

EN/CSCT 731--Anxiety Disorders: The Cultural Politics of Risk

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Office Hours: Monday 1:30-3:30

Tuesday: 1:30-2:30

Description:

"In its mere continuity industrial society *exits the stage of world history on the tip-toes of normality, via the back stairs of side effects*"

Ulrich Beck, Risk Society

"The language of risk is not a language that easily accommodates itself to the language of injustice."

Barbara Adam, Ulrich Beck and Joost van Loon, *The Risk Society and Beyond*

In 1991, sociologist Ulrich Beck famously proposed that the fundamental problem of the distribution of wealth has, in late modernity, given way to the problem of the distribution of *risk*. Taking Beck's argument as our starting place, this course will explore how the concept of risk informs contemporary culture. Among the questions we will explore are: how—through what historical constellations of power, interest and concern--do particular subjects (epidemics, crime, terrorism, debt, environmental destruction, social injustice) emerge (or not) as categories of risk and/or targets of widespread social anxiety? How does risk condition our sense of temporality? What ideas, realities, movements flourish or falter in the framework of risk? And (how) does the increasingly popular concept of resilience work to reinforce and/or to move beyond dominant frameworks of risk? Our reading will focus on texts that express and critically analyze the imaginative impasses that are generated by the discourse of risk, and that seek to envision alternative modes of engagement with the world.

Texts:

Safe (film)

Contagion (film)

Junot Díaz, "Monstro" (PDF)

Mohsin Hamid, *Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Thomas King, *The Back of the Turtle*

Beasts of the Southern Wild (film)

Lisa Moore, *February*

Guardians of Eternity (film)

Larissa Lai and Rita Wong, *sybil unrest*

Additional readings will be available as PDFs via Dropbox.

Assignments:

Everyday objects show-and-tell 15% (**Feb. 27th**)
Participation 20% (10% leading seminar, 10% general participation)
Essay Proposal 5% (500 words) (**Mar. 6th**)
Essay Draft 25% (10-12 pages) (**Mar. 27th**)
Final Essay 35% (max. 15 pages) (**Apr. 13th**)

Risky Objects 15% (Feb. 27th)

Everyone is responsible for one 10-minute presentation, and a 600-800 word narrative, analyzing in relation to course themes an everyday object (it could also be an image, a clip, a sound, a written text, symbol, etc.) that implicitly or explicitly evokes risk. **Your choice of object should be confirmed with me (in person or via email) by Feb. 20th.** The goal of this assignment is to think about how risk is produced, contained, expressed and disseminated (and/or hidden) in specific material and symbolic locations. Among the questions you might address in your presentation: how (historically and/or genealogically) does this object come to embody (or conceal) risk? For whom is it risky? What interests does its riskiness serve? What's the history of this risk? What are its spatial and temporal dimensions? (How) could/should its riskiness be navigated or eliminated? While the write-up should take the form of a coherent narrative, with references where appropriate, the focus of evaluation will be less on writing than the strength of your analysis in relation to course themes, clarity of your presentation, and engagement with questions.

(NB. Objects should be chosen with careful consideration of the course parameters, and the context of class discussion. Please no weapons, illegal substances, or anything that could reasonably be anticipated to cause harm to anyone in the class, or get me or you into trouble! Please see above re: confirming objects ahead of time.)

Participation (20%: 10% leading seminar, 10% general participation)

Students will be assigned randomly in the first class to lead the discussion on one of the short **critical readings** (articles/chapters) for the week. The discussion will last from 45-65 minutes, depending on how many readings are scheduled for that week. The discussion leader is not responsible for giving a presentation or teaching the text to the class. Rather, the goal is to foster inclusive and productive discussion focused on, first, making sure we have a good collective grasp of the basic concepts and arguments and, second, discussing broader implications (including connections with other texts) and limitations with the text in question. See Appendix for optional format that fulfills these objectives, and general suggestions for leading/participating in discussion.

As part of general participation, each student will be randomly assigned to initiate brief discussions of two **literary texts/films**, by inviting us to do a close reading of

a short passage (one paragraph maximum) or scene whose themes and/or form are important in terms of the text/film as a whole. In suggesting a passage or scene, you should indicate briefly, using specific references, why you think the passage/scene is particularly illuminating with respect to the text/film, then invite commentary from the class (each discussion should last approximately 15 mins). Ideally, these discussions should highlight images, ideas or questions contained or suggested by the passage that connect with the broader themes of the week's discussion or of the course.

Essay Proposal 5% (Mar. 6th)

Your essay proposal should consist of a concise statement of the specific question or problem your paper will explore and site(s) of analysis (e.g. texts, objects, practices), a brief summary of the critical context (i.e. relevant scholarly conversations), and comment on the stakes or significance of your inquiry (why is this question worth investigating?). The proposal should be no more than 500 words.

Essay Draft/Final Essay (Mar. 27th/Apr. 13th)

Draft essays (10-12 pp.) are due Mar. 27th. They will be returned with comments by Apr. 3rd. Your essay should engage with one or more of the texts we have explored in class. While you may want to focus directly on the text(s) (film, literary or critical work[s]), you are also free to make use of the ideas we have studied to guide a critical analysis of an image, an object, a technology, a movement or an institution (it's okay to use the same object you used for your "Risky Objects" assignment; just make sure that the essay significantly extends or complicates the points you raised in the first assignment!) All references should be cited in proper MLA style. The final essay is due by **Apr. 13th**.

Written assignments may be submitted via Email. All assignments should have the course name and assignment details in the subject line. Remember to keep copies of all your work in case anything goes astray.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Jan. 9th: Introduction (**Optional Reading**: Ulrich Beck, Ch. 1, "On the Logic of Wealth Distribution and Risk Distribution" *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage, 1992. 1-50.)

Jan. 16th: Andrew Lakoff, "Preparing for the Next Emergency" *Public Culture* 2007: 247-271; Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy and Adele E Clarke, "Anticipation: Technoscience, Life, Affect, Temporality." *Subjectivity* 28 (2009): 246-265; Robert Castel, "From Dangerousness to Risk." *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Ed. Graham Gordon, Colin Gordon & Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 281-298.

Jan. 23rd: *Safe* (film); Eric Cazdyn, Introduction and Part I, "The New Chronic"; "Palliative Time" *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness*. London: Duke University Press, 2012. 1-17.

Jan. 30th: *Contagion* (film); Michel Foucault, "11 January, 1978." *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*. Ed. Michel Senellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. Palgrave MacMillan. 16-38.

Feb. 6th: Junot Díaz, "Monstro", *The New Yorker*, 4 & 11 June, 2012: 23 pp.; Sarah Blacker. "Your DNA Doesn't Need to Be Your Destiny": Colonialism, Public Health and the Financialization of Medicine." *Topia* 30-31 (2013-2014): 123-146.

Feb. 13th: Mohsin Hamid, *Reluctant Fundamentalist*; Randy Martin, Introduction and Ch. 1 from *Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management*. Duke UP, 2007. 1-63.

Feb. 20th: READING WEEK

Feb. 27th: Risky Objects Show & Tell

Mar. 6th: Thomas King, *The Back of the Turtle*; Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013. 1-44, 284-291.

Mar. 13th: *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (film); Jennifer Henderson and Keith Denny, "The Resilient Child, Human Development and the 'Post-Democracy.'" *Biosocieties* (July, 2015): 1-27.

Mar. 20th: Lisa Moore, *February*; Jane Elliott "Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Britain." *Social Text* 115 31.2 (2013): 83-101.

Mar. 27th: *Guardians of Eternity* (film); Ashlee Cunsolo, "She Was Bereft;" Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman, "Introduction: To Mourn Beyond the Human." *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*. Ed. Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman. McGill-Queens Press. xii-xxii, 3-26.

Apr. 3: Larissa Lai and Rita Wong, *sybil unrest*; Melinda Cooper, "Turbulent Worlds: Financial Markets and Environmental Crisis." *Theory, Culture and Society* 27.2-3 (2010): 167-190; Ruth Levitas, "Discourses of Risk and Utopia." *Risk Society and Beyond*. Ed. Barbara Adam, Ulrich Beck and Joost van Loom. Sage, 2000. 198-210.

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 please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, specifically Appendix 3, located at <http://www.mcmaster.ca/senate/academic/ac_integrity.htm>

APPENDIX

Optional Seminar Format

The leader of the discussion should begin by soliciting suggestions from the class of **key terms/concepts** in the text. Once these have been identified, the leader should ask whether anyone would like brief discussion/clarification of any of the terms. The discussion leader is not responsible for providing definitions, but should solicit ideas and information from the class. This part of the discussion should take about no longer than 10 minutes (use your discretion here; if the conversation strays too far from key ideas in the text, you can suggest that these points can be revisited later).

The discussion should then proceed to the **main argument(s)** of the piece. Rather than starting off with her/his own ideas, the leader should invite class members to share their sense of what the article is about. The leader should try to draw out key ideas, and make connections between other comments.

Once there is general agreement about what the main points of the text are, the discussion can move on to the third stage of identifying **implications and questions**. The leader can begin by suggesting an issue for discussion, then inviting others to raise significant issues. Don't forget to comment on strengths as well as weaknesses of the reading! Throughout the discussion, the leader should try to draw in as many participants as possible.

Tips for Facilitating and Participating in Discussion (adapted with minor revisions from notes to Will Coleman's GLOB 710 class, 2007):

When you are leading the discussion:

Preparation

In order to lead discussion you need to be familiar with the material. You do not need to have mastered it! The goal of discussion is to deepen everyone's understanding of the material, including the leader's. Think of your role as facilitating discussion rather than teaching material to the class.

Approaching the material:

There's no substitute for close reading. Don't worry if you don't understand everything. Underline parts you find unclear and come back to them after you've finished reading. If you can, incorporate them into questions for the class. Remember too that your job is not to sell an article's argument or to rip it apart; our collective goal in discussion is to make sense of what we're reading before beginning to critique it. If someone starts editorializing before we've summarized the main arguments, ask them to hold the thought until later, and call on them to make the point once we get to that stage of discussion.

Coming up with questions for the class:

Questions should be based on issues in the text that intrigue, perplex or disturb you: that is, issues that you have thought about (and so can speak to in the event of a deadly silence--though of course that will never happen. . .) but not fully figured out. In general, try to keep the questions succinct—i.e. avoid multi-part questions that require too much preamble.

Sustaining discussion:

- Everyone comes at the material differently, so you can't expect others to necessarily share your perspective. Encourage an exploration of different points of view. When you hear conflicting views, point them out and get the holders of those views to discuss their differences. If one person begins to do all the talking, try to encourage others to join the discussion.
- Don't rush to fill silences. Some quiet periods are productive, giving time to think and allowing students who don't always speak up time to contribute. It's not essential to rush to respond to an idea that someone has raised. Sometimes if someone has made a particularly complicated or confusing point, it's helpful to try to restate it in your own words and/or to get the person to link their comment to a concrete example or passage in the text.
- Make connections. One of the most valuable aspects of discussion is bringing together ideas that might at first seem unrelated, but whose integration can produce new insights. When you can, try to point out connections between ideas and get students talking to one another. It can be useful periodically to sum up what's been said to convey a sense of the cumulative drift of the conversation.
- Keep the class on track. This means trying to ensure that each idea that is raised is played out before moving on to something else, e.g., by saying "does anyone else have any thoughts on this issue before we move on to something else?" and, if someone raises something interesting that's unrelated to the previous point, asking someone to hold onto it until people have had a chance to weigh in on the topic at hand. Deciding when it's time to move on is a judgment call; sometimes we may get stuck on something fascinating, and you'll need to intervene to move us on to other things so we don't run out of time.
- If the discussion goes off topic, try to pull it gently back to the text!

For more tips on leading discussion, see Gale Rhodes and Robert Schaible, *A User's Manual for Student-Led Discussion*, available at <http://www.usm.maine.edu/~rhodes/StdLedDisc.html>, from which some of these ideas have been adapted.

Tips for Participating in Discussion

- Raise hands before speaking and wait to be acknowledged by discussion leader
- Try to engage with what others have said (e.g. by supporting or challenging an idea with evidence from the text or by drawing connections to other works; asking someone to explain or restate a comment if the meaning is unclear; noting connections between points others have made).
- Try to make sure everyone is included
 - the leader can facilitate this by calling first on people who haven't said anything, soliciting ideas from people who are quiet and/or asking everyone to say something briefly, either near the beginning of the discussion (i.e. identify a key idea) or at the end (ask a question)
 - for participants, know your habitual patterns of class participation and balance your instincts with the interests of having an inclusive discussion. If you're inclined always to be the first to speak, try holding back and letting the discussion get going before jumping in. Don't be afraid of silences. If, conversely, you're inclined to second-guess your ideas, and to refrain from speaking until you're absolutely sure of what you're saying (which often means you don't speak at all), take a chance; don't be afraid to say something half-baked. Oral skills improve with experience, and this is the time/place to practice them.

3. Be conversational. The most useful interventions tend not to be pithy, brilliant statements that nail an argument, but rather tentative propositions or questions that create openings for others to respond. Remember that not everyone in the group has read the same things, or had the same disciplinary training, and make sure to explain any terms or theorists you introduce into the conversation that might not be generally known.

4. Stay on topic. Try to keep discussion on track, and to consider whether a comment will carry a conversation forward, send it flying off in unproductive directions or stop it completely. Avoid the latter two kinds of intervention, and try to stick to the subject at hand, referring directly to the text where possible

5. Be respectful. Though disagreements are sure to arise, it should pretty much go without saying that you should engage with classmates' ideas, and never engage in personal attacks.

Remember, the participation grade is based on an evaluation of your contribution to the seminar. Though it's informed by your knowledge or understanding of readings, the value of your participation has principally to do with your role in facilitating our efforts as a class to understand and think critically about the material. It's not essential that you say brilliant things (actually brilliance can be a bit of a conversation stopper. . .). To assess how you're doing, participation-wise, ask yourself these questions:

Did I come to class? (well, it's a start!)

Did I think about/make notes on what I read, highlighting parts that were especially relevant or difficult?

Did I initiate a topic or a question?

Did I give examples when needed?

Did I respond to the comments of others?

Did I try to restate what someone else had said to ensure that I and others understood?

Did I try to synthesize or summarize a part of the discussion?

Did I encourage or help others in the group?

Did I work to keep the discussion on track?