American Studies 6190/Women’s Studies 6270: Theory and Emotions
George Washington University
Fall 2014

Professor Jennifer Christine Nash
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Class Meetings: Monday 11:30AM-1:30PM, AMST seminar room (P201)
Office Hours: Wednesday 10:45AM-12:45PM
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We desire and demand to think beyond what’s deemed possible.
– Feel Tank Manifesto, 2006

Course Description:

In 2008, Americans were captivated by a powerful call to embrace optimism: “hope.” A few months after President Obama’s election, many (on the Left) were describing a sense of disappointment that some critical theorists termed “political depression.” This course examines how affects – including “hope” and “depression” – are cultural formations. We will use the tools of critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory to examine varied affects including trauma, anger, love, and hope, and we will ask how those affects are culturally constituted and sustained. Over the course of the semester, we will explore questions including: What are the cultural politics of emotion? How does affect, as an analytic, help us think about publics, politics, histories, memory, and activism in new ways? How might affect allow us to understand race, gender, and sexuality in new ways? How can we respond to exhaustion, rage, apathy, or disappointment – whether engendered by global politics, domestic politics, or academic politics – in ways that are generative, creative, and enabling? Readings include works by: Patricia J. Williams, Avery Gordon, Susan Brison, Jose Muñoz, Saidiya Hartman, Audre Lorde, and Ann Cvetkovich.
**Course Materials:**

The texts listed below are required, and are available at the GW bookstore. All additional material will be available on the course website.

- Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*
- Patricia J. Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights*
- Anne Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*
- Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*
- Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*
- Marianne Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory*
- Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*
- Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*
- Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals*
- Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*
- Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics*
- Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me*
- Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*
- Mari Ruti, *The Summons of Love*

**Learning Goals:**

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of contemporary debates in affect theory, and will demonstrate an understanding of how affect theory intersects with related fields, including feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory.
- Students will develop close-reading skills, and strengthen their critical thinking skills by drafting weekly response papers that closely engage the assigned texts.

**Course Requirements:**

1) **Thorough Preparation and Weekly Response Papers:** (70%)

   This course is a reading intensive graduate theory seminar. You should be prepared to devote significant time and energy to reading the assigned material thoroughly and thoughtfully. I encourage you to read with two ethics in mind: generosity and curiosity. You should read generously, with an interest in understanding the assigned text on its own terms, and with an investment in inhabiting the theoretical universe the author presents. This, of course, does not mean you should suspend your critical imagination, or overlook what you see as the text’s shortcomings. Rather, I encourage you to approach what a text doesn’t do with curiosity rather than criticism (or condemnation).

   Rather than producing a seminar paper at the end of the semester, you are required to write a response paper (≈3-4 pages) every week. The weekly response paper is designed to give you a space to work through your initial response to the readings, so that our seminar conversations can be richer. While the papers should be critical, argumentative, and rooted in the texts, please feel free to use the papers as a space
for developing your own ideas and for posing your own questions about the material. Papers should be submitted to me by email no later than Sunday at 8PM.

Finally, a note on difficulty: Many of the texts we are reading are hard. They will challenge you, and they might even, at times, frustrate you. Though I assure you these texts are also deeply rewarding, I also encourage you to think about the relationship between difficulty and critical theory. The following passage by Jordana Rosenberg is a useful point of departure:

“Reading and not understanding, and keeping on reading is one of the singular pleasures and engagements of the life of the mind. It is so not because it is fun to be confused, but because being lost in this particular way is related to having – or developing – a political life: to the extension of ourselves into the world and to the forming and care for the collectivities that we will need to survive this world, and that, perhaps more importantly, we want to survive us into a different future.”

2) **Participation:** (15%)

Your most important responsibility in this course is to collaborate with your colleagues to craft productive discussions. It is a firm course requirement that all of our seminar members participate actively in all of our meetings. **I treat your enrollment in class as evidence of your commitment to participate in seminar every week.**

3) **Presentation:** (15%)

Each student will act as a facilitator for one class. The presenter will guide the week’s conversation, and will provide discussion questions that structure our conversation. The presenter should help the class develop a working understanding of the book’s key terms, intervention, and contribution, and offer questions that help us place the book in the context of affect theory more generally. The week that you act as facilitator, you need not write a response paper.

4) **Support for Students Outside the Classroom:**

- **Disability Support Services:** Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information, please see: [http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/](http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/)
- **University Counseling Center:** The University Counseling Center (UCC) offers assistance and referral to address students’ personal, social, career, and study skills problems. For more information, please see: [http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices](http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices)
- **Writing Center:** All students are encouraged to take advantage of the Writing Center. The center conducts free, one-on-one sessions with students to assist with research papers, theses, etc. For more information, please see: [http://www.gwu.edu/~gwriter/](http://www.gwu.edu/~gwriter/)
- **Security:** In the case of an emergency, if at all possible, the class should shelter in place. If the building that the class is in is affected, follow the evacuation procedures for the building. After evacuation, seek shelter at a predetermined rendezvous location.
Schedule

August 25: Depression (and the Politics of Academic Life)
  • Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*

September 8: Anger (the “Gift of Intelligent Rage”)
  • Patricia J. Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights*

September 15: Melancholy
  • Anne Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*

September 22: Haunted
  • Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*

September 29: Historical
  • Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

October 6: Memory
  • Marianne Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory*

October 13: Trauma
  • Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*

October 20: (Social) Death
  • Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*

October 27: Debility
  • Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals*
  • Sarah Lochlann Jain, “Living in Prognosis: Toward an Elegiac Politics”
  • Jasbir Puar, “Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility, and Capacity”

November 3: Ordinariness
  • Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*
  • Screening (before class): Miranda July, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*

November 10: Moving/Being Moved I
  • Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics*

November 17: Moving/Being Moved II
• Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me*

**November 24: Optimism**

• Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

**December 1: Love**

• Mari Ruti, *The Summons of Love*
• June Jordan, “Where is the Love?”
• Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic”
• Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt, “No One is Sovereign in Love”

**Additional Sources**

There are myriad important texts omitted from this syllabus due to time constraints. For those preparing comprehensive fields on affect, I have included a brief list of additional sources below:

• Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*
• Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*
• Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*
• Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*
• Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*
• Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*
• Aime J. Ellis, *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*
• Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Popular Cultures*
• Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*
• Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*
• Jose Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s The Sweetest Hangover”
• Jose Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position”
• Jose Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*
• Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*
• Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*
• Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*
• Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*
• Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*
• Jackie Orr, *Panic Diaries*
• Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*
• Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*
• Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*
• Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*
• David Eng and David Kazanjian, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*
• Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*
• Judith Greenberg, ed. *9-11: Trauma at Home*
• Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame*
• Scholar and Feminist “Public Sentiments” issue : [http://sfonline.barnard.edu/ps/](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/ps/)