

**Critical Context:** In Spring of 2019, I was part of a committee who attempted to revise the undergraduate major in Gender Studies, particularly those parts that promoted horribly whitewashed and white colonized history content. In fact, the history curriculum in Gender Studies was more Eurocentric and racist than anything I had witnessed in DECADES. The response to our curricular revision was met with such hostility from white faculty and administration, all who celebrate the “diversity” of the campus ad nauseum, that I felt the need to address the issues in this letter to the dean. Though such labor is seldom counted as part of our research, this is the unrecognized knowledge-work that faculty of color must constantly do in universities that are hellbent on denying Black and Brown intellectual traditions in every aspect of college learning. This too is part of our scholarship and presence: endless emails, letters, and counter-arguments that dominate the time we could be spending on better things. Particularly at those moments when white dominant trends and patterns are challenged in the academy, especially as it relates to the study of race/gender/sexuality today, white backlash can be especially violent and unrelenting.

Dear Dean of Undergraduate Studies,

Thank you for your care and attention to the curriculum in Gender Studies as the dean of Undergraduate Studies. I truly appreciate the ways you have taken my comments seriously when that so seldomly happens here. I apologize for not responding in full sooner, but I have grown weary of doing the heavy lifting of speaking up and challenging folk who are so comfortable in their privilege. To re-mix the words of Ntozake Shange, that’s just so redundant for Black women in the modern world. That said, I want to clarify my critiques around current curriculum issues in Gender Studies, especially in relation to the course, “History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650,” as a requirement for Gender Studies majors (the ONLY history requirement in the program). In fact, I question the racist legacy/leadership that has brought us to this point.

In terms of a recapitulation, Gender Studies (GEN), as you know, is a program, not a department, with our first, 100% tenure-track hire this year. We have a very small set of GEN-designated courses while students take the majority of their classes for the major and minor all over the campus from anything that seems tangential to gender analysis. Because the program does not control when/if most of these classes will run, who will teach them, or what will get taught in them, we on the advisory board are in a constant state of flux and critical reflection of the curriculum. We continually collect students’ informal reactions, especially when they report lectures and reading materials that insultingly unravel what we and the discipline currently theorize and do in relation to intersectionality, decolonization, non-binary social construction, feminisms of color, transactivism, queer of color critique, anti-racism, anti-ableism, etc. While many at the college dismiss these theories, anyone whose work is widely referenced in Gender Studies today (or studying it at the graduate level) recognizes these as central tenets.

At this juncture, we decided to revise the list of elective courses which qualify for a Gender Studies major and minor (sometimes these courses have not even been taught for a while, are taught by adjuncts whose CVs we never see, and/or taught by people who I have never heard from or seen). We also wanted to streamline the required courses, many of which are also not governed by the Gender Studies program. I was in full support of moving “History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650” from a required course for the Gender Studies major to an elective. That choice seems to have elicited the ire of multiple constituencies in the City University of New York (CUNY). Once the history department learned of the memo to make such curricular changes, all hell seemed to break loose. After learning of the memo, history faculty secured letters from faculty across CUNY (with the chair praising these efforts) about our work in Gender Studies as a space that was removing history and humanities from its core. Across multiple emails with multiple recipients, we were called anti-intellectual, non-egalitarian, and non-deliberating and we were accused of not appreciating the value of history and the humanities to academic learning as well as to the very study of gender today. I was attending a conference and had to interrupt my work and weekend there to interject. At that time, I expressed my general critique of the course (and overall curriculum) as whitewashed, a point that I have always made. I also made it clear that I felt targeted when at the exact time that the Gender Studies program’s leadership and organization at the college were most multiracial, we had to face a public representation of our minds and bodies as non-historical, non-humanities, non-communicative, and non-gender. No amount of excuse-making or gaslighting that white faculty performed can deny or revise these incidents. I am now as incensed by this public discourse as I am by the content of the courses that CUNY professors seem to think is beyond the scope of my intellectual and political comprehension. As a Black feminist at the largest HSI in the Northeast who examines intersectional race studies, Black cultures, rhetoric, and humanities education and who draws a significant number of young Black/ Latinx/ Queer/ Activist Feminists to my courses and workshops everywhere that I go, I have just cause to be disturbed by the course of these events.

In my earliest email, I asked for a syllabus (and even the original proposal as well as assessment information) about the main course in question. To this day, no one has responded with these materials. I find this troubling given the public discourse surrounding these events. Why the sudden silence about the curriculum? When the chair of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies (DIS), which oversees Gender Studies, emailed all of us on the advisory board about a meeting, I reiterated for the *second* time that I wanted a syllabus, original course proposal, assessment information, agenda, and confirmation of minutes/ record-keeping. I stated in the email to the entire group that I would not attend a meeting with history faculty without these things and would regard the continual ignoring of my requests as refusal. We do not staff the course, see the syllabus, or decide the readings but are expected to merely accept a meeting to hear of its importance in the curriculum. To this day, no one has responded to that second request either. The chair of DIS never responded to me and simply moved forward with a doodle poll asking for meeting dates. I ignored her since she seemed so comfortable ignoring me. This kind of invisibility and non-seeing is a trend for Black women in the academy, and it has also been a trend for me in the Gender Studies program. I never spoke with the rest of the advisory committee about my decision to not participate in the meeting or the doodle poll; however, most of the advisory board did not respond. No scholar of color and no activist scholar whose research focuses on QTPOC and/or BIPOC responded either. The chair of DIS moved forward

yet again and determined a final meeting date and time anyway. It was thus clear to me whose interests matter most. For sure, there will be more gaslighting and excuse-making about these issues, but once again, these are the actual incidents. Everything can't always just be a coincidence.

I have volunteered for the Gender Studies advisory committee for the past four years now since, as a program and not a department, Gender Studies has no real governance structure (i.e., no bylaws, no office managers, no budget, no chair, no committees, etc). In that time, I have been the advisory member to teach the most students in GEN-designated classes because of my sheer proximity to the required course, Introduction to Gender Studies 101. This is due, in large part, to the fact that my classes were never zoned (despite my requests) for writing intensive size-reductions like my other colleagues on the advisory board, bringing my class rosters to the 36-student capacity each time. My point in relaying this fact is that I have advised many-upon-many students to, at least, minor in Gender Studies. Student complaints about courses have seemed endless where "History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650" is a constant source of extra labor on my mentoring. My credibility in this regard is implicit given my teaching assignments for the past four years.

One of the primary reasons that I asked for a syllabus from "History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650" is to confirm students' complaints. In fact, one student was so thoroughly disgusted with the textbook and supplemental readings that she gave me her textbook, stating she simply did not want it and advised me to peruse it. While she insisted that the professor was "a lovely person," she was very disheartened by the curricular content (an area of discernment that eludes many at the college). Since no one honored my syllabus request, I had to secure the most current 2018 version based on my capacity as an advisory board member. In fact, in a very recent informal conversation with the chair of DIS, she was still insisting that this syllabus has been greatly improved. If the last (fall 2018) iteration of this course represents "improvements," I am extremely alarmed by what the original proposal may have entailed (since it was never shared with me). Here are just a few brief instances of my many issues, particularly in relation to the descendants of Africa and the legacies of First Nations:

1. The people who we now call Black, people of African descent, enter the syllabus as slaves via the graphic novel, *Abina and the Important Men*, based on the 1876 court transcript of an African woman named Abina in what was then called (by Western Europeans) the Gold Coast. Likewise, later in the semester, people of African descent reappear in the context of Caribbean slavery via Richard Ligon, a British sugar plantation owner who published *History of Barbados* circa 1657. Though these texts might be thought-provoking, one does not need a PhD in history to know that people of African descent did not spend the majority of their time from prehistory to 1650, the topic of the course, as the enslaved peoples of Western Europeans (and these two, assigned texts represent post-1650), since Blackness and slavery are not historically contingent for most of the years covered by the course. Any young person who has seen the movie, *Black Panther*, has a critique of this representation of Africa and the devoicing of enslaved Africans. Even popular culture gets this part right today. These aren't difficult concepts or new polemics. My own undergraduate education from 1989-1993 (and training as a New York City high school teacher right after) taught me to challenge such basic curricular distortions.

2. The textbook mentions African Americans on four pages though there was no such title from prehistory to 1650. Although this does not necessarily present a problem, the text does not indicate that the very concept of African Americanness is only knowable via Black enslavement which, in turn, has fundamentally shaped what gender, sexuality, bodies, and reproduction mean for modernity. European/White Americans or whiteness are not an index listing though African American is.
3. Specific histories of “Subsahara Africa” (the problematic, outdated term used in the course description) are mentioned on fifteen pages of the 227-page textbook via an array of peoples on the continent: the Zazzua, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Dahomey, Ancient (Anlo) and modern Ghana, 20<sup>th</sup> century Guinea-Bissau, the Igbo, Colonial Kenya, 21<sup>st</sup> century Mali, the Mbuti of Zaire, the Yako of Nigeria, 21<sup>st</sup> century Rwanda, 21<sup>st</sup> century Somalia, 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa, the Tuareg, 20<sup>th</sup> century Uganda, the Yoruba, 20<sup>th</sup> century Zimbabwe. In sum, Africa’s explicit “prehistory until 1650” is named seven times in the textbook. This includes those moments when it is difficult to tell a specific time and place reference; for instance, the one occasion when the Igbo are named occurs in a general section on “global tribes and villages” from 10,000 BCE. There is no way that students have learned much about alternative worldviews of “prehistory” Africans in the ten sentences such Africans are mentioned in the semester’s course readings.
4. The people who are called Native Americans in the book only enter the syllabus via the textbook. There are no primary source materials assigned to students that focus on First Nations. Most of the primary source readings assigned to students center on Western Europe with a few nods to Ancient China and Islam. Indigeneity has no artifact though our students often travel to our very campus in Manhattan via Broadway, the Wickquaskeck Trail, created during the historical time period that is the focus of the course. The excuse that the college does not have any Native American faculty does not justify this deliberate erasure.
5. The people who we now call Native Americans are usually writ large as one, undifferentiated group across all of the Americas with no mention of longstanding vocabularies central to Gender Studies such as white settler colonialism. The peoples representing First Nations are mentioned in the textbook on eighteen pages of a 227-page text via an array of peoples across the globe: Agta people of the Philippines, brief and collapsed accounts of Aztec/ Inca/ Powhatan marriage arrangements for daughters of the rulers, Aztec girls, descriptions of Aztec/ Inca/ Nahua/ Maya/ Navaho/ Inuit rituals that are often depicted simultaneously, Cherokee women, 20<sup>th</sup> century Native American voting rights in Canada, peoples in the Andean region, Iroquois women’s marginalization, reservation/ family life for (all) Native Americans, record-keeping for Mayans and Ancient Native peoples in Central America and the Andes, missionary schools, two-spirit people (used interchangeably with “third gender” to characterize the gender politics of all First Nations). Some of these highlighted topics in the eighteen pages of this book share page-time with Africans named in #3 above so these are not necessarily new pages/tropes of learning in addition to what students are told about Africans and African Americans. Most alarmingly, notions of Indigenous “rituals” as radical in terms of gender and sexuality are also dismissed as mere romanticism though the text represents no real understanding of any First Nation.
6. *Mestizo*, *India*, and *Negro* are briefly introduced as categories specific to the Spanish and Portuguese crowns under Catholicism. In this section of the book, African slaves in the

Americas are described as *imported*. Neither current nor outdated terms like Latinx, Latino, Latina, or Hispanic are used; most people are simply referenced as women who live/work/protest in Argentina, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Colombia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. African slavery in Brazil is offered as an example in two sentences; the main Caribbean context that is offered are contemporary interviews in Jamaica where respondents allegedly view mothers as more central to their lives than fathers. The only break in this representation of gender and sexuality in the Americas comes from one, supplemental reading assignment at the end of the semester by noted ethnohistorian, Laura Lewis, about gender and sexuality in late 17<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. Like with Africa, the place that we now call South America enters the syllabus at the site of colonialism (and after 1650). Given the consistency with which Brown and Black peoples are historically represented in the syllabus after the date of 1650, it would seem that the very rationale for a required class focused exclusively on prehistory to 1650 is disingenuous.

The lectures may, in fact, produce a more dynamic content but the syllabus bears no indication that my students' critiques are unfounded. Even the author of the textbook is a white historian who began her career as a historian of early modern Europe with a research focus on women's work in Germany and only recently considered herself a historian of early modern Europe *alongside* "global histories of women, gender, and sexuality." Any syllabus review or even casual perusal of the required readings in this course would produce my basic analyses in #1-6 which are not even exhaustive points. Non-problematicized and de-contextualized vocabulary is often presented as current and factual: for example, the unclear and/or binaristic messaging in terms like transsexual, gender dysphoria, MTF, FTM, effeminate males, etc. The haphazardness of the way language is used is alarming given the gender identities of the students in our programs and, obviously, this language does not map neatly onto global cultures from prehistory to 1650. This is a constant issue across many of the courses that the advisory board in Gender Studies has been closely examining.

I resent the history faculty's insistence and *public announcement* that my opinion about the obfuscated role of some of the courses in the Gender Studies major represents my inability to understand history and the humanities based on my "anti-intellectual" disposition. I am stunned that #1-6 would constitute "improvement." A course that teaches the issues in #1-6 is not compatible to contemporary Gender Studies today, which is a *discipline* and not a subset of European medieval histories. The kind of curriculum described in #1-6 above is a site of colonization. Feminists of color, especially Black feminists, have been at the forefront of pushing Gender Studies research, activism, and scholarship past this white center so my history, commitment, and relationship to Gender Studies should not be the one in question. As someone who also considers herself the heir of longstanding BIPOC in educational theory/activism who have fought for decades against curriculum that presents Black peoples as only having been voicelessly enslaved and Indigenous peoples as not existing at all, I find it embarrassing that faculty have supported the teaching of #1-6 for so long. It should come as no surprise then that some of us in Gender Studies are simply unwilling to serve primarily Brown and Black college students in 2019, especially a Latinx population who is largely Caribbean (and therefore of African descent), with history textbooks that use language like "the importation of huge numbers of slaves from Africa," likening Black peoples to a seemingly countless number of imported

objects available for consumption in the Global North.

While one might argue that the course could be revised, there is no reason to have faith in such curricular magic. As of today, according to the college's most recent course bulletin, there are three history courses at the college with the name Africa/African/Black in it, two of which do not have course numbers yet and must be therefore relatively new: African Diaspora History I; African Diaspora History II; Imperialism in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. The only course that explicitly names Africana America is a class taught by the music department: Comparative History of African American Musics. There are three courses that focus on any aspect of Latin America: U.S. Foreign Policy in Latin America; History of Contemporary Cuba; Class, Race, and Family in Latin American History. There are no courses that are explicitly named with Indigenous peoples as the center of attention. While it could very well be true that the more generalist courses include Africa, First Nations, and the Americas, the range of faculty expertise in the department suggests gaps that a financially-strapped institution such as ours won't be able to circumvent any time soon. According to the bios on the department's website as well as other public bios as trend-populated by google search, only one faculty member explicitly describes their expertise in relation to the African Diaspora; one faculty member explicitly describes their expertise in relation to the contemporary Latinx Diaspora. None describe their scholarship in relation to Indigeneity. Neither of these two faculty members have been named as people who we should consider when connecting the history department to Gender Studies. While I share the concern of the demise of the Humanities and its particular invisibility at this college (since my own academic work has been centered in English departments, albeit as the unworthy composition-rhetoric stepchild), I do not exempt us from a critical self-reflection of the ways in which the humanities have also promoted an intellectual enterprise that has denied many groups their full humanity. A white regrettable lament (which I have already heard) that we simply do not have Ancient African historians or Indigenous scholars on our campus does not excuse the colonized curriculum that has been deliberately adapted instead.

Moreover, in the gender studies assessment of "History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650," the only issue that was raised in the self-study report--- of which I was neither author nor audience--- was students' lack of understanding of historical methods. Given that the class presents all of the prehistory of Africa and the First Nations of the Americas as devoid of a historical record, it should make sense that our students are confused as to what the historical method actually entails given that it has erased almost all of them. Interestingly, the self-study report does not present the *methods* by which the course was actually assessed nor is there any description of what kind of *records* were examined, just a final, scapegoating statement that *students* are the ones who do not have a rich, wide grasp of history's research processes. No assessment data or records about the course and syllabus have ever been shared. One could argue that my letter here holds more evidence-based detail than the self-study. The only formal assessment of the Gender Studies program that has ever been critiqued by people outside of the advisory board was the 2018 external evaluators' report which was quickly downplayed as lacking detail and depth. Only ironies abound.

Now that I have also taught the senior seminar, the issues that I raise in this letter hold even more urgency for me. As of this date, half of the small number of students who have made it to the

senior seminar were students who I taught in GEN 101 (and sometimes in my first year writing courses in English as well). I can now say emphatically that the program has had a subtractive impact. When I look back on students' eportfolios from my classes when they were first- and second-year students, I have explicit evidence that students never talked about themselves in the elitist, anti-feminist terms that I continually challenge now. Many describe themselves as race-spokespersons or native informants who can speak for marginalized groups (especially now that they have "privilege" as "college-educated people"). They did not talk this way when they read and wrote about Indigenous and Transnational Feminists and decolonization. In the beginning of the program, they never called Black and Latinx communities the most homophobic groups in the country; they acquired this strand of racism much later. This means that students who wrote affirmatively of their readings in QTPOC critique during Gender Studies 101 have made a complete turn-around. Early on, these students did not collapse all groups in anti-intersectional ways (i.e., the experiences of all Black people match, irrespective of gender, ability, age, sexuality, immigration status, socioeconomic class, etc). Today, I have to re-teach/remind students of the very same unit, "Introduction to Intersectionality," that they received and wrote more eloquently about in Gender Studies 101. This is especially disheartening since the program touts itself as having an intersectional theoretical foundation. In terms of skills, students wrote more, composed more fluently, argued more critically, and had fewer errors in their writing. They were more punctual with their work and attendance, followed the syllabus more closely, and did more of the readings. We have rarely talked about these issues as anything other than senioritis, but this was always just another convenient excuse and scapegoating. For me, these issues are a testament of our necessity to do bigger and more critical work with teaching and learning than centering the history department.

By every measure that is pedagogically important to me, the students who I saw as first- and second-year students did better than they are doing now in terms of Gender Studies perspectives, critical theory, and general skills. It was not until Gender Studies came under new direction that my critiques were ever taken seriously, but the dominance of a certain kind of content and faculty member at the college means that the curricular and instructional issues that I describe here have been cast out, at best, as outrageous and illogical. This year was the first, serious engagement with the content of "History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650"; any utterance that suggests otherwise is, at best, a newly found consciousness and, at worst, an outright lie.

As of fall 2019, Gender Studies majors will still be required to take the "History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650" course. We have, in essence, been told that we must ask permission from and meet with professors in history here who founded Gender Studies (those who have been named are all white with a focus on medieval Europe) in order to revise the curriculum *for the current sum total of our 35 majors out of 13,000+ undergraduates*. This is just not a wise way to spend time and energy on curricular (re)design, program building, or instructional activity given the kind of intervention we need to make in a space that represents the epitome of what education research calls subtractive schooling. My concerns are not necessarily exclusive of all other Gender Studies departments and programs across the country as everyone has to struggle to connect their praxis, curriculum, and pedagogies to the activist histories and current sociopolitical commitments that we most often claim for the field, especially in ways that challenge white supremacy. However, as a college in a city with the

largest Latinx and Black population and with our distinct student population, we have a unique set of structural problems that require a kind of serious address and redress that eludes most of us.

After this May, I won't be working with the Gender Studies program at the college anymore so the fate of this course and the program are no longer part of my worry. While I have no direct request here, I am hoping that this letter will be used in the next self-study and program review as it communicates issues that have been silenced for far too long. I make this request with the sincere wish that our students, the descendants of the people who have been erased from the course on the lands that the course refuses to acknowledge, will someday be educated within the contemporary terms of actual Gender Studies and not age-old white settler logics.

My best,  
Carmen Kynard

*AUGUST 2019 UPDATE: The most prominent scholars who supported the HIS department's role in Gender Studies at the college rescinded their original support after learning what and how the HIS faculty teach. Meanwhile, the college gave a distinguished teaching award to the faculty member who designed "History of Gender and Sexuality: Prehistory to 1650" and has taught it most frequently (college faculty make the nominations---usually a white "jury of peers"--- and decide on the winners, not students). The college also gave a research award to the faculty member who wrote the complaint letters against the Gender Studies advisory committee. All white administrators/faculty who promoted this course/curriculum have since been promoted within the leadership ranks of the college... thus, the college, in sum, moved backward, not forward.*