

# WS 1142: Feminist Theory

Tu/Th 9:30-10:45 am

Fall 2003

## Professor Carrie Rentschler

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Office Hours: Tu/Th 10:45-12:00, or by appointment.

## Course Description

This course examines several key concepts in feminist thought -- such as experience, knowledge, patriarchy, embodiment and gender -- that enable us to expand how we think about feminist issues. You likely learned in Women and Society (or another introductory Women's Studies course) about the diverse and unevenly distributed problems women face as women, from racial discrimination to economic and sexual exploitation, second-class citizen status, heteronormativity and the expectation of motherhood, and health crises, among others. This course aims to help us think about these problems and their interconnectedness in "the big picture." How do our understandings of what it means to be women and men constrain, improve and otherwise shape our experiences of life and our perspectives on the world? How is lived experience different from and similar to what we claim to know about gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and power? What are some of the limits of personal experience when we theorize gender and power? How might we expand the ways we can think about gender as a social construct?

These and other questions will orient our reading and thinking in the course over the semester. For our purposes, we will approach theory as a set of practices rather than a collection of texts. Theory is a means of thinking systematically, and it is best done through combination and synthesis. This course aims to make this kind of systematic thinking possible.

## Course Readings

A packet of required readings has been prepared for this course. It can be purchased at the Pitt Bookstore on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, or checked out from reserves at Hillman Library. Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed* is also available at the bookstore on 5<sup>th</sup> -- three of its chapters are required reading for the course. Readings are due on the date in which they are listed in the course schedule below.

## Assignments and Grading

Below is a general outline of assignments for the semester. The specifics of each major assignment will be explained over the duration of the course. The numbers in brackets indicate the cumulative weight of each category toward the semester grade. Please note: students must turn in all assignments to pass the course.

*Journals* [10%]: Students will write an informal journal of 1-2 pages on the readings or on a topic from class discussion every other week. These journals will be exchanged in class with another student, and each student will write a short response to the journal they have received for the next week. The journals and responses will be graded lightly; your professor will not grade each journal you write. This assignment will be explained more in a handout.

*Class Presentations* [20%]: Student-led discussions will comprise a good portion of our in-class work over the semester. Each student will lead class discussion two times during the semester by presenting a **2-3 page discussion paper** on the assigned reading. The paper should not summarize the reading, but instead should indicate specific ideas and particular passages from the text that shaped your response to it. What interested you? What perplexed you? What pissed you off? What seemed right on? What seemed wrong? Why? At the end of your paper, you should pose two to three questions for the class to discuss. Bring enough copies of your paper for each class member. To begin our sessions, we will read the paper together out loud. Then you will be in charge, ready to initiate the discussion. Our collective goals in each session will be to have open and respectful conversation, become aware of the concerns and assumptions underlying each reading, and engage in the process of synthesizing ideas and questions across readings.

*Short Essays* [60%]: Students will write **three** short essays over the term of the semester. The purpose of the essay assignment is to enable you to engage more in-depth with a course concept, either through careful analysis of one or more authors' use and definition of a concept, or through the application of a concept to an object, issue or relationship of your choice. Essays should be 5-6 pages in length, which requires you to adequately narrow your choice of concept and what you want to say about it.

*Participation* [10%]: As a discussion class, your professor encourages participation! Participation means attending *all* class meetings, being prepared and attentive, having something relevant to ask or tell, and being respectful and courteous to your classmates and your professor. Students are expected to read course materials closely, and be prepared to substantively discuss and argue about ideas. Take notes and mark key passages in the texts we read to help stimulate discussion questions. **To help facilitate open discussion, students are required to prepare a discussion question on the reading for each class day.** Each student should expect to contribute a question to each day's discussion. Note that no participation means 0% (regular absences, have not done the reading, not prepared for discussion, does not speak in class), moderate/adequate participation means 5% (no absences, have done the reading, ready for discussion, will speak in class), and exceptional participation means 10% (no absences, have carefully done the reading, regularly speaks in class and routinely adds important material and insight to the discussion, asks excellent questions).

## **Ground Rules for Class Discussion**

Discussion will make up a great percentage of our time in class. Following a few basic discussion guidelines will help insure that this time is productive, enlightening and fun.

1. Follow the golden rule. Treat others as you would like to be treated.
2. Wait your turn – do not interrupt others.
3. You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.

4. Disagreements are natural and welcome in scholarly discussion. So are arguments. But arguments are not contests. You should grant the same courtesy and respect to the people with whom you disagree that you would want for yourself.
5. Students bring lots of interesting experiences to the classroom, and you are encouraged to bring up your experience when it is relevant to class discussion (and when you feel comfortable doing so). Everyone's personal experience deserves respect. But if you bring up your own experience in class, please recognize that it becomes a public topic for discussion. Others may interpret your experience differently than you do, and they are free to respectfully disagree with your interpretation.

## Course Policies

### 1. Attendance: VERY IMPORTANT

We will treat this course like a seminar, which means your attendance at every meeting is very important. You are paying for an opportunity to learn. Absences hurt your ability to learn and they hurt your grade. Signing up for this class indicates that you are committed to being here for the full class period each class meeting. **For the purposes of this policy, you are either present for an entire class meeting or not. Late arrivals and early departures will count as absences — really.**

**You are allowed two unexcused absences over the course of the semester. Save them up for those awful sick days when you can't drag yourself to class without pain and embarrassing bouts of nausea. For each absence above two, your semester grade will be reduced by 1/3 grade. Further, in-class assignments and quizzes cannot be made up. If you miss class, you are still responsible for whatever was covered in lecture and discussion that day. YOUR PROFESSOR IS VERY SERIOUS ABOUT THIS POLICY, AND SHE ENFORCES IT.**

Unexcused absences in excess of two will be excused only under exceptional and unavoidable circumstances. Requests for excused absences must be submitted in writing, with documentation, and immediately upon a student's return to class. **Students who enroll late are not exempt from this policy.**

### 2. Assignments and Extensions

Assignments (except for quizzes, in-class work, and the like) will be announced well in advance of due dates. If you know in advance that you can't make a due date, please discuss it with me beforehand. In all other cases, late assignments will not be accepted.

### 3. Grades

I am eager to help you do well on assignments before they are due. Please visit me during office hours to ask me questions when you are working on an assignment or reviewing material.

Grades are final. I grade assignments and quizzes on performance, not effort. Under no circumstance will I award a grade of "incomplete" for the course.

Final grades will be based on the standard university scale:

90-100% = A range	60-69% = D range
80-89% = B range	0-59% = F
70-79% = C range	

The professor reserves the right to adjust students' semester grades based upon her evaluation of their overall performance. Grades are not given out over email or the telephone.

#### 4. **Accommodations**

If you require special testing accommodations or other classroom modifications, please notify both the professor and Disability Resources and Services by the end of the first week of the term. Disability Resources and Services is located in 216 William Pitt Union (648-7890 [voice or TDD]), and their website is at: [<http://www.drs.pitt.edu>]. If you have a physical disability, please let me know as early as you can so that I can accommodate you. If you have a learning disability that affects the amount of time you need to complete assignments, please let me know as early as possible so I can understand your limitations. If you have an emotional disability (which may limit your ability to effectively discuss particular topics), you need only disclose this to me if you are requesting particular accommodations.

#### 5. **Nondiscrimination Statement**

As a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, I value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic/cultural diversity. Be assured that I will promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, disability, or status as a disabled veteran or a veteran of the Vietnam era. In addition to the University's policy, and within the bounds of the course, I do not discriminate on the basis of political creed. This means that you do not have to agree with me in order to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material, you are under no obligation to agree with it. I also make every effort to avoid discrimination on the basis of class or income. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

#### 6. **Other Policies You Should Know**

Student Code of Conduct: [<http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/usjs/code.html>]

Academic Integrity: [<http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/ai1.html>]

Plagiarism is using someone else's ideas as your own. If you use someone else's ideas, you are expected to cite them. If you use someone else's exact words, even if it is part of a sentence, you should put quotation marks around them and cite them. Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and can result in failure of the assignment, the course, and other serious sanctions. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please see me.

## **Semester Schedule of Readings and Assignments**

### **Tuesday August 26: Introduction to the course.**

#### **Concept: Power in the Classroom**

### **Thursday August 28: Gender and Pedagogy**

Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler (1990) "Power Relationships in the Classroom" In Susan Gabriel and Isaiah Smithson (Eds.). *Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 41-59.

### **Tuesday September 2: Responsible and Shared Authority**

Joreen (1973) "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" In Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone (Eds.). *Radical Feminism*. New York: Quadrangle, 285-299.

Reading Questions: According to Kramarae and Treichler, how is power in the classroom experienced differently by gender? What has your experience of college classrooms been like? What would like to change about these experiences? Does Joreen offer any ideas for how to make power accountable in the classroom? How can we, students and professor, share power in the classroom? What ideas can you offer? Look over the syllabus: are there changes you want to make?

#### **Concept: Oppression**

### **Thursday September 4: Intersecting Oppressions**

Marilyn Frye (1983/1998). "Oppression" In Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill-Collins (Eds.) *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 48-52 (originally published in Frye's *The Politics of Reality*).

Cherrie Moraga (1983). "La Güera" In Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Eds.) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 27-34.

Reading Questions: How does Frye define oppression? What does Frye mean when she says oppressions are networked? Why are oppressed people routinely faced with double-binds? How do Moraga and Frye both explain the phenomenon of intersecting oppressions and privilege?

#### **Concept: Experience**

**Tuesday September 9:** Joan Scott (1992). "Experience" In Judith Butler and Joan Scott (Eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York: Routledge, 22-40.

### **Thursday September 11- Tuesday September 16: Theorizing the History of Second Wave Feminism**

Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, 24-82.

Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, 63-140.

Reading Questions: What is Scott's critique of the way historians and critics use the term "experience"? What are the limitations of using experience as a form of evidence? Using Scott's theory of experience, how do Evans and Rosen use experience to tell their histories? How do Rosen and Evans tell the history of the second wave women's movement differently?

### **Concept: Raced Epistemology**

**Thursday September 18:** Patricia Hill Collins (2000) "Black Feminist Epistemology" In Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2d ed. New York: Routledge, 251-272.

**Tuesday September 23 - Thursday September 25: How Race and Racism are Learned**

Ruth Frankenberg (1993). "Growing Up White: The Social Geography of Race" In *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 43-70

Lorraine Delia Kenny (2000). "I was a Teenage White Supremacist" In *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class and Female*. Rutgers University Press, 136-166.

Reading Questions: How does Collins define black feminist epistemology? How does it differ from other forms of knowledge? How do Frankenberg and Kenny construct knowledge about women's experiences of race? How does Frankenberg explain the connection between the material and physical realities of race and how whiteness gets constructed as a racial identity? Does Kenny's analysis of the suburban teenage white supremacist help you think about the relationship between overt and more covert forms of racism?

### **Concept: Patriarchy**

**Tuesday September 30:** Cheris Kramarae (1992). "The Condition of Patriarchy" In Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender (Eds.) *The Knowledge Explosion: Generations of Feminist Scholarship*. Teachers College, Columbia University, 397-405.

**Thursday October 2 - Tuesday October 7: Theorizing Reproduction and Family**

Stephanie Coontz (1992). "Pregnant Girls, Wilding Boys, Crack Babies, and the Underclass: The Myth of Black Family Collapse," *The Way We Never Were*. New York: Basic Books, 232-254.

Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (1998). "Working Without a Net: Poor Mothers Raising their Families" In *The Unknown City: Lives of Poor and Working Class Young Adults*. Boston: Beacon Press, 186-205.

Reading Questions: How has patriarchy been defined? According to Kramarae, of what importance is the concept to feminists? According to Coontz, Fine and Weis, how does the myth of the American nuclear family support institutionalized racist patriarchy? How do the women in Fine and Weis' ethnography define motherhood differently from middle class norms of "good mothering"? How does each author challenge these norms?

### **Thursday October 9: Review Day**

## **Concept: Gender**

**Tuesday October 14:** Monique Wittig (1997/197?) "One is Not Born a Woman" In Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. New York: Routledge, 265-271.

### **Thursday October 16: When Women Identify with Masculinity**

Ana Cox, Freya Johnson, Annalee Newitz, and Jillian Sandell (1997). "Masculinity without Men: Women Reconciling Feminism and Male-Identification" In Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Eds.). *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 178-199.

Reading Questions: How does Wittig define lesbianism? What does Wittig mean by "woman as myth"? The women who wrote "Masculinity without Men" all identify differently with masculinity and femininity. How do they talk about gender as a kind of public performance? In what ways do they trouble many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about being "men" and "women"?

**(ALSO on the 16<sup>th</sup>): Verda Taylor lecture on drag**

### **Friday October 17: Women's Studies Screening of the Film "The Brandon Teena Story"**

## **Concept: Compulsory Heterosexuality**

### **Tuesday October 21: Theorizing the Relationship between Patriarchy and Heterosexism**

Adrienne Rich (1980). "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" *Signs* 5:4, 631-660.

### **Thursday October 23: Compulsory Heterosexual Media Programming**

Jennifer Maher (2002, Winter) "What Do Women Watch? Tuning In to the Compulsory Heterosexuality Channel" *Bitch Magazine Issue 15*, 52-57, 90.

Reading Questions: How is the reproduction of patriarchy dependent upon the cultural and institutional enforcement of heterosexuality? In what ways is heterosexuality compulsory? How does Rich define lesbianism differently from Wittig? In addition to

*The Learning Channel*, what other forms of popular culture reinforce heterosexist norms?  
Are there any pop cultural practices that challenge heterosexism?

**Tuesday October 28: Review Day**

**Concept: Work/Labor**

**Thursday October 30: “A Woman’s Wage”**

Alice Kessler Harris (1990) “The Wage Conceived: Value and Need as Measures of a Woman’s Worth” In *A Woman’s Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences*. Louisville, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 6-32.

**Tuesday November 4: Not Getting By on “Women’s” Wages**

Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) “Introduction,” “Selling in Minnesota” and “Evaluation” In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1-10, 121-221.

**Thursday November 6: Women in Sales**

Ericka Fricke (2002, Summer). “Sisterhood is Powderful: Inside the Feminine World of the Direct Sales Industry” *Bitch Magazine Issue 17*, 44-49, 99.

**(ALSO on the 6<sup>th</sup>: Alice Kessler Harris Lecture in Women’s Studies)**

Reading Questions: In what is the history of women’s wages rooted? How have the concepts of “women’s work” and “women’s wages” undervalued the varied work lives of women? How have they been used against women?

**Concept: Embodiment**

**Tuesday November 11-Thursday November 13: “Throwing Like a Girl”**

Iris Marion Young (1990) “Throwing Like a Girl” In *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 141-159.

**Friday November 14: Women’s Studies Screening of film “Watermelon Woman”**

**Tuesday November 18: Sexuality and Disability**

Robert McRuer (2002) “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence” In Sharon Snyder, Brenda Jo Bruggeman, and Rosemary Garland-Thomas (Eds.) *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 88-99.

Reading Questions: According to Young, how are masculinity and femininity different forms of embodiment? What does it mean to “throw like a girl”? According to McRuer, what is the relationship between norms of ablebodiedness and norms of heterosexuality? How did you learn to be in your body? How did you learn to think about your body’s abilities and limitations?

**Thursday November 20: NO CLASS, PROFESSOR OUT OF TOWN**

**Tuesday November 25-Thursday November 27: THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY**

**Tuesday December 2: Review Day**

**Thursday December 4: Final Class**