

GENDER & WOMEN'S STUDIES 449: SPECIAL TOPICS IN FEMINIST THEORY

UNCERTAINTY & POSSIBILITY

Class Time: Tuesday & Thursday, 9:30am-10:45am, Chamberlin Hall 2223

Professor: Dr. Elaine Cannell (she/her) – cannell@wisc.edu

Office Hours: Thursdays, 2:45-4:00pm (in-person, Sterling Hall 3434) or by appointment (via Zoom)

Canvas Course URL: <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/428584>

3 Credit Course: This intermediate-level humanities or social science course contributes to the GWS major & certificate program requirements through the feminist theory issue area. The class meets for two 75-minute class periods each week over the fall semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, etc.) for about 3 hours out of classroom time for every class period. This syllabus includes further information about meeting times and expectations for student work.

Prerequisite: Sophomore standing.

“**The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility.** In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.

This is education as the practice of freedom.” – bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

“Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: **Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.** I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent.” – Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

“One can’t ask feminism—or any other political movement—to firmly fix a better future. All the same, I choose to be the fool committed to celebrating the power of political imagination. **Whatever their uncertainty, I prefer unstable goals to cynicism...One needs to improvise. Then one needs to confront the nightmare version of one’s wishes. Then one imagines again.**” – Ann Barr Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty*

In her retrospective reflection on the feminist 1970s *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, activist and academic Ann Barr Snitow writes, “Because so many feminist thoughts and acts include radical designs for a different world, uncertainty, doubt, skepticism—also rage and despair—are their inevitable accompaniments...All the same, I choose to be the fool committed to celebrating the power of political imagination.” In this session of Gender & Women's Studies 449, we will address feminist theories of “uncertainty, doubt,” and “skepticism,” alongside theoretical and cultural texts which take that uncertainty as a site of radical “political imagination” and possibility. By examining work from queer and feminist theorists including Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Barbara Johnson, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Jennifer Nash, Sara Ahmed, Marquis Bey, Jasbir Puar, and more, we will identify new forms for reckoning with uncertainty as we navigate activist pasts and imagine new feminist futures.

Required Texts: There is only one required text for purchase at the University Bookstore or elsewhere; the listed edition is preferred but not required. All other texts will be provided digitally.

- *This Is How You Lose the Time War* (2019), Amal El-Mohtar & Max Gladstone, 2020; ISBN 9781534430990

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will:

- apprehend contemporary feminist theories of uncertainty, possibility, invention, and imagination while also surveying key interventions in the field of feminist theoretical thought writ large.
- develop skills in reading, interpreting, and making theoretical arguments.
- cultivate intersectional understandings of feminism as a project for racial, economic, gender, & sexual justice.
- practice genuine interlocation, intellectual collaboration, and productive disagreement within a community of thinkers.
- apply feminist theoretical analysis to a wide variety of objects from the media, the arts, and everyday life.

Regular & Substantive Interaction:

This course provides regular and substantive interaction by:

- Providing direct instruction twice weekly in seminar discussion on the scheduled and assigned weekly content.
- Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework throughout the semester based on the expectations of the learning activities described in this syllabus.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

- Participation, Engagement, Attendance, 150 points: **15%**
 - Attendance: 50 points
 - Participation & Engagement: 100 points
- Discussion Posts (12 posts, 25 points each), 300 points: **30%**
- Comprehensive Project:
 - Proposal, 100 points: **10%**
 - Draft (Completion), 50 points: **5%**
 - Peer Review Activity, 50 points: **5%**
 - Presentation & Group Discussion, 150 points: **15%**
 - Final Essay (7-10 pages), 200 points: **20%**
- Extra Credit: Autotheory personal essay/creative artifact, up to +50 points.

GRADING SCALE: *grades are not curved*

- 93-100% = A
- 88-92% = AB
- 83-87% = B
- 78-82% = BC
- 73-77% = C
- 68-72% = D

Final Grades (Out of 1000 Points)

930-1000 (A)	880-929 (AB)	830-879 (B)
780-829 (BC)	730-779 (C)	680-729 (D)
	Below 680 (F)	

COURSE POLICIES

Rules, Rights, & Responsibilities

See: <https://guide.wisc.edu/undergraduate/#rulesrightsandresponsibilitiestext>

Academic Calendar & Religious Observances

See: <https://secfac.wisc.edu/academic-calendar/#religious-observances>

Readings and Assignments

- **Course Readings:** Follow the reading schedule as it appears at the end of this document (and on Canvas); the material assigned should be read before the class meeting in which it will be discussed.
- **Assignments:** As listed above, you will complete weekly discussion posts and a multi-part comprehensive assignment for this course. In addition to a final analytical essay that puts feminist theory into conversation with an object of your choice, this scaffolded project will include a proposal, a draft, a peer review activity, and a conference-style presentation. Each of these assignments will be submitted and graded on Canvas. You can find the overview for this multi-part assignment at the end of this document and on Canvas under “Course Modules”→ “Assignments, Rubrics, and Descriptions.”
 - **You will find additional descriptive assignment sheets and rubrics outlining my expectations for each component assignment on Canvas, and we will discuss forthcoming assignments during class meetings.**
 - There is also an opportunity to receive extra credit in this class: you can find this supplemental assignment on Canvas (under “Assignments”).

Communication, Participation, & Attendance

- **Drop by my office hours.** I strongly encourage you to stop by my office hours or arrange an appointment. You can come by for any reason: to discuss course material, brainstorm assignment ideas, or even just to say hello. I am truly excited to get to know you and want to act as a resource for your success in the course. On that note:
- **Keep me informed** of concerns, questions, or issues related to this class that come up during the semester. If you are confused or struggling with any aspect of the course, communicate with me. I cannot help you succeed if you do not share your needs.
- **Attend course meetings and actively participate in discussion.**
 - **Note on attendance:** of the 150 points you will receive in this course for participation, 50 points (or 5% of your final grade) will be determined by attendance, which will be documented every day on Canvas. If you need to miss class for any reason, please notify me ASAP and I will provide you with an alternative assignment to make up for that missed class period. **You may make up a maximum of 3 missed class periods by completing these alternative assignments within a week of requesting them.** Unexcused absences will result in a 10-point deduction from the attendance points per absence; excessive absences will result in a significant deduction of your participation/engagement grade.
 - With the above in mind, except for in the case of unusual, extenuating circumstances OR pre-arranged attendance accommodations, **students who miss more than 6 total class periods will be unable to pass the course.** *However*, I am a human being and I also recognize the human in you. Please communicate if issues arise that may significantly impact your attendance.
 - **Note on participation:** we will collaborate to create a holistic rubric for participation and engagement during the first week of the class.

- **Always be respectful and considerate to your peers.** In and beyond our classroom, I expect absolute respect, kindness, and courtesy. Personal attacks, offensive language, or rudeness to your peers will not be tolerated. It is our goal to create an **inclusive** and safe learning community; we will establish shared guidelines and vocabularies for inclusivity and social and intellectual generosity. Relatedly:
- **A further note on diversity & inclusion:** In this course, we will be navigating difficult discussions on gender, sexuality, race, class, disability and other facets of identity as they relate to lived experience on a weekly basis. This means that as a community, we must expressly value one another's diversity and enact a daily commitment to collaboration and inclusivity in our classroom.
 - **UW Institutional statement on diversity:** "Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals."
- **Use technology appropriately.** During class time, please only use technology for course-related materials and tasks. If improper use of technology becomes a repeated issue, after a first warning, you may lose participation points or be marked absent.
- **Follow university guidelines—and common sense/consideration—for health and safety.** The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing; while masks are not currently required, we will be following university policy regarding masking, prevention, and quarantining as such policy is updated. You are required to follow the guidelines as listed [here](#). Please do not come to class if you are seriously ill. Communicate with me & we can work together to ensure that your absences will not pose a threat to your success in the course.

Accessibility, Late Work, and Academic Integrity

- **Late Work:** For major assignments, in circumstances where you need an extension (which I reserve the right to grant on a case-by-case basis), please reach out a minimum 24 hours before the assignment is due to request the extension. Basically, if you are behind or struggling, COMMUNICATE! If I do **not** hear from you, you will lose 1/2 starting letter grade on the assignment for each day it is late, with a maximum of **four days** allotted before the grade is a zero. If you receive an extension, the policy starts on the new deadline. This late work policy applies to all major written assignments including:
 - Project Proposal
 - Project Draft
 - Peer Review Activity
 - Final Essay
 - Discussion posts are meant to lay the groundwork for seminar with your initial ideas. For this reason, **discussion board posts will not be accepted late without advance notice.**
- **Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:** The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably

accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

- Please meet with me within the first two weeks of the semester to discuss necessary accommodations. For example, if you have attendance accommodations, **we must make a plan for how absences will be accounted for**. Plans, of course, can change, but it is imperative that we remain in communication about them.
- Even if you do not have a disability documented with the [McBurney Center](#), if you need accommodations, communicate with me and I will work with you to help you succeed.
- **Academic Integrity and Plagiarism:** Plagiarism—meaning taking credit for words or ideas that are not your own or re-using work from previous classes without prior approval—will not be tolerated. It is always better to seek help and/or to ask for an extension than to plagiarize. See the university's statement on academic misconduct [here](#).
 - **Institutional Syllabus Statement:** By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but is not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.
 - **AI Use & Expectations for this course:** ChatGPT and other AI software has particular uses in the college learning environment. **However, this course considers the use of AI software to compose graded written assignments or discussion posts academic dishonesty**. One of the key learning outcomes for this course is growing your analytical skills and expressing them through writing, a goal which hinges on you doing the writing. At its current level, it is far easier to identify AI-generated writing than you may think; further, AI often fails to account for the nuances of theoretical texts/assignments about them. If you have any questions about this, please reach out to Elaine.

Sexual Harassment & Other Forms of Sexual Misconduct

- As an instructor, scholar, and ally, I am committed to supporting survivors of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, and sexual exploitation. UW–Madison offers a variety of resources for students impacted by sexual misconduct.
 - If you wish to seek out free, confidential support, there are a number of [services](#) available on campus and in the community.
 - If you would like to report sexual misconduct to the campus, a number of [reporting options](#) are available. In addition, each department has staff members, known as Responsible Employees, who can assist you. If you are an undergraduate student, most of the academic and career advisors you work with are designated Responsible Employees. Please note that Responsible Employees are required to report specific disclosures that you share about sexual misconduct to UW-Madison's [Title IX Office](#). The Department of Gender & Women's Studies has the following Responsible Employees:

- Department Chair, Dr. Judy Houck (jahouck@wisc.edu)
- Department Administrator, Jamie Gratrix (jamie.gratrix@wisc.edu)
- Graduate Coordinator, Duachi Yang (duachi.yang@wisc.edu)
- Undergraduate Advisor, Lachrista Greco (lachrista.greco@wisc.edu).

Privacy of Student Records & The Use of Audio Recorded Lectures

- Materials for this course are protected intellectual property at UW-Madison. Students in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in this class. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, you are not authorized to course materials without my permission—please communicate if you need to for an accommodation. Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities. Students are also prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor's express written permission.

Course Evaluations

- Students will be provided with several opportunities to evaluate this course and your learning experience, both formally and informally. In addition to an anonymous, mid-semester survey that will track your experiences and changing needs in our course, we will also be using UW-Madison's course evaluation survey tool called [HELIOCAMPUS](#) at the end of the semester. For this course, you will receive an official email two weeks prior to the end of the semester, notifying you that your course evaluation is available and providing a link to complete it. Your feedback is important to me, and I strongly encourage you to participate in the course evaluation.

OVERVIEW: READINGS & DEADLINES

WEEK 1: We aren't here to learn what we already know

- Thursday September 5 – Class Overview & Introductions + Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "[We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know](#)" (2016) + bell hooks, "[Theory as Liberatory Practice](#)" (1991)

WEEK 2: Uncertainty, ambivalence, paranoia

- Tuesday September 10 – Ann Barr Snitow, excerpts from *The Feminism of Uncertainty*: "[A Gender Diary](#);" "[The Feminism of Uncertainty II](#)" + Barbara Johnson, "[Introduction](#)," (excerpt), *The Feminist Difference*

Discussion Post #1 Due Wednesday, September 11 at 11:59pm

- Thursday September 12 – Eve Sedgwick, "[Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading](#)"

WEEK 3: Imagining our own undoing

- Tuesday September 17 – Shulamith Firestone, excerpts from *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970): Introduction: "[The Dialectic of Sex](#)" + Chapter 9: "[Dialectics of Cultural History](#)"

Discussion Post #2 Due Wednesday, September 18 at 11:59pm

- Thursday September 19 – "[Gender is dead, long live gender: just what is 'performativity'?](#)" + Judith Butler, excerpts from *Undoing Gender*: [Introduction: "Acting in Concert"](#) (excerpted); [Chapter 1: "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy"](#)

WEEK 4: Reimagining borders

- Tuesday September 24 – Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, eds., excerpts from *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981/1983): "[Between the Lines](#);" Pat Parker, "[Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick](#);" Aurora Levins Morales, "[...And Even Fidel Can't Change That!](#)"; Cherríe Moraga, "[La Güera](#);" Genny Lim, "[Wonder Woman](#);" [The Combahee River Collective Statement](#)

Discussion Post #3 Due Wednesday, September 25 at 11:59pm

- Thursday September 26 – Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "[La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a new consciousness](#)" + Jamie L. Ratliff, "[Birthing a Nation, Breaching the Border: Silvia Gruner's Mitad del Camino](#)" (feel free to just skim this second article; we will primarily be discussing Gruner's work)

WEEK 5: (Dis)Identifications

- Tuesday October 1 – Audre Lorde, "[The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House](#)" + "[Poetry is Not a Luxury](#)" + "[Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference](#)"

Discussion Post #4 Due Wednesday, October 2 at 11:59pm

- Thursday October 3 – José Esteban Muñoz, "[Introduction: Performing Disidentifications](#)" from *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics*

SCREENING: *BORN IN FLAMES*

WEEK 6: Dystopian/Utopian Imaginings

- Tuesday October 8 – Lizzy Borden, [Born in Flames](#) + Ramzi Fawaz, excerpt from "[Entering the Vortex: Breaching the Boundaries of the Lesbian Separatist Frontier in Avant-Garde Science Fiction Film](#)" from *Queer Forms* **SKIP CROSSED OFF SECTIONS

Discussion Post #5 Due Wednesday, October 9 at 11:59pm

- Thursday October 10 – *Born in Flames* + Octavia Butler, "[The Book of Martha](#)"

Comprehensive Project Proposals Due Sunday, October 13th at 11:59pm

WEEK 7: Intersectionalities

- Tuesday October 15 – Tuesday October 15 – "[Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw Defines Intersectionality](#)," (7 minute YouTube video, complete transcript in caption); "[Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color](#)" (1991)

Discussion Post #6 Due Wednesday, October 16 at 11:59pm

- Thursday October 17 – Jennifer Nash, "[Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality](#)"

WEEK 8: From intersectional to queer to cyborg feminisms

- Tuesday October 22 – Sam McBean, "[Queer Feminism](#)"

Discussion Post #7 Due Wednesday, October 23 at 11:59pm

- Thursday October 24 – Donna Haraway, "[A Manifesto for Cyborgs](#)"

WEEK 9: Cyborg feminisms II

- Tuesday October 29 – Jasbir Puar, "[I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess](#)"

Discussion Post #8 Due Wednesday, October 30 at 11:59pm

- Thursday October 31 – Chela Sandoval, "[New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed](#)"

WEEK 10: Uncertain Temporalities

- Tuesday November 5 – Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, *This Is How You Lose the Time War*

Discussion Post #9 Due Wednesday, November 6 at 11:59pm

- Thursday November 7 – Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, *This Is How You Lose the Time War*

WEEK 11: Trans Feminisms

- Tuesday November 12 – Finn Enke, "[Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s: Toward a Less Plausible History](#)" + [Radicalqueens manifestos](#) (1973)

Discussion Post #10 Due Wednesday, November 13 at 11:59pm

- Thursday November 14 - Marquis Bey, Chapter 1, [Black Trans Feminism](#)

Final Project Drafts Due to Canvas & Peer Reviewers Sunday, November 17th at 11:59pm

WEEK 12: Feminism and disability

- Tuesday November 19 – Keywords in Disability Studies: Kim Q. Hall, “[Gender](#)” + Sami Schalk and Jina B. Kim, “[Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies](#)”

Discussion Post #11 Due Wednesday, November 20 at 11:59pm

- Thursday November 21 – Alison Kafer, “[Introduction: Imagined Futures](#),” from *Feminist, Queer, Crip*; feminist joy object activity

Peer Review Due to Canvas and Peers Reviewed Sunday, November 24th at 11:59pm

WEEK 13: Killing and Finding Joy

- Tuesday November 26 – Sara Ahmed, “[feminist killjoys and other willful subjects](#)” + selected joyful feminist objects
- Thursday November 28 – *no class*

WEEK 14: Presentations

- Tuesday December 3 – in-class work time and/or presentations

Discussion Post #12 Due Wednesday, December 4th at 11:59pm

- Thursday December 5 – presentations

WEEK 15: Conclusions

- Tuesday December 10 – presentations + closing remarks

Comprehensive Project Final Essays Due Sunday, December 15th at 11:59pm

FINALS WEEK:

- Tuesday December 17 – presentations (if needed)

Autotheory/Creative Extra Credit Assignment Due Wednesday, December 18th at 11:59pm.

No late work will be accepted after December 19th at 11:59pm

Comprehensive Project Overview

Location: Each part will be submitted to Canvas

Comprehensive Project: Introduction

In this course, we will be grappling with challenging theoretical texts, many of which either draw theory from within a primary artifact or put that artifact in conversation with a theoretical framework. Over the course of this semester, you will practice this kind of analytical work through a multi-part, scaffolded comprehensive project. Drawing on feminist critical theories of uncertainty, possibility, ambivalence, and/or political imagination from course readings or other texts in the field, you will examine a cultural object—be that a novel, music video, poem, work of art, practice from everyday life, or something even more unexpected—in conversation with theoretical ideas. This process will be broken down into manageable, drafted components that will allow you to challenge yourself while also receiving support from both Dr. Cannell and your peers. We will also examine models for each component throughout the semester. The final iteration of the project will come in the form of a 7-10 page essay and a 5-7 minute presentation in the last weeks of the course, which will also include roundtable Q&A sessions with pre-set groups of your classmates.

I. *The Proposal*

Due October 13th in the sixth week of the semester, your proposal will be a 500-750 word document wherein you introduce the idea of your comprehensive project with a focused abstract and three brief entries in an annotated bibliography. You will receive a more detailed list of requirements and a holistic rubric at least two weeks before submission. Elaine will provide you considerable feedback on this document by October 27th, so that you can revise and develop your ideas in preparation for...

II. *...The Draft*

Due November 17th in the eleventh week of the semester, this rough draft—or, as Elaine will sometimes refer to it, 3/4 draft—will require approximately 75% completion of an initial iteration of your final 7-10 page essay. You will receive a more detailed list of requirements at least two weeks before submission. You will be graded on “thoughtful completion,” meaning that the draft should show a real attempt at completing the assignment requirements. You will submit this draft both to Canvas and to a peer review group (the same group that you will present with in roundtables at the end of the semester). The next part of the project, then, is...

III. *...The Peer Review Activity*

Due November 24th in the twelfth week of the semester, this peer review activity will ask peer reviewers to answer guided questions in a short worksheet for each of their group members' essay drafts. This process will help reviewees and reviewers alike as they consider best practices for critical writing and analysis in their own work and the work of their peers. Together, this process will help you as you create...

IV. *...The Conference Presentation & Roundtable*

Due weeks fourteen and fifteen—you will sign up for a presentation slot in advance—these presentations might take the form of a more formal script and slideshow, pre-recorded audio or video, or a more experimental expression (with approval) of your theoretical analysis. You will receive a

more detailed list of requirements and a holistic rubric at least two weeks before submission. Your groups will be determined in advance by bringing together shared approaches, ideas, kinds of texts, or more unlikely connections. After each group member presents for approximately 5-7 minutes, the entire group will participate in a conference-style question-and-answer session, both with one another and with their peer-spectators. The ideas you present in this session will build on—and help you polish—the final component of your comprehensive project, which is...

V. *...The Final Essay*

Due December 15th in the final week of the semester, these essays must demonstrate both consideration of semester-long feedback and continued development of your ideas. The final product should be clear, original, and accessible; it must include theoretical engagement with course concepts and textual analysis, though its style and organization do not necessarily need to follow typical scholarly standards. After all, much of the best theoretical writing subverts formal, stylistic, and organizational expectations. As the concluding expression of your work in Gender & Women's Studies 449, I encourage you to take thoughtful risks.