

Contemporary Feminist Theories WS 5843.01, Feminist Theories

Texas Woman's University, Fall 2008
Tuesdays 2:30-5:20 in ASB 304

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HDB 307E

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Office Hours: Tues. 12:30-1:30 and Thurs. 12:30-2:30; also by appointment

Possibility is not a luxury, it is as crucial as bread.
- Judith Butler

Course Description:

Feminist theories, ways of thinking that problematize sex/gender/sexuality systems and agitate for justice, have existed for as long as there has been a category labeled “women.” This course provides an exploration of feminist theories as they have developed since the 1980s, especially in the U.S., including social construction, performative subjectivity, intersectionality, postcoloniality, and the “Third Wave.” It encourages us to think about how theory informs practice and vice versa, and therefore about the relationships between feminist theory, daily lived experience, history, and feminist politics. It challenges us to question what we think we know about feminism, to explore new thinking, and to further develop our feminist tools for critical analysis.

Course Objectives:

- To gain appreciation for the importance of theory and an understanding of what is meant by doing theory
- To develop tools for feminist analysis: asking who benefits; asking who the author and audience is; looking for what or who is left out/silent/disappeared/not at the table; considering power relations and privilege in each situation; questioning totalizing statements; and viewing dualisms with suspicion
- To consider different feminist epistemologies and be able to distinguish them
- To recognize and grapple with some of the contemporary themes in feminist theory, especially with regard to how they inform your own life

Required Texts:

- Judith Butler, Undoing Gender, 2004.
- Eli Clare, Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation, 1999.
- Rory Cooke Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century, 2003.
- Kathy E. Ferguson, The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory, 1993.
- Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, 2003.
- Juana Maria Rodríguez, Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces, 2003.
- Additional articles and materials will be made available on Bb.

Recommended Texts:

- Sonya Andermahr, Carol Wolkowitz, and Terry Lovell, A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory, 1997.
- Maggie Humm, The Dictionary of Feminist Theory, 2nd Ed. 1995.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you anticipate the need for reasonable accommodations to meet the requirements of this course, you must register with the office of Disability Support Services (HDB 002, 940-898-3835, dss@twu.edu) in order to obtain the required official notification of your accommodation needs. Please plan to meet with me by appointment or during office hours to discuss approved accommodations and how my course requirements and activities may impact your ability to fully participate.

Course Requirements:

Grades will be calculated on a 600 point scale.

- Participation (40% total):
 - Classroom Participation (20%, 120 pts): Your participation is the most important component of this class. A successful class depends upon everyone coming to class having done the reading and prepared to engage in discussion. Thoughtful engagement does not simply mean speaking a lot. It includes listening attentively, making connections to the readings and comments by others, asking informed questions, offering critique, and so forth. As a strategy to foster classroom participation I am having you do response notes every other week.
 - Response Notes (20%, 120 pts): To help me gauge where everyone is with the readings, and to help you develop some focused ideas and questions before we meet, you will be submitting response notes by 12 noon every other Monday. Half the class will be responsible for the readings on six odd weeks and the remaining half for six even weeks between 9/9 and 11/25. Each response note is worth 20 points. The response notes should be submitted using the Bb Assignments feature as MS Word documents (or in Rich Text Format if you don't have Word), and should be roughly 300 words (1 pg double-spaced; be sure to include your name and the date of the readings you are responding to). You may propose questions for discussion, critique some aspect of the readings, suggest possible connections with other readings, and/or bring up anything else that helps us engage and work with the material. While these are not formal papers, please attend to proper grammar and spelling.
- Leading Discussion (25%, 150 pts): Paired up with another student you will be asked to lead discussion for one of our class sessions. You will prepare a 20-25 minute presentation on the materials for that day and pose some provocative questions to get discussion going. Be creative in your presentation. As a pair you will also prepare a 2 page handout summarizing your presentation to be posted on Bb by 9pm the night before your presentation. More information about this assignment will be provided in class.

- Final Paper (35%, 210 pts): A 10-12 page final paper is due 12/9 at the beginning of the final class session. Topics can be drawn from any of the gamut of issues dealt with in the course. Papers must utilize at least four of the course readings and three outside sources, using MLA citation style. More information about this assignment will be provided in class.

Late or Missing Work

Assignments are due as indicated above or announced in class. You must complete all assignments to pass this class. Late assignments will be docked by 25% for each day they are late. It is not fair to your classmates for you to take extra time on an assignment. I will not accept emailed papers except in extraordinary circumstances if you have obtained prior permission. For your protection, keep a file of all your graded work in case any questions arise about an assignment or grade.

Attendance

This small graduate seminar will not be successful unless everyone shows up for each class ready to engage. Therefore, attendance is mandatory, which necessarily means being in class on time and staying the full period. Your final grade will be dropped by 30 points for each unexcused absence after the first two (absences will be excused with documentation from the Office of Student Life; see TWU Attendance Policy: <http://www.twu.edu/o-sl/StudentLifeOffice/AttendancePolicy.html>). It goes without saying that excused absences should be avoided when at all possible since you obviously cannot participate if you do not attend and we only have 16 class sessions. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to get notes and find out about assignments from a classmate.

Conduct

It is important in this seminar that we create as safe a space as possible for all involved. Discussions of race, gender, identity, privilege, oppression, and power challenge all of us. I expect that there will be times in class when we will each feel uncomfortable, angry, sad, confused and/or depressed because we will be dealing with difficult topics and having previously held beliefs/theories unsettled. I need for you to exercise self-care and to reach toward empathy for your classmates (remember, TWU offers free counseling services to students). If you are someone who tends to talk a lot in class, monitor yourself and allow silences for others to step into. If you tend not to speak in class, I want you to challenge yourself to be more vocal.

Think of others in class as peers who will help make you smarter, rather than rivals in competition. I expect us to disagree, and believe disagreement enriches class by stimulating our thinking, but we have to find ways to disagree respectfully. Here are some suggestions:

- Describe your reactions with “I” statements (i.e. “I was uncomfortable when you said...” rather than “Your comment made me uncomfortable...”)
- Be as specific as possible (relate what you are saying to what has already been said or to a specific part of a text; state the reasoning behind your position; avoid broad generalizations)
- Concentrate on sharing information, ideas and experiences, rather than giving advice, persuading, cajoling, or judging.

- Check with others to ensure they have a shared understanding of what is being communicated (i.e. “I hear you saying X, is that correct,” or “I read this author as arguing Y, is that what others got?”)

Academic Integrity

This class assumes that all participants are doing the assignments with integrity. TWU’s policy on Academic Dishonesty states: “Students who violate University rules on academic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure or removal from a course, disciplinary probation, and/or dismissal from the University. Academic dishonesty includes cheating, plagiarism, collusion, fabrication, falsification, falsifying academic records and other acts intentionally designed to provide unfair advantage to the student and/or the attempt to commit such acts.” (see: <http://www.twu.edu/o-sl/StudentLifeOffice/AcademicDishonesty.html>).

You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with all TWU student policies, especially those regarding academic dishonesty. As this is a graduate course, I am assuming you know the rules for proper citation and how to avoid plagiarism. If you do not, you need to educate yourself (start with the library web site and come to me with further questions). In this class, if you plagiarize, commit or attempt to commit another act of academic dishonesty, you will receive a failing grade for the assignment, have your actions reported to Student Life, and probably fail the course.

Course Schedule

Be aware that some changes in this schedule are likely as we flex around unforeseen obstacles and opportunities. Any changes will be announced in class. It is your responsibility to stay on top of them.

I. Doing Feminist Theory: An Introduction to Theory-Praxis

This section provides the groundwork from which the course develops by exploring various definitions of feminism and discussions about what it means to “do theory”—how we know, categorize, divide, process and file the world in our mental data banks. It makes clear that there is no universal feminist theory, but rather multiple feminisms emerging from varied locations at different times, responding to different conditions, and part of diverse feminist movements.

Guiding Questions:

What differences are there in the way these scholars define feminism? Pay particular attention to the language they use – do they talk about equality, justice, oppression, gender, race, other subjectivities? How might this diversity strengthen or weaken feminism? What is meant by “building feminist theory?” How do the authors describe the relationship between theorizing and activism—what has your experience of this relationship been?

8/26 Course introduction and individual introductions

9/2 Sign up for preferred dates to lead discussion. Response Notes groups assigned.

- Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory”
- bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice”
- Brown, Wendy, “The Impossibility of Women's Studies”
- Wiegman, Robyn, “Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures”

II. Feminist Epistemologies (Development, Standpoint, Situated Knowledges)

Epistemologies answer questions about what is knowledge, who can be a knowing subject, and what practices constitute knowledge acquisition or inquiry. Feminists have long argued that there are particular gendered ways of knowing – where they have disagreed is on the origins of those differences. Some believe that girls and women develop differently than boys and men in their relational and ethical frameworks. Some ascribe to standpoint theory, contending that certain social groups (usually those who are oppressed) have access to knowledge by virtue of their social-political locations that others do not. The concept of “situated knowledges” originates with Donna Haraway and is poststructuralist in that it is suspicious of fixing and then privileging any location. It suggests that knowledge acquisition and production is “situated” temporally, spatially and relationally, and therefore dynamic across all of those registers. Disability theorists add one more index, arguing that variable sensory knowledge has been often disregarded.

Guiding Questions:

Think about everyday conversations you have with people—can you recognize instances where they seem to subscribe to one of these three epistemologies? How do these

epistemologies inform theorizing? For example, if you follow standpoint theory what methods might you undertake to pursue research?

9/9 First Response Notes due

- Development:
 - Nancy Chodorow, “The Psychodynamics of the Family”
 - Carol Gilligan, “Woman’s Place in Man’s Life Cycle”
- Standpoint:
 - Nancy C. M. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism”
 - Patricia Hill Collins, “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology”

9/16

- Pair 1 presentation. Situated Knowledges & Sensory Knowledges:
 - Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”
 - Hsiang-Ann Liao, “Toward an Epistemology of Participatory Communication: A Feminist Perspective”
 - Mairian Corker, “Sensing Disability”

III. Essentialism/Social Construction/Difference

A key discussion in feminist theory involves what we mean when we say “women,” how such a group comes into being, and whether it’s even possible to talk meaningfully about such a diverse category. There has been much debate about the origins of our gendered identities clustering around three main arguments: woman as a natural category, woman as socially constructed, and woman constituting many levels of difference. Kathy Ferguson’s book, The Man Question, offers an excellent introduction into key threads in feminist theorizing on subjectivity.

Guiding Questions:

What does Ferguson mean by “the man question” and why is it important? What are the dangers in ascribing sex/gender performances, experiences, or practices to “nature?” How does this relate to the different feminist epistemologies in the last section? Ferguson believes irony can be an important tool for feminist theorizing. Do you agree? Does the concept of “mobile subjectivities” work for you?

9/23 Kathy Ferguson, Ch 1-3 (1-96)

9/30 Pair 2 presentation

- Ferguson, Ch 4-6 (97-183)
- Linda Alcoff, “The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory”

IV. Theorizing Sex/Gender/Sexuality: Performing Subjectivity

Judith Butler is the scholar most responsible for introducing the idea of the performativity of identities. She, along with other feminist and cultural theorists, maintain that identities are constantly being molded and transformed as much through actions and practices as anything else. How one “performs” oneself is influenced by many factors and has a great deal to do with how someone views herself and how others view her. In fact, to a large extent these

theorists argue that performance and “being” are so interrelated it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins.

Guiding Questions:

How does Butler’s thinking upset easy notions of agency, autonomy and self-definition? She is consistently worried about the normalizing, disciplinary power of the state; about what it is we desire when we desire the state’s desire. How does this tie in with her belief in the importance of fantasy and imagination? Do you see that as political, as part of social transformation? What examples can you think of from your own life of gender performance? Can you think of possible personal motivations as well as social-cultural and institutional factors or forces? More importantly, how are such performances undertaken unconsciously?

10/7

- Judith Butler, Intro (1-17), Ch 1 (17-39), Ch 3 (57-74)
- Edwina Barvosa-Carter, “Strange Tempest: Agency, Poststructuralism, and the Shape of Feminist Politics to Come”

10/14 Pair 3 presentation

- Butler, Ch 5 (102-130), Ch 9 (174-203), Ch 10 (204-231)

V. Theorizing Intersectionality

Intersectional theory has developed slowly over the last two decades. It contends that a singular analysis that only considers one lived modality, or privileges one over others, is inadequate. Intersectionality argues that our multiple/mobile subjectivities cannot be understood by just adding all the different “pieces” together (gender, class, race, etc) and stirring. In order to develop a more complex theory of identity we need to consider the relationships between all these elements and allow for their fluidity and contingency.

Guiding Questions:

How does Rodríguez use intersectional theory in her thinking about identity formation and practices in the realms of activism, cyberspace and the law? In each of these areas how does she help to explain both the constraints and possibilities of differing discourses in creating transformative space populated by intersectional subjectivities? Did you find one chapter or research site more successful than the others, and if so, why? How does Eli Clare’s book compliment Rodríguez?

10/21 Guest Speaker, Dr. Beverly Yuen Thompson on reproductive justice

- Alicia Arrizón, “Race-Ing Performativity through Transculturation, Taste and the Mulata Body”
- Juana Maria Rodríguez Preface-Ch 2 (1-83)

10/28 Pair 4 presentation

- Rodríguez Ch 3- Epilogue (84-162)
- Eli Clare—please have it read by this date and bring it to class

VI. Postcolonial Feminist Theory, Global & Transnational Feminisms

Postcolonial/Global/Transnational Feminisms are applying feminist theoretical tools to help in thinking about our rapidly globalizing world. They argue that difference needs to be

considered not just in relation to race, class, gender, religion, ability, sexuality and so forth but equally with regard to histories of colonialism, global location, nationality (and nationalism), geopolitics, global flows of capital/labor/natural resources/markets, liberation movements, and movements of people (immigration, emigration, diaspora, refuge, asylum, travel...).

Guiding Questions:

How do postcolonial and transnational feminist theories relate to intersectional theory? Do they have similar goals? What are the differences? How might U.S. feminists respond to the arguments of these scholars (does it change the way “we” act or think)? In what ways have you participated in or been influenced by globalization? What are some local signs/consequences of globalization and do you consider them positive, negative, a mix?

11/4 Video: *Performing the Border*

- Reina Lewis & Sara Mills: 1.4 Mohanty, 3.3 Narayan, 4.6 Boone

11/11 Pair 5 presentation

- Lewis & Mills: 6.1 Brah, 6.2 McClintock, 6.4 Mills
- Mary Hawkesworth, “The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age”

VII. Third Wave Feminism

Gen X is responsible for launching what is known as Third Wave feminism (1st Wave characterized by advocacy for women’s rights by women like Elisabeth Cady Stanton; 2nd Wave characterized by liberal battles for equality by women like Gloria Steinem). Third Wavers are struggling to bring feminism up-to-date with their lives and issues. They tend toward more playful, ironic politics, are more interested in localized counter-cultures (music, zines, cyber spaces) than national marches, are not separatist, embrace new technologies, are less ambivalent about their consumption, and tend toward sex-positive attitudes.

Guiding Questions:

In what ways can you relate to what these Third Wavers are saying? Do you think they are overstating their argument with the Second Wave? How are they changing the definition of feminism, or are they? What do you think they want from the older generation of feminists? Should they get it? What might be some of the limitations of the “wave” metaphor?

11/18 Rory Cooke Dicker & Alison Piepmeier: Intro, Harad, Darraj, Pough

11/25 Pair 6 presentation. Last Response Notes due.

- Dicker & Piepmeier: Koyama, Schippers, Afterword
- Aikau, Hokulani K., “Between Wind and Water: Thinking About the Third Wave as Metaphor and Materiality”

12/2 Feminist conflict over race and gender in the 2008 election

- Articles to be posted on Bb. Suggestions welcome.

12/9 Wrap up, end of semester celebration, **final papers due**

Full Citations for Course Materials

- Aikau, Hokulani K. "Between Wind and Water: Thinking About the Third Wave as Metaphor and Materiality." Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy. Ed. Karla A. Erickson Hokulani K. Aikau, and Jennifer L. Pierce. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 232-49.
- Alcoff, Linda. "The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self. Ed. Linda Alcoff. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 133-50.
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- Brown, Wendy. "The Impossibility of Women's Studies." differences 9.3 (1997): 79-101.
- Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Chodorow, Nancy. "The Psychodynamics of the Family." The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997. 181-97.
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- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." Feminist Studies 14 (1988): 575-99.
- Hartsock, Nancy. "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997. 216-40.
- Hawkesworth, Mary. "The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age." Signs 29.4 (2004): 961-85.
- hooks, bell. "Theory as Liberatory Practice." Feminist Theory: A Reader. Eds. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1997. 28-33.
- Humm, Maggie. The Dictionary of Feminist Theory. 2nd ed. New York; Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall; Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995.
- Lewis, Reina, and Sara Mills. Feminist Postcolonial Theory : A Reader. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Liao, Hsiang-Ann. "Toward an Epistemology of Participatory Communication: A Feminist Perspective." Howard Journal of Communications 17.2 (2006): 101-18.
- Rodriguez, Juana Maria. "Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces." Sexual cultures. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Wiegman, Robyn. "Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures." New Literary History 31.4 (2000): 806-27.