

American University of Beirut  
ENGL234: Gender and Language  
**Contemporary Feminist Rhetorics**  
Spring 2016

**Prof. Jennifer Nish**

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**Course Description:**

This section of Language and Gender, focusing on “Contemporary Feminist Rhetorics,” will introduce feminist rhetorics by discussing interdisciplinary scholarly theories and key issues within feminism. In this class, we will read feminist and rhetorical theory alongside speeches, essays, conference presentations, blog posts, and other examples of feminist rhetoric. As we do so, we will examine the intersections of feminism and rhetoric and what they can tell us about the ways in which gendered politics and contexts influence language use at the rhetorical level. Taking a rhetorical perspective on feminist rhetoric means that we will pay attention to the situations for which texts are created (the rhetor, audience, purpose, and context) and the effects of specific choices that rhetors make within those situations. This course should build and challenge your understanding of rhetoric, feminism, language, and gender through an exploration of the following questions:

- What is feminism? Who or what can be “feminist”? Why does it matter?
- What makes rhetoric “feminist”? What can feminist theory help us understand about the importance of our language choices?
- What kinds of “difference” matter to feminism? What rhetorical choices can feminists make in order to build an inclusive movement?
- What adjustments do we need to make to feminist rhetoric(s) when we speak or write in new cultural, geographical, religious, or political contexts?

**Course Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Define the terms “feminism” and “rhetoric” and explain how they are related
- Identify and explain key issues in contemporary feminist discourses
- Relate feminist theories to current events and popular discussions of feminist issues
- Analyze contemporary feminist discussions from a rhetorical perspective
- Apply contemporary feminist theory to current and/or local concerns

**Required Texts:**

hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody*. Cambridge: South End Press. 2000.

All other readings will be made available via Moodle.

## **Grading:**

Your grade for this class will be based on a combination of research, writing, and participation.

## **Attendance/Participation 10%**

Careful reading of the texts and informed participation in classroom meetings is required. Students are expected to come to class having read the assigned material, ready to actively participate in discussion about the material with questions, thoughts, and ideas. **Being prepared to discuss the material means having copies of the assigned readings with you.**

Attendance will be taken, but absence from class will only affect your grade if excessive (i.e., more than 3) or you miss multiple consecutive classes. You do not need to be excused from class (i.e., to present a doctor's note or other documentation) unless your illness will require that you miss several class periods. Otherwise, I expect you to come to class and save your allowed absences for the times when you need them.

## **Exploring a Feminist Community (15%)**

We will read and discuss many examples of contemporary feminist rhetorics in assigned readings and discussion. However, we cannot possibly cover the wide range of feminist rhetorical activity through our class readings and assignments. In order for you to develop an understanding of localized and/or interest-based feminist rhetorical activity, you are required to explore a community in which "feminist" rhetoric is created and/or circulated. Over the course of the semester, I expect you to familiarize yourself with your chosen community and the ways that community engages with feminist issues.

To do this, you will need to follow a feminist page or join a feminist group on social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Tumblr, Reddit, etc.) or elsewhere on the web. **Your group should either identify as feminist or work against oppressions related to sex, sexual orientation, and/or gender identification. That is, a group that has eschewed the label "feminist" or that has a primary focus on, say, trans\* issues, may still qualify for this assignment.**

You will need to regularly look at the community page and read some of the content that they post/share/write. Depending on the platform, you should also view comments or other discussion that takes place around the posts. (For very popular pages, reading top comments or a selection of comments would be fine. Please note that in some contexts, online public comments can be very upsetting. YouTube, for example, is notorious for having particularly racist and sexist commenters. If you have any concern about reading triggering comments, I strongly recommend that you choose a group who moderates their comment section.)

Part of your work for this portion of the class work will be to analyze the rhetorical situation of this group and to occasionally report on this group's practices to the class. In addition to your analysis paper, I may occasionally ask you to share examples from the community with your classmates during discussion.

## **Rhetorical Analysis Paper (15%)**

Once during the semester, you will share with the class a brief (3-4 page), semi-formal response

paper in which you analyze an example of feminist rhetoric from your chosen feminist community. Your goal will be to make a convincing argument about the effectiveness of the rhetor's choices; in order to do this, you should be sure that you can convincingly explain (1) the rhetorical situation of this text, and (2) how specific choices that the rhetor made relate to that situation. Successful papers will thoughtfully engage with the text and use specific examples from the text to support the argument. You will share your example and a brief explanation of your analysis with the class.

### **Group Presentation (15%)**

At mid-semester, you and a group of 3-4 classmates will give a presentation on an issue of your choice that we will not cover extensively in class. Your presentation should be directed toward your classmates as an introduction to feminist perspectives and/or debates related to the issue. Be sure to focus your coverage of the issue on rhetoric and/or language, including supporting examples from a range of feminist texts. In addition to your presentation, you will need to provide your classmates with a suggested reading list of at least 4 sources on the topic (including selections for both scholarly and general audiences).

### **Final Research Paper (35%)**

You will write a final research paper, 6-8 pages in length, in which you make an argument about the way(s) in which contemporary feminist scholars and/or activists engage with a major cultural, socio-religious, political, or historical theme and/or issue. You may choose to focus on a particular group's engagement with that issue (i.e., literature scholars, a particular activist group, AUB students) in order to narrow your focus. You will need use several examples of feminist rhetoric related to that issue to help you make your argument.

All papers and assignments must use MLA format. Please consult a handbook (Wadsworth Handbook, the Purdue Online Writing Lab, etc.) for examples and specific instructions regarding MLA formatting. Because this is an advanced course, papers for this course should be reflective, thoughtful, well-researched and contain polished writing.

### **Grade Distribution:**

Analysis Paper	15%
Group Presentation	20%
Exploring a Feminist Community	15%
Final Research Paper	35%
Participation/Attendance	15%

**Note: You must turn in all of the required projects listed above and must abide by the attendance policy for the course in order to pass the course. Late major projects will be reduced one letter grade for each day late. No exceptions.**

### **Ground Rules for Class Discussions (both online and in the classroom)**

The classroom should be a place where we all feel comfortable expressing positions on issues as well as reflecting on our personal experience, even if those positions or issues are controversial. However, classrooms are not completely "free speech" zones; they involve state-owned facilities, and participants may be subject to state and federal discrimination and harassment laws. Even more important, classes are temporary communities that function best when their

members exhibit consideration toward one another. In order to create a comfortable learning environment, we should all follow the common-sense ground rules below:

1. Recognize that any position you state is open to rebuttal; in other words, you are free to have an opinion, but others are equally free to dispute it.
2. Be open to disconfirming evidence; that is, if someone presents a compelling counterargument to your own, you should consider it.
3. Be willing to assume and receive “devil’s advocacy.” A devil’s advocate is a person who takes up a position she or he may not personally hold in order to introduce new perspectives to a discussion.
4. Remember that you must work closely with the other members of the class for the remainder of the semester. Be careful with sarcasm, “jokes,” stereotypes, or innuendo, especially online. The classroom—both physical and virtual—is no place for personal attacks or other forceful tactics. Indeed, such behavior may lead to your forced withdrawal from the class.

Here are a few more ideas about discussion, respect for others, and building and sustaining community that you may want to keep in mind, whether discussions occur face-to-face or online:

- **Conflict:** Conflict is good. We are passionate; conflict shows that we care. Seek out and talk with those with whom you disagree as well as those with whom you agree. Seeking out people shows your respect for the person. Respect builds community.
- **Civil discourse:** Be attentive to how others receive your comments. When discussion does become tense, be careful not to insult others or otherwise exacerbate the situation. If necessary, take a moment to collect your thoughts and think about what is going on. Speak your mind, but remember that alienating people prevents persuasion, while being civil builds community.
- **Reason:** Focus on ideas, not people. Don't tell someone they're wrong; instead explain why you disagree with their idea. Using reason builds community.

### **Phone policy**

You should not be looking at your phone during class discussion. Put your phone on mute or “do not disturb” during class in order to avoid losing participation points for that day’s discussion.

### **The public nature of class writing and discussions**

Please consider every piece of writing you do for this class to be “public.” Part of becoming a good writer is learning to appreciate the ideas and criticisms of others, and in this course our purpose is to come together as a writing community. Remember that you will often be expected to share your writing with others, so avoid writing about things that you may not be prepared to subject to public scrutiny, or things you feel so strongly about that you are unwilling to listen to perspectives other than your own. This does not mean that you are not entitled to an opinion but that you adopt positions responsibly, contemplating the possible effect on others.

### **E-mail and Moodle Policy:**

I will communicate with you outside of class through your university email account, and I will post any changes to the schedule or any requirements not stated in the syllabus on Moodle. You should check your email and Moodle on a daily basis.

**Academic Integrity and Plagiarism Policy:** In all writing, ideas and words taken from any source should be documented. Failure to credit ideas or material taken from sources constitutes plagiarism, a violation of the University's academic regulations, and is subject to disciplinary action.

**All writing you do for this course must be your own and must be exclusively for this course,** unless I specifically stipulate differently. Please pay special attention to the quotes, paraphrases, and documentation practices you use in your papers (note: if you are referring to work previously submitted for this course, then you must cite yourself).

**Academic Honesty** means applying the following standards to all submitted work:

- Documenting the source of all proprietary information that is received from sources, including books, articles, websites, lectures, interviews, photos, videos (television, movies, or other video), radio, podcasts (or other audio), etc.
- Putting quotation marks around the words that were originally written or spoken by someone other than oneself.

**Plagiarism:**

Students should be aware that engaging in any of the following activities constitutes plagiarism:

- Submitting a paper written by another student
- Requesting or paying someone to complete an assignment for you
- Deliberately taking material from secondary sources without proper documentation
- Copying, word for word, someone else's writing without putting that passage in quotation marks and identifying the source
- Taking someone else's writing, changing some of the words, and not identifying the source
- Taking someone else's ideas or organization of ideas, putting them into his/her words, and not identifying the source
- Having someone else change your writing – a tutor, friend, or relative, for instance – and creating the impression that this writing is your own work.
- Purchasing or downloading papers or passages from the Web.
- Including photos, videos, illustrations, or other material composed by someone else without acknowledging the source.
- Using facts, data, graphs, charts, or other information without acknowledging the source with a footnote or reference. Borrowed facts or information obtained in one's research or reading must be acknowledged unless they are "common knowledge." Students should check with their teachers regarding what can be viewed as "common knowledge" within a specific field or assignment, but often the student will have to make the final judgment.
- When in doubt, footnotes or references should be used.

**Disciplinary Action:**

When confronting plagiarism, I will abide by the guidelines stipulated in [AUB's Student Code of Conduct](#), which states:

“It is the responsibility of the faculty to uphold university policies. Thus, the immediate responsibility for dealing with instances of cheating, plagiarism, and other academic violations rests with the faculty member. If a faculty member has good reason to believe

that a student has violated academic standards, it is his or her responsibility to discipline the student expeditiously. A faculty member who has good reason to believe that a student has violated academic standards must give a grade of zero on the exam or assignment where the violation occurred. When the instructor has taken the initial disciplinary action, he or she should send a letter to the office of the Dean of the Faculty or School, in which the incident occurred, informing him/her of the incident and the initial action he/she has taken. A copy of the letter will be placed in the student's file, and another copy forwarded to the student's advisor for follow-up.” (10)

**Other Resources:**

*Writing Center:* The Writing Center offers free, one-hour consultations for AUB writers at Ada Dodge Hall, 2nd floor balcony; West Hall 336; or Jafet Library, second floor reading room. Check the Writing Center webpage on the AUB website. Make an appointment by walking in or via their online appointment system.

*Library Information Services:* Reference librarians and information specialists in the AUB libraries can support you individually with finding academic sources for your research. Jafet information librarians can be contacted in person in their office in the Jafet Library lobby, by email at [libinfo@aub.edu.lb](mailto:libinfo@aub.edu.lb), or by phone, extension 2629.

*Counseling Center, Student Affairs:* The center offers counsel and help to students with a range of academic and non-academic problems. If anything happening in your life is causing you distress and influencing your academic performance, and you feel you could benefit from professional help, contact Dr. Antoine Khabbaz (Ext. 3178; [ak28@aub.edu.lb](mailto:ak28@aub.edu.lb)) or Dr. Nay Khatcherian (Ext. 3158; [nk63@aub.edu.lb](mailto:nk63@aub.edu.lb)), or visit West Hall 210.

**Sensitive Course Content:** Many of the topics and readings in this course can be considered sensitive material. If you are concerned about your ability to engage with sensitive material, please make an appointment to see me as soon as possible.

**Course Revision**

I reserve the right to modify/change the course any time during the semester.