

CDIPS Final Project
2021-22 Cohort
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Designing a New Course: Gender and Sexuality in Russia and Eastern Europe

Part I: Executive Summary

I would like to propose a course on Gender and Sexuality in Russia and Eastern Europe for several reasons. First, the course will add more breadth to our offerings and allow for collaboration with the Women's and Gender Studies Program. Second, many current events warrant such a course. Third, studying texts through the lens of gender and sexuality will allow us to see canonical works of various genres anew. While I do not claim expertise in this subject, I am fascinated by it. Teaching the course will allow me to consider new approaches and read works that have been overlooked. I have designed the course with the assumption that students do not know much about Russia and Eastern Europe, so I will provide substantial context and background information before analyzing works. I also want the course to involve a variety of "texts," such as musical and visual works, so that students can make interesting comparisons. We will consider both famous and little-known authors and works; likewise, we will study both highbrow and popular works. One main goal of the course is for students to become better-informed global citizens, so they can compare situations abroad and at home. To that end, I will invite guest speakers to interact with students and share their (often painful) experiences.

Reference List

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Sypniewski, Zbyszek and Warkocki, Błażej, eds. *Homofobia po polsku*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2004.

Tomasik, Krzysztof. *Homobiografie: Pisarki i pisarze polscy XIX i XX wieku*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009.

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Part II: Analysis

Boston College is a private, Jesuit university that has a Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) Program, featuring faculty members from various departments (such as Sociology, History, Philosophy, English, etc.). The course I proposed would be an elective course; students need to take 4 elective courses for the minor. I suspect the class size will be modest, perhaps around 10-15 students. Besides the WGS program, I can apply to get the course approved as a "core" course, fulfilling the "cultural diversity" requirement. The university also participates in the Consortium for Gender, Culture, Women, and Sexuality housed at MIT. If the course can get cross-listed, it could potentially attract students from the broader Boston area.

Proposed Content

Course Description

Sex was once frowned upon in the Soviet Union, with the famous proclamation: "There is no sex in the USSR!" In many ways, the "iron closet" was no less impenetrable than the "Iron Curtain." In spite of (or, one can argue, because of) the official censorship, writers and artists consistently produced works that engage with the issues of gender and sexuality in Russia and Eastern Europe. This interdisciplinary, transnational course will consider works alongside their historical contexts and address key questions such as: what is at stake besides artistic expression? How do these works reflect – and undercut – the dominant culture? How have these issues evolved (or regressed, in some instances), and how do they compare with the situation in the US? This course fulfills the Cultural Diversity core and counts towards Women and Gender Studies Program minor. Readings and class are in English. Some knowledge of Russian and/or a Slavic language may be helpful but is not necessary or expected.

Course Content

- An introductory unit that covers basic terms such as cisgender, trans man/woman, non-binary, gender fluid, homophobia, transphobia, etc. (look at <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>). Discuss if there are parallels in Slavic languages. Some information about Slavic languages might be in order (Polish has “virile” vs. “non-virile”; “to marry” verbs is highly gender-specific in various Slavic languages). There are numerous derogatory terms, and many LGBT-related words are anglicized words (in Russian: гей-прайд, каминг-аут, активист, etc.). Discuss the notion of the “closet” in conjunction with “traditional values.” Read excerpts from David Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay & Lesbian Russia*. Show the striking map of where there is marriage equality. Discuss what’s at stake. Homosexuality was a crime in Russia until 1993. Law against “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors” passed on June 29, 2013 (read the federal law 135-FZ). Russia passed a constitutional amendment in July 2020, during the pandemic, defining marriage as between a man and a woman. End this unit with a preliminary comparison with Western Europe and the United States (will return to this regularly)
- A unit on sexuality and music. Listen to music by LGBT composers such as Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Karol Szymanowski. Read Tchaikovsky’s letters, some of which were censored. Discuss the relationship between a composer’s sexuality and his music. Was ____ (Chopin, etc.) gay and does it matter? Also look at the biographies of a few dancers (Vaclav Nijinsky and Rudolf Nureyev) and a famous impresario (Sergei Diaghilev). Read Karlinsky’s article: Sergei Diaghilev: Public and Private,” *The Christopher Street Reader* (NY: Perigee, 1983), 265-273. In addition to “high art,” we will consider the punk group Pussy Riot and discuss their notorious performance in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ and Savior. End this unit with the popular Eurovision contest, which has become integral to LGBT culture (watch performances of Dima Bilan and Sergey Lazarev).
- A unit on sexuality and literature. Read Simon Karlinsky’s introduction from Kevin Moss (ed.), *Out of the Blue: Russia’s Hidden Gay Literature*. Read short stories such as Evgenii Kharitonov’s *The Oven*, published underground in 1979. Look at non-Russian examples such as Witold Gombrowicz’s *Pornografia*, a work that critic Michael Dirda describes as “as sick, as pathologically creepy a novel as one is ever likely to read.” Also read excerpts from Michał Witkowski’s *Lovetown* (2004), which depicts the LGBT community in Communist Poland.
- A unit on sexuality and politics. Show how Poland’s Equality Parade is met by counter-demonstrations every year. Discuss transgenderism using the case of the first openly transgender person in Europe to be elected to parliament, Anna Grodzka (b. 1954). View 2010 HBO film “trans-akcja” <https://vimeo.com/21013516>. In 2014, Poland elected its first openly gay mayor, Robert Biedroń. We will consider Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabić, who is the second female LGBT head of government. We will transition to Russia and consider the 2017 court decision that outlawed a meme of Putin as a “gay clown.” We will

also look at the 2020 Constitutional amendment banning gay marriage in Russia. We will conclude this unit by having a Zoom chat with guest speakers – LGBT Russians who came to the US to seek asylum.

Part III: Design

Performance objectives:

- Students will be exposed to texts of various genres (literature, music, art, film) that engage with the questions of gender and sexuality. Students will develop skills to analyze the works and consider what is at stake.
- Students will become familiar with various terms and vocabulary used in gender studies.
- In consultation with the instructor, students will develop a semester-long project, synthesizing their interests and the course material. Students will present their projects and make changes based on the feedback received.
- Students will learn to think critically, consider various viewpoints, and compare situations abroad and at home.

Alignment

Objective	Assessments	Strategies/Activities/Methods
Students will be exposed to texts of various genres (literature, music, art, film) that engage with the questions of gender and sexuality. Students will develop skills to analyze the works and consider what is at stake	Quizzes, papers, interactive lectures	Interactive lectures. Distribute study guides to ensure students study in a focused way. Assign students to make short presentations to jumpstart class discussion.
Students will become familiar with various terms and vocabulary used in gender studies	Quizzes, papers, in-class discussions	Interactive lectures. Write the terms on the board.
Students will develop a semester-long project in consultation with the instructor; students will present their projects, which synthesize their interests and the course material	Final project	Regular meetings with students during office hours, written reflections, Q&A after each presentation
Students will learn to think critically, consider various viewpoints, and compare situations abroad and at home	Final project, in-class discussions	Zoom chat with guest speakers from Russia

Study guides will be distributed prior to each quiz to help students study; the lowest quiz grade will be dropped. I will grade the final project based on three general criteria:

originality of the idea, synthesis of the information, and quality/craftsmanship of the execution. I may also consider asking students to create a log, detailing the amount of time they put into the project. All projects will include an oral presentation to the class as well as a written portion. These projects are presented before the final product is due, thus allowing students to revise based on the feedback received.

Part IV: Development

Since I plan to use a variety of texts, it makes sense to compile these and upload them onto the Canvas site. In addition to using Kevin Moss's anthology, I imagine creating a YouTube playlist where movie and music clips are located. In designing this course, I have consulted with numerous syllabi on similar topics. Most colleagues use an interdisciplinary approach, which I plan to adopt as well. In preparation for teaching the course, it is important to not only re-read the texts but also to formulate interesting and thought-provoking discussion questions.

If teaching such a course in its entirety is not feasible, I hope to teach at least a portion of it in an "Introduction to Slavic Peoples and Cultures" course I am slated to teach in the spring. I will be sure to give students advance warning prior to viewing and reading potentially objectionable content.

Part V: Implementation

There will be a substantial amount of content delivery, which will be carried out by interactive lectures with PowerPoint presentations. To ensure retention, I will quiz students regularly on the readings and lectures. Study guide will be distributed prior to the quiz, and the lowest quiz grade will be dropped. Slides are always posted on Canvas after each class meeting for students to review. As part of the course, I will ask each student to design a final project in consultation with me, based on the student's own interests. The final project can be a traditional academic paper or something creative (such as making a film, conduct interviews, etc.). Final projects – instead of an exam – allow students to better engage with the material. The projects will "de-centralize" the classroom and empower students to become experts in their topics and allow collaborations and collegial discussions.

I plan to invite guest speakers to share their experience on being LGBT in Russia and the process of applying for asylum in the US. This will be done over Zoom. To facilitate discussion, I will ask students to prepare questions beforehand. I hope the experience will be not only educational but also impactful.

Part VI: Evaluation

In addition to the end-of-semester evaluation, I will conduct an anonymous mid-semester survey to gather feedback from students about what they like as well as things that can be improved. Students will meet with me individually to discuss their final project ideas, and I will solicit their feedback about the course then as well. I have not taught such a course before, so regular reflections and adjustments will be essential. To that end, I will keep notes about what resonates with students and what needs to be re-worked when I teach the course again in the future.