

HNRS130-008 Conceptions of Self

Selves and Others: Gender, Race and Responsibility

Syllabus Spring 2017

MW 12noon - 1.15pm

Nguyen Engineering Building 1109

Instructor: Prof. Rachel Jones (Philosophy)

email: rjones23@gmu.edu

Open Office Hours: M10am - 11.30am, W3pm - 4.30pm, Robinson B462.

Where to find information about this course: all course information including the syllabus, assignments, and any additional announcements or changes to the schedule (including assignment deadlines) will be posted on the Blackboard site for this course. You should also check your GMU email regularly for class announcements.

Course Outline: On this course, we will explore how the modern concept of the self was born, how it developed and matured, and how it can be questioned, challenged and transformed. We will pay particular attention to the ways in which gender and race are integral to the shaping of self and identity, as well as to the role of others.

We will begin with the birth of the self as it takes place in key philosophical texts by Descartes and Locke (17th century). We will explore the strengths and limits of their approaches by considering an alternative, narrative approach to selfhood (Cavarero), and with the help of the film *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000). Despite the apparent solitude of the Cartesian self, this part of the course will show how the self is in fact bound up with others - and hence, with questions of responsibility.

We will pursue these themes through later (20th century) existentialist thinkers, focussing in particular on Sartre, de Beauvoir and Fanon. These thinkers argue (against Descartes) that the self is not grounded in an essence, but can only be formed through actions and projects, which always take shape in relation to others. We will ask what happens to those positioned as the Other *for* the self: who gets trapped in this position, and why? what effects does being seen as 'Other' have on one's own sense of self?

We will pursue these questions further through Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This powerful novel depicts the effects of slavery, racism, and colonialism on African-American individuals and communities, using a non-linear narrative to portray the traumatic loss of self and to explore ways of recovering the self via re-attachment to others.

In the final part of the course, we will examine the work of several recent thinkers engaged in critical dialogue with both Descartes and existentialism. Michel Foucault argues that the modern self is produced through disciplinary power and normalizing judgements that work primarily on the body. Sandra Bartky and Judith Butler build on Foucault's approach to account for the ways in which the self is not only always *bodily*, but also always *gendered*. We will use the 1997 film *Ma Vie en Rose* (dir. Alain Berliner) to examine the disciplinary practices and discursive norms that simultaneously produce and constrain our gendered identities.

Like the existentialists, this final group of thinkers argues against the idea that the self is grounded in an underlying essence or unchanging substance. At the same time, they develop and complicate our understanding of how much power we have to determine our own identities, shifting the emphasis from individual freedom to social and linguistic structures and cultural, bodily practices.

This brings us back to the question of responsibility: if identities are produced through social norms that confine and constrain, and do harm to those who do not conform, how should we go about changing those norms? How is resistance and change possible, if individuals are themselves the products of dominant norms? To what extent does this mean rethinking the existentialist conception of radical freedom? If identities are performatively constituted, is a performative politics possible?

Book Requirements

You will need to purchase your own copy of four books for this course:

1. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated D. Cress (third edition), Hackett Classics, 1993.
NB you must use this translation!
ISBN-10: 0872201929 **ISBN-13:** 978-0872201927
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated C. Macomber, Yale University Press, 2007.
ISBN-10: 0300115466 **ISBN-13:** 978-0300115468
3. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Vintage, 2004.
ISBN-10: 1400033411 **ISBN-13:** 978-1400033416
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated A. Sheridan, Vintage, 1995.
ISBN-10: 0679752552 **ISBN-13:** 978-0679752554

We will also be using some texts posted on BB as well as selected films:

Texts on BB:

Letters from Elizabeth to Descartes (extracts)
Locke, 'Of Identity and Diversity' (extract from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)
Cavarero, 'A Stork for an Introduction' and extract from ch.3 of *Relating Narratives*
de Beauvoir, 'Introduction' to *The Second Sex*
Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (selected chapters)
Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power'
Butler, *Gender Trouble* (extracts)

Films:

Memento (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000)
Ma Vie en Rose (dir. Alain Berliner, 1997)

Please note:

1. Unless you have copies of the original source material (i.e. the relevant books in the required translation), **you will be responsible for printing off each of the set readings on BB listed above so that you have a paper copy to work with in class.**

Please note: this is a course requirement. We will be doing close work with the texts both in class and for assignments. In addition, ***all laptops, phones and other electronic devices (e.g. coffee makers) must be turned off during class time***, so you must have a paper copy of each class reading with you on the appropriate day.

Printing costs should not exceed \$12 (in total), based on the JC print costs of 10c per page. A proportion of your participation grade will be attached to producing your own portfolio of readings (see section on participation below). Checklists for the portfolio will be distributed at class 2.

2. You will also need access to the film *Memento*: you should treat this as a set text for the course. *Memento* is available to rent/purchase via Netflix and Amazon. You will be expected to watch this film in its entirety *at least once* before the relevant class. If you choose to write your first essay on *Memento*, you will need to be able to go back and re-watch key scenes. If for any reason you cannot obtain the film, please ask me, well in advance of the relevant class, so that I can lend you a DVD of the film. A group viewing can also be arranged, again, with enough advance notice!

Reading: the schedule of readings is given below. I will expect you to have done the set reading before the relevant class. This means reading through the set text *at least once*; going back and re-reading either the whole text, or the passages that seem especially important/ difficult/ puzzling/ interesting to you; and writing down your thoughts and questions (I recommend keeping a notebook/ electronic file just for

your reading notes for this course that you can bring to class, as a reminder of what you want to ask or comment on).

If you don't have questions, you're not reading properly! If you do the reading in advance, you will get a lot more out of classes. Often, you will also find it helpful to read through the texts once more *after* the class discussion.

Questions and Problems: if you have a question about the course, or a problem with a class or assignment, please do one or more of the following:

- ask in class (often others will have the same question/concern)
- come and see me in my open office hours (see above for details)
- email me with a question or query, or to ask for an appointment: rjones23@gmu.edu

I will respond to emails as soon as I reasonably can, though as a general rule I will not answer emails in late evening and will only check intermittently at weekends. This means you should not panic if you email me on Saturday morning (for example) and have not heard back by Sunday afternoon! It also means you need to plan ahead – *please don't leave questions about assignments or reading until the last minute.*

Commitment to Diversity: In keeping with the general ethos of the University and the Honors College, this class seeks to create a learning environment that fosters respect for people across differences. We welcome and value individuals and their differences, including gender expression and identity, race, economic status, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, national origin, first language, religion, age and ability. We encourage all members of the learning environment to engage with the material personally, but to be open to exploring and learning from experiences different than their own.

NB This does not mean not being critical: respecting others' views means taking them seriously, and taking them seriously means thinking about their strengths and weaknesses, asking questions, and offering constructive criticisms or alternative viewpoints where appropriate. It also means thinking about where the views of others can challenge and change our own, and being open to what they have to teach us.

Valuing diversity is not just an attitude – it is a matter of developing an active practice. Amongst other things, this practice involves:

- learning to listen to other perspectives;
- being open to criticism of one's own views;
- being willing to evaluate different positions while being unsure where one stands;
- having good reasons for one's views, but being willing to change one's mind;
- not rushing to judgment;
- basing critical comments or questions on as good an understanding of another or text or theory as one can manage;
- *and* being willing to accept that there will always be things one cannot see or understand;
- learning to express criticisms and differences of opinion in ways that are not personal or hurtful and that leave space for other voices.

Assignments and Grading

Participation: 5%

Film Quiz: 5%

Worksheets: 2 x 10% = 20%

Response Paper: 10%

Essays: 3 x 20% = 60%

1. Attendance & Participation: There are no points for showing up. However, showing up has value for all other aspects of assessment and you should not expect to do well on the course if you miss classes. After week 1, you will lose one grade on your participation grade for each unexplained absence (you cannot participate if you are not there).

Your **participation grade (5% of final grade)** will be based on class activities that will vary from week to week and may include small group discussions, informal writings, blackboard discussions, reading quizzes, etc. Please note that if you are absent and miss an activity that contributes to the participation grade, you will forfeit the points unless you have mitigating circumstances and contact me to arrange a make-up activity.

Portfolio of readings: as noted above, from Week 3 onwards you are responsible for printing off some of the set readings for this class (all readings will be available on BB). A checklist of the required readings will be provided in class 2. As having a paper copy of the text to work with in class is essential, 25% of your of your participation grade will be dependent on producing your own portfolio of course readings. Once you have printed off the readings for the course, you should ask another member of the class to check your portfolio is complete, sign off the check list for you, and hand it to me. **This must be completed by the end of class on Monday February 8th (week 3).**

2. Film Quiz (5% of final grade): there will be a take home quiz on the film *Memento*. You will be expected to complete this as you watch the film (in your own time) and bring a paper copy to class on Wed. February 15th.

3. Worksheets (10% each): there will be two worksheets based on close textual analysis: one on Locke and one on Butler. Completing these worksheets will help you to engage with the theories we are examining and to write better, more rigorous essays. You should prepare the worksheets *before* the relevant classes and use the classes to test and refine your answers before posting your final worksheet response on BB by the relevant deadline (see schedule below).

3. Response Paper (10%): you will write a 2-3 page paper responding to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The paper should identify and discuss a particular scene or section of the novel that has furthered your understanding of one of the key themes of the course, such as self, identity, memory, race, gender, embodiment, freedom, or responsibility. Further details will be given 1 week before the assignment is due.

4. Essays: You will write three papers of 6-8 pages each, one on each section of the course. The topics for each paper will be distributed 2 weeks before the due date, along with further information about expectations for these assessments. For submission dates, please see the course schedule below.

Submitting Written Work: all written work should all be submitted on BB by the relevant deadline (see course schedule below). Paper copies of the response paper and the first two essays should also be submitted at the first class after the submission deadline. If you cannot attend class, please hand the paper copy in to the Philosophy Office (Robinson B465) during office hours (9am-4pm, weekdays), clearly marked for my attention.

Please note: *the date of submission will always be taken from when you upload the work on BB.* If there is a system problem that means you can't upload the work, please email me and let me know, attaching a copy of the relevant assignment.

Late Submissions & Extensions: extensions can be arranged if you have a good reason for submitting work late. Whenever possible please let me know and arrange the extension in advance (by email is fine).

- Extensions cannot be given beyond the last day of the exam period.
- Where an assignment is late without an agreed extension, one grade will be deducted for each day it is late (weekends count as two days - work can always be uploaded on BB). So an A grade paper that is one day late will become an A-; if two days late, it will be a B+, etc.
- Lateness penalties can be waived if you have a good reason for submitting the work late and let me know about it. Please provide me with some evidence to support your case whenever possible (e.g. a doctor's note or emergency room receipt).

Incompletes (IN): requests for a grade of incomplete must be made to me in writing (preferably by email), and must be submitted 24 hours before the last assignment deadline for this course.

Accommodations for Disabilities: if you require academic accommodations for a disability, please let me know and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 703-993-2472. All academic accommodations (e.g. arrangements for note-takers, modified assignments, etc) are made through that office.

Academic Integrity and the Honor Code: this course is conducted in accordance with the GMU Honor Code as set out on the University website:

'Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.' <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/>

It is your responsibility as students, and mine as instructor, to be aware of the Honor code and to act in accordance with it. The key issue here is that you always respect both your own work and that of others. In teaching this course, I am interested in *your* ideas and your work: no matter how tired, panicked or under pressure you feel, do not give in to the temptation to pass off the work of others as your own. This is a major violation of trust and academic integrity. If you are struggling, come and talk to me.

Passive plagiarism (e.g. failing to cite properly or give proper references for sources) is as bad as active plagiarism (e.g. downloading an essay off the internet). Always appropriately cite and reference your sources. For acceptable citation models, see Purdue University Online Writing Lab (Purdue OWL), "Research and Citation": <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/>

Where there is evidence of plagiarism (or any other form of cheating), I will refer the case to the University Honor committee, in keeping with the Honor Code. For further guidance, see the Honor Code website: <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/>

COURSE AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

NB: This schedule is subject to change. It is your responsibility to CHECK BB AND YOUR GMU EMAIL REGULARLY for any posted changes in reading material, assignments or deadlines. If in doubt - having checked those places first! - you can always email me.

Week 1

Monday January 23rd

Introduction to the Course; Introduction to Descartes

PART ONE: THE BIRTH OF THE SELF

Wednesday January 25th

Descartes: From Radical Doubt to Self-Certainty

Reading: Descartes, *Meditations*, 'Preface to the Reader' and Meditations 1 & 2 (up to p.18)

Week 2

Monday Jan 30th & Wednesday February 1st

Descartes: Self and Substance, Mind and Body

Reading: Descartes, *Meditations* 2 (pp.21-24) & Med. 6 (pp. 47-53); letters from Elizabeth (extracts on BB)

Week 3 Monday February 6th & Wednesday February 8th

Locke: Personal Identity, Consciousness and Memory

Reading: Locke, 'Of Identity and Diversity' (on BB)

Locke worksheet due on BB by 5pm on Friday Feb 10th

Week 4

Monday February 13th

Who are we? Narrative selves and the need for others

Reading: Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* ('A Stork for an Introduction' & extract ch 3; on BB)

Film Quiz on *Memento* due: bring paper copy to class on Wed. Feb 15th.

Wednesday February 15th

Memento I: Memory, Selfhood and Narrative (mapping the timelines)

Reading: *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan)

Week 5

Monday February 20th

Memento II: Memory, Selfhood and Narrative (mapping ideas); essay preparation advice.

PART TWO: SELVES & OTHERS, FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY

Wednesday February 22nd - Introduction to Existentialism

Sartre: Existence precedes Essence

Reading: Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism* (on BB)

1st Essay due on BB by 12 midnight, Sunday February 26th; bring paper copy to class next day.

Week 6

Monday February 27th

Sartre: Freedom, Anguish and the Self

Reading: Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism*, continued (on BB)

Wednesday March 1st

Sartre: Selves, Others and the Struggle for Freedom

Reading: Sartre, 'The Look' (on BB);

Week 7

Monday March 6th

de Beauvoir: Woman as 'Other'

Reading: de Beauvoir, 'Introduction' to *The Second Sex* (on BB)

Wednesday March 8th

Concluding de Beauvoir; introduction to Fanon: The Black Man as 'Other'

Reading: Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Introduction

SPRING BREAK

Spring Break assignment: Read (or re-read!) Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (there will be an in-class reading quiz on Wed. March 22nd, which will also contribute to your participation grade)

Week 8

Monday March 20th & Wednesday March 22nd

Fanon: Colonialism, the Epidermal Racial Schema, and the Negation of Self

Reading: Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, chapter 5

Response Paper on *Beloved* due on BB by 12 midnight on Friday March 24th

Week 9 Monday March 27th & Wednesday March 29th

Fanon and Morrison: Memory, Trauma, Race: the Recovery of the Enslaved Self

Reading: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

2nd Essay due on BB by 12 midnight on Sunday April 2nd, bring paper copy to class next day

PART THREE: BODIES, SELVES AND DISCIPLINARY POWER

Week 10

Monday April 3rd

Foucault 1: From the Power of Spectacle to Disciplinary Power

Reading: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Part One, chapter 1 'The Body of the Condemned'

Wednesday April 5th

Foucault 2: Docile Bodies, Disciplined Selves

Reading: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Part 3, chapters 1 'Docile Bodies' [small groups to present specific sections]

Week 11

Monday April 10th

Foucault 3: Observation, Examination and Norms

Reading: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Part 3, chapter 2 'The Means of Correct Training' [small groups to prepare and present specific sections]

Wednesday April 12th

Foucault 4: Panopticism and the Power of the Gaze

Reading: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Part 3 chapter 3, 'Panopticism'

Week 12

Monday April 17th

Bartky and the Panoptical Production of Femininity

Reading: Sandra Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power' (on BB)

Wednesday April 19th

Butler: Gender and Identity

Reading: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (extracts on BB from chapters 1)

Week 13 Monday April 24th & Wednesday April 26th

Butler: Performative Identities & Possibilities for Resistance

Reading: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (extracts on BB from chapter 3)

Butler worksheet due on BB by 6pm on Thursday April 28th

Week 14

Monday May 1st & Wednesday May 3rd

Ma Vie en Rose (dir. Alain Berliner): heteronormativity and the (re-)production of gender identities (in class screening and discussion)

Final Paper due on BB by 10.30am on Monday 15 May (bring paper copy to Prof Jones' office, Robinson B 462, between 10.30 and 12 noon)