

## **Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips**

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

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**Article/Essay Title:** Feminist Killjoys

**Author:** Sara Ahmed

**Readability:** Moderate+

**Thesis:**

Ahmed is reacting against the characterization of the “joyless,” unhappy feminist not by denying that feminists are killjoys, but by doing a genealogy of women’s happiness especially as it concerns the fantasy figure of the “happy housewife.” She shows that happiness has been a tool used to reinforce the oppression of women; the promise of happiness has oriented women toward the goals and projects of others and away from their own “willful” desires. Feminists are and should be killjoys. They disturb the myth that women’s joy ought to be found in certain places and uncover the work that this very “joy” does in reorienting the projects of women and making their happiness conditional on the goods, projects, and happiness of others.

**Key Definitions:**

*Happy Housewife* – “a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness”(50); this figure has been a cultural tool used to justify gendered forms of labor by suggesting the labor itself makes women happy.

*Feminist Killjoy* – women that do not find “the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising.”(65) They reject the cultural reorientation towards certain projects that is attempted through the happy housewife fantasy. “The feminist killjoy ‘spoils’ the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.”(65)

*Orientation* – the way in which we are directed toward certain projects and objects (and away from others).

*Happiness* – is a form of orientation; it is a promise that directs you towards some projects and objects and away from others. The promise of happiness can also be used as a tool or

mechanism for “reorientation” toward a common good.

*Conditional Happiness* – In Rousseau, happiness is achieved as a consequence of virtue (i.e. being directed towards the good). Our parents direct us towards the good; we inherit their goods or orientation. It makes them happy if we maintain the inherited orientation. Our happiness is conditional on their happiness.

*The Sociality of Happiness* – “...if one person’s happiness is made conditional on another person’s happiness, such that the other persons’ happiness comes first, then *the other person’s happiness becomes a shared object.*” (56)

*Willful Subjects* – are subjects whose will does not just take up or dictated by the general or social will.

### **Brief Summary:**

#### I. Happiness as a Mechanism of Control

Happiness has been historically used as an argument for sustaining a gendered division of labor. The hope for happiness directs people towards certain projects and away from others. In *Émile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau points out that a women’s duty is to keep the family together. Her happiness is contingent on the successful execution of this duty, and success is dependent on keeping the members of the family (especially the husband) happy. Women’s happiness is conditional on the happiness of others; they have therefore been required to take up the happiness objects of others. However, this can be a source of crisis.

Happiness Object = the object that is the cause of happiness.

Women’s Happiness Object = the happiness of another (it is *conditional happiness*)

Women’s Happiness → Y’s Happiness → Y’s Happiness Object X

“In cases where I am also affected by x, and I do not share your happiness with x, I might become uneasy and ambivalent, as I am made happy by your happiness but I am not made happy by what makes you happy. The exteriority of x would then announce itself as a point of crisis: I want your happiness to be what makes me happy, but I am reminded that even if my happiness is conditional on yours, your happiness is conditional on x and I am not happy with x. In such occasions, conditional happiness would require that I take up what makes you happy *as* what makes me happy, which may involve

compromising my own idea of happiness (so I will go along with x in order to make you happy even if x does not "really" make me happy). In order to preserve the happiness of all, we might even conceal from ourselves our unhappiness with x, or try to persuade ourselves that x matters less than the happiness of the other who is made happy by x.” (57)

The feminist fight is for the disruption of this as the status quo (or inherited) orientation and against the right of men to decide what happiness means for women.

## II. Troublemakers

Troublemakers (59-60) = Women that:

1. Do not place their hopes for happiness in the “right” things
2. Speak out “about their unhappiness with the very obligation to be made happy by such things.”
3. Refuse to follow other people’s goods
4. Refuse to make the happiness of others a condition for their happiness.

If happiness means giving up one’s will (which it traditionally has for women), then fuck happiness.

Reject the “economy of happiness” in which the happy housewife resides:

“Feminist readers might want to challenge this association between unhappiness and female imagination, which in the moral economy of happiness, makes female imagination a bad thing. But if we do not operate in this economy—that is, if we do not assume that happiness is what is good—then we can read the link between female imagination and unhappiness differently. We might explore how imagination is what allows women to be liberated from happiness and the narrowness of its horizons. We might want the girls to read the books that enable them to be overwhelmed with grief.”(62)

## III. How Feminists Kill Joy

Feminists expose how happiness covers over its own “reorienting” work and point out the subjugating uses to which happiness has been put. Their failure to be made happy by the public objects of happiness is read as “sabotaging the happiness of others.”(65-66) They are read as “destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy ‘spoils’ the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.” (65)

## IV. Feminism and Racism

We’ve seen how this mechanism works; now we can apply it to feminism...

Within feminism there are killjoys. The “angry black woman” kills feminist joy “by pointing out

forms of racism within feminist politics.” Like the feminist in the world, the black feminist may be read as killing feminist joy, as being difficult, without doing anything other than not sharing the same objects of happiness as white feminists. She is “affected in the wrong way by the right things,” getting in the way of the enjoyment of those things by others and “functioning as an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, that disturb an atmosphere.” (67)

From bell hooks:

“A group of white feminist activists who do not know one another may be present at a meeting to discuss feminist theory. They may feel they are bonded on the basis of shared womanhood, but the atmosphere will noticeably change when a woman of color enters the room. The white women will become tense, no longer relaxed, no longer celebratory.”

The source of the tension is located in or attributed to the body of color.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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**Article/Essay Title:** Killing Joy: feminism and the history of happiness

**Author:** Sara Ahmed

**Possible Applications:**

Classes on/including units on:

Authenticity

Feminist philosophy

Political philosophy

Public/private divide

Moral psychology

Counterpoint to utilitarianism

Bioethics, medicalizing unhappiness (e.g. schizophrenia)

Intersectionality

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

Aristotle: on natural slaves, ethics as centered around happiness

Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility"

Contemporary virtue ethics

Kantian/neo-Kantian on relationship between happiness and autonomy

Iris Marion Young on Rousseau in prologue to *Recognition of Love's Labor*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Karen Stohr, *On Manners*, "Keeping the Shutters Closed"

**Possible Class Activities:**

Discussion about moms, grandmothers, examples of housewives

On smiling:

Encourage women to do a smile boycott (but warn them about possible backlash)

Encourage men to smile even when not happy, to try to make others more comfortable

Encourage students to keep track of how many times they smile when have no reason to

<http://stoptellingwomentosmile.com/About>

**What traditional texts might this text replace?**

Aristotle

Foucault

Rawls – public/private divide

Hobbes

Hume

Kant