

Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Music

GSWS 3480/MUSC 3480

Dr. Maria Murphy

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Wednesdays 5.15pm-8.15pm - FQT/GSWS Conference Room (In person)
Office hours: Wednesdays 3.00-4.30pm - 345 Fisher Bennett Hall - Suite 342

How is popular music implicated in the representation, production, performance, and interpretation of gender and sexuality? How have musicians negotiated traditional categories of gender and sexuality? In this class, we will approach the study of popular music through the lens of feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, transnational feminist theory, and intersectional methodologies to articulate the ways in which gender and sexuality have shaped musical discourse and popular culture more broadly. Topics include: gay anthems, trans vocality, masculinities, boy bands, oral histories, queer electro-pop, afrofuturism, performance alter-egos, queer(ing) methods, cover songs, censorship, musical borrowings & cultural appropriation, the politics of representation, and affective modes of listening. Students will learn about and be able to articulate the values and ideologies that are communicated in various subgenres of popular music, and how musical production impacts our understanding of cultural practices and social systems. Content will focus primarily on work in the U.S. and Canada.

No prior musical knowledge required.

All course materials will be available on the class canvas site. Musical selections will be available on the [course's public YouTube playlist](#), with the exception of Sikh Knowledge's "[More than Aware](#)" and BEARCAT, "[CDMX Tapes X NTS Radio](#)".

This course is cross-listed with the GSWS Program. If you liked this course, consider adding a GSWS minor. The minor is 6 CUs and very flexible in terms of requirements. To learn more, contact Gwendolyn Beetham (gbeetham@sas.upenn.edu) or visit: <https://gsws.sas.upenn.edu/>

Academic Accommodations

The University of Pennsylvania provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified and been approved by the office of [Student Disabilities Services](#) (SDS). Please make an appointment with me as soon as you can in the semester so we can discuss your accommodations and your needs. Even if you think that your particular accommodations may not pertain to class assignments, for example, I would really enjoy the opportunity to learn about your needs.

If you have not yet contacted SDS, and would like to request accommodations or have questions, you can make an appointment by calling SDS 215.573.9235. The office is located in the [Weingarten Learning Resources Center](#) at Stouffer Commons 3702 Spruce Street, Suite 300. There is [also information about financial support](#) for students with disabilities on their website.

Statement of commitment to inclusion

In support of the University of Pennsylvania's commitment to providing an equitable and safe experience for students whose birth name and/or legal name does not reflect their gender identity and/or gender expression, Penn accepts requests from any student seeking to use a preferred first and/or middle name in University records. A student's preferred name can and will be used where feasible in all University systems unless the student's birth name and/or legal name use is required by law or the student's preferred name use is for intent of misrepresentation.

Any student, including transgender, gender nonconforming, gender variant, and non-cisgender students who wish to designate a preferred name should fill out the Preferred Name Change Form. Students wishing to change a birth name and/or legal name to a preferred name must meet with one of the following designated University Life trans* allies to discuss the scope and limitations of the preferred name request:

[Erin Cross, Director, LGBT Center](#), 215-898-5044

[Rodney Robinson, Associate Director, Office of Student Affairs](#), 215-898-6533

For additional Preferred Name Information: <https://www.vpul.upenn.edu/preferrednames.php>

A Note on Pronouns

Pronouns are a common way to refer to someone in the third person instead of using a name (ie. she, he, they, zie, ze, ve--there are many!) and in our classroom, it is essential that we refer to each other by the names and pronouns that each person uses. Remember that pronouns *may or may not* specifically affirm someone's gender identity and you cannot tell what someone's pronouns are by their name or by looking at them.

You are not required to declare or share your pronouns. If you would prefer not to share, we will refer to you exclusively by name. You are welcome to include your pronouns on [your canvas profile](#) if you would like. You can also update this information on [Path at Penn](#). If the pronouns you use change over the course of the semester, please let us know so we can all be sure to use them.

Take care to take note of each other's pronouns. If you accidentally refer to someone by the wrong pronoun, quickly apologize, correct yourself, and move on with whatever you were saying.

Communication Policy & Office Hours

I hope you take advantage of office hours to ask questions or chat about course materials--you don't have to have an academic issue to come to office hours, and I enjoy getting to know students better. I will have a sign-up sheet after the first session to visit office hours at least once. Office hours are posted at the top of the syllabus.

Feel free to email me with any concerns or questions and I will do my best to get back to you in a timely fashion, typically within 48 hrs, Monday-Friday between 9am and 5pm eastern. Please note: if you email an hour before class, I will NOT get that message until after class.

Academic Integrity

Since the University is an academic community, its fundamental purpose is the pursuit of knowledge. Essential to the success of this educational mission is a commitment to the principles of academic integrity. Every member of the University community is responsible for upholding the highest standards of honesty at all times. Students, as members of the community, are also responsible for adhering to the principles and spirit of the following Code of Academic Integrity. Please familiarize yourself with it in its entirety:

<https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>

Course Requirements

Class Engagement and Participation: 20%

Protocol Assignment: 20%

Creative Assignment: 10%

Discussion Leader Assignment: 20%

Oral History Project Attendance & Participation: 30%

Class Engagement & Participation – 20%

Attendance

Class participation comprises a significant portion of your grade. Participation is integral in this class, and I expect you to contribute thoughtfully to class discussion throughout the semester. Most importantly, to achieve course learning goals, you must attend and participate in classes. However, if you feel unwell or if you are under quarantine or in isolation because you have been exposed to Covid-19 or tested positive for it, you should not come to campus or attend in-person classes or activities. Any absences should be reported through the Path at Penn course action notice system. It is your responsibility to contact me to create a plan for participation and engagement in the course as soon as you can, and to make a plan to complete assignments when illness delays your completion. I recognize there can be a variety of extenuating circumstances that can prevent attendance. If you have additional concerns about attendance, or if there are unforeseen circumstances that change for you over the course of the semester, please be in touch with me as soon as possible so we can discuss possible accommodations.

The only sessions that are absolutely mandatory (with the exception of illness) are the oral history training sessions on March 22nd, March 29th, and April 5th.

A note on wellness

Please be in touch if you need additional support or accommodations and remember that taking care of yourself and your loved ones should be your top priority. I am always happy to discuss options to find an appropriate balance for the semester. Please don't hesitate to reach out.

Participation

In class, I encourage you to ask questions, make clarifications, and share your thoughts about the readings, recordings, and viewings. To prepare for class, take notes while you are reading, listening to, and watching course materials. Look up names or concepts that are unfamiliar to you. I recommend keeping a running list of keywords/terms that we encounter throughout the semester.

Ways to participate can include:

- asking & answering questions on lecture presentations and the previous week's protocol submissions during lectures and recitations
- participating in discussions by sharing opinions, asking questions, and responding to the readings and course materials
- sending me or questions and comments in advance of discussion sessions

Difficult Content & Building a Feminist Classroom

In a feminist classroom, first and foremost is the creation of a respectful environment for learning. In this class, we will be discussing some difficult topics. As your teacher, I will never do anything to intentionally shock or upset you; it is also my intention to create a challenging and intellectually stimulating environment, which will occasionally involve unpacking and processing difficult topics. Please be conscious of the fact that others may have (and will have!) opinions

different from your own. If you are having difficulty dealing with a class discussion, reading, viewing, or listening excerpt, you may voice these concerns in class or you may discretely step out of class (in this event, please send me a quick email afterward).

If you are confident about speaking in class, try to be mindful of how much time you are occupying and try to invite others into the conversation. Be mindful of others' experiences when you speak. Avoid making assumptions about anyone's experience. Respect each other's names, gender pronouns, and expressed identities; no one is required to share information about their identities or experiences. Do not hesitate to approach me if you feel there are measures I can take to make the classroom a more hospitable space for you.

A note on late work

Assignments are due on the date listed in the syllabus/on canvas. 1-week extensions will generally be granted regardless of circumstances, apart from the oral history assignments, for which I cannot grant extensions in order to get grades submitted on time. Improvement over the course of the semester will be taken into consideration for the final grade submission.

Assignments

Protocol Assignment -20 %

At the beginning of the semester, each student will choose a class session to take notes for and write up a detailed, thoughtful summary of the discussion, while situating the discussion as part of broader themes and concerns of the class. A protocol provides both a synthesized account of and constructive reflection on the topics covered during class discussion. It should connect the discussion overview to themes from the module's assigned listening, viewings, and readings (with relevant quotations) and broader course issues, questions, and concepts. You will sign up for the class for which you'd like to write the protocol. You will write the protocol in groups of 2, depending on the interest for each module. When your session comes up, you will take detailed notes and submit your protocol before the next class meeting. The protocol should be submitted before the next class session the following week. It should be 2-4 single-spaced pages (1000-2000 words). A sample protocol from another class is posted on the canvas assignment page.

Discussion Lead – 20 %

At the beginning of the semester, each student will choose a class session for which to lead an approximately hour-long discussion. This *cannot* be the same session for which you are writing the protocol. To prepare, take extra time with the reading and listening assignments for your assigned session. Be familiar with any key figures, events, or concepts that the readings discuss in detail. You may also want to conduct a little extra research to familiarize yourself with the session's topics. Prepare 3-5 discussion questions to help guide discussion. A rubric for the discussion leader assignment is posted on the canvas assignment page. **I strongly recommend you visit office hours the week before you are scheduled to lead discussion to talk through your plan.**

Discussion tips:

- Avoid yes/no or agree/disagree questions. Questions that begin with “what, why, and how” often help generate discussion.
- Consider what the main takeaways are from each reading/listening/viewing assignment. What do you think your classmates should know about the insights, critiques, and/or perspectives from each assigned reading? How do the assigned readings connect with other themes/topics we’ve discussed this semester?
- You may wish to choose certain passages from the assigned readings for the class to read together. Come up with discussion prompts that help your classmates analyze the excerpt.
- You may wish to choose excerpts from musical selections, particular performances, or music videos for the class to analyze. Let your classmates know what to pay attention to as part of these analysis exercises.
- Consider how you want to organize the class session. If you are co-leading discussion, you may wish to divvy up tasks. For example, one person may offer an introduction to the key themes/issues presented in the week’s course materials and the other discussion leader may introduce the discussion questions. You may decide to split the class into small groups to tackle specific issues/questions.

Oral History Project – 30%

As part of our final module, we will examine the relationship between archival practices and queer, feminist, & trans histories, with a particular focus on oral history methodologies. Students will participate in training sessions on conducting oral histories and will have the opportunity to conduct an oral history interview. Not all students will conduct an oral history interview; some students will support the project by organizing resources for interviewees, scheduling, and tagging and/or transcribing interviews. *The oral history training sessions are mandatory for everyone, even if you are not conducting one of the interviews.*

Creative Assignment – 10% (due April 5th)

This assignment is designed to help you practice conveying information, ideas, or perspectives in a concise and engaging way. You may choose the medium and topic of your choice, but it must be related to class materials and/or the oral history project. You may create an Instagram carousel post, infographic, twitter thread, set of memes, an online timeline, or you may decide to create a different type of creative work (musical, artistic, performance-based, etc) that critically engages with the themes of the course. Some potential ideas:

- Infographic about trans history or trans activism in Philly (eg. using canva)
- Twitter thread about the oral history project
- Online historical timeline of trans history in Philly (eg. using a free online platform like sutori)
- Set of memes related to gender, sexuality, and pop music
- Create a short musical, performance-based, tik tok, or other artistic work that critically engages with the themes of the course

If you are having trouble deciding on the scope of your creative assignment, please be sure to check in with me during office hours or via email to talk through your options.

Course Schedule (subject to change)

Module I: Vocality

January 18 big dyke energy

Listening:

- Bessie Smith, "You gotta give me some"
- K.d.lang, "Miss Chatelaine"
- Meshell Ndegeocello, "If that's your boyfriend (he wasn't last night)"
- Indigo Girls, "Closer to Fine"

Related materials for future study:

- Tavia Nyong'o, "Free as a Bird? Thinking with the Grain of Meshell Ndegeocello's Butch Voice" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*
- Mairead Sullivan, "The Butch Throat," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*
- Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*
- Elizabeth Freeman, "Epilogue: Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex*

January 25 masculinities

Reading:

- Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, "Masks, Sincerity, and (Re)Claiming Country Music," in *Queer Country*
- Elliott Powell, "Corner Politics," in *Sounds from the Other Side: Afro-South Asian Collaborations in Black Popular Music*

Listening:

- Prince, "Darling Nikki"
- Culture Club, "Karma Chameleon"
- Miles Davis, "Black Satin" and "Bitches Brew"
- Lil Nas X, "Old Town Road" and "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)"

Related materials for future study:

- Alix Chapman, *Raising the Bottom: New Orleans Sissy Bounce* (forthcoming from Duke University Press)
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "'Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!'" in *Constructing Masculinity*

February 1 voice processing

Reading:

- Morgan M. Page, "[Beyond the Flesh and the Real: Transsexual Cyberpunk, baby](#)"
- Simon Reynolds, "[How Auto-Tune Revolutionized the Sound of Popular Music](#)"

Listening:

- Laurie Anderson, "O Superman" and "Language is a Virus (From Outer Space)"
- Tami T, "I Never Loved This Hard This Fast Before"
- SOPHIE, "Faceshopping"

Related materials for future study:

- Dave Tompkins, *How to Wreck a Nice Beach: The Vocoder from World War II to Hip Hop, The Machine Speaks*
- Stephan Pennington, "Transgender Passing Guides and the Vocal Performance of Gender and Sexuality"
- Lucie Vágnerová, "'Nimble Fingers' in Electronic Music: Rethinking sound through neo-colonial labour"

February 8 cyborgs & synthesizers

Reading:

- Roshanak Khesti, "Original Synth" and "Switching On," *Switched-on-Bach*
- Marquita R. Smith, "Visions of Wondaland: On Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturistic Vision" in *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions*

Listening:

- Wendy Carlos, "Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major," *Switched on Bach*
- Janelle Monáe, "Wondaland," "Q.U.E.E.N.," and "Make Me Feel"

Engage:

- King Britt, "[Blacktronika](#): Afrofuturism in Electronic Music"

Related materials for future study:

- Daniele Schlomit Sofer, "It's Code," in *Sex Sounds*
- Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]*
- Robin James, "Sonic Cyberfeminisms, Perceptual Coding and Phonographic Compression"

Module II: Aurality

February 15 queer pessimism, queer hope with guest lecturer Richard Tucker

Reading:

- Maria Murphy, "Electro-Pop as Trojan Horse: Hearing the Call to Arms in Anohni's *HOPELESSNESS*" in *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions*
- Craig Jennex, "'A Fag Like Me': Sikh Knowledge, Xenophobia, and the Promise of Audiotopia" in *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions*

Listening:

- Anohni, "Four Degrees" & "Watch Me"
- Sikh Knowledge, "[More than Aware](#)" (not on YouTube playlist; listen on bandcamp)

Related materials for future study:

- Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*
- David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*
- Sara Ferris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*

February 22 queer kinship with guest Nat DiFrank, project manager, TOHP

Reading:

- Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship"
- Meredith Evans, "[Refusal and Resurgence: A Review of *Wolostogiyik Lintuwakonawa*](#)"

Listening:

- Beverly Glenn-Copeland, "Colour of Anyhow," "La Vita," & "Ever New"
- Jeremy Dutcher, "Mehcinut" and "Essuwonike," *Wolostogiyik Lintuwakonawa*

Related materials for future study:

- Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*
- Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*
- Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*

March 1 girl groups, boy bands, and that sweet, sweet, sugary pop with guest FQT/GSWS artist-in-residence Ricardo A. Bracho

Reading:

- Gayle Wald, "'I Want It That Way': Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands"

- Laurie Stras, "'Brave New Ideas Begin:' Disability, Gender, and Life Writing in Twenty-First-Century Pop"

Listening:

- The Shirelles, "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?"
- Backstreet Boys, "I Want It That Way"
- Mitski, "Working for the Knife"
- *Switched-On Pop* podcast, "[Listening 2 Britney:...Baby One More Time](#)"
- Madonna, TBD

Related materials for future study:

- Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*

March 8 NO CLASS - Spring Break

Module III: Orality

March 15 archives & cover songs

Reading:

- Elspeth H. Brown and Myrl Beam, "Toward an Ethos of Trans Care in Trans Oral History"

Listening:

- Lucas Silveira, "Crying" & "Crying"
- Brunswick 4, "I Enjoy Being a Dyke"

Related materials for future study:

- Dana Baitz, "Toward a Trans* Method in Musicology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*
- Beans Velocci, "Standards of Care: Uncertainty and Risk in Harry Benjamin's Transsexual Classifications," *Transgender Studies Quarterly*
- Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

March 22 oral history training part one (mandatory)

March 29 oral history training part two (mandatory)

April 5 oral history training part three (mandatory)
Creative Assignment Due by midnight

Module IV: Theatricality

April 19 at the nightclub & tape workshop with guest Jezenia Romero

Reading:

- Alexander Weheliye, “Assemblages: Articulation” & “Racism: Biopolitics,” in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*

Listening:

- Dj Rekha, “Basement Bhangra Anthem”
- BEARCAT, “[CDMX Tapes X NTS Radio](#)” (not on YouTube playlist; listen on bandcamp)

Related materials for future study:

- Mehka Malhotra, “Last Night a DJ Queered my Life: Disrupting the Mythologies of a Popular Media Practice”

April 26 debrief