Transgender: Histories, Identities, Politics
Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, NYU
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Course Description:

In the past decade, the term "transgender" rapidly became a moniker for a range of social identities, a political movement, and a community that had no name until the early 1990s. Although transsexual, transvestite, drag queen, and many other identities (now grouped under transgender) have a long history in the West, and while non-normative genders have been recorded in many societies, "transgender" is a term with a very short history. Despite this, it is ubiquitous in the early twenty first century in a wide range of contexts: from grassroots activism and social service provision, to academic settings (such as courses like this one), to the U.S. Congress, and even in psychiatry and the medical community more broadly.

The main project of this course is to begin to map out the territory of “transgender,” its current cultural and political articulations, as well as its historical evolution and global prevalence. Within that framework, we will address the following questions: What social, political, cultural and normative, historical changes produced “transgender?” What does it enable as a category? What does it obscure? Where is “transgender” located in the terms of American understandings of personhood? What are the problems and possibilities of using "transgender" to describe non-normative genders cross-culturally? What are the contexts within which "transgender" can be used to make claims of the state in a representative democracy? What possibilities and problems are presented by using the term to describe people who refuse it as descriptive of their experiences? What issues arise when non-transgender identified people investigate, and ask questions about, those who take this category to be meaningful about their lives? And what does "transgender" tell us about the organization of gender and sexuality in the contemporary United States?

This course will engage a multi-disciplinary literature to answer these questions, from medical sexology, to anthropology, sociology, history, cultural studies, film and (auto)biography. We will engage topics from medical regulation to feminist understandings of gender variance to grassroots activism, law and public policy, drag and performance, and identities and community formation. In essence, we will attempt to use as many available resources as we can, to forge an understanding of what a “transgender studies” would look like.

Much like the field of “transgender studies” itself, this course is new and a work in progress. As such, I welcome suggestions for additions/revisions to the syllabus, as well as alternate ways to conceptualize the topics and projects.

Course Materials:

Please purchase the following texts, available at the NYU bookstore: (Note: For students for whom the cost of purchasing these texts is prohibitive, copies will be made available
at the reserve desk of the library. If possible, you should endeavor to buy all the books, as it will be useful to you to be able to reference them in class.)


A required **course packet** is also available at New University Copy, 11 Waverly Place. This packet will not be available on reserve and contains some materials that will be difficult or impossible for students to obtain from other sources.

A number of films will be shown in class. They will not be available for viewing at any other time.

**Course Projects:**

The success of this course depends almost entirely on the people who comprise its membership. Not only is it important that all class members take an active role in steering class discussions, but it is imperative that class members listen to, consider and respect the opinions and ideas of others. **You should only take this course if you feel you are able to engage in discussions of gender, sexuality, bodies, genitals and personal identities in a mature, intelligent and thoughtful way.** As a group, we will set down some ground rules for class discussion, during the first class period.

**Reading Responses:**

There are four response papers due during the course of the semester, an initial “position” paper and three responses to the weekly readings. Details and instructions for both will be handed out separately. Response papers are due **on or before** the class period in which we discuss the readings about which you choose to write. For students whose work is handed in on time, you will have the opportunity to re-write your papers for a higher grade.
Final Exam:

A final exam will be administered at the end of the semester. Details TBA.

Grading:

In general, success at achieving the goals of the course will be evaluated according to the following formula:

- Subject Position Paper = 5%
- Reading Responses and Discussion Leadership = 45%
  - 3 Individual Papers = 15% each
- Final Exam = 40%
- In-class Participation and Attendance = 10%

Course Outline:

Introduction: In-Roads, Beginnings, Ground Rules, etc.
What is “transgender?” Where did the term come from? What will we be learning about in a “transgender studies” course? How do these issues affect me?

- Introduction to the Position Paper Assignment

Part 1: Policing from Without: Medicine, Sexology, Feminism

Medicine and Gender Variance I
How do doctors think about gender variance? How have their ideas evolved over time?

Due: “Subject Position” paper


**Medicine and Gender Variance II**


**Medicine and Gender Variance III**


**Feminist Accounts of Transgenderism I**

What do the debates between different types of feminists and trans activists looks like? What are the issues they invoke? How do each employ different ideas of what “feminism” is take make their case?


**Feminist Accounts of Transgenderism II**

**Policing Transexuality/Homosexuality in Children**

How do doctors differentiate between homosexuality (sexuality) and transgender (gender) in children? What kinds of anxieties do we see them responding to? What do those responses look like?


**Part II: Borders and Differences**

**Still Sorting “Out”: Who's "Gay" and Who's "Transgender"**

Continuing with the questions raised in the last section…


**Butch/FTM Border Wars**


**FTMs and Transmen I**

**Film: You Don’t Know Dick**


**FTMs and Transmen II**


**Part III: From Within: Transgender(?) Voices**

**Activism and Meaning Making I: Historical Overview**
What counts as “trans” activism? How has it changed over time?


**Activism and Meaning Making II: Who Defines Transgender?**
Who controls the meanings associated with trans identities? Using the example of transphobic violence, think about how are they mobilized differently by different groups.

• Cartwright, Donna, “Remembering Falls City: the Death of Brandon Teena and the Resurgence of Transgender Activism.”
• Reading packet on the GenderPAC controversy.

**Activism and Meaning Making III: Law and Public Policy**
How do/should transpeople attempt to use the law to gain social rights? How does the law address concerns voices by transpeople?


**Part IV: History and Anthropology**

**Autobiography and History I**
How has autobiography been integral to consolidating trans communities and making trans identities visible in the larger culture? (Think back to Rubin.)

**Autobiography and History II**


**Speaking in/to the Academy I**

How does the academy “Study” and use trans concepts to further intellectual and political goals? How can transpeople use the academy for similar ends?


**Speaking in/to the Academy II**


**Using Transgender in Cross-Cultural Description I**

How are trans identities generalizable across lines of culture and place? What are the common themes across cultures and what are the differences? What can we glean from the readings in this section about the ways in which “gender” and “sexuality” are complex and place-specific?

**Film: Travesti**


**Using Transgender in Cross-Cultural Description II**


**Using Transgender in Cross-Cultural Description III**

Part V: Interrogating Transgender: Gender, Race, Class, Sexuality, Embodiment

**Transgender, Economy and Class**

How do issues of class play out in specific ways in trans communities? How is gender variance implicated in larger discussion of class politics?

**Guest Lecturer:** Dean Spade, Esq. Founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project

- Spade, Dean. “Compliance is Gendered: Struggling for Self-Determination in a Hostile Economy” (forthcoming).

**Intersexuality I**

What are the commonalities between trans and intersex identities? What are the differences? What has been the particular trajectory of intersex activism over the last century; how does it influence and how is it influenced by struggles for trans rights?


**Intersexuality II**


**Drag I**

What can we learn about gender performance and the politics of race and gender from looking at these canonical representations of drag culture? How do they inform the larger issues explored in this course?

**Film: Paris is Burning**

Drag II


Exam Review and Conclusions