Hello!

I’m Dr. Pietras, and this is the abbreviated syllabus for my Expos 20 course, “Inventing the Queer Past.”

Please feel free to reach out with questions. My email address is bpietras@fas.harvard.edu.

Please note: this document is tentative and subject to revision.
Course Description

From *Brokeback Mountain* to the National Book Award-winning novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* to FX’s Emmy-winning television series *Pose*, the last few decades have seen an explosion in what we might call “queer historical fiction”: stories set in the past that center LGBTQ+ protagonists. In this course, we explore what’s at stake in fictional portrayals of America’s queer past—particularly given that, until very recently, queer people were routinely written out of American history. Can fiction and imagination help to recover communities erased from the historical record? What gets lost when queer histories are invented instead of being reconstructed through archival research? And how do changing understandings of LGBTQ+ history impact how it is represented in the work of queer writers, filmmakers, and artists?
Course Description, continued

In our first unit, we will closely examine Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, a “biomythography” that combines memoir and myth to capture Lorde’s experiences as a young Black lesbian growing up in 1940s Harlem. In our second unit, we will use film theory to analyze *Far from Heaven* and *Carol*, two recent movies about gay and lesbian characters trying to survive the systemic homophobia of the 1950s. In our final unit, students will make a researched argument about a queer historical fiction of their choice; options include novels by Virginia Woolf, Monique Truong, and Sarah Waters, and the films *Call Me By Your Name*, *Desert Hearts*, and *Moonlight*. 
Prompts for the Major Essays
Unit 1: Close Analysis of a Single Source

For your first essay, you will analyze Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). The daughter of Caribbean immigrants, Lorde grew up in Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s, and *Zami* vividly recounts her coming of age as a Black lesbian poet. *Zami*, however, is far from a conventional autobiography. Written in the form of what Lorde calls a “biomythography,” the text draws on elements of fiction, poetry, and myth to tell the story of Lorde’s life.
Unit 1, Continued:

Your assignment is to close read *Zami*, making an argument about the relationship between the form of the work (how it is written) and its content (what it is about). You will want your close reading to focus on how and why *Zami* departs from the typical conventions of autobiography. What seems to be the intended effect of including elements of fiction, poetry, and myth in the text? How do instances or patterns of this material relate to the work as a whole?

**Length:** Your final essay should be about 5-6 pages long (at least 1500 words). You should include a Works Cited section that cites your primary source, and a Cover Letter. (Neither counts toward the paper’s overall word count.)
Unit 2: Analysis Using a Theoretical Lens

In our second unit, we will move from one medium of representation—literature—to another: film. Our primary sources will be two films by the award-winning gay director Todd Haynes: *Far from Heaven* (2002) and *Carol* (2015).

Set in the 1950s, both movies lavishly recreate the visuals of melodramas from that era, even as they foreground something very, very rarely shown on screen at that time: sympathetic queer protagonists.
In Unit 2, you will write an essay that analyzes one of these films through a theoretical lens provided by another scholar: either Marc Le Sueur’s work on nostalgia films, or Richard Dyer’s work on heritage films.

Often assigned at Harvard, this type of paper—sometimes called “a lens essay”—asks the writer to use a primary source as a case study to test the more general theories advanced by another scholar. The goal of such a paper is twofold. On one hand, the writer should demonstrate how the theoretical lens provides us with tools to uncover the deeper meanings or implications of the case study (in this case, *Carol* or *Far from Heaven*). At the same time, however, the writer should use the case study to assess the theoretical lens itself.
Unit 2, Continued:

For this essay, you need to develop an **Analytical Question/Problem** about your chosen primary source that can be addressed using the theoretical lens of your choosing. Your essay may also draw on the provided contextual material (excerpts from Harvard professor Michael Bronski’s *A Queer History of the United States*). You should not consult any other outside sources.

**Length:** Your final essay should be about **6-8 pages long** (at least 1750 words). You should include a Works Cited section, and a Cover Letter. (As with Essay 1, neither counts toward the paper’s overall word count.)
Unit 3: Making a Researched Argument

In Unit 1, you learned how to closely analyze a written primary source. In Unit 2, you learned how to use another scholar’s argument as a lens to interpret a film. In Unit 3, you will build on these skills as you write a paper that draws on multiple sources to make a researched argument.

For this assignment, you will write about a primary source that is

- A work of fiction (a novel, a short story, a film);
- Set in the past (at least twenty years before it was made); and
- Centers LGBTQIA+ figures.

If you’re having trouble deciding on a primary source, feel free to choose one from the source bank below.
Unit 3, Continued:

In addition to your primary source, you will also be finding and using secondary sources to help you establish the scholarly or critical conversation on your chosen research topic. (For our purposes, “secondary sources” means scholarly work written by university professors, as well as writing by professional critics, such as a movie or book reviews written for national magazines and newspapers.) You will need to draw on at least five secondary sources. At least three of these sources should be peer-reviewed scholarly articles or books that you’ve located by yourself.

Length: Your final essay should be about 8-10 pages long (at least 2250 words). You should include a Works Cited section, and a Cover Letter.
Primary Source Bank for Unit 3:

**Novels**
Mary Renault, *The Last of the Wine* (set in ancient Greece)
Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (spans the 1500s to the 1920s)
Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (set in the 1800s)
E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (set in the 1910s)
Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt* (set in the 1920s and 1930s)
Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch* (set in the 1940s)
Andrea Lawlor, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (set in the 1990s)
*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (set in the 1990s)

**Film and Television**
*Orlando* (film version, spans the 1500s to the 1920s)
*Maurice* (film version, set in the 1910s)
*Desert Hearts* (set in the 1950s)
*The Talented Mr. Ripley* (set in the 1950s)
*Brokeback Mountain* (set in the early 1960s)
*Milk* (set in the 1960s)
*Call Me By Your Name* (set in the 1980s)
*Pose* (set in the 1980s)
*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (film version, set in the 1990s)
*Moonlight* (set in the 1990s)