PHIL 442: Topics in Feminist Theory

TOPIC: FEMINIST THEORIES OF EMBODIMENT

Thursday 16:05-18:55, Leacock 927

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Office hours: Tuesday 17:30-19:00 and Thursday 19:00-19:30 (and by appt.)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is the place and significance of “the body” for feminist theory? In the past three decades, feminist thinkers from diverse philosophical backgrounds have forcefully argued that the project of critically reconceiving embodiment is one that feminist theory cannot afford to ignore. If, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, the body has been the silenced side of a dichotomy upon which the supremacy of the (masculinist, patriarchal) mind has been constructed—and if woman has been representationally correlated with that body—then feminists who disavow embodiment risk upholding the dichotomy that has traditionally subordinated women. This is not to say that feminist theory should accept the body, or materiality, as traditionally defined (as the negative mirror, passive instrument, or other to consciousness). What feminists call for is a rethinking of embodiment that overcomes the dichotomy of mind/body (and we could add, activity/passivity, subject/object, and matter/consciousness).

I. First Half of the Course (Weeks 1-8): We will study the movement within feminist theory to rethink, revalue and complicate the philosophical concept of “the body.” We will see that this not only involves acknowledging other—“feminine”—historically and socially marginalized bodily lived experiences (S. de Beauvoir, I. M. Young), but also rethinking the structure and agency of embodiment itself (L. Irigaray, E. Grosz). Such a move cannot leave the concept of “the body” intact, but replaces it with an open and dynamic field of bodies that interrelate through multiple dimensions of difference. This move complicates one of the core distinctions in feminist theory, that of sex/gender (J. Butler, E. Grosz), as well as the philosophical distinction between nature/culture and matter/consciousness. Taken seriously, this may mean moving beyond a focus on “the body” as singular to an understanding of materiality and life as the wider generative fields wherein subjects and bodies arise (E. Grosz, E. Wilson, “material feminism”).

II. Second Half of the Course (Weeks 9-13): Rethinking embodiment also leads us to question our understanding of the senses. In Weeks 9-11, we will look at the ways in which feminist theories describe and reconceive the senses. Feminisms that study the body offer, on the one hand, a critique of the senses as they have been habituated, defined and delimited in our current cultural moment (in particular a critique of objectifying vision in its racist and sexist forms). This is the critical, descriptive side of this feminist project. On the other hand, these feminisms work to rethink the role of the senses (not only vision, but also voice) and to propose a practice of perceiving and acting differently that no longer reduces difference to sameness. This is the prescriptive, ethical side of the project.

Thus, one of the main concerns of “feminisms of embodiment” is not only to acknowledge but also to develop conceptual frameworks that allow for and do justice to bodily difference (in all its dimensions: sexual, racialized, cultural, etc.). Here questions of race, culture and the status of “other women” within feminist theory come to the fore. In Weeks 12-13, we will look at an issue that has challenged many “Western” feminist attempts to think bodily difference: the case of the Muslim headscarf or hijab, an article of clothing taken as “visible” and bodily symbol of
cultural/religious/racial “otherness.” This case brings together questions of vision, voice, cultural racism, and the ability of feminist theories of embodiment to think subjects and bodies beyond its own categories and cultural representations.

*Prerequisites:* **PHIL 242 and one intermediate course in philosophy, or permission of the instructor.**

**REQUIRED TEXT:** COURSE PACK (McGILL BOOKSTORE)

**ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES**
You are required to write two papers: the first paper is worth 35% and the second paper is a term paper worth 40%. In addition, you must submit a series of 4 questions during the term (15%). The remaining 10% depends on your attendance and participation in discussion segments of the class and in the class in general.

Details of Assignments:

(1) The **first paper, worth 35%**, should be approximately 5 pages in length, double-spaced (no more than 6 pages). It is due on March 1st (in my mailbox, Leacock 908). This paper should deal with a theme or issue in “feminisms of embodiment,” drawing on texts discussed in the first half of the course (weeks 1-7). The paper must involve a *critical* discussion of the topic chosen.

There are two possible formats:

A. An analysis of one thinker and critical evaluation of her version of “feminism of embodiment” or “material feminism”. For example, you could consider: What core concepts (of “the body”, bodies, materiality, etc.) is she putting forward and how does this contribute to a feminist understanding of subjectivity? What are the potential consequences of her theory? What is her position with respect to traditional dichotomies in philosophy, and with respect to the sex/gender or nature/culture distinction in feminist theory? Your analysis should include the positive contributions of the theory, as well its limitations, and should take a considered position with respect to the theory.

B. A critical comparison of two thinkers of your choosing: Beauvoir, Young, Irigaray, Grosz, Butler, and Wilson. You should show their similarities as well as their differences. The comparison is not meant to be exhaustive, but should concentrate on specific themes and/or consequences of their theories (i.e., you are responsible for defining the parameters of the comparison). The comparison should not be merely expository, rather it should lead you to take a position with respect to the two thinkers.

(2) The **second paper is a term paper, worth 40%**, and should be approximately 7-8 pages in length, double-spaced. The topic and format of this paper is to be designed by you, in consultation with the instructor. It will be due in the last week (date to be announced). This paper must be critical and should relate to the themes of the course, but you are allowed in this paper to extend those themes according to your interests. The paper should, however, be mainly based in the readings we have done in the course.

(3) **Four questions, together worth 15%**. These questions will be due at designated dates throughout the term. Each question must be well-formulated, must deal with the readings listed, and should aim to generate discussion (see guidelines below). You will be assigned a grade for all four questions as a whole at the end of the term.
(4) **Participation and attendance, worth 10%**. This includes participation in the discussion segments of class (on designated days), as well as participation and attendance in class in general.

**ORGANIZATION OF DISCUSSION GROUPS**

The class will be divided into 4-5 groups, with about 6 members each (depending on class size). These groups will be formed after drop/add period is over and will be the basis for discussion segments in the course throughout the term. There will be four discussion segments during the term. Questions handed in by group members that week will be used to generate discussion in each group (I will select one question for each group each time). Discussion should take approximately 45 minutes. (Group discussion will not be graded as such, but you will each be held responsible for attending the group discussion segments of the class and participating actively in them.)

**Guidelines for Formulating and Submitting Questions for Group Discussions**

(1) Questions should be TYPED and maximum length should be 6 lines. (Note that this length is in lines, not number of sentences.)
(2) Restrict yourself to ONE question (this can have a related sub-question, but you should avoid multiple questions).
(3) Keep your question CLEAR. Remember that this is a DISCUSSION question, so others should be able to understand it. Do not bring in background that others in the class will not share. Write your question in as straightforward a manner as possible.
(4) Make sure this is a real question. That is, that there is something at stake in what you are asking. The question should not be a factual or textual one (i.e. something that can be answered merely by examining the text). Your question should try to locate a PROBLEM or ISSUE that calls for discussion.
(5) The question need not have only one answer. Indeed, it is better if the question does not have a simple answer but rather calls for multiple interpretations and positions.

**POLICY ON EXTENSIONS FOR WRITTEN WORK**

No extensions will be granted without an appropriate medical note. Late work will be penalized at the rate of one letter grade per calendar day past the due date. For instance, a paper that is evaluated as a B, if one day late, will be assigned a B-, and if two days late, will receive a C+.

*MCGILL UNIVERSITY VALUES ACADEMIC INTEGRITY. THEREFORE ALL STUDENTS MUST UNDERSTAND THE MEANING AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHEATING, PLAGIARISM AND OTHER ACADEMIC OFFENCES UNDER THE CODE OF STUDENT CONDUCT AND DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES* (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Instructor generated course materials are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor.
SCHEDULE OF READINGS

I. FEMINISMS OF EMBODIMENT AND MATERIALITY

January

10 Introduction to the class.
   Introduction: Elizabeth Grosz, “Refiguring Bodies” (pp. 3-24)

17 Woman’s Body as Burden?
   Simone de Beauvoir, Selections from The Second Sex: “Introduction” and
   [OPTIONAL: Genevieve Lloyd, “The Struggle for Transcendence” (pp. 87-
   102)]

24 Feminist Phenomenology: On Female Body Experience
   Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl” (pp. 259-273) and “Throwing
   Like a Girl’: Twenty Years Later” (pp. 286-290)
   Bodies in Sexual Difference:
   Luce Irigaray, “Equal or Different?” (pp. 30-33)
   Begin Luce Irigaray, “Sexual Difference” (pp. 5-19)

31 Cont. Irigaray, “Sexual Difference” (pp. 5-19)
   Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One” (pp. 23-33)
   DISCUSSION

Question 1 (readings from Jan. 10 through 31) due by 4PM January 29th in my mailbox
   (Leacock 908).

February

7 Sex/Gender and the Fluidity of Lived Bodies:
   Elizabeth Grosz, “Sexed Bodies” (pp. 187-210)
   Bodies that Matter:
   Judith Butler, “Introduction” and selections from Bodies that Matter

14 Bodies that Matter – Continued
   Judith Butler, “Introduction” and selections from Bodies that Matter (pp. 1-
   AND “How Bodies Come to Matter: An interview with Judith Butler.”

21 Material Feminism
   Elizabeth Grosz, “The Nature of Culture” (pp. 43-52)
   Elizabeth Wilson, “Gut Feminism” (pp. 66-94)

28 Material Feminism: Debate
   Sara Ahmed, “Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the
   ’New Materialism’.” (pp. 23-39)
   Noela Davis, “New Materialism and Feminism's Anti-Biologism: A Response
   to Sara Ahmed” (pp. 67-80)
   DISCUSSION.

Question 2 (readings Feb. 7 through 28) due by 4 PM Feb. 26th in my mailbox (Lea 908).

FIRST PAPER due on Friday, March 1st (by 4 PM) in my mailbox, Leacock 908.
March 7 No Class. Reading Week.

II. RETHINKING THE SENSES: VISION, VOICE, AND CRITIQUE

VISION: CRITIQUE AND RE-ENACTMENT

March 14 Vision and Racism: Linda Martin Alcoff, “Habits of Hostility: On Seeing Race” (pp. 30-40)
Vision and Sexism: Marilyn Frye, “In and Out of Harm’s Way” (pp. 52-83)

March 21 Seeing Differently: Maria Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” (pp. 419-433)
Seeing Differently: bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze” (pp. 115-131)

[ Likely to be rescheduled due to out-of-town talk by professor]

VOICE AND REPRESENTATIONS OF “OTHER WOMEN”

March 28 Voice and Resistance: bell hooks, from Talking Back (pp. 5-18)
Voice and Difference: Linda Martin Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others” (pp. 5-32)
Challenges: Marnia Lazreg, “The Triumphant Discourse of Global Feminism” (pp. 29-38)

DISCUSSION

Question 3 (covering readings from March 14 through 28) due by 4PM March 26th in my mailbox (Lea 908).

FEMINISM, MUSLIM WOMEN, AND VEILING

April 4 Cont. Lazreg, “The Triumphant Discourse of Global Feminism”

Veiling, gender, and cultural racism:
Alia Al-Saji, “The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis” (pp. 875-902)

Colonialism and “the veil”: Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled” (pp. 35-67)
[OPTIONAL: Historical Background to the Question:
Leila Ahmed, “The Discourse of the Veil” (pp. 144-168)
Homa Hoodfar, “The Veil in their Minds and on our Heads” (pp. 5-18)]

April 11 Alternative Conceptions of Embodied Subjectivity:
Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent” (pp. 202-236).
Wrap-up and DISCUSSION.

Question 4 (covering readings from March 28 through April 11) due by 4PM April 9th in my mailbox (Lea 908).

Last week: SECOND PAPER DUE (date to be announced)