Body Counts: Technologies of Life & Death
MCM 0901I, cross-listed in Ethnic Studies, Gender & Sexuality Studies, Science & Society

Instructor: Mike Litwack
michael_litwack@brown.edu
Office Hours: F 2-4PM, and by appointment
Location: 155 George Street 210

Seminar time: T/R 4 – 5:20
Location: 135 Thayer Street 102
Screenings: M/W 7-11PM
Location: M 155 George Street 106
W 135 Thayer Street 102

From Hurricane Katrina and the global obesity crisis to self-help reality TV and new biotechnologies, questions of life and death have come to center stage of contemporary politics. This interdisciplinary seminar will investigate the theoretical and historical contexts under which “life itself” has emerged as a key arena of social, cultural, economic, and technological importance. We will read critical studies of race, embodiment, media, and the state, tracing how distinctions between life and its others have structured differential proximities to death, risk, freedom, and “the human” in modernity. We will ask: What counts as life? What tools, techniques, and technologies have been used to count and define, manage and modify, optimize and debilitate the lives of individual bodies and entire populations? And how have 20th and 21st century practices such as mass incarceration, genetic engineering, suicide bombing, and the control of infectious diseases transformed the boundaries between the living and the dead? Conceiving of technology broadly, this seminar will treat the politicization of “life” both as a technique of regulation and as a tool for resistance. Throughout, we will attend to a diverse range of case studies that provoke questions about how we might live—corporeally, politically, and ethically—at a moment when “life itself” has increasingly become a site of contestation.

Required Books (also available on reserve in the Rock)
• Talal Asad, On Suicide Bombing
• Assata Shakur, Assata: An Autobiography

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation: Your attendance and participation are crucial to the success of this seminar. You are expected to come to class prepared to contribute meaningfully to our discussions with your own questions and critical commentaries on course materials. Participation, however, does not only require talking but also actively listening to your peers and respectfully engaging them in discussion. I also understand that students participate in different and unique ways. If you are concerned about your participation in seminar, it is your right and responsibility to meet with me.

Readings: You are responsible for completing all required readings. This means carefully reading course materials at least once before seminar. You must bring paper copies of all assigned readings with you to seminar. If you anticipate having trouble printing the readings due to financial concerns, please speak with me no later than January 28th to make alternative arrangements. Other than the required books, all readings are available on OCRA (password: bodycount). Please note that readings and screenings are subject to change based on the needs and interests of the class. Changes, if any, will be announced in seminar and through e-mail.

Screenings: Attentive attendance is required at all scheduled screenings. While you are free to attend either the Monday or Wednesday screening, you must come prepared to discuss the film and television texts during our Thursday meetings. On weeks when two films/programs are scheduled, they will be shown in the order listed on the syllabus on the first night and in reverse order the second night.

Blogs: Each week you are required to post a brief (approx. 250 words) response to course materials on our class discussion board (https://canvas.brown.edu/). Responses need not be formal. The blog is intended to
provide a forum for you to raise questions about course materials, pursue passages that you find particularly confusing/compelling/problematic, test out arguments that may later develop into paper topics, and share your critiques with the class before we meet. While you are encouraged to draw on screenings and previous readings in your blog posts, you must engage at least one of the readings assigned for that day in your response. Blog posts are due at 10:00 AM the day of class. It is my hope that you will also read the discussion board before coming to seminar.

• The class will be divided into two groups (A and B). On weeks marked on the syllabus as “A” weeks, students in Group A will blog in response to Tuesday’s materials and students in Group B will blog in response to Thursday’s materials. On weeks marked on the syllabus as “B” weeks, students in Group B will blog in response

**Papers:** Students are expected to write three papers: one extended response in lieu of a blog post (3 pp.) at any point during Part I of the course; a midterm (5-6 pp.); and a final (8-10 pp.). I will hand out suggested paper prompts for the midterm (drawing on readings, screenings, class discussions, and blog posts). The final paper will be on a topic of your own choosing so as to allow you to pursue your own interests within the framework of the seminar. Evaluation rubrics and writing strategies will also be distributed with the first paper assignment.

**Grading Breakdown:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response</td>
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**Laptop Policy:** With the exception of students with a documented need for accommodations, laptop use is not permitted during either seminar or screenings.

**Communication:** My e-mail address is michael_litwack@brown.edu. I will make every effort to respond to messages sent during the week (Monday to Friday) within 24 hours. I am also available to meet during my office hours on Fridays from 2-4 PM in 155 George Street Room 210 and by appointment.

**Accessibility:** If you have or think you may have a disability, you may want to let me know. If you choose to do so, I encourage you to address any special needs or accommodations with me at the beginning of the semester so as to ensure your full participation in our seminar. To obtain proper documentation, contact the Office of Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401.863.9588. Also, if you wish to be called by a different name or addressed with a different pronoun than the one with which you are officially enrolled, do let me know and I will gladly oblige.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

Note: All readings are listed in suggested order.

**PART I: WHY LIFE?**

**REGULATING BODIES AND POPULATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

**WEEK 0 Introductions**

R Review syllabus, course expectations, etc.

**[A] WEEK 1 The Chance of a Lifetime**


[B] WEEK 2 Securing Life


• Denise Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xi-xiv, 1-16.

(A) WEEK 3 (Neo)Liberalism as a Way of Life

T • Barbara Cruikshank, The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 66-86.
• Loïc Wacquant, Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), selections TBD.


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[A] WEEK 3 (Neo)Liberalism as a Way of Life

WEEK 4 Against Life?

T [NO CLASS – LONG WEEKEND]


[Screening] Jamie Oliver’s *Food Revolution*, “Pilot” (ABC, 2010)
*The Gift* (Louise Hogarth, 2003), 62 min.

**PART II: PARADIGMS OF THE MODERN**

[B] WEEK 5 Sovereignty and Disposability

**T**

**R**

[A] WEEK 6 The Body and the Flesh (I)

**T**

**R**

*Bush Mama* (Haile Gerima, 1979), 97 min.

[B] WEEK 7 The Body and the Flesh (II)

**T**

**R**
• *Assata*, finish.

[Screening] *Visions of Abolition* (Setsu Shigematsu, 2011), 92 min.

[A] WEEK 8 The Body Politics of Information

**T**

**R**
MONDAY 3/18: MIDTERMS DUE IN MY MAILBOX (155 GEORGE STREET) BY 5PM

[B] WEEK 9 Life Is A Very Queer Thing
T

R
  [Screening] HaBuah (Eytan Fox, 2006), 90 min

“President Obama Commemorates Hate Crimes Prevention Act” (whitehouse.gov, 2009), 10min.

Spring Break
T
  NO SEMINAR!
R
  NO SEMINAR!

[A] WEEK 10 Living Labor I: Social Reproduction
T

R
  [Screening] Import/Export (Ulrich Seidl, 2007), 141 min.

PART III: ON INSURGENT ECONOMIES OF LIFE AND DEATH

[B] WEEK 11 Living Labor II: Networked Life
T
  • Paolo Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude: For An Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 73-111.

R
  [Screening] Sleep Dealer (Alex Rivera, 2008), 90 min.

T

R
  • Talal Asad, selections from On Suicide Bombing (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
[B] WEEK 13 Immunity/Community: Common Life

[A] WEEK 14 Life As We Knew It: Fugitive Life
T • Stefano Harney, “Abolition and the General Intellect” (unpublished ms.), 1-10.

FRIDAY MAY 17: FINAL PAPERS ARE DUE AT 5PM VIA E-MAIL