

Course Outline
WS1023F: “Introduction to Gay Male Culture”
Western University, Summer 2016
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Gay culture is in itself a specious set of terms. In fact, much of queer thought in the last fifty years—and certainly since the stonewall riots—has debated who and what both ‘gay’ and ‘culture’ have come to represent. No representation or instantiation of gay culture can possibly represent the diversity of gay North American life. But we can point to places where gay cultures overlap, intersect, diverge, and converse. This course attempts to follow such lines of thought.

“Introduction to Gay Male Culture” provides a taste of the variety of histories, cultures, and ideas that make up the state of North American gay male life. While it would be impossible for this course to provide a definitive understanding of gay culture, through intersectional lenses of critical race theory, gender theory, disability studies, class, trans theory, and more, we can begin to understand just how rich, and how problematic, gay culture has become.

So too, the term culture is here taken in its widest possible connotations. This course understands ‘culture’ to represent everything from artistic practice to quotidian life to social mores, from politics to activism to sex.

We will begin with a general discussion of how we will approach gay culture from an intersectional lens. Next we will develop a shared sense of queer history—notably stonewall and what we’ve come to term ‘gay liberation’—followed by a brief foray into the politics of contemporary gay life. Beginning in week 7, we will cast our nets wide and study a cluster of gay cultural icons, moments, and tendencies that have come to influence what it means to be a gay man, including dating apps and RuPaul, Tilda Swinton and activist die-ins. Our course concludes with some recent work by queer and trans thinkers who imagine where gay culture is headed, for better or for worse.

Week 1: “Introduction: Whose culture is it anyways?”

Weeks 2: “Different versions of a shared history: Stonewall and it’s aftermaths.”

Week 3: “The politics of a fragile coalition.”

Weeks 4 and 5: “Young and queer and out of control.”

Week 6: “The library is open: reading and voguing.”

Week 7: “The DL.”

Week 8: “Sexual culture(s) from the Mineshaft to Grindr.”

Week 9: “Focus: Derek Jarman in context.”

Week 10: “Notes on an epidemic: HIV then and now.”

Weeks 11 and 12: “The future of gay life.”

Evaluation and Assignments

Weekly participation/discussion: 25%

The goal of this course is to engage with a variety of facets of gay male culture. As such, students are encouraged to ask questions of, and work with, assigned readings in whichever way they see fit. A weekly post is the bare minimum in terms of expected participation. The best forms of participation include: engaging with the ideas of your colleagues to foster discussion, placing readings in the context of the course specifically and subject matter generally, providing new and unique insight through critique and creativity, using assigned texts to create structured argument and analysis.

Short response papers: (5x5%) 25%

You will be asked to write five 500 word posts, each pertaining to a single text and in response to a question prompt at the end of the lecture notes. You are not asked to regurgitate or summarize the lecture or readings to demonstrate understanding. Instead, the best response papers are those in which you have formulated an interesting and thoughtful critique of the work at hand. You may choose to engage with the text directly, apply the text elsewhere, or create a personal reflection. You may engage with the text as a whole, or choose to break apart a single sentence, thought, or example. Outside of the box thinking and cogent arguments will be rewarded.

Community engagement assignment: 15%

During the course of the semester, students are asked to either profile or volunteer at an established queer- or trans-based community organization. Students choosing to profile the organization should submit a 5 page analysis of the organization's objectives. Students choosing to volunteer for 5 hours or more should submit a 2 page reflection on their time spent at the organization. More details will follow on the course website.

Final exam: 35%

Details of the final exam to be released at the course's mid-way point.