

University of Wisconsin, Madison  
English 822: Topics in Literary and Cultural Theory

## On Groundlessness

Professor Ramzi Fawaz  
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Class Meetings: T 1-3:30  
Office Hours: M 12-2, or by appointment  
Office Hours Zoom Link: <https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/97447450860>

Canvas Site: <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/232252>  
Course Modality: Online  
Weekly Class Zoom Link:  
<https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/92020337195?pwd=M1NaSIZEcGhRR3ZGTXFtblZvcVJYQT09>  
(Meeting ID: 920 2033 7195; Passcode: 411340).

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 essay, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” (1964), the political theorist Hannah Arendt suggested that times of crisis—the rise of a totalitarian government, an economic crash, a pandemic—are often preceded by the moral collapse of a society. She contended these moments reveal that by relying on the idea of a universally shared ethical standard of conduct—by assuming that everyone has been following prescribed rules like not killing, lying, or stealing—we become complacent and ignore all signs of our culture’s ethical bankruptcy. Rather than lament this state of affairs or seek solace in another set of rules, Arendt argued 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 or free will, *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 class will explore critical, cultural, and political theories of *groundlessness* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We will study Arendt's conception of political freedom as unpredictable collective action; postmodern theories of contingency and fragmentation; deconstruction's commitment to indeterminacy and *différence*; anti-identitarian projects in feminist, queer, transgender, and critical race theories; eco-criticism's decentering of the "human"; and popular Buddhism's description of the existential groundlessness of life. While concepts like contingency, indeterminacy, and anti-essentialism are now so common in critical discourse as to be cliché, most of us still hold fast to our most cherished concepts, identities, ideologies, or frameworks, each providing the illusion of a ground upon which we might base all our inquiries. Questioning such tendencies, we will ask: what kinds of theories refuse to hold fast to seemingly stable, essential or fixed assumptions about their objects and methods of analysis? Why do so many intellectual and political projects of the last hundred years often fall back on totalizing or universalizing claims? Why do claims to certainty and knowability remain seductive despite our supposed commitment to anti-essentialism? And most importantly, how can groundless thinking provide a more labile, and methodologically open relationship to the world's unpredictability? In other words, when the ground beneath our feet crumbles at a touch, rather than grasp at air, how can we learn to fly? 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.

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 read widely across a range of "groundless" theorists in varied fields including Stephen Best, Judith Butler, Lucas Crawford, David Getsy, Donna Haraway, Barbara Johnson, Lisa Lowe, Jennifer Nash, Eve Sedgwick, Darieck Scott, Ann Snitow, and Linda Zerilli. Finally, throughout the semester we will engage with an eclectic archive of literature and popular culture that includes: Joanna Russ's lesbian feminist speculative novel *The Female Man* (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 experimental trans\* graphic novel *Gaylord Phoenix* (2010); The Invisible Committee's radical anarchist manifesto *NOW* (2017); 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, while anti-essentialism is a stance or intellectual orientation that questions attempts to understand history, identity, the body, or social relations in universal 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 scholars 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 scholarship 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 eclectic combination of texts drawn together each week, you will become a more acute curator of scholarly and cultural texts in your own research and teaching. All of these skills will evolve organically, but ultimately, the point is to expand your imagination about what you can think, what kind of scholar you can possibly be or become, and what kind of knowledge you can produce and share 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. Throughout the semester we will view two films and one HBO television series, *Lovecraft Country*. I have listed the latter as a required text because it will not be available on DVD in time to be streamed to students; the series may be purchased as a whole or episode by episode on iTunes and other online streaming services. It will be considered the equivalent of a book purchase.

On Week 13 we will be discussing the entirety of Jeff Vandermeer's science fantasy series *Area X*, which is a whopping 600 pages. I realize this is a big ask. But the series is absolutely riveting, and you'll feel compelled to read it breathlessly. If students are overwhelmed by the amount of reading when we arrive at this text, I will have you omit portions of Book 2 in the trilogy. With all this in mind, however, it is a great idea to start reading *Area X* over the Winter break before the new semester starts. The same goes for the television *Lovecraft Country*, which will demand a significant amount of viewing (but is thrilling and compulsively watchable).

Alongside our regularly assigned reading, I ask that you read 1-2 chapters of Pema Chödrön's *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* each week. None of the chapters are longer than 5-8 pages. You will have finished the book by the time we arrive at week fourteen, at which time I will ask you to briefly re-view it for our final discussion. Arguably the most

celebrated Buddhist self-help book in North America, *When Things Fall Apart* will offer a weekly reminder to breath, regroup, and face the stress and chaos of graduate school and the world.

#### 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)  
Eddie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix* (2010)  
Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (2019)  
Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (2007)  
*Lovecraft Country* (HBO Television Series) (2020)  
Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019)  
Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings by Yoko Ono* (1964)  
Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975)  
Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014)  
Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2005)

This is a reading intensive advanced graduate 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 can be subject to change at my discretion as an instructor.

#### What are we writing?

This course has four assignments, which include: 1) a 2K word reflection paper on your intellectual investments and tendencies; 2) short weekly online discussion posts; 3) a 2K word project proposal; and a 25 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 graduate 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.” Consequently, 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 2K word reflection paper articulating one or two of your most intense intellectual 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 different avenues of inquiry. [**Soft due date: Friday January 29 by 11 PM; Final due date: Friday, February 5 by 11 PM**].
- 2) **Making and Keeping Promises** [Weekly Online Discussion and Group Engagement—20%]: Each week, two members of the class will be responsible for developing a substantive 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 (but not over-thought); 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 Monday evenings before our class meetings the following afternoon. 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 10 AM on Tuesday mornings and should be a minimum of one solid paragraph. Each member of the class will cycle through posting a primary response two times across the semester.

Early in the semester, you will be asked to make and keep an intellectual promise to your fellow primary poster—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.

- 3) **The Surprise of Otherness** [Project Proposal & Optional Mini-draft—10%]: you will craft a 4-5 page project proposal that can also be a mini-draft of your longer seminar paper. The proposal will offer a rationale for the object you propose to study and provide a substantive description of how you intend 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 student to discuss their proposal or mini-draft and provide feedback on your course performance mid-semester. [**Final due date: Friday, March 26 by 11 PM**].

- 4) **Putting Thought into (Unpredictable) Action** [Final Paper—20%]: you will develop a 25-page seminar paper that offers a sustained analysis of a single cultural object of your choosing. You are encouraged to work on an object that has, or may have, a meaningful relationship to your larger research vision. This might be a text that helps you flesh out a theoretical intervention you have been meaning to make, contributes a case study to a dissertation or thesis, or is simply something that keeps you up at night. 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. **[Final due date: Friday May 7 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 the course 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. **With this in mind, 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.**

**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 are paramount.

**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/>.

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

Tuesday, January 26

Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading." In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2002)\*

Barbara Johnson, "Introduction to *Dissemination*," (1981, excerpts) and "Nothing Fails Like Success" (1980)\*

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

Omise'eke Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 14.2-3 (2008)\*

\*\*Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (1997). Pages 1-19.\*\* (From this point forward read 1-2 chapters each week)

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

Tuesday, February 2

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958). Chapters 1-2, 5-6.

**\*\*Reflection Paper Due Friday, February 5 by 11 PM\*\***

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

Tuesday, February 9

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

Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2005). Introduction, Chapters 1-3 and Conclusion.

## **Week 4: Toward a Female Man**

Tuesday, February 16

Ann Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (2015). Introduction and Chapters 1-2.\*

Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975)

## **Week 5: Keeping it Unreal**

Tuesday, February 23

Screening: **Lovecraft Country** (2020) Episodes 1-2 and 5.

Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008)\*

Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012)\*

Darieck Scott, *Keeping it Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (2021). Introduction, Chapters 1 & 3 and Conclusion.\*

## **Week 6: White Skin, Black Magic**

Tuesday, March 2

Screening: **Lovecraft Country** (2020) Episodes 6-10.

Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019). Introduction and Chapters 2-4.\*

Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides, "When We Enter: The Blackness of Rachel Dolezal," *The Black Scholar* 46.4 (2016)\*

## **Week 7: Unfaithful to the Original**

Tuesday, March 9

Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996). Chapters 1, 3, and 6.\*

Leslie Bow, "'For Every Gesture of Loyalty, There Doesn't Have to Be a Betrayal': Asian American Criticism and the Politics of Locality." In *Who Can Speak?: Authority and Critical Identity*, ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman (1995).\*

Rachel Lee, "Pussy Ballistics and the Queer Appeal of Peristalsis, or Belly Dancing with Margaret Cho," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 20.4 (2014).\*

Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings by Yoko Ono* (1964)



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

Tuesday, March 16

Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” (1964) and “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (1971)\*

Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgement* (2016). Chapters 1 & 6.\*

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: Assembling in a Riotous Manner**

Tuesday, March 23

The Invisible Committee, *NOW* (2017). Pages 5-52.\*

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (2019). Read Book 1, and pages 177-202, 217-256, 297-349.

**\*\*Project Proposal Due Friday, March 26 by 11 PM\*\***

## **Week 10: On Being Beside Oneself**

Tuesday, March 30

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

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

Online viewing: The paintings of Math Bass (2015-present) and Joe Brainard’s “Nancy Series” (1971-1975)

### **Week 11: The Body as a Short-term Lease**

Tuesday, April 6

Lucas Crawford, *Transgender Architechtonics* (2015). Introduction and Chapters 1-2.\*

Eva Hayward, "Lessons from a Starfish." In *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (2008)\*

Eddie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix* (2010)

### **Week 12: When Species Meet**

Tuesday, April 13

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

Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (2007). Chapters 1-4, 6 and 12.

Monique Allewaert, "Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone," *PMLA* 123.2 (2008)\*

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**

Tuesday, April 20

Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014)

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

Tuesday, April 27

Eve Sedgwick, "Pedagogy of Buddhism." In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2002)\*

Ellen Rooney, "Form and Contentment," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000)\*

Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (1996). Finish or review.

**\*\*Final seminar paper due Final due date: Friday May 7 by 11 PM.\*\***