

Carleton University
Fall 2026 Preliminary Course Outline
Department of English

ENGL 3605A: Modern and Contemporary Literary Theory

**Prerequisites: Third-year standing or the permission of the Department
Precludes additional credit for ENGL 3002 (no longer offered)**

**Instructor: Professor Stuart Murray
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****** This is a preliminary syllabus—texts and assignments are subject to change. A complete version will be available closer to the start of the term. ******

Course Description

Introduction to contemporary approaches to literary texts, such as formalist, structuralist, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, Marxist, historicist, and feminist. Topics may include: the nature and role of literature, of author and reader, of canons, ideology, gender, sexuality, and race.

Course Organization

As you can see below, the semester will be organized into **three intensive 4-week Modules**, each structured around a movement from theory to praxis. Across the term, the course moves from questions of historical violence and its afterlives, through the performative constitution of gender and sexuality, to the transformation of subjectivity under conditions of algorithmic mediation. What is at stake throughout is not only how we interpret texts, but how we understand the conditions under which interpretation itself becomes possible—and increasingly, automated.

Module Week 1 (with the exception of Module 1): We begin with a literary text that stages a set of problems—of race, gender, or technological mediation—without immediately resolving them. Rather than treating theory as a pre-existing framework to be applied, we approach it as something that emerges in response to these textual encounters.

Module Weeks 2 and 3: Introduce key theoretical interventions that both clarify and complicate the initial reading. These texts are not presented as stable interpretive tools, but as competing attempts to name, organize, or contest the forces at work in the literary text. Students are expected to read these theories critically, attending not only to what they reveal but also to what they obscure or foreclose.

Module Week 4: Shifts from literary analysis to what we will call a “social text”: contemporary media, political discourse, or cultural artefacts drawn from the present moment. Here, the aim is not simply to “apply” theory, but to test its limits—asking how theoretical concepts hold up, mutate, or fail when confronted with ongoing social and technological conditions.

Tentative Structure and Texts

Module 1 — Race, Violence, and the Afterlives of Slavery

(What counts as violence, and who gets to name it?)

Week 1 — Theory

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (selections: “On Violence”)

Week 2 — Literary Text

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Week 3 — Theory

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Introduction)

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (selections)

Week 4 — Social Text (“Diagnostic Lab”)

Contemporary media and cultural materials (student-sourced)

Module 2 — Gender, Sexuality, and the Limits of Identity

(What, if anything, exceeds performativity?)

Week 5 — Literary Text

Andrea Lawlor, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (Content Warning: explicit sexual content)

Week 6 — Theory I

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Introduction + Chapter 1, selections)

Week 7 — Theory II

Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix”

Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Introduction, selections)

Week 8 — Social Text (“Diagnostic Lab”)

Contemporary media and cultural materials (student-sourced)

Module 3 — AI, Memes, and the Posthuman Condition

(What would it mean to respond otherwise?)

Week 9 — Literary Text

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*

Week 10 — Theory I

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (Introduction + Chapter 1, selections)

Week 11 — Theory II

Ted Chiang, “Anxiety Is the Dizziness of Freedom”

Week 12 — Social Text (“Diagnostic Lab”)

AI outputs, memes, and contemporary digital media (student-sourced)

Evaluation

Evaluation in this course is designed to support sustained engagement with theoretical concepts and their application to literary and contemporary cultural texts. Students will be assessed on a combination of short analytical writing, participation, and more extended critical work.

A central component of the course will be a series of **Diagnostic Lab assignments** (one per module). These short written exercises (600-750 words) ask students to analyze a contemporary “social text” (e.g., news media, visual culture, digital artefacts) using concepts developed in the preceding weeks. The aim is not simply to apply theory, but to test its limits—identifying where it illuminates and where it fails.

In addition to the Diagnostic Labs, students will complete **one or more formal essays or critical projects** that engage course readings in greater depth. These may include comparative analysis across modules or sustained work on a single theoretical problem.

Active participation is essential. Students are expected to attend regularly, contribute thoughtfully to seminar discussions, and come prepared to engage both the readings and the work of their peers. Participation may also include brief informal writing, discussion facilitation, or the presentation of materials during the “social text” weeks.