

Winter Term 2013

Department of English and Cultural Studies  
McMaster University

English and Cultural Studies 3QQ3  
Cultural Studies and Critical Theory 3QQ3

## Contemporary Critical Theory: Knowledge, Power, Precarity



Gordon Lester, *Jacques Derrida with Bear* (2003)

**Instructor:** Dr. David L. Clark

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**T.A.** Dr. Ailsa Kay

E-mail: [kayac@mcmaster.ca](mailto:kayac@mcmaster.ca)  
Office Hours: See document posted on coursepage for contact hours and dates for face-to-face and Skype meetings.

Class time: Monday, 9:30-11:20 am  
Wednesday, 10:30-11:20 am  
Classroom: BSB 108

### Course Description:

Emerging in the aftermath of social science models of scholarly investigation, and often highly critical of certain forms of empirically based cultural criticism, contemporary critical theory is a mixed and still unfolding project whose borders are--by design--difficult to determine. Yet contemporary theory is characterized by several distinguishing features, each

of which shapes the concerns of this course. These features include:

a complex relationship with Continental philosophy (i.e., a strand of philosophy going back to early nineteenth-century Germany and efflorescing in twentieth-century France), especially its focus on the question of representation and the limits of knowledge;

a robust concern with our responsibilities and obligations towards others, both human and non-human;

a long-standing interest in the forces that produce and police subjects, cultures, and histories;

a commitment to honouring the irrepressibility of justice, and to the difficult task of doing justice to others;

a thoughtful concern with the precariousness (or “precarity”) of life on the planet--the vulnerability, exposure, dependency, and radical singularity or uniqueness of each living creature;

an abiding pre-occupation with what it means to be loved and lost, grievable or ungrievable, legible or illegible;

a deep suspicion of concepts that otherwise often seem fixed and foundational, including “history,” “education,” “politics,” “nature,” “the human,” “the animal,” and “the social;”

a promise to preserve, affirm and complicate the space of the political, and the possibilities of a more democratic future;

an emphasis on teaching and learning, and on the role that education—understood in the broadest senses of the term--plays the creation of a just polity;

a critical respect for the histories and genealogies in whose wake we struggle, coupled with a scepticism about politics, educations, and knowledges that forget the past, or that deny its complicated presence in the present;

a self-reflexive impetus, i.e., an insistence on making *how* we know things—our presuppositions, critical frameworks, cultural and historical circumstances, and interpretive strategies—a central part of *what* we know.

Contemporary critical theory draws on a wide range of disciplines and bodies of knowledge, ranging from psychoanalysis to linguistics, and from cultural theory to philosophy. It is sometimes said to be what philosophy looks like from outside the scholarly discipline of “philosophy.” Contemporary theory is unrelentingly *counter-intuitive*: i.e., its difficulties lie in its capacity to make the familiar *unfamiliar*, and to throw into question what goes without saying and what passes itself off as “common-sense.” Contemporary theory is suspicious of the idea that what is “real” or “true” should be transparently available to thought, or too easily understood. If there were a motto for contemporary theory it might well come in the form of the words of Socrates when he was on trial for encouraging his students to think dangerously and to think for themselves: “*An unexamined life is not worth living.*” That’s why we begin this course with Astra Taylor’s documentary and collection of interviews with contemporary theorists, *An Examined Life*.

Contemporary theory is difficult because the world is a difficult place, and calls for arduous questions and laborious work. An undergraduate course in contemporary theory is therefore by nature a challenging course--but not an impossible course, not if you are an intellectually courageous and curious student . . . and a well-organized one.

Our course falls into three movements:

- i) *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*
- ii) Exemplary theorists: Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida
- iii) Theoretical flashpoints: Theory, Pedagogy, and the University + Trauma after the Holocaust + Animals . . . Theory

The first move in this course is briefly to consider an overview of some of the questions and problems that are dear to contemporary critical theory. We do this through a particular lens: Astra Taylor’s extemporaneous interviews with eight contemporary theorists, which she conducts in different city streetscapes. Taylor emphasizes a crucially important feature of contemporary theory, namely the different ways in which it speaks to “the search for meaning and our responsibilities towards others in a world rife with iniquity, persecution, and suffering” (xi). We will consider both her documentary and the book of interviews that accompanies her documentary. In the second part of this course, we briefly survey the definitional problems quickening some of the work of three of the most significant contemporary critical theorists (Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida), focussing on the transgressive questions that contemporary theory raises about knowledge, power, and precarity. Judith Butler is well-known as a queer theorist, but we turn to other, more recent elements of her research which focus on the politics and the vulnerabilities of what she calls “precarious life.” Michel Foucault is the thinker who teaches us that sexuality has a history, but that is not the work which we address in this course. Instead, we examine influential lectures that he gave exploring the history and pervasiveness of what he calls “biopower” in modern life. We also look at the work of Jacques Derrida, exploring his writing about the particular question of “hospitality”—i.e., about the politics and ethics of the encounter with the mortal

and imperilled stranger.

In the third part of this course, we turn to examine three important “theoretical flashpoints,” i.e., three particular phenomena which contemporary critical theory engages and interrogates:

- i) Theory, Pedagogy, and the University
- ii) Trauma after the Holocaust
- iii) Animals . . . In Theory

Questions that are posed in this part of the course include:

--What *is* the university, and what roles must students and teachers play in doing justice to others? “---“Can the university stand for peace?” (a question that Susan Searls Giroux poses).

--In the wake of the Nazi extermination of the European Jews, what is to be said, thought, and done? --What discourses, practices, and knowledges are answerable to the enormity of Holocaust atrocities?

--Is injustice only ever a matter of inhumanity?

--What does it mean to do justice to non-human life?

Students are warmly encouraged to liberate this course from the confines of the formal classroom, and to form independent study groups to discuss and debate the course materials and questions. For example, students in previous iterations of this course have created Facebook pages to co-ordinate study groups and to discuss the course materials.

Students interested in considering my view of undergraduate education and the role of the university are encouraged to consider “Thought & Theory,” an unfolding reflection on teaching and learning posted on my website, <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/interviewBtL.html>

### **Required Texts:**

*Contemporary Critical Theory: Knowledge, Power, Precarity.* [Coursepack]

Jacques Derrida. *Of Hospitality.* Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.

Michel Foucault. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976.* Trans. David Macey. Picador: New York, 2003.

Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved.* Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Taylor, Astra. *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers.* New York: The New Press, 2009.

David L. Clark, *3QQ3 Study Questions and Course Blog.* [Posted on coursepage]

*Examined Life: Philosophy is in the Streets.* Dir. Astra Taylor. Sphinx Productions and the National Film Board of Canada, 2008. [Documentary screened in class; 88 minutes]



Gordon Lester, *Michel Foucault with Bear* (2003)

### **Study Questions and Course Blog**

“Study Questions and Course Blog” is a document posted on the coursepage that will be updated regularly. Here students will find study questions derived from the content of lectures—i.e., not summaries of the lectures but questions to help you retain key concepts discussed in the lectures. The blog will also include remarks that extend some of the arguments and points that are raised in class. The SQCB is purpose-built to help you grasp the course materials, explore new questions arising from those materials, and to prepare for the course assignments (mid-term, final essay, final examination).

### **Course Assignments and Weighting:**

Midterm examination:	20%
Essay (10 pages / 2500 words):	45%
Final Examination:	35%

### **Essay Due Date and Late Submission Policy:**

Essays are due in class, at start of class, 25 March 2013. Essays submitted at this point will receive a full marking commentary. Essays handed in after 25 March 2013 will be graded the same but without comment. Essays may be handed in up to start of the last class, in class, 10 April 2013. No essays will be accepted after 10 April 2013. A grade of zero/F will therefore be assigned to essays not submitted by start of class, in class, 10 April 2013.

Since the essay is weighted heavily in this course, students are encouraged not to leave working on this assignment until late in the term. Suggested essay topics will be posted on the coursepage. You are encouraged to discuss your essay topic with Dr. Kay prior to writing your essay.

If you are a smoker, please ensure that you print your essay in a smoke-free environment.

### **Provisional Lecture Schedule (Readings keyed to list on pages 6-9):**

Jan	7		Prefatory Remarks
	9		<i>Examined Life: Philosophy is in the Streets</i> (Parts 1-5 of documentary screened in class)
	14		<i>Examined Life: Philosophy is in the Streets</i> (Parts 6-10 of documentary screened in class)
	16	1.0	<i>Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers</i>
	21	1.0	<i>Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers</i>
	23	2.0	Judith Butler
	28	2.0	Judith Butler
	30	3.0	Jacques Derrida

Feb	4	3.0	Jacques Derrida
	6	4.0	Michel Foucault
	11	4.0	Michel Foucault
	13		Midterm Examination
	18		<b>Reading Week</b>
	20		<b>Reading Week</b>
	25	5.0	<b>Theory, Pedagogy, and the University:</b> Henry Giroux, Stanley Fish, Kate Zernike
	27	5.0	Stanley Fish, Kate Zernike, Henry Giroux
March	4	5.1	Susan Searls Giroux, Deborah Britzman
	6	5.1	Jacques Derrida
	11	5.2	Jacques Derrida
	13	6.0	<b>Trauma after the Holocaust:</b> Primo Levi
	18	6.0	Primo Levi
	20	6.1	Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub
	25	6.2	Giorgio Agamben, Dominick LaCapra, Roger Simon [Essay due]
	27	6.2	Giorgio Agamben, Dominick LaCapra, Roger Simon
April	1	7.0	<b>Animals . . . in Theory:</b> Jacques Derrida
	3	7.0	Jacques Derrida
	8	7.1	Emmanuel Levinas, David L. Clark
	10	7.1	Emmanuel Levinas, David L. Clark [Last day for submission of essays]



Gordon Lester, *Judith Butler with Bear* (2003)

**Sources of Readings for this course:**

The sources of the assigned materials for this course fall into five categories:

- 1) Assigned texts by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Primo Levi, and Astra Taylor to be purchased in the Tank.
- 2) Materials collected in a coursepack to be purchased in the Tank.
- 3) Materials available on-line from the periodicals collection at Mills Library (durable url's are provided in this course outline)
- 4) Materials posted on the coursepage. (See url at top of course outline to access the coursepage.)
- 5) Documentary screened in class.

### **Course Materials (in order of their being taken up in class):**

1.0 *Examined Life: Philosophy is in the Streets.* Dir. Astra Taylor. Sphinx Productions and the National Film Board of Canada, 2008. [Documentary screened in class; 88 minutes]

1.1 Astra Taylor. *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*

2.0

### **Judith Butler**

Butler, Judith. "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear." *Social Text* 20.3 (2002) 177-188.  
[http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1215/01642472-20-3\\_72-177](http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1215/01642472-20-3_72-177)

Butler, Judith. "Violence, Mourning, Politics." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. 4.1 (2003): 9-37.  
<http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1080/15240650409349213>

Butler, Judith. "Dehumanization via Indefinite Detention." From *It's a Free Country: Personal Freedom in America After September 11*. Eds. Cornel West, Danny Goldberg, Robert Greenwald, and Victor Goldberg. pp. 265-279. [In Course-pack]

3.0

### **Jacques Derrida**

*Of Hospitality*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. [Available in the Tank]

4.0

### **Michel Foucault**

*Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. Trans. David Macey  
 Picador: New York, 2003. [Available in the Tank]

**Note: You are responsible only for Lectures 1 to Lecture 5, plus Lecture 11 and "Course Summary," i.e., pages 1-114 and 239-272.**

### **Theory, Pedagogy, and the University**

5.0

Giroux, Henry. "The Post-9/11 University and the Project of Democracy;" and "Academic Culture, Intellectual Courage, and the Crisis of Politics in an Era of Permanent War;" and "Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy in the Academy." From *Take Back Higher Education*. 9-27, 53-87. [In Coursepack]

Giroux, Henry. "Youth, Higher Education, and the Crisis of Public Time," *Social Identities* 9.2(2003): 141-168.

<http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://dx.doi.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1080/1350463032000101533>

Giroux, Henry. "The New Right Wing Assault on Higher Education: Academic Unfreedom in America." From *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Press, 2007. 137-199. [In Coursepack]

Fish, Stanley. "Will the Humanities Save Us?" *The New York Times*, 6 January 2008.  
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/>

Fish, Stanley. "Fish to Profs: Stick to Teaching (Interview with Andy Guess)," *IHE*, 1 July 2008.  
<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/07/01/fish>

Fish, Stanley. "Neoliberalism and Higher Education," *The New York Times*, 8 March 2009.  
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/neoliberalism-and-higher-education/>

Zernike, Kate. "Career U: Making College 'Relevant,'" *The New York Times*, 29 December 2009.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/education/edlife/03careerism-t.html?scp=1&>

## 5.1

Giroux, Susan Searls. "The Age of Unreason: Race and the Drama of American Anti-Intellectualism." *Between Race and Reason: Violence, Intellectual Responsibility, and the University to Come*. 74-126. [In Coursepack]

Britzman, Deborah. "Introduction: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning." *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*. 1-21, 137-140. [In Coursepack]

Britzman, Deborah. "The Very Thought." From *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Professions*. 1-26. [In Coursepack]

## 5.2

Derrida, Jacques. "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils." *Diacritics* (Fall 1983): 3-20.  
<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/stable/pdfplus/464997.pdf>

Clark, David L. "Reading Notes for Jacques Derrida's "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils." [Posted on Coursepage: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/courses.html> ]

## **Theory and Trauma after the Holocaust**

### 6.0

Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Vintage, 1989. [Available in the Tank]

### 6.1

Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," *American Imago* 48.1(Spring 1991): 13-73.  
[http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://gateway.proquest.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:pao-us:&rft\\_dat=xri:pao:article:1011-1991-048-01-000002:1](http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://gateway.proquest.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:pao-us:&rft_dat=xri:pao:article:1011-1991-048-01-000002:1)

Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," *American Imago* 48.1 (Spring 1991): 75-91.  
[http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://gateway.proquest.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:pao-us:&rft\\_dat=xri:pao:article:1011-1991-048-01-000003:1](http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://gateway.proquest.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:pao-us:&rft_dat=xri:pao:article:1011-1991-048-01-000003:1)

### 6.2

Simon, Roger and Claudia Eppert. "Remembering Obligation: Pedagogy and the Witnessing of Testimony of Historical Trauma." *Canadian Journal of Education* 22. 2(Spring, 1997): 175-191.  
<http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://www.jstor.org/stable/1585906>

Agamben, Giorgio. "The Witness," *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. 15-39. [In Coursepack]

LaCapra, Dominick. "Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim's Voice," *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. 86-113. [In Coursepack]

### **Animals . . . in Theory**

#### 7.0

Derrida, Jacques. "The Animal Therefore that I Am (More to Follow)." Trans. David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002): 369-418.  
<http://libaccess.mcmaster.ca/login?url=http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344276>

Derrida, Jacques. "Violence Against Animals." In *For What Tomorrow...* Trans. Jeff Fort. Stanford UP, 2004. 62-76. 210-212. [In Coursepack]

#### 7.1

Levinas, Emmanuel. "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights." [Posted on course-page:  
<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/courses.html>

Clark, David L. "On Being 'the Last Kantian in Nazi Germany: Dwelling with Animals after Levinas.'" [Posted on Course-page: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/courses.html> ]

### **Ten Important Notes About the Course**

#### **1. Class cancellations:**

In the unlikely event of a class cancellation, students will be notified on the Department of English and Cultural Studies website and on Dr. Clark's website. The url's for those websites are, respectively:

<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/>

<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/courses.html>

#### **2. Class attendance and preparedness:**

Although there is no roll-call, attendance in lectures is mandatory. Uneven class attendance will have a profound impact on your ability to thrive in the course and to do well in the term work and in the final examination. Even though many of you are busy with other important things—holding down jobs, raising families, to name two—do make every possible arrangement to ensure that you are able to attend lectures, including the two-hour Monday morning lecture. Ensure that you come fully prepared for lectures by reading the assigned materials with great care. It will be important to get into the habit of reading the course materials *ahead* of the class in which we take them up. In other words, try as best you can to get *in front* of the course materials, rather than find yourself trying to catch up! My lectures assume that you have read that material prior to class. That material will make a great deal more sense if you come to class having already considered it. Remember to bring the assigned materials to class, since specific arguments and examples in those materials will be discussed. You'll want to underline passages and arguments in the texts that I discuss in class. Don't forget to take copious notes during the lectures. You'll need those notes to do well in the course, and to do well on the

mid-term and final examination. If you are not a student who takes lots of notes, ask yourself: why am I depriving myself in this way? Why am I compromising my own education by not keeping a good record of the arguments and discussions unfolded in class? How could I possibly remember everything that was said in class if, at the end of the term, I have only a few pages of notes?

### **3. E-mail policy and protocols:**

It is the policy of the Faculty of Humanities that all email communication sent from students to instructors and T.A.'s and from instructors and T.A.'s to students must use McMaster University email accounts. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. Instructors and T.A.'s will delete emails that do not originate from a McMaster email account.

Note: please ensure that your McMaster e-mail account quota is not full. Messages will not be resent if your quota is full.

All e-mails to your instructor or T.A. must be written in full sentences (i.e. no point form, no text-messaging short form), and must contain a subject line that includes the course designation, "3QQ3." All e-mails must contain some form of salutation and valediction (i.e., "Dear Dr. Clark," "Dear Dr. Kay," and "Yours sincerely," respectively, or equivalents). Receipt of all e-mails from your instructor or your TA *must* be acknowledged. For example, a simple "Thank you for getting back to me." will suffice. Be professional, courteous, and respectful in all communications.

Your instructor or T.A. will respond to your e-mail in a timely manner. Do not assume that you will hear back immediately, or at any time of day or night, especially if you send an e-mail outside of regular business hours.

### **4. Contacting the course Teaching Assistant:**

Students are free and encouraged to contact Dr. Clark with questions regarding the course. But all questions should *first* be directed towards Dr. Ailsa Kay, the course Teaching Assistant, who will be more than happy to help you with any questions. (See Dr. Kay's contact information, hours and dates in the document that is posted on the coursepage.)

### **5. University Statement Regarding Academic Dishonesty:**

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresentation by deception or by other fraudulent means and can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various kinds of academic dishonesty see:

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/AcademicIntegrity.pdf>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- i) Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- ii) Improper collaboration in group work.
- iii) Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld. See:

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity/students/index.html>

### **6. Statement from the Office of the Associate Dean, Faculty of Humanities, regarding course modifications:**

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes

necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check their McMaster email and instructor websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

### 7. Copies of Essays:

Keep a copy of the essay that you submit for the course.

### 8. Course evaluation:

Students will be invited to evaluate the course on-line towards the conclusion of the term.

### 9. McMaster University Grading Scale:

Grade	Equivalent Grade Point	Equivalent Percentages
A+	12	90-100
A	11	85-89
A-	10	80-84
B+	9	77-79
B	8	73-76
B-	7	70-72
C+	6	67-69
C	5	63-66
C-	4	60-62
D+	3	57-59
D	2	53-56
D-	1	50-52
F	0	0-49 -- Failure

### 10. Cell phones, sending and receiving texts, and internet connections:

All cell phone and mobile device notifications (ringers, etc.) must be turned off and all internet connections must be suspended during class. No surfing, texting, or checking for texts or messages is permitted while class is in session. Rest assured, you will never go more than 50 or 60 minutes without being able to check your messages. Texting and surfing in class is distracting to your instructor and to your classmates. More important, it is deeply disrespectful. (For a discussion of what's unprofessional and horribly wrong about texting and surfing while class is in session, see: entry for 12 October 2012 @ <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/whatiamthinkingabout.html> ) Failure to comply with this basic course instruction will result in you being asked to leave class.