

## Discrimination Policy

University values, Title IX, and other federal and state laws prohibit sex discrimination, including sexual assault/misconduct, dating/domestic violence, and stalking. If you, or someone you know, has been the victim of any of these offenses, we encourage you to report this to the Title IX Coordinator at 309-298-1977 or anonymously online at: [http://www.wiu.edu/equal\\_opportunity\\_and\\_access/request\\_form/index.php](http://www.wiu.edu/equal_opportunity_and_access/request_form/index.php). If you disclose an incident to a faculty member, the faculty member must notify the Title IX Coordinator. The complete Title IX policy is available at: <http://www.wiu.edu/vpas/policies/titleIX.php>.

## Schedule

### **Week 1: January 17**

Introduction to the course.

Film: *Paris Is Burning*.

*Homework*: Two-page response to the movie.

### **Week 2: January 24**

*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

Judith Butler, "Gender Is Burning," in *Bodies that Matter*.

Student Presentations: Drag / Violent Homophobia.

Film: *Tough Guise*.

*Homework*: Two-page analysis of a single image of femininity or masculinity from commercial media.

**Week 3: January 31**

*History of Sexuality: Volume I.* WesternOnline: "Masculinity as Homophobia."

Student presentations: Hegemonic Images of Masculinity / Hegemonic Images of Femininity / New Masculinities.

Film Clip: The Chomsky-Foucault Debate.

On Screen: Tobaron Waxman.

*Homework:* Two-page response to Tobaron Waxman.

**Week 4: February 7**

*Borderlands/La Frontera.*

Student presentations: Intersections of Sexuality & Race / Intersections of Sexuality & Colonialism.

Film: *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World.*

*Homework:* Two-Page Response to Anzaldúa.

**Week 5: February 14**

*Epistemology of the Closet*, Preface, "Introduction: Axiomatic," & "Epistemology of the Closet."

*Close to the Knives* 1-137.

Student presentations: Male Homosexuality in Literature / Lesbianism in Literature.

Handout: Amy Lowell, "In Excelsis."

*Homework:* Two-Page Response to "In Excelsis."

**Week 6: February 21**

*Close to the Knives*, 138-276. WesternOnline: "The Spectacle of AIDS," Looking for Trouble" & "Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography."

Student presentations: The AIDS Crisis / LGBT\* Censorship in the USA.

Film: *Fire in My Belly.*

Film: *Damned in the U.S.A.*

**Week 7: February 28**

*Bodies that Matter*, "Bodies that Matter."

Student presentations: LGBT Visual Artists / LGBT Musicians.

Student presentations: Transgender.

On screen: Del LaGrace Volcano.

***Personal Narrative due.***

**Week 8: March 7**

*Bodies that Matter*, "The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary" and "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex."

Student presentations: Judith Butler, Celebrity / Trans.

Film: TBA.

**Spring Break**

**Week 9: March 21**

*Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. WesternOnline: "Trading Places."

Student presentations: Geographies of Desire / Queer Sociology / Life before Stonewall.

Film: *Queer Geography Tijuana*.

***Formal proposal for the Research Essay due.***

**Week 10: March 28**

*Profit and Pleasure*.

Student presentations: Queer Economics.

Film: *Looking for Langston*.

*Homework: Two-page response to Hennessy.*

**Week 11: April 4**

*Female Masculinity*

Student presentations: Queer Pedagogies.

Film: *It's Elementary*.

*Homework: Rewrite a fairy tale or nursery rhyme (two pages).*

**Week 12: April 11**

*Beyond Sexuality*, 1-93; 174-279.

Student presentations: Queerness in Popular Culture.

On Screen: TBA.

*Homework: Two-page response to Dean.*

**Week 13: April 18**

*Terrorist Assemblages*.

Student presentations: Homonormativity.

On Screen: TBA.

**Week 14: April 25**

*Terrorist Assemblages. Crip Theory*.

Student Presentations: Queerness & Disability.

**Week 15: March 2**

*Crip Theory*.

**Final Exam Week**

***Research Essay due on Monday, May 6 by 2:00 p.m.***