

Foucault and Feminism / Foucault et le féminisme

Organizer / Organisatrice: Chloë Taylor

The philosophy of Michel Foucault has provided feminist scholars with sophisticated analyses of sexuality, power, resistance, self-care and self-transformation, however Foucault himself has often been accused of gender-blindness. For these reasons, Foucault's work has simultaneously proved to be enormously useful for feminist thought and has been a frequent target for feminist critique. The presentations in this panel will take up aspects of Foucault's work in order to consider topics of particular concern for feminist thinkers. Robert Nichols' paper will discuss the subject of sexual exceptionalism while Margaret Denike's paper draws on Foucault's theory of biopower in order to consider the conjunction of race and sexuality. Next, Dianna Taylor's presentation will consider gendered normalization. Finally, Christinia Landry's paper uses the feminist phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir in order to critique Foucault's account of embodiment and self-care.

La philosophie de Michel Foucault a fourni des chercheurs féministes des analyses sophistiquées par rapport à la sexualité, au pouvoir, à la résistance, au souci de soi et à la transformation de soi. Cependant, Foucault a souvent été accusé d'être aveugle aux différences sexuelles. Pour ces raisons, les recherches de Foucault se sont simultanément avérées extrêmement utiles pour la pensée féministe et une cible pour la critique féministe. Les présentations dans cette séance vont aborder certains aspects de l'œuvre de Foucault de manière à considérer des thèmes qui préoccupent des penseurs féministes. La présentation de Robert Nichols discutera de l'exceptionnalisme sexuelle. Celle de Margaret Denike se base sur la théorie de la biopuissance de Foucault afin de considérer la conjonction entre la race et la sexualité. Ensuite, Dianna Taylor considérera la normalisation des genres. Enfin, Christinia Landry utilisera la phénoménologie de Simone de Beauvoir à fin de critiquer les thèmes de l'incarnation et du souci de soi chez Foucault.

Robert Nichols, "Sexual Exceptionalism and the Return of the Speaker's Benefit"

Commentator: Cressida Heyes (Alberta)

This presentation analyzes an emergent general thesis found within a range of recent feminist work: that the presumed 'sexual exceptionalism' of western, liberal-democratic societies serves as a vehicle for the racialized governance of non-western women and queers. Attention is paid to this sexual exceptionalism as an instance of what Foucault referred to as the 'speaker's benefit' [le bénéfice du locuteur]: the construal of the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression such that those who are willing and able to articulate sexual knowledge of themselves are uniquely legible as exercising agency, particularly when such articulation is transgressive of prevailing societal and religious norms.

Dianna Taylor, "Monstrous Women"

Commentator: Stephen Thierman (Toronto)

In this paper I argue that "monstrous" women – violators of both moral and gender norms – mark the limits of acceptable behaviour through such violation and thus provide particular insight into the workings of gendered power relations within contemporary western societies. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's 1975 College de France course titled *Abnormal*, I begin by arguing that gendered power relations in western societies can be characterized as "normalizing." Next, I refer to Foucault's discussion of "natural" and "moral" monsters in order to provide a sketch of the monstrous woman, and then show how specific monstrous women violate moral and gender norms. By way of conclusion I argue that the figure of the monstrous woman is not wholly negative but rather ambivalent. As Foucault asserts, monsters are "limit figures;" monstrous women challenge limits – including prevailing norms governing the feminine and the human – in ways that render them explicit such that they are denaturalized and ultimately opened up to critical interrogation.

Margaret Denike, “Biopolitics and Racial Degeneracy”

Commentator: Catherine Clune-Taylor (Alberta)

This paper considers Foucault’s discussion and analysis of biopolitical formations in the 19th century, as a framework for examining the emergence and proliferation of racial ideology, and particularly, the notion race as “manifest destiny” in North America at this time. Through a consideration of the convergence of race, sex and nationhood in late modern political discourse, my interest lies in mapping the role of fear-mongering about racial degeneracy in the legal regulation of sexual unions, and particularly in the state’s valorization of heterosexual monogamous unions.

Christinia Landry, “Foucault and Beauvoir: Negotiating the Phenomenal Body”

Commentator: Lisa Guenther (Vanderbilt)

Simone de Beauvoir maintains that woman’s being-for-herself is permeated by her being-for-others. This permeation happens at the level of the phenomenal body. Given this socio-ontological framework, I argue that care of the self cannot be thought of as simply a negotiation between normative intensities and subjective capabilities as a Foucauldian reading might have it. Genuine care of the self rather always implicates an Other and this implication cannot be thought without questioning one’s phenomenal body. If the phenomenal body is silent in Foucault’s historical ontology of the self, which I argue is in fact the case, I ask if the claim “I do X for myself,” holds any justificatory weight.

Biographies of Panelists

Robert Nichols is a Killam Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Alberta. He completed his doctorate as a Trudeau Scholar in Political Theory at the University of Toronto in 2009. His research interests include political philosophy and its history (especially 19th and 20th century continental thought) and the question of imperialism and colonialism in the history of political thought.

Dianna Taylor is Associate Professor and Chair of Philosophy at John Carroll University. Her research focuses on twentieth-century continental philosophy, especially the work of Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt, and feminist theory. She is the author of articles on Foucault and Arendt, and co-editor of *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (University of Illinois Press, 2004) and *Feminist Politics: Identity, Difference, Agency* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). She is currently working on a book project which analyzes Foucault’s location within the western philosophical tradition.

Margaret Denike is an Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Human Rights Program at Carleton University. She has long been active in women’s legal equality-seeking organizations, and she has published on topics such as feminist constitutional equality theory and advocacy; queer theory; histories of sex discrimination and persecution; and contemporary humanitarian law and policy.

Christinia Landry is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her dissertation is on Beauvoir and Foucault. She argues that we must consider the phenomenal body if we are to understand woman’s positioning in patriarchy and her embodied possibilities for agency. She has presented nine refereed papers on such thinkers as Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir and Nagarjuna.

Chloë Taylor is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alberta. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and was previously a SSHRC and Tomlinson postdoctoral fellow at McGill University. Her research interests include twentieth-century French philosophy, philosophy of sexuality, feminist philosophy, and animal ethics. She is the author of *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault* (Routledge 2009) and is currently working on a manuscript entitled *Sex Crimes and Misdemeanours: Foucault, Feminism, and the Politics of Sexual Crime*.