

# Performing Race, Gender, and Sexuality

Fall 2016, WS 364S Race, Gender, Sexuality

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## Course Description

In our course, we will approach the categories of race, gender, and sexuality as ongoing performances, staged everyday encounters. Rather than thinking of these subject positions as natural and fixed, we will elucidate their artificial nature, how race, gender, and sexuality are crafted. Far from being inborn, these categories have shifted over time; and as, such we will return to these moments.

Our unit on gender and performance uses burlesque as a case study through which we can explore how ideals of femininity are often tied to artificial constructions of the female body, via body cinchers and makeup. The unit on sexuality, follows Michel Foucault's assertion that the term "homosexual" was invented in 1870, and as such our modern notion of same-sex desire emerges. In this section of the course, we explore how gender and sexuality are related but not commensurate, thereby allowing for a range of desires and bodies that do not map onto the concept of "man" or "woman."

Our unit on race and performance explores the phenomenon of "passing," in which people of color pass as white. We will also examine the history of minstrel shows in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which predominantly white performers wore blackface. Note that although this course is arranged according to race, gender, and sexuality there is, of course, overlap and slippage between all of these categories. Often all three are entangled with one another and will elucidate these connections over the course of the semester.

## Participation and Attendance(20%)

Students are expected to attend all classes and demonstrate active engagement. Please note that engagement in the classroom is not only communicated through vocal participation. I fully understand that some of you may be quieter and not as comfortable with participating in class than others. This is absolutely fine. You will have plenty of opportunities to talk with me outside of class about your interests/project. Keep in mind that this is a seminar class, which means that classes will revolve around the communal discussions we have together. My aim is to help generate a safe classroom environment where everyone feels welcome to participate. Additionally, all assigned homework, in-class writing, and generally ungraded writing will count as your participation grade. If you are absent for more than **2 classes**, this will affect your participation grade.

## Mandatory Office Hour Meetings

I will require that you meet with me **at least two times** over the course of the semester: once at the beginning so we can start to talk about your interests/concerns, and a second time after you have received comments on your research proposal. I will hand out a sign-up sheet for available times so we can meet one-on-one. You are welcome to schedule as many meetings over the course of the semester, but I make these two meetings mandatory so I can get to know you better. I will send out a sign-up sheet of times for each meeting.

## Assignments (80%, total)

This course demands incisive critical thinking skills and the willingness to explore new and challenging ideas, all of which will inform your written work.

1. **Weekly Blog Posts (20%):** Weekly blog post of a minimum of 500 word response to the reading of the week, due every Sunday at 5:00PM. As you write your blog posts, start thinking of ways the reading of that week might inspire your final project.
2. **Project Proposal for Final Project, “Designing Your Own Performance” (2-3 pages 20%).** Inspired by the performers and performances we have encountered over the course, you will design your own play or show that is attuned to the issues of race, gender, and sexuality and their relationship to performance. You will include three fictional performers of your own making, describe their characters, their costumes, and dance routines if applicable. Your performers might all be in the contemporary neo-burlesque. They may be located in 1920’s Harlem. Your show might have a time traveling situation with performers from different eras. It may be very short play, it may be a It’s completely up to you. Be creative! The show must have a larger theme that ties all the acts together so your show must have an original title. Keep in mind that burlesque can be a political act as you design your show. The document you turn in will include a poster you design for the show and sketches of the sets and costumes.
3. **Final Project: Design Your Own Performance Script (8-10 pages) and Film Clip (5 minutes) (40%):** You will submit a script that will be an expanded version of the project proposal you handed in, taking into account my suggestions for revision. You will also submit a short clip of the performance, keeping in mind how you will translate the vision in your script to a filmed performance, no longer than 5 minutes.

## Reading

Much of the reading will be available on our course website. These readings are often chapters of books or articles. You can access these reading on our course site at sakai.duke.edu, under the **resources** tab. Readings are organized according to date.

## Films

You'll notice I've assigned a number of films for this course. We will not be screening the films in class; instead, we will devote class time to discussion about the film. This means that all films must be watched before the date it is listed on the syllabus. The films will be placed on reserve at Lilly. To make use of the reserve, just look up the film in the library's catalog at [library.duke.edu](http://library.duke.edu) and jot down the reserve number. Once you've got the number, you can go to the circulation desk at Lily and request the film. Films on reserve are given a 3 hour viewing period. You can watch the film in Lilly. Some of the films may be available on Netflix instant play or Amazon/Amazon prime instant play.

## Class Schedule

### **I. What is Performance?**

#### **Week 1**

Richard Schechner, "What is Performance?"

Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance."

J.L. Austin, "How to Do Things with Words."

### **II. Performing Gender**

#### **Week 2**

Sherry Ortner, "The Problem of 'Women' as an Analytic Category."

Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?"

Emily Martin, "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles."

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,"

#### **Week 3**

*Watch Paris is Burning (1990).*

Judith Butler. "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion."

bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?"

#### **Weeks 3-4 Gender and Burlesque**

Selections from *Your Beauty Mark: The Ultimate Guide to Eccentric Glamour*, Dita Von Teese

“What’s So Feminist About Garters and Bustiers? Neo-Burlesque as Post-Feminist Sexual Liberation.” By K. Siebler.

“Introduction: Defining/Defending the ‘Feminist Pin-Up’ and ‘From Womyn to Grrrls: The Postmodern Feminist Pin-Up.’” From *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*. By Maria Elena Buszek.

Watch *Morocco* (1939). Marlene Dietrich.

Kennison, Rebecca. “Clothes Make the (Wo)man: Marlene Dietrich and ‘Double Drag.’”

“Queer Femme Follies: These Queer Burlesque Dancers Are Fighting Their Own Sexual Revolution, Where Dykes are Proud to be Flirty and Feminine in Fishnet.” By Lauren Marie Fleming.

“The Politics of Burlesque: A Dialogue Among Dancers.” By Adriana Disman.

### **III. Performing Sexuality**

#### **Week 5**

Selections from Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*

Selections from Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*.

Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.”

Selections from Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*.

#### **Week 6-7 Shape-shifting Genders and Sexualities**

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*.

Erica Gene Delsandro, “In the Classroom: Virginian Woolf and the Possibilities of Queer Histories.”

### **IV. Performing Race**

#### **Week 8 : Performing Race, Gender , and Sexuality**

Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman,” 1851

Selections from *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. By Bell Hooks.

Josephine Baker, watch ZouZou

“Skin Fashion: Josephine Baker and Dressing Race.” By Anne Anlin Cheng.

### **Week 9-12 Passing as Performance**

**\*\*\*\*Project Proposal Due\*\*\*\***

Passing, Nella Larsen

Langston Hughes, “Passing” and “Who’s Passing for Who”

*Imitation of Life* (1934)

Selections from *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. By Nicole Fleetwood.

### **Week 13-15 Performing Race in the Minstrel Show**

Tavia Nyong'o, “Minstrel Trouble”

Selections from *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. By Daphne Brooks.

Selections from *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. By Eric Lott.

Watch *The Jazz Singer*.

Selections from *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. By Michael Rogin.

Selections from *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imaginary*. By Lori Harrison-Kahan.

**\*\*\*\*Final Project Due on the Course’s Designated Exam Day\*\*\*\***