

Masterstudiengang JFKI,
Kultur-Modul C
(*Kulturgeschichte einzelner Medien und ästhetischer Darstellungsformen*)
Hauptseminar

Post-Classical Theory

Prof. Dr. F. Kelleter

Tuesday, 14.15 – 15.45 (JFKI 319)
(Summer Term 2025)

Please read this syllabus carefully: It contains detailed information about the seminar's structure and suggestions for preparing "your" session. Note that we will **finalize our class schedule in the first two meetings**. This means that every registered student who wants to attend this course needs to **be present in the first session** (April 15) in order to **sign up for a topic (student-run session) or have contacted me beforehand by e-mail** with a session proposal (no later than April 11). No additional students can be admitted after we have finalized our schedule in the initial meetings. In other words: Registration for this course is completed in class; it is not enough to have registered on Campus Management. Please understand that no exceptions can be made. If you have registered for this course on Campus Management, but cannot attend the first session, please get in touch with me beforehand and we will find a solution.

Altogether, there will be two organizational meetings, four background sessions on "postclassical" theoretical paradigms (with more substantial reading assignments), up to seven student-run sessions (with shorter reading assignments, no more than 25 pages per session), and possibly one "open" session (yet to be determined). I will not define any additional tasks beyond the ones explained below, which are: Every participant should (try to) read (most of) the assignments, participate in our classroom discussions, and prepare and moderate one session together with a group of other students. As *Prüfungsleistung*, the *Studienordnung* defines "Referat mit schriftlicher Ausführung": in this course, we will interpret this as a brief "group report" on the session you have organized (you can submit your PowerPoint slides and/or session manuscripts together with a brief reflection on what you think went well and not so well in your session; the latter no longer than 5 pages), possibly accompanied by a short individual conversation (10 minutes). I will specify the details in class as the semester draws to a close.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns! Feel free to do so at any time during the semester, or before the beginning of the term, or if you're not sure yet if you want to take this course or not. My e-mail address is: Frank.Kelleter@fu-berlin.de

Course Description: This seminar serves as "**Hauptseminar**" of Culture-**Module C** in the **Master's degree program**. We will study different types of cultural theory that have

emerged after the “classical” paradigms of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, orthodox Marxism, and their poststructuralist inflections. Our introductory sessions will survey several developments from the 1970s-2000s (revisionary Marxism, field theory, actor-network-theory, systems theory). Additional topics (to be chosen and prepared by students) can include, but are not limited to, later or other paradigms such as poststructuralism (e.g., Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida), affect theory (e.g., Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Stewart, Sara Ahmed, Margaret Wetherell), post-critique and new formalism (e.g., Rita Felski, Caroline Levine), new queer theories (e.g., José Esteban Muñoz), trans theories (e.g. Jack Halberstam, Paul Preciado), media archaeology and media ecology (e.g., Lisa Gitelman, Katherine Hayles, Jay Bolter, Richard Grusin), post-cinema theories (e.g., Shane Denson, Julia Leyda), seriality studies (the JFKI’s own Popular Seriality Research Unit, e.g., Kathleen Loock, Maria Sulimma, Daniel Stein, Ruth Mayer, Frank Kelleter), contemporary aesthetic theories (e.g., Sianne Ngai), critiques of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism (e.g., the Judith Butler-Nancy Fraser debate, Catherine Rottenberg), black feminism and intersectionality (e.g., Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw), theories of neoliberalism (e.g., David Harvey, Wendy Brown), critical university studies (e.g., Christopher Newfield), critical whiteness studies (e.g., Claudia Rankine, David Roediger), Afropessimism and philosophies of blackness (e.g., Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten), black Marxism (e.g., Angela Davis, Cedric Robinson, Karen and Barbara Fields), contemporary theories of neofascism (Alberto Toscano, David Neiwert, Cynthia Miller-Idriss, George Hawley, Simon Strick), or any other new trend or publication you would like to discuss.

All participants are expected to have **familiarized themselves with these topics** before the beginning of the semester so that they can sign up for a session in our first meeting—or propose an alternative group topic by advance e-mail. If some topics turn out to be more “popular” than others, it may happen that not everyone will get to work on the topic they would like to sign up for. In this case, some participants will be asked to join a different group, preferably one that is thematically close to their initial choice. **First session:** April 15.

Course Organization: This seminar serves as **Hauptseminar** within Culture-Module C in the JFKI’s Master’s program. **There is no auditing this course.** Every participant will have to join a group that will organize and conduct one of our sessions. Alternatively, if you want me to supervise your Master’s Thesis, you can use this seminar to workshop your M.A. project (as a substitute for *Master-Kolloquium*; see “M.A. Policy” below).

Starting December 2, all **sessions** (except perhaps the last) **will be student-run**, i.e., a group of students will be in charge of the design, assignments, timing, and moderation of “their” session. (If seven or less students attend this course, each participant will organize one session individually.) It is possible to propose topics other than the ones listed below, ideally by organizing a group of participants before our first session (please send advance e-mail).

The students in charge of a session need to **coordinate their efforts both logistically and thematically**, so that their session will be a joint and coherent endeavor, not a collection of individual presentations. As a group, you should focus strongly on **one text or textual excerpts of your choice**, not exceeding 25 single pages (book pages, not copied pages).

By contrast, **readings for the initial four thematic sessions (not organized by students) will be somewhat more extensive.** They will be sent in time to all enrolled students or uploaded on Blackboard (go to “Kursmaterialien”; you may have to click on “open [Document] here” for download; if that doesn’t work, try a different browser: students have reported problems with the Chrome browser).

Registration: All participants need to be registered on Blackboard *and* Campus Management by the first session. If you cannot register online or cannot attend the first session, please

contact me before the beginning of the term (no later than April 11). Before our first meeting, all communication about and within this class will be channeled through the course's Blackboard site, so please make sure you are registered there. Note that your **registration is only finalized after you have signed up for a session topic** or proposed an alternative group topic (not listed for sign-up below).

Structure and Requirements of Student-Run Sessions: Each participant will be part of a group that organizes and conducts one session on a topic of their choice. That topic will be represented by **one assigned text (or an excerpt thereof, or a collection of excerpts from different texts)**, which will be **chosen by the group in charge, distributed at least two weeks before the day of class, and then studied by all course participants**. Assigned material should **not exceed 25 book pages** per session (please do not include any additional or “optional” readings).

In the beginning of “your” session, I will hand over all classroom responsibilities to the designated moderator of your student group. Afterwards, you and your group are in charge of all the details of the session, including time management. However, all student-run sessions should (roughly) follow the same structure:

- **A.** Please always start with a **brief introduction**, in which you tell us about the structure and aim of your session. This part should not take longer than **5 minutes**.
- **B.** This should be followed by an “**expert**” **presentation**, in which you introduce and “frame” your topic. In this part, you essentially want to do three things: **(1)** very briefly fill us in on the intellectual backgrounds of the author(s) and the work(s) to be discussed; **(2)** situate them within the larger spectrum of contemporary theory, making reference to “surrounding” texts and/or explaining key concepts of relevant debates; and **(3)** briefly sketch important positions and controversies in the research literature on them. Please note that this section requires substantial previous research! It cannot be prepared over night or by a simple internet search or Chat GPT conversation. You will want to consult a variety of sources—both primary and secondary texts beyond the one(s) you have assigned. All sources should be cited (e.g., in a PowerPoint slide) at some point during the session. In general, the use of PowerPoint or other presentation tools is strongly encouraged for this part. (Please arrive early to set up and test your technological equipment. Bring your own adapters, if needed!). This part should last no longer than **15 or 20 minutes**. In particular, avoid reciting lengthy biographical or historical data if they serve no analytical purpose; everything presented should be functional to your analytical goal in the next part.
- **C.** What follows is the central—and longest—part of your session: a detailed discussion of the assigned text(s) (up to 25 pages), together with all participants. In this part of your session, you want to **reconstruct the logic of the text(s) you have assigned**, closely reading individual passages: Which central ideas are put forward? How are rhetoric and argument related? Is there a specific trajectory or hierarchy of arguments? Which underlying assumptions can be identified? How does the material situate itself (explicitly or implicitly) toward other positions we have discussed in this class? Which methodological, theoretical, or political consequences need further discussion? To pursue these, or similar, questions, together with all participants, you may want to **prepare a set of questions**, together with a **number of short passages for close rhetorical or stylistic analysis** (on PowerPoint slides). Whichever structure you prefer, this part should **not be done in the style of one uninterrupted presentation but in more interactive ways**, such as a moderated discussion; Q&A; short “prompts” about core concepts; pre-assigned tasks for all participants (via Blackboard); shortly presenting a canonized reading in order to challenge it or carry it

forward; group work (breakout sessions); or other strategies of your choice. This part should last **at least 25 minutes but no longer than 40 minutes**.

- **D.** A **brief conclusion** in which you summarize the session's results, compare them to your initial goals, and give yourself and everyone else (including me) some time to "critique" the session: What worked well? What didn't? Are there any lessons for future session organizers? This part of your session should take **about 5 minutes**. This is also the point where I will step in and add additional observations and summaries of my own: allow **another 15 minutes** for this purpose, i.e., try to **wrap up your session around 3:30**.

When preparing "your" session, please remember that **your goal is a coordinated group effort**, not a sequence of individual presentations. For this purpose, all group members should start meeting regularly at least four weeks prior to the session in order to coordinate their tasks. **Allow at least a month for intensive preparation**—this is why the student-run sessions only start in the seventh week of the semester, halfway through our course. You may want to agree on a clearly defined division of labor within your group (e.g., distributing the tasks of compiling a bibliography; library work and literature procurement; PDF conversion and text distribution; moderation; expert presentations; discussion of assigned text; summary; technological supervision; time management; etc.)

The **reading assignments for your session should be made available at least two weeks (14 days) in advance**, as indicated in the time schedule below. Keep in mind that it will take some time to get a hold of the material and to scan or otherwise convert the assigned text(s) to PDF format. Once you have done so, please distribute the assigned text (or excerpts) using the Blackboard group-email function. Remember that your reading assignment should not exceed 25 single pages (book pages). Do not add "bonus" material or "optional" extra pages!

Important: All material you distribute needs to include **proper bibliographical information**, cited directly on the document itself (not just in your e-mail), so that students can assess its publication contexts and quote it in their own research. Please follow either MLA or Chicago Style citation standards. If more than one version of a text exists, make an informed choice about which edition/variant you are using. You may want to address this issue in the beginning of your session. **If the chosen text has endnotes, remember to include them in your document!** (Pages with endnotes are not included in the page count.)

Attendance Policy: To participate in this course, you must be registered on Campus Management *and* be present in the first session to sign up for student-run sessions individually or as a group. If you cannot attend the first session, please let me know in advance (e-mail). Success of the student-run sessions largely depends on the participation of all members of the seminar. Therefore, it is **important that you are present—and active—in all discussions**, not just in your "own" session. **We will take attendance;** if you cannot attend a session due to health or other issues, please let me know in advance. Students who miss more than two classes altogether without any notice whatsoever will be taken off the class roster. If you decide to drop this course, please let me know (don't just stay away).

Credit Requirements ("Prüfungsleistung"): For Culture Module C, the *Studienordnung* defines "aktive und regelmäßige Teilnahme" (active and regular participation) and "Referat mit schriftlicher Ausführung": the latter will be interpreted in this course as a brief "group report" on the session you have organized. This means that at the end of the term, you and your co-organizers can submit your PowerPoint slides, your session manuscripts (if available), and a brief written reflection (individually) on what you think went well and not so well in your session (no more than 5 pages). Depending on the size of our class and on how successful the student-ran sessions were, this may be accompanied by a short individual

conversation between each student and me (10 minutes). I will specify further details in class as the semester draws to a close.

Plagiarism: Always indicate your sources, even when you're "only" paraphrasing them. Everything else constitutes plagiarism and is a serious breach of academic ethics that will not only result in immediate failure of this course but can endanger your career as a student at this Institute (and potentially beyond). Please take this issue very seriously, because plagiarism is a severe scholarly offense! This goes for papers as well as presentations. To find out more about what constitutes plagiarism, see definitions and examples collected in the *MLA Handbook* (and similar textbooks). Citing AI-generated texts (such as Chat-GPT dialogues) without exact source quotation will be considered plagiarism. **All cases of plagiarism involving exchange students will be reported to the student's home institution. There are no exceptions to this rule.**

A Note on the Selection of Course Material: The material for this course has not been selected in order to canonize, celebrate, or condone it. Rather, this is a course in cultural history that analyzes influential American self-descriptions and self-performances (plus a few non-American sources) from a non-U.S. perspective. Thus, some canonical (theoretical) sources have been selected precisely because they are canonical, i.e., because of their prevailing agency within the cultural system we study and investigate. We will read them—and their canonization—critically. Doing so, we will find that studying cultural history can be intense and disturbing. This course assumes that students are able to engage with material that is challenging in its representations and agendas. In fact, engaging with political or aesthetic discomfort is a significant part of an American Studies education and an opportunity for research and learning. However, there are some instances where a student may have experienced personal trauma that creates specific triggers for severe emotional distress. If this applies to you, please take responsibility to research the material we will be reading ahead of time, and let me know if you think that studying a particular text would create a significant issue for you—we can then work out alternative arrangements.

A Note on Language: I will not voice the N-word (or other racial slurs) in this course, also not when I'm quoting it visually (on a PowerPoint slide) from a primary source and even when this source text uses the word not as a slur, but as an in-group expression. I would like to ask all non-Black students to follow the same practice. By contrast, the word "negro" has a different semantic history. In many texts in American cultural history up to the 1970s and beyond, it is used by writers of different ethnicities as an accepted term of ethnic identification without overt motivations to voice an insult. As a self-attribution in the writings of authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey—or, later, in the poetry of Langston Hughes, in the self-naming of the Harlem Renaissance as the "New Negro Movement," or in the writings of artists and activists such as Ralph Ellison or Martin Luther King, Jr.—the word "negro" is not used as an exclusive in-group marker, but as an unmarked expression in accordance with the political parlance of the day. Therefore, I will quote the word whenever it occurs but will not use it as a descriptive term myself (outside of quotations). In terms of semantic history, it is important to understand that the English word "negro" is not completely identical with its German dictionary translation. Both terms, however, and also their French and Spanish equivalents, are ultimately rooted in colonialist discourse. Therefore, if someone in this course feels personally offended by these quotations, please do not hesitate to let me know and I will try to find individual ways of historicizing our texts without de-historicizing their language.

Regarding the term "Indian," I will largely follow the example of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, who suggests that we "use 'Indigenous,' 'Indian,' and 'Native' interchangeably. ... Indigenous

individuals and peoples in North America on the whole do not consider ‘Indian’ a slur” (*An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, 2014). However, since the term “Indian” originates as a colonialist appellation, I will not use it as a descriptive term myself, but put it in quotation marks or paraphrase it whenever the context requires.

Electronic Etiquette Policy: You will not be able to follow class discussions and presentations with undivided attention when you’re simultaneously surfing the Web. Laptop, tablet, or mobile phone screens can also be a distraction for other students in the classroom. Therefore, I kindly ask you to take your notes on paper. Only if absolutely necessary, use laptops or tablets for note-taking, and if you do, please go offline. In addition, please turn off all cell phones during class. Thank you! *Exception:* students with special needs that can be accommodated by using a laptop or tablet may use all required devices (offline).

M.A. Policy: If you want me to supervise your Master’s Thesis (*Abschlussarbeit*), you should have attended at least one of my seminars. Alternatively, you can use one of my seminars (such as this one) as an M.A. colloquium, preferably in conjunction with the corresponding lecture course. You will have to choose a topic connected to the seminar’s material; please get in touch with me before the first session (preferably by e-mail) to discuss possible options. Similar arrangements can be made for B.A. Theses. Seminar topics are always broad enough to provide fruitful material and interesting M.A. research questions for all students of American cultural history.

Semester Schedule and Topics: see next page.

SEMESTER SCHEDULE

15 April 2025

Organizational Matters

Assignment: Please have read this syllabus carefully and be ready to sign up for a student-run session.

22 April 2025

Semester Schedule

Assignment: none; but please start preparing the readings for next week's session (29 April: approximately 50 pages plus another 50 pages of suggested reading).

BACKGROUND SESSIONS: FOUR KEY EXAMPLES OF NON-AMERICAN "POST-CLASSICAL" THEORY

29 April 2025

Revisionary Marxism / British Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall)

Assignment: Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms"; "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies."

Additional Reading: Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance."

6 May 2025

Field and Habitus Theory (Pierre Bourdieu)

Assignment: Pierre Bourdieu, from *The Field of Cultural Production*: "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed."

13 May 2025

Actor-Network-Theory (Bruno Latour)

Assignment: Bruno Latour, from *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*: "Second Source of Uncertainty: Action is Overtaken," "Third Source of Uncertainty: Objects too Have Agency," "Fifth Source of Uncertainty: Writing Down Risky Accounts."

Additional Reading: Bruno Latour, from *Reassembling the Social*: "Mediators vs. Intermediaries."

For the student group working on [the topic of May 27]: Please distribute the reading assignment for your session no later than today!

20 May 2025

Systems Theory (Niklas Luhmann)

Assignment: Niklas Luhmann, from *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*: "Fünfte Vorlesung: Operative Geschlossenheit / Selbstorganisation, Autopoiesis"; Niklas Luhmann, "Die Unwahrscheinlichkeit der Kommunikation"; Niklas Luhmann, from *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*: "Selbstbeobachtung und Selbstbeschreibung"; Niklas Luhmann, "Lesen lernen" [translations: "Operational Closure / Self-Organization, Autopoiesis," "The Improbability of Communication," "Self-Observation and Self-Description," "Learning How to Read"].

For the student group working on [the topic of June 3]: Please distribute the reading assignment for your session no later than today!

STUDENT-RUN SESSIONS

The following topics and their dates are purely hypothetical. Feel free to propose other topics or sequences! We will decide on a final schedule for this part of our course in the first two sessions (April 15/22) after considering all student suggestions.

27 May 2025

Black Feminism and Intersectionality

Some of the most influential challenges—and contributions—to post-classical theory have been articulated by Black feminist theory since the late 1970s. Three sources may be of particular interest to the students organizing this session: the 1977 “Combahee River Collective Statement”; the poetry and essays of Audre Lorde; and/or bell hooks’s theoretical writings since the 1980s. (1) The “Combahee River Collective” is a key document both of Black feminism and various 1970s lesbian movements. The best current edition, with good background material, is collected in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (2017). (2) Audre Lorde had close ties to the Combahee group; her oeuvre, encompassing poetry and theory, is so wide-ranging that it might be difficult to decide on a single text for discussion. Perhaps you want to combine a short poem with a short theoretical excerpt to discuss their inter-dependence, but also potential conflicts (rhetorically and aesthetically) between both modes. You might also want to think about how Lorde’s work illuminates the emergence of a “New” (culturalist) Left in the 1970s, with consequences all the way to our time. (Other interesting perspectives are: her time in Berlin, affiliated with the JFKI, and what this meant for—or how it has been historicized and recently also been problematized by—Afro-German groups and movements; Lorde’s political notion of lesbianism as well as her equally political way of writing about her illness in *The Cancer Journals*, 1980.) (3) Arguably, the writer who best condenses and summarizes the theoretical perspectives of US Black feminism in the 1980s/90s is bell hooks. In particular, her critique of (the history of) white feminism and her deep engagement with the ideological dimension of American entertainment media—an important continuation of Stuart Hall’s take on “ideology” (compare our first session)—have influenced many contemporary styles of Black feminist theorizing. The following texts by bell hooks may be particularly interesting in this regard: *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984) and *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990). – In your introductory framing, you may want to think about how these theorists relate to the Black Power movement and the Black Panthers, but also to other Black feminists of the 1960s/70s, especially Angela Davis and Assata Shakur. Note that all three sources (especially bell hooks) stress the importance of a cultural analytics focused on the interrelation of race, gender, and class (as social constraints and social “identities”). This foundational insight of Black feminism was systematized in 1989 for the field of Legal Studies by Kimberlé Crenshaw with her influential concept of “intersectionality.” A good overview is provided in Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (2006).

Session Organizer(s):

Assignment:

For the student group working on [the topic of June 10]: Please distribute the reading assignment for your session today!

3 June 2025

Affect Theory (Margaret Wetherell, Lauren Berlant)

“Affect” is one of the most prominent, but also one of the most slippery, or least well defined, concepts in contemporary theory. Its presence in academic language is often traced back to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s poststructuralist philosophy of “intensity”—and, even more so, Brian Massumi’s North-American popularization of Deleuze and Guattari, especially in the Foreword to his English translation of *Mille Plateaux* (1980) as *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). We might even want to organize a separate student-run session on Deleuze/Guattari and/or 1970/80s French poststructuralism (e.g., Jacques Derrida). However, given the metaphysical—some would argue: crypto-theological—dimension of poststructuralist affect theory, it might make sense to focus the “Affect Theory” session on explicitly feminist—or more systematically political—varieties and developments in the study of affect. A good place to start is Margaret Wetherell’s 2012 book *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. In particular, Wetherell’s first chapter (“Introducing Affect: Lines of Argument”) provides a good survey of research paradigms in the early 21st century. It might be interesting to pair (selections from) Wetherell with one of the most frequently quoted books of cultural critique in the 21st century, Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* from 2011, which re-defined for many readers how they think about the affective/emotional realities of contemporary neoliberalism. The following chapters from *Cruel Optimism* have particularly fruitful passages that could be discussed and/or assigned in class: “Introduction: Affect in the Present,” “Cruel Optimism,” “Intuitionists: History and the Effective Event.” You might also want to consult Sara Ahmed’s work on affect (predating Berlant) and Claire Hemmings’s, Ruth Leys’s, and Monique Scheer’s critique of the field.

Session Organizer(s):

Assignment:

For the student group working on [the topic of June 17]: Please distribute the reading assignment for your session today!

10 June 2025

Post-Critique and New Formalism

Few theoretical interventions of the early 21st century have rocked the boat of US literary studies more strongly than those collected under the label of “post-critique” (or “postcritique”). Starting out as a critique (sic!) of “paranoid” reading, “symptomatic” reading, and the so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion” (post-critique’s name for “classical” theory, especially Marxism and psychoanalysis), the movement—if it can be called thus—has left its mark even on academic writing styles that don’t subscribe to its founding assumptions but are nevertheless reluctant to employ supposedly retrograde concepts such as “ideology” (which Stuart Hall still placed at the center of his definition of Cultural Studies: see our first session). One of the earliest statements in this vein, rooted in affect theory and queer studies, was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay Is about You” (available in Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 2002). But the debate really took off with a special issue of the journal *Representations* (108.1, Fall 2009), edited by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, titled “The Way We Read Now.” Subsequently, Rita Felski has become one of the most productive torchbearers of post-critical literary studies. Her position, strongly influenced by Bruno Latour (especially Latour’s 2004 essay “Why Has Critique Run Out Of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”), is best summarized in her much-discussed 2015 book *The Limits of Critique*. – While not identical with “post-critique,” the so-called “New Formalism” in US literary studies has been developing in close dialogue with Felski, Best/Marcus, Sedgwick and, again, Latour. The most influential publication in this vein is still

Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Networks*, published (like Felski's book) in 2015.

Session Organizer(s):

Assignment:

17 June 2025

Gender and Class Beyond “Identity”: Judith Butler vs. Nancy Fraser

No discussion of contemporary theory is complete without addressing the 1995-1998 debate between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler in the *New Left Review*. Centering on Nancy Fraser's feminist theory of justice—in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (1997), which can also be read as an early study of neoliberalism—this debate touches on virtually all the neuralgic points of post-classical theory, from the difficulty of integrating macro- and micro-analysis to the role of affect and embodiment in an intersectional analysis of capitalism. Many 21st-century debates on (and within) critical theory are prefigured here in a strikingly consistent and accessible manner, with Judith Butler representing a postmodern (or “culturalist”) perspective on questions of gender, queerness, and class—and Fraser articulating a more skeptical (or empirical and “historicist”) view of these issues, based in a critique of political economy strongly indebted to revisionary Marxism. It might be difficult to read these texts from the 1990s without thinking of recent controversies about what many have seen as Butler's equivocations about anti-Semitic terrorism. Indeed, it may well be the case that some of these issues are already visible, if obliquely so, in the NLR debate. I would nevertheless encourage you to focus on the gender-theory-aspects of the debate and to historicize the Fraser-Butler exchange in the theoretical climate of the 1990s. The central texts are: Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68–93; Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *New Left Review* 227 (1998): 33–44; Nancy Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler,” *New Left Review* 228 (1998): 140–149. Another participant in the debate was Iris Marion Young with “Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser's Dual Systems Theory,” *New Left Review* 222 (1997): 147–60, to which Fraser responded in “A Rejoinder to Iris Young,” *New Left Review* 223 (1997): 126–29. – The student group organizing this session may want to look at all of these texts (and more), but focus on the exchange between Fraser and Butler. In particular, Fraser's response to Butler's initial critique (or selections thereof) should be part of the assigned classroom readings. For some of the more contemporary reverberations of these issues, you may want to consult Catherine Rottenberg's *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (2018) and other critical perspectives on “postfeminism” (Jo Littler, Rosalind Gill, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and others), including Fraser's own *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (2013). These latter sources could also be discussed in a separate session on neoliberal feminism.

Session Organizer(s):

Assignment:

For the student group working on [the topic of July 1]: Please distribute the reading assignment for your session today!

24 June 2025

– **no session** –

For the student group working on [the topic of July 8]: Please distribute the reading assignment for your session today!

1 July 2025

Queer and *Trans Theories

More a wide-ranging research field than a unified theoretical paradigm, Queer Studies comes in different methodological shapes, ranging from the empirical-sociological to the metaphysical-philosophical. Always closely connected to LGBTQ+ activism, this field has been traversed by almost all post-classical approaches to theory (poststructuralism, Black feminism, post-critique, affect theory, revisionary Marxism, etc.) and has, in turn, influenced their trajectories in manifold ways. For our purposes, the intersections of queer theory and theories of ethnicity and race may be particularly interesting. A foundational text in this regard is Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), which combines the mode of the sexual memoir with the scholarly register of (black) urban studies. A more explicitly academic, if occasionally more utopian, writer is Jack Halberstam, author of *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) and *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011, both as Judith Halberstam); a more recent publication (as Jack Halberstam) is *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2018). Another foundational text, which illustrates queer theory's engagement with questions of embodiment and affect, is Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), which could be usefully discussed in conjunction with Gail Weiss's *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (1999) and Iris Marion Young's feminist study *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (2005). Other important theorists (committed to different theoretical approaches) are Monique Wittig, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, David Halperin, Michael Warner, Cathy J. Cohen, Robyn Wiegman, Heather Love, Lee Edelman, and Leo Bersani. One of the most widely discussed queer theorists in the field of Latinx and Chicana Studies is José Esteban Muñoz with *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) and, especially, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) as well as the posthumously published essay collection *The Sense of Brown* (2020). In the same context, you may want to look at Juana María Rodríguez's *Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014). A queer version of postcolonial theory is attempted by John C. Hawley in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (2001). Last but not least, one of the most interesting non-Anglophone writers in this field is Paul B. Preciado, whose theory of transsexuality is deeply inflected by poststructuralist philosophy (especially Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze); central publications—in English translation—are the "auto-theoretical" book *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2008), the essay collection *An Apartment on Uranus* (2020), and the lecture *Can the Monster Speak* (2021), which summarizes Preciado's scathing critique of psychoanalysis.

Session Organizer(s):

Assignment:

For the student group working on [the topic of July 15]: Please distribute the reading assignment for your session today!

8 July 2025

Black Marxism / Revisionary Marxism

A good entryway into this topic is Stuart Hall's 1980 essay "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" (included in the "Additional Reading" section of our first session). Another important source is Cedric Robinson's 1983 landmark study *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (which can be read as a counterstatement of sorts to Harold Cruse's more polemical *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 1967). There are important forerunners of Robinson, however, most notably W.E.B. Du Bois with *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), his most Marxist work; C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938); and, of course, Angela Davis (for example, *Women, Race and Class*, 1981). In your session, you may want to reference these earlier authors, but also think about—and

perhaps discuss in detail—more contemporary examples that draw on them. A good collection of texts on the continued relevance of Robinson is *Futures of Black Radicalism*, edited in 2017 by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin; this volume also contains an interview with Angela Davis. Another contemporary Black Marxist—and feminist—you may want to read is Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor; central publications are her 2013 book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* and her 2019 study of Black home ownership, redlining, and eviction: *Race for Profit*. And then, of course, there is Cornel West, whose critique of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s (supposed) “Afropessimism” may be worth looking into. Also very much recommended: *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* by Karen Fields and Barbara J. Fields, one of the most consistently “Marxian” theories of US-American racism in a colonial/postcolonial historical perspective.

Session Organizer(s):

Assignment:

15 July 2025

Afropessimism(s) and/or Philosophies of Blackness [or Open Session / M.A. Projects]

The term “Afropessimism” covers an extremely wide and diverse field of theoretical and aesthetic practices. What they have in common is, arguably, a philosophical-ontological (sometimes: “para-ontological”) notion of “blackness,” developed in critical dialogue with, or sometimes even open hostility to, traditionally leftist and Marxist liberation movements (discussed in the previous session). Orlando Patterson’s concept of “social death” is a frequent point of departure, sometimes critically so. Afropessimist texts tend to be written in a register of (postmodern) philosophy rather than historiography or sociology. In other words, these are often difficult and challenging texts, and meant to be. An interesting (and rather accessible) author is Frank B. Wilderson III., who published a memoir-like book called *Afropessimism* in 2020. Another brilliant writer in this vein—though he distances himself from the term “Afropessimism”—is Fred Moten, author of *The Undercommons* (with Stefano Harney, 2013), *Black and Blur* (2017), *Stolen Life* (2018), and *The Universal Machine* (2018). Sometimes Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* (2014) is also discussed in this context. For all these writers—but especially Wilderson—you might want to consult critical perspectives on the US-centrism of academic “Afropessimism” and/or study some theoretico-historical precursors (compare Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, Modernity*, 2010). – Alternatively, you may want to return to the original feminist inspirations of many of these male-authored theories: Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, two of the most frequently quoted Black scholars of our time. Their texts are so rich, dense, and sophisticated that I would advise you to focus on only *one* of them in your analysis section, but it will be helpful to keep the other writer in close view for purposes of theoretical and historical framing. Spillers’s most influential essay is “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” from 1987. It was an important influence on “Afropessimist” and ontological thinkers like Frank Wilderson and Fred Moten, but also on the—much more accessible, but no less sophisticated—archival practices of Saidiya Hartman. Of central importance (and relevant for our own compositional and pedagogical practices) is Spillers’s critique of “pornotroping,” which you may want to address in your introductory section, because it is pertinent to *any* academic approach to African American history. If you focus on Hartman, the methodological question of archival work will almost automatically become important. Particularly important in this regard is Hartman’s book *Scenes of Subjection* from 1997 (especially that book’s “Introduction”) and her 2008 essay “Venus in Two Acts,” which rethinks and transforms some of her earlier methodological practices, introducing the concept of “critical fabulation.” Hartman’s writings about Africa (in *Lose Your Mother*, 2008) also raise questions about the US-centrism of Black Studies in their current institutional form.

Session Organizer(s):

Assignment:

You may propose authors / texts / theoretical frameworks that are not included in this list! If you want to do so, please let me know by e-mail before our first session, preferably together with other students who are willing to form a group with you. You can also focus on **an important book or (series of) article(s)** that is perhaps not yet representative of a larger field but has already produced numerous discussions or has simply proven valuable to your own work. Alternatively, you can focus on the intellectual work of **a specific journal**—or on how a journal has developed in its theoretical outlook and allegiance—or **other topics and other kinds of material!** If you're not sure if a topic is suitable or not, feel free to contact me by e-mail!

Other possible topics:

NEW AESTHETIC THEORIES: “Aesthetics” is a wide field that could be covered in a number of student-run sessions. In fact, it’s so trendy that almost all the paradigms listed above touch on it in some form (especially “Queer and *Trans Theories” and “Afropessimism and/or Philosophies of Blackness”: see, for example, Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, 2023). A return to more classical notions of aesthetics is attempted in Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (2015) and Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (2019). There is also a large field of studies on “aesthetic capitalism,” usually focused on neoliberal capitalism (Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool*, 1997; Jim McGuigan’s *Cool Capitalism*, 2009; Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism*, 2009, in Germany: Andreas Reckwitz; also see Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*, 2021). Each of these sub-fields makes for an interesting (separate) session. But perhaps the most sophisticated and most widely discussed contemporary theorist of aesthetics is Sianne Ngai, who examines aesthetic affects in the context of their changing institutional and economic realities. The underlying assumption of her books *Ugly Feelings* (2005), *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), and *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (2020) is that aesthetic experience has a (material) history and that neoliberal capitalism invites aesthetic affects which are characterized by diminished claims to transcendental intensity while they enable timely reflections on our “hypercommodified” everyday world. (Ngai’s investigation of contemporary commodity aesthetics coincides in this point with Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, 2011).

MEDIA ARCHEOLOGY/MEDIA ECOLOGY: A large field; it encompasses: studies on media change and the idea of “new media” (e.g., Lisa Gitelman; Lev Manovich; Jay Bolter & Richard Grusin; N. Katherine Hayles); media philosophy (e.g., John Durham Peters, Mark Hansen, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young); post-cinema studies (e.g., Shane Denson, Julia Leyda, Steven Shaviro); history of the book and print culture studies (e.g., Alexander Starre’s *Meta-Media: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization* from 2015; Johanna Drucker; Ben Kafka); seriality studies (e.g. Frank Kelleter, Ruth Mayer, Jason Mittell, Kathleen Loock, Jared Gardner). Many of these approaches are explicitly or implicitly influenced by the foundational writings of the Toronto school of media studies (Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis).

SERIALITY STUDIES: a research field with strong connections to the John F. Kennedy Institute (as the former home of the Popular Seriality Research Unit, 2010-2016). Some key

publications: Frank Kelleter's collection *Media of Serial Narrative* (2017), Maria Sulimma's *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* (2020), Jared Gardner's *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling* (2012), Jason Mittell's *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (2015), Daniel Stein's *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre* (2021), Kathleen Loock's *Hollywood Remaking: How Film Remakes, Sequels, and Franchises Shape Industry and Culture* (2024), Ruth Mayer's *Serial Fu-Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (2014), Christina Meyer's *Producing Mass Entertainment: The Serial Life of the Yellow Kid* (2019), Ilka Brasch's *Film Serials and the American Cinema, 1910-1940: Operational Detection* (2018), Felix Brinker's *Superhero Blockbusters: Seriality and Politics* (2022), and Frank Kelleter's *Serial Agencies: "The Wire" and Its Readers* (2014).

GAMES STUDIES: One of the best recent studies in this field, Sören Schoppmeier's *Playing American: Open-World Videogames and the Reproduction of American Culture* (2023) originated as a dissertation at the John F. Kennedy Institute. It would be an excellent choice for a session topic. Other important recent publications include Graeme Kirkpatrick's *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* (2013), Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford's *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society* (2018), Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann's edited collection *How to Play Video Games* (2019), John Wills's *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (2019), Alexander R. Galloway's *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2009), Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (2009), Jamie Woodcock's *Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle* (2019), Alenda Y. Chang's *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games* (2019), Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2014), Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (2017), and Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007).

CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES: Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) is a classic example of studying "whiteness" in American literary history. Other foundational texts are Theodore W. Allen's *The Invention of the White Race* (1975), Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990), Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995), Richard Dyer's *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997), Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2012), and (especially) the work of David Roediger, in particular *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), a title borrowed from W.E.B. Du Bois.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND ITS CRITICS: Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's classical article ("Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–168) as a starting point, this session could engage a number of later developments and critical interlocutors, such as: Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38.4 (2013): 785–810; Jennifer C. Nash, "Re-Thinking Intersectionality," *Feminist Review* 89.1 (2008): 1–15; Jasbir Puar, "I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess': Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics," *Transversal* (2011); James Bliss, "Black Feminism Out of Place," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41.4 (2016): 727–749; Edward Schiappa, *Beyond Representational Correctness* (2008); Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social*

Theory (2019); David Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism* (London: Verso, 2017); or Cinzia Arruzza's critiques of the intersectionality paradigm in *Viewpoint* magazine.

THE "SETTLER COLONIAL" PARADIGM: Classical publications include Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism* (1999); James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld, 1783-1939* (2009); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (2010). One of the best recent attempts to put the "settler colonial" paradigm into dialogue with other theories of racial capitalism (including Black Marxist ones) is the work of Iyko Day, e.g., *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (2016). A provocative critique of "settler colonial" studies was formulated by Tiffany Lethabo King in *The Black Shoals* (2020): a book that tries to synthesize the concepts of settler colonialism and Afropessimism into an integrated position of scholarly activism.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY: Classical statements include, of course, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), but you may want to focus on more contemporary developments and revisions of postcolonial theory in the writings of scholars such as Achille Mbembe (English translations: *Critique of Black Reason*, 2017; *Necropolitics*, 2019; *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*, 2021), Pankaj Mishra (*Blind Fanatics: Liberals, Race, and Empire*, 2020), and Harry Harootunian (*Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism*, 2015). Note that postcolonial theory is often Anglophone but not typically US-based. An important influence on many postcolonial theories, especially in their theories of race, was the Martinique writer and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, especially with *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

Further options:

Studies of Neofascism: e.g., Simon Strick, *Rechte Gefühle: Affekte und Strategien des digitalen Faschismus*; Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism*; Rey Chow, "The Fascist Longings in our Midst"; Anton Jager, "Populism and the Historians: Richard Hofstadter and the Birth of a Global Populism Debate"; Keally McBride; Denise Ferreira da Silva; David Neiwert, Cynthia Miller-Idriss, George Hawley.

Algorithmic Culture (Information Society): Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*; Robert Hassan, *Media, Politics and the Network Society*; D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*

Environmental Studies and Ecocriticism: e.g. Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*; Barbara Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity*; Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*.

Climate Change and the Humanities: Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*; Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious*; Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm and How to Blow Up a Pipeline*.

Feminist Media Studies Beyond the Representationalist Paradigm: Charlotte Brunsdon on "the ur feminist article" (in "The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha and Nigella," 2006) as an inspiration for Amanda Lotz's pleas for production culture studies; Maria Sulimma's *Gender and Seriality*.

Studies of Neoliberalism: e.g., Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*; John T. Caldwell on "spec labor"; Richard Florida on "creative classes"; Andreas Reckwitz on "Kreativitätsdispositif"; David Graeber; David Harvey; Walter Benn Michaels; Mark Blyth; Mark Fisher (on "capitalist realism"); Tiziana Terranova; Yann Moulier-Boutang; and, especially, Wendy Brown (with *Undoing the Demos* and later works).

(Critiques of) Postfeminism: e.g. Catherine Rothenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*; Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once*; Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*; Rosalind Gill; Jo Littler; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*; “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation” (*Feminist Theory* 21, 2020).

Porn Studies: e.g., Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible and Screening Sex and Porn Studies*; Sarah Schaschek, *Poronography and Seriality: The Culture of Producing Pleasure*; Tristan Taormino et al., *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*; Madita Oeming, *Porno: Eine unverschämte Analyse*;

Feminist Standpoint Theory: e.g., Sandra Harding; Nancy Hartsock; Patricia Hill Collins.

Feminism and Science: e.g., Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; N. Katherine Hayles; Donna Haraway.

Fan/Audience Studies: a long established field, but you may want to look at some more recent publications, such as Abigail DeKosnik’s *Rogue Archives*; André Carrington’s *Speculative Blackness*; Rukmini Pande’s *Squee from the Margins*.

Critical University Studies: e.g., Christopher Newfield’s *The Great Mistake*; Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s *Generous Thinking*.

Modernity Studies: e.g., Benedict Anderson; Arjun Appadurai; Charles Taylor.

Global History: e.g., Sven Beckert; Sebastian Conrad.

Microhistory: e.g., Laura Putnam; Jill Lepore; Giovanni Levi.

... and many others