This course has two main goals: 1. To familiarize students with a broad array of different theoretical modes and theorists that could be said to form a toolbox for the Comparatist. To this end, we will explore writings of major theorists from Adorno to Zizek. 2. This year, we will focus on the specific question of “theory” in relation to “practice” in contemporary culture. Ideally these two goals will be well integrated, but we will explore the relation between theory as “instrument” and as “body of knowledge.” We often hear about a crisis in literary (theory) studies, and “mere theory” is opposed to “people who do things” (to steal a line from Hitchcock’s Strangers on a Train). Is it possible that theory and praxis—whatever these terms might mean—cannot be separated? If so, who is trying to tear them apart, and for what reasons? By the end of the course, it is hoped that students will have a grasp of major issues in contemporary literary theory, and they will have explored questions of literature—or the Humanities, more broadly—in relation to activism, interventions, critical practice, and so on.

Students will be asked to purchase a series of texts for this class (a list will be available in advance—please email me for information). In addition, some readings will be available as electronic reserve, downloadable through the Ares reserve system.

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