

Direct Engagements, Spring 2010

GWSS 3004: Contemporary Feminist Debates

Direct Engagement Question 1:

In "The Dark Side of Birth Control," Dorothy Roberts writes:

"Sanger's shifting alliances reveal how critical political objectives are to determining the nature of reproductive technologies--whether they will be used for women's emancipation or oppression. As the movement veered from its radical, feminist origins toward a eugenic agenda, birth control became a tool to regulate the poor, immigrants, and Black Americans (58-59)."

In "Musings: Eugenics, Race, and Margaret Sanger Revisited: Reproductive Freedom for All?," Alex Sanger, the grandson of Margaret Sanger, writes:

"My grandmother's entire career shows that she was motivated by a desire to save the women she took care of as a nurse--the poor, the uneducated, the immigrant. There was no motivation to eliminate them....Her emphasis on childbearing served to reinforce the notion that the fertility of the poor, and by extension that of the black race, was a proper subject of social and governmental control. The dangers inherent in this view are still with us (217)."

Answer at least one of the following questions: make sure to draw upon the readings

- What were the dangerous consequences of linking the promotion of birth control with eugenics?
- How (and in what specific ways) did birth control become a tool of social control?
- Finally, what can/should we learn from the case of Margaret Sanger as we think critically about feminist movements and their attempts to develop and implement agendas for reproductive rights/justice?

Direct Engagement Question 2:

What is choice? Is the right to choose the most fundamental right for feminists? Are there other rights that are just as important? Should there be limits to our ability to "choose"? Who gets to decide those limits? Focus your direct engagement on how some or all (Roberts, Ross, Sayce/Perkins, Crews, Bitchfest) engage with these questions.

Direct Engagement Question 3:

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The Politics of House(work)

According to Friedan, Cox/Federici, Syfer, and the flyer (Wages for Housework) what kind of work is housework? How is it (de) valued in relation to other forms of work? Who does (and/or should do) the housework? Why is housework a political issue for the authors? Why is it a feminist issue? Do you think it should be a political and/or feminist issue? Why or why not?

Direct Engagement Question 4:

Pick one of these questions to answer:

Question One:

"...the use of nannies allows upper middle-class women and men to benefit from feminist changes without having to surrender the privilege of the traditional patriarchal family. The hired household worker is an employee, but she is mainly treated as if she were a wife (Joan Tronto, 47)."

How are feminists responsible for the "nanny problem"? What do you think of Tronto's charge in relation to Judy Syfer's essay? What connections can you draw between Tronto's claim and the essays by Ehrenreich and Flanagan?

Question Two:

"...what kind of moral education does one learn from being in a household in which one adult is so clearly subordinate to others (Tronto, 40)?"

"To be cleaned up after is to achieve a certain magical weightlessness and immateriality....A servant economy may provide opportunities, however, limited, for poor and immigrant women. But it also breeds callousness and solipsism in the served, and it does so all the more effectively when the service is performed close up and routinely in the place where they live and reproduce. ...The moral challenge is, put simply, to make work visible again (Ehrenreich, 102-103)."

Why should the nanny/domestic workers problem be important for feminists? Why is this a feminist issue? What sort of moral education should children be receiving? What contributions can/should feminists make towards that moral education? Why is the moral challenge to make work visible again? What other moral challenges do housework/the nanny problem create?

Direct Engagement Question 5:

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Term: the Political

Since we don't have any readings for this week, I thought you could respond to some more open-ended questions that are central to our discussion of feminism, feminist debates, and feminist strategies for social justice.

How have the feminists that we have read so far defined the political?

What is meant by the feminist idea, "the personal is political"?

How broad (or narrow) of a term should "the political" be?

What makes an issue a political issue?

Make sure to connect your discussion directly to (at least) one of the readings we have done so far.

Direct Engagement Question 6:

For Tuesday we are reading essays about gender roles and science and thinking about them in relation to some of your "this is a feminist issue because..." entries.

All of the readings discuss the ways in which culture (societal norms, stereotypes about gender roles) shapes how scientific facts about men and women/male and female/masculine and feminine are reported and understood within popular culture, news reports about scientific studies and scientific textbooks. In different ways, each author is curious about how the way we interpret "facts" about bodies is mediated through language that is not free of cultural expectations and norms. In other words, the language that is used to describe certain scientific/biological facts is often loaded with culturally specific metaphors (Martin), is wholly concerned with differences instead of similarities (Wilchins), and is frequently promoted as "natural" and beyond question/ing (Bornstein).

Members of Group D: Find one concrete example from the readings that illustrates this idea and do the following:

- Clearly describe the example. Include the author, title of the article and the page number/s of your example. Be as specific as possible.
- Articulate what the author's larger argument is and how your specific example helps to illustrate that argument.

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The purpose of this engagement is not to express your own opinion about the example, but to clearly articulate what the author is trying to say and how they say it. Therefore, your entry should not include how you agree/disagree with the claim or the author. Instead, it should offer a clear, succinct and specific articulation of the author's claim and the example that they use to explain/defend/support that claim.

Comments by groups A and B could include:

- Questions of clarification connected to example given in the entry. Why does the author use this term...? Or what does the author mean by...?
- Critical thoughts on why the example does/doesn't support the author's claim or why you agree or disagree with the claim.
- Questions that the example or larger argument raise for you.

Direct Engagement Question 7

After reading through all of your midterm evaluations, I have decided to mix it up a little. Several of you indicated that the question prompts were too restrictive and didn't enable you to engage with the readings in the ways that you wanted to. Therefore, I am opening up the direct engagements for this week by asking one broad question in terms of the readings: How do the readings (Hill Collins, Feminist Family Values Forum, or Pardo) make you curious? You can engage with this question in any way that you wish as long as you follow these basic rules:

- Your direct engagement must address at least one of the readings
- Your direct engagement should be aimed at making us curious and demonstrate a respectful and critical engagement with the ideas/readings
- You may include your own opinions about the readings, but those opinions must be explained and supported by examples (from the readings, your experiences)
- You should include some sort of question that you pose to your readers

In discussing how the readings make you curious, you could think about these questions--Were there terms or concepts that didn't make sense or that you weren't familiar with? Are there certain issues that you would like to know more about? Were any aspects of the readings confusing? Are there certain claims that you strongly agree/disagree with and that you would like to read how others feel/think about them? What issues did the readings fail to address that you think are very important for discussing family values?

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Good luck! I am looking forward to reading your entries and being impressed by your creativity.

Direct Engagement Question 8:

Here are two options for your direct engagement:

OPTION 1: As I mentioned in last week's question, several of you indicated that the question prompts were too restrictive and didn't enable you to engage with the readings in the ways that you wanted to. Therefore, I am opening up the direct engagements by asking one broad question in terms of the readings: How do the readings (Martin, Berstein) make you curious? You can engage with this question in any way that you wish as long as you follow these basic rules:

- Your direct engagement must address at least one of the readings
- Your direct engagement should be aimed at making us curious and demonstrate a respectful and critical engagement with the ideas/readings
- You may include your own opinions about the readings, but those opinions must be explained and supported by examples (from the readings, your experiences)
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OPTION TWO: Does this approach seem too broad for you? Does it make it difficult for you to engage with the readings? Here's another option for your direct engagement: you can respond to one of the ways in which these readings make me curious:

- What does it mean to engage in gender-neutral child rearing? How can we compare/contrast gender-neutral, as it is defined by Karin Martin in "William Wants a Doll, Can He Have One?," with Riki Wilchin's idea (remember her discussions about the history of sex a few weeks ago?) that we should focus on gender similarities instead of differences?

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- How are gender and sexuality connected in terms of child rearing and the development of gender identities? This is a key part of Martin's argument--I am curious about what you all think she is saying with this argument and if you agree with it or not.
- We will be watching the clip from Free to be...you and me, "William Wants a Doll" in class on Tuesday (I couldn't find it on youtube to post it, but you can check out the lyrics here). What sorts of strategies (theories of gender, etc) are going on in this song? What do you think about how this song frames William's behavior in terms of his role as a father?
- In her essay, Martin describes one of the critiques made against socialization theory, that it offers an "exaggerated view of children as unagentic, blank slates" (457). (How) are children active participants in their gendering process? How do they process and reflect on their own gender performances (their practices, actions, etc)? Are they just products of socialization? Or, are they both projects of socialization and agents who negotiate their gender identities/roles/expectations?
- How can we apply Martin's/Bernstein's readings to the recent uproar over Brangelina's daughter, Shiloh? Check out what feministing says about it here.

Direct Engagement Question 9:

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- You may include your own opinions about the readings, but those opinions must be explained and supported by examples (from the readings, your experiences)
- You should include some sort of question that you pose to your readers

In discussing how the readings make you curious, you could think about these questions--Were there terms or concepts that didn't make sense or that you weren't familiar with? Are there certain issues that you would like to know more about? Were any aspects of the readings confusing? Are there certain claims that you strongly agree/disagree with and that you would like to read how others feel/think about

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them? What issues did the readings fail to address that you think are very important for discussing family values, feminism and marriage.

OPTION TWO: For this option, I have one set of questions: Is gay marriage an important issue for feminists? Why or why not? What feminist (or queer) family values can be generated from our critical conversations about gay marriage and/or gay families and radical kinship configurations?

Direct Engagement Question 10:

OPTION 1: How do the readings (Dworkin, Lorde, Rubin) make you curious? You can engage with this question in any way that you wish as long as you follow these basic rules:

- Your direct engagement must address at least one of the readings
- Your direct engagement should be aimed at making us curious and demonstrate a respectful and critical engagement with the ideas/readings
- You may include your own opinions about the readings, but those opinions must be explained and supported by examples (from the readings, your experiences)
- You should include some sort of question that you pose to your readers

In discussing how the readings make you curious, you could think about these questions--Were there terms or concepts that didn't make sense or that you weren't familiar with? Are there certain issues that you would like to know more about? Were any aspects of the readings confusing? Are there certain claims that you strongly agree/disagree with and that you would like to read how others feel/think about them?

OPTION TWO: Several of the readings for Tuesday (Dworkin, Lorde, Rubin) aim to distinguish between the erotic and the pornographic. Using specific passages/ideas from the readings, answer some of the following questions:

- Are there differences between the pornographic and the erotic?
- If so, what are they?
- What is at stake for feminists in attempting to link a politics of sex with the erotic or the pornographic?

Direct Engagement Question 11:

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OPTION 1: Visit [critical resistance, women and prison: a site for resistance](#) and then do the following in your direct engagement:

- Spend some time (around 20 minutes or so) exploring the site.
- In a 200 word post, describe a few things on the site (or on specific parts of it) that made you curious and why.

OPTION 2: How do the readings make you curious? You can engage with this question in any way that you wish as long as you follow these basic rules:

- Your direct engagement must address at least one of the readings
- Your direct engagement should be aimed at making us curious and demonstrate a respectful and critical engagement with the ideas/readings
- You may include your own opinions about the readings, but those opinions must be explained and supported by examples (from the readings, your experiences)
- You should include some sort of question that you pose to your readers
- In discussing how the readings make you curious, you could think about these questions--Were there terms or concepts that didn't make sense or that you weren't familiar with? Are there certain issues that you would like to know more about? Were any aspects of the readings confusing? Are there certain claims that you strongly agree/disagree with and that you would like to read how others feel/think about them?

Direct Engagement Question 12:

In this final blog direct engagement, I would like you to reflect on the class and what you learned this semester. You could write about:

- one of your favorite readings
- how your understanding of feminism has been influenced by our discussions/readings/papers
- your thoughts about our blog and the blogging experience
- whatever else you want to write about in relation to the class.

Also, I will be teaching this class again next spring. What advice would you give students who will be taking it then?