2014 Winter Session (2014-2015 Academic Year)

**ENGL 553F: Studies in Literary Theory (3 credits)**

**Instructor:** Dina Al-Kassim  
**Section:** 001  
**Term:** 1

**CATEGORY D - Transhistorical/ Cultural Studies**  
**CATEGORY E - Theory, Rhetoric and Language**  
(Students in the MA program should consult Section 4.4 of the Handbook when planning their courses.)

**Exposures: Biopolitics and Psychoanalysis in the Practice of Truth**

**Course Description:**

* * * THIS SEMINAR IS CROSS-LISTED WITH GRSJ 502 * * *

"I found that, after witnessing Peter Hujar's death on November 26, 1987, and after my recent diagnosis, I tend to dismantle and discard any and all kinds of spiritual and psychic and physical words or concepts designed to make sense of the external world or designed to give momentary comfort. It's like stripping the body of flesh in order to see the skeleton, the structure. I want to know what the structure of all this is in the way only I can know it...there is something I want to see clearly, something I want to witness in its raw state. And this need comes from my sense of mortality. There is a relief in having this sense of mortality." -- David Wojnarowicz

"I do not think that reflection on this notion of govermentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self. Although the theory of political power as an institution usually refers to a juridical conception of the subject of right, it seems to me that the analysis of governmentality - that is to say, of power as a set of reversible relationships - must refer to an ethics of the subject defined by the relation of self to self." -- Michel Foucault

No analysis of power without the relation of self to self, yet no analysis possible without a radical exposure of the self; between them, Foucault and Wojnarowicz identify a conundrum of contemporary thought in its approach to biopolitical realities and in doing so, they both, in different ways, attest to a fundamental relation of exposure in all its valences (self-exposure, disclosure, contamination, vulnerability, precarity) at the core of social relations. What histories of the exposure, harrowing, and harnessing of the self do they narrate? How do witnessing, suffering and expression alter or figure this exposure? What place does this subjection have in political theory today? What place does it have in contemporary literature and art practice attuned to political predicaments and the afterlife of crisis, revolution and colonial predation?

In Foucault's wake, much biopolitical theory seems to have forgotten that power and governmentality go by way of the subject. Such theory produces "bare life" as a mute and fallow ground inhospitable to aesthetico-political renewal and lacking access to concepts of truth, disclosure and community because of the violent mediations of global capital, modern anomie and the assumed effects of precarity.
(illiteracy, deficiency, incapacity for self-governance). Through this lens, the political struggles of
gendered, racial and religiously-marked subjects are often characterized as no more than the return of
the archaic in a social landscape devoid of community. In this course we will chart this claim as it has
emerged in political philosophy (Agamben, Esposito) and examine the ways that such political theory
obscures the real labor of survival that constitutes and characterizes social vulnerability. As a counter to
this trend in biopolitical theory, postcolonial and post-revolutionary writing reflecting on alternatives to
bare life will guide our critical engagement.

To address these issues we look to a set of writing and art practices that argue for revelation through
containment or exposure of truth through figures of impasse. The authors and artists we will study aim
to disarticulate witnessing from the juridical notion of truth-telling to accede to what we might call,
following Foucault and Butler, a radical parrhesia, which many of the writers and thinkers we will read
believe is accessible only through the ordeal of exposure. Psychoanalysis, as a set of speculative
reflections on the modes and means of such parrhesia without mastery, offers us ways of approaching
practices of truth in the modern dispensation of subject and community. We will also consult the work
of anthropologists responding to biopolitical theory and crafting new terms of description, e.g. "spiritual
insecurity" in the wake of state sovereignty.*

Critical writings by Agamben, Ashforth, Bataille, Bersani, Butler, the Comaroffs, Fletcher, Foucault,
Taussig, Zizek

**Literature:**

- Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet*
- Rachid Daif, *Dear Mr. Kawabata*
- (Nureddin Farah, *Close Sesame*)
- Zoe Wicomb, *David's Story*
- David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*

*N.B. Please acquire the literary texts above.

**Assignments:** 1 weekly webpost to be posted by Midnight XXX of each week. This will give everyone
time to read each other’s texts. Please respect this time frame as the mutual reading of what we
produce is part of our class discussion. Students will also be responsible for leading 1 weekly discussion
in the term.

**Final requirement:** 20 page seminar paper
READINGS: (subject to adjustment)

Desubjectivation and Citational Practices of Biopolitical Theory
Agamben - "What is an apparatus?" / Nudities, Ch. 7
Foucault - "Confessions of the Flesh" in Power/Knowledge
(Bolaño - "Dance Card")

Testimony’s Exposures: Psychoanalysis and Ethics
Wicomb - David’s Story
Butler - Giving an Account of Oneself

Foucaultian Legacies
A.
Butler -- Psychic Life of Power, Ch. 2
Foucault - "The Concern for Truth" in Politics, Philosophy, Culture also in Foucault Live

B.
Ashforth, "Introduction", "Part One"
Taussig - Nervous System, "State Maleficium"

Psychoanalysis and Truth I: Drives
Bersani - Intimacies
Daif - Dear Mr. Kawabata
Fletcher - "Introduction", Essays on Otherness by Jean Laplanche

Psychoanalysis and Truth II: Postcolonial Inflections and the Politics of Art
Bolaño - Amulet

Psychoanalysis and Truth III: Society of the Spectacle
David Wojnarowicz - Close to the Knives, (especially pp.165-)
Zizek - Sublime Object of Ideology, second half