

A photograph of a cobblestone path leading towards the ocean. The path is made of smooth, rounded stones in various shades of brown, tan, and grey, set in a dark, pebbly matrix. The path recedes into the distance, where it meets a calm, greyish-brown sea under an overcast sky. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

# Gender and Sexualities: An Inquiry

UNST 231

Jason G. Damron  
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# **Gender and Sexualities: An Inquiry**

By

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## **Introduction—*Gender and Sexualities: An Inquiry***

We created *Gender and Sexualities: An Inquiry* to accompany UNST 231 Sophomore Inquiry: Gender and Sexualities course at Portland State University. This project is funded through the Provost's Challenge ReTHINK Portland State University Initiative. As writers, editors, learners and teachers, we are committed to facilitating student access to low-cost, shareable academic work. We created a document that can be appreciated by all students who desire an intellectual inquiry into gender and sexuality studies.

Sophomore Inquiry courses at Portland State University encourage students to build communication skills, refine individual and group presentational methods, and hone writing and research techniques. Sophomore Inquiry course also present an opportunity to explore academic topics different from, yet complementary to, a major course of study. The readings and topics herein sample the broad, interdisciplinary field of gender and sexuality studies. This field should not be considered a monolithic or even strictly disciplinary one. We endeavor to contextualize but not isolate these studies into a single disciplinary frame. In selecting these readings and by providing introductory reader notes, key terms, and key questions to consider, we emphasize the diversity of human experience, offer models of critical thinking, and provide a template to consider the various issues of ethical and social responsibility within the field of gender and sexuality studies.

*Gender and Sexualities: An Inquiry* provides an interdisciplinary and intersectional framework for thinking critically about the historical and contemporary applications of knowledge about gender and sexuality. This may be straightforward in some arenas, but we will find navigating gender and sexuality terminologies (e.g., sexual orientation, what constitutes “sex” in particular places and times, sexual identity, gender and gender identity, among many other discussions) to be a rigorous historical, personal, political, philosophical, and anthropological study (to name just a few of the intellectual traditions we encounter). Throughout we encourage readers to interrogate social ideals and other narratives that aim to “naturalize” gender and sexuality. IN other words, we will address gender and sexual identities and practices and meaning as historical, cultural, and political phenomena. We will question whether contemporary categories infer that bodily practices, pleasures, and knowledge are permanently tethered to universal, trans-historical ideals and thought. We will investigate the intersectional contexts where sexualities and genders take shape and provide. Finally, throughout readers and students should begin to understand the rich and deep efforts of gender and sexuality based social movements and thought and appreciate the ethical significances of various claims about gender and sexuality.

Chapter 1 explores the foundational feminist concept, the “personal is political” and the way this idea shaped and continues to shape our theoretical understanding of lives affected by public, political, structured realities. This Chapter also explores the ways we allow ourselves to communicate this knowledge.

Chapter 2 further interrogates disciplinary and scientific knowledge about the body and its processes. The readings offer a way to both embrace scientific epistemologies while encouraging us to remain vigilant in illuminating the social and cultural assumptions that also construct this knowledge. So, when making intellectual inquiry into gender and sexuality we must

simultaneously ask how this knowledge might already be embedded with sexist, homophobic, and heteronormative narratives.

Chapter 3 explores a deeply influential theme in gender and sexuality studies: an inquiry into “historical sexuality.” Drawing upon Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* and the reading, “Why is the History of Heterosexuality Essential? Beliefs About The History of Sexuality and Their Relationship to Sexual Prejudice” the audio file introduces both works, introduces key questions about the relationship between historiography and theorizing a historicized sexuality, and then makes inquiry into key questions governing contemporary research in gender and sexuality. This Chapter then presents, “Early America,” a review by Thomas Foster.

Chapter 4 offers a video panel discussion on the question: How can we theorize, articulate, and produce understanding on the social and cultural specificity of gender and sexuality, while simultaneously offering useful and meaningful interruptions to oppressive social practices? This discussion takes place on the Portland State University campus and includes faculty in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program.

Chapter 5 examines the sociological phenomenon and social codes of children “on the playground.” We ask our readers to consider the way children both are constructed by and participate in the social construction of gender and, thus, future sexualities. The readings envision children’s “daily worlds” as saturated with negotiations of gender and gendered meanings. Finally, this Chapter presents a reading from the other end of life. In “Reading the ‘Sexy Oldie’: Gender, Age(ing) and Embodiment,” the author asks us to think about how we perceive both negative and positive outlooks on ageing, desire, and bodily pleasure.

Chapter 6 surveys the contemporary discussion and debate on marriage in Western societies. This Chapter introduces a practice assignment. This practice assignment asks readers to engage Web-based resources and forums in comparison to scholarly work on the changing institution and practices of marriage arrangements. We then encourage our readers to consider the ways these resources do, or do not, account for what Stephanie Coontz named the “World Historical Transformation of Marriage.” In offering this, we hope our readers will compare and contrast scholastic and historical knowledge on marriage with public discussion and governmental and juridical treatises on marriage. We, specifically, seek to help elucidate the way juridical discourses (court filings and briefs, lawyer statements, judges’ pronouncements, and political activism) both rely on *and* reject historical scholarship on marriage.

Chapter 7 introduces queer theory with an audio introduction. We introduce “queer” neither as an umbrella term for various gender and sexual identities, nor as a contemporary political identity but, instead, as a method. *The* audio lecture and introduction “Asking Queer Questions” begins to assess and seeks to understand how abiding beliefs in the normalcy and universality of heterosexuality (as heteronormativity) remains unquestioned and unexamined in most social institutions and even in contemporary social science scholarship. We encourage our reader to practice queering by engaging with the methods offered by Andrea Daley and Nick J. Mule in “LGBTQs and the DSM-5: A Critical Queer Response.”

Chapter 8 concludes *Gender and Sexuality: An Inquiry* with the pertinent question: How can I contemplate social justice and *do* sexuality and gender research? In this video panel discussion we contemplate the ramifications of this vital question and the future of gender and sexuality research. We hope this offers students and readers robust and considered ethical approaches for inquiry into gender and sexuality studies. Our panel discussion draws on two included articles, each offering vital considerations on ethics and social justice in gender and sexuality research, study, and writing.

-Jason G. Damron and Vicki Reitenauer, Editors

## Introduction—Chapter 1: The Personal Is...?

This chapter takes its title from a foundational concept from the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, “the personal is political.” While the phrase is typically credited to Carol Hanisch, who wrote an essay in 1969 that was re-issued in 1970 under the title “The Personal Is Political,” no single writer has laid claim to having coined the term. “Instead,” Kerry Burch writes, “they [individual feminist writers] cite millions of women in public and private conversations as the phrase’s collective authors.”<sup>1</sup>

The essays included here explore and tease out this theoretical breakthrough in exposing the connection of private experiences to the public, political, structured realities that create the conditions under which individual lives are lived. Both in writing that might be termed “memoir” and in a scholarly essay, the authors reveal elements of their own social locations (the social position occupied by a person based on their membership in various identity groups) and the lived experiences which both arise from and shed light on the identities and identifications that inform their social locations.

In this way, the pieces included here evidence what Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 called *intersectionality*, a theory that holds that various forms of oppression, domination, and discrimination exist always and only in relation to each other. These authors articulate how they negotiate multiple identities and identifications within and against the intersectional systems of domination that characterize our social and political world in fundamentally complex ways.

Key words and phrases: *the personal is political, social location, identity, identification, oppression, domination, discrimination, intersectionality*

Key questions:

- In what ways do these authors exemplify “the personal is political”? How do their essays offer examples of what this concept looks like, when viewed through the lenses of people’s lives?
- How do the authors illustrate “intersectionality” in their essays? In what ways do these pieces speak to the complex ways that systems of oppression play themselves out in people’s lives? Which systems of oppression do you see at work in these pieces, and how?
- How do you understand the difference between the terms “identity” and “identification,” as discussed by Deborah Thompson? How do you name your own identities and identifications? What meaning does that naming have for you?
- If you were to write an essay like Diana Courvant’s or Vicki Reitenauer’s, what would you write about? What lived experiences resonate deeply for you, and how do those experiences connect to your multiple identities and/or identifications?

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<sup>1</sup> Burch, Kerry T (2012). *Democratic transformations: Eight conflicts in the negotiation of American identity*. London: Continuum. p. 139

## Audio file for Chapter 1: The Personal Is...?

I can still clearly remember the conditions under which I wrote “Home Movies.” I was living in a cheap winter beach rental on an island off the coast of New Jersey, writing and revising a book of poems and regularly reading *Poets and Writers* magazine for both its articles on craft and its information on publishing opportunities.

It was in the magazine’s classified section that I saw the call for submissions to an anthology focusing on lesbian writers’ takes on the theme of “home.” The anthology, to be published by Cleis Press, was entitled *Chasing the American Dyke’s Dream: Homestretch*, and its editor, Susan Fox Rogers, was looking for creative nonfiction essays to include in the book.

Thinking back on it now, I believe that I was gripped right away by a desire to submit some work to this project—although I didn’t resonate then, and don’t now, to either the “american” or the “dyke” parts of the anthology’s title. But I did happen to be a female-bodied person who had loved other female-bodied persons—making me a dyke for all intents and purposes, I suppose—and I was in the midst of grappling with what “home” could and did mean to me. As much as I loved living there, Long Beach Island wasn’t *really* my home... unless I decided to define that term anew, in ways that might make sense for the shape and the stuff of my life.

“Home Movies” had not yet been written when I first saw the notice in *Poets and Writers*, which meant that, if I was going to submit something to the anthology, I’d have to write it first. The piece got itself born in a variety of places and ways: in my daily walks on the beach, when I would think about the piece until not-thinking took over and ultimately delivered some number of words that I would hurriedly write down when I got back to my rental. In stolen moments in my childhood bedroom when I visited my father as he recovered from cancer surgery and treatment. In longer break-away stints at the public library in the dying city in which I was born.

At some point, freewriting allowed me to discover the structure for the piece, with its short sections headed with the titles of imaginary “home movies” from my lived experiences. That was big—the inventing of a form to inform the content of the essay, and vice versa.

That’s much like identity and identification, I think now: the always-changing interplay of our selves in bodies interacting in the social and political world, perceiving and thinking about and seeking to understand ourselves in certain ways and being perceived and thought about and understood—or not—by others. If anything, I hope that the piece says something about the shifting sands of this individual and collectivized understanding of “self,” and the way that so-called “personal” writing can allow us a moment of invention so that we may release that self into the world and get busy with the task of inventing new ones.

By the way, Long Beach Island was devastated by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. I find it poignant and powerful, miraculous and sad, that this place where I once birthed a form of myself can no longer be visited, in the way it once was, by me. And absolutely fitting, too.

## Introduction—Chapter 2: Constructed Knowledge

Higher education approaches to sexuality, gender, and sex education courses and curriculum can be understood as existing in distinct realms. First, “sex education” as constituted in biology, physiology and anatomy, and health sciences (often referred to colloquially as “sex education in the hard sciences” or “health studies”) emphasizes sexuality across the life-cycle, bodily functions and parts, and what is generally coined as “sexual risk factors.” So-called risk factors are likely to include: sexually transmitted disease, unwanted or unplanned pregnancy, and relationship education (often named “healthy relationships” within sex education rubrics). Throughout this textbook, our readings concern the second distinct realm of sex education: gender and sexuality understood and determined through social and cultural factors, and *as* determinants of prevailing modes of social, sexual life. Our approach critically examines gender and sexual relations, the political, economic, and social factors that may frame the primary formulations and assumed truths *already embedded* within first realm of sex education, but taken as scientific truth. Too often, we argue, prevailing assumptions about gender and sexuality are assumed to form an eternal, value neutral ground from which to build a model of “healthy” sex, desire, and sexuality in our time.

We must begin to ascertain how knowledge generated within the sciences and administered in sex education (concerned with secondary, higher, and public education in this Chapter) imports then relies on meaning from other social fields of experience. Primary education, church, family, and clinical-medical settings each assert province over sex education prior to higher education. Despite this sustained attention, sex education is *not* generally standardized across comparable overlap coordinates within a school, district, or state (not to mention a nation). For example, a school board may not be compelled to employ a standardized curriculum even across a single district. The struggle for comprehensive, or restricted, or religious, or any other type of sex education program must be appreciated as a political and social cauldron worthy of sustained academic attention.

What most sex education models do share in common, however, is the assumption that science-based considerations of sexual reproduction may offer some final arbitration of truth. Or, at least, a solid, lasting foundation of “sex.” Indeed, inclusion of accepted scientific knowledge should be one of the primary educational aims across governmental, non-governmental, religious, and civic organizations concerned with gender and sexuality. But, critically for our readers, it must also be appreciated that science and the modes of presenting scientific knowledge do not exist in a social vacuum. In this Chapter, Emily Martin’s seminal article “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles” encourages our readers to engage in critical dialogue with scientific knowledge and with the overlapping stereotypes and assumptions that too often direct gender and sexuality research and reporting. Addressing this intellectual dilemma engages us in unexpected and counterintuitive lines of questioning about gender, sex, and reproduction. Martin asks us to be aware of the ways accepted social norms and traditions also work to set the stage for scientific inquiry about the

body and its processes. We often and unquestionably accept knowledge associated with effects that are “on or in the body.” Author Emily Martin, through feminist science criticism, encourages us to see the narration of “human reproduction” also as a narrative interlaced with gendered, romantic assumptions and biases.

**Key words and phrases:** *feminist science studies, scientific knowledge, critical thinking, anthropology, gendered assumptions, gender roles, stereotypical romance, scientific fairy tales, reproduction, scientific narratives, public science, sex education.*

**Key questions:**

- How do scientific narratives draw from wider social narratives to make meaning?
- How do scientific narratives of reproduction draw from narratives of gendered romance? Why do scientific narratives rely on these narratives, even when they may contradict research models and findings?
- Is it possible for natural and social scientific inquiry (and under what conditions) to construct value-free research in gender and sexuality?
- How can researchers ascertain, and/or limit, biases when undertaking an inquiry into gender and sexuality studies?

### **Chapter 3—Introduction: A History of Sexuality?**

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Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality, Volume 1, An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1990.

Freedman, Estelle B. and John D'Emilio. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998.

**Key Words and Phrases:** *sexual histories, prejudice and social justice, quantitative surveys and sexual studies, incommensurability, early America, social construction theories, essentialist thinking, historiography, production of subjectivity, Atlantic world, everyday lives, popular narratives of sexuality.*

## **Introduction—Chapter 4: Gender, Sex and Culture**

Video panel discussion

This chapter offers a video panel discussion on the question: How can we theorize, articulate, and produce understanding on the social and cultural specificity of gender and sexuality, while simultaneously offering useful and meaningful interruptions to oppressive social practices?

## Introduction—Chapter 5: Coming of Age

What are the first words that get spoken when a baby is born? Easy question, right? *It's a boy!* or *It's a girl!* And so, in these first moments of a new human being's entrance into the world, the gender binary is evoked, prescribed, and reified. From the perspective of the one doing this naming, there are two possibilities, and two possibilities only: male body = boy baby, and female body = girl. The child's socialization around gender, the sexed body, and sexuality has begun—and our collectively limited ways of perceiving and understanding gender are reinforced.

*Socialization* rests on a highly complex and deeply subtle system of categorization of human possibility tied to an interrelated set of factors:

- the perception of the biological sex of any given person, which itself conforms to subjective determinations that may well belie the “real” biological configuration of any particular body;
- the expectation that a person's gender identification, roles, and ongoing performance will conform to that perception of the sexed body (as in “male body = boy/man” and “female body = girl/woman”);
- the requirement that a person's expression of sexuality—if not their experiences of desire, even more fundamentally—support a heteronormative vision for human relating; that is, the view that
  - male body = boy/man = sexually desirous of and engaged with female-bodied girl/woman; or
  - female body = girl/woman = sexually desirous of and engaged with male-bodied boy/man

Whew. That's a lot of weight for a newborn baby to carry. And from that first moment of a baby's birth—and even, actually, before a baby is born, given the commonplace practice of learning the baby's “sex” before its birth—the ways that that baby is interacted with, talked to, held, and related to in every way depends upon that pronouncement of sex/gender. Every institution with which the child interacts reinforces this socialization around gender and sexuality: the medical system, the family, church, the legal system, school... In fact, it is the fundamental task of institutions to organize and regulate human experience—and the gendering of reality that is undertaken and continuously reinforced by the institutions which frame our lives is one of the key ways that human experience is organized and reinforced.

As Thorne and Luria explore in their article in this chapter, play is a deeply important mechanism through which children become socialized around gender and sexuality. In the key questions that end this introduction, you will be asked to consider the ways that one of your childhood games contributed to your socialization around gender and sexuality, in order to shine light both on your lived experiences and on the larger societal-level forces that shape our understanding of our lives.

As with other mechanisms for socialization, there is always also the possibility of creating sites of resistance to the dominant heteronormative script, and play, as a dynamic grounded in creativity and invention, may well serve as a place of possibility for our subverting the dominant messaging we receive as gendered and sexed beings. Perhaps your exploration of a childhood

game will expose the ways you both were socialized to and resisted socialization to gender-normativity and heteronormativity. Perhaps this exploration will shed light on how you may make intentional choices now, with the new understanding you continue to develop about the forces of socialization we all exist under, to perform gender, the sexed body, and sexuality in your daily life.

Key words and phrases: *biological sex, embodiment, gender binary, gender identity/identification, gender normativity gender performance, gender role, heteronormative/heteronormativity, institution, sexed body, sexual scripts, socialization*

Key questions: First, create a sketch or a map of a remembered childhood game that you played. Then use your map to answer the following questions, based on the article by Thorne and Luria:

- “The core of sexuality is desire and arousal. Desire and arousal are shaped by and associated with socially learned activities and meanings...[called] ‘sexual scripts.’ Sexual scripts—defining who does what, with whom, when, how, and what it means—are related to the adult society’s view of gender” (Thorne & Luria, 127). What are the sexual scripts in your game?
- Is gender segregated in your play? Are sexed bodies organized by/in your play? How is gender understood? How might segregation be evidence of heteronormativity? (Think about how the construction of heterosexuality counterintuitively relies upon gender-segregated behavior.)
- “...[C]hildren so often separate themselves by perceived genders—ritualizing boundaries between girls and boys, and talking about them as separate ‘teams’ or ‘sides’...” (Thorne & Luria, 129). What are the ritualized boundaries and rules in your sketch/map? What, if any, are the violations of these boundaries/rules? What were/are these boundaries/rules violated/sustained in your game?

## **Introduction—Chapter 6: Love and Marriage**

Bodies, genders, sexualities, marriages, property, and dowries: these are just a few of the considerations scholar Stephanie Coontz encounters in a study of “marriage.” She makes an inquiry at the roots of marriage: What is “traditional” about traditional marriage? Her findings and answers may be the most counterintuitive in the entirety of this textbook.

In contemporary, Western, neoliberal life, marriage is argued as—just for some, or just for monogamous couples, or just for all people of a certain age, or just for “straight and gay” couples, or just for straight and gay couples with children, or just for those of the same religious beliefs, or just for best friends, or just for the time being, or just for ... forever. As Coontz notes, this debate is just a part of the wider, worldwide historical transformation of marriage. In this cacophonous social debate, Coontz asks us to take a step back—in fact 5,000 years back, to ask: What is *actually* traditional about our ideal of traditional marriage? And: What are the “traditions” that are assumed to be traditional in contemporary time, in the first place? Her findings lead us to another, vital question: How is marriage *and* love socially constructed?

**Key words and phrases:** *overdetermined phenomenon, rights of adulthood, divorce and marriage rates, same-sex marriage, individual autonomy, love match, nonmarriage, world-historical transformation of marriage.*

After reading the article and defining key words and phrases, proceed to the practice assignment.

### **Practice Assignment**

We ask our readers to compare Coontz’s article, “World Historical Transformation of Marriage” with Web-based content on the “marriage debate.”

- Use the following key words and phrases to aid in your Web search: *traditional marriage, defend marriage, sex and marriage, friendship and marriage, relationships and marriage, freedom and marriage, monogamy and marriage, satisfaction and marriage, history and marriage, civil marriage, polygamy and monogamy, natural marriage, arranged marriage.*
- Use the following additional Web sources to aid your research:
- You will be comparing and contrasting Coontz’s assertion that most contemporary commentary on “marriage” relies on notions of a “tradition” without specifying the tradition in question. Note the various traditions Coontz considers in relation to marriage. List these traditions.
- Next compare your listed “traditions” with Web sources that justify their arguments by employing narratives of “traditional” marriage.

- Now, compare your research to Coontz's criticism: marriage is fundamentally changed or altered from previous historical eras, and this knowledge must be considered when assessing contemporary challenges to marriage arrangements.
- Then, assess how "fundamentally changed" (979) epistemologies of "traditional marriage" may illuminate your comparisons. In other words, if marriage has already undergone a fundamental, radical change to emerge in its contemporary form, what other reasons may activists argue that "traditions" need defending, or preserving? Specify the "traditions" invoked or inferred in each of your comparisons.
- Finally, how does the contemporary emphasis on "love matches" relate to disputes about same-sex marriage, non-monogamy, child-rearing, family law and family social policy, and polygamy?

## Chapter 7—Introduction to Queer Theory (Audio)

### References

Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality, Volume 1, An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1990.

Sedgwick E. K. *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Ward, Jane. *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008.

**Key words and phrases:** *queer theory, heteronormativity, social construction, nominative and descriptive, queering, homosociality, queer affect, activist politics, coalitional and identitarian political formations, conventions of normal, LGBTQ, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders -5 (DSM-5).*

## **Introduction—Chapter 8: Gender and Sexuality Research**

Video panel discussion

This chapter concludes *Gender and Sexuality: An Inquiry* with the pertinent question: How can I contemplate social justice and *do* sexuality and gender research? In this video panel discussion we contemplate the ramifications of this vital question and the future of gender and sexuality research.