

Practicing Theory

CRES 28720 | ENGL 28720 | GNSE 28720
WINTER 2018
TUESDAY/THURSDAY 12:30-1:50PM
YOUNG MEMORIAL 106

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Office Hours: Thursdays 10:30am-12:20pm & by appointment

Course Description

This experimental, writing-intensive course provides students with both an introduction to key texts in critical literary theory and a workshop environment in which to practice this theory with select works of contemporary literature. We will pay particular attention to critical theories of race, empire, gender, and sexuality. We will also balance reading “classics” in theory with more recent work, in order to explore both the state of the conversation today as well as foundational texts to which work today responds. Although the length of the quarter prevents us from exhaustive survey, the goal of this introductory course is to map out enough coordinates in the discursive universe of critical theory for you to be able to situate and understand theory you might go on to read outside the course.

Students in the course will form small teams organized by a chosen novel, which will be your common object to think through the theory we read as a class. We will then alternate “reading” weeks, which will be organized by schools of critical thought, with “writing” weeks, in which you will think alongside these schools of thought through your chosen novel. During these writing weeks, your team will meet to workshop each other’s essays. In this way, you are asked to try on a range of different theoretical idioms and approaches, with an emphasis on writing as a way of metabolizing them.

Course Requirements

Grade Determination

This is a writing-intensive course in which you will be asked to write four summary papers on the theory we read (2-4 pages) and three workshop essays applying theory to a select novel (6-8 pages). The grade break-down is as follows:

- participate regularly in class and workshop (20%);
- write 4 response papers (5% each, 20% total); and
- write 3 workshop papers (20% each, 60% total).

Participation & Workshop Expectations

This class is structured as a seminar, and discussion will be our common activity. Class participation is essential and mandatory for us to succeed—and that means not just showing up, but actively listening to and engaging with each other. I know it can be hard to put yourself out there and to think out loud in a room of your peers, but it's essential to our aims in the course. If you're finding it difficult to participate in class, come chat with me in office hours and we can brainstorm points of entry for you to make the discussion more accessible.

If you're going to be absent for a good reason, please let me know 48 hours ahead of time. More than one absence will make it much harder for you to develop the skills and knowledge you need to succeed in this course; more than two absences will directly lower your grade by 1/3.

In workshop weeks, each student's paper will be the focus of group discussion for about 25 minutes. In addition to being prepared to answer questions posed to your own paper, you are expected to come with written comments on every other paper in your group. You should have 2-3 questions prepared to ask each paper's author.

Summary Papers

The aim of the summary papers is to give you a chance to parse a theorist's argument by attending to, quoting, and analyzing key passages. Each response paper should be about 600-1000 words and primarily descriptive: your goal is to describe what a theorist is saying, putting their argument into your own words, rather than to critique it by pointing out its weaknesses or gaps. Critique is important, and we will get to it, but having a very good sense of how an argument works before attacking it will make your case all the more powerful when you do.

At the end of 1st week, you will be assigned four texts to summarize over the course of the quarter. This will ensure every text gets equal coverage. Your paper should be posted to Canvas by midnight before the class in which your text is assigned. This is because your paper will also provide your peers with a guide to the texts we read. Together, we will be building a sort of theoretical encyclopedia we can refer back to as a source of shared knowledge.

Workshop Papers

The core of this class is the workshop, which will convene three times. Before the quarter begins, you will be assigned one of the following contemporary novels that will be your common object throughout the course. For each workshop paper, you will write 6-8 pages that reads the novel alongside the theoretical texts from the previous unit. This paper will be due by noon on Monday before the workshops and shared with the class. Your task is then to read all the papers by students who are writing on your same text. We will spend our time in classroom discussing each student's paper in the resulting small groups.

Here are the novels you can choose from:

- Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000)
- Jennifer Egan, *Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011)
- Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (2011)
- Junot Díaz, *This is How You Lose Her* (2012)
- Nell Zink, *Mislaid* (2015)
- Mary Gaitskill, *The Mare* (2015)
- Darryl Pinckney, *Black Deutschland* (2016)

Please purchase or borrow the novel so that you have a hard copy for class.

Class Policies

Accommodations

I aim to make this class accessible and inclusive by meeting the needs of each student. That means I'm happy to meet with you or respond to your e-mails if you have any concerns about the class. I just ask that you get in touch sooner rather than later so we can work toward solutions together as soon as possible. I also welcome requests for accommodation; just check out <https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/requesting-reasonable-accommodations>.

Plagiarism

Here is the University's Academic Integrity statement:

It is contrary to justice, to academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit another's statements or ideas of work as one's own. To do so is plagiarism or cheating, offenses punishable under the University's disciplinary system. Because these offenses undercut the distinctive moral and intellectual character of the University, we

take them very seriously. Proper acknowledgment of another's ideas, whether by direct quotation or paraphrase, is expected. In particular, if any written or electronic source is consulted and material is used from that source, directly or indirectly, the source should be identified by author, title, and page number, or by website and date accessed. Any doubts about what constitutes 'use' should be addressed to the instructor.

That means get in touch with me *before* you submit any writing about which you have doubts. Please. If you plagiarize, you will be promptly failed at the very least.

Screens

Everything we read will be on Canvas. I realize that means lots of folks will be reading on screens. As long as you're just looking at the readings, go for it. But I also know there's a lot of research that says having screens on in class distracts from both your learning and the learning of your classmates, so we'll also be having dedicated "no screens" time in class when our discussion doesn't require reference to the readings. Please be prepared to put your machines to the side. And if I ever notice you are using your screen for something other than the readings, please be prepared that I will tell you to start printing off all the readings and bringing them in hard copy so you can put your screen away entirely.

Reading Schedule

1 Theory as a Reading Practice

Thursday, January 4: Two Poles

- Judith Butler, "What Is Critique?" (2002)
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or: You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (2003)

2 Aesthetic Form | Social Structure

Tuesday, January 9: Marxist Ideology Critique

- Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970)
- Fredric Jameson, "On Interpretation" (abridged) (1981)

Thursday, January 11: Varieties of Formalism

- György Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" (1936)
- Alex Woloch, Introduction to *The One vs. the Many* (2003)
- Jacques Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed" (2008)

3 Workshop #1

Papers posted to Canvas by Monday, January 15, at noon

4 Empire and Colony

Tuesday, January 23: Orientalism

- Edward Said, “Introduction” and “Imaginative Geography and its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental,” from *Orientalism* (1978)
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988)

Thursday, January 25: Empire and World

- Edward Said, Said, “Narrative and Social Space” and “Jane Austen and Empire” from *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)
- Pheng Cheah, “Missed Encounters: Cosmopolitanism, World Literature, and Postcoloniality” (2016)

5 Race and History

Tuesday, January 30: Varieties of Hybridity

- W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
- Lisa Lowe, “Lowe, Heterogeneity, Hybridity and Multiplicity: Asian American Differences” (1996)
- Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Conciencia de la Mestiza” (1999)

Thursday, February 1: Afropessimism

- Frantz Fanon, “The Black Man and Psychopathology” from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)
- Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987)
- Frank B. Wilderson III, Introduction to *Red, White, and Black* (2010)

6 Workshop #2

Papers posted to Canvas by Monday, February 5, at noon

7 Reading Feminisms

Tuesday, February 13: The Culture of “Woman”

- Elaine Showalter, “Toward a Feminist Poetics” (1979)
- Nancy Armstrong, Introduction to *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987)
- Lauren Berlant, Introduction to *The Female Complaint* (2008)

Thursday, February 15: What is “Woman”?

- Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa” (1975)
- Luce Irigaray, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine” (1977)
- Julia Kristeva, “Women Can Never Be Defined” (1981)
- Monique Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman” (1981)

8 Between and Beyond Identity

Tuesday, February 20: Expanding Feminism Beyond “Woman”

- Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex” (1984)
- Kimberle Crenshaw, “Introduction” and “Representational Intersectionality” from “Mapping the Margins” (1991)
- Emi Koyama, “Transfeminist Manifesto” (2001)

Thursday, February 22: Historicizing And Multiplying Sex/uality

- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)
- Judith Butler, “Critically Queer” (1993)
- Alexander Eastwood, “How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read? Notes toward a Trans Literary History” (2014)

9 Queer Futurities

Tuesday, February 27: Impasse

- Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff” from *No Future* (2004)
- D. A. Miller, Chapter 1 from *Jane Austen, or: The Secret of Style* (2005)
- Lauren Berlant, Introduction to *Cruel Optimism* (2011)

Thursday, March 1: Thresholds

- Revisit: Butler on “Critique” and Sedgwick on “Reparative Reading”
- Kathleen Stewart, “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World” (2008)
- José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction” and “Cruising the Toilet” from *Cruising Utopia* (2009)

10 Workshop #3

Papers posted to Canvas by Monday, March 5, at noon