

Disability and Madness in African American Literature

ETHN 174/LTEN 185 | Winter Quarter 2022 | University of California, San Diego

Instructor and Course Information

Instructor

Dr. Kianna M. Middleton (she/her)

Course Location and Time

Zoom ([LINK](#)) and Solis Hall 111
first 2 weeks of class on Zoom

Virtual Office Hours

[Wednesdays, 2:00-4:00pm PT](#)

Email: kmmiddleton@ucsd.edu

TuTh 9:30-10:50am PT

[Office Hours Sign-up Sheet](#)

Course Description

Welcome to Disability and Madness in African American Literature! This quarter we will interrogate the themes of disability and madness in African American literature. Disability and madness are often overlooked analytic and lived experience in African American Studies and African American criticism, though recent work in Black disability studies is shifting this. Our goal will be to pull disability and madness to the center of our readings to understand the complexities of Black life, such as: grief, sexuality and gender identity, geography, and the impact of incarceration and institutionalization. It is my hope that we can approach canonical texts (*Passing*, *Beloved*, and *Eva's Man*) and other less familiar texts (*A Visitation of Spirits* and *Trumpet*) for messier re-readings, unraveling(s), and ravings that complicate Black life. Likewise, we will watch (either in class or on our own) films that also represent disability and madness on screen. Because disability and madness are recurrently represented visually, as is race, it will be important for us to trace representation from the page to the screen as part of a deeper understanding of how disability and race become co-constituted in American culture. Lastly, we will ask ourselves, again and again: what does disability and madness look like in literature? What images, language, etc. are used to represent disability and madness as it intersects with Blackness? And finally, what things are made possible through a disabled or mad lens? How are freedom, injury (and healing), and salvation better imagined through disability and madness?

“Remember that madness is manifold, potentially a wellspring of inspiration as well as a pit of frustration—and some pits hold seeds. Remember, also, always, that the abyss may have no bottom...but blackness has no top, no limit.

Are you still holding tight?”

-La Marr Jurelle Bruce | *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind*, p. 230

Course Objectives

1. To define disability, madness, and Blackness
2. Become keen watchers of film and visual representations of disability, madness, and Blackness
3. Identify disability metaphors and symbols in literature
4. Learn to read literature through an anti-ableist lens

Course Materials

Required Text

Passing, Nella Larsen (1929) – available through the UCSD Bookstore and [eBook](#) (requires UCSD VPN)

Beloved, Toni Morrison (1987) – available through the UCSD Bookstore

Eva's Man, Gayl Jones (1976) – available through the UCSD Bookstore

A Visitation of Spirits, Randall Kenan (1989) –available on [Amazon](#) or other used bookstores online

Trumpet, Jackie Kay (1998) – available through the UCSD Bookstore

Optional Texts

Each novel has accompanying articles that work to explain or critique the texts and/or provide a deeper dive into disability and madness and Blackness in literature. You are not required to read the articles, but you may find them useful. Additionally, I will (periodically) add other resources to Canvas. Please be sure to check Canvas modules for all updates.

Course Schedule

***Subject to change, weekly reading load is open to revision! ***

Week and Theme	Day	Text	Pages or Chapters
Week 1 (01/04 + 01/6): <i>An Amazing Soft Malice</i>	TU (01/04)	Course Introduction	N/A
	TH (01/06)	<i>Passing</i> by Nella Larsen	“Part One: Encounter” (pp. 143-178)
Week 2 (01/11 + 01/13): <i>An Amazing Soft Malice</i> (Continued)	TU (01/11)	<i>Passing</i> by Nella Larsen	“Part Two: Re-Encounter” (pp. 181-210)
	TH (01/13)	<i>Passing</i> by Nella Larsen	“Part Three: Finale” (pp. 213-242)
<u>FILM</u> : <i>Passing</i> (Dir. Rebecca Hall) Netflix			
Week 3 (01/18 + 01/20): <i>Flesh that Needs to Be Loved</i>	TU (01/18)	<i>Beloved</i> by Toni Morrison	pp. 3-105
	TH (01/20)	<i>Beloved</i> by Toni Morrison	pp. 106-147
Week 4 (01/25 + 01/27): <i>Flesh that Needs to Be Loved</i> (Continued)	TU (01/25)	<i>Beloved</i> by Toni Morrison	pp. 148-217
	TH (01/27)	<i>Beloved</i> by Toni Morrison	pp. 218-273
<u>FILM</u> : <i>Us</i> (Dir. Jordan Peele)			

Week and Theme	Day	Text	Pages or Chapters
Week 5 (02/01 + 02/03): <i>Just Creepin' on the Downlow</i>	TU (02/01)	<i>Eva's Man</i> by Gayl Jones	"Part One," Chapters 1-6
	TH (02/03)	<i>Eva's Man</i> by Gayl Jones	— "Part One", Chapters 7-10
Week 6 (02/08 + 02/10): <i>Just Creepin' on the Downlow</i> (Continued)	TU (02/08)	<i>Eva's Man</i> by Gayl Jones	"Part Two and Three"
	TH (02/10)	<i>Eva's Man</i> by Gayl Jones <u>FILM</u> : <i>Gothika</i> (Dir. Mathieu Kassovitz) TubiTV (free)	— "Part Four"
Week 7 (02/15 + 02/17): <i>On Demon Time</i>	TU (02/15)	<i>A Visitation of Spirits</i> by Randall Kenan	CH: "White Sorcery and Black Necromancy"
	TH (02/17)	<i>A Visitation of Spirits</i> by Randall Kenan	— CH: "Holy Science"
Week 8 (02/22 + 02/24): <i>On Demon Time</i> (Continued)	TU (02/22)	<i>A Visitation of Spirits</i> by Randall Kenan	CH: "Old Demonology"
	TH (02/24)	<i>A Visitation of Spirits</i> by Randall Kenan <u>FILM</u> : <i>The Alchemist Cookbook</i> (Dir. Joel Potrykus Kanopy (free)	— CH: "Old Gods, New Demons"
Week 9 (03/01 + 03/03): <i>Lifelong Terror</i>	TU (03/01)	<i>Trumpet</i> by Jackie Kay	CH: "House and Home → House and Home" (pp. 1-100)
	TH (03/03)	<i>Trumpet</i> by Jackie Kay	— CH: "People: <i>The Funeral Director</i> → Sex" (pp. 101-143)
Week 10 (03/08 + 03/10): <i>Lifelong Terror</i> (Continued)	TU (03/08)	<i>Trumpet</i> by Jackie Kay	CH: "People: The Drummer → Today's Television" (pp. 144-222)
	TH (03/10)	<i>Trumpet</i> by Jackie Kay	— CH: "Interiors → Shares" (pp. 223-278)

A Statement About Access

The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) asks you to submit your access needs to your Disability Specialist or to the OSD at osd@ucsd.edu. You may also find more information about OSD resources at osd.ucsd.edu. It is critical to note that the OSD may not be able to provide support to you for all your access needs. Your frustration is valid. Please email me with questions or suggestions for how I can make this course more accessible for everyone. Please share what you need with either/both the OSD and me as soon as possible.

Attendance and Participation

I understand that attendance is difficult during the pandemic for several personal and technological reasons. I will take attendance, but loosely. If you miss class, please note that you may complete readings, watch films, listen to recorded lectures, and submit discussion responses on your own. However, I encourage attending class lectures for discussion and community. If you attend class, we may begin the class period with a warmup writing assignment that can serve as a form of participation if you do not wish to participate in other ways (speaking up in class, writing in chat box). You may submit your warmup during class or at any point during the rest of the day for 'credit'. You do not need to inform me as to why you have missed class; however, if you know that you will only be able to attend class remotely, please let me know as soon as possible.

There are multiple ways to participate in class: submitting warmups; speaking during Zoom meetings; typing in the chat box during Zoom meetings; attending office hours; attending and contributing to breakout sessions; working with a partner or group on final projects. I am also open to other forms of participation. For example, if you participate in an extracurricular organization, community group, etc. that overlaps with class themes, we can talk about making your participation there count towards our class.

Lectures

Lectures for this class will be recorded and uploaded to our Canvas page after class. Note: all lectures will be brief and are meant to provide you with relevant background information about the authors, their artistic intentions and style, and provocative questions that will guide discussion (in class and discussion board posts). You are responsible for either listening to lectures on your own or in class.

Assignments

All assignments for this course have flexible deadlines, though all assignments need to be submitted by the end of the quarter (**March 11, 2022**). If you have difficulties submitting assignments by the final deadline, please let me know. You are responsible for the following assignments:

1. Writing Warmups
2. Book Responses (must complete 5 total)
3. Occasional Discussion Board Posts (Small Group Work)
4. Final Paper: *Mad Black Reading in African American Literature* (prompt)

Writing Warmups:

Though we may not write each class, on the days that we do this is the format: For the first five minutes of class, we will free-write on a topic that relates to the week's course materials/themes. You do not need to submit polished writing; writing can be fragments, lists, etc. Daily writing will also loosely serve as an attendance and participation meter, though there is no formal attendance for this course and there are other ways to participate. If you are unable to attend class, please submit your writing before the start of the next class meeting.

Discussion Board Posts (Small Group Work):

Weekly, we will have space for small group activities aimed at unpacking the week's readings. For these activities, you will be responsible for attending and participating in the conversation and contributing to written, in-class assignments submitted to Canvas.

Reading Responses:

There is no formal midterm assignment for this course. Instead, you will submit a total of FIVE response papers or video essays for each course text. Please address the following questions in your response paper:

1. Summary of the text
2. How disability and/or madness are represented (describe scenes, include dialogue, symbols, writing style, etc.)
3. How disability and/or madness challenges static notions of Blackness/Black people
4. A question about either the text, the author's writing style or identity, or a question for your classmates.

Reading response specifications: please address all questions and must be two pages double-spaced (minimum, max 4). You may reference the films listed in the syllabus or other media. Please upload your responses to Canvas. **Suggested due dates are every two weeks or when we finish each text. However, deadlines are flexible. You may submit your responses until the last day of the quarter, March 11, 2022.**

Final Paper: Mad Black Reading in African American Literature (prompt)

The final paper will allow you space to reflect on one or more course texts (and films) and their contribution to our understanding of Blackness and disability and madness. Additionally, you will discuss transgressive reading (and viewing) strategies as a path to deeper analyses of disability and madness in African American literature.

Final Paper specifications: 7-10 pages double-spaced (max 10), includes 1-2 course texts, can include a film, must include 1-2 outside sources. Due: **March 18, 2022.**

Due dates for assignments:

Meeting the suggested due dates for assignments is encouraged. This course was designed to give you enough time to work on projects throughout the quarter. However, you may find that you need more time to complete assignments. With that being said: you may turn in all assignments by the end of quarter if you choose. Note: this may put a heavier workload on you at the end of the quarter if you choose this route. Furthermore, you may not receive feedback on your work and risk submitting work at the end of term with no guarantee or knowledge of the grading system for this course. If you can submit assignments by the suggested dates listed here, I encourage you to do so.

Late Work Policy:

Since all assignments have flexible due dates, late work is highly discouraged. If you turn in your reading responses, discussion posts, writing prompts, etc. after **March 11, 2022**, the highest you will receive is 50% for each assignment. I will not accept any late final exam papers (due **March 18, 2022**).

Finals Week

Our class will probably not meet during finals week unless we decide to as a class. If we do decide to meet, our finals week time is **March 15, 2022, from 8-11am PT**. We will meet over Zoom. Final papers are due by the end of finals week (**March 18, 2022**). You may submit your final earlier than finals week and ask for feedback at any time before the due date.

Grading

Participation 20% (includes writing exercises, participating in class discussions, office hours)

Small Group Work 25%

Reading Responses 25%

Final Paper: Mad Black Reading in African American Literature (prompt) 30%

****Detailed rubrics for each assignment will be posted in the assignment tab on Canvas.**

Grading Scale:

A+ (97-100)	B (85-83)	C- (72-70)
A (96-93)	B- (82-80)	D and below – not passing
A- (92-90)	C+ (79-76)	
B+ (89-86)	C (75-73)	

Academic Integrity

From the University:

"Academic Integrity is expected of everyone at UC San Diego. This means that you must be honest, fair, responsible, respectful, and trustworthy in all of your actions. Lying, cheating or any other forms of dishonesty will not be tolerated because they undermine learning and the University's ability to certify students' knowledge and abilities. Thus, any attempt to get, or help another get, a grade by cheating, lying or dishonesty will be reported to the Academic Integrity Office and will result sanctions. Sanctions can include an F in this class and suspension or dismissal from the University. So, think carefully before you act by asking yourself: a) is what I'm about to do or submit for credit an honest, fair, respectful, responsible & trustworthy representation of my knowledge and abilities at this time and, b) would my instructor approve of my action? You are ultimately the only person responsible for your behavior. So, if you are unsure, don't ask a friend—ask your instructor, instructional assistant, or the Academic Integrity Office. You can learn more about academic integrity at academicintegrity.ucsd.edu" (Source: Academic Integrity Office, 2018).

For this course:

It is understandable that you are now navigating new educational terrain. You may be attending class from a location where you do not have the same resources, dedicated time, silence, etc. to work on assignments. Our

goal is to work together this quarter to create new educational materials and familiarize ourselves with the concept of decolonization. Work does not need to be perfect; it is more about working intentionally on projects of interest. Please do not submit work you have written for other courses or work that is not your own. What you complete this quarter is more than enough.

Additional Resources – [Ethnic Studies Minor](#)