

WAGNER COLLEGE
Spring 2008
Feminist Political Theory (GOV 272-ILC, H1)

Crossing Boundaries, Raising Voices: The History and Politics of Feminist Activism

M W F 11:20-12:20, Main Hall 7

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 1:30-2:30; Wednesday 4-6; and by appointment

“Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.”

--Barbara Smith, *But Some of Us Are Brave*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will introduce you to many topics in feminist theory, which has been defined in various ways. At its base, however, feminism expresses a commitment to gender equity, and continues to value freedom for all as one of its core goals. Yet, there is a vast and growing literature on how best to achieve feminist aspirations.

Part of our work this semester will be to better understand the major historical and contemporary debates among those who share a common desire to end systematic oppression against women. We will primarily focus on contemporary debates, sharpening our awareness about the ways in which the past imbues the present. We will analyze the roots of anti-feminism. Some of our texts and discussions will reach further back in history in order to throw light on our current situations, as we ask what possibilities are open for women to achieve freedom.

Towards this end, we will examine some of the founding ideas of “second-wave” feminism, along with the many issues raised by African-American, Third world, postcolonial, and poststructuralist thought. Given that this course is offered during the spring semester, we have three unique opportunities. First, February is black history month, March is women’s history month, and April is Sexual Violence awareness month. The campus and community have planned several events, and I will integrate some of these into our course. As the semester unfolds, other related events will be announced and we should keep one another informed about such happenings. New York City offers a great resource for us as well and I will recommend that you attend at least one event that pertains to our class material.

Another primary goal this semester is to understand how various modes of oppression are entangled with other forms, such that not all women's oppression can be called the same. Matters of race and class, ethnicity and sexuality all come into play because of their historical and material significance. And, yet, part of the goal among many feminists is to point out areas of commonality in women's lived experiences in order to change circumstances that perpetuate gender oppression. But, how might this position be achieved? In this class, I will encourage you to look for points of commonality, but not to assume what these are in advance of your investigations.

This class will be conducted as a seminar. This means that each of you will be responsible for keeping discussions lively and provocative. To accomplish this goal, you'll have to do the reading carefully and think *critically* about your response to it before arriving in class. Students will be designated "discussion leaders" at least once during the semester. On those days (concentrated between weeks seven through ten), students will be responsible for presenting the material and getting everybody to understand and discuss it. You will sign up for your two days in advance so that you will have plenty of time to prepare and seek my help if you need it. To be in charge of the class is not as difficult as it sounds, but it does require advance preparation and thoughtful reflection about how to best present and discuss the material.

Finally, this course has an Intermediate Learning Community (ILC) as well as an honors designation. The ILC component means that both professors will encourage students to make connections between the history and politics of feminism, leadership, and community. Each student will all assume a community leadership role in Park Hill. The honors designation means the reading and writing will be demanding. It is imperative that students keep up with the assignments.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (1949)

Lori Marso and Patricia Moynagh (eds.), *Simone de Beauvoir's Political Thinking* (2006)

Lori Marso, *Feminist Thinkers and the Demands of Femininity* (2006)

Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed* (2007)

Linda Nicholson, editor, *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (1997)

bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984)

Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (1997)

Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988)

We will begin by reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in its entirety. Be sure to keep up with the reading of this text as we will discuss its arguments very carefully in the first several sessions. You should begin reading Matwaai by Week Two so that you are prepared to discuss in on March 2. You will read these texts concurrently. Linda Nicholson's collection of feminist writings *The Second Wave* contains many important founding articles in feminist thought. It will help us think about the various categories into which different kinds of feminists have been classified. In addition, we will read works by African-American feminists, Chicana feminists, and various "third-world perspectives," including the work by Uma Narayan.

We will link feminist theory with women's lived realities. Feminist theory will help us understand the complexity of women's lives. In the final section of the course, we will work on an "autobiography project." Each student will choose one memoir from the list below. You may also suggest an alternative, but must get my approval in advance. During the final two weeks of the semester, you will present your project, examining the theories we have studied in relationship to the woman's life you are reading. You will submit a final paper (10 pages) combining theory and your chosen autobiography after the semester ends. We'll discuss these projects more as the semester progresses. Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life* will help guide your preparation.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation and Discussion Leadership (20%)

Since this class is a seminar, you are expected to attend and participate in class sessions, except in the case of illness or other legitimate reasons. You are encouraged to express your questions, concerns, and criticisms regarding the readings. I will expect that you come to class ready to discuss the material. Some of you may also wish to participate with me through email or office meetings. On one occasion, each of you will act as a discussion leader. See attached sign-up sheet (on pages 8-9 of this syllabus) which covers weeks seven through ten. Try to sign up early.

Two short papers (10 % each)

All students are required to complete two five double-spaced papers. The first paper is due on **March 10** and the second one on **April 16**. I will provide topics, but you are free to devise your own. More details to be given in class.

Autobiography project and end of the semester report (40%)

All students are required to complete an autobiography project (about ten double-spaced pages). This paper is due at the end of the semester. I will provide more guidance for this project in class though you should choose your autobiography by **February 27**. I own most of these titles, so you should stop by my office to review them early on. In these books, specific women describe their lived reality. Some of these books are about the lives of black women, Chinese-American women, Latinas/Chicanas, Middle Eastern women, two are about gender identity and transgender, at least one uses "class" as a central category of analysis. It would be best if no two

people chose the same book. I recommend you order your title from amazon.com. after you inform me of your choice. Final projects are due no later than **May 7, 5:00 p.m.**

Choose one of the following autobiographies:

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs
The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography, Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815-1897, Elizabeth Cady Stanton
Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, Simone de Beauvoir
Memoirs of an Ex Prom Queen, Alix Kates Shulman
Landscape for a Good Woman, Carolyn Steedman
The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, Maxine Hong Kingston
Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, Audre Lorde
Borderlands/La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldua
The Last Time I Wore a Dress, Daphne Scholinski
Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us, Kate Bornstein
The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War, Gioconda Belli
Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi
Living for Change: An Autobiography, Grace Lee Boggs
Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books, Azar Nafisi
Dear Senator, Essie Mae Washington
Living My Life, Emma Goldman
The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt
I Was Born Greek, Melina Mercouri
Black, White & Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self, Rebecca Walker
Open House: Of Family, Friends, Food, Piano Lessons, and the Search for a Room of My Own,
 Patricia Williams

Community Leadership Project (20%)

Each student will assume a leadership role in the Park Hill community by choosing to work on one of the following projects: 1) figuring out how to build a community garden in Park Hill (we have the funding, now we need to implement the project 2) archiving oral histories of women from the Park Hill community (this project is ongoing and is being stored on the Wagner College website with Prof. Weintrob as its director; 3) working with the refugee community, largely Liberian. The Liberian refugee community in Staten Island is the largest outside of Liberia. We will ask that you focus your attention on how to help displaced families and the many challenges they face because of their political exile. This project will be evaluated jointly by both professors.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND READINGS

January 23

Discuss requirements of the course.
 Start reading *The Second Sex* today.

Week One: January 28 & 30

Beauvoir, "Introduction" and "Destiny" (xviii-60)
 "History" (61-138)
 "Myths" (139-263)

2/1: Orientation on Community-based Leadership Project (CLP), including visit to African Refuge Center. Required for all three groups. Group A (African Refuge Center Leaders); Group B (Community Garden Leaders); Group C (Oral History Project Leaders)

Start reading Marso & Moynagh, Introduction and Chs. 1 & 2

Week Two: February 4 & 6

Begin reading Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed* along with regular assignments.
 Beauvoir, "The Formative Years, (267-424)
 "Situation" (425-527)

2/6 *The Trojan Women*. Performance at Harlem Stage, 7:30 p.m.
<http://harlemstage.org/SEASON/index.php?id=1> 212 564-9983 (Jamie)

Read *The New York Times* and other articles on Liberian community in Park Hill.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/18/nyregion/18liberians.html>
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/31/nyregion/31reconcile.html?pagewanted=print>
http://pulitzercenter.typepad.com/untold_stories/2008/01/liberia-from-on.html
<http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/hcsadvocates/blog/?p=5>

2/8: Marso & Moynagh, Chps. 3 & 4

Week Three: February 11 & 13

Beauvoir, "Situation" (528-628)
 "Justifications" (629-678) "Toward Liberation" (679-732)

2/15: Orientation for Community Leaders. Deadline to choose a group.

Week Four: February 18 & 20

Nicholson, Part 1, Early Statements (Shulamith Firestone and Gayle Rubin)
 Nicholson, Part 3, Gynocentrism (Combahee River Collective in Early Statements, Radical lesbians, MacKinnon), bring notes on discussion questions

2/20: Start considering texts for your Autobiography Project.

2/22: Jeremy Leavitt visit. 6:00 p.m. Spiro Hall (required).

Week Five: February 25 & 27

2/25: Simulation on Liberian Politics (earlier class)

Start reading Marso's *Feminist Thinkers and the Demands of Femininity* along with other assignments

View [A Question of Silence](#)

Discuss [A Question of Silence](#) (Bring comments on discussion questions)

2/27: Choose a book for your Autobiography Project.

2/29: Mentoring. Park Hill Projects.

Week Six: March 3 & 5

3/3: Rosa Parks. Read Holloway Sparks "Dissident Citizenship: Democratic Theory, Political Courage and Activist Women" (Moodle)

3/4: View *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* 6:00 p.m. (required)

3/5: Read Patricia Moynagh, "Women's Activism and Political Change" (Moodle);

Recommended: Marso and Moynagh, Chs. 5 & 6

3/7: Mentoring, Park Hill Projects

Week Seven: March 10 & 12

3/10: First paper due

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed*

3/15: No class.

3/17-3/21 Spring Break

Week Eight: March 24 & 26

bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

3/26: *Women and Leadership Forum*, time TBA

3/28: Mentoring, Park Hill Projects

Week Nine: March 31 & April 2

Nicholson, *Theorizing Difference/Deconstructing Identity* (Wittig, Barkley, Brown, Alarcón)

Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, Chapter 1

4/4: Mentoring, Park Hill Projects

Week Ten: April 7 & 9

Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, Ch. 2

Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, Ch. 3

4/11: Mentoring, Park Hill Projects

Week Eleven: April 14 & 16

View and discuss film.

Second papers due on April 16

4/18: Mentoring. Park Hill Projects

Weeks 12 and 13: April 23-28-30

4/21: No class. Passover holiday.

3/23: Reports on “autobiography projects”

4/25: Mentoring. Park Hill Projects

4/28 & 4/30: Reports on “autobiography projects”

May 5: Group presentations on Community Leadership Projects

May 7: Final Autobiography Projects due

CLASSROOM PROTOCOL

It is important to abide by the following standards of conduct.

1. Students are expected to attend and be prepared for ALL regularly scheduled classes.
2. Students are expected to arrive on time and stay in class until the class period ends. If a student knows in advance that he/she will need to leave early, he/she should notify the instructor before the class period begins.
3. Students are expected to treat faculty and fellow students with respect. For example, students must not distract class by making noise. They must be attentive to comments by the instructors and by peers.

HONOR CODE

For each of your assignments, please sign your name attesting that all work is your own or that of your group as appropriate. http://www.wagner.edu/campus_life/node/498

DISABILITIES

If you have a disability for which you may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to inform both your instructor and Dina Assante in the Academic Advisement Center, 390-3278 as early as possible.

Sign-up list for leading discussions weeks six through nine:

When you are a discussion leader with your partner, you can either work entirely together planning the session for both before and after the break, OR you can divide your tasks by one person taking the period before the break and one person the period after the break. If you choose the latter style, make sure that you two have met and discussed which themes you will cover in the readings so that your work is not duplicated. If for some reason you cannot make it to class on the day of your discussion, it is entirely YOUR responsibility to get someone else to cover for you. You have a copy of this list and know when everyone is presenting. If you foresee a problem with your date, you should try to arrange an exchange early on.

Week Seven: March 12

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed*

Two people:

- 1.
- 2.

Week Eight: March 26

bell hooks, chapters one through six, pages 1-96

Two people:

- 1.
- 2.

bell hooks, chapters seven through twelve, pages 96-167

Two people:

- 1.
- 2.

Week Nine: April 2

Nicholson, *Theorizing Difference/Deconstructing Identity*
 Articles by Wittig, Barkley Brown, Alarcón

Two people:

- 1.
- 2.

Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures* Chapter One, “Westernization,” Respect for Cultures, and Third World Feminists”

Two people:

- 1.
- 2.

Week Ten: April 9

Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, Chapter Two, “Restoring History and Politics to “Third-World Traditions: Contrasting the Colonialist Stance and Contemporary Contestations of Sati”

One person:

- 1.

Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, Chapter Three, “Cross-Cultural Connections, Border-Crossings, and “Death by Culture:” Thinking about Dowry-Murders in India and domestic-violence Murders in the United States”

One person:

- 1.

