

Critical Toolkit

This semester, we will encounter a variety of theoretical writings about sexuality, from Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* to Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto." Theory can be difficult, frustrating, and boring – but also stimulating, illuminating, and even life-changing.

In her 2016 book *Living a Feminist Life*, theorist Sara Ahmed shares what she calls her "feminist tool kit," a collection of ideas, plans, people, and texts that she turns to when she is grappling with a particular idea or seeking solace and solidarity:

"So this tool kit contains my personal stuff, what I have accumulated over time; things I know I need to do and to have around me to keep on going on. We will accumulate different things, have our own stuff; we can peer into each other's kits and find in there someone else's feminist story. But I think the point of the kit is not just what we put in it; it is the kit itself, having somewhere to deposit those things that are necessary for your survival" (235-6).¹

Elsewhere, Ahmed writes about the importance of other scholars' work to her own thinking:

"Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before...Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings" (15-6).

One of our projects this semester will be to work together to **create a shared critical toolkit**. This assignment has **three parts**:

1) Each of you will choose **one theoretical work** (marked with an asterisk (*) on the syllabus) and write a brief entry about it on our **shared Google Doc (under "Collaborations" in Canvas)**.

Your entry should consist of **four short paragraphs**:

- a) A brief introduction to the author/theorist
- b) A brief summary of the author's central questions and claims, as best you understand them. Use specific textual evidence.
- c) A discussion of how this theory relates to the novel/poem/short story for this week (or another week). Use specific evidence from both texts.
- d) A discussion of the lingering questions you have about this theoretical work. **Remember: it is okay to be utterly confused.** (There are tenured professors who still don't entirely understand what Judith Butler is saying!)

¹ I have put this section of Ahmed's book – as well as her list of texts – on Canvas, if you wish to take a look.

This paragraph is a space for you to express your confusion/vent your frustration/express your lack of understanding.

**On some days, two of you might be responsible for the same theoretical text. This is fine; the more brain power to deal with these texts, the better!*

2) On the day your theoretical work is assigned, **you will give a brief (5-minute) presentation** in which you share what you wrote about the work and invite questions from your classmates.

3) In addition, throughout the semester, **you must log onto the Google Doc (under “Collaborations” in Canvas) at least three times** and write comments and questions under a peer’s entry. This is a space for further collaboration and dialogue about these theories. Please **respond and initial your response**. Your comments should be approximately **100 words each**.

By the end of the semester, we will have a shared theoretical toolkit that we can all take forward into future classes and our lives, as we “keep on going on.”

Details

-Your Google Doc entry is due before class on the day your theoretical work is assigned. For example, if you are writing about Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic,” it would be due before class on T 10/8. You would also present on that day.

-You will need to comment on three other entries throughout the semester. You must complete your first comment before class on **T 10/15**, your second comment before class on **T 11/19**, and your third comment before class on **T 12/3**. Comments submitted after these deadlines will not be counted.

-This assignment is worth **100 points**:

-Google Doc entry (60 points):

-Brief intro. to author/theorist (10 points)

-Brief summary of theorist’s central questions/aims (20 points)

-Discussion relating theory to literary work (20 points)

-Discussion of lingering questions (10 points)

-Presentation (10 points)

-Comments on peers’ entries (30 points = 10 per comment)