

Deviant Bodies Seminar: Final Assessment

Participants:

Nadine Knight, English
Cynthia Croot, Theater
Susanne Beechey, Politics
Jacqueline Woodfork, History
Brooke Vick, Psychology
Kendra Golden, Biology

Overview:

Our seminar, "Deviant Bodies," examined the way that female bodies are subject to observation, exploitation, dissection, and profit, often under the rubric of furthering scientific knowledge. We discussed the ways in which these bodies are seen as deviant: foremost racially, sexually, and/or medically, and especially when the bodies belong to black women. Beginning with a discussion of the historical and artistic depictions of Sara Baartman, the nineteenth-century "Hottentot Venus," then discussing the use of the HeLa cells in cancer, HPV, and other genetic research, continuing on to the works by social and evolutionary psychologists who have compared race and weight bias, and ending with the recent Oscar-winning film, *Precious* (2009), our seminar was truly interdisciplinary in its texts and our discussions. (The final syllabus is included at the end of this assessment). Everyone felt that the seminar was extremely successful, and each day we all shared insights particular to our own fields and then forged new connections to other fields. There was a real sense of excitement and pleasure, even when discussing painful topics such as the half century of injustice experienced by the Lacks family, as we all saw how our fields could overlap. We all became learners again, and all of us found something from another discipline that would bolster the material we use in our own courses: a psychology paper on bias against "non-normative" bodies will greatly enhance a literary discussion of *Venus*, or *Geek Love*; thinking about how theater directors organize bodies and space will shed light on new metaphors to use in teaching biology. I think Kendra Golden put it best when she wrote that participating in this seminar "made [her] feel more connected to a liberal arts education"; indeed, it was a wonderful reminder of what the true strengths of a liberal arts campus, and a small, close-knit faculty, can offer in terms of scholarly inspiration.

Meeting structure and organizational notes:

Our seminar decided to go for the "crash course" approach, meeting for 3-hour blocks for one week during exam period, rather than weekly during the course of an entire semester. While this made the reading load fairly high, I think that I would prefer this method again, as it made seeing the connections between various works much clearer, and gave me, personally, the sense that this was a continuing conversation. The momentum was easier to keep up, some members felt, than if this had dragged out over 15 weeks. Some members of the colloquium felt otherwise, however, and we think that it really depends on personal preference. It is thus important for the seminar leader and the other participants to all be in agreement for the meeting method that best suits the seminar's needs and composition.

Our seminar brought in a Visiting Educator, Sharrona Pearl, an historian of science who suggested some readings for us, worked with one of Cynthia Croot's Theater classes, and gave a

public talk. Given that our seminar did not meet until after classes, the timing of Dr. Pearl's visit was difficult in terms of how well it could feed into our ongoing discussion; this is where meeting weekly throughout the semester would perhaps be advantageous. That said, we all benefitted from her contributions, and we would encourage other seminars to also consider including Visiting Educators as part of their intellectual exchange.

Finally, as Kendra Golden comments in her review of our seminar, we hope that Division III continues to grow in its participation in these seminars, as there are perhaps some of the greatest leaps—but also greatest rewards—in bridging those interdisciplinary gaps. We also found our method of syllabus construction, in which each member suggested texts and was more or less responsible for leading discussion in their field of expertise for a session, a good method to use. Each of us ended up reading wholly unfamiliar texts, but having a "go to" person who was already familiar with the work, and had often already taught/researched it, was a great way to keep the pedagogical uses in mind when organizing our discussions. It also gave some sense of structure to each day's discussion, as the person in each field would generally begin with some background, observations, and questions.

--Nadine Knight

Participants' reflections:

When Nadine and I first started talking about a seminar regarding "Deviant Bodies" the play *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks came immediately to mind. Having worked on the play in the US and South Africa, I was interested in how the text dealt with a woman's body (Sara Baartman) as a site for colonial oppression, and how the marginalization of her medically, ethnically, sexually and culturally served to perpetuate the cause of colonialism in Africa. I knew that working with this text in an interdisciplinary setting would show me a number of connections I hadn't made before, but the seminar exceeded my expectations.

Our workshop expanded my knowledge of sociological, historical, psychological, and scientific thought on Deviant Bodies (from the life of Henrietta Lacks, to the work of Franz Fanon, to the film "Precious" to contemporary Fat Theory), and was a rich space to discuss, differ, and compare our intersections. It would take me pages to enumerate my academic and pedagogical epiphanies, but three specific threads running through our conversations - Stigma, Objectification, and Agency - stood out to me. In working with young actors and directors struggling to articulate themselves, these issues are often dealt with *inside* dramatic works, but rarely tackled among the participants and practitioners. I was inspired by the possibilities.

In terms of future coursework, I see these concerns influencing everything from how plays are selected for a given season, to how "normal" is defined off stage and on. Our conversations bolstered my sense that the political and the artistic are indivisible, and helped me envision team-taught courses with partners in the Humanities and Sciences to further investigate the humanist concerns in our disciplines, where they overlap, and where they diverge. Some topics might include: Normative Pressures in Performing Arts; Self-objectification and the Search for Authenticity; Voyeurism and the Nature of Audience; Justice, Voice, and the Ethics of Telling Another Person's Story; and the Commodification and Creation of Desire.

--Cynthia Croot, Theater

I found our seminar highly successful in encouraging creative cross disciplinary inquiry. Our seminar was greatly enriched by the disciplinary perspectives each participant brought to discussion and I was impressed with how much these insights added to our readings.

Participating in this workshop has helped me begin to rethink some of the disciplinary assumptions I have brought to my teaching. For example, I have generally been reluctant to use short video clips in my classes, but I found the supplemental clips that my colleagues brought to our discussions were some of the most valuable contributions. I learned a lot from the types of sources my colleagues in the humanities used and the ways in which they brought those clips into the discussion. Next spring I hope to try this mixing of short videos into my course of Deservingness in Social Policy as another tool for motivating critical inquiry. Similarly reading from a variety of disciplinary perspectives helped me to question whether some of my assumptions about good writing and argumentation are in fact disciplinary. I hope these insights will help me to better articulate my own disciplinary assumptions about good writing and argumentation to my students even as I reconsider some of those assumptions.

In general participating in these cross disciplinary conversations has helped me to see some of the rich potential of team teaching a course with someone who has a very different entry point for the material. While I do not see a specific new course emerging from this workshop it has provided a useful foundation for considering potential future collaborations.

--Susanne Beechey, Politics

The interdisciplinary work, *Deviant Bodies*, was tough and incredibly rewarding because of the challenging reading list that we tackled and the often-intense three-hour long discussions that our sources and perspectives on them generated. We explored our topic through the perspectives of all three divisions. It helped me to think about creating questions from a variety of perspectives that are not historical or theoretical, but questions that people in other disciplines would ask of historical texts.

I will take what I learned in this week and apply it to my work with students especially in interdisciplinary programs. As an historian, I found the discussions of what we all found to be credible evidence and what the authors did to make their arguments work (or not) fascinating. I greatly enjoyed the opportunity to read works from a variety of disciplines with experts and other interdisciplinary tourists. The seminar also reminded me that I love being an historian.

--Jacqueline Woodfork, History

Although I was certainly looking forward to spending time with my colleagues and discussing a topic, deviant female bodies, that has had my scholarly attention for some time now, I had not anticipated just how engaging, thought-provoking, and generative this week of meetings would become. In my mind, our seminar was a great success in that it opened my eyes to a broad, interdisciplinary range of material and ideas that are directly relevant to my pedagogy and scholarship, and it encouraged me to exercise several academic skills that I had not since I was an undergraduate at a liberal arts college. Thanks to Nadine, Cindy, Kendra, Susanne, and Jackie, I found myself analyzing language and symbol in artistic work, thinking critically about the method, findings, motivation, and authors of scientific work, and craving historical and cultural reference to better understand the ideas borne of each scholar we reviewed. And while

we focused on specific works on specific days, one of the great strengths of our group was the attention given to recognizing the unique perspectives of each discipline relevant to each work; we took note when cross-disciplinary perspectives aligned, and when and why they did not. The meta-awareness of the cross-disciplinary work we were doing led me to appreciate diverse perspectives, and see the limits of knowledge that are created when different disciplines do not communicate with one another.

Throughout the week, I repeatedly noted when a topic, author, or manuscript was relevant to courses I teach and/or research I conduct or sponsor with Whitman students. Given the frequency with which I was taking these kinds of notes, it is easy to imagine incorporating pieces from our seminar (some that we collectively read, others that were mentioned by participants throughout) into my seminar on social stigma and potentially my lab course on intergroup relations. I see great potential in asking students in my psychology courses, for instance, to engage in close reading of relevant, cross-disciplinary work, be that an historic speech, a play, or a novel, from a psychological perspective. This kind of work would not only enrich the content of my courses, but would also encourage the students to continue strengthening the critical and analytical skills they are building throughout the liberal arts curriculum. And although there aren't current plans to develop a new cross-disciplinary course, I would welcome the opportunity to co-teach with any of my colleagues that participated in this seminar at some point in the future. I gained so much from this seminar; I am grateful to have had the opportunity to become a student again, if only for a short time.

--Brooke Vick, Psychology

The "Deviant Bodies" workshop was a wonderful opportunity to engage in conversation with five other women with academic interests very different from my own, yet with some common interest in the theme "Deviant Bodies." From my personal perspective as a member of the Biology department, I found it most fascinating to discuss the medicalization of the human body, and the concept of human beings (alive or dead) as *specimens* to be probed, sampled and examined. Issues of consent, scientific gain, and privacy were ethical dilemmas for consideration. For me, this thread was woven throughout the workshop. It was an obvious component of the book I suggested for the seminar, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, but this theme resounded with several of the readings. Since I teach a course in nutrition, I am also interested in issues of body image and eating disorders. At one point we discussed the medicalization of eating disorders and their diagnosis as compared and contrasted with the sociological and psychological components of those disorders and the resulting implications in terms of treatment strategies.

I was much less familiar (as in not at all) with the literature that emphasized deviant bodies as being fodder for display (interestingly, the term *specimen* also works here – something to be gawked at, leered at, poked, fondled, ridiculed, etc.), but this is the area where I learned the most. Deviant bodies are subject to display and/or voyeurism, but they can also make political statements and reflect socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and historical context. They can be viewed as deserved consequences for particular actions or even as pathologies to be avoided lest one catch the deviant trait. Significant portions of the workshop were devoted to discussions of black, female and fat as a deviant body type. Amazingly, that prototype worked its way into almost every (if not every single) discussion we had, which opened my eyes in a big way. It was very interesting to have theatrical, literary, historical, and psychological perspectives represented

in the discussions, particularly concerning representations of deviant bodies. Often, while the other workshop participants, who were way more well-versed in such topics than I, were discussing a particular reading, I found myself internally thinking, "Oh my gosh, I had no idea." In all, I very much enjoyed being part of the workshop on "Deviant Bodies." I feel much more prepared to broach topics of bodies as *specimens* when I tell my Cell Biology class about Henrietta Lacks, and better prepared to talk about eating disorders more holistically in my Nutrition class. Mostly, I found it enlightening and invigorating to sit and talk with five exceedingly intelligent women who were clearly experts in their fields and passionate about the topic. As an aside, two things: 1) more people from Division III should take part in exercises like this – it made me feel more connected to a liberal arts education; 2) it makes me really sad that two of these women are leaving the College.

If there was a down side to the workshop, I would say timing was difficult. The workshop occurred at an extremely busy time of year, and there was not as much time to read and digest the materials as I would have liked (this could very well in part be due to me being really unfamiliar with the types of reading that were given – I found them very interesting but slow-going for someone used to reading science journal articles). Note that I, along with others, voted for this particular time frame (not realizing the time investment necessary for me to fully digest the material. Of course hind sight is 20/20, and if I were to do this again, I would vote for a workshop that took place over the course of a semester. Still, a great experience.
--Kendra Golden, Biology

Final syllabus:

Deviant Bodies syllabus 3.0
All meetings 9-12, Maxey 308

Thurs 5/12: Venus

--Quereshi, S. "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus.'" *History of Science* 42 (136):233-257

--Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Venus*

Fri, 5/13: Policing the Body

--Shaw, Andrea Elizabeth. *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*

--from Bordo, Susan, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*:

"Reading the Slender Body" (pp185-215)

"Whose Body is this? Feminism, Medicine, and the Conceptualization of Eating Disorders" (pp45-71)

Mon, 5/16: Medical Control

--Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Tues, 5/17: Psychology and Deviant Bodies (All articles available via .pdf)

Crandall, Christian S. "Prejudice against fat people: Ideology and self-interest." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol.66(5), May 1994, pp. 882-894.

Park, Justin H; Schaller, Mark; Crandall, Christian S. "Pathogen-avoidance mechanisms and the

stigmatization of obese people." *Evolution and Human Behavior*. Vol.28(6), Nov 2007, pp. 410-414.

Goldenberg, Jamie L; Roberts, Tomi-Ann. "The Birthmark: An existential account of the objectification of women." Calogero, Rachel M [Ed]; Tantleff-Dunn, Stacey [Ed]; Thompson, J. Kevin [Ed]. (2011). *Self-objectification in women: Causes, consequences, and counteractions*. (pp. 77-99). xii, 254 pp. Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association; US.

Quinn, Diane M.; Chaudoir, Stephenie R.; Kallen, Rachel W. "Performance and flow: A review and integration of self-objectification research." *Ibid* (pp. 119-138)
Bergman, S. Bear. "Part-Time Fatso." Rothblum, Esther [Ed]; Solovay, Sondra [Ed]. (2009). *The Fat Studies Reader*. (pp. 139-142). New York, NY, US: New York University Press.

Weds, 5/18: Aesthetics of Display

Dunn, Katherine. *Geek Love*

Film viewing: *Precious* (LionsGate 2009)