CULTURE OF DESIRE: QUEER THEORY

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Languages and Literature
2008

In the 2008-2009 academic year, I will be teaching CORE 2531: Culture of Desire: Queer Theory as a writing-intensive Core course. The theme is Self and Identities, and the course is built around the nature of identity, primarily looking at the way (self-)identity is constructed through linguistic means. In the syllabus, I give the following blurb as a course overview: "The course examines the nature of gay male and lesbian desire and identity as reflected through the prism of queer theory and as exemplified through national politics, literature, film, and art in general. Queer theory posits an Other that is usually defined through society, and particularly through artistic and linguistic means, hence the role of literature and any art form that uses some sort of 'text' (such as film, ballet, music, etc.). This course is not really intended to answer questions, but it will try to make you ask questions that will eventually bring up even more questions. This course is also not intended to be an exercise in identity politics. The course is divided into three broad areas: sexuality, queer theory, and identity. This course is also writing-intensive, which means that I will try to work with you on your written expression as much as possible." We approach the concept of identity with readings ranging from Michel Foucault's *Introduction to Sexuality* to Didier Eribon's *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*.

The course title likely is one of the reasons why the class attracts a diverse audience. While I do not get the student who picks Core classes to fit her or his schedule, I do get a wide variety of seriously interested students: gay and lesbian students who are looking, somehow, for an affirmation within DU's academic structure; "allies" -- people who have close gay friends and family who are taking the course as a gesture of solidarity and eagerness to understand; the open-minded "straight" student, who is just as eager to experience something new and different. The differing expectations make this course a challenging one to teach, especially since I try to make certain that the course is not an "exercise in identity politics." It is impossible not to have some of those issues pop up during the course, but I try to continually keep things focused on the construction and shifts of identity as much possible, as opposed to politicizing what identities may be.

Perhaps my struggle to keep topics relentlessly intellectual and academic as possible is what makes students often say that they argue and discuss class topics late into the night, which is gratifying. Given this sort of expectation and engagement, it seems to me that this class is an ideal writing-intensive Core class: writing gives the students a chance to process what they are learning, and, frequently, a reason to receive my personalized feedback. But it is suited to be writing-intensive is a rather personal way, because, ultimately, the writing that takes place is an exchange between the students and me. Peer reviewing, for instance, would only work with difficulty because the writing students produce, even when on topic with an intellectualized approach with queer theory, is often quite personal and revelatory.

Given all of these dynamics, I try to start the course with a bang, by shocking the class into heated discussion. I screen the 2003 documentary *Capturing the Friedmans*, by director Andrew Jarecki. The film is about a family -- the Friedmans -- in Great Neck, New York, during the 1980s. Allegations of serial sexual child abuse are filed against the father Arnold, and against one of the sons, Jesse. This film not only forces the audience to consider the impact of the sexual abuse of children, but also to consider the ties that sexual abuse all too often has to homosexuality: the outsider role of both pedophilia and homosexuality are reinforced by interviews with various members of the police force. Since the film is significantly tied together by the Friedman's passion for videotaping their lives, my course can

begin with a discussion of our chosen self-perception and how it is seen and used by others to categorize us. Once we have investigated some of these general ideas, the course continues with an overview into the history of sex and sexuality as tied to identity and difference.

We start with historical perspectives on sexuality, reading articles about the social construction of same-sex desire, pairing that with James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. That, in turn, leads us to a discussion of race, sexuality, and queer theory. We then move to the invention of heterosexuality as a concept that is developed specifically to oppose homosexuality. Discussing the origins of these dueling ideas leads us to an examination of peoples in New Guinea where "homosexuality" (as we would see it) is practiced by a majority of people and, in a sense, institutionalized. Our travels then take us to very late Soviet Ukraine, where (male) homosexuality was criminalized. We finish with an exploration of gender identity, Jacques Lacan, and the use of sexual categories in countries and societies around the world.

I confess that I have used this class as one of the original writing-intensive pilots in the Core, but I always viewed the concept as a way to work with students more individually on their understanding of the course, instead of guiding them in their writing as well as in the topics of the course. The workshop I attended in March, 2008, really drew my attention to the idea that we need to teach our students how to write: not in the way that we are writing teachers exactly, but in the fashion that we need to explain what writing -- and thinking -- in fact are. The practice of writing is crucial, but someone needs to walk students through what it is. It is something that I did not do before, mainly on account of the fact that I felt that the writing in this class is so personal. But talking about writing does not have to as intimate. As a result, I will be spending about 15 to 20 minutes every week talking about writing, specifically here in the context of this course's topics. It is too easy for students to slide from talking about the conceptions of (sexual) identity to value judgments, positive or negative. Talking about writing -- how these thoughts are structured -- will not only help the students' writing, but also help avoid that certain pitfall. That, in turn, will help them integrate the personal with the academic ever better in their written work.

I try to organize the writing assignments in a spiral of intensity so that they match, in a sense, the complexity of the topics we discuss. I will quickly cover these assignments, which I developed for the Core writing-intensive workshop. While I will be developing more assignments as the course progresses, these now form the backbone of the course. The first assignment is an informal, exploratory writing assignment that encourages the students to process the *Friedman* film:

> We have just finished watching the film *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003). Write for ten minutes, where you explore your reactions to the film -- specifically addressing whether you think Arnold and Jesse Friedman are guilty of child molestation. Grammar and punctuation are not important here, only the depth of your reaction. Are few of you (including me, if you like) will be called upon to read your thoughts to the class.

It is important to me that I share in the experience of writing with the students themselves: something I would not have thought of prior to the workshop. What better way to give a message about the process of writing, particularly since I am trying to intimate to my students, by beginning with this film, the challenges ahead? By writing with them, I am letting them know that I also have to deal with these issues as I teach. This writing assignment, I think, also indicates to these students (most of whom are really quite highly motivated in the class) that I am valuing thought and reaction simultaneously.

I will be following this assignment with another informal one assignment the following week, regarding the novel *Giovanni's Room*. I have found that students have difficulty reconciling Baldwin's novel with their own lives: it is almost as though they view the novel as a parody of what they see their own immediate experience as being. Once they get deeper into a discussion of the novel's development, however, they begin to understand the function of labels that are, it seems, a series of large semiotic circles that intersect one another in a type of Venn diagram

fashion: man-gay-queer overlapping in multiple sets with prostitute-faggot-murder. The informal assignment allows them to begin the exploration of these questions prior to class discussion:

> Write for ten minutes, where you explore whether you think that David and Giovanni are gay in Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*. What makes them gay -- or not? Grammar and punctuation are not important here, only the depth of your reaction. Are few of you (including me, if you like) will be called upon to read your thoughts to the class.

Baldwin's novel is our first opening to the idea that categories of identity may, indeed, be only something that we absorb from the world around us, and this writing exercise should be crucial in getting that conversation going.

So far I have covered informal assignments. The first formal assignment revolves around the construction of heterosexuality as a category. It is an assignment worth 10% of the student's final grade. Again, the student is encouraged to react to something that is provocative, but, this time, the reaction must be written as a paper that needs to reveal some reflection and thought:

> Writing in the first-person, explore your reaction to the following quotation from Jonathan Ned Katz's *Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995), a book in which Katz argues at length that normative heterosexuality is a reaction to the establishment of homosexuality as a category of identity.
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> "In the first years of the twentieth century, with Freud's and other medical men's help, the nineteenth century's tentative, ambiguous heterosexual concept was stabilized, fixed, and widely distributed as the ruling sexual orthodoxy -- The Heterosexual Mystique -- the idea of an essential, eternal, normal heterosexuality. As the term heterosexual moved out of the small world of medical discourse into the big world of the American mass media, the heterosexual idea moved from abnormal to normal, and from normal to normative." (Katz, 82)
>
> Explain the premise of Katz's argument and then respond to it. Your paper should be 5 to 6 pages in length. This essay is worth 10% of your final grade.

This paper gives the student an opportunity to engage personally with Katz's work, which is a somewhat idiosyncratic historical view of the development of sexuality. Students read this work after Foucault's *A History of Sexuality*, so they are ready to react both personally and in an informed academic manner. I will be meeting with the students individually after this assignment, both in order to work with them on their writing, but also to push them in their assumptions about identity.

The next informal assignment achieves the same goal. We screen part of the 2000 documentary film, *Keep the River on Your Right*, which records Tobias Schneebaum's return to New Guinea to his husband in a society where "homosexuality" is expected and cannibalism occurs. Like the *Friedman* film earlier, queerness is portrayed, at least implicitly, as something that is broader than sexual activity. Earlier in the course, we will have discussed sexual practices and sexual identity: how can a woman be a lesbian yet be only in heterosexual relationships? How can heterosexual men, who do not identify as gay at all, enjoy being penetrated, or, even, involved in a monagamous relationship with a man? How can a man attracted to women become a woman himself and then be attracted to men? These discussions lead us into this assignment:

> In this class, we have watched a segment of the documentary *Keep The River On Your Right*, in which you have seen that in certain societies everyone engages in "homosexual" behavior as much as "heterosexual." We have also discussed the fact that in the United States there are straight men in gay long-term sexual relationships with another man. Imagine that you are

> Dan Savage, writing a draft column for "Savage Love" in which you are going to take apart the issue of sexual identity by referring to both of these facts. Grammar and punctuation are not important here, only your thoughts and reactions.

As an informal assignment, it is more guided, because by this point the students have been familiarized with identity constructions for quite a number of weeks. Whether the column really reads like Dan Savage is not important, but the sense of irony Savage brings to his writing is (and the students will have read some excerpts from Savage's work).

The problems with labels guide the next formal assignment in the course. *The Wrath of Dionysus*, a 1910 novel by Evdokia Nagrodskaia, was one of the boulevard novels printed in Saint Petersburg between 1905 and 1917. These novels typically were intended to be sensationalist, and, often, tried to tackle the topic of same-sex love. Nagrodskaia's novel is no exception: in it, the heroine Tania discovers her true (lesbian) nature through painting and art. The novel's plot is inconsequential, but the conceptualization of sexual identity permeates it. It is, as such, an interesting experiment for students to do some formal work in questions of sexual identity, as reflected in cultural and temporal difference:

> At the conclusion of Evdokia Nagrodskaia's 1910 novel, *The Wrath of Dionysus*, Alexander Vikentevich explains to the heroine Tania what he thinks drives her identity: "Tatiana Alexandrovna, you are a *man*. You only have the body of a woman. You're feminine, soft, and gracious -- but you're still a man. If one looks at you as a woman, your character appears quite original and complex. But as a man, you're plain and simple." (Nagrodskaia, 182).
>
> While he later uses the word "lesbian" in his speech to Tania, Alexander Vikentevich is, in fact, talking about transgenderism. Respond to his analysis of Tania in an essay of 4 to 5 pages. This essay is worth 10% of your final grade.

This paper gives students the opportunity to engage with the book in a fashion that is quite unexpected, and they are, by this point of the course, able to argue some subtle elements of sexual and gender identity.

The final paper in the course is an attempt to encapsulate the work that the students have done over the quarter, while letting them explore on their own. I refer to "current cultural discussions" in my instructions for this assignment, and the students have had the opportunity throughout the course to see what is meant, and how broadly they can take things. This paper is worth 15% of the final grade in the course.

> In this course, we have -- are -- exploring the nature of sexual identity. We have looked at language, cultural norms, physical drives, psychology, and philosophy. Didier Eribon writes in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (2004), one of our more recent readings:
> "For the project of *Madness and Civilization*, as it is given in the 1961 preface (which Foucault removed from the 1972 republication), was to inaugurate the vast future work of a 'history of limits,' of gestures that establish borders, 'gestures that are obscure and necessarily forgotten once performed, whereby a culture refuses something that will come to function as its Outside.'" (Eribon, 265)
> Beginning with this quotation from Eribon, expand on the connection between madness as explained by Foucault and (homo)sexuality. First analyze the meaning of this view of Foucault's work, which Eribon admits is not easily interpretable in this fashion. Then expand for the remainder of the paper your application of this interpretation to current cultural discussions in the United States or your own home country. Feel free to use the

discussions we have had in class as a starting point. For the second part you will need to refer to sources we have have read/watched in class (including *Madness and Civilization*, excerpts of which we have also read in class), as well as do research on your own (using the library, current magazines and newspapers, and the Internet). Cite sources using any academic style you are comfortable with (but remain consistent). Your essay should be between 10-12 pages. It will be graded for clarity of thought and is worth 15% of your final grade.

Prior to the paper, I will have handed out my grading criteria for the paper. I have always resisted providing my students with this sort of statement, because, in a way, I think that I am afraid of being cornered, of somehow being forced to grade in a way that is more mechanical than I would like. But the wonder of criteria is that they actually provide for that sort of inventiveness and they encourage students to actually try (it is the papers that do not have that sort of "umph" that get "C"s). Here are my criteria:

Required Elements: Will get a grade in the "C" range if met:

1. There is an introductory section on the Eribon quotation.
2. You bring in cultural viewpoints and discussions from class discussions in your paper.
3. You expand with items from other sources.
4. Those sources are properly identified, and fit your argument for the most part.
5. You are trying to expand the Eribon viewpoint beyond its original intention, but not always logically: more passion than reason.
6. The paper is generally understandable and well-organized, with occasional confusing sections.
7. You stick to one academic style for your citations.
8. The paper generally understandable, with frequent errors in mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation).

Superior Elements: Will get a grade in the "B" range if met:

1. The introductory section on the Eribon quotation engages with an expanded interpretation of limits and outsiderness.
2. Class discussions on cultural viewpoints are smoothly expanded into items culled from further research.
3. You are successfully expanding the Eribon viewpoint beyond its original intention, with only occasional relapses into passion instead of reason.
4. The paper is understandable and generally well-organized
5. The paper has few errors in mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation).

Extraordinary Elements: Will get a grade in the "A" range if met:

1. The introductory section on the Eribon quotation smoothly brings in the overall tone of the paper in engaging with discussions of cultural otherness and difference.
2. Class discussions on cultural viewpoints are merged seamlessly with further research.
3. The paper's style embodies the contradictions presented by the conception of otherness and limits, revealing unexpected correlations between the concepts presented -- keeping with the original spirit of the Eribon interpretation of Foucault.
4. The paper discusses questions fully.
5. The paper flows smoothly and has no confusing sections.
6. There are no errors in mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation).

With this assignment, the course ends. I hope that the students will have been able to both work on their perception of writing, and engage more fully with the topics of the class. I think that the writing element of this course is central to its mission. In a way, I feel even more convinced of that centrality after attending the Core writing-intensive workshop. That workshop was revelatory -- I was struck at the variety of ways that faculty guide their students in their writing. There are those who specify each step of research and writing that their students must do. Others are much looser in instructions, but subtly try to achieve the same result. What is common is the desire to really have students learn the material and learn to think through it. Writing is crucial in this exercise, and having the opportunity to teach this Core class as writing-intensive is central to the goals of all of our courses. I can think of few ways of teaching that are more satisfying, and I look forward to teaching this course again, with that much more eagerness!