GSWS 411-4: Special Topics in GSWS:

Professor: Dr. Lucas Crawford
Email: lccrawfo@sfu.ca
Lecture: Mondays 13:30-17:20; HC 2290

Course Description:
How did creative thinkers imagine gender outside the norm before the category and concept of “transgender” cohered? In the west, transgender becomes increasingly codified in culturally authoritative institutions such as medicine and psychiatry, but what might queer gender have become had it not been accepted (or captured) by these institutions? By looking back to texts that challenged gender norms just as such codification was beginning to take place, we will see how and why authors saw “queer gender” differently then. Though it’s all too easy to regard past definitions of queer gender as somehow archaic or silly, we will instead ask how the lack of settled discourses on queer gender might have actually allowed for a more open and imaginative process of queering gender. By looking primarily to the 1890-1930 period, we will see that fiction precedes scientific “fact” when it comes to queer gender. Indeed, our authors hint at – and critique avant la lettre – queer gender’s absorption (or containment) by sexology and psychiatry. We will start to see that queer genders and specifically “transgender” might have developed along many other lines. As such, our current beliefs that transgender is an immutable category of embodiment and identity will start to appear far more contingent and dynamic. We will end with two novels written nearer to the “transgender turn” in western queer cultures and queer theory, which will allow us to ask: how can we recapture and develop some of the imaginative and radical potential of literature in general and of the authors of this generative era in particular?

One characteristic of this course makes it very unique in relation to all of the other courses that I teach: all of the novelists we will study are white. It is not the perspective of this course that white British people “invented” the idea of living beyond gender norms. Rather, by reading for colonial affect and racialized/classed practices of gender in the novels, we will be able to gauge the extent to which “transgender” coalesced in the spaces, experiences, and critiques of the British Empire. A guiding question throughout the course will therefore be: how can the useful ideas of the texts be re-mobilized in a way that is actively anti-colonial? What does it mean that “transgender” as a discursive formation developed at that particular time and place? As we move to Weimar Berlin, we will also be able to query the relation of queer gender to the Holocaust and WWII more generally.

Educational Goals:
• broader understanding of the term “queer genders” both within and beyond “transgender” as it’s now known
• developed sense of the ways in which genders transform throughout history in non-linear fashions
• an appreciation for the literary and aesthetic foundations of queer gender
• improved critical skills with regard to history, literature, politics, and the embodied lives thereof
• increased curiosity and confidence as a viewer, creator, critic, and witness of culture
• ability to form highly unique, rigorous, imaginative, and relevant arguments

NOTE: students who have previously taken GSWS 331: Queer Genders with Dr. Crawford may not take this course. Student who have taken 331 with another professor may take this course. Those who take this course may not enrol in 331 in the future if taught by Dr. Crawford.

Prerequisite: 45 units, including 6 units in GSWS.
Course Texts and Courseware:
NOTE: We will read six complete books (five novels; one very accessible history) and study two films.

1. Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray
2. Virginia Woolf, Orlando: a Biography
3. Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness
4. Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body
5. Angela Carter, Nights at the Circus
6. Susan Stryker, Transgender History
7. Tipping the Velvet (based on Sarah Waters’ novel of the same name – do not purchase)
8. Cabaret (based, loosely, on Isherwood’s The Berlin Stories – do not purchase)

Course Evaluation and Assignments:
Participation  25%
Mid-Term  25%
Major Seminar Presentation  25%
Final Exam  25%

NOTE: This course is a seminar. Students will vigorously debate ideas they have gleaned from our fun but heavy reading load. The level of discussion will not be intentionally opaque, but students’ previous engagement with the histories and debates of GSWS fields is important. A student without the proper pre-requisites, or without a genuine interest in the topic, will be very challenged. A challenge can be a wonderful thing indeed. My advice, however, is to regard this seminar as you would any other senior seminar, such as those in Chemistry, Russian Language, or Music Performance. (If you wanted to take a senior-level credit in playing jazz trombone, but do not like jazz and have never played the trombone, what would you do to succeed in such a course? Think creatively and be in touch with Dr. Crawford with any questions.)