

# MEANING/S OF DEATH

*making sense of memory, murder, and monstrosity*



ELIZABETH BROCKWAY (2018)

**content note:**

THIS CLASS  
CENTERS ON  
FRANK DISCUSSION  
OF VIOLENCE,  
DEATH, AND  
SYSTEMIC  
OPPRESSION(S)

## What Does Death Mean?

DEATH IS WHAT WE MAKE OF IT

The meaning(s) we make of death reveal important things about ourselves, our communities, our commitments, our desires, and our limits. This class explores death and what we make of it as a window into the study of religion. Students engage fiction, films, podcasts, and scholarly analyses to learn how and why religious studies helps us make meaning of human experiences (and what comes after them).

Also, look: the pandemic isn't over. None of us are okay right now, and I don't need you to pretend otherwise. We don't know what the semester will look like. I fully expect you to get tired, disgusted, angry, and/or overwhelmed by this material at some point(s). Take care of yourself; do the best you can with the assignments; and let me know if the class starts getting to be too much in an already-way-too-much moment in time.

# REQUIRED READINGS

Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, 2nd edition  
Stoker, *Dracula*

(I have extra copies, if these aren't in your budget)  
everything else is on Canvas



MOHAMMED HUWAIS (2013 | AP)

**Complete the assigned readings before class on the day they're listed on the syllabus.** I strongly recommend you submit reading notes for that class before we meet again, while our discussion is still fresh in your mind.

But also—I cannot say this enough—we are still in the midst of a pandemic. All due dates for this class, **with the exception of 4 May** (deadline for *all* assignments), are suggestions to help you manage your schedule and workload.

**There are no penalties for late work in this class.**

# Class Format and Expectations

YOU ARE ADULTS; YOU GET OUT WHAT YOU PUT IN

This class works best—for you, me, and your classmates—if you do the as much of the work as you can and show up as often as you can. But, again: pandemic. **There are no penalties for absences. If you are sick, PLEASE do not come to class.** Class materials are available on Canvas. I am happy to help you catch up if needed, especially if it means we can take care of one another and stay as healthy as possible.

Each class centers on discussion of the assigned materials. Some will include brief lectures, media analysis, or other elements. **Please come to class ready to analyze and respond to the readings, as well as to the contributions of your fellow students.** Always bring the readings to class with you.

Remember: engagement includes active listening! It also involves asking questions! **You don't have to understand every assignment to participate in the discussion.**

This is an introductory course. **I don't expect you'll know anything about religious studies as a discipline.** I do assume a basic familiarity with humanities scholarship. If you're unfamiliar with reading and analyzing scholarly articles or writing scholarly essays using standard humanities styles, you might find some course assignments challenging. Please be sure to read directions closely and seek additional assistance as needed well in advance of deadlines.

Regardless of your academic background, **treat every student and every concept you encounter with scholarly respect.** Challenge your assumptions and your position(s) of privilege. Speak from your own best understandings of the issues. As scholars of religion, it is not our job to evaluate the truth or validity of any tradition. We use the evidence we have to position that tradition's beliefs, practices, teachings, and products in the broader context of the study of religion.

“

*Why does one  
make a monster?  
In order to  
watch it die,  
of course.*

*Ingebretsen, At Stake*



## Accessibility

### HOW CAN I HELP YOU SUCCEED?

If you're having trouble keeping up, need alternate assignment options, or have requests to facilitate your learning process, please let me know as soon as you can. **You do not have to have a registered disability to request accommodations**, but I won't know you need help or more time unless you tell me so. You don't have to tell me why you're having a hard time, but getting in touch means I can come up with a plan to get you what you need.

**It is 100% okay to be struggling to retain new information or keep up with schoolwork right now.** Crises affect our moods, our energy, and our cognition. I will never judge you for needing more time or an alternate assignment, but I can't help you if you don't tell me you need help. If I can better help you learn, let me know!

## Technology

### MAKING IT WORK

Unless you need them for learning accessibility, only use your laptops and other devices in the classroom for specified class activities.

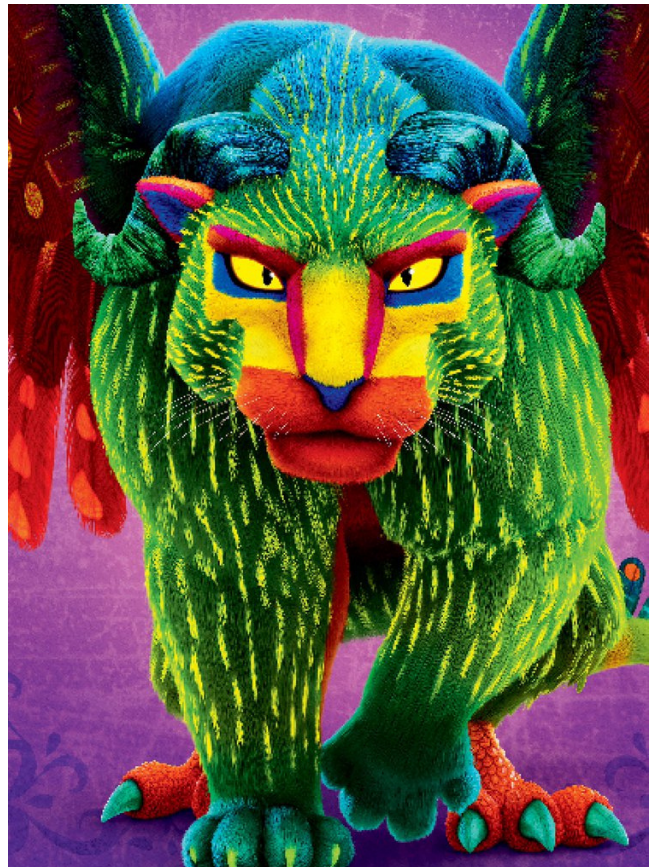
You'll also need to know how to use Twitter as well as how to create a PDF document and submit it via Canvas in a timely manner. (We'll discuss these in class.) Please note: I only accept electronic submissions in PDF format, and only via Canvas. I will not accept assignments as \*.doc or \*.docx files or assignments sent to my email address.

I do not record my lectures; currently there is no distance learning option for this course. (If public health concerns require us to pivot online, obviously we'll work something out.) **All course materials are available on Canvas** and your TA and I are happy to catch you up.

“

*You don't have  
to forgive him.  
But we shouldn't  
forget him.*

Coco





ASHA SERGO

## Know Your IX

### LEARNING HAS NO GENDER

Despite recent federal efforts to the contrary, gender- and sex-based harassment is still a Civil Rights offense. Offenders are subject to the same kinds of penalties applied to offenses against other protected categories (such as race, national origin, etc.).

Survivors are entitled to confidential support.

If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you're not alone. I believe you. **You can find the university's resources here.** I am also happy to provide further resources within and beyond the university if you get in touch with me in class or during office hours.

*WE WILL WORK TO  
MAKE OUR CAMPUS  
AND CLASSROOM A  
SUPPORTIVE LEARNING  
ENVIRONMENT FOR  
PEOPLE OF ALL RACES,  
GENDERS, AGES,  
ETHNICITIES,  
ABILITIES, CLASSES,  
SEXUALITIES, AND  
STATUSES OF  
DOCUMENTATION.*

## Participation

### JUST KEEP SWIMMING

In "normal" semesters, I have a whole chart about how to earn participation credit. This semester? Let's all just do the best we can.

Which is to say: **there is no participation grade for this class.** Any engagement beyond what is explicitly required = awesome. I hope you'll want to talk about the material we'll be covering beyond what's explicitly required, but I won't penalize you for being short on the ability to even right now.

We're tackling some tough subjects this semester. Your health is more important than this class. **If you need to opt out of any discussions or assignments because of the topic or required materials, please contact me.** I also know that the internet is not a safe space for anyone, and it's especially unsafe for minoritized folks. **If you'd prefer not to use Twitter for safety or privacy reasons, please get in touch with me about alternative options for those assignments.**

# DON'T CHEAT

**Seriously, it's the only way to fail this class. Just don't.**

Do your own work; cite everything; and complete this plagiarism tutorial by **26 January**.



# EXTRA CREDIT?

**You won't need it.**

Keep reading to find out why.

(Hint: the grade you earn in this class is 100% based on how much you decide to contribute.)

# Opt-in Grading

## YOU DECIDE YOUR GRADE

There's a lot of evidence to suggest that grading isn't (and maybe can't be) 100% objective, and that often grades reflect unconscious instructor biases. This class hopes to challenge and disrupt white supremacy, cis-sexism, anti-queerness, ableism, and other injustices. So let's try something different, shall we?

**Opt-in grading = you decide how much and what kind of energy you can devote to this course.**

**Option F:** failure is not an option.

**Option D:** turn in literally any of the work assigned for this course. (It has to be something I assigned. Don't make up your own assignment.) Congrats, you've got yourself a D. It's not fancy, but you pass the class.

**Option C:** turn in at least 75% of your reading notes (12/14) and *either* turn in a film analysis *or* participate in a Harkness discussion. Bam! That's a C.

**Option B:** turn in at least 85% of your reading notes (13/14) + at least two film analyses + participate in at least two Harkness discussions. Mazel tov on your B.

**Option A:** turn in at least 95% (13/14) of your reading notes + three film analyses + participate in all three Harkness discussions. You earn an A, also several naps. Just kidding, everybody deserves naps.

**Please note:** you must follow directions to earn credit for turning in assignments. Opting in for an A requires completion of all assignments required at the C and B levels. (That means you can't sleep on the reading notes.)



# READING NOTES

## **The only non-optional assignment**

Technically due by 4 May, but I encourage you to submit them as we go to help you prepare for Harkness discussions and media analyses.



## Assignment: Reading Notes

ANNOYING TO DO BUT HELPFUL TO REVIEW

Ultimately, this class has two central goals: to help you think more carefully and critically about what religion is and what people do with it; and to help you become a more careful and critical thinker and reader/consumer of media, period. This assignment is designed to help you meet both goals.

**After each discussion, you'll complete your reading notes assignments on Canvas through the "quizzes" function.** For each bolded reading on the syllabus, identify the argument (1 sentence), the evidence used to support the argument (3-5 sentences), and the significance of the argument (3-5 sentences). Basically, what does the author want you to think, what are they using as proof to trying to convince you, and why does it matter? (This, by the way, is something you should ask of every single thing you read.) Cite all references to assigned sources and consult the assignment sheet for more instructions. You must closely follow instructions to receive credit for completing this and all assignments.



## Assignments

### HARKNESS DISCUSSIONS

These are rigorous, student-led classroom discussions that tackle questions at the core of this course. At the end of each unit, students will spend the class period responding to a prompt provided in advance. Students will also receive further research questions and a list of required readings selected from sources assigned this semester.

I will record the conversation but interject only to pause for check-ins. You must attend and participate to receive credit for this assignment.

Review the rubric, assignment sheet, and sample feedback sheet for more info. A written option is available for those who prefer one.

### MEDIA ANALYSES

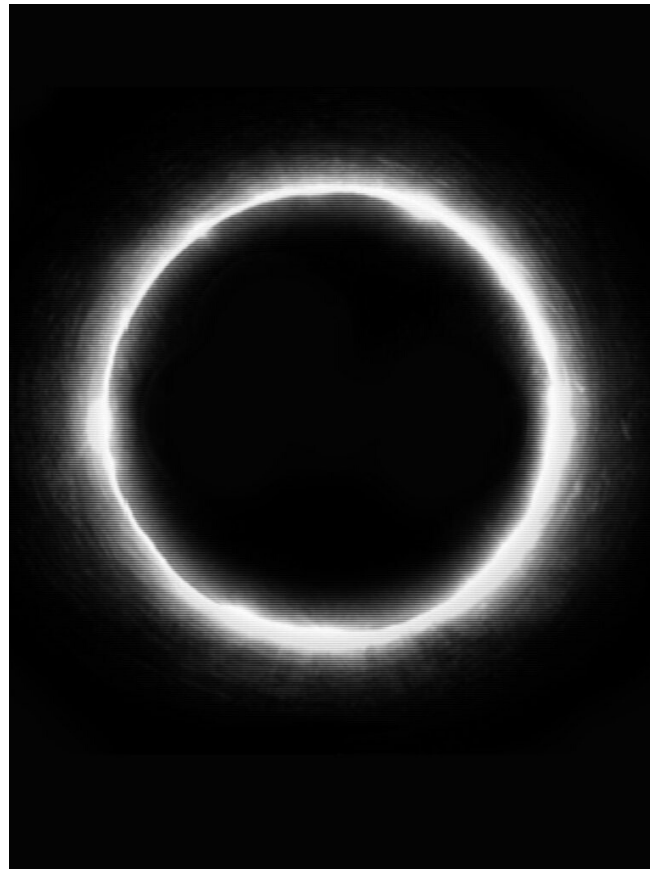
We'll be watching (and live-tweeting! #NUdeath) selected scenes from a number of films this semester. Choose three of these films and put them in conversation with the sources assigned for this class. How might the authors of these essays respond to the films in question? Do the film's depictions of religion and death correspond with our class materials & discussions? About broader concerns in the study of religion and culture? Why or why not? Why do these correspondences matter?

Submit your analysis as a twitter thread. Draw on (and cite! always be citing!) course materials to support your argument. Review the assignment sheet for more info.



*If you want something  
bad enough and praying  
takes too long, they say  
there's a way of making  
it happen yourself.  
By forcing the hand of  
nature, or working roots,  
as they call it.*

*Newsome-Bass, Wake*



# CLASS SCHEDULE

| DATE   | TOPIC   | ASSIGNMENT   |
|--|---|--|
| 19 January                                   | Introductions                                     |  |
| 21 January                                   | What's religion and why should you care?          | Nye, "Religion: Some Basics"<br>KI101 E101, "What the Heck Is Religion"<br><b>KI101 E202, "Intersectionality"</b>  |
| 26 January                                   | LT Screening:<br><i>This Is Where I Leave You</i> | Ruttenberg, thread on shiva and collective mourning<br>Frazier, "Speak Torah to Power"<br>Yale Film Analysis Guide: basic terms & cinematography   |
| <b>Religion, Race, Gender, and Abjection</b> |   |  |
| 28 January                                   | Abjection, religion, and gender                   | <b>Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine"</b><br>Ingebretsen, "Death by Narrative"<br>Butler, from <i>Bodies That Matter</i><br><br>Recommended: Nye, "Gender;" KI101 E305, "Gender, Sexuality, and Religion in what's now the US" |
| 2 February                                   | Abjection, religion, and race                     | KI101 E203, "Race and Religion in What's Now the US"<br><b>Rana, "Race"</b><br>Baker, "Monsters"<br><br>Recommended: Nye, "Race and the Study of Religion"   |
| 4 February                                   | Making a way out of no way                        | <b>KI101 E402, "You Don't Know African Diasporic Religions"</b><br>Nye, "Ritual"<br>Brand, "Verso 55"<br><br>Screening: <i>The Water Will Carry Us Home</i>  |
| 9 February                                   | The mattering of Black lives                      | <b>Sharpe, "The Wake"</b><br>Rankine, "The Condition of Black Lives"<br>DuBois, "Strivings of the Negro People"<br>Morrison, from <i>Beloved</i>   |
| 11 February                                  | LT Screening:<br><i>Candyman (2021)</i>           | Brown, "What We Owe to Candyman"<br>Brown, "Candyman Is a Bittersweet Revival"   |
| 16 February                                  | Film discussion and Harkness prep                 |  |
| 18 February                                  | Harkness 1  |  |
| <b>Making Meaning of Making Monsters</b>     |   |  |
| 23 February                                  | No class - catch up day                           |  |
| 25 February                                  | Monster watching                                  | <b>Williams, "When the Woman Looks"</b><br>Baker, "Extreme Zombie Activity"<br>Casimir, "The Zombification of Blackness"<br>Hesiod (trans. Lattimore), "Pandora" & "Why Life Is Hard"<br><br>Clips: <i>Girl with All the Gifts</i>     |

## Making Meaning of Making Monsters

|          |                         |  |
|----------|-------------------------|--|
| 2 March  | Belief                  | Nye, "Belief"<br>Beal, "Introduction"<br><b>Peacock, "Worship of the Blood God"</b><br><br>Clips: <i>Lost Boys; From Dusk 'Til Dawn; Salem's Lot</i> |
| 4 March  | Culture                 | Nye, "Culture"<br><b>Peacock, "Religious Shadows"</b>  |
| 9 March  | Ritual                  | Nye, "Ritual"<br><b>Creed, "Woman as Possessed Monster"</b><br><br>Clips: <i>The Exorcist (1973)</i>   |
| 11 March | Undead religion (1)     | Peacock, "OMG!"<br>Arjana, "The Monsters of Orientalism"<br><b>Halberstam, "Technologies of Monstrosity"</b>   |
| 16 March | No class - spring break |  |
| 18 March |                         |  |
| 23 March | Undead religion (2)     | Stoker, <i>Dracula</i>   |
| 25 March | Harkness prep           |  |
| 30 March | Harkness 2              |  |

## Conversations with the Dead

|          |   |   |
|----------|---|---|
| 1 April  | No class - catch up day                   |   |
| 6 April  | Talking to the dead                       | <b>Chireau, "Our Religion and Superstitions"</b><br>Hurston, "Graveyard Dirt and Other Poisons"<br>Manigault-Bryant, "Ah Tulk to de Dead All de Time"<br><br>Screening: Newsome Bass, <i>Wake</i>   |
| 8 April  | Ancestors: missing, stolen, and returning | KI101 E404, "What Are Indigenous Religions? Part 2"<br>Silversmith, "Violence against Indigenous Women"<br><b>Holscher, "Children's Graves in Canada"</b><br>Kesler, "Indian Boarding Schools' Traumatic Legacy"<br><br>Clips: <i>Blood Quantum; La Llorona</i> |
| 13 April | Interceding with the dead                 | <b>Machado, "Transgressing Saint"</b><br>Barajas, "LGBT Appropriations of Popular Religiosity"<br><br>Screening: <i>Muerte Querida</i>  |
| 15 April | Relating to the dead                      | Cervantes-Altamirano, "Understanding Mexican Nationalism and Mestizaje"<br><b>Anzaldúa, from <i>Borderlands / La Frontera</i></b><br>Aguilar, "A Gringo's Guide to <i>Coco</i> "  |
| 20 April | LT Screening: <i>Coco</i> (2017)          |   |
| 22 April | Film discussion and Harkness prep         |   |
| 27 April | Harkness 3                                |   |
| 4 May    | <b>ALL WORK DUE</b>                       |   |

# MEANING/S OF DEATH



RED RIBBON SKIRT SOCIETY OF THE BLACK HILLS



## Prof. Megan Goodwin

OFFICE HOURS WF 1:30 - 2:30PM  
(APPOINTMENT REQUIRED)

**Email:** [me.goodwin@northeastern.edu](mailto:me.goodwin@northeastern.edu)

**Twitter:** @mpgphd

I live in Maine, so I'm not on campus a lot. But I'm happy to arrange a virtual meeting if you can't make office hours!

*class info*

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SPRING 2022  
WF 11:45AM - 1:25PM  
DODGE 330