

Syllabus

COURSE: Critical Perspectives on Gender

DATE: Spring, 2010

COURSE #: 640/650:250
Reineke

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Martie

TIME: T/H 2-3:15 p.m.

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TEXTS:

Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter; Undoing Gender*

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer* (on reserve, also available in E-Library at Rod Library)

Toni Morrison, *Recitatif* by (on reserve)

Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*

PURPOSE:

In this course, students will give close attention to a body of work that today comprises key portions of the literature of feminist theory. This course will be taught from a feminist perspective. Consequently, the professor and students in this course will assume throughout that what is meant by such terms as "female," "woman," and "sexual difference" is worthy of sustained reflection and systematic analysis. Further, in this course, students will seek not only to understand received images and texts of gender, but also to locate the means to modify and challenge the cultural traditions that they explore. In this respect, the intellectual traditions out of which feminist theorists work will not be exempt from criticism; rather, they likewise will be subjected to rigorous critique. This course is organized around the consideration of two theoretical traditions that have influenced feminist theories in the last two decades: poststructuralism and psychoanalysis.

Poststructuralism and Feminist Theory: "Poststructuralism" is a term applied to a range of thinkers, including Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, and Foucault. Although there is considerable variation among these theorists, they do share one factor: each understands that *language* is the place where forms of social organization are defined and contested. By means of language and the institutions in which language is expressed, social control is exerted over what counts as knowledge. Poststructuralists seek to understand how language works on behalf of power and to explore the possibilities of counter-discourses.

Poststructuralists suggest also that language is the site for the construction of subjectivity. This means that poststructuralism offers no notion of a unified subject who enters history already formed; rather, the subject of poststructuralism is socially produced. The possibilities for human identity are plural and historically specific: "woman," for example, has no fixed meaning, but is socially constructed within language. Consequently, how humans order their lives depends on the range and social power of the discourses that constitute them. Moreover, humans find themselves located in and structured by discursive fields that often organize social institutions and processes in competing ways.

Feminist theorists appeal to poststructuralist models in order to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change. In discourse theory, poststructuralists offer feminists a means to understand how subjects and social institutions are ordered. Because poststructuralism decenters the rational, self-present subject of classical liberalism or humanism and replaces that subject with a subject in process who is produced in language, poststructuralism makes it possible to thematize subjectivity as a site of struggle open to emancipation.

Psychoanalysis and Feminist Theory: Situated at the crossroads of the disciplines of the social sciences and humanities, psychoanalysis is interrogated today by the most vigorous methodologies in the humanities and social sciences: feminism, Marxism, and poststructuralism among them. In turn, psychoanalysis enriches the study of literature, history, philosophy, and women's and gender studies. Essays and works studied in this course participate in the lively interaction of psychoanalysis and other disciplines as these disciplines focus, in particular, on the theme of sexual difference.

Psychoanalysis consists of diverse schools of thought, embracing such elements as American ego psychology, British object relations theory, and Lacanian theory. In this course, attention will be focused primarily on feminist psychoanalytic theorists who are influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Like poststructuralist theories, Lacanian-influenced psychoanalytic theories are important to feminists because they challenge those who would assume a unified, self-present subject of rationality or a simple biological determination of femininity and masculinity. In the Lacanian tradition, the subject of psychoanalysis is a fiction, a fragile creation of history. Indeed, within that history, framed by a phallogocentric fantasy of men, "women" do not exist. Feminist psychoanalytic theory in the Lacanian tradition attempts to understand oppression in light of this view of the subject. Most significantly, it considers ways in which that theory can positively contribute to feminist politics and emancipatory interests. In doing so, it emphasizes aspects of psychoanalytic theory that Lacan overlooks: the very earliest moments in individual history during which each human becomes a subject. In particular, feminist psychoanalytic theory seeks to understand how the notion of the unconscious, implicated in the fantasy of subjectivity and its repetitive posings, also points to an excess of desire that can be evocative of emancipating agency. Building on such insights, feminist psychoanalytic theory posits a subject who is capable of agency: it can make autonomous decisions and act freely.

Given the tenacity, centrality, and power in our lives of a sense of gendered existence, that psychoanalytic theories offer sustained analyses of sexual difference suggests that, if feminists are not to "reinvent the wheel," they should give careful attention to explorations of sexual difference within the psychoanalytic tradition. Specifically, psychoanalytic theory warrants attention by feminists because of its analyses of the development of sexually differentiated subjectivity and the construction and reconstruction of a felt past in the present. Building on that assumption, feminist, psychoanalytic theorists address the intersections of sexual difference with race, class, and ethnicity. Their insights make substantive contributions to feminist reflections on these topics.

COURSE STRUCTURE:

This course will not be a survey of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theorists. Instead, students in the course will engage in close readings of several representative texts. This approach has several strengths: through in-depth and intensive analysis of these texts, students will become well acclimated to key aspects of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories. They will develop reading and critical skills that they may take with them outside the course and on which they may draw to constructively engage other theorists. The approach of this course also has one notable weakness: because it is not a survey course, students will not be introduced to the diversity of theories associated with these two contemporary schools of thought. In particular, the diversity of psychoanalytic theory will not be represented in the course. Nevertheless, because the texts selected are challenging, an in-depth rather than survey approach to the subject is warranted.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand the writings of representative figures who write about gender from a poststructuralist or psychoanalytic perspective. Ask yourself if you are getting a clear idea of what each author is saying. Do the various points fit together? What is still unclear? Jot down your questions as you read the texts and share them in the next class period.

2. To master basic concepts in poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories, especially those that are advanced from a feminist perspective. Throughout the semester you will be introduced to "tools" of analysis of central importance to contemporary theorists of gender. You will be expected to grow in awareness of these tools and to take preliminary steps toward using these tools in your own analyses of gender.

3. To critically reflect upon the texts and to articulate your own views of the strengths and weaknesses of each thinker's argument. To what do you react positively? Why? To what do you react negatively? Why? What elements of the argument are insightful? What elements are problematic?

4. To personally assimilate the material. Following your critical evaluation of the texts, there will be some ideas and insights that you will want to keep. You will be on your way to your final goal in this class: to arrive at your own view of theories of gender that draw on poststructuralist and psychoanalytic resources and to synthesize this view with other perspectives on gender with which you may be familiar. At this point, you may want to move outward in your thought to examine the intersection of the ideas we have discussed in class with ideas about gender that you have entertained in other contexts or classes.

EVALUATION AND CLASS PROCEDURES:

Graduate study of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories works best when it is pursued as a communal, conversational effort. Class discussions will comprise a major part of this course and will play a crucial role in facilitating reading comprehension of the challenging texts we will be exploring. As a consequence, you should aim for **as close to perfect attendance as is possible**. Formal evaluations will focus on essay exams, not on classroom activities. However, students will be responsible for key aspects of classroom leadership and will be given regular written assignments to prepare them for this leadership.

You will write a take-home essay exam on each book in the course. These exams will be graded on a 90/80/70/60 percentage basis. The final grade will be based on a total of these individual grades.

ACADEMIC ETHICS:

To assist students in their efforts to meet graduate-level expectations for academic ethics, essay

exams will be submitted by students to Turnitin.com. Students will have access to the Turnitin reports. These reports flag problematic paraphrasing, which can assist students in developing stronger writing skills. Turnitin reports also flag more egregious violations of academic ethics: the copying of materials without citation. Any documented violations of academic ethics will be reported to the Office of Academic Affairs and will result in a grade of "F" for the course. In this course, UNI's Academic Ethics Policies are strictly enforced. These policies are posted at <http://www.uni.edu/policies/301>. Students are responsible for knowing these policies.

THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT OF 1990 (ADA)

The ADA provides protection from illegal discrimination for qualified individuals with disabilities. Students requesting instructional accommodations due to disabilities will want to arrange for such accommodation through the Office of Disability Services. The ODS is located in 103 Student Health Center (273-2676). Assistive Testing Services are provided to enrolled students approved by the University of Northern Iowa Office of Disabilities Services for accommodations. Alternative testing formats, as well as auxiliary aids such as readers, scribes, or assistive technology, are available. Tests are to be scheduled in advance with the Department of Academic Services -- Examination Services office. The test service is provided for University course tests and final examinations (not quizzes) to students enrolled in classes that are unable to provide the approved accommodations (i.e. extended time, large print options, reader/recorder, or computer testing). Course testing accommodations are based on disability documentation as determined by the University of Northern Iowa Disabilities Services.

CALENDAR:

January 12 – Introduction; lecture on Butler

January 14 - Butler, Bodies That Matter, 1-16, 28-36

January 19 - Butler, Ch. 1 cont.

January 21 - view Paris is Burning

January 26 - Butler, Ch. 4

January 28 - Larsen - Passing

February 2 - Butler, Ch. 6

February 4 - Butler, Ch. 8. Exam assigned.

February 9 - Butler exam due. Introduction to *Undoing Gender*.

February 11 – Butler, pp. 1-28

February 16 –Butler, 28-56

February 18 – Butler, Chs. 3-4

February 23 – Butler, Ch. 6 (presupposes Ch. 5)

February 25 – Butler, Ch. 9-10 (redux). Exam assigned.

March 2 – Butler exam due. No class.

March 4 – Crooks, 1-30

March 9 – Crooks, 1-30 continued

March 11 - Crooks 30-56

March 23 – Discussion of Conrad.

March 25 – Crooks, Ch. 2 (Conrad)

March 30 – view Suture.

April 1 – Crooks, Ch. 4

April 6 – Discussion of Morrison.

April 8 – Crooks, Ch. 5 & 6 (Morrison). Crooks exam assigned.

April 13 – Crooks exam due. Introduction to Mahmood.

April 15 – Mahmood, Ch. 1

April 20 – Mahmood, Ch. 2

April 22 – Mahmood, Chs. 3 & 4

April 27 – Mahmood, Ch. 5

April 29 – Mahmood Ch. 5 continued and Epilogue

Wed. May 5 – Final consultation 2-3 p.m. (my office); Exam due Thursday May 6 – 5 p.m. Under Baker 151 door.

Syllabus

Class Work

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