

Lesbian Identity Throughout History

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Course Description

What is a lesbian? If you asked most people today, they would describe a non-man who exclusively has sexual and romantic interactions with other non-men. However, the definition of 'lesbian' and (eventually) the community associated with the label have a long and fraught history. Together, we will explore female homosexual behavior historically, the origins of 'lesbian' as an identity group, defining moments in lesbian history, and finally, contemporary lesbian discourse. This course is designed as a primer for sapphic queer history, so no prior experience (with academia or queer history) is required. However, even queer history veterans may learn a thing or two due to the erasure of lesbian history from the 'queer history canon'. The material I've chosen is designed to be as accessible as possible while still being educational for two reasons. First, due to the longstanding invisibility of lesbian history, everyone could benefit from learning at least a little about this community. Second, choosing complicated and overly-academic texts (sorry, Judith Butler) would be doing a disservice to the theatrical and, for lack of a better word, blunt nature of lesbian activism.

I chose the material for this class by reading (or watching) the material myself and deciding that it met three criteria: 1) It provides a valuable and nuanced perspective on a lesbian issue 2) It centers lesbians 3) It is accessible and easily understandable. It is my desire for this course to be taught similar to ACT UP's teach-ins, meaning that it is activist-informed and guided by discussion. This means that many of the syllabus materials are articles meant to be read by people with various education backgrounds. Although some materials are more difficult than others, it is my hope that the discussion will be illuminating for certain pieces that may give people trouble and the more inaccessible pieces have a companion piece meant to provide a more accessible breakdown. The ideal venue for this course would be activist or community gatherings in a seminar setting.

Course Goals

After completing this course, students will be able to:

- Define and describe what a lesbian is, both historically and in the present moment
- Construct a timeline of important moments, groups, and people in lesbian history
- Describe the most important issues in the lesbian community, both historically and in the present moment
- Understand how queer history informs other histories

Words: 391

Course Schedule

Historical Homoeroticism

- Texts:
 - Johnson, Marguerite. “Guide to the Classics: Sappho, a Poet in Fragments.” *The Conversation*, The Conversation US, 12 Feb. 2018, theconversation.com/guide-to-the-classics-sappho-a-poet-in-fragments-90823.
 - Pasulka, Nicole. “The History of Lesbian Bars.” *VICE*, 17 Aug. 2015, www.vice.com/en/article/8x443v/the-history-of-lesbian-bars.
 - Buzwell, Greg. “The Censorship of Lesbian Fiction: From The Well of Loneliness to Tipping the Velvet.” *The British Library*, The British Library, 23 Oct. 2020, www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/the-censorship-of-lesbian-literature#.
 - Holmes, Shirlene. *A Lady and A Woman*. Shirlene Holmes, 1990.

- Explanation:

The popularization of the term ‘herstory’ arose because of **history**’s focus on men. Perhaps no area of history is this problem more clear than within lesbian history. Historical depictions of homosexual behavior between women are few and far between, but this class we will explore the most famous historical lesbian, Sappho, and some available depictions of queer female life pre-Stonewall. Despite Sappho’s importance in lesbian history, there is still a dearth of information about her life and work available. Marguerite Johnson’s “Sappho: a poet in fragments” deftly weaves together the most important facts about Sappho with her poetry (including Fragment 16 and Fragment 31). It is an excellent and accessible read that includes all of the most critical information in a nutshell. Beyond Sappho, one of the best ways to construct a timeline or overview of lesbianism in the US historically is through bar culture. The Vice piece from Nicole Pasulka takes us from circa-WWI to the present, covering a wide breadth of lesbian public life and community, making it the perfect introduction piece for the rest of the seminar. Outside of the US, Greg Buzwell’s piece explains how lesbian fiction was denied entry into the historical record via censorship. Beyond the historical record, I have also included Shirlene Holmes’ play “A Lady and a Woman” which focuses on the fictional, but realistic, relationship between two Black women during the 1890s. This play, both beautiful and an accessible read, will allow students to begin to imagine stories that may have been left out of the historical record.

During class, students will evaluate the materials I have made available for them and imagine narratives that may have existed but were undocumented. They will aim to answer questions such as “What effects has the privatization of women’s personal lives had on the historical record?”, “How have the sexual lives of women been treated historically?”, and “What historical figures and/or pieces of art that you are familiar with may have homoerotic undertones?”.

Words: 330

Let's Get Political: Feminism & Political Lesbianism

- Texts:

- Billy, Michael, director. *A Stormé Life*. YouTube, Itlmedia, 30 June 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgCVNEiOwLs.
- Rizinti, Izzy. "Short Thread on 'Political Lesbians.'" *Twitter*, Twitter, 17 Sept. 2019, twitter.com/BellaRizinti/status/1173894002044801025.
- Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, and Jo Nesbitt. *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*, Onlywomen Press, Ltd, 1981.
 - **Companion Piece for the Pamphlet (optional):** Thompson, Karl. "Political Lesbianism." *ReviseSociology*, 12 June 2020, revisesociology.com/2020/06/12/political-lesbianism/.
- Aron, Nina Renata. "Lesbians Battled for Their Place in 1960s Feminism." *Medium*, Timeline, 20 Jan. 2017, timeline.com/lesbians-battled-for-their-place-in-1960s-feminism-25082853be90.
- Lesbian Avenger Documentary Project. "Lesbian Avengers: A Brief History." *Lesbian Avenger Documentary Project*, 2010, www.lesbianavengers.com/about/history.shtml.

- Explanation:

While LGBTQ+ activism and culture have always existed in the shadows and on the fringes of society, the Stonewall riots brought them into mainstream political consciousness. This is especially true for lesbians, who were nearly entirely invisible pre-Stonewall. However, no discussion of Stonewall would be complete without talking about Stormé Delarvarie, the lesbian drag king rumored to have thrown the first punch at Stonewall. This video from *In the Life* allows Stormé to share in her own words her contributions to the community in terms of her biracial identity, her drag, and her eventual 'protector of lesbians' role as bouncer of Henrietta Hudson. Lesbian invisibility also inspired the old joke that 'lesbians didn't exist before the 1970s', which has some truth to it, as lesbian identity was defined for the first time during this era.

We will also explore how lesbian identity interacted with the second wave of the feminist movement, from the introduction of 'political lesbianism' to the Radicalesbians and Lesbian Avengers. I have provided a pamphlet from the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group that is widely regarded as the radical feminist origin of 'political lesbianism'. While the language is fairly accessible, I have also included an optional companion piece that breaks the pamphlet down further in order to be accessible to all audiences. There is also a twitter thread on political lesbianism that shows the contemporary consensus surrounding the potentially harmful impact of political lesbianism on the lesbian community. I have also provided two pieces on two different lesbian activist groups, the Radicalesbians (or Lavender Menace) and the Lesbian Avengers. These pieces explain how lesbians became the catalyst for greater inclusion within the feminist

movement, both for sexual minority women as well as for women of color and low-income women. They also provide a portrait of the theatrical and blunt nature of lesbian activism during this era. This thematic area builds upon the students' understanding of lesbian identity historically and introduces them to the late-1960s and 1970s where lesbianism is at the forefront of feminism.

During class, students will aim to answer questions such as “How have today’s texts challenged and changed your understanding of the Stonewall riots and 1970s feminism?”, “What challenges and intersections existed for lesbian women during the 1970s, both within the queer community and the feminist movement?”, and “What connections can you draw between the Lavender Menace, the Lesbian Avengers, and intersectional feminism?”

Words: 398

AIDS Crisis: How GLBT became LGBTQ

- Texts:
 - Lister, Kate. “The Lesbian 'Blood Sisters' Who Cared for Gay Men When Doctors Were Too Scared To.” *Inews.co.uk*, Associated Newspapers Ltd, 21 Aug. 2020, [inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/the-lesbian-blood-sisters-who-helped-save-gay-mens-lives-235100](https://www.inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/the-lesbian-blood-sisters-who-helped-save-gay-mens-lives-235100).
 - Brekke, Kira. “How Lesbians' Role In The AIDS Crisis Brought Gay Men And Women Together.” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 4 Apr. 2017, www.huffpost.com/entry/aids-crisis-lesbians_n_5616867ae4b0e66ad4c6a7c4.
 - **(CW: discussion of death, drug use)** National AIDS Memorial. *Laura Thomas - Women and AIDS - Surviving Voices*. Performance by Laura Thomas, *YouTube*, YouTube, 5 Dec. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CfbaPcln1o&t=385s.
 - Drescher, Elizabeth. “GLBT? LGBT? LGBTQIA+? What's in a Name?” *Medium*, The Narthex, 7 Nov. 2018, medium.com/the-narthex/glb-t-lgbt-lgbtqia-whats-in-a-name-a5608849c9fa.
 - **(TW: mention of death, non-graphic police brutality)** Schulman, Sarah, and Ali Cotterill. *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*. *YouTube*, YouTube, 1 Dec. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrAzU79PBVM.
 - **(58:30-1:05:59)**

- Explanation:

While the 1970s was characterized by lesbian separatism from the queer community, the advent of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s changed everything. This thematic area moves chronologically from the previous section on activism and feminism. As described by Dr. Kate Lister and Lillian Faderman, lesbians stepped up to take care of their sick brothers by running food pantries, blood drives, and volunteering in hospitals. The activism and leadership shown by lesbians during the AIDS crisis fundamentally changed the dynamics of the queer community

and even inspired the acronym shift from GLBT to LGBTQ+ as explained by Elizabeth Drescher.

This class also contradicts the common assumption that the AIDS crisis only affected gay men and discusses the effect of AIDS on women, both via women who contracted the disease and the legal mechanisms that prevented women from accessing care. Laura Thomas explains the role that women played in AIDS activism and provides a nuanced perspective on lesbian inclusion in the movement. While watching the entirety of the documentary is recommended, the selection I have chosen from *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* shows footage of the protests ACT UP participated in to promote the Centers for Disease Control changing the definition of AIDS to include women. While this selection may be sensitive for some audiences, I believe witnessing actual protest footage and hearing chants of “CDC can’t you see? Lesbians get HIV” are critical to understanding the dire nature of this era in queer and lesbian history.

During class, students will answer questions such as “How did the role of lesbians in the queer community change during the AIDS crisis?”, “What facets of intersectionality impacted the treatment of lesbians during the AIDS crisis?” and “What effects from the AIDS crisis can be seen in the contemporary queer community?”

Words: 300

Dykes to Watch Out For: Lesbian Theatre and Media

- Texts:
 - Solomon, Alisa. “The WOW Cafe.” *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1985, pp. 92–101., doi:10.2307/1145606.
 - Garner, Dwight. “The Days of Their Lives: Lesbians Star in Funny Pages.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Dec. 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/12/03/books/03garner.html.
 - **Optional:** Bechdel, Alison. *The Essential Dykes to Watch out For*. Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020.
 - Available PDF: <https://archive.org/details/essentialdykesto00bech>
 - McDonnell, Maureen. “Branding Bechdel’s Fun Home: Activism and the Advertising of a ‘Lesbian Suicide Musical.’” *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre (JADT)*, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, 13 May 2019, jadtjournal.org/2019/01/28/branding-bechdels-fun-home-activism-and-the-advertising-of-a-lesbian-suicide-musical/.
 - Deshler, Kira. “Why Is Every Lesbian Movie a Period Piece?” *Screen Queens*, 12 Sept. 2020, screen-queens.com/2020/09/12/why-is-every-lesbian-movie-a-period-piece/.
 - Saturday Night Live. *Lesbian Period Drama*. YouTube, YouTube, 10 Apr. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgaLIP0xmQE.
- Explanation:

Media is such a complex and broad category and so the variety of materials for this thematic area are designed to give a taste of what lesbian theatre, comics, and movies have to offer. No discussion of lesbian theatre would be complete without exploring the history of the WOW Cafe, an anarchical collaborative and sapphic space that contributed heavily to grassroots theatre and lesbian public life in NYC. Additionally, McDonnell's discussion of the marketing for the groundbreaking lesbian tragicomic musical *Fun Home* depicts the challenges of making lesbians marketable to the masses. This discussion continues with Kira Deshler's "Why is Every Lesbian Movie A Period Piece?" which, beyond challenging the chaste and historical themes that seem to dominate lesbian-centered movies, provides several lesbian film recommendations for the dedicated student. Accompanying that piece is the SNL "Lesbian Period Drama" sketch which also pokes fun at the tired tropes of lesbian movies. Additionally, I've provided a discussion of the importance of Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* by Dwight Garner which highlights the strip's precocious discussion of issues relevant today, such as climate change, showing the sometimes-invisible contributions of lesbians to popular culture. I have also provided a link to a PDF of *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* for optional browsing. These pieces were selected in order to engage students in the beauty of lesbian life and culture as sort of a palate cleanser for the heaviness of the AIDS discussion.

During class, students will discuss questions such as "What are common narratives in lesbian media?", "How have lesbians subverted dominant norms in media?", "In your opinion, what is the importance of representation?", "How has lesbian media succeeded in representation and what are some areas in which improvement is needed?", and "What is your vision of lesbian media in the future?"

Words: 302

Sapphic Struggles: WLW Solidarity & Gender Trouble

- Texts:
 - The New York Times Style Magazine. *Butches and Studs, in Their Own Words*. *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Apr. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdN4PnSv0qg.
 - Vrangalova, Zhana. "A New Study Explains Why Many Lesbians Are Biased Against Bisexual Women." *Them.*, Condé Nast, 18 July 2018, www.them.us/story/study-explains-lesbian-bias-against-bisexual-women.
 - Prager, Sarah. "Dear White Lesbians: You Are Not Studs." *Tagg Magazine*, Tagg Communication LLC, 10 Mar. 2020, taggmagazine.com/white-lesbians-you-are-not-studs/.
 - Czyzelska, Jane. "Lesbophobia Is Homophobia with a Side-Order of Sexism." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 July 2013, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/09/lesbophobia-homophobia-side-order-sexism.

- Fogel, Aly, et al. “Lesbian TikTok & Everything You Need To Know About Sapphic Subgenres.” *GO Magazine*, Modern Spin Media, LLC, 14 Aug. 2020, gomag.com/article/lesbian-tik-tok-everything-you-need-to-know-about-sapphic-subgenres/.
- Justsaimsapphic, Zafy. *Bi/Pan Lesbian Is Not A Valid Identity*, 2021, justsaimsapphic.carrd.co/.
- Drasky, Kathy, and Efrain Gonzalez. *The Lesbian Bar Project*, 2020, www.lesbianbarproject.com/.
- Explanation:

The lesbian community has grown and changed so much, even just within the past few years, that it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to give an overview of contemporary lesbian discourse. However, I’ve assembled a sample of sources that will give students a taste of several issues the lesbian community is actively facing and currently discussing. Perhaps the most important and impactful piece is the New York Times Style Magazine’s “Butches and Studs, In Their Own Words”. It is incredibly rare to see masculine lesbian representation in general, but the group of people they assembled are both eloquent in their explanation of the intersections between their sexuality and gender presentation as well as extremely impactful within queer history. The Vrangalova piece and the Bi/Pan Lesbian carrd explain some of the rifts between the contemporary lesbian and bisexual/pansexual/sapphic communities. Prager’s, “Dear White Lesbians: You Are Not Studs” explains the appropriation of terms historically specific and salient to lesbian communities of color, especially Black lesbians. Aly Fogel’s piece shows some of the conversations surrounding lesbian identity and culture prominent on the social media platform. Finally, the Lesbian Bar Project’s website and associated video brings the course full circle from the Vice piece on lesbian bar culture from the first class, thus showing the threat of losing historically important physical queer spaces.

This thematic area can only be explored after the foundation from the previous sections is set because it would be difficult to interact with and understand contemporary lesbian discourse without a basic knowledge of lesbian history. During class, students will discuss questions such as “How do gender and sexual orientation interact with one another for lesbians?”, “What is the importance of learning queer history?”, and “How did the previous classes inform your perspective on these issues?”.

Words: 299

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