

A light blue convertible car is shown flying through the air in a desert landscape. The car is positioned in the upper center of the frame, with its wheels and body clearly visible. The background consists of rugged, reddish-brown rock formations under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is surreal and evocative of a classic movie stunt.

University of Wisconsin, Madison  
English 559: Topics in Theory (Spring 2022)

## On Groundlessness

Professor Ramzi Fawaz  
E-mail: [fawaz@wisc.edu](mailto:fawaz@wisc.edu)  
M 2:30-5:00 PM Humanities 2637  
Office hours: M 11:30-1:30 PM by Zoom  
Office hours zoom link: <https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/93929038792>

The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end. . . . Man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958)

As fleet and bright as a lodestar, he wheeled towards Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.

—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977)

In her 1964 essay, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” the political theorist Hannah Arendt suggests that large-scale catastrophes like the rise of a fascist government, an economic crash, or a pandemic, are often preceded by the moral collapse of a society. She contends these moments reveal that by relying on the idea of a universally shared ethical standard of conduct—for instance tacitly assuming that everyone has been following common laws or codes against killing, lying, and stealing—we become complacent and ignore all signs of our culture’s ethical bankruptcy. Rather than lament this state of affairs or seek security in another set of rules, Arendt argues that true radical democracy seeks only new forms of unpredictable collective action in the

face of atrocity. For Arendt, to be groundless is to be free, not in the sense of sovereignty, free will, or license to do as one pleases, *but in the capacity to invent political associations the world has never seen*. We are living in such groundless times. The question is, what do we do about it?

This advanced theory seminar will explore critical, cultural, and political theories of *groundlessness* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Buddhism, the concept of groundlessness describes the fundamental uncertainty of life. For political theorists, groundlessness captures those moments when all our traditional collective values, like ideas about progress, ethics, and the good life, are thrown into disarray. In both definitions, to become groundless involves a thrilling and terrifying loss of stability, which demands that we evolve in response to new circumstances. Against the tendency to seek certainty in social norms, rigid political ideologies, or totalizing theories, we will ask: what kinds of theories or belief systems refuse to hold fast to seemingly stable, essential or fixed assumptions about their objects and methods of analysis? How can groundless thinking provide a more flexible, and methodologically open relationship to the world's unpredictability? In other words, when we lose our ground, rather than grasp at air, how can we learn to *fly*?

We will begin by reading Arendt's magnum opus, *The Human Condition*, arguably the most sustained study of political contingency in the history of democratic theory. We will then explore a range of groundless worldviews including postmodern theories of contingency and fragmentation; deconstruction's commitment to indeterminacy and *différence*; anti-identitarian projects in feminist, queer, and critical race theories; eco-criticism's decentering of the "human"; the "blossoming of mental states" occasioned by the psychedelic experience; and popular Buddhism's description of the existential groundlessness of life. Our goal will be to reimagine the role of theory in our current moment of crisis, not as a set of universal standards or stable concepts that give us false comfort in the face of chaos, but as equipment for living that facilitates an intellectual orientation to surprise, unpredictability, and change necessary for acting in concert.

Alongside a variety of theoretical writing, throughout the semester we will engage with an eclectic archive of literature and popular culture that includes: Toni Morrison's black feminist novel *Sula* (1974); Yoko Ono's book of imaginary instructions *Grapefruit* (1964); the HBO fantasy television series *Lovecraft Country* (2020); Pema Chodron's bestselling Buddhist self-help book *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (1996); Edie Fake's transgender graphic novel *Gaylord Phoenix* (2011); and Jeff Vandermeer's epic science fantasy series *The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014).

### **What will we learn?**

On its face, this course offers students a sustained, interdisciplinary understanding of the concepts of *contingency* and *anti-essentialism* as they have developed in a range of related fields including political theory, cultural studies, art history, and critical race studies. Contingency describes the unpredictability of human action, and consequently the radical uncertainty of all historical phenomenon. Anti-essentialism is a stance or intellectual orientation that questions attempts to understand history, identity, the body, or social relations in universal, transcendent, or natural terms. In that vein, "On Groundlessness" is intended to reorient, and perhaps help us

loosen our grip on, each of our existing scholarly preoccupations with fixed time periods, ideological or theoretical investments, and objects or fields of study. The point is not to lose all our bearings, abandon our investments, or believe in nothing, but rather to develop a more supple, and open-hearted relationship to intellectual change and transformation. Great thinkers evolve, reapproach the same questions anew, and construct nimble models for analyzing an unpredictable world filled with equally unpredictable cultural objects, stories, fantasies, and social bonds.

This course then, will introduce you to theoretical, literary, and cultural texts that provide examples of contingent thought, that might inspire you to figure out your own, while lovingly questioning whatever ground you claim to stand on. We can identify some of the concrete outcomes of this endeavor: by encountering cultural objects across a wide range of media forms, you will develop much stronger media literacy and close reading skills. Through engagement with theoretical writing in multiple disciplines, you will become more skilled at understanding and intervening in conversations taking place in fields beyond your immediate expertise. And because of the surprising and unusual combination of texts drawn together each week, you will become a more acute curator of scholarly and cultural texts in your own research and writing. All of these skills will evolve organically, but ultimately, the point is to expand your imagination about what kind of ideas you can cognize, what kind of thinker you can possibly be or become, and what kind of collective life you can forge with others in an increasingly fragmented and chaotic world. In this sense, our course goals are themselves groundless, since the outcome of each person's potential transformation as a thinker cannot be known in advance. At its most ambitious this seminar imparts an orientation of intellectual generosity and an openness to surprise and wonder in ideas, rather than any singular body of knowledge or method of analysis.

### **What are we reading?**

The texts below are required. They are available for purchase at the University Bookstore or online. I recommend Bookshop.org, BetterWorldBooks, Powell's Bookstore or other independent online retailers that support local booksellers. All texts marked with \* in the syllabus will be available on Canvas for download. If you are able to, I highly encourage you to print out and take notes directly on all course texts posted to Canvas. You will retain and comprehend the material best in physical, print format.

Throughout the semester we will view two films—*Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *My Octopus Teacher* (Netflix, 2020)—and one HBO television series, *Lovecraft Country* (HBO). *Lovecraft Country* may be viewed by anyone with an HBO membership or purchased as a whole season on iTunes and other online streaming services (keep in mind that purchasing a single month of HBO membership to view the series will actually cost less than buying the entire season). This will be considered the equivalent of a book purchase.

On weeks 13-14 we will be discussing Books 1 and 3 of Jeff Vandermeer's science fantasy trilogy *Area X*, which add up to a whopping 500 pages. I realize this is a big ask. But the series is absolutely riveting, and you'll feel compelled to read it breathlessly. Because of the sheer volume of reading, I am making Book 2 in the trilogy optional. Book 2 is often considered the slowest and most plodding part of the series, but I think it's extremely important, which is why

I'm still recommending it without making it mandatory. With all this in mind, however, it is a great idea to start reading *Area X* before the new semester starts. The same goes for the television series *Lovecraft Country*, which will demand a significant amount of viewing (but is thrilling and compulsively watchable).

Alongside our regularly assigned reading, I encourage you read 1-2 chapters of Pema Chödrön's *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* each week at your leisure. None of the chapters are longer than 5-8 pages and they are deeply calming. Regardless, we will read a significant portion of the book alongside Book 1 of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* for Week 13. If you choose to read it week by week, however, you will have finished the book by the end of the semester, at which time I will ask you to briefly re-view it for our Week 13 discussion. *When Things Fall Apart* is arguably the most celebrated Buddhist self-help book in North America, and it will offer an ongoing reminder to breathe, regroup, and face the stress and chaos of coursework and the world with equanimity.

### Required Texts:

Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, *The Legion by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning Volume 2* (2018)  
 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958)  
 Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (1996)  
 Edie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix* (2010)  
 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)  
*Lovecraft Country* (HBO Television Series) (2020)  
 Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings by Yoko Ono* (1964)  
 Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014)

**This is a reading intensive advanced theory seminar, which means you will need to manage your time well, plan ahead for each week of reading and viewing, and commit significant time to prepare for our discussions.** Officially speaking: the credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, and other student work as described in the syllabus. That is roughly ten hours of work a week. If you are putting in this kind of time and still struggling to keep up with the course readings, we will thoughtfully trim readings as we go along. At all times, the syllabus may be subject to change at my discretion as an instructor.

### What are we writing?

In addition to our weekly readings, this course has five assignments. These include: 1) a 3-4 page reflection paper on your intellectual investments and tendencies; 2) short weekly online discussion posts; 3) a take-home mid-term exam; 4) a 700-word project proposal; and 5) a 10-page final seminar paper that develops a sustained original analysis of a cultural object of your choosing. While all these assignments will be familiar to students as traditional elements of a seminar, I reframe each of these tasks in groundless terms by associating them with contingent concepts we will encounter in our course readings. For example, Hannah Arendt movingly claims that making and keeping promises is one of two practices (along with “forgiving”) that

provide “islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty.” Following Arendt, we will conceive of our weekly online discussion posts and various kinds of peer assessment as expressions of making and keeping promises to our intellectual community (I will also ask you to make and keep an intellectual promise of your choosing to a fellow classmate as an expression of scholarly generosity). Alternatively, the feminist literary theorist Barbara Johnson argued that the strongest possible interpretation of any cultural text is one that returns “the surprise of otherness,” that is an interpretation that bequeaths to a reader something new or unexpected about a work of art, making it thrillingly unrecognizable. Consequently, we will treat your project proposal for the final paper as an opportunity to reapproach a text you wish to write about from a fresh angle, allowing the object to surprise you and others. In this sense, we will try to give new meanings to traditional assignments by shifting the ground upon which we view or understand them. I will provide separate detailed instructions for each assignment, but short descriptions of each and their corresponding weights can be found here:

- 1) **Assessing Our Investments** [Reflection Paper—10%]: you will develop a 3-4 page reflection paper articulating one or two of your most intense intellectual, spiritual, or emotional attachments, how those attachments formed, what role they have played in your development as a thinker, and where they may or may not be holding you back from taking in new perspectives. [**Soft due date: Saturday, February 5 by 11 PM; Final due date: Saturday, February 12 by 11 PM**].
- 2) **Making and Keeping Promises** [Weekly Online Discussion and Group Engagement—10%]: At the start of the semester, I will assign people to groups of three members. Every week, the members of one group will be responsible for developing a substantive set of response to a pre-circulated question or task related to that week’s reading. These are mini-essays around 500 words that should be well written and organized in thought and execution. You should have an original argument or stake a distinct position and incorporate at least 1-2 direct citations from the week’s reading in making your claims. These posts must be online by 8 PM on Sunday evenings before our class meetings the following afternoon; they should not take more than 1-2 hours of your time to formulate. The rest of the class is required to post short replies that take up and complicate particular ideas, questions, or concepts brought up in the primary posts. These responses are due no later than 11 AM on Monday mornings and should be a minimum of one solid paragraph; they should not take more than 15-20 minutes to formulate. Each member of the class will cycle through posting a primary response twice across the semester.

Early in the semester, you will be asked to make and keep an intellectual promise to your fellow group members—this could involve committing to reading drafts of their papers, meeting periodically to discuss the course readings outside of class, conferring regularly about professional activities like teaching and research, or something else. This will be reciprocated with another equivalent or related promise. These promises will be documented in writing and you’ll reflect on your follow-through at mid-semester. This is one way we will hold one another accountable and cultivate the affective orientation necessary for maintaining intellectual community in higher education. **While many people tend to dislike group work, it is extremely rewarding to develop a long-term intellectual dialogue with fellow students, receive mutual support, and build new**

**friendships. I encourage everyone to be very open to the surprise of learning from others. I will also have policies in place to ensure all members of a group are pulling their weight.**

- 3) **Holding Ourselves Accountable** [Take-home mid-term exam 10%]: during Spring Break I will give you the opportunity to complete a short and easy take-home mid-term exam. You will be asked to explain a handful of key concepts from our course in your own words, use 2-3 of those concepts to analyze a literary passage or scene from a film, and reflect on your progress in the course so far.
- 4) **The Surprise of Otherness** [Group Project Proposal & Optional Mini-draft—10%]: with your group, you will craft a 700-word project proposal offering a blueprint of your final seminar paper. The proposal will offer a rationale for the object you intend to study and provide a substantive description of how you collectively plan to approach the object from a new angle that you have not pursued in previous research or writing (see description of the final paper below). I will meet with each group to discuss their proposal and provide feedback on your course performance after Spring Break. **[Final due date: Saturday, March 27 by 11 PM]**.
- 5) **Putting Thought into Unpredictable Action** [Final Paper—20%]: with your group, you will develop a 10-page seminar paper that offers a sustained analysis of a single cultural object of your choosing. Together, you must deploy at least one method you have never practiced before to offer an original reading of this object that questions or complicates previous assumptions you might have had about it—depending on your disciplinary background or intellectual history you may consider methods like ethnography, close reading, phenomenology, historiography, comparative analysis, archival research etc. **[Soft due date: Saturday, May 7 by 11 PM; final due date: Friday, May 13 by 11 PM]**.

**Note: All assignments will be submitted through Canvas as .docx documents. There will be a link to submit each paper under the Assignments tab on our Canvas site.**

**The remaining 40% of your grade rests on your dedicated engagement in our class discussion. This is, without a doubt, where most of the magic happens in a seminar. The heft of this percentage is intended to stress how important it is for you to bring your A-game every week.**

**Attendance Policy: Attendance and participation at every class session is mandatory.** That means not only showing up, but being awake, attentive, and actively engaged in our meetings. Most importantly, this includes coming to class having completed that day's reading (and viewing) assignments, taken careful notes on all these items, and prepared to engage in dialogue about them. I will grant each student one excused absence for any reason; all other unexcused absences will incur the 5% participation grade deduction listed above.

**Covid-19:** I am acutely aware that the conditions of the Covid pandemic might create obstacles to a consistent attendance record. Please inform me of all unforeseeable absences, such as those

caused by severe illness or a personal emergency, as soon as possible. I will do everything in my power to accommodate unexpected changes in anyone's personal circumstances. **Your health and wellbeing is paramount. With this in mind, however, remember that anytime you miss a class session, you lose the opportunity to participate in a completely original intellectual event that can never be reproduced or adequately conveyed after the fact. This loss is no small thing.** Moreover, during a period of intense stress and isolation under the groundless conditions of the pandemic, our class sessions can provide an uplifting weekly anchor in the storm, connecting you to a larger intellectual and social community.

**Email etiquette:** Whenever you write an email to a professor, you should always begin with a formal salutation (such as Dear Professor or Dr. Fawaz) and sign off with an appropriate ending followed by your name (Sincerely, All Best, Have a wonderful day etc.). It is imperative that you read all emails from your professors carefully to ensure you receive appropriate instructions and details about course assignments and schedules. Finally, I cannot stress enough that you must reply to any email individually directed to you by a professor, and provide a specific explanation for any absences. A general statement that you are stressed or overwhelmed will not suffice as an excuse for an absence. If you are at any time struggling with your mental health, or your state of mind is preventing you from completing work or attending class, please inform me immediately and reach out to university Mental Health Services at <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/> or 608-265-5600 to receive appropriate care and attention.

**Disability Support Services:** At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

### **What does groundlessness look like in the classroom?**

This is a course that will ask you to question every assumption you have about the world, including your deepest convictions about the nature of identity, social relations, desire, and politics. Being willing to suspend one's attachments is an extremely generative, but also difficult task, especially when we feel those attachments provide the foundation for our lives and worldviews. Moreover, we are currently living through a revolutionary moment in American culture, when many of our most sacredly held ideas about political freedom, collective good, and democratic life are under threat, or at least, in flux. In this class, I encourage you to practice making strong claims but holding them lightly, resisting the need to defend any one position or idea universally, and generously questioning other people's assumptions. Perhaps most importantly, I want you to learn how to listen carefully to what others are saying and be willing to change your mind when the ideas, questions, or arguments you hear are convincing. None of us have all the answers, which is why we must actively draw upon the opinions and perspectives of others to get a broader view of the world we share in common. Our conversations should be lively and intense, but under no circumstance should anyone ever be personally attacked; at the same time, I want to encourage you to take risks and get involved, even when it might feel easier

to bow out of a controversial conversation. I guarantee the rewards of participating will be extraordinary. Below are best practices for class discussion:

1. All students must speak at least once in every class session.
2. Regardless of what we discuss, we will treat one another with respect, knowing that we may not always agree on other peoples' conclusions, interpretations, or claims.
3. Anything you bring up in class is up for discussion and others are free to agree, disagree, or respond to what you have said in a respectful way.
4. **You must always begin by responding to what other students have said before you or inform the class that you intend to move the dialogue in a new direction.**
5. Practice making arguments, not stating opinions. This requires you to always have your reading materials with you in class and to be able to point to specific moments or features of a text to support your ideas.

**Finally, I offer a blanket content warning for the course:** all students should be aware that we will view and read about a range of human experiences—from the most tragic and violent to the most joyful and life-affirming—that will activate every emotion imaginable. Some of our texts like *Thelma & Louise* and *Lovecraft Country* depict terrible forms of sexual and racial violence; yet these same texts also present us with life-long friendships, intergenerational love and community, and exhilarating fantasies of a better world for gender and sexual outlaws, people of color, and their allies. At different times you will feel joy and devastation, wonder and horror, boredom and confusion, disgust and thrill. Life is complicated and messy, and it includes *all the feels*. Our job is to remain open to the entire gamut of affects, emotions, and sensations that comprise the human experience, and to thoughtfully grapple with our complex, sometimes painful, but most often transformative responses to them. With this in mind, it is up to you as informed adults, to decide how you wish to view and engage with this material.

### **Week 1: When Things Fall Apart: Four Exercises in Groundless Thinking**

Monday, January 31

Barbara Johnson, "Introduction to *Dissemination*," (1981, excerpts)\*

Gloria Anzaldúa, excerpts from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)\*

Ann Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (2015). Introduction.\*

Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (1996). Read chapters 1-2.

### **Week 2: Islands of Certainty in a World of Uncertainty**

Monday, February 7

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958). Prologue, Chapters 1 and 5, and the following pages from chapter 6: 248-257, 305-325.

**\*\*Reflection Paper final due date Saturday, February 12 by 11 PM\*\***

### **Week 3: The Abyss of Freedom**

Monday, February 14

Screening: **Thelma & Louise** (Scott, 1991)

Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2005). Introduction, Chapter 3 and Conclusion.\*

### **Week 4: “A Constant Sharing of Perceptions”**

Monday, February 21

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

### **Week 5: Heterogeneity, Hybridity Multiplicity**

Monday, February 28

Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1.1 (Spring 1991)\*

Stephen Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” *MLQ* 73.3 (2012)\*

Arun Saldanha, “Reontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society* 24 (2010)\*

Jennifer Nash, “Rethinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89 (2008)\*

### **Week 6: Keeping it Unreal**

Monday, March 7

Screening: **Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse** (Presichetti, et. al. 2018)

Darieck Scott, *Keeping it Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (2021). Introduction and chapter 1.\*

### **[Week 7: March 14—Spring Break]**

### **Week 8: Judging in the Absence of Universals**

Monday, March 21 [No online posts; mid-term exam due Saturday, March 26 by 11 PM]

Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” (1964)\*

Linda Zerilli, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Judgement,” *Signs* 34.2 (2009)\*

Ramzi Fawaz, “Legions of Superheroes: Diversity, Multiplicity, and Collective Action Against Genocide in the Superhero Comic Book,” *Social Text* 36.4 (2018).\*

Danny Abnett and Andy Lanning, *Legion Lost* (2000-2001). Focus on issues #1-2, 4, 8, 11-12.

### **Week 9: On Being Beside Oneself**

Monday, March 28

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (2004). Introduction and Chapter 1.\*

David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (2015). Introduction and Chapter 4.\*

**\*\*Group project proposal due Saturday, April 2 by 11 PM\*\***

### **Week 10: The Body as a Short-term Lease**

Monday, April 4

Lucas Crawford, *Transgender Architechtonics* (2015). Introduction and Chapter 1.\*

Eddie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix* (2010)

### **Week 11: When Species Meet**

Monday, April 11

Screening: **My Octopus Teacher** (Reed & Ehrlich, 2020)

Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (2007). Chapters 1-4.

Selections from Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2015)

### **Week 12: How to Become a Tree (Part I)**

Monday, April 18

Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014). Read Book 1: *Annihilation*.

Michael Pollen, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (2018). Pages 1-20, 121-137, 291-330.\*

**Week 13: How to Become a Tree (Part II)**

Monday, April 25

Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014). Book 3: *Acceptance*.

**Week 14: Strong Theories, Held Lightly: On Learning to Surrender**

Monday, May 2

Ramzi Fawaz, "Literary Theory on Acid," *American Literary History* 34.1 (2022)\*

Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (1996): Chapters 3, 7, 10-11, 13, 16, 19 and 22.

**\*\*Final group seminar paper due final due date, Wednesday, May 11 by 11 PM.\*\***