

Sex and the American City

Spring 2026
Tuesday, 3:00PM-5:30PM
Gilman 377
Course # AS.100.252 (01)
January 20th-April 27th



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

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Why are cities associated with sex and vice? This course explores the role of American cities in the history of sexuality. We will read a range of work by historians covering cities from the early republic (late eighteenth century) onward. The focal points of the semester will be the regulation of entertainment and sex work, the development of vagrancy laws, the development of anti-crossdressing laws, and class-based subcultures.

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 field 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 online links (including books we have electronic versions of at the library).

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. Our class relies on vibrant discussion, but we are also here to learn how to engage in discussion of scholarly texts and primary sources. If you prepare for class by reading and taking notes, as well as writing your reading journal assignments, that preparation can be the basis of your participation in class. Aim to bring up at least one thing each session. Respond to your peers and offer thoughts, questions, confusions, and other interventions in the moment, as well. Our classroom is a space where we are free to think out loud and explore ideas without knowing where they are leading, and without being sure we agree with them or even believe in them. You do not have to be sure of something to talk about it and we are all allowed to make mistakes.

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. This is a "journal" in the sense that you explore your reactions to readings, as well as organize your thoughts, and create questions to discuss in class. It is not a summary of the reading, nor will you be graded for having the "right" kind of reflection. The goal is to get comfortable with reading scholarly texts and help you prepare to discuss them in class. By taking regular time to write, you will always have something to contribute to class discussion, and you won't always have speak extemporaneously.

Each journal entry should be 2-3 paragraphs. Submitting an entry on time automatically earns you full credit; there is no qualitative grading. I will read your journals each week to help prepare for classroom discussion. If a journal is submitted late for an unexcused reason, I will deduct two points per week of lateness. Because the journal is reflective writing, not a summary, do not use Large Language Models (aka generate AI) to complete any part of them.

Due dates: Submit on Canvas by 3:00pm (the start of class). (Dates are specifically listed in the course schedule below.)

Primary Source Interpretation (15 points): This assignment, due in Week 6, asks you to write a short historical interpretation of a newspaper article recounting the arrest of Ann Casey in 1876. Drawing on the readings we have done so far and our classroom discussions, you will analyze the article “A Petticoated Fraud” to explore how crossdressing fits into the legal and political attack on Black mobility towards the end of Reconstruction.

Your interpretive analysis should be 1.5-2 pages, double spaced. First, introduce the primary source. Give some context from what we’ve read about Memphis in this period. What do we know about crossdressing arrests in this period, or the arrest of freedpeople in Memphis more broadly? What was the broader political context of Reconstruction? Then, describe the key information that you think matters for understanding this article. Finally, answer this question: how does Ann Casey’s arrest contribute to our understanding of the restriction of African American mobility in the ending of Reconstruction? You will need to focus on textual evidence in the primary source, drawing on relevant readings (especially Hannah Rosen and William Cohen) for context, to answer the question.

Due date: Wednesday, February 24th, 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 the newspaper article on Ann Casey (perhaps two, or even three times). Now, at the end of the semester, how would you refine and revise your interpretation? You don’t need to do any new writing. Just share with the class how your thinking about this source has changed over the course of the semester. You don’t need to use slides or visuals in your presentation. After everyone has presented, we will take time to have a group discussion about the primary source, and to reflect on the end of the semester.

You will be graded on three criteria:

Clarity of your historical contextualization of the primary source	5 points
Interpretive complexity of your reading of the source	5 points
The refinement of your interpretation over the course of the semester	5 points

Policies

Illnesses and absences: if you are feeling unwell, please do not come to class. Absences for illness and other important reasons are always excused (family emergencies, religious holidays, other academic or work obligations, etc.) You do not have to email me to tell me why you are not able to come to class and I will not deduct points for missing class. I will assume the absence is legitimate. If you are missing several weeks in a row, however, it would be a good idea to be in

touch. If you miss an assignment due to illness or other legitimate absence, I will be happy to accommodate you.

Academic integrity and AI: In this course, you are expected to be honest and truthful in all academic work. Ethical violations include cheating on exams; plagiarism; reuse of assignments; unauthorized collaboration; improper use of the internet, generative AI tools, or electronic devices; alteration of graded assignments; forgery or falsification; lying; facilitating academic dishonesty; and unfair competition.

Generative AI would not be that helpful in this course, except for background informational research (looking up historical events, names, etc.) to make sense of readings and classroom discussion. I ask only that you not use AI to work on your assignments.

Students with Disabilities - Accommodations and Accessibility: Johns Hopkins University is committed to providing welcoming, equitable, and accessible educational experiences for all students. If disability accommodations are needed for this course, students should request accommodations through Student Disability Services (SDS) as early as possible to provide time for effective communication and arrangements. For further information about this process, please refer to the SDS Website or email SDS Homewood: studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu .

Inclusivity: Johns Hopkins University is committed to creating a classroom environment that values the diversity of experiences and perspectives that each student brings. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Fostering an inclusive climate is important because research and experience show that students who interact with peers who are different from themselves learn new things and experience tangible educational outcomes. We invite you to help create a welcoming, vibrant and intellectually engaging classroom climate. Note that you should expect to be challenged intellectually by the instructor, the TAs, and your peers, and at times this may feel uncomfortable. Indeed, growth often requires being pushed beyond your comfort zone. However, at no time in this learning process should someone be singled out or treated unequally based on any aspect of their identity (visible or invisible). If you ever have concerns in this course about harassment, discrimination, or any unequal treatment, or if you seek accommodations or resources, please reach out to your instructor or the TAs, who will take your communication seriously and seek mutually acceptable resolutions and accommodations. Reporting will never impact your course grade. You may also share concerns with the department chair, the Director of Undergraduate Studies, the WSE Associate Dean of Outreach and Belonging (Darlene Saporu, dsaporu@jhu.edu), the KSAS Assistant Dean for Diversity and Inclusion (Araceli Frias, afrias3@jhu.edu) or the Office of Institutional Equity (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).

Course Schedule

(January 20-April 27, 2026)

Week 1 (Jan 20)
What is an American City?

No readings to prepare.

Week 2 (Jan 27)
Port Cities in the Early Republic

- Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (2004), chapter 1.
- Vaughn Scriber, *Inn Civility: Urban Taverns and Early American Civil Society* (2019), chapter 3.

*Reading Journal #1 due

Week 3 (Feb 3)
Antebellum Baltimore

Katie M. Hemphill, *Bawdy City: Commercial Sex and Regulation in Baltimore, 1790-1915* (2019), chapter 1 and chapter 2.

*Reading Journal #2 due

Week 4 (Feb 10)
Memphis During the Civil War and Reconstruction

- Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (2009), chapter 2, plus pp 235-241.
- U.S. House of Representatives, 39th Congress, Select Committee on the Memphis Riots, *Report*, July 25, 1866, pp 196-197 (testimony of Frances Thompson and Lucy Smith).

*Reading Journal #3 due

Week 5 (Feb 17)
Vagrancy and Cross-Dressing Laws (I)

Note: class does not meet in person this week.
Do the reading and complete your reading journal.

- Willian Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (1991), chapter 8.
- "A Black Chevalier D'Eon," *Daily Alta California*, August 5, 1870.

*Reading Journal #4 due (this week your journal will have a built-in prompt on Canvas)

Week 6 (Feb 24)

Vagrancy and Cross-Dressing Laws (II)

Note: class does not meet in person this week.

Do the readings and complete your primary source assignment.

- Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge*, chapter 9.
- "A Petticoated Fraud," *St. Louis Daily Globe Democrat*, August 23, 1876.

* Primary Source Interpretation due

Week 7 (Mar 3)

St. Louis in the Gilded Age

- Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (2020), chapter 6.

* Reading Journal #5 due

Week 8 (Mar 10)

Crossdressing in San Francisco

- Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth Century San Francisco* (2014), chapter 4, chapter 5.

*Reading Journal #6 due

Week 9 (Mar 17)

Spring Break

No class this week.

Week 10 (Mar 24)

Becoming Small Town Men

- Emily Skidmore, *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (2017), chapter 3, chapter 4.

*Reading Journal #7 due

Week 11 (Mar 31)

The Working-Class Lesbian Bar Scene

- Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (1993), pp 29-66, 151-170.

*Reading Journal #8 due

Week 12 (Apr 7)

The Transsexual Underclass (I)

- James P. Driscoll, "Identity and the Transsexual Adaptation" (1974), pp 313-322.
- Aleisha Brevard Crenshaw, interviews with Susan Stryker, August 2, 1997, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, pp 1-24.

*Reading Journal #9 due

Week 13 (Apr 14)

The Transsexual Underclass (II)

- Crenshaw, interviews with Stryker, pp 25-42.
- Watch: *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2005)—documentary film.

*Reading Journal #10 due

Week 14 (Apr 21)

In-Class Presentations