GWS 933: Feminist Political Theory
Feminist Thinking in Dark Times
Spring 2018
Tuesday 2:30-5 pm

INSTRUCTOR
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Office hours: Thursday 1-3 pm, and by appointment

This is a time of multiple planetary crises: ecological, political, economic. Yet for many, crisis is nothing new. This course asks what feminist and closely linked analytics can tell us about both the power differentials that shape the impacts and timelines of crisis, and about how the lessons of ongoing struggles might generate more possible futures. We focus especially on Black feminist, decolonial and indigenous feminist, abolitionist, “post-humanist,” and queer theoretical work.

The course is organized into five units: Crisis and Time, Gender/Violence, Praxes, Phenomenologies, and Ecologies. A central concern over all of these units will be the concept of “the human” as category, in terms of legal personhood, gender, kinship, and language. What are the politics of these definitions? Who and what have been and are included and excluded from these definitions, and to what effect? And how do these historical and contemporary inclusions and exclusions—always bound up with questions of race and gender—orient our politics in what some call the Anthropocene (“era of the human”—also denominated “Capitalocene” and “Eurocene”), as the globe faces radical environmental change with radically disparate impacts? Other central themes will include the idea of crisis, body-environment relations/co-constitution, and care.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES
Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:
- Define and use feminist political theoretical, Black feminist, decolonial and indigenous feminist, abolitionist, “post-humanist,” and queer theoretical frameworks to analyze contemporary life and politics
- Explicate and deploy concepts and themes central to recent feminist political thinking, including but not limited to: gender, kinship, racism, colonialism, “the human,” crisis, the body, care, power, ecology, sovereignty, and time.
- Fruitfully connect course themes to their own courses of study
- Carry out an independent analysis that links course texts to their own scholarly concerns, producing an article-length research paper or equivalent project

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION
There will be four requirements for this course:

1) Research paper (50%) of 20-25 pages will be due at the end of the term (May 8). The paper should develop themes from course readings and discussions. You should expect to conduct additional research on the specific topic of your choosing. A prospectus for this paper (3-5 pages and a working bibliography will be due six weeks before the final class meeting. Please meet with me, preferably as early as possible, to discuss paper topics and additional related readings. You are encouraged to develop topics that intersect with interests and questions you may bring from other classes or future research plans. Those not in a PhD program may consult with me about an equivalent alternative project.

2) Two in-class oral presentations (15% total) on assigned reading for the week, each lasting approximately 15 minutes. One or two students will present each week, depending on the number of students enrolled in the class. Each presentation should: (1) briefly describe the most important and interesting argument(s) in the reading(s); (2) connect the argument(s) to each other (if more than one) and to past readings and discussions; (3) offer 3-4 questions and critical points (positive or negative) as coordinates for the ensuing discussion. When two students present, please meet or communicate to divide the reading(s) equitably in order to cover the most ground.

3) Four short essay responses (20% total) corresponding to any four of the readings, of approximately four pages each. Like the presentation, the response should: (1) briefly describe the most important and interesting argument(s); (2) connect the argument(s) to each other (if more than one) and to past readings and discussions; (3) raise questions and critical points (positive or negative)
about the reading(s). You may coordinate essay responses with your presentation dates (though please do not simply read your essay to the class). These are due 30 minutes before class start time on the Tuesday for which the text is assigned.

Format:

- ~4 pages, double-spaced, in 12-point font
- Properly labeled: header: your name and the date, title indicating the primary text (can be a creative title or simply the author and title of the work)
- Appropriate citations: Consistent use of any standard citation style (APA, Chicago, MLA, etc). Provide in-text citations, footnotes, or end notes. Please include a works cited list at the end of the document.

Grading criteria (1-10 points):

- Good structure (introduction, thesis statement, supporting evidence, smooth transition sentences between paragraphs. Conclusion is optional)
- Skillful synthesis of the readings
- Well-supported with cited evidence from the texts.
- Fully addresses all three components (argument summarization, connections, critical discussion)
- Fulfills all formatting expectations

4) Class participation (15%). Regular attendance and thoughtful contributions to class discussions are vital to the success of the seminar. Seminar discussion should be student-driven. Therefore, any absence will be keenly felt. You must keep up with the reading and come to class with questions and comments.

NOTE ON CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before coming to class and to take responsibility as active participants in class discussions. You should come to class prepared to engage in thoughtful and constructive conversation that is respectful of others in the classroom and takes seriously the issues and themes presented in the readings.

That said, discussion participation, style, and non-participation often manifest structural power differentials. The historical and contemporary forms of oppression, violence, and resistance that shape racial, class, gender, ability, citizenship, and sexuality differentials in opportunities and life chances also
shape this campus. The classroom cannot be a “safe space,” but my hope is that it can be a space of learning and growth that:

- engages constructively with alternative perspectives,
- thinks critically about conventions (disciplinary, linguistic, genre-related, etc)
- grapples with multiple perspectives,
- exhibits stamina in engaging with new and challenging ideas,
- is curious about our responses to texts and ideas,
- tolerates ambiguity,
- recognizes the power relations embedded in positionality, and
- values collaboration over competition.

In this class, we will draw on at least two techniques in order to foster such a space.

1. For the first hour of class, we will not advance any negative critiques of the text (this was first modeled by my dissertation adviser, feminist political theorist Christine Di Stefano).

2. We will look to the following guidelines, developed by longtime social justice educators Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (from whom the above bullet points are also adapted). These guidelines are “intended to recognize and respond to unequal power relations in the room, help more reticent students speak up, help more dominant students slow down, and guide open and humble entry into the conversation.”

Discussion Guidelines
- Strive for intellectual humility. Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas.
- Differentiate between opinion—which everyone has—and informed knowledge, which comes from sustained experience, study, and practice. Hold your opinions lightly and with humility.
- Notice your own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge, rather than as a rationale for closing off.
- Recognize how your own social positionality (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship) informs your perspectives and reactions to your instructor, other course members, and those whose work you study.
- Differentiate between safety and comfort. Accept discomfort as necessary for social justice growth.
• Identify where your learning edge is and push it. For example, whenever you think, I already know this, ask yourself, How can I take this deeper? Or, How am I applying in practice what I already know?

Discussion Starters
• It feels uncomfortable to say [X], but . . .
• From my experience/perspective as [identity], . . .
• Can you help me understand whether what I’m thinking right now might be problematic?
• This is what I understand you to be saying: . . . Is that accurate?
• I’ve been wondering about how we are using [term] in this discussion . . .
• How would you respond to [X] from [theorist Y’s] theoretical framework?
• I am having a sceptical/defensive moment. Can you all help me work through it?


COURSE CREDIT INFORMATION
This course includes 37 hours of face-to-face class time and at least 74 hours of reading, writing, and studying. At UW-Madison, one credit is the learning that takes place in one hour, (i.e. 50 minutes) of classroom or direct faculty/instructor instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work each week over approximately 15 weeks, or an equivalent amount of engagement over a different number of weeks.

GRADES
Final grades will be assessed in the following manner:

   A=93-100   B=83-87   C=70-77
   AB=88-92   BC=78-82   D=65-69   F=under 65

COURSE MATERIALS

Books available at Room of One’s Own:
Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch
Angela Y Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?
Judith Butler, *Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*
Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*
Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*
Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*
Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity*
Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive*

*Canvas:* Other assigned readings and links are posted in PDF form on the Canvas course site, https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/90840.

**ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION**
Assignments are due by the time and date specified in the syllabus as an upload to Canvas. Email attachments will not be accepted except as a time stamp (e.g. if Canvas is not functioning, send the assignment to me and then upload it later that day).

If you are unable, or anticipate being unable, to complete an assignment by the due date, please contact me as soon as possible.

**UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS**

*Where to Take Concerns about the Course*
If you have questions or concerns about course content, your grade, or any other important issue related to this class, please speak to me. If the question or concern is still not resolved, or if you do not feel comfortable speaking with me directly about your concern, make an appointment with the Chair of the Gender & Women’s Studies Department, Dr. Aili Tripp, by emailing atripp@wisc.edu. She will attempt to resolve the issue and inform you of the Appeals Procedure if no resolution is reached informally.

*Academic Integrity*
Academic integrity is critical to maintaining fair and knowledge based learning at UW-Madison. Academic dishonesty is a serious violation and will have serious consequences, per university policy.

If you present the words or ideas of others without giving them proper credit, you are guilty of plagiarism. It is your responsibility to learn what constitutes plagiarism and the correct rules for citing sources. Please refer to the
Disability Access

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations in GWS 533, students must first be registered with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu/). Students who have or think they may have a disability are invited to contact the McBurney Center for a confidential discussion at 608-263-2741 (phone), 608-225-7956 (text), or by email at mcburney@studentlife.wisc.edu.

If you have already registered with the McBurney Center, and if you wish to request any accommodations on the basis of disability, you should schedule an office appointment with me within the first two weeks of the semester (by Monday February 5). Please schedule this office appointment by email. To maintain the confidentiality of your request, please do not approach me before or after class to discuss your accommodation needs. You should bring a copy of your service plan to our meeting.

Please note that I am unlikely to honor an accommodation request made within 72 hours of an assignment due date. Advanced planning on your part enables both of us to create an accessible classroom environment. Please do not delay in contacting me regarding your accommodation requests.
SCHEDULE OF READINGS

1) Crisis and time

January 23


January 30

- Alison Kafer, “Time for Disability Studies and a Future for Crips,” in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, Ch. 1

2) Gender/Violence

February 6


February 13

February 20

**2nd half of class will be Federici talk, Feminism and the Politics of the Commons, 6191 Helen C. White. Additional talk, Reproduction and Capital Accumulation: Past and Present in same room is on Weds, Feb. 21, and open seminar on Thurs, Feb. 22 at 12:20 pm in Social Sciences 8108.**

3) Praxes

February 27

- Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” (1949), *Political Affairs* (June).

March 6


March 13

5) Phenomenologies

March 20

April 3
4) Ecologies

April 10
- Maria Puig de Bellacasa, Matters of Care (2017), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

April 17

April 24

May 1

FINAL PAPER DUE TUESDAY, MAY 8 BY 11:59 PM.