GWSS 290 A: Special Topics in Women Studies

How to Have Sex During an Epidemic: Intimacy, Disease, and the Politics of Vulnerability

* Autumn 2020

The Coronavirus has triggered a global pandemic that has devastated some and changed all lives in society. Social Distancing, Mutual Aid, Zoom Chats, PPEs, Face Masks, and Dying Alone and Flattening the Curve: terms that nearly overnight are so common in ordinary life that they index a society undergoing irreversible transformations, unmoored from the norms of its past, and on the threshold of still unknowable changes. Like prior epidemics, the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the Coronavirus, has impacted and disorganized every scale of society, from the macro, such as the “economy” to the most intimate, like sex. In this course, we will use intimacy to focus our discussions about the social, cultural and political upheavals that COVID-19 is creating. How does one study the “cultural” impacts of a pandemic? How do pandemics throw into question bodies, others and our own? Whether it’s touching a public doorknob or streaming pornography in a family home, stable boundaries are dissolved, freighted with psychological power. Though vulnerability is everywhere present, why are racial disparities in the disease’s impact so often understood by moral and cultural explanations individual responsibility? And why do so many want to know how to have sex during contagious times? Why do such inquiries even matter? When pandemics reveal our lack of knowledge, how does that effect the social order? By learning how other pandemics have been studied —Leprosy, Tuberculosis, Cholera, and AIDS—through comparative gender and sexuality approaches, we will apply these approaches to the study of intimacy, sex, and the distribution of vulnerability in the current moment of the coronavirus pandemic. The course will conclude by focusing on how changes in intimacy —its meaning, instance, and experience—point towards alternatives to our contemporary society and the racial and global distribution of vulnerability and loss on which it is founded.

Catalog Description:
Exploration of specific problems and issues relevant to the study of women. Offered by visiting or resident faculty members. GE Requirements:
Individuals and Societies (I&S)