

Carleton University  
Department of English Language and Literature  
Fall 2014

ENGL 5002: Contemporary Literary Theory  
Neoliberal Biopolitics, Ethics, and “Community”  
**Tentative, Abridged Syllabus for prior distribution**

Seminars: Tuesdays 14:30 – 17:30

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Most academics put on their pants one leg at a time like the rest of us, and after listing their credentials or the “model” they’re employing, they basically tell you what they think the way your uncle Harry or your cabdriver does, with about as much chance of being right. They do have degrees but you can get those from the Wizard, if you make it to Oz. There are certainly people of deep wisdom and insight in the academy, as anyone who’s taken a great course knows. But others talk for the same reason the guy on the stool in the sports bar does: to master reality, conquer fear, win respect, make it through the night—it’s often just a matter of what tactic you use; in the universities, it’s verbal and mental.

—[Rick Salutin](#) on Michael Ignatieff, 26 June 2014

### **Brief [and polemical] Course Description**

Ours is the age of neoliberal biopolitics, savage and unsustainable ideology, the evisceration of community and the commons. Casino capitalism, rampant “entrepreneurialism,” “innovation,” hyper-individualism, “self-care,” liquid life: these are the ubiquitous and savage tropes – the modes of existence – that have poisoned public policy, destroyed the university, militarized public culture, defined modern biomedicine, and made our lives nasty, brutish, and interminable.

Polemical? Much of the language above critically mimes [Carleton’s Strategic Integrated Plan, 2013–2018](#), titled, “Sustainable Communities—Global Prosperity.” The document is meant to inform research and curricular planning across our campus, as much as it presents a public face,

an image of what the university is or ought to be. This course hopes to problematize its basic tenets, driven by neoliberal entrepreneurialism, and to interrogate its key terms – and the dash that links yet divides them: sustainable communities and global prosperity. Using theories of biopolitics, we might see that only *some* communities will be sustainable and prosperous, and these only at the cost of global and globalizing disparities, destitution. To be sure, this is ideology critique, as taught by Marx. But in recent decades, the theory of biopolitics sheds some new light on the ways that life, the human *bios*, if being manipulated, regulated, and governed in the pursuit of happiness and health as much as profit and power.

This course begins with Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics as “the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: [through] health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race....” It proceeds to investigate the ways that “life” circulates discursively today – “life” subject to corporatization, governmental regulation, criminalization, surveillance, segregation, health and welfare schemes, pro-life policies and improvement programmes, through forecasts, education, medicine, securitization, and statistical measures, among others. It surveys a number of critical biopolitical theorists and concludes by asking: what is left of political agency and what ethics – or revolt – will arise from life under such a regime?

Less a manifesto than a theoretical provocation, this theory course also incorporates what I am calling “literary interludes,” where we step back in some weeks from our theory texts to read a work of literature. Here you are invited to reflect on the relationship between literature, writing, and the politics of life and death as these are inflected across an ethic(s) of community.

### Course Texts

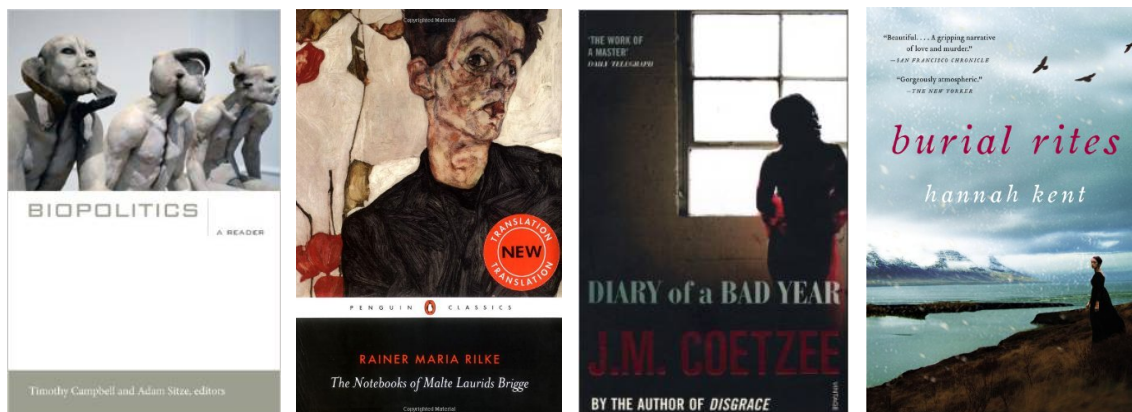
Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (eds.), *Biopolitics: A Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, ed. and trans. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin Books, 2009). Originally published in German in 1910.

N.B. I prefer this translation, but I realize it may no longer be readily available.

J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage Books, 2008).

Hannah Kent, *Burial Rites* (London: Picador, 2013).



There will be a course website with readings.

### **Course Requirements and Evaluation**

1. **Seminar Presentation: 20%**
2. **Research Presentation: 20%**
3. **Research Paper (20–25 pp.): 60%**

Details will be provided.

### **Course Readings** [Recommended Readings are indented]

#### **Week 1      9 September      Introduction**

A brief case study from the media: Makayla Sault (readings provided online and via email)

Makayla Sault's public statement: "Ojibwe Child Refuses Chemo, Wants Traditional Medicine Instead," 13 May 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrF5wWQ4hIU>

Stuart J. Murray, "[Affirming the Human? The Question of Biopolitics](#)," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (online: June 2014), doi:10.1177/1743872114538908 [I really hate to give you my own work, but it's short, and I prefer to make no secret of my critical perspective and the politics of the classroom, *pace* [Stanley Fish](#)].

#### **Week 2      16 September      Michel Foucault**

Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life" / *Reader*, Chapter 1

Michel Foucault, "'Society Must Be Defended,' Lecture at the *Collège de France*, March 17, 1976" / *Reader*, Chapter 2

Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), "Course Summary," pp. 317-325.

#### **Week 3      23 September      Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben**

Hannah Arendt, "The Perplexities of the Rights of Man" / *Reader*, Chapter 3

Hannah Arendt, "Selections from *The Human Condition*" / *Reader*, Chapter 4

Giorgio Agamben, "Introduction to *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*" / *Reader*, Chapter 5

Giorgio Agamben, "The Politicization of Life" / *Reader*, Chapter 6

Giorgio Agamben, "Biopolitics and the Rights of Man" / *Reader*, Chapter 7

Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binette and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), "Form-of-Life," pp. 3-12.

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Part Three: "The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern," pp. 119-188.

Giorgio Agamben, "No to Biopolitical Tattooing," translation from the French of Giorgio Agamben, "Non au tatouage biopolitique" (*Le Monde*, 10 and 11 January 2004), printed in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5:2 (2008): 201-202.

**Week 4      30 September      Literary Interlude I**

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, ed. and trans. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin Books, 2009). Originally published in German in 1910.

N.B. I prefer this translation, but I realize it may no longer be readily available.

**Week 5      7 October      Bioeconomies of Race**

Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" / *Reader*, Chapter 8

Warren Montag, "Necro-economics: Adam Smith and Death in the Life of the Universal" / *Reader*, Chapter 9

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "Biopolitical Production" / *Reader*, Chapter 10

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "Biopolitics as Event" / *Reader*, Chapter 11

Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), "'After the love has gone': Biopolitics and the Decay of the Black Public Sphere," pp. 177-206.

David Macey, "Rethinking Biopolitics, Race and Power in the Wake of Foucault," *Theory, Culture and Society* 26.6 (2009): 186-205.

Majia Holmer Nadesan, "The Biopolitics of Transactional Capitalism," *MediaTropes* 3:1 (2011): 23-57.

Lisa Diedrich, "Speeding Up Slow Deaths: Medical Sovereignty circa 2005," *MediaTropes* 3.1 (2011): 1-22.

**Week 6      14 October      Biopolitical Bodies**

Paolo Virno, "Labor, Action, Intellect" / *Reader*, Chapter 12

Paolo Virno, "An Equivocal Concept: Biopolitics" / *Reader*, Chapter 13

Donna Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse" / *Reader*, Chapter 14

Peter Sloterdijk, "The Immunological Transformation: On the Way to Thin-Walled 'Societies'" / *Reader*, Chapter 15

Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 19-49.

Patricia Ticento Clough and Craig Willse (eds.), *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), "Introduction," pp. 1-18.

Eugene Thacker, "Necrologies: Or, the Death of the Body Politic," in Clough and Willse (eds.), *Beyond Biopolitics*, pp. 139-162.

**Week 7      21 October              Literary Interlude II**  
J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage Books, 2008).

**Fall Break    28 October**

**Week 8      4 November              "Affirmative" Biopolitics**  
Roberto Esposito, "Biopolitics" / *Reader*, Chapter 16  
Roberto Esposito, "The Enigma of Biopolitics" / *Reader*, Chapter 17  
Roberto Esposito, "Totalitarianism or Biopolitics? Concerning a Philosophical Interpretation of the Twentieth Century," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): 633-644.  
Jodi Dean, "Drive as the Structure of Biopolitics," *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 2 (2010): 2-15.

**Week 9      11 November              Living Another Politics of Life**  
Jacques Rancière, "The Difficult Legacy of Michel Foucault" / *Reader*, Chapter 18  
Slavoj Žižek, "From Politics to Biopolitics . . . and Back" / *Reader*, Chapter 19  
Alain Badiou, "What Is It to Live?" / *Reader*, Chapter 20  
Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life" / *Reader*, Chapter 21  
Didier Fassin, "Another Politics of Life is Possible," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26:5 (2009): 44-60.

**Week 10     18 November              Literary Interlude III**  
Hannah Kent, *Burial Rites* (London: Picador, 2013).

**Week 11     25 November**  
Seminar Presentations

**Week 12     2 December**  
Seminar Presentations