

University of Wisconsin, Madison
English 822 (Section 2): Topics in Theory

Divergent Feminisms

Class Meetings:

M, 1:00 PM-3:30 PM, 7109 HCW

Office Hours:

M 10-12 Noon 7165 HCW

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Course Description:

The “second wave” of US-American feminism, which exploded onto the political and cultural scene in the early 1970s, was arguably one of the most revolutionary, and successful, rebellions against heteropatriarchy in human history. Composed of a multi-racial coalition of former Civil Rights and New Left activists, professional educators, seasoned political organizers, and college-age youth, this movement not only demanded the equal humanity and civil standing of women everywhere, but the potential liberation of all human beings from the constraints of normative gender and sexuality. Yet today on the social justice left, and in the writings of many queer and feminist theorists, second wave feminism is viewed retroactively as a regressive movement characterized by pervasive whiteness, transphobia, liberal pandering to the state, and essentialist understandings of biological womanhood. From this perspective, contemporary social movements like transgender liberation and intersectional and abolitionist feminisms, are seen as a necessary and progressive break from, and improvement upon, 1970s feminist thought and practice, rather than productive interlocutors to, or beneficiaries of, its legacy.

Against this logic, this advanced graduate seminar will explore recent work in feminist theory that reclaims the rebellious, world-making spirit of projects for gender and sexual freedom, while refusing traditional feminist orthodoxies, including notions of universal sisterhood, the idealization (or wholesale rejection) of mothering, and an understanding of women’s trauma as the shared basis for their collective political power. We will conceive of this body of thought as composing an archive of *divergent* feminisms, which draw theoretical dynamism from the original feminist impulse to deviate, divest, or break free from the logic of heteropatriarchy. In this sense, far from a regressive, essentialist politics obsessively committed to identifying a singular essence or experience of women’s subordination, we will understand feminism as a productive form of apostasy or *anti-orthodoxy* that begins with the anarchist rejection of patriarchal worldviews, ideologies, and forms of domination, and continues with the imaginative reinvention of all gendered and sexual categories from rigidly hierarchized identities to creative sites of unrestrained invention.

Toward this end, we will look at feminist political theories that consider the category of “woman” as an ever-evolving, flexible figure of collective solidarity deeply intertwined with, but never reducible to, the oppression of so-called cis women; trans-feminist theory that conceives of feminist and transgender political projects as productively aligned, and mutually influencing, rather than inherently opposed or discordant; Black feminist theorizing, which encourages the release of critical race studies’ proprietary ownership of theoretical categories like *intersectionality* so that they might travel into new and unexpected intellectual and political contexts; and feminist theory written by straight and gay cis men deeply invested in feminism’s promise of a world free from heteronormative policing for people of all gender and sexual expressions. Some of the theorists we will read include: Linda Zerilli, Jennifer Nash, Marquis Bey, Janet Halley, Michael Awkward, Ann Snitow, Erica Edwards, Gloria Anzaldúa, Duncan Kennedy, and Robyn Wiegman.

Image credit: Lynda Benglis, “Fling, Dribble, and Drip,” *Life Magazine*, February 27, 1970.

What are we learning?

On its face, this course offers students a sustained intellectual journey through a range of (mostly recent) feminist and queer theories which have actively sought to pluralize, proliferate, and set loose competing, sometimes even utterly incommensurate, frameworks for apprehending gender and sexuality. These theories find intellectual frisson, political possibility, social conviviality, and libidinal pleasure in gender and sexuality's extraordinary *contingency*, and commit to a rigorous anti-essentialism about these terms, rather than hitching their star to any "drop dead elegant" unified theory of gender and sexual identity, patriarchal domination, or heteronormative schema (though they may be inspired by and even respect theorizations of all three).

Contingency describes the world's fundamental unpredictability, and consequently the radical uncertainty and variability of all historical phenomenon, while anti-essentialism is a stance or intellectual orientation that questions attempts to understand history, identity, the body, or social relations in universal, natural, or monolithic terms. In that vein, beyond its rich exploration of feminist and queer theoretical concerns, "Divergent Feminisms" is more broadly intended to reorient, and perhaps help us *loosen our grip on*, each of our existing scholarly preoccupations with fixed time periods, political ideals, ideological or theoretical investments, and objects or fields of study. The point is not to lose all our bearings, abandon our investments, or believe in nothing, but rather to develop a more supple, and open-hearted relationship to intellectual *change* and *transformation*, which might also make us more open to gender and sexuality as vast, open-ended fields of desire and creative possibility rather than closed social and psychic systems we either rail against or deify in an endless dualism.

This course then, will introduce you to feminist and queer theoretical and cultural texts that provide examples of contingent thought, that might inspire you to figure out your own, while lovingly questioning whatever ground you claim to stand on. We can identify some of the concrete outcomes of this endeavor: by encountering feminist and queer theory produced by scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, cultural identities, and generations, you will develop the capacity to see various theoretical traditions as highly complex, intricate sets of multi-capillaried conversations inflected by the wildly divergent temperaments, political commitments, and worldviews of their creators. Through engagement with scholarship in multiple disciplines, you will become more skilled at understanding and intervening in conversations taking place in fields beyond your immediate expertise. And because of the eclectic combination of texts drawn together each week, you will become a more acute curator of scholarly and cultural texts in your own research and teaching. All of these skills will evolve organically, but ultimately, the point is to expand your imagination about what you can think, what kind of scholar you can possibly be or become, and what kind of knowledge you can produce and share with others in an increasingly fragmented and chaotic world. In this sense, our course goals are themselves contingent, since the outcome of each person's potential transformation as a thinker cannot be known in advance. At its most ambitious this seminar imparts *an orientation of intellectual generosity* and an openness to surprise and wonder in ideas, just as much as in the categories of gender and sexuality, rather than any singular body of knowledge or method of analysis.

What are we writing?

This course has four assignments, which include: 1) weekly 500-word discussion post responding to our assigned course reading; 2) the development of a detailed study guide for various texts in the course (each student will do this twice throughout the semester based on two texts of their choosing); 3) a 700-word project proposal; and 4) a 30-page final seminar paper.

Instructions on assignments 1 and 2:

Each week, members of the seminar will post a 500-word (minimum) response to the reading on the discussion board by 9 PM Sunday night. This is to give everyone a little bit of time to scan people's comments before our class session on Monday afternoon. Your post should zero-in on a particular question, concept, idea, or moment in the text that particularly stood out to you. Rather than merely summarize or describe this specific aspect of the reading, play around with ideas; explicate what this or that concept did for your intellectual imagination; or reconstruct the lines of flight the text took you down as you digested a new way looking at the world. These should be clearly written and well-organized thought experiments (no stream-of-consciousness writing), BUT I don't want you spending any more than thirty minutes on them. They do not need to be the most polished piece of writing in your oeuvre. I want you to practice collating your ideas quickly and acutely, without too much fuss or agonizing. The point of this is to start practicing getting your thoughts in order with swiftness and verve, which is a key part of being an academic that many people do not train in: simply coming up with ideas on the fly and doing something with them that's inventive and thought provoking. That's ultimately your "magic trick," and a skill worth honing along with a variety of others.

Simultaneously, one person each week will produce a review sheet providing a road-map of the text we read. Think of this as a study guide, offering an overview of the book's major intervention(s), defining its central terms, identifying examples from the text (the kinds of close readings, case studies, or analyses at the heart of the project), and perhaps providing some of your own commentary. Whoever is assigned to produce this study guide will kick off our discussion by sharing with the class how they went about developing the review and what burning question the book or essay left them thinking about. There is no set template for this study guide / review sheet. Rather, I'd like each student to develop their own approach. Consider what kind of structure would be most useful to you as a scholar who needs a solid explanation of a book and its main ideas / concepts. How would you restate the book's key arguments, and the arc of the chapters, in your own words (in, say, three solid paragraphs?). What examples would you draw out from the text that are important to understanding its central claims? What terms are necessary to know and how are they deployed in the text? Basically, a kind of "cheat sheet" for anyone preparing to take up this text in a comprehensive exam essay. Since we all have different ways of doing this, or conceptualizing note taking, I want each one to take its own form based on your particular approach (divergence, after all, is the key theme of the course :) This guide is due should be emailed to all the members of the class by 10 AM on Monday mornings.

Required Texts:

The texts below are required. They are available for purchase at the University Bookstore or online. I recommend Bookshop.org, BetterWorldBooks, Powell's Bookstore or other independent online retailers that support local booksellers. All texts marked with * in the syllabus will be available on Canvas for download. If you are able to, I highly encourage you to print out and take notes directly on all course texts posted to Canvas.

- Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrí Moraga, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color: 40th Anniversary Edition* (New York: SUNY Press, 2021 [1981]).
- Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021)
- Paisley Currah, *Sex is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 2022)
- Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangement and Human Malaise* (New York: Other Press, 2021 [1976]).
- Erica Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 2021).
- Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* (New York: NYU Press, 2022)
- Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)
- Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)
- Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

This is a reading intensive, graduate theory seminar, which means you will need to manage your time well, plan ahead for each week of reading and viewing, and commit significant time to prepare for our discussions. Officially speaking: the credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities across the semester (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, and other student work as described in the syllabus. That is roughly ten hours of work a week. If you are putting in this kind of time and still struggling to keep up with the course readings, we will thoughtfully trim readings as we go along. At all times, the syllabus can be subject to change at my discretion as an instructor.

Attendance Policy: Attendance and participation at every class session is mandatory. That means not only showing up, but being awake, attentive, and actively engaged in our meetings. Most importantly, this includes coming to class having completed that day's reading (and viewing) assignments, taken careful notes on all these items, and prepared to engage in dialogue about them. I will grant each student one excused absence for any reason; all other unexcused absences will incur the 5% participation grade deduction listed above. **With this in mind, remember that anytime you miss a class session, you lose the opportunity to participate in a**

completely original intellectual event that can never be reproduced or adequately conveyed after the fact. This loss is no small thing.

Covid-19: I am acutely aware that the conditions of the covid pandemic might create obstacles to a consistent attendance record: please inform me of all unforeseeable absences, such as those caused by severe illness or a personal emergency, as soon as possible. I will do everything in my power to accommodate unexpected changes in anyone's personal circumstances. Your health and wellbeing are paramount.

Disability Support Services: At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

Part I: Embracing a “Feminism of Uncertainty”

Week 1: “Feminism is Inevitably a Mixed Form”

Monday, January 30

Ann Snitow, “The Feminism of Uncertainty,” “A Gender Diary,” and “Critiquing a Gender Diary,” from *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 1-67.

Gloria Anzaldúa, selections from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987): 1-13, 77-91.

Robyn Wiegman, “Doing Justice with Objects or ‘The Progress of Gender,’” in *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 37-90.

Patrick D. Hopkins, “How Feminism Made a Man Out of Me: The Proper Subject of Feminism and the Problem of Men,” in *Men Doing Feminism* ed. Tom Digby (New York: Routledge, 1998): 33-56.

Week 2: Learning to Diverge

Monday, February 6

Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (2006)

Week 3: Learning to Go Ahead

Monday, February 13

Screening: **Thelma & Louise** (Scott, 1991)

Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2005)

Week 4: Learning to Let Go

Monday, February 20

Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019)

Michael Awkward, "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism," in *Men Doing Feminism* ed. Tom Digby (1998): 147-170.

Part II: Back to the Feminist Future (Or, Rethinking the Legacies of Second-Wave Feminism)

Week 5: Building Feminist Bridges

Monday, February 27

Screening: **Terminator: Dark Fate** (Miller, 2019)

Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherri Moraga, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (2021 [1981])

Week 6: Imagining More Life-Affirming Sexual Arrangements

Monday, March 6

Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangement and Human Malaise* (2021 [1976]). Read Preface, Chapters 1-4, 8-10.

Joan Nestle, "My Mother Liked to Fuck," reprinted in *A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings* (2023 [1981])*

Duncan Kennedy, "Sexual Abuse, Sexy Dressing, and the Eroticization of Domination," *New England Law Review* 26 (1992): 1309-1393.*

Week 7: Spring Break

Week 8: Inhabiting Multiple Identities

Monday, March 20

Rostom Mesli, "In Defense of Identity Politics: A Queer Reclamation of a Radical Concept," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan department of Comparative Literature, 2015)*

Week 9: Crafting Feminist and Queer Forms

Monday, March 27 [Guest instructor Elaine Cannell]

Screening: **Born in Flames** (Borden, 1983)

Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* (2022)

Week 10: Assembling a Black Feminist Vanguard

Monday, April 3

Erica Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (2021)

Part III:

From "What is a Woman?" to "What Could a Woman Be?": Expanding the Radical Promise of Feminist Freedom

Week 11: How to Become Fugitive

Monday, April 10

Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (2021)

Week 12: How to Become a Crip Feminist

Monday, April 17

Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013)

Merri Lisa Johnson, "Neuroqueer Feminism: Turning with Tenderness to Borderline Personality Disorder," *Signs* 46.3 (Spring 2021): 635-662.

Week 13: How to Become Just

Monday, April 24

Paisley Currah, *Sex is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* (2022)

Week 14: How to Become a Beginner (at Feminism)

Monday, May 1

Screening: **Beginners** (Mills 2011)

Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto, eds., “Feminism’s Bad Objects,” Special Issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* edited by Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto (Forthcoming Spring 2023)