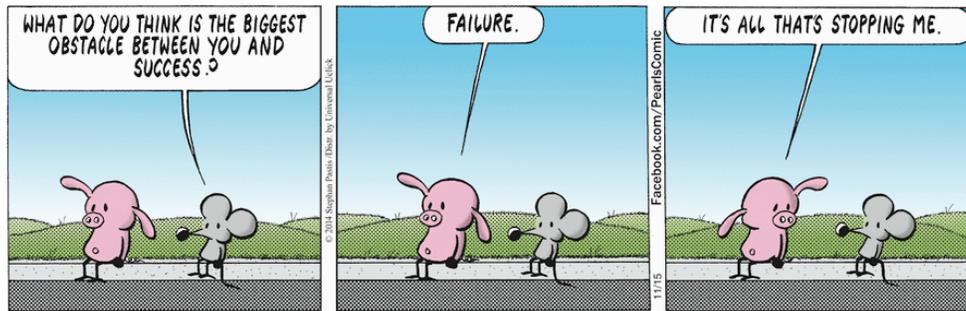


"THE ART OF LOSING": CULTURAL AND LITERARY THEORIES OF FAILURE



In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam argues for the generative possibilities of "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, and not knowing." These aesthetic, political, and interpretive failures allow, Halberstam argues, for "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" than those practices we qualify as "success." This class will examine literary, musical, and filmic explorations of failure, in dialogue with theory that explores failure as an inroad into new understandings of text and world. We will thus think about a range of structural gaps and failures that question our ideals of health and wholeness, productivity and value, beauty and truth.

Notes on Email:

- (1) **Please check your PSU email account at least daily.** I shall do the same.
- (2) Email is great for quick administrative discussions. Longer conversations are better held in person. For example, ***I do not discuss grades or review drafts over email***, but I am more than happy to do so in office hours or by appointment.
- (3) Please **read the syllabus** before emailing with a policy question.
- (4) Treat emails as professional communications. Include a salutation ("Hi Josh" is fine) and a sign-off ("Thanks, [Rob]"); write in grown-up English; etc.

Required Texts for Purchase—HARD COPIES, PLEASE:

Jamaica Kincaid, *Autobiography of my Mother* (ISBN 978-037-453187-4)
Samuel Beckett, *Complete Short Prose* (978-0-802-13490-5)
Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (978-0-393-31146-4)
Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me be Lonely: An American Lyric* (978-1-555-97407-7)
Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis* (978-0-41374830-0)

Required Films (on reserve):

Laurent Cantet, *Time Out (L'Emploi du Temps)*; also available on Netflix.
Richard Linklater, *Slacker*; also available on Netflix.

Other readings will be distributed on D2L. They must be printed out and brought to class.

UNPLUG: Phones, laptops, iPads, etc. disengage students from discussion. Turn them off and put them away. If this policy poses you a specific difficulty, speak to me individually.

REQUIRED COURSEWORK:**CLASS JOURNAL (all students):**

A typed journal in which you write **600 words per week**, reflecting on course readings and discussions. This is not a personal diary, but a record of your *evolving thinking about the material*. Ask questions, engage with specific claims or puzzling passages, pursue nagging questions from class; make connections to other course readings, or to readings from other classes; etc. **Format is not important; feel free to think creatively about the content and form of your writing.** Stylistic imitations of our writers, lists of questions and concerns, diagrams and charts, etc. are all acceptable. I do ask, however, that you engage each week with *specific quoted details* from the readings.

I encourage you to do some writing prior to discussion, and some in which you reflect on our discussions after the fact. How you arrange this is up to you—just be writing thoughtfully and *continuously* throughout the quarter. **You are welcome to use any writing from this journal in the final paper.**

Grad Students: Your journals should grapple with the readings marked § on the schedule, on their own or in dialogue with the primary course texts.

Exchanges: Twice this quarter, you will exchange this journal with a classmate. Email it to him/her as an attachment; CC me on your email.

Responses: Within a week of each exchange, write a letter (500+ words) in response to your peer's journal. Engage with and ask fruitful questions about the journal's ideas. Email this response to your peer (CC me).

Final journal: Submitted with a final addendum (see "Keywords," below).

Grading (undergraduates): Each journal exchange will be graded A (excellent), C (satisfactory), or F. To earn an A, your journal must engage *thoughtfully* and *consistently* with the material, ask good questions, and use writing to work through the problems of our course. Responses to each other's journals will be graded pass/fail.

Grading (graduates): Your journals will be held to graduate standards: A (excellent), B (satisfactory), C (inferior), F (unacceptable).

Late Journals: Late journals will be docked two letter grades (e.g. A --> C); no journals will be accepted more than 48 hours past the due date. "Forgetting" to CC me, "forgetting" the attachment, etc. are not valid excuses for late work.

Keywords (undergrad and grad):¹

As you prepare your final journal submission, plunge back into your journal and trace one particular concept, term, or "keyword" that has recurred in your journal in different, surprising, or contradictory ways. Below I've given you a short list of possibilities, but you're free to choose others: indeed, I'd urge you to *let your journal dictate your choice of keywords rather than vice-versa*. Once you've browsed your journal and located a thought-provoking term, you can use the "find and replace"

¹ Idea adapted, with thanks, from Prof. Sarah Ensor.

feature in MS Word to find four or five other occurrences. Write a final addendum to your journal (750-900 words) making a case for how this keyword reflects a thread or a "through-line" in our discussions—how does it advance, probe, or deconstruct a major question of our class? What questions does it raise that our course didn't cover?

Possible Keywords: failure, gap, trauma, abject, disaster, loss, decay, cruelty, loneliness, structure, development, narrative, closure, rupture . . . ?

THEORY WORKSHOP (all students):



Small groups will lead workshops about what our theoretical readings add to our course questions and to our readings of the literary texts. The group's job is to frame the major terms, concepts, and problems in a way that will help us work through the readings together. Lead at least 20 minutes of discussion, and distribute a handout (format up to you: it might include specific passages, ideas, background, etc.). Your job, overall, is to promote *collaborative engagement with the reading* by asking good

questions, focusing us on specific passages, and using a handout to organize our thinking.

TEACHING PRESENTATION (grad students only):

Graduate students will present on the text under discussion for the day. Give a lecture (15-20 minutes) in which you present relevant information on historical, cultural, or critical context; and begin to unfold an argument about the text's ideas, form, relevance to course themes, etc. You should then open up the discussion by way of two or three focused, intelligent, open-ended yet textually grounded questions to allow the rest of us to engage with your ideas. The discussion portion should run another 15 minutes, or longer (I encourage you to lead the whole discussion, especially if you are considering teaching as a career, but won't hold it against you if you don't). I'll try to stay in the background, but can be there as a "safety valve" as your presentation unfolds. **Please set up an appointment to meet with me at least 3-4 days before your presentation**, so that we can discuss your plans.



"MAKE IT FAIL" (all students, individually or in groups):

Take a short text (literary, artistic, musical, etc.) from beyond the syllabus that strikes you as productive, healthy, formally coherent—everything this class is working against—and revise it in a way that will undo its thematic, ideological, or structural perfection. Turn it into a failed text, but a productive failure; make the text un-succeed in a way that valuably deconstructs the idea of "success," revealing something compelling about what qualifies as successful art/writing/[etc.]. You'll show your work to the class in 10-15-minute presentations, and will write a 3-page explanation of what conventions or strictures your new, proud failure has revealed in the original work. Have fun with this assignment, but do some serious rethinking of the text, not just surface tinkering.

FINAL PAPER. You are welcome to use ideas from the journal, teaching presentations, or theory workshops in this longer essay. Further details will be distributed.

Undergraduates: A paper of **at least 2400 words** exploring an aspect of failure in one or more course texts, including literary and/or theoretical readings, supported by additional independent research. Develop an incisive and original *argument*, pursuing course texts and issues in light of your own thinking. Your paper must cite and engage with **at least four secondary sources**. MLA format, double-spaced, with a Works Cited page.

Grad Students: A paper of **3700-4000 words** exploring an aspect of failure in one or more literary and/or theoretical texts, in dialogue with historical and critical research. Develop an incisive *argument* grounded in course texts, developed through your own reading and scholarship. Cite and engage with **at least six** secondary sources. Use MLA format, double-spaced, with a Works Cited page and endnotes (not included in the word count).

*** All students will meet with me during the last week of class to discuss their paper projects. *Failure to attend a conference, prepared for a meaningful, focused conversation about a draft or outline, will result in a grade penalty.*

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND PAPER PROPOSAL (all students):

In support of your final paper, you will write a **proposal**, laying out a project related to any text(s) on the syllabus. Your proposal must be 300-400 words and must contain a provisional **thesis**. I won't hold you to this thesis—you may decide to revise it—but I want you thinking about what debates your final paper will engage in.

To this proposal, attach an **annotated bibliography** of criticism on your primary text. Include MLA citations for 7-10 *scholarly* sources *from beyond the syllabus* (scholarly articles, book chapters, etc.), followed by a single-spaced entry of 100-150 words for each source. Each entry should summarize and engage critically with the source's arguments and conclusions.

Note: you are not required to use all of these sources in the paper itself. The idea is to start building a repertoire of ideas that you can apply toward your project. Readings from class, or general web sites, encyclopedias, etc., do not count toward your 7+ sources. ***This assignment will not be graded separately, but will count as a substantial portion of your final paper grade.***

PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE:

Undergraduates: Attend each class, with text in hand, ready to write, argue, ask questions, participate in groups, take "devil's advocate" positions, etc. *If you are not ready to do these things, you are not prepared for class.* Your overall participation will be graded A/C/F. To earn an A, you must engage thoughtfully in the discussion *more or less daily*, using textual details to advance our shared understanding of the material.



Attendance (undergrads): You have two free days to miss class without penalty. If you miss more than two classes, you will earn *at best* a C for your overall participation. If you miss more than four, you will earn a zero for participation. With the exception of *documented* emergencies or official religious observances (cleared with me *in advance*), *I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences*. As in the workforce, you're here or you're not.

Note: If you have an issue that will result in several absences, please let me know. Beyond that, you do not need to email me with apologies or explanations for missing class. Get notes from a classmate.

Grad students: Consider yourself "on call" as a thoughtfully engaged scholar in *every class session*. Grad students do not get "free" absences. Be here. Though there is no specific participation component to your grade, *I take it for granted* that you will be present, prepared, and active in each class. Inadequate participation will result, with advance notice, in a final grade penalty of up to a full mark.

"Off day": Each student (grad and undergrad) may claim one day in which you don't wish to participate. Simply give me a written note at the beginning of class, with the date and your name, saying, "Today's my off day." No apologies or excuses needed. You only get one off day; use it wisely. Off days are not connected to attendance: you are expected to be present and attentive. Also, an off day does not exempt you from readings, presentations, journals, or other coursework.



POLICIES AND RESOURCES

Office Hours: I'm here to help. My office hours are Monday 11-12:30 in Neuberger M402. If you can't meet during those times, *please email me to set up an appointment*.

Cell phones: No.

Late Work/Extensions: Except for the journals, which must be submitted on time, I will grant reasonable extension requests made **at least 48 hours in advance** of the due date. Send me an email naming an alternate date by which you can submit the work. Without an extension granted *in advance*, late work will be penalized a full letter grade per day late (including weekends). Again, technology/computer snafus do not excuse late work.

Civility: I do not permit personal attacks or hate speech on any basis, including (but not limited to) race or ethnicity, sex or gender, sexual/affectional orientation, disability, socioeconomics, religion, or age.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism violates a contract of ethical behavior among you, me, and the University. Any instance of plagiarism, cheating, forgery, or falsification—*no matter how "minor" the incident, no matter how informal the task*—will result in an automatic zero for the assignment and a report to the Student Conduct Office. *No exceptions*. You must acknowledge any use of someone else's words or ideas. When paraphrasing someone's

ideas, cite the source. When quoting someone's specific wording, even a short "catchy" phrase, cite the source and enclose the language in "quotation marks." Note: you are **not** permitted to reuse coursework from other classes for credit in this course. If you are ever unsure about what you're doing, please ask me *before* handing in the assignment. *Uncertainty about the rules is not an excuse for violating them.*

Students with Disabilities: If you have a disability that may affect your performance in the class, please speak with me *as soon as possible*, and contact PSU's Disability Resource Center to document necessary accommodations (<http://www.drc.pdx.edu>; 503.725.4150).

Counseling Center: PSU's Counseling Center offers individual and group counseling, by appointment or walk-in (503.725.2800; <http://www.pdx.edu/shac/counseling>).

ASSESSMENT

I realize there's a measure of hypocrisy (or irony) in assigning grades in a course on failure! That said, we'll be working hard to address the course texts and themes with their due rigor. Grades are assigned based on the *quality of completed coursework*. I am happy to talk with you anytime about your performance in the class; however, I will always try to focus our attention on *the work itself*, irrespective of grades.

Incompletes: Not given, except for *severe*, documented emergencies, and even then, only in *very* limited circumstances.

Grade Weights: Assignments will be weighted as follows:

Undergraduates:

Final Paper: 35%
Journal: 25%
Theory Workshop: 15%
"Make it Fail": 10%
Participation: 15%

Graduate Students:

Final Paper: 40%
Journal: 20%
Theory Workshop: 15%
"Make it Fail": 10%
Teaching Presentation: 15%

Grading Standards (<http://www.pdx.edu/registration/grading-system>):

Undergraduate:

A = Excellent
B = Good
C = Satisfactory
D = Inferior
F = Failure

Graduate:

A = Excellent
B = Satisfactory
C = Below Standard
D, F = Failure

Undergraduates should note that a C reflects a *satisfactory* fulfillment of the assignment; it is not an indictment of your abilities or effort. An A signifies work of *excellent* ambition, insight, analytical nuance, argumentative sophistication, and expressive clarity. For graduate students, A-level work must meet a genuinely outstanding scholarly standard.

COURSE SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITH ADVANCE NOTICE):

Readings marked (x) are linked to D2L, and must be printed out and brought to class.

Readings marked § are required for graduate students, optional for undergraduates

M 1/5 Introductions.

W 1/7 Halberstam, from *The Queer Art of Failure* (x). **Sign up for Teaching Presentations (grad), Make it Fail (all), and Theory Workshops (all).**

M 1/12 **Guest Speaker: Prof. Nicole Seymour (CSU Fullerton).** Reading: Nicole Seymour, introduction to *Strange Natures* (x). Please also be reading along in *Autobiography of my Mother*.

W 1/14 Kincaid, finish *Autobiography of my Mother*.

M 1/19 No class; Martin Luther King, Jr day.

W 1/21 Kincaid, cont.

F 1/23 Journal Exchange 1—email to your partner by 5 p.m., with me CCd.

No journaling required this week; focus on your peer's journal.

M 1/26 Beckett, *First Love* (in *Complete Short Prose*); *Not I* (x).

W 1/28 Beckett, *Fizzles*; *neither*; *lessness* (all in *Complete Short Prose*). Adorno, from *Aesthetic Theory* (x). **Theory Workshop.**

F 1/30 Response to peer's journal due by 5 p.m. Email to your partner (CC me).

M 2/2 Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*; up to p. 135 (through end of part II).

W 2/4 Rhys, cont. Finish the novel.

§ *Either* Esty, *Unseasonable Youth* (x) or Cunningham, "Get on or Get Out" (x)

M 2/9 Lee Edelman, from *No Future* (x). **Theory workshop.** Continue with Rhys. § Edelman and Berlant, "Sex without Optimism" (x)

W 2/11 Cantet, *Time Out* (watch before class).

F 2/13 Journal Exchange 2—email to your partner by 5 p.m., with me CCd.

No journaling required this week; focus on your peer's journal.

M 2/16 Richard Linklater, *Slacker*

W 2/18 Continue discussing Linklater and Cantet. Read Berlant, "After the Good Life, an Impasse" (x). **Theory workshop.**

§ Berlant, intro to *Cruel Optimism*

F 2/20 Response to peer's journal due by 5 p.m. Email your partner, with me CCd.

M 2/23 Kane, 4.48 *Psychosis* (all). (Resume journaling.)
§ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (x).

W 2/25 Kane, cont. Cathy Caruth, from *Trauma* (x). **Theory workshop.**
§ Tycer, "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander." (x).

F 2/27—**Annotated Bibliog./Proposal Due by 5 p.m.** Email to me as an attachment.

M 3/2 Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, through p.93.

§ Emma Kimberley, "Politics and Poetics of Fear after 9/11"

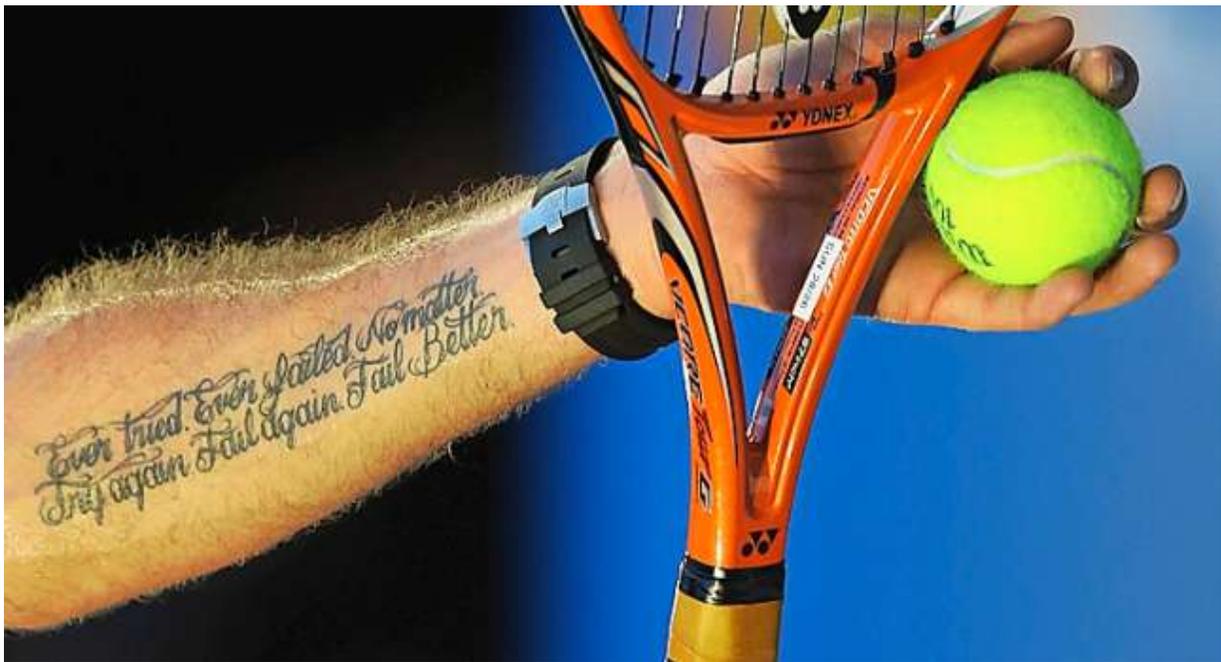
W 3/4 Rankine, finish. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (x). **Theory workshop.**

F 3/6 **Final Journal due by 5 pm, with "Keywords."** Email to me as an attachment.

M 3/9 Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure" (x), "Null Drift" (x); excerpts from
Russolo, *Arte Dei Rumori* (x); Pan Sonic, TBA (x).

W 3/11 **Class Canceled for Final Paper Conferences (required)**

Seminar Paper due **Wednesday, March 18, by 11:59 p.m., via email.**



(Swiss tennis player Stan Wawrinka)