

Contemporary Feminist Theory WS 5843.01/.02, Feminist Theories

Texas Woman's University, Spring
Monday 2:30-5:20 in HDB 105
Tuesdays 6:00-8:50 in ASB 304

Dr. Judy Rohrer
HDB 307E

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Office Hours: Mon. 12:30-2:15 and Wed. 9:30-10:45; 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 and feminist appropriations of theoretical strands as they have developed since the 1980s, especially in the U.S., including social construction, materialism, poststructuralism, intersectionality, and transnationalism. 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, futures, 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 recognize and grapple with some of the contemporary themes in feminist theory, especially with regard to how they inform our lives, feminist movements, and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies
- To consider how we best understand, mobilize, and work with our multiple, mobile subjectivities toward feminist futures

Required Texts:

- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2004.
- Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, 1999.
- Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 2004.
- Robin Riley, Chandra T. Mohanty, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism*, 2008.
- Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*, 2008.

- Additional articles and materials will be made available on Bb.

Recommended Texts:

- Sarah Gamble, *Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, 1999. (Strongly recommended).
- Terry Lovell, Carol Wolkowitz, and Sonya Andermahr, *A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory*, 2nd Ed. 2000.
- 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 (CFO 106, 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. More information about each assignment will be provided in class and an assignment sheet posted on Blackboard (Bb).

- Participation (40% total):
 - Classroom Participation (15%, 90 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. Participation also includes posting continued discussion comments or related resources to the class wiki on Bb. I will post classroom participation points mid-semester and then again at the end. If you are concerned about your participation, please contact me so that we can talk about it. In order to foster classroom participation, you will post discussion questions before each class and do response notes every other week.
 - Discussion Questions (10%, 60pts): In order to prime everyone for discussion, you will be responsible for posting 1-2 discussion questions (DQs) to the "Discussion Question" Wiki on Bb by **9pm** the evening before class. You will post questions for classes 2/8 through 5/3 – a total of 12 classes with each post worth up to 5 points. Questions should be at least 3 sentences long and demonstrate your critical analysis of the readings. They can focus on one reading in particular, but when we are reading more than one piece, I encourage you to try to put the readings in conversation and to find challenging questions that emanate from that interaction. If someone else has asked a question similar to yours, ask another one you are interested in.
 - Response Notes (15%, 90 pts): To help me gauge where everyone is with the readings, and to help you delve into them, you will be submitting

response notes by **10pm** every other Monday or Tuesday. Half the class will be responsible for the readings on six odd weeks and the remaining half for six even weeks between 2/8 and 5/3. Each response note is worth up to 15 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 400-700 words (try to fit them on one page single-spaced; be sure to include your name and the date of the readings you are responding to). You may explore one of your discussion questions (but please don't repeat it verbatim), critique some aspect of the readings, grapple with different possible interpretations, or suggest connections with other readings. I do not want a summary of the readings. This is a chance for you to share your thinking directly with me. While these are not formal papers, please attend to proper grammar and spelling.

- Leading Discussion (25%, 150 pts): You will be asked to lead discussion with a partner for one of our class sessions (I will give you a chance to choose partners and will pair up the rest of you). As a pair you will prepare a presentation on the materials for that day which gives background information on the authors, summarizes the main arguments of each piece, and discusses connections between the readings. Tie in your classmates' DQs as you are able. Be creative in your presentation so that you engage the class: use brainstorming, group activities, debates, PowerPoint, multimedia materials, etc. You will also prepare a handout summarizing your presentation. If you use PowerPoint, this can be a handout of your slides. You must either post your handout on Bb by **11pm** the night before or bring copies to class (email us if you post it so that we know to print it out).
- Final Paper (35%, 210 pts): A 10-12 page final paper is due Friday 5/7 by 5pm at my office. Topics can be drawn from any of the gamut of issues dealt with in the course. Papers must utilize at least two of the course readings and three outside sources, using MLA citation style.

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 or reading posts 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 ability, 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. Often some of our previously held beliefs or theories are 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/student-life-office/academic-integrity.asp>).

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 and feminist theory? Pay particular attention to the language they use – do they talk about equality, justice, liberation, sovereignty, oppression, gender, race, other subjectivities? How might this diversity strengthen or weaken feminism? What is meant by “building feminist theory?” Does feminist theorizing have a proper subject, and if so, do we all agree about what it is? How do the authors describe the relationship between theorizing and activism—what has your experience of this relationship been?

1/19 Video: *Angela Davis keynote from 2009 NWSA*

1/25 or 1/26 Course introduction and individual introductions. Leading discussion assignment explained. Streaming video on challenges to feminism.

2/1 or 2/2 Sign up for preferred dates and partners to lead discussion. Response Notes explained and groups assigned.

- bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice” (Bb)
- Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill, “Theorizing Difference” (Bb)
- Andrea Smith and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, “Native Feminisms Engage American Studies”
- Susan Stryker, “Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question”
- Lisa Duggan, “Making it perfectly queer”

II. 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. Feminists have tended to line up on the question of difference on a continuum between strong identity politics (modernism) and poststructuralist deconstruction (postmodernism). Depending on where you stand, you are going to be making particular assumptions and asking particular questions.

Guiding Questions:

What is essentialism and why should we be scared of it, or should we? In what ways is poststructuralism seen as a threat to feminist theory? In what ways could it be useful to feminist theorizing? What are possible avenues out of this polarized debate? And what about difference, does focusing on it weaken feminist movements; is difference always divisive? Should we only emphasize commonalities and downplay our differences? How do we theorize about all of this knowing that our subjectivities are socially constructed?

2/8 or 2/9 First DQs and Response Notes due

- Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence"
- Joan Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism"
- Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges"

2/15 or 2/16 Pair 1 presentation

- Susan Bickford, "Anti-Anti-Identity Politics"
- Paula Moya, "Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory"
- DiPalma & Ferguson, "Clearing Ground and Making Connections: Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism"

III. Theorizing Sex/Gender/Sexuality: Undoing Gender

Judith Butler is the scholar most responsible for unsettling the way we think about gender. She, along with other feminist and cultural theorists, maintain that identities (in particular gender identities) are constantly being produced, molded and transformed through signifying processes. There is no recognizable prediscursive self; subjectivity does not exist prior to language, cultural forms and regulating processes. How one "performs" oneself is influenced by many factors, is often unconscious (we discipline ourselves to fit social norms without thinking about it), and has a great deal to do with how someone views herself and how others view her. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler stresses gender as something we do in relation, and imagination as imperative for survival and the building of alternate futures.

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 do you think of her discussions of violence, recognition, sexual difference, knowability, and justice?

2/22 or 2/23

- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Intro (1-17), Ch 1 (17-39), Ch 3 (57-74)
- Lisa Duggan, "The Theory Wars"

SPRING BREAK

3/1 or 3/2 Pair 2 presentation

- Butler, Ch 5 (102-130), Ch 9 (174-203), Ch 10 (204-231)
- Edwina Barvosa-Carter, "Strange Tempest: Agency, Poststructuralism, and the Shape of Feminist Politics to Come"

IV. Theorizing Intersectionality, Building Feminist Alliances

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 and mobile subjectivities cannot be understood by just adding all the different "pieces" together (gender, class, race, sexuality, disability, 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 Carrillo Rowe use intersectional theory in her thinking about power relations and feminist alliances? How does her focus on collectivity and coalition modify how we might theorize intersectionality? Does her metaphor of power lines help your thinking, are there ways you would amend it or different metaphors you would use? What does a "feminism of radical belonging" look like? Do the experiences Carrillo Rowe theorizes resonate with your experiences in the academy? How does Eli Clare's book compliment Rowe or how to they speak to each other? What do we learn about intersectionality from Clare?

3/8 or 3/9

- Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines*, first half of book through chapter 2

3/22 or 3/23 Pair 3 presentation

- Carrillo Rowe, second half of book through the epilogue
- Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride*

VI. Theorizing Imperialism: Feminism & War

Imperialism, militarism, and war have been central feminist concerns for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that women are disproportionately negatively impacted by these projects. Today's world is full of militarized state violence, with the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq of particular concern to us. The anthology *Feminism and War* is the product of a successful scholar-activist conference organized by Syracuse University's Women's and Gender Studies Department in the fall of 2006. The conference sought to make space for exploring the complicated connections between women, feminism, war and resistance.

Guiding Questions:

How is war furthered through racialized, sexualized and gendered practices and discourses? How do we think about the matrix of often overlapping roles of women in relation to war and militarism: soldier, contractor, diplomat, counselor, politician, recruiter, mechanic, analyst, medical professional, anti-war activist, mother, wife, daughter, niece, granddaughter, civilian "collateral damage" and so forth. How has feminism been used to further nationalist projects and as a justification for U.S. intervention? How does imperialist feminism promote orientalist caricatures of victimized women "over there" who require our help?

3/29 or 3/30 Pair 4 presentation

- *Feminism and War*, Intro, Part 1 & 2

4/5 or 4/6 Pair 5 presentation. Final paper assignment explained.

- *Feminism and War*, Part 3 & 4 and concluding pieces

V. Transnational Feminism: Feminism without Borders

Transnational Feminism is applying feminist theoretical tools to help in thinking about our rapidly globalizing world. These scholars 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...). *Feminism without Borders* collects some of Chandra T. Mohanty's most influential essays with her newer thinking.

Guiding Questions:

What is Mohanty's pathbreaking critique in "Under Western Eyes" and how does she modify it in the final essay? Why does Mohanty center "home," "community," and "nation" as sites for thinking about feminist politics and solidarity? What are her cautions and hopes for solidarity, sisterhood and coalition, and how are they different? How might this tie back to Carrillo Rowe's "feminist alliances?" Can we trace the influences of Mohanty's work through the *Feminism and War* anthology?

4/12 or 4/13

- Chandra T. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, Intro & Part 1
- Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart"

4/19 or 4/20 Pair 6 presentation

- Mohanty, Part 2 & 3

VII. Feminist Futures

In this final section we consider various possible futures for feminism and feminist theorizing. Scholars presented here are thinking critically about broad questions regarding teaching, activism, institutionalization, scholarship, and how we do (or don't) shape feminism's future.

Guiding Questions:

Which of these arguments resonate for you? Do you see feminism being disciplined in the academy? What types of relationships do we want between activism and the academy and must they always be without conflict? Do you believe there must always be a direct material consequence of feminist theorizing (there are echoes of Butler's call for valuing imagining here)? Do you believe we are reproducing feminism in our own image, and if so, is this a problem?

4/26 Chandra T. Mohanty video conference 3:10 to 4:30pm

Tuesday section members should try to arrange their schedules to be able to participate

4/26 or 4/27

- Laura Pulido, "FAQs: Frequently (Un)Asked Questions about Being a Scholar Activist"
- Julia Balen, "Practicing what we Teach"
- Optional: *Anticapitalist feminist struggle, and transnational solidarity* 70 min. video interview with Chandra T. Mohanty

5/3 or 5/4 Pair 7 presentation. Final Response Notes & DQs.

- Donaldson, Donadey, Stillman, "Subversive Couplings"
- James, Foster and Guy-Sheftall, Intro to *Still Brave*
- Diane Elam, "Taking Account of WS"
- Robyn Wiegman, "The Possibility of Women's Studies"

5/7 Final Papers due by 5pm at my office

5/10 or 5/11 Exam Week meeting Discuss final papers and wrap up

Full Citations for Course Materials (MLA format)

- Balén, Julia. "Practicing What We Teach." *Women's Studies for the Future*. Eds. Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky and Agatha Beins. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005. 272-84. Print.
- Barvosa-Carter, Edwina. "Strange Tempest: Agency, Poststructuralism, and the Shape of Feminist Politics to Come." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6 1-2 (2001): 123-37. Print.
- Bickford, Susan. "Anti-Anti-Identity Politics." *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Eds. Herrmann, Anne C. and Abigail J. Stewart. 2nd ed. Oxford: Westview Press, 2001. 56-77. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Carrillo Rowe, Aimee. *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. Print.
- Clare, Eli. *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*. 1st ed. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999. Print.
- Dill, Bonnie Thornton, and Maxine Baca Zinn. "Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 22 2 (1996): 321-32. Print.
- DiPalma, Carolyn, and Kathy E. Ferguson. "Clearing Ground and Making Connections: Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism." *Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies*. Eds. Davis, Kathy, Mary Edwards and Judith Lorber. London: Sage Publications, 2006. 127-45. Print.
- Donaldson, Laura E., Anne Donadey, and Jael Silliman. "Subversive Couplings: On Antiracism and Postcolonialism in Graduate Women's Studies." *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*. Ed. Wiegman, Robyn. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. 438-56. Print.
- Duggan, Lisa. "Making It Perfectly Queer." *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Eds. Herrmann, Anne C. and Abigail J. Stewart. 2nd ed. Oxford: Westview Press, 2001. 215-31. Print.
- "Theory in Practice: The Theory Wars, or, Who's Afraid of Judith Butler?" *Journal of Women's History* 10 1 (1998): 9-19. Print.
- Elam, Diane. "Taking Account of Women's Studies." *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*. Ed. Wiegman, Robyn. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. 218-23. Print.
- Flax, Jane. "The End of Innocence." *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Eds. Butler, Judith and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 445-63. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 575-99. Print.
- hooks, bell. "Theory as Liberatory Practice." *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Kolmar, Wendy and Frances Bartkowski. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1997. 28-33. Print.
- James, Stanlie M., Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. "Introduction." *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies*. Eds. James, Stanlie M., Frances Smith Foster and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: Feminist Press, 2009. xi-xxviii. Print.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.
- Moya, Paula M.L. "Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory." *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. Eds. McCann, Carole R. and Seung-kyung Kim. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2010. 463-81. Print.

- Pratt, Minnie Bruce. "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart." *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*. Eds. Bulkin, Elly, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith. Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1984. 9-64. Print.
- Pulido, Laura. "Fqas: Frequently (Un)Asked Questions About Being a Scholar Activist." *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Ed. Hale, Charles R. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 341-66. Print.
- Riley, Robin L., Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Minnie Bruce Pratt. *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism*. London: Zed Books, 2008. Print.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. "Deconstucting Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism." *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Eds. Herrmann, Anne C. and Abigail J. Stewart. 2nd ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 2001. 254-70. Print.
- Smith, Andrea, and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui. "Native Feminisms Engage American Studies." *American Quarterly* 60 2 (2008): 241-49. Print.
- Stryker, Susan. "Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question." *Feminist Frontiers*. Eds. Taylor, Verta, Nancy Whittier and Leila Rupp. 8th ed. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2009. 83-89. Print.
- Wiegman, Robyn. "The Possibility of Women's Studies." *Women's Studies for the Future*. Eds. Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky and Agatha Beins. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005. 40-60. Print.