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Teaching Global Intimacies

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Abstract: Howard Chiang traces the evolution of a course on global sexuality, intimacy, and the body.

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For the last five years, I have been teaching a course called “Global Intimacies,” a reading-intensive seminar on the global history of gender, sexuality, and the body.¹ It emerged out of a growing frustration with how little dialogue that has developed between the fields of global history and the history of sexuality, the body, and intimate relations. In many ways, this builds directly on the considerable effort of feminist historians to bring analyses of women and gender to bear on world history in both research and teaching.² An important impetus for naming the course “Global Intimacies” is nicely articulated by anthropologist Ara Wilson, who argues that “the rubric [of intimacy] facilitates a nondeterministic, nonreductive exploration of structures of feeling, public feelings, and biopolitics in relation to globalizing contexts.”³ Meanwhile, I eventually picked “intimacy” over the word “sexuality” in the course title to take seriously the

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1 The course title itself has evolved over time. Earlier iterations include “Sexuality and the Body in the Modern World” and “Intimate Matters: A Global History of Gender, Sexuality, and the Body.” The latter pays homage to John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

2 See, for example, Bonnie Smith, ed., *Women’s History in Global Perspective*, 3 volumes (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004–2005); Ulrike Strasser and Heidi Tinsmann, “Engendering World History,” *Radical History Review*, no. 91 (2005): 151–164; Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, “World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality,” *Journal of World History* 18, no. 1 (2007): 53–67; Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

3 Ara Wilson, “Intimacy: A Useful Category of Transnational Analysis,” in *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Times*, ed. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 31–56, on p. 32.

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question posed by the Iranian historian Afsaneh Najmabadi: “what making sexuality the privileged focus of our historiographical projects does in terms of paths we have *not* taken, questions we have *not* asked”?⁴ Because it is a seminar, “Global Intimacies” privileges topical depth over empirical breadth.

In order to introduce global intimacies as both a historical and historiographical subject, the seminar pays special attention to the production of knowledge, the operation of power, and how they relate to the construction of personhood and the body as sites of meaning-making, grounds for political struggle, loci of cultural identity and social conflict, objects of scientific study and legal regulation, and guarantors of human difference. The main agenda is to help students to develop the intellectual capacity to bring questions conventionally directed toward the private/intimate sphere to bear on historical narratives and analyses concerning macro-structural transformations. This involves the careful interrogation of the concepts, categories, and questions used by scholars in the past and present, always measured against a varying body of empirical evidence. After scrutinizing the historicity of major conceptual frameworks, such as gender, sexuality, historicism, and modernity, the course highlights the mutual interaction between the “global” and the “intimate” from the following thematic angles: the global interbellum, sexuality and imperialism, biological and social reproduction, nationalism and the colonial archive, science and translation, circulation and the book, and transnational rhizomes vs. asymmetrical worlds.

The course was first conceived and developed as an undergraduate advanced option module at the University of Warwick. I taught it as such for four years at Warwick. I then turned it into a graduate level seminar at the University of Waterloo, where I taught for one year. I have since proposed to teach the course again for the long-running gender history Ph.D. minor at the University of California, Davis, where I now teach, in the future. In thinking back on how the idea of developing a course like this planted its seed, I should confess at the outset that an ocean of difference between the British higher education system and the North American system formed an important motivator for me to design this course back in 2012. The most important difference is that all of my courses at Warwick were year-long. As a frame of comparison, I used to teach a history of modern China module at Warwick from October to June every year. At UC Davis, I have chopped this into two courses—one on the Chinese Revolution and another on the history of the People’s Republic of China—taught in two separate academic quarters. So when I decided to

⁴ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Beyond the Americas: Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Analysis?” *Journal of Women’s History* 18, no. 1 (2006): 11–21, on p. 18 (emphasis original).

challenge myself and invent a new advanced undergrad seminar on global intimacies, I took advantage of the fact that the seminar would meet once a week for two hours for at least 20 weeks in any given academic year. This means that the students were immersed in the topic with me for an entire year.

And the fact that history students in the British system are all history majors helped. At Warwick, we admitted students to the department rather than a general faculty (or college). This means that the students are committed to pursuing a history degree from the start. In fact, between 2012 when I first arrived at Warwick and 2016 when I left, our annual undergrad student in-take grew by at least a third. (This may sound surprising to colleagues based in North America given the dismal student interest in the humanities here, but for those based in a department like Warwick without faculty growth, this actually translated into more responsibility in terms of personal tutoring and academic advising.) Anyway, my point here is that, when they walked into my global intimacies module, the UK students already knew how to distinguish historiography from history, differentiate between primary and secondary sources, and cultivate good analytical writing skills as well as strategies for reading smartly. Of course, students always complain about the reading load, but from the very first year that I have taught the course, the majority of students have expressed willingness to read a substantial amount each week. They were eager to manage that because they knew how to do so.

Now having discussed the banal backstory of how the course came about, I like to delve into the intellectual substance of the course. Back at Warwick, at the advanced undergrad level—so “Global Intimacies” intended to enrol history honours during their final year in the program—we had the option of designing two different kinds of seminars: one focuses on primary documents (a source-based approach to reading and interpretation) and the other focuses on secondary literature (meaning more theoretically and historiographically driven). In the former instance, students would be asked to identify different primary source passages on the final exam. In developing “Global Intimacies,” I opted for the latter approach (that is, the reading of secondary literature), because in doing so, the course could cover a wide geographical scope without the burden of linguistic barriers. This is what I say in the beginning of my syllabus:

As this is a reading-intensive course, weekly seminar discussions will unpack theoretical perspectives from methodological approaches and evaluate primary research in light of existing historiographical trends. We will survey a broad range of secondary literature, thereby exploring not only the historical interactions of gender, sexuality, corporeality, and geopolitics, but also their intricate historiography—the history of their histories emerging from diverse interregional and comparative inquiries. We will assess the ways in which theoretical paradigms, disciplinary orientations, methodological styles, data

contents, and genres of scholarly writing have evolved over time, and compare them against one another, while never losing sight of the global framing that unifies them. The readings cover selected regions of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas, focusing primarily on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although the course does not assume prior knowledge in global history, students should be prepared to familiarize themselves with background knowledge in world/regional history beyond the remit of the assigned readings.

I kept this paragraph in the syllabus when I turned the course into a semester-long grad-level seminar at Waterloo. A major advantage of designing the course this way is that it gives me the flexibility to update the syllabus every year with the latest and what I consider the most exciting and intriguing scholarship. I should emphasize that in many ways this mirrors the development of the field of global history. For some of us, global or transnational history might mean a way of studying history beyond the confines of a region or a nation-state. Personally, and pragmatically speaking, I find the bringing together of scholars who would otherwise not necessarily talk to each other the most exciting element of doing and teaching global history. The bringing together of the different scholarship—essays and books that are normally read in seminars defined by national interests—always makes teaching this course a refreshing and exciting experience. Not only has this aspect of the course made it a generative endeavour, its flexibility promises to open it up to unpredictable and queerer possible configurations in the future.

There is value to different kinds of courses, and in the case of “Global Intimacies,” I have decided to foreground theoretical/critical history over micro-history. Of course, as it is well-known, the best microhistories are also much more besides a concentration on a small region or single event. This is most evident when we read Nancy Rose Hunt’s erudite *A Colonial Lexicon* (1999), which focuses on a small region of the Congo in the vicinity of Yakutsu, the site of a British Baptist Mission Station founded in 1895.⁵ For students to fully grasp the arguments in the book—and I confess that most students, like myself, do not grasp the full arguments in their first read of the book—they actually have to do some extra research to unpack (if they are not already familiar with) the colonial history of the Congo Free State, the role of the missionary regime, the implications of hierarchy and hybridity in tropical medicine, the humanitarian disasters resulting from the Red Rubber economy, and so forth. By the time we read Hunt in the course, however, the students are already exposed to Foucault, the linguistic turn, and postcolonial criticism. So they either hate or love the book.

⁵ Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

Time and again, I hear from my students that they think Hunt's book is *the* solution to *all* of the historiographical problems and conundrums that we have discussed in the course. For most of them, this is their first deep exposure to a major research monograph on central Africa. And I am not even an expert on African history.

Some of the other books that I assign regularly in this course include (in alphabetical order): Dennis Altman's *Global Sex* (2001), Anjali Arondekar's *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (2009), Kathy Davis' *The Making of Our Bodies, Our Selves: How Feminism Travels across Borders* (2007), Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1990), Ari Larissa Heinrich's *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West* (2008), Dorothy Ko's *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (2005), Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (2002), Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (2013), Leila J. Rupp's *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women* (2011), Mrinalini Sinha's *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (2006), Ann Laura Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002), and the collaborative volume *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (2008).⁶ Although my research focuses on modern China, I always aim for a geographical balance in the selection of readings. The course, like any other, is

⁶ Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Our Selves: How Feminism Travels across Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); Ari Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Leila J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), and Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

not perfect. For example, it leaves ample room to expand on the history of eugenics, third world feminism, prostitution, health activism, legal pluralism, sexual commodities, labor migration, the roots of contemporary conservatism, among other important topics.

Let me conclude by circling back to research, because for a course like this to succeed it must be kept up-to-date with the most cutting-edge scholarship in the field. Although I have only taught the course for a handful of years, I have increasingly felt that the reading list is insufficient. First, it will be a significant leap if there is a reader of primary sources from different parts of the world that addresses the themes and issues that I have tried to draw attention to in the course. This is not an easy task, but I look forward to a day when someone courageously takes it on.⁷ Yet another major reason why I already consider my syllabus inadequate has to do with an identity crisis of the field. That is to say, if we reflect on the evolution of the history of sexuality as a field from, say, 1968 to 2018, we might ask ourselves if there has ever been a cogent interest defined around the idea of global history in the last half-century.⁸ As late as 2009, American historian Margot Canaday proclaimed that “despite the way that sexuality has already been implicated in transnational history, a full transnational history of sexuality still remains to be written.”⁹ I would argue that this has changed in the last few years while I was experimenting with teaching “Global Intimacies.”

My syllabus will be quite different the next time I teach the course. To begin with, there is that exciting collection of essays called *A Global History of Sexuality: The Modern Era* coedited by Robert Buffington, Eithne Luibhéid, and Donna Guy which came out in 2013.¹⁰ Joseph Boone’s *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (2014) is a tour-de-force that systematically interrogates how male homoerotic desire has underpinned Western perceptions of the Islamic world.¹¹ Then there is Jonathan Zimmerman’s *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* which came out

7 One might argue that an early exception is Mathew Kuefler, ed., *The History of Sexuality Sourcebook* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

8 An early hint of the “world history” approach to the history of sexuality can be found in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1989). See also Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003).

9 Margot Canaday, “Thinking Sex in the Transnational Turn: An Introduction,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1250–1257, on p. 1256.

10 Robert M. Buffington, Eithne Luibhéid, and Donna J. Guy, eds., *A Global History of Sexuality: The Modern Era* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

11 Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

in 2015.¹² In 2017, Peter Stearns published the 2nd edition of his *Sexuality in World History*.¹³ Two other landmark volumes appeared in the same year. The first is the 900-page tome, *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s–2000s*, coedited by Magaly Rodríguez García, Lex Heerma van Voss, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk.¹⁴ The second is Veronika Fuechtner, Douglas Haynes, and Ryan Jones' groundbreaking *A Global History of Sexual Science, 1880–1960*, for which I wrote an afterword.¹⁵ Lastly, I have been editing with a stellar team of associate editors (Hanadi Al-Samman, Anjali Arondekar, Marc Epprecht, Jennifer Evans, Ross Forman, Emily Skidmore, and Zeb Tortorici) the 3-volume interdisciplinary *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, scheduled for publication by Cengage in 2019.

In light of this new body of work, it is timely to reflect on what I have called an identity crisis. What are the questions emerging from a Western-centric field of the history of sexuality that need to be forgotten or forgiven? Recall that scholars such as Kate Soper, David Halperin, and Jeffrey Weeks had articulated various injunctions to either “forget” or “remember” Foucault.¹⁶ Are these injunctions still relevant today, in cross-cultural contexts or otherwise? Take another example, does South Asia remain a central theoretical frame for postcolonial histories of Africa, East Asia, and the Middle East? Taking cues from the subaltern studies intervention in the late 1980s and 1990s, we might ask what we need to leave behind in order to move forward. Finally, these questions should also invite us to think about what kinds of analytical issues we should *reactivate* or *recuperate* as we transform this new exciting field in the global history of sexuality and intimate relations. After all, by bringing the global and the intimate to bear on one another, our end goal has never been a mere oxymoronic metaphor. Being a “globalist” is like being a feminist, politically committed to diversifying our categories of analysis in order to understand the plurality of our historical experience and make room for shifting views of any historical problem.

12 Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

13 Peter Stearns, *Sexuality in World History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

14 Magaly Rodríguez García, Lex Heerma van Voss, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, eds., *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s–2000s* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

15 Veronika Fuechtner, Douglas E. Haynes, and Ryan M. Jones, eds., *A Global History of Sexual Science, 1880–1960* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

16 Kate Soper, “Forget Foucault?,” *New Formations* 25 (1995): 21–27; David Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality,” *Representations* 62 (1998): 93–120; Jeffrey Weeks, “Remembering Foucault,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, nos. 1–2 (2005): 186–201. See also Howard Chiang, “Revisiting Foucault,” *Cultural History* 5, no. 2 (2016): 115–121.