

**Women's Studies 535  
Lesbian Lives and Cultures  
Professor Bonnie Zimmerman**

Fall 2004  
Monday 4:00-6:40  
AH 2106

Office: Centennial Hall 3310  
Phone: 594-6111  
E-mail: [bjimmerm@sdsu.edu](mailto:bjimmerm@sdsu.edu)  
Office Hours: Monday 3:00-4:00 and by appointment

This course introduces students to historical, sociological, political, and cultural constructions of lesbian existence; the influence of feminisms on lesbian lives; and the complexity of lesbian lives across class, race, ethnic, age, and national/international differences. We'll learn about the many ways women have expressed same-sex desire through history, and theorize about the meaning of "lesbian" (and other synonyms and closely-related terms) in various eras and cultures. We'll talk about coming out, language, codes, and passing; we'll discuss love and sexuality, families, communities, and cultural production. We will look at lesbian politics, both separatist and coalitionist, and we'll examine the relationships among self-identified lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and queers. Throughout, we'll explore past interpretations, present realities, and future visions.

**TEXTS:**

Blackwood, Evelyn & Saskia Wieringa  
*Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures*

Kleindienst, Kris  
*This Is What Lesbian Looks Like*

Lewin, Ellen  
*Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*

Lorde, Audre  
*Sister Outsider*

Zimmerman, Bonnie  
*WS 535 Reader*

There are also two articles available through Electronic Course Reserve (ECR)

Books and reader are available at Aztec Shops Bookstore

## STUDENT LEARNING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

Student learning goals for this course have been aligned with the overall goals for a Women's Studies major. Please see the Undergraduate Advisor if you are interested in the department's goals and objectives.

At the end of this course, the student should be able to:

1. Explain the social construction of lesbian sexuality and identity (Women's Studies Department Goals no. 1 and 3)
  - 1.1 Compare/contrast the meaning of "lesbian" across time and culture
  - 1.2 Discuss the way that lesbian identity is shaped by race, class, and culture
2. Identify mechanisms of oppression and resistance (Women's Studies Department Goal no. 4)
  - 2.1 Identify the structures, beliefs, and practices that oppress lesbians in particular contexts nationally and internationally
  - 2.2 Delineate ways that lesbians defy oppression and the implications of this defiance for all women's lives
3. Analyze the development of key concepts in the history of lesbian movements and communities (Women's Studies Department Goal no. 7)
  - 3.1 Relate the broad parameters of lesbian community-building and cultural development in modern times
  - 3.2 Evaluate the influence of feminism and anti-racism on the growth of lesbian issues and ideas
  - 3.3 Analyze such concepts as identity, coming out, the closet, heterosexism, homophobia, and separatism
  - 3.4 Assess the current status of lesbian cultural production, lesbian motherhood, same-sex marriage, butch-femme relationships, and lesbian activism
  - 3.5 Situate contemporary lesbian lives in their historical context
4. Evaluate multiple perspectives with the field (Women's Studies Department Goal no. 6)
  - 4.1 Articulate the connections among lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered realities
  - 4.2 Compare/contrast perspectives of different cultures and communities, including your own
  - 4.3 Practice communicating with people who have different opinions and experiences from your own
  - 4.4 Collaborate with other students by planning and executing a group project
5. Write and speak articulately on lesbian issues, and demonstrate critical thinking skills (Women's Studies Department Goals no. 8 and 9)
  - 5.1 Produce papers with correct grammar and spelling, good sentence and paragraph construction, and clear focus and argument
  - 5.2 Support ideas in class clearly and articulately
  - 5.3 Distinguish between assumptions and information in arguments
  - 5.4 Cite external sources correctly and show relevance to arguments and analyses

## QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING AND DISCUSSION

To facilitate your thinking about the readings and focus class discussions, I have developed five questions, drawn from the Student Learning Goals, that we will weave throughout the course. These are questions that one can ask repeatedly about almost any reading or topic in lesbian studies. They can be addressed from many perspectives and paradigms. These are the questions to ask as you prepare each week's assignment, and the questions I will ask to shape each class session. Not every question will apply to every assigned text, but each week you should find a way to apply at least one question to each reading.

1. What does this reading indicate or suggest about the ways in which the meaning of lesbianism varies in different social, historical, political, and cultural contexts?
2. What does the reading suggest about the relationship between lesbianism and (a) feminism, (b) anti-racism, and/or (c) social movements?
3. What assumptions or assertions does this reading make about the social position of lesbians compared to bisexual women, transgendered persons, heterosexuals, or any other sexual identity?
4. Select a significant concept, idea, or argument from this reading and use it as a basis for (re)interpreting (a) an experience in your own life, or (b) observation(s) you have made regarding contemporary society. How might this concept, idea, or argument change the way you interpret that experience or observation?
5. How do the ideas in this reading relate to ideas you have encountered in other women's studies courses or other courses you have taken at SDSU?

## REQUIREMENTS:

1. Participation and Discussion Questions (10%)

Since focused and thoughtful discussion and analysis of the issues and readings is such an important part of this course, I will encourage it in the following ways. First, each week, you are to select one or more of the assigned readings, and write three brief, bulleted "talking points" that answer one of the Questions to Guide Your Reading and Discussion. You are to email these to me no later than noon on Sunday before class. You are required to turn in a minimum of eight acceptable talking points to receive full credit for this assignment. Second, should it become necessary—that is, if a significant portion of the class is having difficulty with the readings—I will assign responsibility for specific articles to students on a rotating basis. This means that you will assist your classmates in identifying the article's main thesis, line of argumentation, and supporting evidence, and in applying one or more of the Questions to it.

2. Short paper (20%)

In order to get your creative and analytical juices flowing as soon as possible, you are to write a short (3-4 pages) paper on the question of what "lesbian" means or refers to. Your paper should be informed by the readings of the first two weeks but be primarily your own analysis and opinion. Keep in mind, however, that opinions must always be supported by logical arguments and evidence; otherwise, they are simply prejudices. You can have fun with this paper, but be sure it

demonstrates your best writing, including careful organization and proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation. This paper is due September 27.

3. Group Presentation (30%: 10% presentation, 20% individual paper)

On September 13, I will ask everyone to select one supplemental text to be read and presented by small groups on October 18. Each group will select its own format for presenting the material in the supplemental text, which could include panel presentations, readers theater, multimedia presentations, performances, etc. Use your creativity and imagination to make the presentations interesting. In addition, each student will write a short (3-5 pages) paper on the book, due October 25. This paper should not merely summarize the book, but rather critically analyze its main thesis and overall argument. A critical analysis provides a short and clear synopsis of the argument, explains how the author goes about supporting or demonstrating it, evaluates the book's strengths and weaknesses, and presents your conclusions about its value to readers. You will select from the following:

Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*  
Kennedy & Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*  
Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*  
Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators*  
Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868*  
Gagehabib and Summerhawk, *Circles of Power: Shifting Dynamics in a Lesbian-centered Community*

4. Research Project (40%)

The final requirement is an 8-10 page research paper covering material on any topic relevant to the subject of this course. Your final paper should apply the Questions to Guide Your Reading and Discussion. In addition, you are to offer an analysis of the sources that you use. Later in the semester, I will hand out a more detailed description of the assignment. On November 8, you will turn in a two-page prospectus including a brief (one or two paragraph) abstract of your topic and a preliminary bibliography. You must incorporate sources of the following types:

4-6 scholarly sources (books, book chapters, or academic journal articles)

2-3 internet sources (web sites, electronic data bases, or other resources about which you probably know much better than I)

At least one outside source (cultural or political events, interviews with practitioners or activists, meetings of organizations, and so forth)

On December 13, you will make an informal (but well-organized and carefully-timed) presentation to the class on your research. The final paper is due at that class session.

**Graduate students:** Your critical book analysis should be 5-7 pages, and should aim at the style and quality of a book review in a scholarly journal (that's a good goal for undergraduate students as well). Your research paper should be approximately 15 pages.

## REVIEW OF TIMETABLE

September 13	Selection of books for group presentations
September 27	Short paper due
October 4	Work on group presentations in class
October 18	Group presentations

October 25  
November 8  
December 13

Book analysis due  
Prospectus for research paper due  
Informal presentations on research; Research paper due

## COURSE OUTLINE:

- August 30                    Introduction  
FILM: Not Just Passing Through
- September 13                Identity and Coming Out  
Morris et al, Finding a "Word for Myself" (reader)  
Lorde, The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action  
Onodera, True Confessions of a Queer Banana (reader)  
Moraga, La Güera (reader)  
Samuels, Bodies in Trouble (reader)  
FILM: Just Because of Who We Are
- September 20                What Does "Lesbian" Mean?: Theories and Definitions  
Radicalesbians, The Woman-Identified Woman (reader)  
Rich, Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, excerpt (reader)  
Amory, Club Q: Dancing with (a) Difference (Lewin)  
Lang, Lesbians, Men-Women, and Two-Spirits (Blackwood)  
Wekker, Rethinking Identity in Light of the *Mati* Work in Suriname (Blackwood)
- September 27                Doing Research  
Blackwood and Weiringa, Challenging the Silence in the Study of Sexuality (Blackwood)  
Nestle, My Journey with the Lesbian Herstory Archives (reader)  
Leyva, Putting Latina Lesbian History at the Center (reader)  
Ng, Looking for Lesbians in Chinese History (reader)  
PRESENTATION: Library and Information Services, Room 76
- October 4                    Lesbian Herstory in the West before the 20th Century  
Vicinus, "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong" (reader)  
SLIDE SHOW: Amazons, Dykes and Women-Loving Women  
Group work on book presentations
- October 11                    Lesbians in the U.S. Before Stonewall  
Kennedy, The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South Dakota, 1928-1933 (Lewin)  
Thorpe, African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975 (Lewin)  
Nestle, Sexual Courage in the Fifties (reader)  
FILM: Before Stonewall
- October 18                    Book Presentations
- October 25                    Lesbian Feminism and "Lesbian Nation"  
Treblicot, Lesbian Feminism in Process (reader)  
Morris, Eden Built by Eves, excerpts (reader)  
Stein, The Decentering of Lesbian Feminism (reader)  
FILM: If These Walls Could Talk II, Part 2

- November 1                    One "Nation" Over All?  
 Lorde, An Open Letter to Mary Daly  
 Romo-Carmona, Introduction to Compañeras (reader)  
 Allison, A Question of Class (reader)  
 Macdonald, Do You Remember Me? (ECR)  
 Tremain, We're Here, We're Disabled and Queer (reader)
- November 8                    Lesbian Cultural Production  
 Lorde, Poetry is Not a Luxury  
 Klinger, The Political Aspirations of Lesbian Activist-Writers (Lewin)  
 Zimmerman, Lesbian Culture and the Lesbian Novel (reader)  
 Stein, Lesbianism and Popular Music since the 1970s (reader)  
 Parmar, That Moment of Emergence (reader)  
 FILM: Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts
- November 15                    Sex, Love, and Relationships  
 Lorde, The Uses of the Erotic  
 Herman, Lesbian Motherhood Meets Popular Psychology (Lewin)  
 Lewin, Claiming Community in Lesbian Commitment Ceremonies (Lewin)  
 Wieringa, Butch-Femme Lesbians in Jakarta and Lima (Blackwood)  
 Hollibaugh & Moraga, What We're Rolling around in Bed With (reader)  
 Frye, Lesbian "Sex" (ECR)
- November 22                    Global Lesbianism  
 Murray, Class and Jakarta Lesbians (Blackwood)  
 Kendall, Women in Lesotho and the (Western) Construction of  
 Homophobia (Blackwood)  
 Aarmo, How Homosexuality Became "Un-African": the Case of Zimbabwe  
 (Blackwood)  
 Tan beng hui, Women's Sexuality and the Discourse on Asian Values (Blackwood)  
 Mogrovejo, The Lesbian Movement in Mexico (Blackwood)
- November 29                    Lesbian Activism in the 21st Century  
 Kleindienst, *This is What Lesbian Looks Like* (pp. 11-125)  
 FILM: After Stonewall
- December 6                    Kleindienst, *This is What Lesbian Looks Like* (pp. 126-278)
- December 13                    Final Presentations