

## Affect Theory: Identity, Affinity, Sociality

COMS 492 (Power, Difference, Justice)

Winter 2010

Thursdays, 1:05-3:55

Prof. Carrie A. Rentschler

Department of Art History and Communication Studies

Office location: W-115 Arts (second floor, west wing)

Office phone: (514) 398-4932

Email: [carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca](mailto:carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca)

Office hours: Thursdays 10:30-12:00

**Course Description:** COMS 492: “Affect Theory: Identity, Affinity, Sociality” is an advanced undergraduate seminar that explores current feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories of affect and the constitutive role of emotions, feeling and the capacity to be affected/moved in social and political life. Drawing from a number of current key texts in feminist theory, queer theory and sexuality studies, postcolonial studies and social theories of affect, labor, and memory, we will examine the ways affect orients and mediates our lived experiences of sociality and the production of collective identities and affinities. In particular, we’ll consider the ways affect theory re-figures the focus on questions of identity toward other models of social and political subjectivity that work outside and alongside those of identity. Theories of affect in particular shift the focus in social and cultural theory from that of meaning making and the propositional work of language and representation toward the dimensions of movement, resonance and the “felt” in human life and our capacities for agency. Our readings and discussion will reflect on this shift, and what it gets us as cultural critics and theorists.

**Course Readings:** All readings for the course are required. A number of our readings are available in pdf format via WebCT. The following required books are available for purchase from Paragraphe Books (corner of Sherbrooke and McGill College) and are also on reserve for three-hour loan at Redpath Library.

Judith Butler (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Paul Gilroy (2005). *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Arlie Hochschild (2003/1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

South End Press Collective (2007). *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*.

Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005). *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Capitalism*. Princeton University Press.

Sara Ahmed’s 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press) is out of print and available on reserve. Prof. Rentschler will be making an additional copy available for students.

To enable the proper citation of readings, the reading schedule below contain full bibliographic information.

## Assignments

The work for this course requires a substantial amount of reading and writing. In addition to completing all of the required readings for seminar each week and attending every class session, you are expected to come to seminar ready to discuss them in-depth.

*Weekly Short Writing Assignments [15% of final grade]:* For each class, you will write a one-page response to one of the readings for that day. The responses should offer a critical take on the reading, by which I mean you should aim to question some part of the reading in a way that, ideally, will stimulate and open up seminar discussion. Short weekly writing assignments are due the day before the seminar meeting for which you are submitting it, by 4pm (Wednesday). Everyone should be prepared to say a few words about the short paper in seminar the following day. Submit them to the professor at: [carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca](mailto:carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca) under the subject heading COMS 492 Response. These weekly writing assignments will be graded lightly to encourage openness and risk-taking in your thinking. I would also like to post them to WebCT after seminar.

*Term Paper Proposal [20% of final grade]:* On **Thursday February 18<sup>th</sup>**, you will submit a 5-page term paper proposal. The proposal will present your plan for the final essay, including what you plan to write about, a short review of the existing literature on the topic, and a statement of its significance in light of the course and our course readings. The proposal must include a bibliography of sources you will be drawing upon from the course, and preliminary library research you have conducted.

*Class Presentation [15% of final grade]:* On **Thursday April 8<sup>th</sup>**, seminar time will be devoted to short presentations each student will give based on her or his final paper topic. Presentations should be 5 minutes long (that's not a lot of time), and should be practiced in advance. Because of the time constraint, presentations should get right to the point: tell us what you studied/analyzed, what you discovered or figured out as a result of your analysis, and why it matters (e.g. what does it tell us?). Presentations will be followed by a 5-minute question and answer period.

*Term Paper [50% of final grade]:* The course will end with a 20-page term paper on a topic related directly to the course materials and the conceptual, theoretical and analytical tools we have discussed over the term. The paper is due on **Friday April 16<sup>th</sup>**. More specifics on the paper assignment will be forthcoming after the commencement of the course.

## Grading

Your final grade for the semester will be based on the quality and clarity of your performance in your written work and your presentation performances. As a student at McGill, you have the right to turn in work that is written in French. All lectures, class discussions, in-class viewings and presentations will be conducted in English.

**How to Interpret Grades in this Course:** I am eager to help you do well on assignments before they are due. Please visit me during office hours to ask questions about material for the course and assignments on which you are working.

Grades are assigned based on the scale set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar. Grades in the "A" range are awarded only for superior work (and not merely sufficient performance). Grades in the "B" range are awarded for work that is above satisfactory. In the "C" range they are awarded for satisfactory/sufficient work. And in the "D" range, they reflect unsatisfactory work.

Final grades will be based on the McGill University scale, reproduced here:

85-100%	= A	60-64%	= C+
80-84%	= A-	55-59%	= C
75-79%	= B+	50-54%	= D (Conditional Pass)
70-74%	= B	0-49%	= F (Fail)
65-69%	= B-		

Grades are never given out over email or the telephone. You can check your grades via WebCT.

**Discussion Etiquette:** Our seminar time is dedicated to in-depth discussion. Following a few basic discussion guidelines will help insure that this time is productive, enlightening and fun for all of us.

1. Experience and anecdote do not constitute evidence in a scholarly argument. While you each bring interesting experiences to the classroom, **ONLY** bring up your personal experience when it is relevant to class discussion; think carefully about this before you speak about your experience. If you bring up your own experience in class, recognize that it becomes a public topic for discussion. Others may interpret your experience differently than you do, and they are free to respectfully disagree with your interpretation. Furthermore, ask yourself what point you seek to make by talking about yourself. Is it really relevant? Do you want others to know this about you?
2. Work to create a shared climate of friendly and lively discussion. Avoid personal attacks, jabs, and grandstanding behaviors. Also avoid overly personalizing the topic under discussion. The point is to build knowledge together, not to look good or act smarter than everyone else or endlessly talk about yourself.
3. Disagreements are natural and welcome in scholarly discussion. So are arguments. But arguments are not contests. Grant your fellow course participants courtesy and respect, whether you agree with what they say or not.
4. As much as possible, avoid purely negative critique in your comments. Our goal in discussion is to understand the texts we read and how they might be useful to us -- in addition to cultivating our skills in critique. Understand first, criticize second.
5. Wait your turn – do not interrupt others.
6. You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.

**Nondiscrimination Statement:** As a professor at McGill University, I value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial, ethnic, sexual, physical and cultural diversity. Be assured that I will work to promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. In accordance with University policy, we will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, civil status, familial status, sexual orientation, or disability. In addition to the University's policy, and within the bounds of the course, we do not discriminate on the basis of political creed. This means that you do not have to agree with me or your classmates in order to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material, you are under no obligation to agree with it. I will also make every effort to avoid discrimination on the basis of class or income. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

**Academic Integrity:** McGill University and I take academic integrity very seriously. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and

other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

## Schedule of Readings and Due Dates

### **Thursday January 7: Introduction to the Course**

- Brian Massumi (2002): Definitions of “affect” and “emotion” in *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 27-28.
- Cynthia Enloe (2004) “Introduction: Being Curious about Our Lack of Feminist Curiosity” and “The Surprised Feminist” In *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in the New Age of Empire* (1-18). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Raymond Williams (1977). “Structures of Feeling” in *Marxism and Literature* (128-135). Oxford University Press.

### **Thursday January 14: Affect, Politics and Racial Justice**

- South End Collective (2007). *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Recommended: Ida B. Wells (1997/1892). “Mob Rule in New Orleans” In *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster. Boston: Bedford Press.

### **Thursday January 21: Passionate Politics**

- Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (2001). “Introduction: Why Emotions Matter” In *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (1-26). University of Chicago Press.
- Ron Eyerman (2005). “How Social Movements Move: Emotions and Social Movements” In Helena Flam and Debra King (Eds) *Emotions and Social Movements* (41-56). London: Routledge.
- Tova Benski (2005). “Breaching Events and the Emotional Reactions of the Public: Women in Black in Israel” In Helena Flam and Debra King (Eds) *Emotions and Social Movements* (57-?). London: Routledge.

### **Thursday January 28: The Cultural Politics of Emotion I**

- Sara Ahmed (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

### **Thursday February 4: The Cultural Politics of Emotion II**

- Wendy Brown (1999) “Resisting Left Melancholy” *boundary 2* 26(3): 19-28.
- Lauren Berlant (2000) “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics” In Sara Ahmed et al (eds). *Transformations: Thinking through Feminism* (33-47). London: Routledge.
- Wendy Brown (1995) “Wounded Attachments” in *States of Injury*.

Recommended: Wendy Brown (2006). “Learning to Love Again: An Interview with Wendy Brown” *Contretemps* 6: 25-42.

Sara Ahmed (2004). “Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21(2): 25-42.

**Thursday February 11: Affective and Emotional Labor**  
**(Tentative) Guest Lecture: Emily Raine, Ph.D. candidate, Communication Studies**

Michael Hardt (1999). "Affective Labor" *boundary 2* 26(2): 89-100.

Arlie Hochschild (2003/1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Read Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 and 8, plus afterword.

Recommended: Kathi Weeks (2007). "Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics" *ephemera* 7(1): 233-249.

**Thursday February 18: No Class: Professor out of Town**  
**Midterm Paper Proposal due via email to: [carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca](mailto:carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca)**  
**In the subject line, please note: COMS 492 paper proposal.**

**Thursday February 25: No Class: Reading Week**

**Thursday March 4: Queer Affect**

Heather Love (2007). "Introduction," "Emotional Rescue: The Demands of Queer History" and "Epilogue: The Politics of Refusal" in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jose Esteban Munoz (2006). "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position" *Signs* 31(3): 675-688.

Recommended: Ann Cvetkovich (2003). "In the Archive of Lesbian Feeling" In *An Archive of Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sara Ahmed (2006). "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" *GLQ* 12(4): 543-574.

**Thursday March 11: Postcolonial Melancholia**  
**Guest lecture by Prof. Jenny Burman**

Paul Gilroy (2005). *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

**Thursday March 18: Grief and its Politics of Possibility**

Judith Butler (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Gillian Rose (1996). "Beginnings of the Day: Fascism and Representation" in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Recommended: Vikki Bell (1999). "On Speech, Race and Melancholia: An Interview with Judith Butler" *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(2): 163-174.

**Thursday March 25: Love and Belonging**

Victoria Hesford (2009). "The Politics of Love: Women's Liberation and the Politics of Feeling Differently" *Feminist Theory* 10(1): 5-33.

Aimee Rowe (2008). "Power Lines: Toward a Feminism of Radical Belonging" In *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances* (179-198). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lorraine Code (1995). "I Know Just how you Feel: Empathy and the Problem of Epistemic Authority" In her *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (pp.120-143).

**Thursday April 1: Movement!**

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005). *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Capitalism*. Princeton University Press. Read Chapters: "Introduction," "Prosperity," "Movements," "Forest of Collaborators."

Brian Massumi (2002). "Introduction: Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't" *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

**Thursday April 8: Class Presentations/Research Reports**

**Friday April 16: Seminar Paper Due**