

Carleton University
Winter 2022
Department of English Language and Literature
and
Graduate Program in Cultural Mediations (ICSLAC)

ENGL 5002W: Studies in Theory
CLMD 6904W: Special Topic in Cultural Mediations
Special Topic: Biopolitics and the Cultures of Life and Death

Course website (password protected):
<http://stuartjmurray.com/instant>

Thursdays / 14:35 – 17:25
Location: RB 3228

Instructor: Prof. Stuart J. Murray
Email: stuart.murray@carleton.ca
Office: *online via Zoom*

Office Hours: By appointment (please email me)

(To comply with FIPPA privacy legislation, sensitive discussions
will take place by phone or via Microsoft Teams)



I. Course description

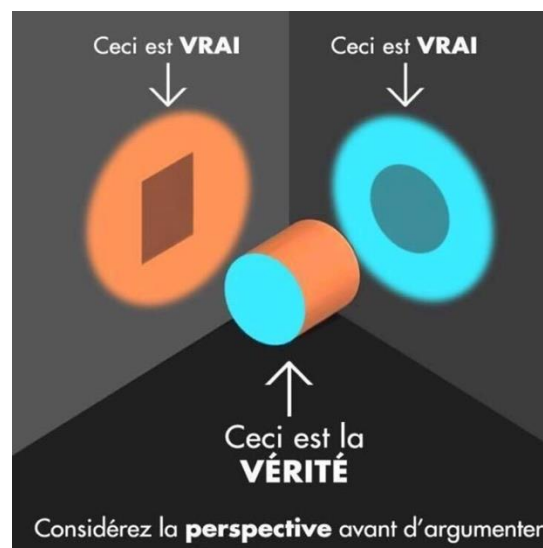
This is a cross-listed course intended to be interdisciplinary and is open to the disciplinary perspectives and research interests that each student will bring to the course. **Calendar descriptions** are as follows. **ENGL**: Selected topics in literary and cultural theory. **CLMD**: This in-class course offers selected topics in interdisciplinary studies of culture not available in the regular course offerings.

Detailed description

How might we read the (non)representational practices that surround death today? Aesthetic or anaesthetic, ours is a time when death is quietly cultivated and calculated by neoliberal biopolitics – deaths dismissed (or justified) as collateral damage, opportunity costs, negative externalities. This differential power is summed up by Foucault as the power to “make live and let die.” Crucially, those we “let die” stand in relation to the lives that we “make live”; dying is the bloody secret of life, even as “letting die” is disavowed, refused, silenced. Whether it is “slow death” (Berlant) wrought by austerity, fast death in the digital mediascape, or more coordinated ways of “letting die,” including war, systemic ethnic/racialized violence, or pandemic policies, these deaths nevertheless speak to belie our “culture of life.”

This is not a course on memory studies or memorialization or trauma and witnessing. And this is for two reasons. First, and practically, our texts are more diverse and less disciplinary. We will read from high theory and literature to popular culture – an eclectic selection from philosophy, political theory, black studies, and cultural studies, among others, alongside select works of literature, a graphic narrative (a “comic” with no comedy), social media metastases, etc. Second, and more ideologically, this course will argue that the study of (non)representational practices in the relationship between death and speech/writing will permit an oblique but trenchant critique of identity politics, liberalism (including its “human rights” guises), and the hypostatizations of possessive individualism, ego, self, interiority. To what extent are these forms of subjectivity false idols and tools of subordination, all the while packaged as freedom and rational choice? Moreover, to what extent do they foster profound complicity with the differential violence that “makes live and lets die”?

A more speculative question emerges: what is the possibility for community that is not tied to identity categories and to its rituals of representation, be they memory, memorialization, witnessing, or confession? Is there community post-identity? Or, said another way, is there a form of speech/writing that is not tethered to – sanctioned, policed, and in some cases prohibited by – our great idol, our political theology: identity?



Consider the graphic above: there are many representations of a phenomenon that can be true (*vrai*), but a theoretical understanding tries to make sense of what might not necessarily be represented – but is nevertheless the truth (*la vérité*) on which our representations depend.

This course is thematized around representations of violence and death; however, it refuses to embrace despair. The syllabus is populated by writers and artists engaged in an ongoing struggle to resist, challenge, or lay bare some of the sedimented cultural and political assumptions that structure public discourse on violent acts. This course will dramatize their struggles to think through/about/within violence and to intervene in its perpetuation.

II. Preclusions

None.

III. Learning Outcomes

Students will develop advanced knowledge of key theoretical terms toward a critical analytical understanding of death and its cultural representations. Moreover, students will learn to exercise active literary reading skills across distinct genres, including literary, sociocultural, historical, and political contexts.

IV. Texts

Most required course texts will be made available online. However, please note that the following should be acquired:

Anna Burns, *Milkman: A Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018).

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (New York: Scribner, 2017).

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

Nick Drnaso, *Sabrina* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2018).

V. Course Calendar

CONTENT WARNING: Many of our course texts include graphic depictions and/or discussions of war, torture, (psychological) violence/murder, suicide, sexual violence, and racial violence. Content Warnings (CW) are noted for each text below; however, they are not exhaustive.

13 January 2022

Lewis, H. Lapham, "Mute Button," *Harper's* (April 2006), 9–11.

"A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," *Harper's*, July 7, 2020, <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>.

20 January 2022

Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), Lecture of 17 March 1976, 239–264.

Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power Over Life," in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 135–159.

27 January 2022

Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death / Demeure* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

CW // war and (psychological) violence/murder

3 February 2022

Anna Burns, *Milkman: A Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018).

CW // war, (psychological) violence/murder, sexual violence

10 February 2022

Anna Burns, *Milkman: A Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018).

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York and London: Verso, 2004), Chapter 2: "Violence, Mourning, Politics," 19–49.

CW // war, (psychological) violence/murder, sexual violence

17 February 2022

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), "Introduction" and Chapters 1 and 2, 1–78.

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), Chapter 1, "The Wake" and Chapter 2, "The Ship," 1–24 and 25–67. [E-book available through MacOdrum Library: https://ocul-crl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01OCUL_CRL/1gorbd6/alma991022759618905153].

CW // torture, (psychological) violence/murder, sexual violence, and racial violence

Reading Week

3 March 2022

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (New York: Scribner, 2017).

CW // (psychological) violence/murder and racial violence

10 March 2022

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (New York: Scribner, 2017).

Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), Chapter 4, "Racism: Biopolitics," 53–73.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), "Imperial Racism," 190–195.

CW // (psychological) violence/murder and racial violence

17 March 2022

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

CW // suicide

24 March 2022

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), "Bringing Out the Dead: Black Feminism's Prophetic Vision" and "Epilogue," 125–149.

CW // suicide and racial violence

31 March 2022

Nick Drnaso, *Sabrina* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2018).

"Wojak," KnowYourMeme.com, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/npc-wojak>.

CW // war, (psychological) violence/murder, and sexual violence

7 April 2022

Nick Drnaso, *Sabrina* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2018).

Art Spiegelman, "Drawing Blood: Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage," *Harper's Magazine* (June 2006), 43–52.

Osman Balkan, "Charlie Hebdo and the Politics of Mourning," *Contemporary French Civilization* 41, no. 2 (2016): 253–271.

CW // war, (psychological) violence/murder, sexual violence, and racial violence

VI. Evaluation

50% Essay(s) or Essay Equivalent(s), such as a Creative-Scholarly Project(s):

In these pesky pandemic times, I am granting the widest possibly leeway for your scholarly (and creative) practices, and I encourage you to take the opportunity to experiment. You may also suggest a Digital Humanities project. I'm always happy to discuss your ideas for assignments in a scheduled office hour or if you hang back after class. I particularly encourage PhD students to develop work that might later be incorporated into their dissertation projects. Your work need not comment on a specific text or texts studied in the course, but projects should be resonant with course themes/problematics.

The end goal is that you will write a total of 15-20 pages this semester (double-spaced, Times New Roman 12 pt font, max. margins 2.5 cm or 1 inch, consistently using the bibliographic style of your own choosing).

The total 15-20 pages can be submitted in one, two, or up to three distinct pieces of writing. The choice is yours.

Deadline(s): Again, it's up to you, but the final assignment must be emailed to me by **April 12, 2022 at midnight**.

All assignments should be emailed to me, and I always acknowledge receipt by return email (so if my spam filter has eaten something and you don't hear, please ping me!).

Assignment Weighting: Obviously, if you choose one assignment, it will be weighted at 50% of the final grade. For more than one assignment, the total of 50% will be pro-rated on the total pages written (e.g., two 10-page essays would be 25% + 25%; a 6-page essay and a 12-page essay would be 17% and 33%).

25% Seminar Presentation (is situated in a particular week's readings)

I'm imagining a presentation of 10-15 minutes followed by a 15-minute moderated discussion on the texts we have read for that week (in weeks where there is more than one text you are free to choose just one or more). Rather than summarize the text, reflect on how it resonates in our particular socio-historical context: how can this week's course reading(s) be deployed to help make sense of – or to question or critique – what continues to unfold as a cultural, epistemological, affective, somatic (etc.) pandemic object?

No "props" or PowerPoint expected, but they are welcome.

15% Show-and-Tell (relates to course problematics generally – not necessarily the week's readings!)

Bring a cultural artifact to class discussion – perhaps an example of an artistic/creative response to the course themes/problematics or a relevant event that is in the news. Be creative, be controversial if you wish, have some fun with this. Show-and-Tell will typically kick off each week's class as a kind of ice-breaker. I'm imagining an informal presentation that moderates a discussion of 10-15 minutes total.

"Course problematics" will emerge – and, I hope, transform – as we collectively engage course texts across the semester, and this is an occasion for you to help direct our discourse.

10% Participation

Active and thoughtful participation is appreciated.

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.
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VII. Statement on Plagiarism

The University Senate defines plagiarism as "presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one's own." See: <https://carleton.ca/secretariat/wp-content/uploads/Academic-Integrity-Policy-2021.pdf>. According to the Department examples of plagiarism include the following:

- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else;
- reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, or paraphrased material, concepts or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another's data or research findings;
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another's works and/or failing to use quotation marks;
- handing in substantially the same piece of work for academic credit more than once without prior written permission of the course instructor in which the submission occurs.

Plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft. It is a serious offence that cannot be resolved directly with the course's instructor. The Associate Deans of the Faculty conduct a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student, when an instructor suspects a piece of work has been plagiarized. Penalties are not trivial. They can include failure of the assignment, failure of the entire course, or suspension from a program. For more information please go to: <https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>

VIII. Special Information Regarding Pandemic Measures

All members of the Carleton community are required to follow COVID-19 prevention measures and all mandatory public health requirements (e.g. wearing a mask, physical distancing, hand hygiene, respiratory and cough etiquette) and [mandatory self-screening](#) prior to coming to campus daily.

If you feel ill or exhibit COVID-19 symptoms while on campus or in class, please leave campus immediately, self-isolate, and complete the mandatory [symptom reporting tool](#). For purposes of contact tracing, attendance will be recorded in all classes and labs. Participants can check in using posted QR codes through the cuScreen platform where provided. Students who do not have a smartphone will be required to complete a paper process as indicated on the [COVID-19 website](#).

All members of the Carleton community are required to follow guidelines regarding safe movement and seating on campus (e.g. directional arrows, designated entrances and exits, designated seats that maintain physical distancing). In order to avoid congestion, allow all previous occupants to fully vacate a classroom before entering. No food is permitted in any classrooms or labs.

For the most recent information about Carleton's COVID-19 response and required measures, please see the [University's COVID-19 webpage](#) and review the [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#). Should you have additional questions after reviewing, please contact covidinfo@carleton.ca

Please note that failure to comply with University policies and mandatory public health requirements, and endangering the safety of others are considered misconduct under the [Student Rights and Responsibilities Policy](#). Failure to comply with Carleton's COVID-19 procedures may lead to supplementary action involving Campus Safety and/or Student Affairs.

IX. Requests for Academic Accommodation

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request the processes are as follows:

Pregnancy obligation: write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For accommodation regarding a formally-scheduled final exam, you must complete the [Pregnancy Accommodation Form](#).

Religious obligation: write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details [click here](#).

Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: The Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at 613-520-6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send me your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with me to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. Please consult the PMC website for the deadline to request accommodations for the formally-scheduled exam (if applicable).

Survivors of Sexual Violence

As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and where survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information

about sexual violence and/or support, visit: <https://carleton.ca/equity/focus/sexual-violence-prevention-survivor-support/>

Accommodation for Student Activities

Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation will be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. <https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf>