The University of Western Ontario
Women’s Studies and Feminist Research
Fall 2019

WS 9550A – Feminist Theory

Class Time: Thursday 1:30 - 4:30 pm
Room: Lawson 2210
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Office hours: By appointment

Overarching rationale for the course

The slogan, “The Personal is Political,” remains the watch word of Second Wave feminist projects and continues to inform our ideas about feminist activist practice and the relationship between feminist theory and practice. The centrality of experience and the everyday as both the impetus for political change and the sites through which it might be manifested remains an important, if not unproblematic, tenet of feminist activism, organizing and theorizing. While this framing enabled feminist theorists to articulate a different, and potentially more inclusive, epistemological approach to knowledge and knowing, it is precisely this location within the particular and subjective which has rendered feminist interventions suspect within the wider academic community. Moreover, even as feminists were asserting the importance of making the personal political and locating both feminist political and artistic practice within the lived experience of women’s lives, trends within postmodernity and poststructuralist theory called into question the very ground on which this authority was established. At the same time, however, these new theoretical approaches opened up other possibilities for feminist scholars, thinkers and writers. Finally, the individualistic framing of this slogan, coupled with the liberal feminist praxis in which it first took hold and the ease with which its political message appeared to be trivialized, raised questions about the usefulness of this approach in relation to lasting social change.

Rather than dismiss “The Personal is Political” as a historical artifact, this course will seek to use it as a lens through which to ask questions about the development of feminist theory and its future as a way of understanding the world in which we live. Central to this lens will be an exploration of assumptions about subjectivity, subjecthood and the self which are implicit in the relation between the personal and political. In unpacking the assumptions that are central to
the linking of the personal and the political, we will consider how feminist theory has had to engage with questions of the self, subjectivity, agency and politics. Thus subjectivity is a productive site through which we might begin to interrogate questions that are central to both feminist theory and feminist practice: How do we understand the self and the subject and the self in relation to the other? In what ways are questions of subjectivity related to power and politics? How have debates around subjectivity and the self shaped feminist theoretical practices and vice versa? How can we start to account for the differential ways that agency has been taken up in relation to feminist theories and activist projects? How have feminist theories intersected with other theoretical approaches? What sorts of ethical issues are raised in relation to feminist theories of self, subjectivity and the other?

This course will enable students to
• explore a number of different approaches to feminist theory, recognizing similarities and interrogating differences between and among these approaches
• evaluate feminist theories in a critical and rigorous manner
• articulate how feminist theories shape academic research
• draw on feminist theories to explore their own areas of interest
• reflect on the relationship between feminist theory and ideas of subjectivity
• appreciate the iterative and reciprocal nature of feminist theory, practice and activism
• recognize political and ethical issues in relation to feminist theory
• consider the collaborative nature of feminist theory and practice

Texts

The instructor will provide access to the readings through E-Z proxy links on OWL. Students will be expected to purchase Sara Ahmed’s book, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke, 2017).

**Overarching rationale for assignments**

My intent in devising these assignments is threefold: firstly, I want to enable students to develop active reading skills, and to this end the presentations, weekly discussion posts, and response papers will encourage students to attend to what they are reading and reflect on it; secondly, I want students to begin to develop different kinds of academic writing skills, including, but not limited to, the formal academic essay; finally, I want to model for students the collaborative nature of feminist theory and practice and facilitate different sites of collaborative intellectual exchange, including on-line discussion posts, class discussions, response papers and feedback on essay proposals.

Particular skills which students are encouraged to develop include:
• the ability to read and evaluate feminist theory
• the ability to engage critically and actively with feminist texts
• the ability to develop analytical arguments, orally and across a number of different types of academic writing
• the ability to provide constructive criticism to peers

Assessment

Weekly Discussion Posts: 10 %

Due: each week there are readings assigned
Students are required to post a contribution to the on-line discussion on the course OWL site by 9 am Thursday each week. Students are also encouraged to comment on each other's discussion posts, either before or after class. Discussion posts may take the form of questions or self-reflexive comments and are intended to facilitate active reading. They will provide students with an opportunity to reflect on the material being covered each week and explore this reflection in writing on a weekly basis. Approximate length of your primary post should be 150 - 200 words. Your mark will be based on your best 10 postings.

Seminar Participation: 15 %

As this is a graduate class, active participation in weekly seminar discussions of the readings and other course materials is both expected and necessary. Students will also be expected to take the lead on discussing at least one reading with the class over the course. Rather than a formal presentation, in leading a discussion on the reading students are encouraged to engage with the argument presented and draw out tensions and possibilities within the readings, drawing out relevant existing and emerging themes, and posing questions which facilitate class discussion. Students will not receive a formal mark for leading a discussion, but will this will contribute substantially to the overall participation grade (worth 15%).

Conference Abstract: 5 %

Students will prepare an abstract for one of the two annual conferences (held as part of Congress each year): Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) or the Sexuality Studies Association (SSA). This abstract will respond to one of the Calls for Papers (CFPs) put out by these associations.

Due: October 17, 2019

Presentation of conference paper (6 pages) and participation in conference: 25 %

Students will deliver a 15 minute conference paper as part of a class conference. These papers are approximately 6 pages in length and should be delivered orally November 21, 2019. Two copies of the paper (as delivered on the conference day) are handed in on the day that the paper is delivered. Participation at the conference is mandatory and students are expected to participate by chairing, acting as assigned respondents to panels, and asking questions during the sessions.

Written Response to Conference Paper: (2 pages) 5 %

Due: November 28, 2019
Students will provide written feedback (of approximately 2 pages) on one of their classmate's conference papers. This feedback will be based on both the orally delivered paper (and discussion) as well as the written version of the paper. This feedback is intended to be framed as a peer review and is expected to be constructive, recognizing both strengths and weaknesses, and making suggestions for how the paper might be further developed.

**Journal Article: (15 -20 pages) 40 %
Due: December 20, 2019**

The final paper of the course is designed to provide students with the opportunity to develop their conference paper into a journal article for a relevant publication. This development includes responding to the publication requirements as set out for the journal in question (citation style, format etc.). Please identify the journal and include a copy of the publication requirements as part of your essay submission. Once you have read this, please email me a photo of your favourite feminist or queer theorist.

**Some policies:**

- Attendance Requirement: Students are expected to attend all classes. Failure to attend classes regularly, present material in class or participate in group activities such as the conference or abstract workshop, in the absence of a documented medical reason, will be reflected in the student's final grade.
- Laptop Policy: We will address the use of laptops during the first class. Regardless of the policy we arrive at, I reserve the right to ask any student to refrain from using their laptop computer. Mobile phones and other mobile devices are not permitted during class time.

The university regulations require that the following plagiarism information be included on all syllabi: **Scholastic Offences:**

“Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy. specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholoff.pdf’.” (see http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/exam/crsout.pdf)

**Specifically on Plagiarism:**

“Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing, such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offense (see the ‘Scholastic Offense Policy’ in the Western Academic Calendar). Plagiarism checking: The University of Western Ontario uses software for plagiarism checking. Students may be required to submit their written work in electronic form for plagiarism checking.” --- U.W.O. Senate statement on plagiarism

**Turnitin:**

"All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under licence to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licencing agreement currently
### Weekly Reading Schedule

#### Sept 5

**Introduction**

Dionne Brand, “Seeing” *Bread Out of Stone*

Riki Wilchins, "Introduction" *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*

Sara Ahmed, "Homework" in "Introduction" *Living a Feminist Life*

#### 12

**Theory**

Required:

Audre Lorde: “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” *Feminism and ‘Race’.* 89-92


Sara Ahmed, "Introduction" *Living a Feminist Life* 1-18


#### 19

**Knowledge**

Required:

Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 183-201


Sara Ahmed. "Feminism is Sensational" *Living a Feminist Life* 21-42.

#### 26

**Subjectivity**

Required:

Michel Foucault, “Power over Life” *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*

Judith Butler, “Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All” *Psychic Life of Power* 106 - 139


#### Oct 3

**Ethics**

Required:

bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology* 178 - 194
Sara Ahmed, “Fragile Connections.” *Living a Feminist Life* 163 -186

10 **Intersectionality**
Required:
Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within” *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology* 155-178
Sara Ahmed. “Trying to Transform” *Living a Feminist Life* 94-114
“Being in Question” *Living a Feminist Life* 115-134

17 **Affect**
Required:
Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” *The Affect Theory Reader* 93- 117

24 **Language/Embodiment**
Required: TBA
Visiting Speaker: Nicole Brossard

31 **Labour**
Required:

Nov 7 Reading Break

14 Materiality
Required:
Sara Ahmed, “Lesbian Feminism” Living a Feminist Life 213-234

21 Student Conference

28 Connections
Required:
Lorraine Mayer, “A Return to Reciprocity” Hypatia 22.3 (2007) 22-42

Dec 5 Futures
Required: