

The University of Western Ontario
Department of English
Precarity: Reading Risk and Responsibility in the Shadow of Neoliberalism
English 9147B

Contact Information:

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Class Meetings: Thursdays from 9:30 a.m. – 12:20 p.m. in Lawson Hall 2205

Office Hours: Tuesdays from 11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. and Thursdays from 2:45 – 3:45 p.m.

Course Description:

What does it mean to be precariously situated in the contemporary era? How is precarity produced, lived, felt, and distributed across populations, communities, and environments? Who or what may be said to be particularly prone to precarity today? This course will investigate precarity's discursive, material, ontological, and affective contours in the shadow of neoliberalism. With the decline of Keynesian economics and the globalizing but variegated spread of neoliberal market principles since the 1970s, class disparities have intensified, planetary power asymmetries have been exacerbated through the fragmentation and outsourcing of labour and the search for new sites of resource extraction, and religious and racialized populations have become targeted in the name of intensified forms of securitization. Despite these ever-widening chasms of inequity, structural conditions underpinning "the unequal distribution of life and death, of hope and harm, and of endurance and exhaustion" (Povinelli 3) have often been occluded by neoliberalism's privatization of risk and responsibility and economic rationalization of slow forms of lethality that "patiently dispense their harm outside...the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media" (Nixon 6).

Such conditions of obfuscation necessitate new analytics for tracing current arrangements of power and for making precarity's multiple modalities visible. This course seeks to assemble such an analytic toolkit by putting the critical and creative resources provided by cultural theorists and cultural producers into conversation in order to attend to a range of intersecting forms of precarity—vulnerable bodies, communities, environments, and knowledges. In so doing, we will seek to better apprehend conditions of precarity and to imagine new methods for attaining social justice.

Course Texts:

Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* (Available at the UWO Bookstore)

Thomas King, *The Back of the Turtle* (Available at the UWO Bookstore)

All other readings are available online (where URLs are provided) or as PDF documents available on a memory stick.

Assignments:

- Two 2-3 page (double-spaced) response papers. **[10% of final grade]**
- One 35-minute seminar presentation and subsequent leading of class discussion. **[35% of final grade]**
- One research paper, 18-20 pages in length. This paper must be written on a topic that is different from the seminar presentation. **[45% of final grade]**
- A mark will also be assigned for overall class participation (which includes attendance, insightful engagement with course readings, attentiveness to the comments of other class participants, and thoughtful and collegial contributions to class discussions). **[10% of final grade]**

Guidelines for Class Participation:

- The participation grade for each semester will take into account attendance and attentiveness in class meetings, evidence of preparedness for class (i.e. demonstrated detailed engagement with the readings, questions about readings brought to class), as well as the quality of verbal contributions to class discussion.
- Students should have carefully read and thoughtfully engaged with the assigned readings prior to class.
- At the graduate level, students are encouraged to assume the stance of professional learners—ones who have the critical maturity to be open to broadening their intellectual horizons and to engaging with a diverse range of scholarship.
- Effective participation in a graduate course involves being open to asking questions about things one doesn't understand, thoughtfully engaging with the course readings, remaining attentive and carefully listening to the comments of other class participants, and debating ideas with respect and sensitivity to both the subject matter and all participants in the discussion.
- The quality of a student's contributions is more important than sheer quantity, though speaking regularly in class is a goal to work towards. At the same time, effective participation in a seminar course also, in certain cases, means learning when one has contributed enough to a particular discussion and providing opportunities for others to share their thoughts.

Guidelines for Response Papers:

- Over the course of the semester, students are required to write **two** 2-3 page written response papers to the assigned readings for the week.
- Students are able to choose which weeks they would like to submit their response papers. Please note, however, that students are not eligible to submit a written response paper on the readings for which they have agreed to present a seminar.
- Response papers should be submitted via email (as Microsoft Word or RTF attachments) to pwakeham@uwo.ca no later than **24 hours** prior to the weekly class (i.e. by **9:30 a.m. on Wednesday mornings**). Response papers for the assigned readings for the week will not be accepted after this deadline.
- The goal for these papers is not to offer a comprehensive summary of all the points expounded in the readings. Instead, the responses should succinctly outline the main argument of each assigned reading for the week (where applicable) and then proceed to critically analyze the texts

and draw connections or reflect on points of divergence between them. In this sense, the goal is to put the assigned readings for the week together in critical conversation. Students might also wish to raise a question or two for further thought or discussion.

Guidelines for Seminar Presentations:

- Seminar presentations should succinctly and briefly outline the arguments developed in the critical essays and analyze key themes and strategies of the readings assigned for the day. **A strong presentation, however, must go much further than merely rehearsing the articles' arguments or the basic plot and structures of a cultural text.** Seminar presentations must engage thoughtfully and critically with the readings, analyzing the connections and points of divergence between the texts as well as reflecting upon the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments. In other words, a seminar presentation **should have an argument**—a nuanced and thoughtful analytic position on the readings/cultural texts assigned for the week. Linking the readings to previous texts studied in the course and/or previous class discussions is also a useful strategy.
- Presentations should also consider how the arguments expounded in the readings could be developed further and, most importantly, how the texts relate to the broader questions under investigation throughout this course. Lastly, presentations should conclude with at least two thoughtful and engaging questions for class discussion.
- Please also note that your presentations will be timed, so you cannot exceed the 40 minute maximum. This is to ensure fairness for all students and to create a comparable basis upon which seminars can be evaluated. In keeping with this point, the seminarist should present his/her work and then questions and discussion will ensue after the presentation.
- After the presentation, the seminar presenter will also be responsible for leading the ensuing class discussion for about 15 minutes.
- Students will be asked to submit a hard copy version of their seminar presentation notes (whether they be just point form notes or a scripted paper) to the Professor on the same day that their presentation is given orally.
- Students are allowed to consider a creative dimension for their seminar presentation. If students wish to use this option, however, they must meet with the Professor and obtain approval for their specific ideas at least two weeks in advance of their presentation.

Important Information Regarding Assignments:

- Any assignments submitted after the scheduled due date will be assessed a late penalty (2% per day, including weekends). Assignments (with the exception of the weekly reading responses) must be submitted in hard copy. Email and faxes will not be accepted.
- Extensions will be granted only with medical certification or under other extenuating circumstances and should, when possible, be arranged with the Professor in advance.
- All assignments should be submitted on 8.5 x 11" paper, with 1" margins, double spaced, and in a 12-point font (preferably Times New Roman). The title page should include the following information: the title of the essay, your name, the course number, and the date.
- Please retain one hard copy and one electronic version of each essay you submit in this class. As well, please retain all returned, marked assignments until you receive your final grade for the course.
- All bibliographic notation should follow the MLA method of parenthetical citation and essays should be accompanied with a Works Cited page.

Academic Offences

- Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

- It is crucial that students create all assignments (both written and oral) using their own ideas and their own words. If a writer uses a concept, idea, or phrasing from another source, it is imperative to signal the direct borrowing of words with quotation marks and to register the borrowing of ideas and concepts via the use of explanatory footnotes and parenthetical citations (or verbal explanation in the case of seminar presentations).

Graduate Course Health and Wellness

As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health-related services to help you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. For example, to support physical activity, all students, as part of their registration, receive membership in Western's Campus Recreation Centre. Numerous cultural events are offered throughout the year. For example, please check out the Faculty of Music web page

<http://www.music.uwo.ca>, and our own McIntosh Gallery <http://www.mcintoshgallery.ca/>.

Information regarding health- and wellness-related services available to students may be found at <http://www.health.uwo.ca/>. Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html.

Schedule of Readings

Please Note: The Professor reserves the right to make minor changes to the schedule throughout the course of the academic term. Any changes will be announced in class and students will be responsible for making note of such amendments.

January 5: Introduction

January 12: Neoliberalism: Concepts and Contexts

David Harvey, "Introduction," excerpt from "Freedom's Just Another Word," and "The Neoliberal State" from *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*

"Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović"

January 19: Risk Society

Ulrich Beck, "Introduction: Staging Global Risk," "Relations of Definition as Relations of Domination"

January 26: Precarious Life and the Politics of Grievability

Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Grievable Life” and “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect”

February 2: Case Study in Precarity and Grievability: Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women

Amber Dean, “Public Mourning and the Culture of Redress: Mayerthorpe, Air India, and Murdered or Missing Aboriginal Women”

Rebecca Belmore’s performance art piece “Vigil” (this performance art piece can be viewed online at: <http://www.rebeccabelmore.com/video/Vigil.html>)

The “Am I Next?” Awareness Campaign: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-women-ask-am-i-next-to-raise-awareness-about-missing-and-murdered-1.2757295>

February 9: Economies of Abandonment in Late Liberalism

Ursula LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

Elizabeth Povinelli, “Introduction: The Child in the Broom Closet” (the complete chapter is provided, but students are only required to read from pages 1-29) and “Events of Abandonment”

February 16: Professor away presenting a paper at another university

February 23: Reading Week

March 2: Case Study in Economies of Abandonment: Settler Colonialism in Canada

Alanis Obomsawin, *The People of the Kattawapiskak River* (available for viewing in UC’s film library as well as through the Weldon library catalogue’s link to NFB access)

Kelly Rose Pflug-Back and Enaemaehkiw Kesīqnaeh “Accumulation by Dispossession” (available here: <http://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/accumulation-by-dispossession#.WBH8Z7SZIAA.twitter>)

Jennifer Henderson, “Transparency, Spectatorship, Accountability: Indigenous Families in Settler-State ‘Postdemocracies’”

Leanne Simpson, “A Love Song for Attawapiskat” (Please listen to the audio version of this poem online at <http://www.arpbooks.org/islands>)

March 9: Cruel Optimism and Precarious Labour

Laurent Cantet, dir. *L’emploi du temps (Time Out)*

Lauren Berlant, “After the Good Life, An Impasse”

CAUT Bulletin, “President’s Message: Make it Fair for Contract Staff” and “The Precarious Life of Contract Staff”

March 16: Precarious Labour and Globalization

Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*

Liani Lochner, “The Politics of Precarity: Contesting Neoliberalism’s Subjects in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*”

March 23: Black Viability and #Black Lives Matter

Some of the material for this week is drawn from Frank Leon Roberts’ Black Lives Matter syllabus from NYU: <http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com/fall2016/>

Marc Lamont Hill, "Preface" and "Nobody" from *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond*

Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement" (available here: <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>)

Treva B. Lindsey, "Post-Ferguson: A 'Herstorical' Approach to Black Viability"

Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival" and "afterimages" (available here: <https://frankroberts.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/audrelordepoems.pdf>)

March 30: Slow Violence and Ecosystemic Precarity

Rob Nixon, "Introduction," "Ecologies of the Aftermath: Precision Warfare and Slow Violence," and "Epilogue: Scenes from the Seabed: The Future of Dissent"

April 6: Slow and Fast Violence: The Multiple Temporalities of Ecological Crisis

Thomas King, *The Back of the Turtle*