

GENDER, RACE, AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

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GENDER, RACE, AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

Feminism emerged from reflection on the difference that sex differences between men and women should and should not make to women's opportunities, power, self-conception, and material conditions. First wave feminism in the 1800s and early 1900s, and second wave feminism, in the 1960s and 1970s, focused almost exclusively on the politics of difference between women and men. During the 1980s, black feminists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith helped inaugurate a new politics of difference in feminism. They criticized feminists for equating "woman" with "white woman" in their theorizing and political agendas and for failing to acknowledge politically significant differences between black and white women's situation. The result was an extensive effort to develop a feminist theoretical framework and a feminist political agenda that respects differences among women. In this course, you will be acquiring the conceptual and theoretical tools to take difference into account. We will look at various recommendations for how to avoid essentialist conceptions of "woman." We will talk about multiple axes of oppression and how to take them into account by using intersectional analyses. We will look at some of the important differences that sexual orientation, race, class, and nationality make to women's experience and to framing a suitable feminist politics. And we will briefly look at the question of how to respect global cultural differences while at the same time protecting women's human rights.

TEXTS:

Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory, and the Politics of Difference*

Cheshire Calhoun, *Feminism, the Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement*

Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*

Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding, eds. *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*

WS221/PL221 Coursepak

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Reading & Attendance. You will need to complete careful reading of the texts prior to each class session. In this course, more than three unexcused absences will result in a

half-letter reduction of the final grade. Six unexcused absences will result in a failing course grade.

30% of grade: Midterm exam. You will have a 6-page take-home essay exam due on 3/31. Essay questions will be given out approximately one week in advance.

30% of grade: Short essays on the question for the day. Everyone will sign up for four days on which they will be responsible for answering one or more of the questions of the day stated on the syllabus. (Your essay can cover more than the question asks). Write a (roughly) two-page answer. Be prepared to present your views in class. You may revise and resubmit your essay by the last day of class if you would like to try to improve your grade. (If you do, you must also submit the original graded essay with your revision).

40% of grade (30% for individual written work, 10% for group presentation):
Intersectional Analysis Project. This extended project is your opportunity to develop a theoretically well-grounded feminist politics in coalition with different others. See the separate instructions for conducting this project.

SYLLABUS

2-5 introduction to the course

I. The Politics of Women's Difference from Men: Sexism

2-10 the politics of women's difference from men
read: Weedon, Ch. 1 "The Question of Difference"
questions:

On the basis of this reading, what would you say are the range of possible meanings of "politics of difference"? What form do you think a politics of difference should and should not take at Colby?

2-12 If anatomy is not destiny, then who is "woman"?
read: coursepak Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender"
questions:

What is "biological foundationalism"? And why does Nicholson think we should give it up? If we do cease being biological foundationalists, how will it be possible to do a history of "women" or to investigate "women's" lives in different cultures? How would you propose interpreting the term "woman"?--Who counts as a woman and who doesn't? And for what (possibly political) reasons do you advocate this interpretation of "woman"?

2-17 radical feminism's political challenge
video clip from Going Further out of our Minds (#1888)
read: Weedon, Ch. 2 "Challenging Patriarchy, Decentering Heterosexuality"
question:

What, given the reading, do you think it means to say that the personal is political?

In what different ways do men under patriarchy "colonize" women according to radical feminists? Why, according to radical feminists, is it important to rely on women's experience as a source of knowledge?

II. The Politics of Lesbian Difference: Heterosexism

2-19 the construction of lesbian difference;

read: Weedon, Ch. 3 "Lesbian Difference, Feminism & Queer Theory"

questions:

What are the different ways that lesbian difference has been constructed (and lesbian difference from what or whom?) Critically evaluate those constructions

What are the different political goals or arguments that have been tied to lesbianism"

Critically evaluate those goals/arguments

How would you construct heterosexual difference and what political goals are most important with respect to heterosexuality?

2-24 lesbian versus feminist politics: the cases of heterosexual domination and feminist politics

read: Calhoun, Ch. 2 "Separating Lesbian Theory from Feminist Theory"

read: Calhoun, Ch. 6, "Constructing Lesbians & Gay Men as Family's Outlaws"

questions:

What are the different conceptions of heterosexuality and of the political significance of marriage and family that Calhoun thinks produce a difference between lesbian and feminist politics? Do you think the conflict is as serious as she does?

What reasons do you think there are for lesbians to be feminists?

2-26 no class

3-3 sexual orientation as a separate axis of oppression

read: Calhoun, Ch. 4, "The Shape of Lesbian and Gay Subordination"

questions:

What do you take the distinctive features of lesbian and gay subordination to be? Choose some other axis of oppression-e.g., anti-Semitism or class oppression or racial oppression of Asians/Asian-Americans-and outline the distinctive features of that form of oppression.

How does the displacement of identity from the public sphere play a role in other forms of oppression?

3-5 heterosexism and race

read: Collins, Ch. 6, "The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood"

questions:

How does Collins's definition of "heterosexism" differ from both Calhoun's and early lesbian feminists'? Which understanding of heterosexism is it most useful to use?

How do the three analytical approaches to sexuality that Collins describes differ from one another? How are the politics of sexuality connected with those of gender, race, class and

nation?

What are examples of the cultural construction of black women as bearers of a deviant, excessive sexuality (e.g., in welfare rhetoric, TV and film, pornography)?

III. Intersectional Analyses and Anti-Essentialism

3-10 what is intersectional analysis?

read: Calhoun, Ch. 1, pp. 1-14

read: Decentering, Ch. 9, Collins, "It's All in the Family"

questions:

What is intersectional analysis?

What are the variety of ways in which ideological depictions of the family work to support gender, race, and nation hierarchies?

How might you extend her analysis, e.g., to understand the creation of an Office of Homeland Security, or the controversy surrounding the relocation of Somalis to Lewiston?

3-12 anti-essentialism about women: complex identities

read: coursepak, Spelman "Woman, the One and the Many"

read: Calhoun, Ch. 3, pp. 51-57

questions:

For what reasons does Spelman conclude that talk about women "as women" (i.e., as having gender in common) is sometimes misleading, and other times arrogant? Given her warnings about the danger of talking about "women", how should a feminist theory and politics proceed?-Can feminism be about "gender oppression" or about "women"?

3-17 anti-essentialism about cultural differences; videoclip from Under One (#4002)

Sky

read: Decentering, Ch. 5, Narayan, "Essence of Culture and A Sense of History"

questions:

What is cultural essentialism? How have both feminists and cultural imperialists been guilty of cultural essentialism?

What "rules of thumb" do you think Narayan would propose that western feminists use in understanding non-western women's situation?

3-19 cultural differences and women's rights

read: Decentering, Ch. 2, Okin, "Feminism, Women's Human Rights and Cultural Differences"

questions:

Why isn't talk about universal human rights essentialist?-Or is it?

How would you define the concept of a human right, and what sorts of things count as human rights? Does pornography count as a violation of women human rights or does it fall in some other category of moral concern?

spring break

IV. The Politics of Race & Ethnicity: Racism

3-31 ideological rationalizations; clip from The Vanishing Family (#820) and A Question of Color (#1551)

read: Collins, Ch. 4, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images"

questions:

What does it mean to say that an image is a "controlling image"? What is a key controlling image that applies to another group of women (e.g., Asian American women or lesbians)? What would be good strategies for disrupting or subverting that controlling image?

4-2 the politics of mothering videoclip from Children of Poverty (#2051)

read: Collins, Ch. 8, "Black Women and Motherhood"

How does the cultural rhetoric about family values and the importance of family work both for and against black women's empowerment?

To what extent has Collins given a feminist analysis of the politics of motherhood? How would you connect this chapter's analysis of motherhood with the one she gave in "It's All in the Family"?

4-7 race, class, and nation at the borderlands; videoclip from Eating Welfare (#4480)

read: Decentering, Ch. 12, Wright, "Maquiladora Mestizas and Feminist Border Politics"

questions:

What does it mean to "perform" or "resignify" an identity? What is Wright's analysis of the politics of the borderland? How do Rosalia and Cynthia "disrupt some codes for interpreting their subject positions while holding steadfast to others" (222)?

Are there other forms of oppression in which it is useful to think about a politics of the borderland in which the boundaries between identities are constructed, policed, and subverted?

4-9 white political responses to the problem of race

read: Decentering, Ch. 15, Alcoff, "What Should White People Do?"

questions:

What are the possible ways that one might think about what it means to be white? (E.g., how do controlling images of race depict whiteness? How do different anti-racist proposals think about what one is rejecting when one rejects all or part of a white identity?)

Given these different conceptions of what it means to be white, what would being a race traitor amount to?

Why does it matter that there be some positive conception of white identity?-or does it matter?

V. The Politics of Class Difference: Classism

4-14 Marxist and socialist feminist analyses of class; videoclip from Maid to Stay (#4398)

read: Weedon, Ch. 6, "Class"

questions:

What do you think it means to say that a difference is "material"? What would be examples of material differences?

What is the difference between "class" as an economic category and "class as a social and cultural category? What different problems and political goals would you focus on depending on whether one uses an economic or a socio-cultural conception of class?

4-16 class differences and race; videoclip from Two Nations of Black America (#3470)

read: Collins, Ch. 3, "Work, Family, and Black Women's Oppression"

questions:

How does Black women's experience of exploitation, alienation, class structure, domestic labor, the private-public distinction, mothering, and the like differ from white women's?

Why would Black middle class women find their middle class position more problematic than white women do?

4-21 the experience of class difference; videoclip from People Like Us (#4461)

read: coursepak, Allison, "A Question of Class"

questions:

What issues concerning class, sexuality, and feminism does Allison raise in the course of this autobiographical narrative? Why do you think she uses autobiographical narrative rather than a theoretical style like Collins's to raise those issues?

How do you think feminist theory and feminist politics should take class differences in experience into account?

VI. Concluding Analyses

4-23 standpoint epistemology and the politics of knowledge

read: Collins, Ch. 11, "Black Feminist Epistemology"

read: Decentering, Ch. 7, Stone-Mediatore, "Chandra Mohanty and the Revaluing of 'Experience'"

questions:

What different reasons to Weedon (ch. 6), Collins, and Stone-Mediatore give for privileging some standpoints and treating them as especially important resources for knowledge.

In constructing a feminist agenda, how should one (and should one not) take different standpoints and differences in experience into account?

4-28 global feminism; videoclip from Gender Matters (#2820)

read: Decentering, Ch. 1, Jaggar, "Globalizing Feminist Ethics"

read: pp. 242-248 only of Decentering, Ch 14, Harding, "Gender, Development, and

Post-Enlightenment Philosophies of Science"

questions:

Drawing on this and other essays we have read this semester, what methods, themes, and political goals are appropriate to a global feminism, and why?

4-30 who are the proper subjects of feminism?

read: coursepak: Narayan, "The Scope of Our Concerns"

read: Calhoun, Ch. 3, pp. 63-73 only

question:

Can the scope of a feminist political agenda justifiably be restricted to the interests of women?

What do you make of Calhoun's claim that if feminism is really going to include lesbians, the subjects of feminist concern cannot be limited to "women"?

5-5 class presentations

5-7 class presentations

final written project due on final exam date