

Human Issues Proposal for Spring, 2009

HI 404/ENG 480/WGS 480: Contemporary Global Feminisms

Lauren Lacey, PhD

1. **Instructor:** Lauren Lacey, Assistant Professor, English Department

2. **Seminar Title and Number:** HI 404 (4 credits), cross-listed with English 480 and Women's and Gender Studies 480. The course will be titled "Contemporary Global Feminisms." It is tentatively scheduled to meet MW 3:00-4:50p.m.

3. **Human Issues Question(s):**

- How do we conceive of feminisms outside of our borders, whether those borders are geographic, political, or personal?
- What strategies can we employ to understand women's lives and concerns in different cultures, locations, and times?
- Is it possible to actively support feminist causes across the globe without imposing dangerous sets of limiting assumptions?

Concise Summary:

This course is an exploration of the methods, concepts, and experiences of feminism as it is practiced all over the world in different ways. The historical development and cultural mappings of feminism since the second wave will be our main concern, but we will maintain specificity by focusing on particular locations, and on locational concerns. Three large units will make up the course: feminism and race in the United States at the end of the second wave and into the present; postcolonial critiques of feminism and issues of religion, rights, and class in various locations throughout the world; and transnational approaches to feminist identity, politics, and possibilities. Throughout our explorations of contemporary feminisms, we will interrogate how our own lives and choices affect the lives of women around the world, in part by investigating the origins of products we purchase regularly. Feminist theorists from a variety of disciplines including philosophy, literature, political science, history, and sociology will provide groundwork for our explorations, which will be filled out through case studies, historical texts, and literary narratives.

4. **Student Learning Outcomes:**

- Develop knowledge about contemporary feminisms from a variety of perspectives: different academic disciplines, a range of cultural and ethnic groups within the United States, and views from throughout the world.
- Increase comfort with academic writing, especially when such writing involves different disciplines.
- Learn to apply theoretical knowledge to primary texts and to real world situations.
- Expand skills pertaining to writing, research, and presenting.
- Confront knowledge and value systems that are radically divergent from their own and from each other—with openness, sensitivity, and confidence.

5. Required Human Issues Elements:

A. Interdisciplinary Inquiry: Students will read feminist theory from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including philosophy, history, literature, and social science. Feminist work has long been interdisciplinary, so that the two readers for the course already provide a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. In this course, students will be asked to look at particular issues, such as the choice of some Arab women to wear a veil or the ways that funding is allotted to women's groups by NGO's, through the different theoretical lenses provided by the disciplines listed above. Students will also apply theory from those disciplines to literary texts.

So, the literature/English framework will be supported through both secondary, theoretical texts and through direct analysis of primary texts. Literary texts will offer first-hand insights into the ways that the issues we discuss in class are perceived by women throughout the world. Philosophical work on gender, race, and class will offer insights into how power relations influence the way we use and think about those categories, which in turn will aid students' abilities to analyze both literature and reality. Feminist historians will inform our discussions of the history of feminism, specifically the way that western feminists have attempted to intervene in the lives of women all over the world. Finally, the work of social scientists will provide case studies of attempts to create transnational bonds among women that students will be able to analyze with the theoretical models of the other disciplines in mind.

B. Values Clarification/Exploration: Throughout the course, students will be asked to reflect on their own values and beliefs in relation to value systems currently operating in other parts of the world. First, in the section on race and feminism in the United States, students will develop an understanding of a fundamental clash in values that led to the reevaluation of both the feminist and the Civil Rights movement. More than that, students will be asked to consider how their own lives and identities might be understood in relation to the debates about gender and race. Second, students will be exposed to postcolonial theory and literature, which demands that we always read, think, and act with our own cultural locations clearly in mind. And third, by exploring the way that women's lives all over the world are affected by the global economy, students will be asked to examine how their choices impact others' lives.

C. "Engaged Learning"—Personal Experience/Service: One way that each student already affects the lives of women all over the world is through their purchasing power. Students will learn about the effects of globalization in different parts of the world—particularly those effects that impact women's health and freedom. In order to put their new knowledge to good use, students will be asked to research the origins of two products for sale here in Madison. The first item will be any conventional import or something made in the United States. The second item must be a fair trade import or produced by a handful of green and fair wage companies in the United States and specified by the instructor. Students will be required to trace the origins of each product, as well as the path the product took to get to Madison. They will present their findings to the rest of the class, and, possibly, to a wider audience at the end of the semester. The presentations will have to be more than factual explanations of the origins of the products; they will be analyses of the information gathered using the lenses provided by theoretical

readings. In order to complete their research, students will have to talk with employees of local businesses and make contact with workers in other parts of the country or the world.

D. Intellectual Growth, Ethical Maturation, and Critical Judgment:

- Students' intellectual growth and ethical maturation will be enhanced by learning to grapple with and understand a wide range of academic writing about deeply ethical issues, such as how to help women throughout the world without judging their cultures or lifestyles.
- Ethical reflection will be further developed through a course long insistence upon the fact that students maintain awareness of their own social, cultural, and geographical locations.
- Much of what students will do in this course is apply academic or theoretical ideas to real world situations. The link between academia and the lives of women all over the world will be a central concern throughout the course.
- By the end of the course, students will be expected to be able to articulate their own arguments for how to act in the best interest of women—and men—throughout the world.

6. Faculty Development: As the instructor, I will bring experience with teaching and learning through the interdisciplinary models of Women's and Gender Studies and Environmental Studies. More specifically, I have had training in philosophy and social science as well as my home discipline of literature in relation to feminist studies. I have already taught a similar course at another institution, and I am currently developing ideas for how best to teach global issues at Edgewood as an Engaged Fellow.

Course development is already underway. The Library has already purchased films that will be used for this course. I plan to discuss the research assignment with local businesses, particularly those that offer fair trade items.

7. Notes

A. Bibliography:

The following are required readings for the course:

Literary Texts:

Divakaruni, Chitra. The Unknown Errors of Our Lives. New York: Anchor Books, 2001.

Head, Bessie. A Question of Power. Oxford: Heinemann, 1974.

Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York: Plume, 1970.

Interdisciplinary Readers:

Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader. Ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics. Ed. Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Sample of essays that will be assigned from the readers:

"Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights," Angela Davis (History)

"White Women and Colonialism: Towards a Non-Recuperative History," Jane Haggis (History)

"US Third-World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," Chela Sandoval (Cultural Theory/Philosophy)

"To Make the Facts Known: Racial Terror and the Construction of White Femininity," Vron Ware (Cultural Studies)

“Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship & Colonial Discourses,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Women’s Studies)

“Notes Towards a Politics of Location,” Adrienne Rich (English)

“Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Postcolonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India,” Ania Loomba (English)

“The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks (English/Film)

“*Las Mujeres Invisibles*/The Invisible Women,” Sharon Ann Navarro (Political Science)

“Contesting Multiple Margins: Asian Indian Community Activism in the Early and Late Twentieth Century,” Bandana Purkayastha (Sociology)

“The Limits of Microcredit: Transnational Feminism and USAID Activities in the United States and Morocco,” Winifred Poster and Zakia Salime (Sociology)

“The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries,” Fatima Mernissi (Sociology)

B. Curriculum Notes: The three large topics that will be covered are:

1. Critical Approaches to Race and Feminism in the United States: This part of the course will include critiques of white, western feminists by women of color who argue that they were excluded from the feminist movement of the 1970s. It will also focus on explorations of “oppositional consciousness” and “critical awareness” that involve both being aware of one’s social location and finding ways to understand the messages of popular culture from a critical stance.

2. Postcolonial Feminisms: The second part of the course will begin with readings and films about the history of women in the colonial era. Students will learn about early alliances among women of different cultures during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then, we will explore critiques of western feminist assumptions from women of the “postcolonial” world, i.e. those areas of the world that were colonies of European nations.

3. Transnational Feminisms: The last part of the course will focus on current attempts to negotiate feminist activism across national boundaries, while maintaining critical awareness of the power differences that can hinder such work.

C. Instructional Notes: The course will be run with feminist pedagogical principles in mind: creating student-oriented discussions, valuing divergent viewpoints, and fostering community. To those ends, assignments will involve presenting results to the rest of the class and sharing writing in progress. Reading journals will be read by peers as well as by the professor, and students will be encouraged to include personal reflection in those journals. Some of the readings of the course will be quite challenging for students, but they will always be expected to contribute to discussions. Students will frequently be asked to come to class with questions written down to begin discussion.

As I mention above, students will be required to research the origins of two items for sale in the Madison area: a conventional item and a fair trade or fair wage item. That research will involve going out into the community as well as making contact with people in other parts of the country and the world.

D. Assessment and Evaluation Notes: I will use the students’ reading journals to gauge their comprehension and involvement with the readings. Before they present their research results

to the class, students will meet individually with me to get whatever support or help they require. In addition to the reading journals and presentations, students will be required to write three five to seven page papers—one for each main section of the course. The paper assignments will ask students to apply theoretical concepts from the readings to examples from literature, case studies, and/or current issues that we have discussed in class.

Student's final grades will be decided by combining grades on the presentation, reading journal, and papers. Class participation and attendance will be included by raising, lowering, or not impacting the final grade. Students who miss more than six classes will fail the course and students who miss more than three classes may receive lowered final grades.

E. Community Partner Notes: There are a number of businesses in Madison that could help the students with their research, and that might benefit from the publicity provided by the students: A Greater Gift, Fair Indigo, The Community Pharmacy, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, and Willy St. Co-op are all potential partners.

F. Administrative Notes: One instructor (me), and an enrollment cap of fifteen (because it is a seminar and will be capped that way by the English Department). As stated above, students will fail after six absences, and will risk a lower grade after three absences. The course is already scheduled for MW 3-4:50pm. Classrooms that foster discussion would be best; any of the library classrooms would be ideal.