

## THEORIES OF FAILURE



In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam speaks up for the generative possibilities of "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, and not knowing." Aesthetic, political, aesthetic, and interpretive failures, Halberstam argues, allow 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 representations of

failure, in dialogue with a range of literary and cultural theory, exploring how various kinds of failure question our ideals of productivity and value, wholeness and health, beauty and truth.

### Required Texts for Purchase—HARD COPIES ONLY, PLEASE:

Henry James, *The Beast in the Jungle* (Dover; 978-0486275529)

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (Penguin; 978-0141181271)

Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (Grove; 978-0802144454)

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (Norton; 978-0393303940)

Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Graywolf; 978-1555974077)

Murfin/Ray, *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Bedford; 978-0312461881)

### Required Films (on reserve):

Laurent Cantet, *Time Out (L'Emploi du temps)*; also available on Netflix.

Richard Linklater, *Slacker*. On Amazon (<http://bit.ly/linklaterslacker>), and Netflix.

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

**PLEASE TURN OFF PHONES, LAPTOPS, IPADS, ETC. AND PUT THEM AWAY BEFORE CLASS BEGINS.**

**PREREQUISITES (FROM THE PSU CATALOG):** ENG 300. Expected preparation also includes ENG 492 (Literary Criticism and Theory) and four additional upper-division Literature credits.

**Office Hours/Email:** You are cordially invited to office hours; if you'd prefer to meet at a different time, feel free to email me to set up an appointment. Beyond that, I ask your help in keeping emails to a minimum. Most emails are redundant (e.g. already answered in the syllabus) or would be better discussed in person. (For example, if you miss class, you don't need to email me to explain why.) The more we talk in person, the better I can get to know you and your work. If you do email me, or any professor, consider it *professional correspondence*. Include a subject line, a courteous salutation (not "Hey"), and a sign-off; write in grammatical English; etc. (<http://bit.ly/avoidssillyemails>).

## REQUIRED COURSEWORK

### CLASS BLOG (25% of course grade):

**Blogs:** On an alternating basis (see schedule), you will post entries to our course blog, available at <<http://theoriesoffailure494.wordpress.com>>. **Instructions for setting up an account are attached to this syllabus.** Sometimes I'll give you topics, but for the most part, you will develop your own: ask a provocative critical question prompted by our readings and discussions, and then explore that question by engaging closely with *specific details from the reading*. Cite those details parenthetically by page (35). Blogs should be **700+ words**, and should represent your best academic writing. Each blog will be graded out of 17 points (I know that's a silly number, but it makes the math work).

**Tags:** We will organize our blog entries with "tags": keywords, topics, terms, etc. used to group similar topics together. For example, if you're analyzing trauma in Nella Larsen, create a "trauma" tag and a "Larsen" tag; later bloggers can reuse those tags and add new ones. Use at least three tags, old or new, for each blog.

Possible Tags (also create your own): trauma, abject, loss, futurity, normativity, development, boredom, (un)productivity, authors, titles, *Bedford* terms, etc.

**Replies:** On an alternating basis, you will **reply** (250+ words) to a classmate's posting, probing its ideas with new textual examples. Don't merely sum up or "grade" the posting ("I agree! Great job!"); develop its arguments further. Each reply is graded out of 10 points.

**Capture the Tag:** Twice, you will find a "tag" and write an entry (700-800 words) that synthesizes 3-4 postings under this tag. For example, if you chose the "trauma" tag, you'd read a few posts that use it, and develop an argument about how these postings explore trauma from similar/different angles. Each Tag entry will be graded out of 15 points.

Blog postings/replies will not be accepted late. If Wordpress is being uncooperative, you may email me your posting *before the deadline*, and then post it once the site is running again. In Week Ten, you'll be given a chance to make up one missed posting.

**PARTICIPATION/ATTENDANCE (15%):** Attend each class, with your text out and open, ready to argue, ask questions, participate in groups, etc. If you are not ready to do these things, you are unprepared for class. Your overall participation will be graded A (excellent), C (satisfactory), F (failing), or zero. To earn an A, you must engage in the discussion more or less every day, having done all readings closely, developing our ideas with specific passages.

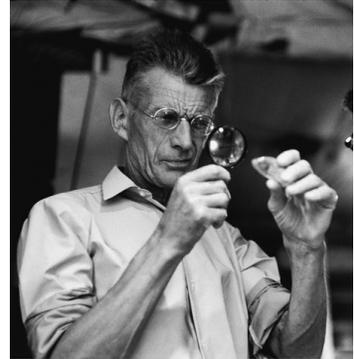
**Attendance:** You may miss up to two classes without penalty, though missed in-class work cannot be made up. I recommend saving these absences for emergencies and illnesses, etc. I do not distinguish between excused/unexcused absences; if you're not here—whatever the reason—you aren't participating. If workload or wellness issues are keeping you from class, I encourage you to contact your advisor and/or Student Health, or to visit my office hours. If you miss 3-4 classes, you can earn no better than a C for participation. If you miss five classes, you will earn a final participation of zero. Each absence thereafter will lower your *course* grade by half a mark (e.g. from A- to B+). If you do miss class, please do not email me to explain (unless, perhaps, there's a major issue that will keep you out of multiple classes). Contact a classmate for notes, assignments, etc. Late arrival (or early departure) will count as an absence. If you're running 10+ minutes late, I respectfully ask that you not enter the class.



### **FINAL PAPER (35%):**

A paper of **2500-3000 words**, exploring a specific aspect of failure in one or more course texts (literary, theoretical, or both), and developing an incisive critical argument, supported by close textual reading and by independent scholarly research. Cite and engage critically with at least **five scholarly book or journal sources** from beyond the syllabus. You are welcome to develop ideas from your blogs or from other assignments in this class. Your paper must be double-spaced, in MLA format, with a Works Cited page. All students will meet with me to discuss their projects; failure to attend your conference, prepared for a focused conversation about a draft/outline, will count as an absence and result in a docked paper grade.

*Paper Proposal & Annotated Bibliography:* In advance of the paper, and contributing to the paper grade, you will write a proposal of 800-1000 words, explaining your topic, drawing on specific examples, and developing a provisional thesis. (It's ok if your thesis or topic evolves later.) In support of this proposal, construct an annotated bibliography of scholarship on the topic. Include MLA citations for at least five books or *scholarly* journal articles *from beyond the syllabus*. (Readings from class, general websites, Wikipedia, etc., don't count.) Annotate each citation with a 100-word synopsis of the source's arguments. Start building a repertoire of ideas to help you develop an informed critical argument.



### **THEORY WORKSHOP (15%):**

Small groups will lead workshops on theoretical readings in dialogue with our course texts. Lead 30-35 minutes of discussion, and distribute a handout (format up to you: passages, context, etc.). Your job is to promote *collaborative engagement with the reading*: ask focused questions, frame the reading's major concepts, lead us through specific passages, and use a handout to organize our thinking. You aren't expected to have every word of the reading perfectly figured out—but you do need to have thought through its arguments in depth, and to have a detailed plan for working through it. Please do not use PowerPoint/Prezi/etc.

### **"MAKE IT FAIL" (individually or in groups) (10%):**

Take a short text (literary, artistic, cultural...) from *beyond the syllabus* that strikes you as productive, healthy, formally coherent—everything this class is resisting—and revise it in order to undo its thematic, ideological, or structural perfection. Turn it into a productive failed text; make it un-succeed in a way that shows us something compelling about what qualifies as success in the text's form or content. You'll present your work to the class in a 15-minute presentation, and write a 600-800-word explanation of what conventions your new, proud failure reveals in the original work (each explanation due a week after the presentation). Have fun with this assignment, but do some serious rethinking of the aesthetic, cultural, and other implications of success/failure in this text.

## **POLICIES, RESOURCES, and GRADING**

**Late Work:** Not accepted in this class. Technology snafus, busy work schedules, etc. do not excuse late work. You are responsible for planning your schedule and backing up your files.

**Academic Integrity:** I am doggedly serious about plagiarism, cheating, multiple submission, forgery, and other forms of academic misconduct. Any such incident will result in a grade of zero and a Student Conduct report. You must cite any and every use of someone else's words or ideas. You are **not** permitted to reuse work from other classes for credit in ENG 494. If you are ever unsure about this policy, or how it applies to a specific case, please ask me *before* handing in the assignment. *Uncertainty about the rules is not an excuse for violating them.*

**Statement on Sexual Discrimination and Harassment:** Portland State University is committed to providing an environment free of prohibited discrimination and sexual harassment (sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender or sex-based harassment and stalking). If you experience any form of gender- or sex-based discrimination or harassment, help and support are available. PSU has staff members trained to support survivors in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more. Information about support on campus, including confidential services and reporting options, can be found on PSU's Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response website: <http://www.pdx.edu/sexual-assault/get-help>. You may also call a confidential IPV Advocate at 503.725.5672.

**PSU Resources:**

- Student Health & Counseling: <http://www.pdx.edu/shac>; 503.725.2800; Univ. Center.
- Disability Resource Center: <http://www.pdx.edu/drc>; 503.725.4150; 116 Smith.
  - ❖ **Please contact the DRC in advance of when any accommodations are needed.**
- PSU Registrar (add/drop, transcripts, etc.): <http://www.pdx.edu/registration>
- English Dept. (faculty, course descriptions, advising, etc.): <http://www.pdx.edu/english>
- PSU Library Research Tools: <http://library.pdx.edu/research>
- OIT (computer labs, passwords, print quotas, etc.): <http://www.pdx.edu/oit>
- Office of Equity & Compliance: <http://www.pdx.edu/diversity/office-of-equity-compliance>

**Grading:** *Grades are assessments of quality, not effort.* Grades are not adjusted for personal aspirations, extracurricular issues, workload, etc. If you wish to discuss strategies for improving your work, I will be happy to speak with you (in person, not over email), but I do not negotiate grades. Each assignment is graded on its intellectual cogency and sophistication, development of ideas, depth of analysis, and written expression, as follows:

- F: fails to meet the expectations of the assignment at a passable level. (0-59)
- D: meets minimal expectations, with major shortcomings of argumentation, clarity, development of ideas, coherence, or presentation. (60-62=D-; 63-67=D; 68-69=D+)
- C: Satisfactory; meets expectations; satisfies the assignment competently, with limited or inconsistent development, analysis, or presentation. (70-72=C-; 73-77=C; 78-79=C+)
- B: Good; meets expectations with merit; develops sound and cogent arguments, supports claims rigorously, and expresses ideas proficiently. (80-82=B-; 83-87=B; 88-89=B+)
- A: Excellent; exceeds expectations; uses the assignment to produce striking work of outstanding sophistication, insight, depth, and elegance. (90-92=A-; 93-100=A)

Each component will be scored out of 100 and weighted as indicated above; your final average will be rounded to the nearest whole number.

**Incompletes and X ("No Basis") grades will not be given in this course.** If you think you will be unable to complete the coursework, please speak with me and your advisor ASAP.

**COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change, with advance notice):**

Readings marked (x) are linked to D2L; print them out and bring them to class.

*BG* = Terms from the *Bedford Glossary*

Optional readings are...optional, but suggested for those presenting/writing on the topic.

Blogs will be written individually, rotating in the following groups:

**Blog Group 1: Students with last names A through D**

**Blog Group 2: Students with last names E through M**

**Blog Group 3: Students with last names N through Z**

T 1/10 Introductions. Excerpts distributed in class.

Th 1/12 Halberstam, from *The Queer Art of Failure* (x). In *BG*: cultural studies; queer theory. In class: sign up for Theory Workshop and "Make it Fail" presentations/dates.

**F 1/13—ALL STUDENTS: blog posts due, 11:59 p.m. No late postings.** Use at least three "tags."

T 1/17 Before class, read *The Beast in the Jungle*.

Th 1/19 *Beast*, cont.; Matthew Helmers, "Possibly Queer Time" (x). In *BG*: narrative theory; psychoanalysis; feel free to look up terms/cross-references. **Theory Workshop.**

**F 1/20 Blogs due, 11:59 pm, as follows.**

**EVERYONE IN BLOG GROUP 1 (A-D):** write blogs (700-800 words). Use at least three tags (feel free to reuse tags from last week, but create a couple new ones).

**EVERYONE IN BLOG GROUP 2 (E-M) and BLOG GROUP 3 (N-Z):** respond to a blog from last week (don't reply to your own posting!) 300 words.

T 1/24 Larsen, *Quicksand* (all).

Th 1/26 Larsen, cont. In *BG*: affect. Sianne Ngai, from *Ugly Feelings* (x). **Theory Workshop.**

**F 1/27—Blogs due 11:59 p.m., as follows:**

**BLOG GROUPS 1 and 3:** respond to a blog entry from last week (not your own).

**BLOG GROUP 2:** write blogs (700-800 words).

T 1/31 Cantet, *Time Out* (watch before class).

Th 2/2 Berlant, "After the Good Life, an Impasse" (x). In *BG*: **cultural materialism. Theory Workshop.** (Optional: the introduction to Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism* [x].)

**F 2/3—Blogs due by 11:59 p.m.:**

**BLOG GROUPS 1 and 2:** respond to a blog entry from last week (300 words).

**BLOG GROUP 3:** write new blog entries (700-800 words)

T 2/7 Beckett, *Murphy* (pages TBA). In *BG*: **modernism; bildungsroman; absurdism**

Th 2/9 Finish *Murphy*.

**F 2/10—ALL BLOGGERS: "capture the tag" exercise due, 11:59pm (700-800 words).**

T 2/14 Beckett cont. Adorno, from *Minima Moralia* (x); In *BG*: **Marxism. Theory Workshop.**

Th 2/16 Linklater, *Slacker* (watch before class). (Optional: Ngai on "paranoia" [x])

**F 2/17—BLOG GROUPS 1 and 2: blog due by 11:59 p.m. (Group 3 has the week off.)**

T 2/21 Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (pages TBA).

Th 2/23 Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (finish).

**F 2/24—BLOG GROUP 3: blog due by 11:59 p.m. (Groups 1+2 have the week off.)**

T 2/28 Rhys cont. Edelman, from *No Future* (x). In *BG*: psychoanalysis. **Theory workshop.**

Th 3/2 Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, pages TBA. In *BG*: **lyric; trauma; others TBD**

**F 3/3—Everybody *reply* to at least one blog posting.**

T 3/7 Rankine, finish.

Th 3/9 Rankine, cont. Žižek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real" (x). **Theory workshop.**  
(Optional: Emma Kimberley, "Politics and Poetics of Fear after 911" [x].)

**F 3/10—"Capture the Tag" exercise (700-800 words), all students, by 11:59 p.m.**

**Annotated Bibliog./Proposal Due by 11:59 p.m.** Upload to D2L dropbox. No blogs due.

T 3/14 E. Priest, from *Boring Formless Nonsense* (x); A/V excerpts TBA. **Theory workshop.**

Th 3/16—**Class Cancelled for Final Paper Conferences (*required*)**

**F 3/17 Optional "make-up" blog due by 11:59 pm.** Each student may make up one posting  
OR one reply (not both, not the tag exercises).

**SEMINAR PAPER DUE THURS., MARCH 23, BY 11:59 P.M., VIA D2L DROPBOX. NO LATE PAPERS  
ACCEPTED.**

## INITIAL BLOG SETUP FOR ENG 494

To add yourself to the class blog, do the following (some of these steps may look different on your computer/browser—I am trusting you to solve problems as they arise). I encourage you to do the steps in this order, unless you already have a Wordpress account:

(1) **Sign up for a Wordpress account at <http://signup.wordpress.com/signup>** . It's probably best to **use your PDX email address**, since that's what I'll use to give you posting access. Create and confirm your account by verifying your email address. A free account is adequate.

**This will set you up with your own individual blog, which is *not* what you'll use for our course blog postings.** Click through all the stuff about creating your own blog.

(2) **Using my class list—and your PDX EMAIL ADDRESSES—I have emailed the class with invitations.** The subject will read "Josh E. invites you to contribute to Theories of Failure" (or something like that). Accepting this invitation allows you to post to our class blog.

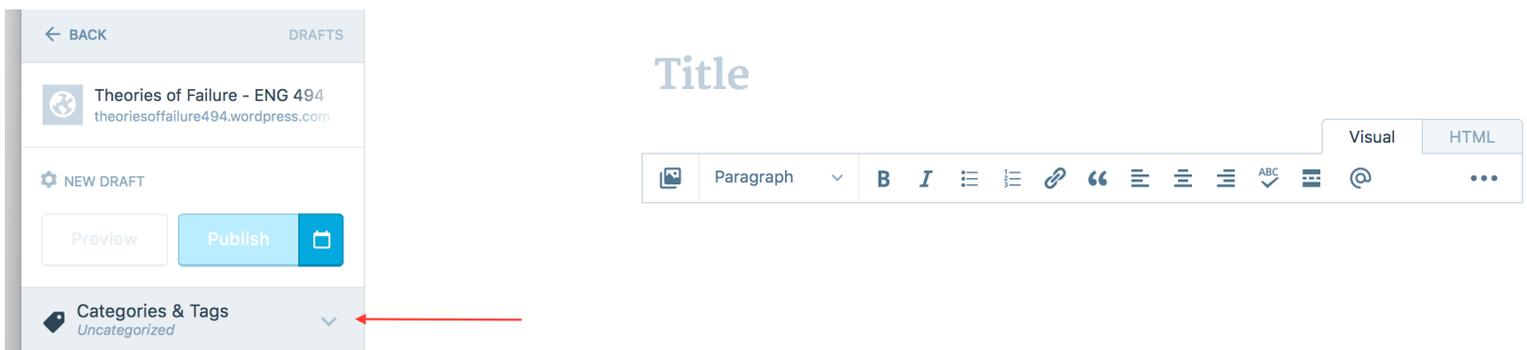
(3) Go to our site: <http://theoriesoffailure494.wordpress.com> . You now have posting privileges. (I may tinker with the blog format during the first few weeks; be patient!)

(4) **To post a blog, click the little "pencil" image at the top right of the page.**



To make sure you're posting to the right blog, click the "My Sites" button at the top left of the page, which should produce a drop down menu. Select "Theories of Failure."

(5) **To "tag" your blog posting, click the arrow under "Categories and Tags."** Once we've started creating tags, you'll be able to choose old ones and create new ones.



(6) **You're ready to blog!** We'll talk about how to label these blogs. For now, just make sure that your name appears in the title (e.g. "Josh E.'s blog on *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*," etc.). To post *replies*, click "leave a comment" next to the relevant post. **Again: whenever possible, write (and save) your work *offline* before copying/pasting it into Wordpress**—this will preserve your work if the Internet fails at an inopportune time.