

Contemporary Trans Fiction & Its History

Time & Location TBD
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Office Hours: TBD

Course Description:

What makes a story “trans?” This junior tutorial examines contemporary narratives written by and about trans people. It seems that for the first time, trans people are writing fiction for a literary readership—not just memoirs about coming out of the closet. But where did this new body of fiction come from, and how do we make sense of its emergence?

This course looks both at recent short stories, novels, and essays written by trans writers, and at the historical contexts that conditions their creation, reception, and transformation. While we will endeavor to focus on contemporary prose written by trans writers, we will also examine the cultural and psychiatric narratives of transness that have developed over history, from early 20th-century sexological and psychopathological discourse to 21st-century activism. This course begins by tracing how some of the earliest examples of “trans lit”—the primary account of “sexual inversion” in the sexological case study—conditioned trans memoir. From memoirs of tragedy and epiphany, we look at how literary fiction written by trans authors responds to, contradicts, and incorporates those same expectations. We will also work to trouble clichés, assumptions and expectations about what makes a narrative “trans”—it need not involve coming out, cross-dressing, and tragedy. To that end, we will also employ narratology, genre studies, psychoanalysis, and other methods to help account for the emergence and transformation of trans literary history.

Throughout the semester, we will discuss the following questions: What joins these texts beyond their shared cultural history? Does transness influence the form of a text as well as its content? To what extent is transsexuality a “narrative condition?” How do different critical methods and approaches in queer theory and transgender studies account for this new body of literature? Is queer theory enough to account for transsexuality?

Course Goals:

- This course will prepare you to write one clear, extended (20-25 pg.) literary critical essay. To that end, this course will teach you the fundamentals of researching, situating, and presenting (on the page and in person) a short-form literary argument.

- By the end of this course, you should have an understanding of the historical discourses behind contemporary trans fiction and its critical contexts in trans studies and queer theory.
- This course will introduce you to the literary methods of narratology and genre studies.

Required Texts:

Short readings and excerpts are available as noted on the course website. For all physical copies listed below, please have the edition listed for consistency in referring to the text.

Imogen Binnie, *Nevada*

Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*

Torrey Peters, *Detransition, Baby*

Casey Plett, *A Dream of a Woman*

Casey Plett, *Little Fish*

Assignments & Grading

Over the course of the tutorial, students will be responsible for three assignments: 1) a **short 5-to-6 pg. close reading paper** designed to get you thinking about 2) a **prospectus and 10-source annotated bibliography** for 3) a **20-25 pg research paper**. The final essay will be submitted twice, first as a draft and again as a revision.

In addition, **students will be responsible for short 5-to-10-minute presentations for the week's secondary readings, on a rotating basis.** You may choose any of the secondary texts. These presentations should not be onerous or overly formal; they are designed to frame the discussions of the secondary readings. What are the main arguments of these texts? What outside context can you bring to these readings? Are there any points of contention or confusion among the readings? What questions would you like the class to discuss?

Attendance and Submitting Assignments

Barring an excused absence, students are expected to arrive to class on time having read the assigned material for the week. Unless otherwise noted, all assignments should be turned in on the date specified on the syllabus. Late assignments will be penalized for each day late. Multiple absences will result in a diminished participation grade.

Collaboration & Plagiarism

Exchanging ideas is essential to a productive, successful tutorial. Students are allowed (and encouraged!) to discuss course readings and paper topics with one another outside of class. However, all writing and research submitted should reflect your own, original engagement with the material. Any work that is not your own must be cited as such.

Accessibility

Harvard's Accessible Education Office (AEO) notes: "Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the AEO and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation."

Reading & Assignment Schedule:

Week 1: Course Overview & An Introduction to Queer/Trans Theory

Introduction to *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) – Eve Sedgwick

"Queer & Now" (1993) – Eve Sedgwick

"(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies" (2013)– Susan Stryker

"Queer Subjects/Queer Critique" in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies* (2020)

Excerpts from *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) – C. Riley Snorton

- Optional, Recommended Reading: "White Glasses" (1992) – Eve Sedgwick

Week 2: Psychopathology, Sexology, & Creating “The Transsexual”

Primary Reading:

Selected primary accounts from *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) – Richard von Krafft-Ebing

Selected primary accounts from *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-dress* (1910) – Magnus Hirschfeld,

Secondary Reading:

“Sexual Aberrations” from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) – Sigmund Freud

Excerpts from *The History of Sexuality* (1976) – Michel Foucault

Week 3: Sexual Inversion & Early Typologies

Primary Reading:

The Well of Loneliness (1928) first half – Radclyffe Hall

Secondary Reading:

“Some Primitive Thing Conceived in a Turbulent Age of Transition: The Invert, The Well of Loneliness, and the Narrative Origins of Transsexuality” (1998) – Jay Prosser

Week 4: Sexual Inversion & Early Typologies Pt. 2

Primary Reading:

The Well of Loneliness to end

Secondary Reading:

“Hall of Mirrors: Radclyffe Hall's "The Well of Loneliness" and Modernist Fictions of Identity” (2003) – Laura Green

Introduction to *Female Masculinity* (1998) – Jack Halberstam

Week 5: Library Visit

We will use class this week to reacquaint ourselves with Harvard's libraries and their rich resources. Please use this week to catch up for the next couple weeks of reading—there's more than the last few weeks!

Week 6: Reverse-Engineering the Popular Trans Novel

Primary Reading:

Detransition, Baby (2021) – Torrey Peters

Secondary Reading:

“Subjects of Gender/Sex/Desire” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism & the Subversion of Identity* (1990) – Judith Butler

“The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1987) – Sandy Stone

Short (5-6 pg.) Close Reading Paper Due

Week 7: Trans Narrative & Its Discontents

Primary Reading:

Nevada (2013) – Imogen Binnie

Secondary Reading:

“The Rise of the Gender Novel” (2015) – Casey Plett

Introduction to *Narrative & Its Discontents* (1981) – DA Miller

Week 8: Transgressive Fiction

Primary Reading:

Little Fish (2018) first half – Casey Plett

Secondary Reading:

“Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) – Jack Halberstam

Week 9: Transgressive Fiction pt. 2

Primary Reading:

Little Fish to end – Casey Plett

Excerpt from *Paul takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (2017) – Andrea Lawlor

Secondary Reading:

“Imitation & Gender Insubordination” (1991) – Judith Butler

Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography due. Come to class prepared to share your proposed paper topic.

Week 10: Beyond Memoir

Primary Reading:

Excerpts from *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (1967) – Christine Jorgensen

Excerpts from *Conundrum* (1974) – Jan Morris

Excerpts from *Redefining Realness* (2014) – Janet Mock

Excerpts from *Fierce Femmes & Notorious Liars* (2016) – Kai Cheng Thom

Secondary Reading:

“The Law of Genre” (1980) – Jacques Derrida

“Mirror Images: Transsexuality & Autobiography” (1998) – Jay Prosser

Week 11: Stone Butch Blues

Primary Reading:

Stone Butch Blues (1993) – Leslie Feinberg

Secondary Reading:

“No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*” (1998) – Jay Prosser

Final Essay drafts due. We will workshop these in class.

Week 12: “Queer Temporality” & Form

Primary Reading:

“Obsolution” (all sections) & “Enough Trouble” in *A Dream of a Woman* (2021) – Casey Plett

Secondary Reading:

“Queer Time: The Alternative to ‘Adulthood’” (2018) – Sara Jaffe

Week 13: Authenticity, Realness, and How to be “Trve Trans”

Primary Reading:

Read: “Battle Vest” (2018) – Camellia-Berry Grass

Watch: *Paris is Burning* (1990) – dir. Jennie Livingston

Secondary Reading:

“Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation & Subversion” from *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1996) – Judith Butler

Excerpt from *Females* (2019) – Andrea Long Chu

Final papers due