

**Feminist Theory
WGSS 791B
Bartlett 314**

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“There’s babies in that bath water.”
--Liz, Goodreads, on Catharine MacKinnon,
Toward a Feminist Theory of the State

Course Abstract

This is a graduate seminar in feminist theory, and constitutes a core course for students enrolled in the Graduate Certificate Program. The seminar will be organized around questions that emerge for feminism from discourses of transnationalism, states, economies, race, affect, and sexuality and gender. It will draw from multiple located feminist works. Given that students will be approaching the work from several disciplines, and with a range of theoretical expertise, we will be emphasizing the methodological and historical contexts for each of the works we will be discussing in class.

Feminist theory is the critical place where activists and intellectuals engage in deep thinking and have arguments about ethics and politics. This course is an invitation to the subjects and terms of these fights. It takes seriously Clare Hemmings’ invitation to stop writing “progress” (or worse, decline) narratives for feminism and feminist theory—or, more bluntly, to take up Liz on Goodreads provocation that there is something well worth the trouble in work like Catherine McKinnon’s, which so many have found it fashionable, recently, to simply dismiss. It is sheer intellectual laziness to pretend that there is something called “70s feminism” or “80s feminism,” that it is singular, that we know what it is, and we are better than that now. Rather, the course explores major themes and questions in feminist theory from the 1970s to the present in a dialogic and recursive way, putting texts and writers in conversation with each other that are sometimes decades apart.

DAY-TO-DAY BUSINESS OF THE COURSE

There are many things we could do in this or any graduate seminar. We can locate readings in relationship to broader scholarly fields. We can engage in a rigorous critique of how books are put together—evidence and argument—in hopes of better understanding how to write good books (and dissertations). We can read closely. We can hold up arguments or turns of phrase that seem particularly smart and wonderful, or conversely, those that we particularly disagree with. We can look at books or articles for what they offer for our own research, teaching, activism, or ethical engagement . . . among other things.

Rather than use one or another of these approaches, the class will be organized by the approaches that are specific to each of this particular group's needs. We will start off each class by writing as many questions as we can think of on the board and we will then orient our subsequent discussion around those questions. The goal is to build intellectual friendships and community through the work of naming our honest questions and particular agendas. It is also my hope that the seminar will be fun, even occasionally thrilling, in the way an elegant idea or a particularly provocative conversation can be exhilarating.

Academe has trained us all to think of learning as a competitive affair. One scholar right, another wrong; students compete against each other for the highest grade. In truth, though, all learning and thinking takes place in the context of intellectual communities—written, virtual or face-to-face. Institutions of higher education like this afford us the privilege and pleasure of reading together and learning from one another. Our job in this seminar is to create an intellectual community, one in which all are enriched by each other's readings. Of course, some of this is difficult material, without a doubt, which is exactly why we need each other's help to read it as well as to try to understand how it can (or fails to) speak to our situation in the context of the world. This imposes on each of us the responsibility of reading carefully, speaking up about our insights and questions, and listening respectfully to each other (which is not to say always agreeing).

BOOKS

1. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984, 2007 edition is also fine)
2. Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Seven Stories Press, 2003).
3. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included* (Duke University Press, 2012)
4. Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989)
5. Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (California University Press, 2003)
6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990)
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003)
8. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011)
9. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1970/2003)

ALL ARTICLES ARE ON THE U-DRIVE IN A FOLDER TO WHICH ALL ENROLLED CLASS MEMBERS ARE SUBSCRIBED.

GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS

- 15% Class Participation
- 20% Four 2 pp. reading response: (5% each)
- 40% Two 5-7pp papers (20% each)
- 25% Final paper

1. Write four 2 pp. reading response papers. These have been frontloaded at the beginning of the semester to help you get quick feedback on your reading and writing.
2. Write two 5-7 pp. reading-response papers bringing together at least two of the readings in the weeks prior to the paper.
3. Write a 10 pp. conference paper that includes original research on a subject of your choosing related to the course material.

Attendance Policy:

You are expected to come to each class with the reading done. If you must miss a class, email the instructor. Two absences are a cause for concern. If you miss three or more classes, plan on meeting with me to discuss options related to making up the work, taking a grade reduction, or repeating the course.

WEEK-BY-WEEK SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER 3: Overview

METANARRATIVES

SEPTEMBER 10:

Clare Hemmings. "Telling Feminist Stories," *Feminist Theory* 6, no. 2 (August 1, 2005): 115–139.

Roderick Ferguson. "On the Specificities of Racial Formation: Gender and Sexuality in Historiographies of Race." In Daniel HoSang, ed. *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. 44-56.

Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995. 1-106.

Robyn Weigman. "Doing Justice with Objects; or, The 'Progress' of Gender." In *Object Lessons (Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies)*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012: 36-90.

>>>2 pp. paper due

CRITICAL RACE FEMINISMS

SEPTEMBER 17:

[Book] Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984.

Chela Sandoval. "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in a Postmodern World" *Genders* 10 (1991): 1-24.

>>>2 pp. paper due

SEPTEMBER 24:

[Book] Angela Y. Davis. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.

Jean and John Comaroff, "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (October 1, 2002): 779–805.

>>>2 pp. paper due

OCTOBER 1:

[Book] Sara Ahmed. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

>>>2 pp. paper due

ECONOMIES AND STATES

OCTOBER 8:

[Book] Catherine A. MacKinnon. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

*****NO CLASS TUESDAY OCTOBER 15 (MONDAY SCHEDULE)*****

OCTOBER 22:

[Book] Lisa Duggan. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

Wendy Brown. "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34 (2006): 690-714.

>>>5-7 pp. paper due. Is MacKinnon's liberalism implicated in the formation that Duggan and Brown are critiquing? Why or why not?

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISMS

OCTOBER 29:

Gayatri Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988): 271-313.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 333-358.

Aihwa Ong, James A. Banks. "Higher Learning: Educational Availability and Flexible Citizenship in Global Space" in *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*, 1st ed, The Jossey-Bass Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. 49-68.

Hester Eisenstein. "Globalization and Women's Labor" in *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009.

SEXUALITY AND GENDER

NOVEMBER 5:

Monique Wittig. "The Category of Sex," in *The Straight Mind*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" in Rayna Reiter, ed. *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975.

Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger* (Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1984).

NOVEMBER 12:

[Book] Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

>>>5-7pp paper due comparing Butler with Wittig or Rubin (or both).

AFFECT

NOVEMBER 19:

[Book] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

NOVEMBER 26:

[Book] Lauren Berlant. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

NATURECULTURES

DECEMBER 6

[Book] Shulamith Firestone. *The Dialectic of Sex ; The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Morrow, 1970.

Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.