

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
DEPARTMENT OF GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND WOMEN'S STUDIES
GSWS 3133F
Lesbian Lives and Cultures
Autumn 2026

Instructor: Chris Roulston

Lecture times: Tuesdays 10:30 am – 1:30 pm

Room: UC 3225

Office: LH2356

Phone: 519 661-2111 ex. 88931

Email: croulsto@uwo.ca

Office Hour: By appointment (in person or on Zoom)

Course Description

This course will explore what it means to identify as a lesbian today. With the move away from identity politics, the ascendance of queer as a challenge to identity categories, and the advent of trans theory, it will consider the place of lesbianism in contemporary North American culture and more globally. Attention will be paid to a variety of aspects of lesbian lives and to contemporary forms of lesbian experiences in relation to their historical antecedents. Themes will include intersectionality, activism, sex, literature, art and politics.

Prerequisites: GSWS 2273E or GSWS 2220E or permission of the department

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Course Materials (available at the UWO Bookstore)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (2006) (cost \$21.00)

All other material will be available on OWL BRIGHTSPACE under 'Course Readings'

OWL Brightspace

Students are responsible for checking the course site on a regular basis for news and updates. This is the primary method by which information will be disseminated to all students in the class. Students may access the OWL Brightspace Learner Support site for assistance: <https://brightspacehelp.uwo.ca/> For IT related issues, they may contact Western Technology Services Helpdesk directly: <https://wts.uwo.ca/helpdesk/>.

Assignments:

Presence and participation	5%
Midterm Test (2 hours)	15%
Short essay (1000 words)	15%
Long essay (2000 words)	25%
Oral presentation (7 mins)	10%
Final examination (3 hours)	30%
Total	100%

Assignment	Percentage value	Date Assigned	Date Due
Short essay (1000 words)	15%	Tuesday 29 September	Tuesday 20 October
Midterm Test (in-class, 2 hours)	15%	Tuesday 27 October	N/A
Long Essay (2000 words)	25%	Tuesday 27 October	Tuesday 24 November
Oral Presentation (5 mins)	10%	Tuesday 8 December	N/A
Presence and Participation	5%	Ongoing	N/A
Final Examination (3 hours)	30%	Between 11-22 December	N/A

Lesbian Lives and Cultures at a glance:

Date	Topic
Week 1: Tuesday 15 September	Introduction: What's in a label?
Week 2: Tuesday 22 September	Is there a lesbian past? Anne Lister
Week 3: Tuesday 29 September	<i>Gentleman Jack</i> : Anne Lister and Popular Culture Short Essay Topic handed out (15%)
Week 4: Tuesday 6 October	1920s: Radclyffe Hall and Vita Sackville-West
Week 5: Tuesday 12-16 October	READING WEEK: NO CLASS
Week 6: Tuesday 20 October	DOCUMENTARY: <i>Forbidden Love</i> Short Essay due
Week 7: Tuesday 27 October	Midterm Test (15%) Long Essay Topic handed out (25%)
Week 8: Tuesday 3 November	1970s Separatism and community building
Week 9: Tuesday 10 November	1980s Sex Wars
Week 10: Tuesday 17 November	Lesbians of Colour: Combahee & Anzaldua
Week 11: Tuesday 24 November	Alison Bechdel, <i>Fun Home</i>
Week 12: Tuesday 1 December	The Nonbinary Lesbian: Andrea Gibson Long Essay due
Week 13: Tuesday 8 December	Oral Presentations (10%)

This course will:

- * Provide an understanding of marginalized sexual identities in contemporary culture
- * Help to develop a context for understanding lesbian lives
- * Provide the critical tools to understand how the categories of sexuality, race and class intersect
- * Identify some of the critical challenges these intersections make apparent

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

In this course, the use of AI (automatic translation tools, grammar checkers, ChatGPT...) is prohibited. If AI use is suspected, the instructor will ask for research notes, rough drafts, essay outlines, and other materials used in preparing assignments. Students are expected to retain these materials until after final grades have been entered. In the unlikely event of concerns being raised about the authenticity of any assignment, students may be asked to produce these materials; an inability to do so may weigh heavily against them.

Course Policies

Participation and Attendance: Students are expected to attend class regularly and come prepared to discuss the week's readings. Should a student need to miss class, a courtesy explanatory email is appreciated.

E-mail Policy: Emails by the instructor will be responded to within 48 hours.

Assignment Submission: All assignments must be submitted via Turnitin on the OWL BRIGHTSPACE platform.

Late Assignments: Late assignments will only be accepted without penalty if a prior agreement with the instructor has been made, or if a valid medical certificate is provided. In the event that a student is unable to meet a deadline, for medical or other reasons, it is the student's responsibility to negotiate an alternate deadline with the instructor, prior to the original assignment deadline. Revised deadlines will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Students who submit late assignments without making a prior agreement with the instructor will be penalized 2% for every 24-hour period after the assignment due date. The 2% penalty also applies to students who fail to submit an assignment on the agreed upon alternate date.

Academic Consideration Requests

For procedures on how to submit Academic Consideration requests, please see the information posted on the Office of the Registrar's webpage:

<https://registrar.uwo.ca/academics/academicconsiderations/>

All requests for Academic Consideration must be made within 48 hours after the assessment date or submission deadline.

All academic consideration requests must include supporting documentation; however, recognizing that formal documentation may not be available in some extenuating circumstances, the policy allows students to make one Academic Consideration request **without supporting documentation** in this course. However, the following assessments are excluded from this, and therefore always require formal supporting documentation:

- Examinations scheduled during official examination period
- Midterm Test

Absences at Final Examinations

If you miss the Final Exam, please contact the Academic Advising office of your Faculty of Registration as soon as you are able to do so. They will assess your eligibility to write the Special Examination (the name given by the University to a makeup Final Exam).

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/exam/definitions.pdf

Academic Offenses

Scholastic offences are taken seriously, and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, here:

https://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_offences.pdf

Plagiarism: "Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offense (see the 'Scholastic Offense Policy' in the Western Academic Calendar). Plagiarism checking: The University of Western Ontario uses software for plagiarism checking. Students may be required to submit their written work in electronic form for plagiarism checking." - U.W.O. Senate statement on plagiarism.

Statement on the use of plagiarism-checking software

All required papers are subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

Policy on Accommodation for Religious Holidays

Students should review the [policy for Accommodation for Religious Holidays](#). Where a student will be unable to write examinations and term tests due to a conflicting religious holiday, they should inform their instructors as soon as possible but **not later than two weeks** prior to writing the examination/term test. In the case of conflict with a midterm test, students should inform their instructor as soon as possible but not later than one week prior to the midterm.

Academic Accommodation and Accessible Education

Academic Accommodation is "a means of adjusting the academic activities associated with a course or program of student in order to permit students with disabilities to participate in those activities at the University and to fulfill the essential requirements of a course or program."

<https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academicpolicies/appeals/Academic%20Accommodation%20and%20Accessible%20Education.pdf>. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with **Accessible Education** at the earliest opportunity. "Accessible Education plays a central role in Western's efforts to ensure that its academic programs are accessible for all students" <http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessibleeducation/index.html>

Link to Accessible Education:

accessibleeducation.uwo.ca

Special Examinations

A Special Examination is any examination other than the regular examination, and it may be offered only with the permission of the Dean of the Faculty in which the student is registered, in consultation with the instructor and Department Chair. Permission to write a Special Examination may be given on the basis of compassionate or medical grounds with appropriate supporting documents. To provide an opportunity for students to recover from the circumstances resulting in a Special Examination, the University has implemented Special Examinations dates. These dates as well as other important information about examinations and academic standing can be found [here](#).

Support Services**Academic Advising**

Your Home Faculty's Academic Advising Office will support or refer whenever you have an issue that is affecting your studies, including information on adding/dropping courses, academic considerations for absences, appeals, exam conflicts, and many other academic related matters. Do not hesitate to reach out to them if you are struggling and unsure where to go for help. Contact info for all Faculties is here:

<https://registrar.uwo.ca/facultyacademiccounselling.html>

Mental Health Support

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (<https://uwo.ca/health/>) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Gender-based and sexual violence

Western University [is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence](#) (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: <https://www.uwo.ca/health/gbsv/support/index.html>. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.

Learning Development and Success

Counsellors at the Learning Development and Success Centre <https://learning.uwo.ca> are ready to help you improve your learning skills. They offer presentations on strategies for improving time management, multiple-choice exam preparation/writing, textbook reading, and more. Individual support is offered throughout the Fall/Winter terms in the drop-in Learning Help Centre, and year-round through individual counselling.

USC

Additional student-run support services are offered by the USC,
<https://westernusc.ca/services/>.

Statement of Recognition

“Western University is situated on the traditional land of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lenape and Attawandaron peoples who have longstanding relationships to the region of southwestern Ontario and the City of London. In close proximity to Western, there are 3 local First Nations communities: the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region of southwestern Ontario, there are 9 First Nations and a growing Indigenous urban population. Western recognizes the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations and all of the Original peoples of Turtle Island (North America) to the development of Canada.”

GSWS3133F: Lesbian Lives and Cultures Course Schedule (Fall 2026)
COURSE MATERIALS ARE AVAILABLE ON THE *LESBIAN LIVES AND CULTURES* BRIGHTSPACE SITE

Week one: Tuesday 15 September

Introduction: What's in a Label? Lesbian vs. Queer vs. Trans

Introductory Lecture

Week two: Tuesday 22 September

Is There a Lesbian Past?: The Case of Anne Lister

Required Readings:

DIARY EXTRACT: Anne Lister, *Diaries* (1821) (35 pages)

BOOK CHAPTER: Chris Roulston, "Introduction," *Decoding Anne Lister* (Cambridge UP, 2023) (17 pages)

Week three: Tuesday 29 September

Gentleman Jack: Anne Lister and Popular Culture

TV SHOW: *Gentleman Jack*, dir. Sally Wainwright, Episode 1, BBC/HBO (2019)

ARTICLE: Chris Roulston, "From Text to Screen: *Gentleman Jack* Then and Now," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. 26.4 (2022): 309-322.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epub/10.1080/10894160.2022.2085235?needAccess=true>

ARTICLE: R. Biggs, 'How *Gentleman Jack* Changed My Life Forever,' *Diva Magazine* (20 August 2019).

Topics for short essay handed out (1000 words) (15%)

Week four: Tuesday 6 October

Feeling Backwards: The 1920s and Early Lesbian Visibility

Required Readings:

NOVEL EXTRACT: Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) (14 pages)

DIARY EXTRACT: Vita Sackville-West, *Diaries* (1920s) (21 pages)

BOOK CHAPTER: Heather Love, "Spoiled Identity: Radclyffe Hall's Unwanted Being" (28 pages)

Week five: 12-16 October

READING WEEK: NO CLASS

Week six: 20 October***Documentary: Forbidden Love (1992)***

DOCUMENTARY: *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, dir. Aerlynne Weissman and Lynne Fernie (1992)

Required Reading:

Jean Bruce, "Forbidden Love: Queer Visibility and the Archive" (adapted from *Forbidden Love* book chapter, Arsenal Pulp Press/ McGill Queen's Press, 2017).

SHORT ESSAY DUE (15%)

Week seven: Tuesday 27 October

MIDTERM TEST (2 hours) (15%)

Topics for long essay handed out (2000 words) (25%)

Week eight: Tuesday 3 November***Lesbian Utopias: 1970s Separatism and Community Building******Required Readings:***

ESSAY: Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified-Woman" (1970) (3 pages)

ESSAY: Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman" (1981) (7 pages)

SHORT STORY: Joanna Russ, "When It Changed" (1972) (8 pages)

Week nine: Tuesday 10 November***Sex, Porn, and Politics: The 1980s Sex Wars******Required Readings:***

ARTICLE: Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1984), (41 pages)

BOOK EXTRACT: Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), (18 pages)

VIDEO: *If These Walls Could Talk 2*. Directed by Jane Anderson, Martha Coolidge and Anne Heche. HBO Home Video, 2000. [segment 2 – "1972: Feminists", 36:37 to 1:07:32] [in-class screening]

Recommended Reading:

Amia Srinivasan, "The Sex Wars," *The New Yorker* (Sept. 13, 2021)

Week ten: Tuesday 17 November***Challenging Whiteness: Lesbians of Colour******Required Readings:***

ARTICLE: *Combahee River Collective, 1974-1980*. "A Black Feminist Statement," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 42.3/4 (2014): 271-280 (9 pages)

BOOK CHAPTER: Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) (31 pages)

Week eleven: Tuesday 24 November
Lesbian Coming-of-Age Narratives: Fun Home

Required Readings:

GRAPHIC NOVEL: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (2006)

ARTICLE: Valerie Rohy, "In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home*," *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Journal Quarterly* 16.3 (2010): 340-361. (21 pages)

LONG ESSAY DUE

Instructions for Oral Presentations handed out (10%)

Week twelve: Tuesday 1 December
The Nonbinary Lesbian: Andrea Gibson

ESSAY: 'A Wild and Precious Life': Remembering Andrea Gibson, Amber Tamblyn, *Poetry Foundation*, 13 October 2025

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/1734695/a-wild-and-precious-life-remembering-andrea-gibson>

Andrea Gibson Poems: "Swing Set," "Andrew"

DOCUMENTARY: *Come See Me in the Good Light*, dir. Ryan White (2025)

Week thirteen: Tuesday 8 December

Oral Presentations (10%)

Final Examination in December 2026 (3 hours; 30% of final mark)