Sexual Violence in America: Theory, Literature, Activism

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Office Hours: Mondays 2:30-4:30pm  
Walker 420

Course Description

This course will consider how a spectrum of sexual violence has been represented, politicized, and theorized in the United States from the 1970s to the present. To get a handle on this vast topic, our archive will be wide-ranging, including legal statutes and court opinions on sexual harassment and pornography; fiction, poetry, and graphic novels that explore the limits of representing sexual trauma; activist discourses in pamphlets and editorials from INCITE to #MeToo; and groundbreaking essays by feminist and queer theorists, especially from critical women of color. How does the meaning of sex and of power shift with different kinds of representation, theory, and activism? How have people developed a language to share experiences of violation and disrupt existing power structures? And how do people begin to imagine and build a different world whether through fiction, law, or institutions?

Because of the focus of this course, our readings will almost always present sexual violence itself in explicit and sometimes graphic ways. Much of the material can be upsetting. So, too, may be our class discussions, because difficult material can produce conversations whose trajectories are not knowable in advance. Careful attention to the material and to each other as we participate in the co-creation of knowledge will be our rule. However, even this cannot make a guarantee against surprises. Please read through all of the syllabus now so you know what lies ahead. I urge you to come talk with me about any concerns you may have about participating fully in this class before the course drop deadline.
Course Readings

In order to reduce the costs of taking this course, each and every reading is available as a PDF on Canvas. Under “Modules,” you’ll see a section for each week and readings available to download. I realize that means lots of folks will be bringing tablets or laptops to class. As long as you’re just looking at the readings, go for it. But I also know there’s a lot of research that says having screens on in class distracts from both your learning and the learning of your classmates, so we’ll also be having dedicated “no screens” time in class when our discussion doesn’t require reference to the readings. Please be prepared to put your machines to the side.

In addition to our readings, we will have a mandatory screening of Movie Title on Monday, February 18 and of Nanette on Wednesday, March 6, immediately following class.

Finally, we will have class field trip to a local anti-violence center on Friday, March 1.

Course Requirements

Grade Determination

Your grade for this course consists of participation, three “current affairs” posts to Canvas, and three projects: a group manifesto; a media production and analysis; and a podcast and essay on a local organization.

- Discussion Participation: 20%
- Current Affairs Posts: 20%
- Project #1—Group Manifesto (due 1/23 and 1/28): 20%
- Project #2—Media Production (due 2/25): 20%
- Project #3—Podcast and Organization Analysis (due 3/13): 20%

Attendance & Participation

The success of this discussion-based seminar depends upon your participation and preparation. Please come to class having read the material and prepared to talk about it. Contributing to discussion means both listening to others and building on what they have said; it means both leaning in and leaning back to facilitate a community process of knowledge formation. Participating can mean commenting on the text or commenting on someone else’s contribution. It can mean asking follow-up questions of someone or synthesizing the comments of those who have contributed before you. It also means participating in group work, where we are teaching each other in a more intimate context. In our classroom community, we want to hear everyone’s voice, and we want to support everyone to participate. If you are finding it difficult to join discussion, please come visit office hours so we can brainstorm strategies for you to jump in.
Absences

If you’re going to be absent for a good reason, please let us know 48 hours ahead of time. More than one absence will make it much harder for you to develop the skills and knowledge you need to succeed in this course; more than two absences will directly lower your grade by 1/3.

Midterm Conferences

As part of participation, I’ll also be holding student conferences midway through the course, at the beginning of week five. This is not an oral exam! The point of the conference is just to check-in with you about how the course is going so that I can improve my teaching earlier rather than later. We’ll also chat about ideas for your remaining projects.

Canvas (“Current Affairs”)

You will be assigned to post to Canvas three times between weeks 2 and 9. In your post, your task is to connect one of the readings assigned for that day to an article, editorial, blog entry, or think piece published in the past year (i.e., in 2018 to the present). The purpose of this assignment is to provide a way of bringing the present into our discussions, drawing connections between theory and activism of the past and such recent developments as the #MeToo movement. It also provides an opportunity to “apply” some of our readings to thinking about our current situation. What would the Combahee River Collective say about X? What would Carmen Maria Machado or Kathy Acker do to represent Y? You may be called upon in class to share what you have found.

Your post should be about 500-800 words long and contain the following:

1. A link (if online) or PDF scan (if from a print source) of your current affairs opinion piece or story.
2. A brief (1 paragraph) summary of the piece, perhaps bringing in relevant quotations.
3. A (1-2 page) discussion of the piece alongside one of the readings assigned for your day.
   
   (a) This might take the form of using a theorist to critique the piece (“Because Janet Halley is worried about sexual harassment law allowing moralism into our sexual lives, she would disagree with this editorial’s position that ...”).

   (b) This might take the form of comparing and contrasting different forms of representation (“While Carmen Maria Machado uses the horror genre to think about genealogies of violence against women, she is never as explicit as this article is in depicting violence, and that has different political consequences...”).

   (c) It could also simply track a continuity between past and present (“This particular protest reminds me Suzanne Lacy’s 1977 action; although their goals are different, their means are the same...”).

   (d) Or you may find yet more creative modes of engagement. But you must be developing knowledge around one of our assigned readings alongside knowledge of the piece you have found.
Project #1: Group Manifestos

On the Wednesday of 2nd week, we will be reading a selection of queer and feminist manifestos. These documents are not only important in the specific interventions they made into the political landscape of their time, but also because they are often the result of careful group deliberation and consensus-making. For some feminist collectives, the process of writing together was itself political, because it aimed to find ways of collaborating and building movements together in non-hierarchical ways. That’s why, to really understand these documents, I want us not only to read them but think about practicing consensus-making ourselves.

Toward that end, we will divide into small groups and I will ask you to meet and draft a manifesto together. The manifesto itself can take any form you please. It will most likely be about or related to gender and sexuality, but I will leave the specific topic open to you. Your goal is to develop a process in which everyone feels comfortable signing a name on a given document of stated beliefs or calls to action. The document itself will probably be about a page long.

After you draft the manifesto, each person will, individually, write up a 5-6 page reflection and analysis. This should include:

1. A description of your group process. How did you make decisions? What challenges did you face? Were there difficulties in distributing power equally? Why and why not?

2. A discussion of your manifesto or process in relation to at least one other manifesto assigned for the class. Perhaps you really agree or disagree with a point made in another manifesto. Tell me why.

The group manifestos will be due at the beginning of class on Wednesday, January 23 (3rd week); someone from your group should post this signed document to the appropriate section on Canvas in the Week 3 Module. Your individual reflection will be due on Monday, January 28 (4th week) and submitted through Canvas.

Project #2: Media Production and Analysis

For this project, due in week 8, you will be asked to think about the relation between theory and media. We’ll have read a lot of theory (from MacKinnon to Bersani to Lorde) and we’ll have consumed a lot of media (from graphic novels to poems to short stories to performance and installation art). Now, I’m going to ask you to theorize some media and to mediate some theory:

1. To mediate theory, pick one of the theoretical works we have read and translate into another medium. Perhaps you make a zine. Perhaps you make a spoken word performance or podcast. Perhaps you make a protest poster.

   (a) Think about the central theme or message or insight you want to translate in the theoretical work and how you could mediate that in language or in a visual or spoken form. The point of this exercise is to get you to think how theory gets its political feet, or how it finds expression outside of the original form in which it was written.

   (b) If you like, you may work in small groups on a mediation, but if so, there must be a compelling reason why (e.g., a video with multiple actors), and you should approve it with me beforehand. Either way, you will do the following writing exercise independently.
2. To theorize media, use your chosen theoretical work to write a 5-6 page essay and think alongside one of the media forms assigned for the class, whether a short story, poem, or visual installation. If you like, you may think about more than one theorist for this part of the exercise. Try to pair your theorist(s) with an object that they can help shed light on.

(a) The purpose of this assignment is to get you using the theoretical texts we’ve read as resources for thinking through and about our culture. What do our readings help you see about cultural products? Alternatively, you might find that your media object pushes back against your theorist, or that fiction is theory, too, laying out a kind of conceptual argument.

(b) In many ways, the second part of this project is a relatively straightforward academic essay, and it is the most traditional of the assignments for this class. That means a successful paper will provide a focused introduction that succinctly lays out what you’re going to discuss about your cultural product and how you’re going to focus in on a theorist or two. Your paper should argue both something specific about your product and something specific about your theorist(s). Here are a couple examples of a good thesis statement.

i. Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* exemplifies a form of self-shattering that Leo Bersani has argued is essential to the experience of sex, but the novel also provides a wider set of scenes in which this shattering occurs, suggesting a more widespread culture of dominance in the way originally theorized by Catherine MacKinnon.

ii. At the same time that Gloeckner’s *A Child’s Life* demonstrates what Millett has diagnosed as our cultural prohibition of granting children access to a discourse of sexuality, it also complicates her call for the emancipation and autonomy of children by suggesting that a discourse of child sexuality might actually sexualize children in order to further dominate, rather than liberate, them.

We will have a show and tell of your mediation the Monday of 8th week, when I am also asking for you to expect class to run a little late to accommodate everyone. Before class that day (February 25), upload your 5-6 page essay to Canvas.

**Project #3: Podcast and Organization Report**

The purpose of this final assignment is to consider the different approaches that activists, agencies, and communities have developed to intervene into a culture that makes sexual violence possible. We will then hold those approaches accountable to the theories we have read in class by asking how the approaches conceptualize the causes of harm and the mechanisms of redress. Here’s what I want you to do:

1. Working in small groups, you will make a roughly 10-minute podcast about a sexual violence collective intervention outside of the University of Chicago. This could be a community agency like Apna Ghar or Resilience. It could be a student organization at a different University. It could also be a virtual community of people sharing stories. Your task is to learn about the group’s history, its motivations, and what it is doing to redress or interrupt sexual violence. This may include interviewing people at the organization, either over e-mail or in-person.
(a) Don’t be intimidated by the podcast format! All you will have to do for this assignment is be able to record, cut, and string together audio. I will show you how.

(b) As with the first project, this project is also an experiment in the kinds of group work that collectives must do in order to make the kinds of intervention they envision. A successful podcast will require equal contributions from each of its members. This does not have to mean each member contributes in the same way, however. It will be up to the group to determine the fairest and most efficient distribution of labor. To gauge the kinds of group engagement that went into making the presentations, each member is required to submit to me a paragraph (or two) describing the group process from their individual perspective.

2. In addition to making a podcast, I will ask you to write up a 4-5 page analysis of your chosen organization. This analysis should put its mission or programming or history in conversation with some of the theorists we have read or some of the other organizations we have discussed in class. Perhaps your organization, like INCITE!, seeks alternatives to the criminal legal system for redressing sexual violence. Perhaps your organization shares the same understanding of rape culture as the Radicalesbians or Sharon Marcus. This paper can be a little less thesis-driven compared to your last paper, but I want you to be making connections between our readings and your organization and thinking about the different approaches to politics we have explored in the class.

We will divide into groups at the beginning of 5th week. Your podcast will be played the last day of class in 10th week (Wednesday, March 13). Your essay and group process reflection should be uploaded to Canvas before class that day.

Plagiarism

Here is the University’s Academic Integrity statement:

As students and faculty of the University of Chicago, we all belong to an academic community with high scholarly standards of which we are justly proud. Our community also holds certain fundamental ethical principles to which we are equally deeply committed. We believe it is contrary to justice, to academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit the statements or ideas or work of others as one’s own. To do so is plagiarism or cheating, offenses punishable under the University’s disciplinary system. Because these offenses undercut the distinctive moral and intellectual character of the University, we take them very seriously; punishments for committing them may range up to permanent expulsion from the University of Chicago. The College, therefore, expects that you will properly acknowledge your use of another’s ideas, whether that use is by direct quotation or by paraphrase, however loose. In particular, if you consult any written source and either directly or indirectly use what you find in that source in your own work, you must identify the author, title, and page number. If you have any doubts about what constitutes “use,” consult your instructor and visit [http://college.uchicago.edu/policies-regulations/academic-integrity-student-conduct](http://college.uchicago.edu/policies-regulations/academic-integrity-student-conduct).

That means get in touch with me before you submit any writing about which you have doubts. Please. If you plagiarize, you will be promptly failed at the very least.
Academic Resources

College-level analysis and writing pose challenges to all incoming students. To help you meet these challenges, you may find it helpful to utilize some of the services provided by Student Services of The College. Various professional staff and advanced students are committed to helping you address academic challenges in a variety of ways. Visit their webpage [https://college.uchicago.edu/student-services/mentoring](https://college.uchicago.edu/student-services/mentoring) to learn about tutoring and mentoring options, guidance on study skills and time management, and one-on-one assistance to ensure that you are using the best possible strategies for success in your course work.

Accommodations

I aim to make this class accessible and inclusive by meeting the needs of each student. That means I’m happy to meet with you or respond to your e-mails if you have any concerns about the class. I just ask that you get in touch sooner rather than later so we can work toward solutions together as soon as possible. I also welcome requests for accommodation; just check out [https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/requesting-reasonable-accommodations](https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/requesting-reasonable-accommodations)

Office Hours

I love talking with students and having the opportunity to think out loud with you in real time. That means the best time to discuss any questions you have with me is in class or during office hours. I am available over e-mail to answer brief clarification questions or to set up office hour appointments, but please come to office hours or set up an appointment to discuss anything more substantive. Please also schedule an office hour appointment at least 2 business days in advance. That means if you want to meet on Tuesday, you should be e-mailing to schedule on Friday.

Please also note that this syllabus gives you detailed information about due dates and readings. Read it and refer to it often. I may not respond to emails asking questions that are answered on the syllabus or in the assignment instructions.

Reading and Discussion Schedule

1 Theory

Monday, January 7: Introductory


- Selected essays on #MeToo
Wednesday, January 9: Radical Feminist Traditions


2 Coercion

Monday, January 14: Gendered Power

- The Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel

Wednesday, January 15: Can Heterosexuality be Saved?

- Valerie Solanas, “The SCUM Manifesto” (1967)
- Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” (1978)
- “The Combahee River Collective Statement” (1978)

3 Archive

Monday, January 21: No Class (MLK, Jr. Day)

Wednesday, January 23: Performing Memory

• Suzanne Lacy, “Three Weeks in May” (1977). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie7A8F0D-k4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie7A8F0D-k4)

• Luzene Hill, “Retracting the Trace” (2012)

* Group Manifesto Due*

### 4 Consent

**Monday, January 28: Affirmative Consent**


- “The Antioch Rules”


* Individual Manifesto Reflection Due*

**Wednesday, January 30: Age of Consent**


### 5 Law

**Monday, February 4: Rape Law’s Racial Histories**


- Monica de la Torre poems?
Wednesday, February 6: Harassment as Sex Discrimination

  


- Rob Bliss Creative, “10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman” (2014). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A

6 Transformation

Monday, February 11: Campus Culture


- Emma Sulkowicz, Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight) (2014–15)

- “Take Back the Night” oral histories

Wednesday, February 13: Critiques of the Legal System


7 Trauma

Monday, February 18: Representing Trauma


*Screening of movie immediately following class**

Wednesday, February 20: Overkill


8 Representation

Monday, February 25: Media Presentations

Wednesday, February 27: Pornography

9  Support

Monday, March 4: Trigger Warnings


- Rani Neutill, “My Trigger-Warning Disaster: '9 1/2 Weeks,' 'The Wire' and How Coddled Young Radicals Got Discomfort All Wrong.” Salon. 28 October 2015. [http://www.salon.com/2015/10/28/i_wanted_to_be_a_supporter_of_survivors_on_campus_and_a_good_teacher_i_didnt_realize_just_how_impossible_this_would_be/](http://www.salon.com/2015/10/28/i_wanted_to_be_a_supporter_of_survivors_on_campus_and_a_good_teacher_i_didnt_realize_just_how_impossible_this_would_be/)


Wednesday, March 6: Shelters & Safe Space


- “Apna Ghar and Person-Centered Advocacy”


*Screening of Nanette immediately following class*

10  Entertainment

Monday, March 11: Rape Jokes

- *Nanette*, written and performed by Hannah Gadsby (2018)


Wednesday, March 13: Podcast Presentations