What can be learned from the edges of life, from those forms of experience and action that seem to defy life in their very impossibility or inexpressibility? Indeed, such forms of experience (psychosis, trauma, possession, torture… ) are commonly regarded as radical exceptions to the order of everyday life, inhabiting a territory that is beyond language, culture, and history. This seminar will examine the labor that such forms of “limit experience” perform in shaping everyday subjective experience and social life. Of particular interest in this seminar will be the significance of limit experience for understanding what it means to be a subject, the relationship between mental disorder and social-political orders, the position of injury and suffering in contemporary formulations of truth and freedom, and anthropological approaches to political power conceived in psychological and social terms. Rather than making a sustained argument, the course will involve open-ended discussions regarding theories of subjectivity as they appear in ethnographic studies of psychiatry, pharmaceuticals, the biosciences, political violence, security, religious experience, and institutions of confinement and care.

REQUIRED TEXTS (available at Amherst Books)


Additional readings will be found on the course website:
https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/departments/courses/0910S/ANTH/ANTH-42-0910S
COURSE WORK

Your evaluation in the course will be based on:

1. critical synthesis papers (80%)

   You will write eight critical synthesis papers over the course of the semester. A critical synthesis paper, for this class, consists of a 2-3 page synthesis and reflection on a day’s readings. The aim of these papers is to help you integrate and think critically about the readings for the course (see “cs guidelines”). Papers must be submitted to me by 10am on the day of the class for which you are writing. These papers are therefore prospective, not retrospective. For seven of the eight papers, you can write about any day’s readings you like (although there are only thirteen possible classes for which you can write eight papers). There is only one week where the paper is mandatory – week three in which we discuss Lorna Rhode’s Total Confinement. For this paper, you will be allowed to turn it in at the beginning of class on Monday, February 8th.

2. class participation (20%)

   First, class attendance is mandatory. Second, once there, participation is mandatory. Both – attendance and substantive participation in discussion – will figure prominently into my evaluation of your work in the course. Attendance is particularly important in that the course will not be relying on a textbook but a number of cases, ethnographic examples, or dialogues that will be framed in my classroom discussions. Attendance is also important because, upon missing your third class session, you will fail the course.

   If there are legitimate reasons for either not being able to turn in assignments on time or not being able to attend class, let me know. And, needless to say, plagiarism of any sort is not allowed. If you have any questions about what is or is not considered plagiarism, see:

   https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty/plagiarism

COURSE OUTLINE

week 1: introduction and orientation (January 25)

week 2: madness and criminality (February 1)


   Lorna Rhodes, Total Confinement, preface & introduction

week 3: confinement and care (February 8)

week 4: orientations: “madness,” subjectivity, and experience (February 15)


week 5: terror and genealogies of trauma (February 22)

Didier Fassin, The Empire of Trauma, pp.13-39, 77-97.

week 6: colonial madness & postcolonial disorders (March 1)


week 7: violence and the ordinary (March 8)

Veena Das, Life and Words, selections.

week 8: NO CLASS – SPRING RECESS – March 15

week 9: possession and the subject of truth (March 22)

Michel de Certeau, The Possession at Loudun.

film: Capturing the Friedmans (2003)
week 10: trauma and the subject of truth (March 29)
Didier Fassin, *The Empire of Trauma*, pp.148-188.

week 11: passionate attachements (April 5)

week 12: symptoms, fantasies, and politics (April 12)

week 13: maddening states & the politics of life (April 19)
João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, introduction & part i

week 14: madness, life, and abandonment (April 26)
João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*.

week 15: injury & freedom (May 3)