A KISS IS NEVER JUST A KISS: INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

When teaching “History of Sexuality in the United States, 1865-1990,” I work from the premise that a “kiss is never just a kiss.” During the first class, I use PowerPoint and show three images. Each of the images depicts a similar act, one person kissing another on the cheek. The person doing the kissing has their eyes closed and the person being kissed is smiling. However, the similarity between the three photos ends there. The first image shows a young woman kissing a young man. The second shows a shirtless man kissing another shirtless man. The third image shows a young woman kissing a baby. For each image, I ask the students the same two questions: What is going on in this photograph? Is this image depicting a sexual act? Students are asked to explain their answers. Each image asks students to debate whether an act is sexual and what constitutes sexuality. With each new image, their definitions become muddier and they gradually come to the realization that physically identical acts have different “social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and contexts.”¹ I use these images to introduce foundational concepts for thinking historically about sexuality.

“History of Sexuality in the United States” is an undergraduate course that will be taught to juniors and seniors at Stony Brook University in 2013 and will be cross-listed in the departments of History and Women and Gender Studies (WAGS). We have two 70-minute meetings each week. The average class size is 25 students. The course is a combination lecture and seminar but is predominantly discussion-based. Students are graded on participation, a short reflexive writing assignment (see Appendix A), weekly discussion questions and responses (see Appendix B), a take-home midterm exam, and a take-home final exam (see Appendix C). A range of primary sources is used to prompt discussion and to model historical analyses.

Because it is a survey course, I emphasize breadth in the selection of readings so that students get a sense of the current state of the field of History of Sexuality in the United States. To do this, I highlight


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specific themes, allowing students to make connections across units/time periods. Over the semester, we also examine touchstones that can be found on many U.S. history surveys including: the Civil War and Reconstruction; immigration, urbanization and industrialization; the Great Migration; the growth of the state; consumer culture; suburbanization; the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism; and the Culture Wars. In covering areas familiar to many students, I also accentuate the centrality of sexuality to the political, social, and cultural history of the United States. The course also stresses that sexuality is intersectional—that it cannot be examined separately from other categories of identity, social structures, and systems of meaning—and therefore highlights connections with race and gender.

This course attracts significant interest from non-history and non-WAGS majors who have never taken courses in either department. Consequently, I get to introduce students to the study of the past in general and the study of sexuality and gender in particular. I view the class as an opportunity to reach students from diverse backgrounds and help them learn how to question widely held assumptions, write persuasively, analyze a variety of evidence, discuss issues productively, and reach conclusions based on careful reflection.

I begin the class with a theoretical unit on the social construction of sexuality. While some students have been exposed to the tenets of social construction theory, the majority of students habitually view gender and sexuality as something biological, innate and unchanging. This first unit is crucial to introducing the fundamentals of thinking historically about sexuality. Students learn to challenge the assumptions that the past is just like the present and that present day values apply to the past. They wrestle with the idea that sexual acts that appear to be identical have varying meanings within a culture, different meanings in different cultures, and have meanings that change over time. Finally, students struggle with the concept that the relationship between sexual acts and sexual identities is not fixed. These basic insights about the need to attend to social context and to variance across time and cultures prepare students for further intellectual leaps: that modern sexual categories and identities such as heterosexuality and homosexuality were invented in the late nineteenth century and became politicized by the middle of the twentieth century; that the relationship between gender and anatomy has been dynamic, unstable and the subject of fierce debates; that “traditional marriage” in the early 20th century was radically different than at mid-century and in the present; and so forth. Students come to learn that sexual acts, identities, relationships, communities and politics were enmeshed in power relationships, imbued with dynamic and contested meanings, and located in specific cultural contexts.

**THE GENDER DIARY**

The first assignment is a Gender Diary (See Appendix A), which builds off the “Kiss Is Never Just a Kiss” lesson and reinforces the readings from our foundational theoretical unit, which includes a short article on gender. I have my students keep gender diaries for forty-eight hours. To write these diaries, students consider questions such as: “What gender(s) are you? What acts do you perform that define you as male or female or masculine or feminine? What do others do that assign you to a gender? What situations reinforce your gender the most? Are there situations in which you find yourself resisting or embracing at least some of the cultural markers of gender?” I use the category of gender for this assignment because masculinity and femininity are more accessible to students than sexuality. Thinking about the construction of gender, moreover, prepares students to think about the construction of sexuality. The Gender Diary encourages students to reflect upon their own lives in a way that is accessible to them. It also has at least three other benefits: (1) it makes social construction theory, which is often abstract and difficult, immediate and intelligible; (2) it motivates students to see the ways in which their own
identities and behaviors, which they may take for granted, are constructed in specific social situations and over time; (3) and it pushes students to think, to paraphrase Marx, about how they make their own history but not just as they please.\(^2\) Students thus come to see themselves as implicated in what they are learning.

It should be emphasized that students do not turn in their actual diaries. I value students’ privacy and I do not want to intrude into their personal lives. As the assignment below explains, I read three-page well-crafted reflection pieces that are based on their experiences. To make this assignment a low stakes process, I grade it as full credit/partial credit/no credit. Questions and responses that do not follow the instructions, or that are not carefully edited do not receive full credit. However, students who follow the instructions and engage in reflexive thinking receive full credit.

Regardless of whether they are gender normative or non-normative, students wrestle with this assignment. They find it challenging because they experience a heightened self-consciousness about gender, which they then have to document. Repeatedly, students have focused on the gendered dimensions of their daily routines and what labels apply to their own and others’ behaviors—clothing, makeup, choice and quantity of food and sense of personal safety are often underlined. Many, if not most, students realize that they don’t fit neatly within categories of masculine and feminine and identify moments of conformity and non-conformity. Ultimately, the Gender Diary allows students to connect their own experiences with the insights of social construction theory. I have found that the Gender Diary clears the path for helping students learn to develop their voice, to effectively use and interpret evidence, and to understand the process of writing as a form of critical thinking.

**SYLLABUS: HISTORY OF SEXUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES, 1865-1980**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Should people be educated about sex? How should sex be depicted in popular culture? What kinds of sexuality are normal and abnormal? Who can have sex and when? Questions like these have informed controversies and social struggles in the United States. How these questions have been answered has radically changed over time in the United States. This course focuses on popular struggles over sexuality in the United States from 1865-1980. We will study how sexual values have been constructed and have changed over time.

The study of sexuality has become one of the most exciting and challenging areas of intellectual inquiry in the university. Its study forces us to rethink our fundamental assumptions about our bodies, our desires and our society. Sexuality is often thought of as a natural and unchanging behavior that has no history. In this course, however, we treat sexuality as socially constructed, culturally specific, and historically dynamic. In studying sexuality, we will attempt to understand how sexual desires, activities, identities and attitudes, have changed profoundly over time and have been the site of social contestation.

Topics include: same-sex and opposite-sex sexualities, gender variance, transgender and transsexual identities, reproductive politics, commercialized sexualities, sexual health and disease, and inter-racial

sexualities. In covering these topics, we will explore how sexuality has been a central aspect of the political, social, and cultural history of the United States.

**AIMS**

- To introduce you to historical approaches to studying sexuality in American society.  
  *How? By examining a range of relevant secondary and primary sources.*
- To encourage you to think deeply and critically about the central role of sexuality in shaping American culture.  
  *How? By having an ongoing discussion about how sexuality has transformed America in the past.*
- To help you identify, analyze and respond to major topics in sexuality in a culturally sensitive and historically informed manner.  
  *How? Through class discussions, reflective writing, structured written responses and course readings.*

**TEXTBOOKS AND ELECTRONIC RESOURCES**

All course readings will be available for download on the library website. Students must print these articles and bring them to class.

**PREREQUISITES**

No prior course work is required to take this course, but a sincere commitment to understanding the history of sexuality and a willingness to complete all course assignments are essential. Beyond the presumption that sexuality is socially constructed and historically specific, the course takes no single perspective. A major goal is to train students in analytical skills that will help them think critically about sexuality in the past and the present.

**GRADING**

The class will have three writing assignments: One short writing assignment, one midterm exam and one final exam. You will also be responsible for weekly discussion questions and responses on Blackboard. Each assignment will allow you to engage key themes and concepts from our readings and discussions and develop critical analytical and writing skills.

- **February 14th** Writing Assignment 1  
  *48-hour Gender Diary (3 pages)*  
  5%
- **March 28th** Take Home Mid-term Exam  
  *2 short essays, 4 pages each (8 pages)*  
  30%
- **May 10th** Take Home Final Exam  
  *2 short essay, 4 pages each (8 pages)*  
  30%
- **In class participation / attendance:**  
  15%
- **Discussion questions on blackboard:**  
  20%
REQUIREMENTS

PARTICIPATION

Many classes will be conducted as discussions. Therefore, careful preparation in addition to lively and informed participation is essential to your success in this class. If you are uncomfortable talking in class or otherwise concerned about your participation, please consult with me by the second week of the course and we will find alternative means for you to participate.

ATTENDANCE

Students are expected to attend all of their classes and are responsible for any work missed. Failure to attend four classes (without an excused absence) will result in a failing grade. Absences up until this point will lead to a warning and penalties to your participation and attendance grade. Class starts promptly and students who are late will receive warnings and grading penalties.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As part of your grade you will be required to prepare one comprehensive and substantive question for discussion sections every other week. Your submission will help shape the direction of our class discussion. It will also help develop your analytical and writing skills by allowing you to critically engage with our course readings. Your question therefore must be carefully edited, thought provoking, and relevant to the readings for that day. Please see the announcement on our course website for the discussion question schedule. The schedule will be posted on the second week of class. See the document on our course website for instructions on how to format your discussion questions.

When it is your turn to post discussion questions, your questions must be posted on our website by 10 pm the day before our class meets. This timing is to ensure that your peers are able to respond to your questions. Be sure to bring a copy of your discussion question with you to class.

DISCUSSION RESPONSES

As part of your grade you will be required to prepare one comprehensive and substantive response every other week. If you closely follow the instructions on how to write your response-paragraph, this assignment will help prepare you for constructing your take-home exams. Your submission also will help develop your analytical and writing skills by allowing you to critically engage with our course readings. To that end, you will answer one question posted online by your classmates every other week. This response must be carefully edited, thought provoking, and relevant to the readings for that day and to the question posted online. Please see the announcement on our course website for the discussion response schedule. The schedule will be posted during the second week of class. See the document on our course website for instructions on how to format your discussion responses.

When it is your turn to post discussion responses, you must post your response on our course website by noon the day after class meets.

Questions and responses should show evidence that you have done the reading. Your submission will be graded as credit/partial credit/no credit, and may be used in class discussions. Assignments that do not
follow formatting instructions, or that are not proofread will not receive full credit. Questions or responses that are submitted late will receive no credit.

**ELECTRONIC AVAILABILITY**

I recognize that many of you use e-mail very frequently. However, I do not engage in detailed conversations over e-mail. For all *non-urgent* matters, please visit me during my office hours or make an appointment. Thank you for your careful attention to this matter.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

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### WEEK 1: INTRODUCING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THEORY

**Tuesday:** Introductions
- *Introductions. Reviewing the Syllabus.*
- *Exercise: “Defining Sexuality and Gender”*

**Thursday:** Introducing Social Construction Theory

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### WEEK 2: SEXUAL POLITICS IN THE AGE OF RECONSTRUCTION

**Tuesday:** Civil War Sexuality in Black and White

**Thursday:** The Politics of Reproduction and Desire
WEEK 3: SEXUAL REGULATION AND POLITICS IN THE LATE VICTORIAN ERA

Tuesday: Science, Gender and Sexuality

Thursday: Love and Marriage?

WEEK 4: GENDER, POWER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

Tuesday: Sex Work and Gender

Thursday: States of Matrimony

WEEK 5: NATIONAL AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES 1880-1920

Tuesday: Inventing Homosexuality

Thursday: Inventing and Policing Homosexual Identities


• Explore the following links from “The Emergence of Queer Networks in Bronzeville (1900-1940)”:  
  http://outhistory.org/wiki/Bronzeville%27s_Vice_District  
  http://outhistory.org/wiki/Ernest_Burgess:_Exploring_Sexual_Systems

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**WEEK 6: NORMS AND DEVIANCE IN THE JAZZ AGE**

**Tuesday: Spaces, Places and Identities**


**Thursday: Mothers, Children and the Shaping of “Normal”**


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**WEEK 7: REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

**Tuesday: Popular Culture, Sexual Pleasures and Dangers in the 1930s**

• Primary Source: Lysol Advertisements (1932-1934)


**Thursday: A Very Queer War**


WEEK 8: NO CLASSES – SPRING BREAK

WEEK 9: COLD WAR SEXUALITY

Tuesday: A Queer and Present Danger
- Primary Source (film): “Boys Beware” (1961)

Thursday: Sex Changes and Gender Troubles

WEEK 10

Tuesday: Romance and Dating at Mid-Century
- Primary Source (film): “How Much Affection” (1958)

Thursday: Race, Marriage, Reproduction

WEEK 11: CIVIL RIGHTS AND SEXUAL WRONGS

Tuesday: Civil Rights and the Politics of Respectability
- Primary Sources: Mattie Smith Colin, “Mother’s Tears Greet Son Who Died a Martyr” and “‘Were Never into Meaness’ Says Accused Men’s Mother,” The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative (University of Virginia Press, 2002): 29, 34.
Thursday: Respectability and Sexual Politics

WEEK 12: SEXUAL REVOLUTIONS

Tuesday: Out of the Closets and Into the...

Thursday: Sexual Revolutions

WEEK 13: SEXUAL LIBERALISM AND RADICALISM

Tuesday: Women’s Liberation

Thursday: Sexual Liberalism and its Discontents
WEEK 14: SEXUAL CONFLICT IN THE 1970S

Tuesday: Gay Liberation and Lesbian Feminism

Thursday: Fetal Politics and 1970s Conservatism

WEEK 15: SEXUAL CONSERVATISM IN THE 1970S

Tuesday: Backlashes, Organized and Otherwise
- Primary Sources (audio): Village People, "San Francisco"; Steve Dahl, “Do You Think I’m Disco”

Thursday: Last Day of Class. Review.
APPENDIX A

ASSIGNMENT #1: FORTY-EIGHT HOUR GENDER DIARY

Part 1:

For your first assignment you will keep a diary for a 48-hour period in which you try to record every act or situation that genders you. As you create your record, consider the following questions:

• What acts do you perform that define you as male or female or masculine or feminine? (Here you should record everything you notice yourself doing that makes you a particular gender.)
• What do others do to you that assign you to a gender?
• Which situations reinforce your gender most?
• Are there situations in which you find yourself resisting the cultural markers of gender?
• Are there situations in which you find yourself embracing the cultural markers of gender?
• Are there instances when you are labeled as a gender nonconformist?
• If you are unsure whether an act or situation genders you, record those events and try to figure out why they are confusing.

Part 2:

Using your gender diary, write a three-page reflection piece. Reflection pieces should combine your experiences with analysis. They should be written in a concise and analytical manner. Each paragraph should have a clear topic sentence. Be sure to provide examples from your diary. You must draw upon the questions from Part 1 and your diary to answer the following questions:

1. What is gender? What are masculinity and femininity?
2. What gender(s) are you? Why?
3. Do you construct your gender or is your gender constructed for you? Why?
4. What do your experiences from your 48-hour diary tell you about the cultural construction of gender and sexuality?

You are strongly encouraged to link your gender diary to the readings from “Day 2” of our syllabus. Please consult the “Paper Writing Guidelines” handout that is available on our course homepage. While this paper is not an essay, clarity and argumentation are still expected.
HOW TO WRITE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Successful discussion questions will enable you and your peers to think critically about the reading. The following are suggestions on how to prepare provocative and critical discussion questions. The sample question below begins with a statement that interprets the article. The question then offers examples or supporting quotations. Examples are followed by a series of short and provocative questions. The question helps us to understand the text better; analyzes how the text works and what it assumes; enables us to evaluate a text’s evidence or arguments; and highlights the implications of the text.

Sample question:

In “Sex Change and the Popular Press,” Joanne Meyerowitz presents the history of Christine Jorgensen, an ex-GI who sought to change her sex from male to female in the 1950s. Her article explores how transsexuals constructed their identity through popular culture and uses Jorgensen’s story to show how “marginalized subjects used available cultural forms to construct and reconfigure their own identities.” Meyerowitz tries to emphasize the agency of transsexuals in creating their own identity. Does Meyerowitz argue that anyone could easily change sex? Who or what does Meyerowitz think had the most power to construct a transsexual identity: doctors, individual seeking sex changes, or popular culture? Do you agree with her assessment? According to the gender norms of the 1950s, when did Christine Jorgensen become a woman?

DISCUSSION QUESTION FORMATTING CHECKLIST

Clarity:
___ Have I carefully proofread my question for typographical and grammatical errors?
___ Have I focused my question on a specific theme or topic that is essential to the text?
___ Will the question be clear to my intended reader?

Provides a context for analysis:
___ Have I begun with a statement that interprets the article?
___ Have I offered relevant examples or supporting quotations from the text?
___ Have I clarified essential terms and the meaning of what I am querying?
___ Is there an obvious relationship between my quotation and the questions I ask?

Allows for inference and debate:
___ Have I presented a series of short and provocative questions?
___ Have I asked questions that are genuinely debatable and for which there are a number of possible answers?
___ Do my questions enable readers to analyze how the text works and what it assumes?
___ Do my questions enable readers to evaluate a text’s evidence or arguments?
___ Do my questions highlight the implications of the text?
___ Is this question relevant to the text and to our course discussion? Is it worth arguing about?
Comparative Questions (optional):
__ Do my questions allow us to relate a text to an issue we've been discussing in previous classes?
__ Do my questions make us compare one text to another text?

Successful discussion responses will demonstrate critical thinking about the reading and the question. Your response should be 250-350 words in length (1-2 paragraphs). Each of your paragraphs should begin with a topic sentence that operates as the thesis of your paragraph. The topic sentence will tell the reader what you will argue and why that argument is significant. The topic sentence should be followed by evidence that supports the topic sentence. Be sure to introduce your evidence and explain why this evidence is relevant to your larger argument. Evidence should be followed by analysis that expands upon or clarifies the implications of the evidence. Finally, the paragraph should end with a sentence that either allows for an easy transition into the next paragraph or explains the broader significance of your overarching argument.

Discussion Response Formatting Checklist:
Your response should be between 250-350 words in length.

Clarity:
__ Have I carefully read and understood the discussion question?
__ Have I carefully proofread my own response for typos and grammatical errors?
__ Have I focused my response on a specific theme or topic that is essential to the question or the text?
__ Will my response be clear to my intended reader?

Content:
__ Have I begun my response with a thesis statement?
__ Is my thesis well developed and clearly focused?
__ Does my thesis acknowledge the complexity of the question itself?
__ Have I offered relevant examples and supporting quotations from the texts?
__ Have I explained the significance of my examples or supporting quotations to the overall argument?
__ Have I clarified essential terms and the meaning of what I am arguing?
__ Have I kept narrative and description to the minimum needed for analysis?
__ Does my conclusion emerge logically from my argument and evidence?
APPENDIX C

EXAM PREPARATION SCHEDULE

On the following dates, we will devote approximately ten to fifteen minutes to these topics.

1. February 5, 2013: Effective reading and note taking.
3. February 14, 2013: Using your weekly discussion responses to practice writing paragraphs for the exam.
5. February 21, 2013: Writing workshop of one student’s discussion response. Topic sentences and answering the “so what” question.
7. February 28, 2013: Interpreting a sample exam question. What does the professor want from me?
11. March 14, 2013: Interpreting a sample exam question. Topic sentences, topic sentences and more topic sentences!
13. April 9, 2013: Writing workshop of a student’s midterm exam.
14. May 9, 2013: 50 minute review for final exam.