

Gender and Sexuality Studies – Unit 1

Introduction & Methods

Unit 1: Introductions and Methods

Week 1

Poetry selection, available on Canvas

Week 2

Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted* (2020) – full text

Studying gender: what is
feminism?

Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. This was a definition of feminism I offered in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* more than 10 years ago. It was my hope at the time that it would become a common definition everyone would use. I liked this definition because it did not imply that men were the enemy. By naming sexism as the problem it went directly to the heart of the matter. Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism.

bell hooks (2000)

What is feminism?

Feminism is an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism.

Historically, feminism has evolved from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes to a more nuanced focus on the social and performative constructions of gender and sexuality.

Feminist theory now aims to interrogate inequalities and inequities along the intersectional lines of ability, class, gender, race, sex, and sexuality, and feminists seek to effect change in areas where these intersectionalities create power inequity.

Feminist political activists campaign in areas such as reproductive rights, environmental issues, domestic violence, decriminalisation of sex work, trans rights, social justice, and workplace issues such as family medical leave, equal pay, and sexual harassment and discrimination.

Strands of feminism

Liberal feminism: works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure.

Radical feminism: springing from the civil rights and peace movements of 1967-68, intent on revolutionary change rather than assimilation.

Marxist/socialist feminism: attributes the oppression of women to the capitalist/private property system.

Cultural feminism: replaces radical feminism in public consciousness, dedicated to building a women's culture and representation in cultural forms.

Eco-feminism: believes that patriarchal society exploits its resources as a direct result of the attitudes fostered by the hierarchy of women's oppression.

Waves (?) of feminism

‘Separating feminist history into waves often erases the splintered nature of feminist struggles, neglecting the existence of dividing lines across race and class. For example, when white middle class Suffragettes fought for the right to vote in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, they did not consider the women under colonial control subjected to inordinate amounts of violence or the working class women who would not meet the property requirements needed to vote.’

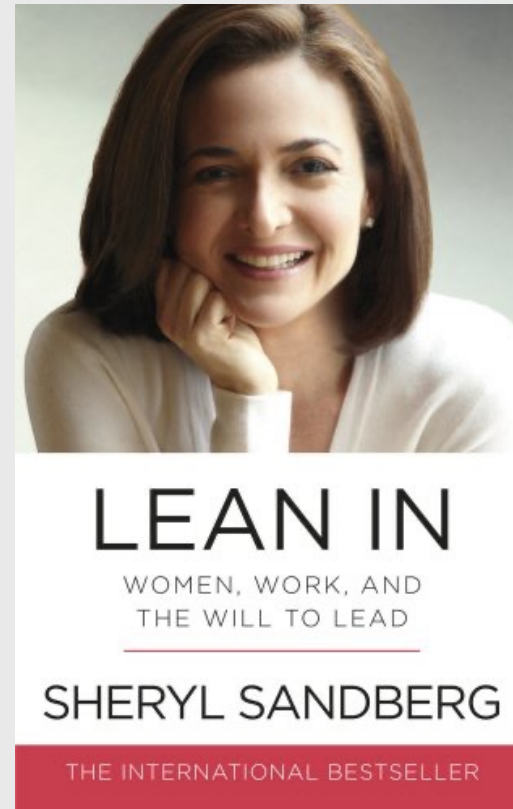
Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted* (2020)

Contemporary mainstream feminisms

Today, we see the mainstream adoption of liberal feminism, which works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure.

Popular feminism is a visible and widely admired brand of activism based in individualistic ideas of empowerment, self-reliance, self-confidence, and overcoming personal adversity.

Overwhelming focus on career progression, which overwhelms demand for wage equality in lower paying jobs.





Postfeminism

Why study feminism?

Feminism creates community: when the ‘personal is political,’ the individual no longer experiences their problems alone.

Feminism contributes to society: ‘[Feminism] is the experience of *taking responsibility toward yourselves*’ (Rich 1977).

Feminism can illuminate intersectional hierarchies of oppression: ‘Radical groups of women continue our commitment to building sisterhood, to making feminist political solidarity between women an ongoing reality. We continue the work of bonding across race and class’ (hooks 2000).

Feminism is work, but worth it: ‘To become a feminist is to stay a student’ (Ahmed 2016).

Feminist theory – and gender studies – roots theory in the everyday: ‘Everything we do in life is rooted in theory. Whether we consciously explore the reasons we have a particular perspective or take a particular action there is also an underlying system shaping thought and practice. In its earliest inception feminist theory had as its primary goal explaining to women and men how sexist thinking worked and how we could challenge and change it.’ (hooks 2000).

Why study sexuality?

Sexuality studies

Studies the social construction of sex and sexuality, challenging the idea of sex as 'natural.'

Emerges from gender studies and feminist challenges to the social creation of gender and sexual difference.

In the UK/US, lesbian and gay movements emerge alongside feminist movements to challenge societal norms where heterosexuality is seen as 'natural' (heteronormativity), an idea which often criminalized and stigmatized homosexuality and led to social ignorance of the AIDS epidemic and its impact on gay communities.

Challenge the historical creation of homosexuality - the word 'heterosexual' was coined in 1892, but its meaning and usage differed drastically from contemporary understandings of the term.

Queer > queer theory

~ 16th century: Meaning strange, odd, peculiar

~ 20th century: A pejorative, used to derogate those perceived to deviate from heterosexual norms

1980s-present: An umbrella term for individuals who don't identify as heterosexual or cisgender

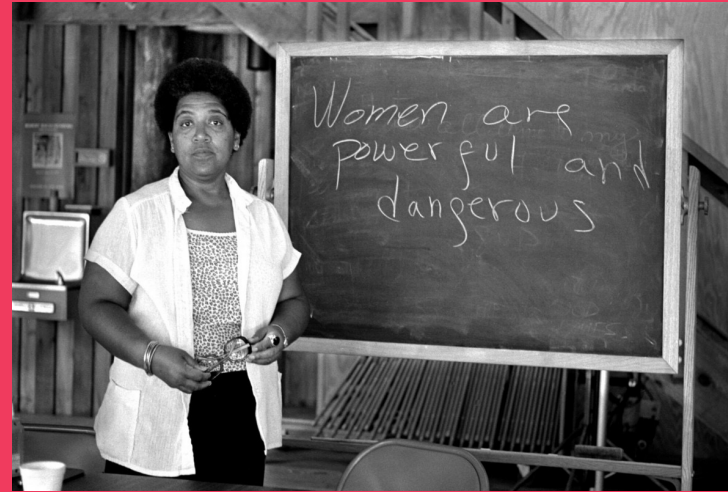
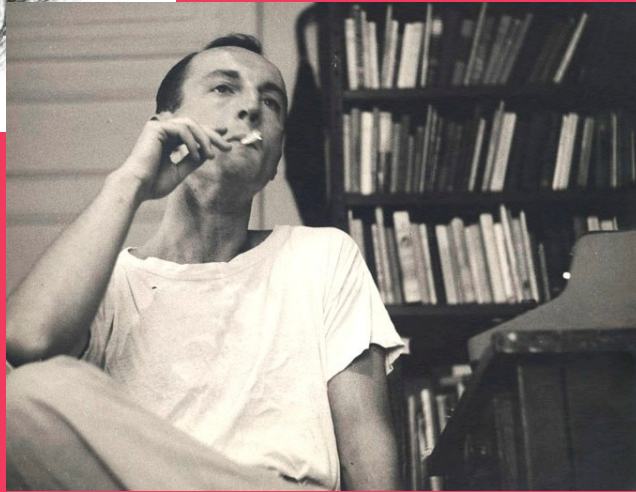
1990s-present: A field of theory building on feminist challenges to gender essentialism and gay/lesbian studies' examination of the social construction of sexual acts/identities

Queer theory

“Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.”

David Halperin, *Saint Foucault* (1997)

- Queer theorists believe identity is not fixed, that it can be fluid both between individuals and within the same person. They also believe that social, political, cultural, and economic forces construct, shape, and often dictate our identities.
- Queer theorists don't believe in fixed identity categories and therefore wouldn't identify as 'queer.' We can 'queer' anything by learning to deconstruct it – i.e. queerness doesn't have to be gay, or about sex!



This unit's texts

well I wanted to braid my hair
bathe and bedeck my
self so fine
so fully aforethought for
your pleasure
see:
I wanted to travel and read
and runaround fantastic
into war and peace:
I wanted to
surf
dive
fly
climb
conquer
and be conquered
THEN
I wanted to pickup the phone
and find you asking me

Romance,
fantasy

Embodiment,
sensuality

Audre Lorde: "erotic
knowledge" is rooted in
"the yes within ourselves"

Insertion of
another, the
Other

if I might possibly be alone
some night
(so I could answer cool
as the jewels I would wear
on bareskin for you
digmedaddy delectation:)
"WHEN
you comin ova?"
But I had to remember to write down
margarine on the list
and shoepolish and a can of
sliced pineapple in casea company
and a quarta skim milk cause Teresa's
gaining weight and don' nobody groove on
that much
girl

Wages for
housework

Domestic,
mundanity
disrupts fantasy,
focus on self

Feminism, Interrupted (2020)

- Activism and justice work
- Recovering Black feminist histories
- The role of the state in patriarchy
- Transmisogyny
- Sexism and Islamophobia
- The role of art in feminist work
- Consent and sex work
- Prison abolition
- Food
- Solidarity and action

Q: how might any of Olufemi's arguments/chapters help you understand Week 1's poems? What arguments might help analyse the themes and/or devices used in the poems?