

QUEER THEORY
SEMINAR IN LITERARY NONFICTION
LOVING THE QUESTIONS: THE PERSONAL ESSAY

QUEER THEORY
WOMEN'S STUDIES 1140 – UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
SPRING 2003

T/TH: 9.30-10.45
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Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday 10.50-11.50 plus Thursday 2.20-3.30 and by appointment

“Queer” can function as a noun, an adjective or as a verb, but in each case is defined against the “normal” or normalising. --Tamsin Spargo

The loss of the sense of “the normal,” however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when “the normal,” “the original” is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody.

--Judith Butler

“I feel like a big queer,” she said again, still laughing and beaming, and I could see she had figured out the landscape of my family. She was laughing, so I laughed, too. She was, after all, exactly who she is, wherever I bring her, a big old queer at my baby brother's wedding, and no matter what we did or didn't say or do, everyone knew it. About her. About me, too. “I feel like a big queer,” she said, “and I want to dance with you here.” --Barrie Jean Borich

Is the male/female dichotomy something natural?

1. Well, duh. Of course.
2. It's probably a combination of nature and nurture.
3. Probably, but there are a lot of exceptions walking around!
4. There's a male/female dichotomy? On what planet?

--Kate Bornstein

Course Description

This course is an introduction to theories of how people think about and enact genders and sexualities. Queer theory indicts both the assumption that people are naturally or normally heterosexual *and* the idea that being seen as “normal” should be the political or personal goal of sexual minorities. Queer theory calls into question the whole idea of normal, and explores how gender aims to “normalize” people by categorizing them. In recognizing the ruse or normality, queer theory examines all kinds of sexual practices and gender expressions without attempting to “dignify,” deny, or apologize for them. (Queer theory is thus a very different kind of thinking

from what you find in the psychology/sociology/anthropology of gender or sexuality, in women's studies, or in gay and lesbian studies.) As we will learn, this approach to sexuality and gender is not devoid of ethics; on the contrary, it can be ethical basis of sexual politics and interpersonal relationships.

Course Design and Materials

In this class, we will focus on: political and intellectual critiques of gender norms and sexual normalizing, especially as they play out in **the marriage debate**; on theoretical and literary accounts of **power and pleasure** that reject "the normal," including sadomasochism and prostitution; and on **camp** as a queer performance that not only rejects, but also reveals the artificiality of gender, sexual, and (sometimes) racial norms. There are, correspondingly, three units.

Unit I: Over the Gay Rights Rainbow?

*Barrie Jean Borich, *My Lesbian Husband*

*Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*
Christine Russo and Kelly Hankin, *Straight Down the Aisle: Confessions of Lesbian Bridesmaids* (video)

Unit II: Spirals of Pleasure and Power

Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks* (film)

*Kate Bornstien, *My Gender Workbook*

*Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory*

*John Rechy, *City of Night*

Unit III: Is Camp to Gay as Soul is to Black?

*Fabio Cleto, editor, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*

Scott Chambliss, *The Celluloid Closet* (video)

Jenny Livingston, *Paris is Burning* (video)

The Andy Warhol Museum (field trip)

*Items marked with an asterisk are available at the campus book center.

Course Requirements

Written Assignments: There are three 5-page papers assigned; they ask you to address the main topics of each unit. Full descriptions of each assignment, along with criteria, will be handed out well in advance. I do not accept late papers. Each paper constitutes 25% of your final course grade.

Participation: Another 25% of your grade is awarded for participation. This means: actively listening; debating issues openly, honestly and respectfully; bringing to class well thought out questions about the readings; asking questions about class dynamic or lectures forthrightly; reading closely and on schedule; relating your discussion directly to the assigned texts; engaging other folks in the class respectfully; volunteering to do extra research, writing, or art relevant to a topic and presenting it to the class; taking notes during video presentations and relating them to assigned readings; and striving to make the class a comfortable environment in which you can learn from everyone in the class and you are available, intellectually, to everyone else.

Schedule (subject to change; discussion questions for units II and III are forthcoming)

Tuesday Jan 7

Introduction to the class – go buy your books!

Thursday Jan 9

?? Borich 1-37

?? Questions for discussion: How does Borich (the author) introduce marriage as a problem? How does the book make you aware of the power that language has to reveal marriage as a discriminatory institution? Does marriage discriminate? What assumptions about marriage do these first pages call into question? What does “marry the ketchup” mean?

?? View *Straight Down the Aisle: Confessions of Lesbian Bridesmaids*

Tuesday Jan 14

?? Borich, 38-186

?? Questions for discussion: How would you describe the relationship between Barrie’s personal memories and the history of lesbian culture in the last 25 years? Is she a reliable narrator of her own history? Of lesbian history generally? What makes a reliable narrator? Why does she go into detail about music festivals, protests, and impersonations of Patsy Cline? What are the Lesbian Herstory Archives? What does Barrie (the narrator) mean when she says “the history of marriage is not in our favor?” Who is the “us” – who is she talking about? What are the critiques she is referring to?

Thursday Jan 16

?? Borich, 186-the end

?? Questions for discussion: When Barrie’s nieces “play bride,” how is this different from or similar to her getting married to Linnea? How does Paulie’s and Mitsuko’s wedding differ from Linnea’s and Barrie’s? How are these wedding different from or similar to the Takarazuka performance? How do issues of race and place crop up for Barrie and Linnea in Minneapolis and Tokyo? What is white flight? How do these issues impace Barrie’s views of marriage?

Extra Credit Event: Saturday, January 18, 8 pm. **Menopausal Gentleman**, performance at the Andy Warhol Museum. Actor, playwright and producer Peggy Shaw has received two Obie Awards for her work with the lesbian theater company Split Britches. In this award-winning, one-woman show, Shaw tackles issues of gender and “the change” by combining stand-up comedy, monologue and lounge act to dance, sing and lip-sync her way through the tortures of menopause. Call 412.237.8300 for tickets. \$10 for students.

Tuesday Jan 21

?? Warner, vii-81

?? Questions for discussion: What is the difference between shame and stigma? What is identity ambivalence? Where do you see these concepts operating in *My Lesbian Husband*? What does Warner mean by “dignity in shame?” Does Barrie or Linnea ever exhibit this oxymoronic trait?

Thursday Jan 23

?? Warner, 81-195

?? Questions for discussion: How does marriage discriminate, according to Warner? Does he give the same reasons for believing this that Borich presents through her creative nonfiction? Does Barrie's history support or repudiate the idea that gay male "experimentation gave way to a more lesbian-like interest in commitment" during the 1990s?

Tuesday Jan 28

?? Warner, 195-the end

?? Questions for discussion: Does *My Lesbian Husband* support or repudiate Warner's claim that there are no institutions of memory for queer culture? How are the politics of place (zoning coeds) in *The Trouble with Normal* similar to or different from the politics of place (white flight) in *My Lesbian Husband*? Would you say that marriage, too, is a "place"? If so, is it an ethical place? What is Warner's message about ethics?

Thursday Jan 30

Bornstein 1-25

Paper #1 due

Tuesday Feb 4

Bornstein 25-173

Thursday Feb 6

Bornstein 173-255

Tuesday Feb 11

Bornstein, 255-the end

Spargo, 1-10

Thursday Feb 13

Spargo 10-39

Tuesday Feb 18

Rechy 1-57

View: Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks*

Topic: How categories of sexual identities and roles change historically

Thursday Feb 20

Rechy 58-245

Topic: Confession and control

Tuesday Feb 25

Rechy 245-315

Topic: Discipline, pain and power

Thursday, Feb 27

Rechy 315-380
Topic: Authentic gay identity versus masquerade

-----Spring Break

Tuesday Mar 11

Spargo, 39-the end

Thursday, Mar 13

View *The Celluloid Closet*

Paper #2 due

Tuesday Mar 18

Cleto, chapter 23

Tyler, "Boys Will Be Girls: Drag and Transvestic Fetishism"

Thursday Mar 20

Cleto, chapter 1 and 2

Isherwood, excerpt from *The World in the Evening*

Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'"

Tuesday, Mar 25

Cleto, chapter 3 and 4

Booth, "*Campe-toi!:* On the Origins and Definitions of Camp"

Core, excerpt from *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth*

Thursday Mar 27

Cleto, chapter 19

Ross, "Uses of Camp"

Attend: Undergraduate Women's Studies Conference

Tuesday Apr 1

Cleto, chapter 20

Torres, "The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the *Batman*

Television Series"

View: *Batman* episode

Thursday Apr 3

Cleto, chapter 21

Tinkcom, "Warhol's Camp"

Tuesday Apr 8

Field trip to the Andy Warhol Museum

Thursday Apr 10

Cleto, chapter 17

Robertson, "What Makes the Feminist Camp?"
View Paris is Burning

Tuesday Apr 15

Cleto, chapter 24

Robertson, "Mae West's Maid's: Race, 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp"

Thursday Apr 17

Cleto, chapter 22

Butler, "From Interiority to Gender Performatives"

Final paper due during scheduled time for final exam.

SEMINAR IN LITERARY NONFICTION, SPRING 2001
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course will explore the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, with an emphasis on the kinds of questions that particularly concern the writer of nonfiction. Class time will be divided equally between reading and discussion of texts that raise especially challenging questions regarding this subject and consideration of student writing. We will focus on issues such as the following: Why choose to write nonfiction (instead of fiction)? When and what to 'fictionalize' in a work of nonfiction. What responsibility does one have to matters of fact of history? How reliable is memory? What are the ethics of revealing someone else's personal history? where is the boundary between self-revelation and exhibitionism? Readings for the course will involve books that cross the boundary between fiction and nonfiction as well as ones that push the above questions to some sort of limit. We will be concerned throughout with the aesthetics as well as the praxis of nonfiction writing. In addition to workshoping student manuscripts, we will discuss students' concerns about the areas of slippage and permeability between fiction and nonfiction in their own work.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Paulette Bates Alden, *Crossing the Moon*

Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein*

Barrie Jean Borich, *My Lesbian Husband*

Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

Kathryn Harrison, *The Kiss*

Shannon Olson, *Welcome to My Planet*

Benjamin Wilkomorski, *Fragments*

Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Short (2 double-spaced, typewritten pages) assignments

Weeks 2-4 I will ask you to write a short nonfiction exercise for each class. This should be new work, in which you "take on" one of the issues raised either by the book assigned or class discussion. I want you to challenge yourself to write in ways that you may previously have avoided out of one kind of anxiety or another, e.g. fear of revealing too much, "fictionalizing" too much, offending someone, looking silly. We will workshop these exercises in class in an atmosphere of mutual respect and confidentiality, of course).

Long manuscripts (15-25 double-spaced, typewritten pages)

Weeks 5-9 we will workshop a longer manuscript by each of you. These manuscripts may be new work (generated out of the first 4 weeks of class work) or something that you have been developing over time. In the case of the latter, you are expected to work on this manuscript during this course and to present a different version of it from any you have presented for workshop in previous classes.

Topic papers (10 double-spaced, typewritten pages)

Weeks 10 and 13 you will be asked to make an oral presentation on one nonfiction "issue" of particular interest to you, with examples drawn from your own experience or practice and to submit this presentation in written form.

Revision of long manuscripts (15-25 double-spaced, typewritten pages)

CLASS SCHEDULE:

Weeks 2-4: Wolff, Olson, Alden

We will focus on the borderline between fiction and nonfiction in works by Wolff, Olson, and Alden. Wolff will make a visit to campus on Sept. 18. Students are expected to attend his craft talk as well as his public reading.

Weeks 5-6: Bellow and Harrison

Each of these books (one fiction, one nonfiction) deals with a controversial revelation or "outing" of someone other than the author. We will discuss public responses to these books as well as our own reactions to the authors' choices.

Week 7: Wilkomirski

Wilkomirski's work raises questions about the reliability of memory, how we respond to nonfiction writing (as representing matters of fact of "truth") and the ethics of using the Holocaust in writing.

Week 8: Eggers, Justin Hall website and "reality TV"

This reading and viewing raise questions of exhibitionism and voyeurism. What is too much? How much is enough? Are there new forms evolving for the writer/consumer of nonfiction?

Week 9: Class presentations: Topic papers with reference to students' own writing

Weeks 10-11: Thanksgiving holiday and writing week

Week 12: Borich

We will continue our discussion of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, considering what it means to be a dedicated nonfiction writer. We will also discuss some of the issues involved in writing about an intimate relationship.

Week 13: Class presentations: Topic paper with reference to students' own writing.

LOVING THE QUESTIONS: THE PERSONAL ESSAY

SPRING SEMESTER, 2000 HAMLINE UNIVERSITY MALS/MFA

Patricia Weaver Francisco

TEXTS

The Personal Essay, edited by Philip Lopate, Anchor Doubleday, 1994

My Lesbian Husband, Barrie Borich, Graywolf Press, 1999

Photo-copied supplements

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND REQUIREMENTS

In this course we will read and write toward an understanding of the broad range of forms known as the personal essay: the meditation, memoir, sermon, reportage, academic essay or work of criticism. Through a series of exercises, students will develop material appropriate for each form and complete and revise one essay in a chosen form. We will prepare by reading with an eye for what excellent examples of the form will teach, drawing upon the reading for inspiration and stimulation. Students will participate in small groups to facilitate discussion of the reading and of student work. Of particular importance to the success of this seminar is the quality of your contribution to the community of reading. Grades will be based on separate evaluations of seminar participation and of writing.

WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS

Particularly in the first half of the course, weekly assignments will be given to allow you to experiment with material and form. Please give these assignments your best effort and bring a typed copy with you to class. In most cases, I will not read these pieces, but we will work with them in class or in groups. These exercises are intended to raise questions and give you a basis for choosing the form and subject of your major project as well as to focus your revision. Your grade for this aspect of the course will be based on completing all the assignments.

CRITICAL PAPER

A 3-4 page paper based on a critical response to the reading will be due toward the end of the course. This will allow you to carefully examine a writer or writers for their use of craft, structure, language or to consider the style and subject matter of particular essays. This is an academic essay and may be used as the foundation of a final essay in this form.

GROUP PRESENTATIONS

The class will be divided into working groups for in-class responses to reading and writing. In addition, each group will be responsible for several presentations based on the reading assigned

for the week before. These presentations are informal, but contribute to your grade for this aspect of the course, so they should be structured and show evidence of preparation.

FINAL PORTFOLIO

At the end of the term, a final portfolio will be due. This consists of the first, subsequent, and final drafts of the essay you have chosen to work toward, as well as a short reflection on the process of revision. The final essay can vary in length but should be at least 10 pages long and not longer than 30 pages.

ATTENDANCE

Because of the central role which the community of writers plays in the success of this course, you are expected to be present for every class. However, in the event of an illness or unforeseen circumstance, please call me at my home number before missing a class. More than one absence will result in a failing grade unless you have received advance permission from me.

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.”

-- Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

“What we select to write about, I am suggesting, isn't a matter of choice so much as being chosen . . . When therefore I endorse the notion of imagination as seeing what's there, imagination as exact inspection of the actual, I mean to work with that part of the world revealed to me because of who I am concretely – place, time, heritage, my existence entire.”

--Terrence Des Pres, *Writing Into the World*

“There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain. It is hard to explain because you have never read it on any page; there you begin. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.”

-- Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

“In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there): ‘Can you describe this?’ And I said: ‘I can.’ Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.”

--Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem: 1935-1940*, preface translated by Stanley Kunitz