

The University of Florida.

Department of English.

LIT 4188: World Literature in English. Entrapped Bodies: Illness, Disability and Language.

Spring 2024

Instructor: Apollo O. Amoko

Office: 4350 Turlington Hall

Time: T 6- 8 (12.50 -3.50pm)

Office Hours: Friday 1-3pm by Zoom
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Course Description

This course addresses bodies in extreme pain; thus, it examines the experience and language of chronic suffering. Around the world, millions feel entrapped in the face of persistent ill-health, escalating disability, and excruciating pain. Fully a third of US residents live with long-term illness, which disabling experiences frequently entail severe pain. Such chronic suffering degrades all aspects of personal, social, and professional life all-too-often amid crushing isolation, diagnostic uncertainty, and therapeutic inadequacy. Highlighting an intractable dilemma, bodies in pain exemplify the pitfalls of representing experience through language: Inevitably, we understand and express even the most intense and excruciating personal circumstances within the confines of socially constructed language. Paradoxically, however, all our descriptions of intense suffering appear to be unfit for purpose; the meager words we use to signify debilitating pain seem unavoidably inapt, inaccurate, or otherwise inadequate. Thus, these experiences remain largely untold at the same time as vocal sufferers feel unheard—or misunderstood—by interlocutors from ranging from loved ones, caregivers, and friends to medical practitioners to employers, supervisors, and colleagues to various publics. Moreover, women, Blacks, Native Americans, immigrants, the poor, and other disempowered groups endure unacknowledged pain in the wake of dismissive prejudices, most notably, degrading discourses of hypochondria and hysteria. Given this complex—and vexing—background, how do chronic sufferers—and their interlocutors—articulate realities that fundamentally elude, if not, exceed language, logic and meaning? Instructively, the rhetoric of pain routinely turns to imprecise analogies and flawed metaphors, for instance, the arbitrary and opaque numerical scales that define clinical settings, not to mention, images of violence and violation embodied in graphic terms like “stabbing,” “crippling,” “tortuous,” and “unbearable.” Bringing together international writers from diverse cultural and historical contexts, this course integrates multiple lines of inquiry: illness and disability studies; the practice and history of medicine; theories of language and subject formation; theories regarding the construction of experience and meaning; and literary theory and criticism.

Course Objectives:

The course is predicated on the following five objectives:

- i) Enhance critical thinking and effective writing by facilitating close readings of wide-ranging, insightful, and thought-provoking creative and critical writing. As detailed below, these writers include prominent novelists, essayists as well influential theorists, historians, and cultural critics. For each text, we will critique not only the relevant substantive content, but also, form, rhetoric, perspective, and persuasiveness/effectiveness. The course aims to concretely model and thus cultivate lucid writing and sound argumentation. In this regard, it includes three writing assignments: a personal reflection on illness, pain and the limits of language, a critical analysis of a creative or autobiographical text, and a comparative study of any two of theoretical or critical perspectives. In short, the course fulfills the requirements for writing courses at the university.
- ii) Facilitate systemic critical engagement with the reality and implications of chronic suffering by studying wide-ranging essays, autobiographies, and fictions of leading writers from the United States, Canada, Britain, France India, Senegal, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. The course elaborates how effective vexing diagnostic uncertainties and insurmountable linguistic barriers fundamentally constrain effective communication.
- iii) Introduce and critique foundational concepts in theories of language and subject formation in addition to exploring the complex—and vexing—relationship between experience and meaning. The course addresses the primacy as well as the perils of language by emphasizing the inescapable but fraught social processes through which our experiences find coherence and expression. We will elaborate how self-definition occurs in unavoidable interaction with others, however tenuous, unacknowledged, diverse, and unequal the relationships.
- iv) Elaborate and critique important aspects of the practice and history of medicine, specifically pertaining to debilitating symptoms that remain shrouded in diagnostic and therapeutic uncertainty. By studying various patient experiences and academic critiques, we will highlight instances of exemplary vis-à-vis problematic or even abusive encounters. Apropos of medical practice, we will highlight historical and enduring inequities.
- v) Examine various “cultures of pain,” that is, the impact of transnational cultural differences in perceptions and expressions of suffering. In this regard, we will consider the extent to which race, nationality, gender, and sexuality, not to mention, the toxic stereotypes that attach to these identities shape—and distort—experiences of illness and pain around the world. For instance, we will address damaging depictions of female hysteria, Japanese stoicism, and Black toughness.
- vi) Provide students a substantive introduction an emerging field of compelling regional, national, and international interest, that is, to illness and disability studies. Predicated on a critique of what preminent disability theorist Tobin Siebers terms “the ideology of ability,” the course highlights invaluable critiques of vitally consequential questions of public policy addressing invidious discrimination and insidious ableism

on the one hand, and affirmative recognition, meaningful support, and reasonable accommodation on the other.

Description of Graded Work

Requirements:

1. Attendance is mandatory for this class. Missing more than six class periods will result in a failing grade for participation; eight or more unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the class. Students can make up for up to three absences by writing two-page essays reviewing the readings of each missed session. Absences for medical and other emergencies will be excused with individual make-up arrangements devised by the instructor.
2. Participation (15%) Students will be required to complete all assigned readings in a timely manner and thereafter to participate meaningfully in class discussions including by asking and answering questions. Fifteen percent (15%) of the final grade will be assigned for participation. The grade scale is provided below.

Personal Reflection (25%). 4-page (1000 words) due at the end of Week 5.

Part of the course's experiential learning outcomes, this assignment requires students to write about a personal experience with serious illness and extreme pain, including the suffering of family members and close friends. To what extent did they feel understood by doctors, loved ones and close friends? What factors facilitate communication? What factor hindered mutual understanding? To what extent are these factors preventable vis-à-vis inevitable?

Critical analysis of a creative text. (25%) 4-page (1000 Words) due end of Week 10.

This assignment requires critical analysis of a creative texts, that is, one of the autobiographical or fictional authors studied in the class. What specific symptoms does the author address? What are the personal, professional, and social consequences of the illness? How do the writer address diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis? What rhetorical strategies—word choice, images, aesthetic choices and so on—do the author deploy? What obstacles to communication and understanding are addressed? How effectively does the author convey specific experiences and perspectives? To what extent did you

understand either the author's pain or his/her fictional representation of illness and suffering?

Research Paper (35%) 8 page (2000 words), due one week after the last class.

This paper requires critical engagement with a central topic addressed in the class, for instance, a critique of cultural difference focus on perceptions of woman's pain in 1960s colonial Rhodesia, or the challenge of describing to other people excruciating symptoms that are shrouded in diagnostic uncertainty. Students will be required to critique a creative text on illness and pain alongside the ideas expressed in two theoretical or critical sources. For example, one could supplement a close reading of Kogawa's *Obasan* with the insights of Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* in a critique of the responses of white Canadians to the expressions of pain by long-suffering ethnic Japanese citizens. As well, one could incorporate Foucault's claim that, far from denoting the absence of speech, silence is a form of speaking to critique the many silences of various characters in the novel.

Grades for Written Assignments.

- A. This grade denotes excellence, that is, a cogent well-written essay that meaningfully addresses all aspects of the assignment. Thus, it will include a succinct introduction with a well-defined topic and thesis; well-organized arguments justified using specific examples, sound logic and insightful analyses; and a strong conclusion briefly reiterating the substance and implications of the argument. The essay will demonstrate in-depth understanding of a salient aspect of the class while offering an original textual interpretation of the relevant primary and/or secondary texts. I reward intellectual risks even in instances of questionable conclusion if there is a diligent effort to construct a cogent argument and present evidence in a coherent and logical manner. While every effort should be made to proof-read and edit your work, minor grammatical or typological errors will not be penalized.
- B. This grade represents a good essay that is somewhat marred by some weaknesses. Such a paper will demonstrate a solid understanding of a good overall understanding of the assignment as well as the relevant texts. As it will include generally plausible interpretations and thoughtful arguments but falter in some of its details. For example, it may feature a well-defined topic with a sound thesis and some insightful well-developed examples, but also, instances of insufficiently specific claims or valid but uncritical textual analyses with no original insights. Finally, a potentially excellent argument can be undermined by repeated grammatical errors and other slips.
- C. Average paper, demonstrating as many strengths as weaknesses. This may reflect a potentially insightful argument that is marred by lack of focus, specificity, and depth because the author addressed too many examples. As well, inaccurate or incomplete citations and questionable

interpretations will undermine an otherwise sound essay. Moreover, persistent grammatical errors and overly general or contradictory claims will render a well-defined argument ineffective.

- D. This grade signifies a flawed paper that misunderstands or disregards a critical aspect the assignment. Examples include falling short of the minimum page requirements, not elaborating claims beyond sketchy examples, or persistently rely on sweeping generalizations and flat assertions instead carefully constructed logical accurate. Further examples include fundamentally misunderstanding a central concept or entirely implausible textual analysis.
- E. A paper that fails to address any aspect of the assignment in terms of the specified topic and texts. The grade will also be awarded for a paper that persistently fail to engage with the texts in question with any specificity.

Grades for Participation:

- A. This grade will be awarded for timely completion of assigned readings, regular class attendance, and consistent attendance and regular contributions to class discussions. Students will be rewarded for probing questions and thoughtful ideas as well as for listening respectfully and responding meaningful to the ideas of others. There is no requirement to speak at each session.
- B. The grade will reflect regular class attendance with no more than four unexcused absences. Repeated instances of inattentiveness may also lower an evaluation from excellent to good. As well, it requires timely completion of assigned readings and meaningful participation in class discussions through thoughtful ideas and questions.
- C. This grade will be awarded for performances with many insightful contributions and thoughtful questions marred by four or more instances of inattentiveness and disengagement or up to six absences.
- D. The grade will be awarded in situations of erratic participation, that is, when the student's inattentiveness and absences significantly outweigh any positive contributions to class discussions. It will also apply when a student fails to complete more than a third of the assigned reading, is repeatedly dismissive of the opinions of others, or misses 7 sessions.
- E. A student will miss more than four classes or persistently fails to complete assigned readings.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1. Jan 9: Introductions

Week 2. Jan 16: Illness and/as Moralism.

- I. Sembene Ousmane, *Xala*

Week 3. Jan 23: Illness as Metaphor

- I. Margaret Edson, *Wit*
- II. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, Introduction, Chapter 1-5

Week 4. Jan 30: The Languages of Pain

- I. Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill*
- II. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*: Introduction and Chapter 1.
- III. First Writing Assignment: 4-page (1000 words) personal reflection on pain due no later than the beginning of class on Tuesday, March 13, 2024.

Week 5: Feb 6: The Body in Pain

- i. Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals*
- ii. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, *second half of the book*.

Week 6. Feb 13: Illness and the Limits of Language

- i. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (preface and Chapter 1).
- ii. Jacques Derrida, “*Cogito and the History of Madness.*”

Week 7. Feb 20 (Un)speakable Pain?

- I. Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (first half)
- II. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience.”

Week 8. Feb 27: Pain and/as the Other

- I. Kogawa, *Obasan*; second half
- II. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, first half
- III. Second Assignment due not later than the beginning of class Tuesday, March 12, 2024

Week 9. March 5. Pain, and/as the Other

Spring break; no class.

Week 10. March 12

- i. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Purple Hibiscus*.
- ii. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Introduction and Chapter 1)

Week 11. March 19

- i. Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*
- ii. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Introduction, Chapter 1)

Week 12. March 26

- i. Jane Pryma, ““Even my Sister Says I am Acting Like a Crazy to Get a Check’: Race, Gender, and Moral Boundary-Work in Women’s Claims of Disabling Chronic Pain,” *Social Science Medicine* 181 (2017), 66–73.
- ii. Keith Wailoo, *Pain: A Political History*. (Introduction and Chapter 1)

Week 13. April 2

- i. J. M. Coetzee *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Week 14. April 9

- I. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*.
- ii. Susan Sontag, *AIDs and its Metaphors*.

Week 15. April 16

- I. Alphonse Daudet, *In the Land of Pain*

Week 16: April 23.

- i. Ferdinand Oyono, *Houseboy*
- ii. Frantz Fanon, “Concerning Violence,” *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Disability Accommodations:

I will provide reasonable support and/or accommodations for students physical and mental disabilities including learning disabilities such as ADHD or severe dyslexia. It is your responsibility to contact the Office of Students with Disabilities and thereafter provide the instructor requisite documentation. Kindly request for support and/or accommodation as early in the semester as possible. On a related note, I undertake to provide all students with a rigorous but safe and respectful learning environment by providing specific protection against harassment including sexual harassment.

Academic Honesty

As you should be aware, the university values on academic honesty with severe penalties for plagiarism and other forms of deception or fraud including: i) possessing, using, or exchanging improperly acquired written or oral information in the preparation of research papers or exams, ii) submitting material that is wholly or substantially identical to material created or published by others, iii) making false claims

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regarding performance or work submitted for a class. The university's policies regarding intellectual honesty are detailed in the Academic Honesty Guidelines. It is your responsibility to complete. If you are ever in any doubt regarding the appropriate use of research materials, please consult the instructor before turning in the assignment in question. You are advised to retain all graded papers until you have been assigned a final grade.