

# Sex and the American City

Spring 2023



*Figure 1. Still from Sex and the City, Season 3, Episode 18 (2000).*

Professor Jules Gill-Peterson

Pronouns: she/her/her's

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Why are cities associated with sex and vice? Are urban settings a natural refuge for LGBT people? This course explores the role of American cities in the history of sexuality. We will read a range of work by scholars considering the relationships of race, gender, and sexuality to urban life, focusing on the period from the antebellum era (early nineteenth century) to the present. Along the way, we will explore the study of the history of sexuality and practice engaging critically with scholarship through reading, reflective writing, and classroom discussion.

## Learning objectives:

- To survey a range of historical approaches to the role of cities and urban life in the history of American sexuality.
- To build a foundation in the methodology of the history of sexuality.
- To develop confidence and fluency in reading, reflection, and discussion of scholarly texts by historians.

## Readings:

There are no books required for this course. All readings will be made available in electronic format through Canvas, either as scanned PDFs or electronic version.

## Assignments and Grades:

Attendance and Participation	20 points
Reading Journals	50 points (10 x 5 points each)
Primary Source Interpretation	15 points
In-Class Presentation	15 points

**Attendance and Participation** (20 points): This is a qualitative grade, not a mathematical one. Our class relies on vibrant discussion, but we are here to learn *how* discussion of scholarly text and primary sources can take place. If you prepare for class by reading and taking notes, as well as writing your reading journal assignments, you can use that preparation to structure your participation in discussion: to pose questions, or try to answer questions posed by your peers and by me. Aim to bring up at least one thing, respond to someone, or intervene in discussion at least once each session. Respond to your peers and offer thoughts, questions, confusions, and other ideas in the moment. Our classroom is a space where we have permission to be vulnerable and exploratory in our participation, rather than being sure of everything we say.

**Readings Journals** (10 x 5 points each, for 50 points total): On the weeks indicated on the course schedule, you will write a short journal entry reflecting on the reading(s) we have done that week, due on Thursday. This is a "journal" in that you are exploring your reactions, thoughts, and assessments of the readings, as well as organizing your thoughts, creating questions, and figuring out how you are digesting the week's text(s). You do *not* need to approach this as analytic or evaluative writing, in other words—nor do you need to write a summary. The goal is to get comfortable with reading scholarly texts before discussing them in class. By taking time to write reflectively, you will always have something to contribute to class discussions—and you won't have to rely exclusively on speaking off the top of your head.

A journal entry should be 2-3 paragraphs of written reflection. Submitting an entry on time automatically earns you full credit; there is no qualitative grading.

Due dates: Submit on Canvas by 12pm (the start of class) on Feb 2; Feb 9; Feb 16; Feb 23; Mar 2; Mar 16; Mar 30; Apr 6; Apr 13; and Apr 20.

**Primary Source Interpretation** (15 points): This assignment, due on Thursday of Week 7, asks you to compose an interpretive reading of a primary source concerning trans history and cities. Drawing on the readings we have done so far and our classroom discussions, you will closely

read one primary source that you have located on your own through the Digital Transgender Archive (<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/>). The DTA has guides on its home page for how to explore its holdings and locate a source.

Your interpretation of the source you have selected should be 1.5-2 pages, double spaced. First, introduce your primary source. Give some context for it, describe it, and outline its components (whether they are textual, visual, sonic, performance, and so on). Then answer the following question: what does this primary source contribute to our understanding of the role of cities in trans history? You will need to use textual evidence from the primary source, contextualized and supported by one of the readings from the syllabus, to answer that question.

Due date: Thursday, March 9, by 6:00PM. Submit on Canvas.

**In-Class Presentation** (15 points): During the last week of class, you will give a short presentation in-class, around 5 minutes. In this presentation you will revisit the primary source about which you wrote earlier in the semester. Start by rereading your Primary Source Interpretation assignment, which will have been graded by the professor. Spend some time rereading and sitting with your primary source. Now, at the end of the semester, how would you refine and revise your interpretation? You don't need to do any new writing; instead, share with the class in your presentation how your thinking about this source has changed over the course of the semester. You don't have to create any slides or other visuals for your presentation, but you will want to make sure you introduce and describe the source in your presentation, so that your peers have a sense of it. After you finish your presentation, we will take a few minutes for questions or responses to your interpretation of the source.

You will be graded on three dimensions of your presentation:

Clarity of your description and contextualization of the primary source	5 points
Interpretive complexity of your reading of the source, drawing on readings	5 points
The refinement of your interpretation over the course of the semester	5 points

### Ethics:

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Ethical violations include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery and falsification, lying, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition.

Report any violations you witness to the instructor. You may consult the associate dean of student affairs and/or the chairman of the Ethics Board beforehand. See the guide on "Academic

Ethics for Undergraduates” and the Ethics Board Web site (<http://ethics.jhu.edu>) for more information.

### **Disability Services:**

Anyone who may need accommodations in this class can obtain an accommodation letter from Student Disability Services, 385 Garland, (410) 516-4720, [studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu](mailto:studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu) . I will be very happy to provide any accommodations that I can, as well as to exceed the university’s definition of accommodation in the service of access whenever possible.

### **Classroom Climate:**

I am committed to creating a classroom environment that values the diversity of experiences and perspectives that all students bring. Everyone here has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. I believe fostering an inclusive climate is important because research and my experience show that students who interact with peers who are different from themselves learn new things and experience tangible educational outcomes. Please join me in creating a welcoming and vibrant classroom climate. Note that you should expect to be challenged intellectually by me and your peers, and at times this may feel uncomfortable. Indeed, it can be helpful to be pushed sometimes in order to learn and grow. But at no time in this learning process should someone be singled out or treated unequally on the basis of any seen or unseen part of their identity.

If you ever have concerns in this course about harassment, discrimination, or any unequal treatment, or if you seek accommodations or resources, I invite you to share directly with me. I promise that we will take your communication seriously and to seek mutually acceptable resolutions and accommodations. Reporting will never impact your course grade. You may also share concerns with the Assistant Dean for Diversity and Inclusion (Darlene Saporu, [dsaporu@jhu.edu](mailto:dsaporu@jhu.edu)) or the Office of Institutional Equity ([oiie@jhu.edu](mailto:oiie@jhu.edu)). In handling reports, people will protect your privacy as much as possible, but faculty and staff are required to officially report information for some cases (e.g. sexual harassment).

### **How to Take This Class:**

- Complete readings before class meets. It will always benefit you to plan ahead to read over the course of the week, rather than in one sitting or the day of class. Take notes while you read, noting three types of information in particular: page numbers for key phrases, passages, and other references you might want to come back to; the key ideas, arguments, and modes of expression in the text; and your reactions, feelings, interests, questions, confusions, and other things you are left thinking about from the text. Your reading journals are a built in opportunity to prepare for class.
- Come to class and participate consistently. Attendance is always conditional on your health; do not come to class if you are feeling unwell. Take notes during class, not to

produce a transcript, but to help organize your ideas. You don't have to answer a question or make an argument about the reading to participate. You can also ask a question, express a confusion or frustration, or form an opinion and ask for help of your peers. The classroom is a collaborative process, especially in this course.

- Turn in your assignments on time. If you foresee an inability to turn in an assignment on time, please reach out to me with as much advance notice as possible so that we can find a fair accommodation.
- Seek out proactive support when you need it. I am available each week in office hours to support your success in this course however I can. We can also do much of the same by email, though it is less ideal. It always benefits you to get ahead of challenges and ask for help before the added pressure of deadlines.

### How to Be OK:

I will teach this class from the premise that none of us—myself included—are going to be “ok” at all times. The pandemic has created a massive amount of uncertainty and exhaustion that has built up over time. We will follow university guidelines, but we can also choose to exceed them in the service of looking out for one another. I care deeply that each of us be as safe as possible, and I will prioritize that above all else. I am committed to making this course humane and empowering under difficult circumstances.

With that in mind, some principles for this semester:

- We are all allowed to have trouble or difficulty. I will not judge you or ask for justification if you tell me you are having a hard time in the course.
- You do not owe me or anyone in this class any personal information. Johns Hopkins does not require any of us to disclose personal or health-related information in the classroom, or to take the course. You can make whatever choices you wish, and change them as need be, to take care of yourself.
- You are always welcome to talk to me about anything you might be going through and if I feel that I can't help you I will suggest someone else or a resource that can.
- If you need extra help, you need to miss class, or need more time with something, please ask. I'll do my best to work with you.

### COVID-19 University Policy

General information about COVID-19 related policies at the university can be found at this site:

<https://covidinfo.jhu.edu/>

FAQs about these policies are [available here](#).

If you are feeling unwell, even if you don't think you are experiencing COVID symptoms, please do not come to class. If you do test positive for COVID, I will happily work with you to make sure

you can take adequate time to rest and recover without it affecting your progress in the course. I am also committed to accommodating any difficulties arising from persistent COVID symptoms during recovery, or long COVID challenges.

## Course Schedule

(January 23-April 28, 2023)

<p style="text-align: center;">Week 1 <b>What is the American City?</b></p> <p><u>Tue Jan 24</u> Class introduction, no readings.</p> <p><u>Thu Jan 26</u> - Saidiya Hartman, “The Terrible Beauty of the Slum,” in <i>Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments</i> (W.W. Norton, 2019), p 1-10.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 2 <b>Did Capitalism Make Us Gay?</b></p> <p><u>Tue Jan 31</u> -John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in <i>The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader</i> (1993), pp 467-476.</p> <p><u>Thu Feb 2</u>—<b>No class meeting today</b></p> <p>*Reading Journal #1 due today</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 3 <b>Sex Work and Black Freedom in Antebellum New York</b></p> <p><u>Tue Feb 7</u> - Shane White, <i>Stories of Freedom in Black New York</i> (Harvard University Press, 2022), pp 25-67.</p> <p><u>Thu Feb 9</u> - Riah Lee Kinsey, “The People vs Mary Jones: Rethinking Race, Sex and Gender through 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Court Records,” NYC Department of Records &amp; Information Services, August 5, 2022, <a href="https://www.archives.nyc/blog/2022/8/3/the-people-vs-mary-jones">https://www.archives.nyc/blog/2022/8/3/the-people-vs-mary-jones</a>.</p>

\*Reading Journal #2 due today

Week 4

**Just a Small-Town Trans Guy**

Tue Feb 14—**No class meeting**; instead, consider attending a WGS event on Wed, Feb 15 at 5pm with Joseph Plaster, author of *Kids on the Street*, which we will be reading this semester.

Thu Feb 16

- Emily Skidmore, "Beyond Community: Rural Lives of Trans Men," in *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (NYU Press, 2017), pp 43-67.

\*Hopkins Ebook available through library.

\*Reading Journal #3 due today

Week 5

**The Fairies of New York**

Tue Feb 21

- George Chauncey, "The Bowery as Haven and Spectacle," in *Gay New York: Gender Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (Basic Books, 1994), pp 33-45.

Thu Feb 23

- Chauncey, "The Fairy as Intermediate Sex," in *Gay New York*, pp 47-63.

\*Reading Journal #4 due today

Week 6

**The Buffalo Lesbian Bar Scene, Part I**

Tue Feb 28

- Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, "I could hardly wait to get back to that bar': Lesbian Bar Culture in the 1930s and 1940s," in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (Routledge, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, 2014), pp 29-66.

Thu Mar 2—**No class meeting**

\*Reading Journal #5 due today

Week 7

**Primary Source Research Week**

Tue Mar 7—**No class meeting**

Thu Mar 9—No class meeting

\*Primary Source Interpretation due today

Week 8

**The Buffalo Lesbian Bar Scene, Part II**

Tue Mar 14

- *Booths of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, pp 151-170

Thu Mar 16

- *Booths of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, pp 170-190.

\*Reading Journal #6 due today

Week 9

**Spring Break—NO CLASS**

Tue Mar 21

Thu Mar 23

Week 10

Tue Mar 28

- Saidiya Hartman, “The Beauty of the Chorus,” in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, pp 297-319.

Thu Mar 30

- Hartman, “The Beauty of the Chorus,” pp 319-343.

\*Reading Journal #7 due today

Week 11

**Perverse Policing**

Tue Apr 4

- Anna Lvovsky, “Peepholes and Perverts,” in *Vice Patrol: Cops Courts, and the Struggle Over Urban Gay Life Before Stonewall* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), pp 180-197

Thu Apr 6

- *Vice Patrol*, pp 197-219

\*Reading Journal #8 due today

Week 12  
**Street Kids, the Vanguard**

Tue Apr 11

- Joseph Plaster, "Urban Reformers and Vanguard's Mutual Aid," in *Kids on the Street: Queer Kinship and Religion in San Francisco's Tenderloin* (Duke University Press, 2023), pp 108-132.

Thu Apr 13

- *Kids on the Street*, pp 132-154.

\*Reading Journal #9 due today

Week 13  
**Gentrifying the Gay City**

Tue Apr 18

- Plaster, "Polk Street's Moral Economies," in *Kids on the Street*, pp 220-242.

Thu Apr 20

- *Kids on the Street*, pp 242-257.

\*Reading Journal #10 due today

Week 14  
**In-Class Presentations**

Tue Apr 25

Presentations—no readings.

Thu Apr 27

Presentations—no readings.