

Reflections on A Pandemic Syllabus

My pedagogical imperative has always been to bring the classroom into the world, and the world into the classroom. Not because the world is a kind place for most of us, nor a just place, but because it is what we have. While I've arranged the following Laguardia Community College course, LIB 200: Cultures of Gender Transgression, around trans-ness in a variety of forms, racialized constructions of culture, nation, and capital are always inseparable from those of gender. By focusing on intersections between (interlapping) forms of marginalization, my hope for the course has always been to expand our individual and collective imagined possibilities of radical empathy, political solidarity, and future-building.

In Fall 2019, I designed and taught this version of LIB 200 completely in-person and felt like it was an exciting and generative experience for both my students and myself. I was given the chance to teach it again in the Spring of 2020, which I eagerly accepted. Laguardia's Spring semester begins in early March, so New York shut down soon after we began. In fact, I taught in-person for three classes, and then remotely for the remainder of the semester. I was afraid -- for many reasons-- but in particular that my students would get sick or worse, that they would disappear or drop out, or that our class would feel disconnected and draining for them, both in material and in (lack of) classroom community.

Throughout the semester, however, our class became not only an academic space, but a gathering space for venting, commiserating, and strategizing. It was also a place for communal grieving -- for the many lost in the COVID pandemic, but also for the victims of

ongoing systemic and police violence against Black and brown communities¹. It was during our semester that Breonna Taylor was murdered, among many, many others, including a disproportionate number of Black trans women. For these reasons (and a multitude of others), communal conversations and connections made over the course of our Spring semester in lockdown were vulnerable and often emotional. However, the personal was always in conjunction with an extremely high level of political and intellectual rigor. All this despite the fact that all of us dealt with, to varying extents, anxiety and anguish, financial strain and chronic overwork, and of course, illness and death within our extended families and communities.

I am extremely proud of the beautiful and brilliant work that each of my students was able to accomplish under the strain of pandemic, piled onto the continued forms of 'everyday' structural violence that so many of us are facing. I am even more proud of how we were able to come together to support and sustain each other.

The syllabus below, which also contains class notes, links to in-class materials and readings, additional resources, and free-writing responses, would shift weekly or even during the course of a meeting, according to outside political and social events, as well as communal desire, affect, and interest. I have tried to maintain it, for the most part, as it was then. After all, it is meant to highlight the vulnerability and transparency that I tried to weave through the overwhelming unknowns of the semester. The only changes I have made have been the integration of additional readings and class notes, as well as some formatting shifts for clarity. I have also included the FAQ sheet I created for our sudden shift from in-person to remote.

¹ Not forgetting race, class, and immigration-status related disparities in mortality rates...

My hope is that this can be a resource to someone, as well as a marker of our shared resilience during those first surreal and panicked months. I fear, in returning to "normal," that academia will turn again to its oppressive rigidity, further marginalizing vulnerable students. For that reason, I hold tight to my pandemic approach of mutual learning and solidarity in material and praxis-- a necessary integration of world and classroom, while allowing us the grace to make it through together.

Spring 2020 Syllabus
LAGUARDIA LIB 200
(Virtual) Cultures of Gender Transgression: Writing the Body
Professor Oliver Sage

Cultures of gender transgression exist underground, in the margins, in tenuous and often precarious circumstances. They struggle, they resist, they are appropriated, assimilated, devoured by dominant strains of culture. New mutations arise, bud and flower. The struggle continues.

They are inside and outside, everywhere and nowhere, too much and too little. They are trauma-response, perpetually-in-mourning, burnt-out; they are dancing at midnight on the pier, potluck dinners, text-me-when-you're-home-safe. They are in the streets. They are posting bail. They are caravans crossing the border. They're wearing their roommate's girlfriend's high heels (size 11) and a wet-and-wild lipstick (Rebel Rose Perfect Pout) that they stole from Duane Reade. They're setting up surgery fundraisers with stick-and-poke tattoos and performance art in the living room. They are getting sir-ma'am-sir-ed at the bodega. They are "honey, what's your sign?" They are the slippery slope, the monstrous, the decadent. They are glittering, spacious, everything you ever dreamed of. They are our ancestors– the ones we were warned about. They are dying; they are fiercely alive. They are those that are yet to come, just on the horizon. They are here, right now.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome! In this class, we'll be looking at how gender transgression (in many different forms), intersects with race, class, technology, art, counter-cultures, politics, and society more generally.

This document is an evolving draft and is open to feedback and change based on the mutual agreement of all parties involved. If you have comments, questions, feedback, or concerns based on the course, the syllabus, or the class environment, you are always welcome to let me know. There will also be additional opportunities to (anonymously) express concerns, questions, and feedback throughout the semester.

I am here to help and I recognize that we all have individual histories, abilities, needs, and positioning. If you feel that there is any way I can make our class more accessible to your needs or have any other concerns, please don't hesitate to let me know.

To quote CUNY Professor Carmen Kynard, "You are not graded on the skills that you brought with you to the course, skills that are more representative of socioeconomic status [among other things] than knowledge". Instead, class assessment will be based on your hard work, participation, and engagement (in any variety of ways) with this course and its material.

GOALS

- Come to a greater and more nuanced understanding of the intersections of oppression, resistance, technology, and culture, through the lens of gender transgression
- Develop our formal and informal writing practices
- Create a personal intellectual framework that brings together the many different skills and forms of knowledge that you've gained from your time at Laguardia, as well as your lives more generally

CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

The material and our discussions will often focus on mature, difficult, and potentially challenging topics, which are often political and personal. Readings and discussions might bring up strong feelings—anger, discomfort, anxiety, confusion, excitement, humor, and even boredom.

Some of us will have emotional responses to the material; some of us will have emotional responses to our peers' understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful.

Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us in the classroom.

If you are concerned about your potential reactions to some of the material, here are some tips:

- Read the syllabus so that you have an idea what topics will be covered and when.
- Feel free to approach me ahead of time if you'd like more information about a topic or reading. I am happy to let you know (to the best of my ability) if there's a particular subject that you'd like some advance warning about.
- If you think a particular reading or topic might be especially challenging or unsettling, you can arrive to class early and take a seat by the door so that you can easily exit the classroom as needed. (Please note that If you need to leave or miss class, you are still responsible for the work you miss.)
- Above all, please take care of yourself however you need to! You never have to discuss anything with me, but I am a resource and I am always here for you.

EXPECTATIONS

Various levels of writing assignments will be assigned throughout the course, with weekly journaling and written group discussions required, plus a more creative final project. You will also have a short presentation on a "cultural artifact" of your choice that will relate to our discussions.

Please arrive prepared, having listened to, read, or watched whatever was assigned, and to be actively engaged in our (virtual) classroom. Participation does not only include contributing to our group discussions during our synchronous sessions and our written engagement on Slack, but also active listening, encouragement, and keeping our minds open even when we feel confused or we disagree.

IMPORTANT: ALL materials for the course, including assigned and in-class materials, homework, powerpoints, the syllabus, and more, will be available **on the course website and on our Slack workspace.**

You do not need to buy anything. If there is an announcement or change of plans, it will also be announced on the website as well as on Slack.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

NO doctor's note required if you miss class. Take the day off if you're sick or need a mental health day, or if you are taking care of a loved one. Just get in touch (beforehand if possible) so that I know you're ok!

If you miss a synchronous class period, it's up to you to find out what you missed. Consider asking for a classmate's phone number or email for this purpose. Additionally, I will put all materials, such as powerpoints, assignments, etc., on the course website. I'm also here as a resource!

CLASSROOM POLICIES

- For my sake and yours, please keep online and phone distractions to a minimum
- Please arrive to our synchronous sessions on time and have the assigned readings and homework completed for each class before we start
- Act respectfully towards your classmates, yourself, and me
- Don't make assumptions about anyone else's experiences
- Step forward, step back (AKA if you've been talking a lot, chill for a bit and listen to your classmates. If you've been quiet and feel up to speaking, please do!)

GRADING

Participation : 20%

Weekly Reflections on Slack : 20%

Cultural Artifact Presentation : 20%

Homework / Readings : 20%

Final Project (Form and content up to you!) : 20%

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is incredibly important to me and to our class as a whole. Please feel free to speak up in class, write to me or come see me about any accessibility issues or needs that you might have.

Additionally, if there are any factors outside of your control (immigration, public transportation availability, financial issues, etc.) I'm here for you and can try to help you get help through the variety of resources available at Laguardia.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

NOTE: If you are feeling overwhelmed and aren't sure how you're going to finish your work, talk to me! We can figure it out together. I am more interested in your progress and thoughts than something more 'polished' that you've taken from somewhere else.

CUNY College regards acts of academic dishonesty as serious offenses against values of intellectual honesty. You are expected to adhere to the college's standards of academic integrity.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

- **A WEEKLY REFLECTION FREE-WRITE ON OUR SLACK WORKSPACE**
- **RESPONDING TO AT LEAST ONE OTHER REFLECTION ON SLACK PER WEEK**
- **CULTURAL ARTIFACT**

DON'T FORGET that at some point in the semester, you need to post a 'cultural artifact' on the Slack #culturalartifact channel.

This can be any piece of media, news, literature, poetry, etc. that struck you and reminded you of our class in some way. Please post a copy of your cultural artifact (or a description of it), as well as a paragraph or two commenting on why you chose it and how you relate it to the work of our class. YOU get to choose when you post it.

- FINAL PROJECT

The requirements are:

1. that it involves in-depth engagement with a topic, issue, film, reading, etc. that has come up during the semester
2. that it involves writing in some capacity
3. that it involves an element of personal, as well as social, cultural, and/or political reflection

This could look many ways. Some examples might be:

- A more traditional academic paper (2-4 pages)
- A 4-8 page zine (it's like a magazine, but short, hand-made, and sometimes involves drawings or collages)
- A small collection of poetry (must have a written introduction of one page to contextualize)
- An illustrated manuscript (see: the Middle Ages)
- A *Borderlands: La Frontera* style mix of poetry, academic writing, and related personal anecdotes (see: Gloria Anzaldúa)
- Something else entirely!

FYI: [Cate Denial's idea of the "unessay" might provide you with some ideas of how a more untraditional final project might look!](#)

***** If you have an idea but you're not sure if it will work, get in touch! If you're excited about an idea but don't know where to start or find sources, get in touch! If you have no idea and want guidance, also get in touch! *****

SEMESTER SCHEDULE (subject to change as needed)

Wed. March 4: Introductions

Mon. March 9: Defining Terms

Homework:

Write two paragraphs reflecting on the idea of 'ancestry'. Preferably, send to me by email or google docs before our class on Wednesday (3/11). If needed though, I'll take a paper copy!

Note: This is not a formal essay, but an opportunity to reflect and make whatever connections come to your mind.

Additionally, you are free to interpret the ideas of 'ancestor' and 'ancestry' in whatever forms you wish– this can include your family history, cultural or spiritual ancestors, people from the past that you feel an identification with, etc.

Media from class :

- (Mentioned) [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#), Peggy McIntosh
- [A Glossary of Trans Terms](#) (based on updated/edited material from [Erin Houdini's original glossary](#))
- Cisgender Privilege Checklist, from [an article by Sam Killermann](#))

Mon. April 6: The Compton Cafeteria Riots

Homework :

Watch the rest of [Screaming Queens](#) documentary and jot down some notes of your feelings, confusing moments, or surprises you encountered.

Texts and Media from class :

- [Screaming Queens Documentary](#), by Susan Stryker
- [“Other Balms, Other Gileads”](#), by Bryn Kelly
- [Ongoing Resource Doc about Transgender History and Activism](#)

Mon. April 20: Riots in history

NOTE: No writing is due this week, but in addition to engaging with the preparatory material below, please *do* start thinking about what you'd like to work on for your final project (can be anything that has come up in our discussions/materials or something that the class has made you think about).

Please see the Essays and Projects website tab for more info, examples, and project due dates!

By the end of Spring Break, Please watch :

- Clip from [ACT UP](#) (3 mins)
- [Lou Sullivan on honesty](#) (5 mins)

Please read at least 3 out of these 5 articles :

- [Why We Fight](#)
- [Invisible Women – Why Transgender Woman are Hit So Hard by HIV](#)
- [Sabel Samone-Loreca: ‘I’m a Black Trans Woman with HIV. I’m Supposed to Be Worth Nothing’](#)
- [Kia LaBeija’s Best Photo](#)
- [Reflections on Lou Sullivan](#)

Optional extra reading / watching :

- [Close to the Knives : A Memoir of Disintegration](#) (article)
- [Goodnight, Kia](#) (Short film)

Media from our class

- [11 Numbers that Show how the Coronavirus has changed NYC](#)
- [Quaranzine tutorial](#)

- [World of Warcraft Corrupted Blood Incident](#)

Wed. April 22: Open discussion on Zoom

Mon. April 27: AIDS Activism / Life and death in the time of the pandemic

Homework :

1. Your manifesto

- can be based off of what you wrote in class, in response to the prompt “if you could change one thing in the world, what would it be” **OR** another topic you feel strongly about
- If you feel comfortable doing so, please post your manifesto in the Slack #manifestos channel. Or, if you’d prefer, you can send it by email !

2. Proposal for final project (*Please send your proposal by email*)

- 1 to 2 paragraphs on your final project topic and how you want to accomplish it
- (remember, your final project does not need to be a traditional essay – it can be anything from poetry to a video to collage!)

3. Please sign up to meet with me over Slack (or google hangouts, Zoom, Blackboard, etc.) **either this week or next week** to talk about your final project ideas + proposal.

Class Notes :

Today we talked about art-making and survival during the AIDS epidemic and its connections to the present (and how our identities, such as race, class, and gender affect how we can access care and treatment).

We also discussed the power of [the manifesto](#), what manifestos are and what they can look like.

For our free-write, we wrote about “one thing we want to change in the world”, which can, if you choose, become the basis of your own manifesto!

We watched: [DiAna’s Hair Ego Remix](#)

We looked at : [Examples of AIDS art/activism](#)

Examples of different manifestos :

- [The Gorilla Girl Manifesto](#)
- [The Dada Manifesto](#)
- [Martin Luther's 95 Theses](#)
- [The Futurist Manifesto](#) (FYI : futurists were **awful** but they had a very poetic manifesto)
- [TRUTH 9-Point Manifesto](#)

Extra resources : More art related to AIDS activism (and AMAZING resource) at visualaids.org

Also : The [ACT UP Historical Archive](#)

Wed. April 29: Open discussion on Zoom

Mon. May 4: Monstra-cities

Homework :

1. Please watch *Fenced Out* (20 mins) and write down some of the most interesting or surprising moments to discuss together in class:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn9gHUwhAEQ>
2. In addition, please interview someone that you know that's lived in your neighborhood/borough for longer than you have (if that's not possible, find the person you think has lived in one place for the longest and talk to them!)

Get their answers to these three(ish) questions :

- Has the neighborhood / place they live changed significantly since they've been there?
- If so, how? Are the changes good, bad, both ? (If not, is that good or bad?)
- What do they want the future of their neighborhood/area to look like? Does that future seem possible?

Email me your interview responses to me before next Monday, and come into our next class prepared to talk about your interview and the film you watched.

Class notes :

In class today we talked about how we define our communities. Some different and wonderful responses ranged from family, friends and neighbors / digital communities like Animal Crossing / shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds / geographical and (inter)national connection.

We looked at [an interactive map of Mannahatta](#), which shows Manhattan in 1608, and gives information about the indigenous people that lived there, as well as the wildlife and flora that made up the island at the time.

We watched [Equality for Flatbush : A Gentrification Walk](#) by Imani Henry, and then class members talked about their different experiences of gentrification, changes in their neighborhood, renaming and 'rebranding' neighborhoods.

We also brought up [gerrymandering](#) and [red-lining](#) as tactics to segregate and disenfranchise marginalized communities and communities of color.

Extra resources :

- ["What it's like to get kicked out of your neighborhood"](#)
- [The history and routes of dollar vans](#)
- [New York Gerrymandering with prisons](#)
- ["The Atlas of Redistricting" aka reimagining would districts look without gerrymandering](#)
- [Some interesting dystopian architecture](#)
- [On food deserts and how people survive in them](#)

Wed. May 6: Open discussion on Zoom

Mon. May 11: Insidious Technologies

Homework : Work on a first draft of your paper / project and send it to me on / before May 18th (or get in touch beforehand if you need extra time and assistance)!

Additional resources from 5/11 :

[Video on the history of race and color film](#)

Sources about issues with facial recognition :

- [Facial Recognition Misclassifies Trans and Non-Binary People](#)
- [Artist Makes Prosthetic Mask of His Own Face to Help You Fool Facial Recognition](#)
- [Why Facial Recognition Technology Can Be So Biased](#)
- [Amazon's Face Recognition Falsely Matched 28 Members of Congress With Mugshots](#)
- [23andMe Is Terrifying, but Not for the Reasons the FDA Thinks](#)
- [How to hack your face to dodge the rise of facial recognition tech](#)
- [In Hong Kong Protests, Faces Become Weapons](#)

Sources about Activists using Technology :

- [Technology in Activism: Amplifying Indigenous Injustice](#)
- [How technology is shaping creative activism in the 21st century](#)
- [CV Dazzle](#)
- [Laser Pointers and Traffic Cones: Creative Ways Hong Kong Protesters Are Organizing](#)
- [TechActivist](#)

Wed. May 13: Open discussion on Zoom

Mon. May 18: Future Bodies, Future Selves

Homework :

- **Please read:** Mark Aguhar's poem, "These are the Axes" ([on last page of this google doc](#)).
- **Please read:** Interview with Alok Vaid-Menon, "I Don't Want to be Boring", in Madison Moore's *Fabulous*
- **Please watch youtube video:** [Against Respectability Politics](#), By Sarah Kelsey Hall

Take some notes as to your responses and be ready to discuss them in class.

Class Notes:

This week we started by discussing questions and concerns about financial aid during the pandemic, and issues with transferring.

Financial aid and transfer discussion resources:

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/27/nyregion/cuny-application-fee-to-be-waived-for-low-income-students.html>
- nytimes.com/2020/04/25/your-money/college-financial-aid-coronavirus.html

Then, we spoke about gender, bodies, and deviance. We discussed people's experiences of feeling like they were not living up to the 'ideal' of manhood or womanhood, and that doing gender 'perfectly' is actually impossible.

We also discussed the difference between sex and gender.

Sex refers to the physical body, its chromosomal, hormonal, primary and secondary sex characteristics. We noted that sex has been proven to not be binary (one or the other), but that there is actually a spectrum. See this brief article on the definition of **intersex** :

<https://isna.org/faq/what-is-intersex/>

Gender is how you identify, regardless of what sex you were assigned at birth. **Your gender presentation** is how you dress and present yourself (it can be masculine, feminine, neutral, etc. etc.) **Your sexuality** is who you're attracted to, regardless of your gender / gender presentation.

Free Write : What does it mean to you to be a man / woman ?

We read and discussed:

Susan Stryker, "[My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix](#)"

"Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself."

And listened to: Aretha Franklin's "[You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman](#)" (what is a natural woman, anyway??)

Wed. May 20: Open Discussion

Mon. May 25: NO CLASS

IMPORTANT! Tues. May 26 (Monday Schedule): That's Revolting!

Wed. May 27: Open discussion on Zoom

Mon. June 1: Closing the Circle / Presentations

Wed. June 3: LAST DAY

Going Virtual FAQ

HEY! Do you have a question that I haven't addressed here? Write me on Slack or ask me during our class time and I'll add your question and the response here.

When are you available if I need you or have a question?

Basically whenever! Your needs as my students are my first priority, and since we're not meeting in a classroom and most of the work henceforth will be done in your own time anyway, just get in touch whenever you need. A Slack message is the best way to get in touch, but you can send an email too!

Soooo... how do we have our class online?

Like a crazy quilt, made with whatever fabric scraps we have at our disposal, we will create something new, strange, and hopefully somewhat functional (I'm working on a quilt right now, if you can't tell...)

Fortunately, we have a beautiful and wild creature at our disposal: the internet. There's a lot to read, look at, and watch out there, and we can use those bountiful resources to our advantage.

In addition, I'm trying to find some low-pressure and low-tech ways for us to keep generating discussions and ideas throughout the week, through using Slack, short writing assignments, real-time Zoom video chat conversations, and more. ALL material will also continue to be posted on the class website!

I'll be adding some virtual office hours as well!

Because I know this is a strange and stressful time, as much as possible of the material will be available to access at any time, asynchronously, so you can work on things at your own pace and when your schedule allows it. If you feel you're falling behind or getting confused, reach out to me!!! We will find a solution! I promise!

What will participation look like?

There are a number of different ways to participate online, just as there are in the classroom. I will not be taking attendance during our scheduled class time, but I will be making sure that everyone is interacting and participating in various ways every week.

Some examples of participation include:

- posting in Slack-- writing comments about readings, responding to and helping your classmates, and posting resources!
- asking questions / giving answers during my office hours or during our class time
- Writing, writing, and more writing!

What will our work outside of class hours look like?

Well, I plan to assign some videos/movies to watch, some texts and poems to read, some podcasts to listen to, writing prompts to reflect on, and some other secret ideas too!

While there will be weekly deadlines, you'll have a lot of flexibility as to when during the week you do your work. As usual, just let me know if you need an extension on something or are feeling confused or overwhelmed!

For more detailed expectations, see your updated syllabus above !

What about deadlines?

Any already announced deadlines will be extended! And if you need a personal extension, just ask! I'll be posting a revised syllabus shortly with new deadlines.

Will we be switching back to in-person class time this semester?

I **highly** doubt it, but if I hear anything different, I'll let you know. I would prepare yourself to be studying remotely through (at least) the end of this semester, unfortunately.

How is grading going to work?

I am going to be grading gently and with grace. If you participate regularly, stay prepared and do your work, you'll be just fine. Grades will be posted on Blackboard.

What's the deal with Slack?

Slack is a tool that allows us to chat in live time in a shared workspace, and in various channels (sort of like different group chats) that have different themes. You can use it on your desktop or through an app on your phone!

Slack is where I want to direct as much of our written communication as possible. Obviously for longer questions and concerns, email is still great, but you can also just send me a direct message on Slack and I'll see it and be able to respond quickly!