

WOST 397Q
Course Syllabus
Spring 2009

Queer Theory and Contemporary Issues

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Course Description:

Queer theory erupted within academia in the early 1990s. Its roots are in a very particular historical moment which was shaped by the AIDS crisis and the activist response to AIDS, theories of intersectionality developed largely by feminist women of color, and post-structuralist theory which highlighted the instability and discursive production of identity categories. This course will begin with an introduction to queer theory, looking at the cultural context from which it emerged, its central tenets, debates within the field, and the activist strategies that have been connected to it. During the first half of the course, we will read selections from the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, and we will look at the emergence “New Queer Cinema” as an activist response to the AIDS crisis. During the second half of the course, we will use the anti-normative theoretical perspective proposed by queer theory to think about its usefulness for contemporary cultural and political topics such as the formation of queer subjectivities, GLBT marriage, queer kinships, queer representations in popular culture, transgender issues, immigration and migration, and sexuality and the military.

Part of the goal of this course is to help you learn how to read theory and apply it to contemporary issues. Reading theory is a task that can be both delightful and frustrating. This is true for people who are just beginning to read theory, and for those who have more experience with it. Although sometimes difficult, reading theory can be deeply satisfying and can push us to think about and experience the world in new and exciting ways. Please expect that some of the readings for the course will be challenging and will require time and active-reading practices such as highlighting and note-taking. We will work together as a class to tease out some of the ideas in the more difficult readings, but you will need to come with your own thoughts, notes, and questions. I have interspersed the more challenging readings with films and other articles that are written in more traditional prose so as to vary our reading experiences throughout the course.

Readings and Texts:

All course readings are available on our SPARK page in the “Course Readings” folder. I encourage you to print out as many readings as possible and bring them to class. The cost of such printing is in place of an expensive textbook. Every student gets fifty free pages of printing per semester on his/her UCard when used at the library printing stations. Some of you might like to use this benefit for printing articles from our class. There are some articles that I will require you to print since you will need to mark them as you read and you will need to bring them to class for discussion.

A course reading schedule is posted in both the “Syllabus” folder and the “Course Readings” folder on our SPARK page. You will automatically be given access to our SPARK page once you are registered for the class. You can access SPARK from the top right corner of the UMASS webpage (www.umass.edu). Please print out the reading schedule and follow it carefully. It contains due dates for readings and response questions, and it tells you what we will be doing in class each day. The homework that is listed on each day is due the *following* class.

Grading:

30% Reading/Viewing Response Papers:

It is most important to me that you come to class having done the readings and with ideas or questions to share. This is your contribution to making our class one that has engaging discussions and a quality use of class time. To help facilitate this end and to make sure you are grasping the central tenets of queer theory, I will ask you to write short response papers to some readings and films during the first half of the semester. You will choose from response questions posted on SPARK. They are due in class on the due date assigned. These questions are meant to help you synthesize and think critically about the texts we read/watch and be prepared for discussion. You are required to answer *three* of these questions in 2 page, typed, double-spaced papers. The response due dates are listed on the reading schedule.

30% Paper on Contemporary Issue

This 7-8 page paper is due at our last class meeting. You will choose one contemporary issue as the focus of your paper. You will need to situate your discussion of this issue within the context of queer theory by drawing from course readings, discussions, and at least two outside sources. I will provide you with a more detailed description of the assignment before mid-semester break.

30% Queer Cultures Portfolio:

Throughout the semester, I would like you to be looking for and collecting contemporary cultural “artifacts” that represent or reflect queer issues and/or queer cultures. These might be found in newspaper articles, magazines, ephemera, TV programs, editorials, Internet chats, advertisements, films, presentations on campus, music videos, songs, or discussions or interviews with peers. Create a portfolio that can contain each “artifact” that you find or, if it is not something you can place in a portfolio, a description of it. Then, for each “artifact” create an entry (1-2 paragraphs) where you analyze what you found in light of course readings, films, or discussions. You may choose to focus your entire portfolio on one specific theme, or it can contain an array of topics. Conclude your portfolio with a brief (approx. 3 pages) analysis of your findings. What do these “artifacts” tell you about queer contemporary cultures, issues, conflicts, subjectivities, etc. **Please come to my office hours or make an appointment with me before mid-semester break to show me the entries you have collected so far. In this way, I can give you feedback on your entries before you have to hand in the entire portfolio.**

10% Participation and Attendance

You are expected to attend class and to participate in discussion. If you are someone who absolutely cannot speak in class, come talk to me and we will find another way for you to convey your thoughts about discussion and earn your participation grade. You are allowed four absences without penalty. Please use these absences for illness, doctor’s appointments and family emergencies. If you are experiencing a serious illness or family emergency that will cause you to miss more than four classes, then please come see me and provide documentation. If you will be absent due to religious observance please see me ahead of time to let me know. **For**

every absence over the first four, your grade will be reduced by one third of a letter grade. This is true even if you use your four absences and then encounter an emergency. So, save your absences for illness and family emergencies or events.

A Note on Participation:

Speak up, ask questions, and make this class your own. Please listen carefully to what others are saying or trying to say, and I will do the same. I will do my best to encourage your participation and I am interested in what each of you has to say. **You don't have to agree with me to participate.**

In order to create a safe space for discussion and learning, I require that you speak to each other with respect. It's OK to have different opinions, but I ask that you share them in a way that is educational for and respectful to others. Please remember that for some people in this class the material is very new, and for others it will relate to their own lives in such a way that they might feel a deep personal investment in the material and discussion. I encourage everyone to ask any question they have, and I ask that you give each other the room to learn and grow throughout the semester.

Contacting Me and Office Hours:

I encourage you to come to my office hours. In a course of 30-35 students, it helps me to know about the questions or experiences that you are having in relation to the class, and I welcome your visits to my office hours. You don't have to have a particular agenda to come talk to me during office hours. If you would like to meet with me, but can't make my office hours, please come speak to me and set up an appointment. I hope I see you all at some time during the semester during office hours!

Please see me immediately if any problems arise for you during the course; the sooner we address any difficulties, the more time we have to find a solution to the problem together. **Please give me at least 24 hours to respond to e-mails!**

Plagiarism:

The University's policies on plagiarism apply to ALL written work in this course. Taking a sentence, paragraph, or entire paper from an Internet source without using proper citation, or handing in someone else's writing as your own counts as plagiarism. To better understand the definitions of and penalties for plagiarism, please visit the following URL:

http://writingprogram.hfa.umass.edu/student_resources/plagiarism_policy.asp

Learning or Psychological Disabilities:

UMass is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services, you may be eligible for academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements. If you had a documented disability in high school, or if you think you might have a physical, learning, or psychological disability, I strongly urge you to contact Disability Services for consultation. Their number is: 545-0892, or e-mail inquiries to DS@educ.umass.edu

