Example of perfect midterm for WGSS 200: Introduction to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Spring 2019

Below are two essay questions. Be sure to organize your answer in the form of an essay. Answer all parts of the question. Each question is worth 50 points, and the different parts of each question are worth 10 points. Good luck.

1. We have framed this introductory course to women, gender, and sexuality studies by first defining feminism, then trying to parse out what feminism might look like for different groups of women. Using the work of bell hooks, Roxane Gay, and Sarah Jaffe, write an essay in which you discuss how race and class affect the tenets of feminism. Be sure to answer the following: (1) What is feminism? (You may use several definitions.) (2) How can feminist ideas be helpful to men? What can they get out of feminism? (3) Which group has been the biggest beneficiary of feminist ideology? Who is left out and how did that happen? (4) Is there a way to “perform” feminism? What do some women think it means to live the feminist life, and why does that make Roxane Gay feel like she is often a “bad” feminist? (5) What is the difference in bell hooks overview of the value of feminism and Sarah Jaffe? They each have different tasks that they want feminism to do.

Essay 1

While there are many definitions of feminism, in *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (1). hooks’ definition is quite broad, including women, men, and gender nonconforming people, yet by defining feminism as a “movement,” her definition implies that feminism requires action. However, in her essay “Bad Feminist,” Roxane Gay offers the definition of feminists as “women who don’t want to be treated like shit” (1). While this definition prescribes that only women can be feminists, it still is quite broad in that it does not stipulate that feminism requires action; rather, it is simply a belief system. Despite the differences in these definitions, neither make any restrictions on who can be a feminist based on race or class. However, as hooks, Gay, and Jaffe note, throughout the history of feminist movements, people have been excluded based on race and class, and as such have not been able to partake in the benefits that feminism can bring to all.

In *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks explains how feminism is an ideology and a movement which can bring benefit to all people, including men. In hooks’ view “to choose feminist politics… is a choice to love” (104). Since love is of great benefit to both men and women, feminism correspondingly can be beneficial to men as well. She makes this clear throughout the book, but especially when she discusses the development of a feminist masculinity among young men and states that boys need love and a healthy self-esteem, and that only “a wise and loving feminist politic can… save the lives of male children. Patriarchy will not heal them. If that were so they would all be well” (71). In stating that “patriarchy will not heal [male children],” hooks alludes to the phenomenon of toxic masculinity, which she argues is destroying boys and keeping them from achieving whole and healthy personhood and lives.

However, despite the fact that feminism can bring benefit to all people, traditionally, middle to upper-class white women have been the biggest beneficiaries of feminist ideology. First wave feminism largely focused on securing voting rights for white women, while one of the main focuses of second wave feminism quickly became about “privileged [white] women [who] wanted equality with men of their class” (40). This focus in second wave feminism on securing rights for privileged professional white women resulted in benefits seen only by them, leaving out women of color and lower-class women. However, these women who were left out were “encouraged to see the economic gains of affluent females as a positive sign for all women” (41). Yet, as Jaffe notes, “while we all worry about the glass ceiling, there are millions of women standing in the basement— and the basement is flooding” (2). This focus on privileged white women making gains in the workplace has come at the detriment of lower-class women and women of color, who are overrepresented in the minimum-wage workforce and in tipped work (Jaffe 2).

Another reason that lower-class women and women of color have often been left out of feminist movements is that traditionally, the correct performance of feminism has been what Roxane Gay describes as “a proper white, heterosexual” women who “[hates] pornography, unilaterally [decries] the objectification of women, [doesn’t] cater to the male gaze, [hates] men, [hates] sex, [focuses] on career, [doesn’t] shave” (1). Yet, as Gay explores in “Bad Feminist,” this definition leaves out all the women who do not adhere to this standard. While Gay does not condemn this version of feminism, she does acknowledge that some women, like her, are feminists, but enjoy the color pink and wearing maxi dresses.

While hooks and Jaffe do agree that feminism has value for all people, they differ in what they see as the ultimate goals of feminism. In *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks portrays feminism as a visionary ideology and movement which is applicable to all facets of life, while Jaffe sees feminism as being most relevant for lower-class working women, as it can secure them rights and protections that they so desperately need.

1. In Davis’s *Women, Race, and Class*, she begins with the origins of the women’s movement. Unlike Davis, Valenti seeks to present an ultra-modern view of feminist ideology. Write an essay in which you answer the following questions: (1) According to Davis what are the roots of feminism? Does Valenti’s book complement this assertion or not? (2) Davis gives us examples of how Black women have been left out of the feminist discourse, especially when there was something White women wanted for themselves. Discuss one or two of these historical periods. (3) Valenti says intersectionality is important, but goes on at the end of the book to say that a “full frontal feminist” is one who has as much sex as she wants to, where she wants to, and how she wants to. Why might this prescription lack an intersectional critique? She claims a “slut” is just someone of whom others are jealous. Can all groups of women adopt this attitude? (4) Davis’s chapter on rape presents us with several dilemmas. One has to do with the real purpose of rape; the other has to do with who can be raped and who cannot. Why do we not believe all women who say they have been raped? (5) How would Davis explain the lack of participation by Black women in the “Me Too” movement?

Essay 2

According to Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class*, contrary to popular belief, the roots of feminism are in slavery and the fight for abolition. She asserts that during slavery, black women had an equal share in both their oppression and in resisting that oppression (19) and their experiences spelled standards for a “new womanhood” (29). She also traces the roots of feminism back to the abolition movement, because in fighting for the abolition of slavery, white women were able to recognize their own subjugation (39). However, in *Full Frontal Feminism*, Valenti does not acknowledge slavery and the fight for abolition as being the roots of feminism, rather, she identifies the suffrage movement as the catalyst for the movement, a view which erases the importance of black women to the foundations of feminism.

Throughout *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis provides examples of how black women have been left out of feminist discourse. One period in which she describes this is during the struggle for reproductive rights throughout the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, eugenic ideas became popularized, and were advocated by the early reproductive rights advocate Margaret Sanger. These eugenic ideas took the struggle for birth control and morphed it into a struggle for population control (215), which was an extremely racist strategy and thus pushed black women away from feminism. The ideas of eugenics had lasting effects well beyond the early twentieth century, as forced sterilization of lower-class women and women of color was a common phenomenon.

Black women continue to be left out of feminist movements and discourse today, which Valenti makes clear in *Full Frontal Feminism*. Despite stating that “there is perhaps no idea more important in feminism than intersectionality” (233), this assertion comes at the end of her book in a chapter titled “A Quick Academic Aside,” which downplays the importance of intersectionality. Despite stating the importance of intersectionality, she states in her final chapter that a “full frontal feminist” realizes “that ‘slut’ is just code for ‘I’m jealous of your sex life’” (254). In stating this, Valenti lacks an intersectional critique in that she does not acknowledge that black women have been continually viewed as “loose women” and “whores,” so the word slut can have a racialized connotation. Furthermore, this continuing historical view of black women as “loose women” and “whores” that Davis mentions in *Women, Race, and Class* has had the implication of black women not being believed when they say they have been raped (182). Because they have been viewed as sexually promiscuous since the time of slavery, it has been implied that they simply cannot be raped as they are constantly craving sex. As such, this lack of belief in black women may be one of the reasons they have been largely absent in the “Me Too” movement, despite the fact it was started by Tarana Burke, a black woman. However, it is also likely due to the fact that the women who have been publicized in the “Me Too” movement have been famous white women, who benefit from their racial and class privilege.

Another one of the faults of the way the “Me Too” movement has been publicized and popularized by the media is that it ignores the real purpose of rape, which is as a tool of power. Davis makes this clear throughout *Women, Race, and Class*, as she provides multiple examples of how rape has been used as a tool of power, including slavery and the Vietnam War. During both periods, rape was used to demoralize not only the women who were being targeted, but the men as well, as they were unable to protect the women in their communities from these terroristic rapes.