

Topic: *The Covid-19 Pandemic and our Settler Colonial Present: through the lens of Critical Disability Studies and Critical Race and Decolonial Feminism*

**Tuesday 14:35-17:25**

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*McGill University is located on unceded Indigenous land. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations and continues to be home to a diverse population of Indigenous and racialized peoples. [Making this acknowledgement does not exculpate us institutionally; rather, it intensifies the need to actively support Indigenous peoples in their struggles for decolonization.]*

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

One of the main goals of this course is to develop nuanced conceptual tools to think through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and our settler colonial present, both here and globally. (To say that these tools are conceptual is not to exclude the affective and structural levels that must also be part of our analyses.) Little attention has been paid to the ways in which colonial and racial schemas—what I call “colonial duration”—have intensified and repeated in recent years. Even less studied is how these schemas have rephrased through a normalization and denial of the pandemic that has gone largely unquestioned (even by “progressive” movements that claim to engage in social justice or feminist work). The embrace of a “return to normal” that explicitly accepts the *disposability* of “vulnerable” peoples (an amorphous category that includes not just elders and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, but also Black, Indigenous and racialized people, as well as all those who now have a “comorbidity” through Covid infection) is dissonant with the critique of normality at the core of feminist theory. Moreover, this *active forgetting* and *abandonment* repeats an “epistemology of ignorance” or “colonial disregard” that those who have studied racism and colonialism should recognize, but this link has yet to be made.

What this forgets is how the normalization of the pandemic was precipitated, in part, by the public awareness that it was Indigenous, Black, and racialized populations that were most susceptible to death and debility by SARS-CoV-2 (not only because of socioeconomic and intergenerational factors, but because of the “weathering,” wearing-down, and premature physiological aging these populations already endured). More so, the “organized abandonment” (Ruth Wilson Gilmore) that the pandemic has become reflects the “boomerang effect” (to use Aimé Césaire's concept) of colonial medicine ricocheting back onto imperial-centers from the Global South where it has been hitherto norm. Concepts like “endemicity” with their colonial inheritance (think cholera) instantiate how public health has incorporated this silent coloniality.

While our starting point will be the pandemic we have been living through together, other contemporary oppressive structurings of our present and settler colonial projects will also inform our discussions. We will be reading texts at the intersection of critical disability studies and critical race/decolonial and feminist theories, with the aim of applying them to the COVID-19 pandemic and

to our settler colonial present, while also questioning these theories by means of current experience. The texts we are drawing on include work (from before the pandemic) in feminist philosophy of disability, especially decolonial and Black disability studies, by Jasbir Puar, Sami Schalk, and others—as well as writings on the pandemic by philosophers such as Tommy Curry. While there has been interesting work on the first year of the pandemic, the “mass disabling event” it has turned out to be—and the “organized abandonment” and denial/forgetting that are taking place—have received much less attention. Recent years have been more deadly in the pandemic than the initial phase (also in Canada), yet have been normalized and brushed aside; much theorization has dealt with “lockdowns” and social distancing, but very little with the mass death and disablement (and their simultaneous forgetting) that has taken place and continues to take place unmitigated. We are all living through this pandemic, but in different ways, and this course is an attempt to understand how a culture of desensitization and denial has been instituted and how it now structures our everyday lives (quashing solidarity and revolutionary possibilities that were glimpsed at the beginning of the pandemic).

Background theoretical considerations that will also be addressed in the course: The intersection of disability studies and critical race/decolonial studies has been a difficult terrain for feminist theory to navigate. Long-standing critiques of disability studies as a field where predominantly “white” voices are in the foreground contrast with critiques of critical race and decolonial philosophies as “ableist.” Recently, work in critical disability studies has tried to bridge this gap, addressing the unreflective coloniality that has sometimes made the *disability rights* movement into a US-centred celebration of the ADA and the exceptionality of Western contexts for people with disabilities. Decolonial and critical race feminist work on *disability justice* (Sins Invalid) focuses on the intersectionality that is needed for *disablement* to be understood as more than an identity or accident, but rather as a structure and process. More so, the concept of *debilitation* (Jasbir Puar) triangulates what it means to make abled/disabled by rendering tangible the hidden underside of “expected impairment” through environmental racism, labour practices, and imperial wars in the Global South. It is argued that these historically provide the material conditions by which “disability” receives support as a state-recognized identity in the Global North (Helen Meekosa, Nirmala Erevelles, Robert McRuer).

**\*\* Please note** that this is a course in formation, so we will be creating the content together. It is an experiment in understanding, philosophically and with nuance, the reality we are stuck in. Thus I have left space on the syllabus to add content based on our discussions in class. ***Your active and sensitive engagement in discussing the topics of the course are crucial.*** These discussions will no doubt be difficult, as we are going through different experiences of the pandemic, settler colonialism, and loss. These evoke affective subaltern experiences, of mass death and disablement, of “organized abandonment” and disposability that have been ongoing—and which intensify and repeat colonial, racist and eugenic logics that have continued for centuries. These voices and theorizations have been suppressed and actively disregarded in the colonial and eugenic formations that structure our present. Please approach the works in this course and the interventions of your comrades with the attention and critical generosity they deserve. \*\*

**Prerequisites:** For PHIL 442: PHIL 242 and one intermediate course in philosophy.  
For GSFS 402: GSFS 200/250 and one intermediate course in GSFS.  
Or permission of the instructor.

## TEXTS

Three books at Paragraphe Bookstore: <https://paragraphbooks.com/collections/textbooks/PHIL-442>  
 On Reserve: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/courseReserves/course/id/19855330>

1. Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant, *Health Communism*. (No eBook)
2. Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. (eBook available)
3. Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics* (eBook available)

All other readings will be posted to MyCourses (usually one week in advance)

## FIRST CLASS

The first class on September 3<sup>rd</sup> will be on Zoom with subsequent classes being in-person. The Zoom link will be posted on MyCourses. *If you are not registered for the class, please email the instructor for the Zoom link.*

Due to the instructor's conference obligations, there are two classes later in term that will need to be rescheduled to in-person sessions on dates most students can attend (TBD).

## ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES

You are required to write two papers: the first paper is worth 40% and the second paper is a term paper worth 50%. The remaining 10% depends on your participation in discussion.

- (1) The **first paper, worth 40%**, should be **5 pages** in length, double-spaced. This paper should take up one of the readings in the course to theorize and critically understand an aspect of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and/or our settler colonial present.

Expectations: The aim of the paper is to *apply* the theory in the reading, but the best papers will also aim to *extend/enhance/speak back to the theory* from the perspective of our present social-political context. The paper should involve a *critical* discussion of the reading/topic chosen. The grading scheme is on the percentage point system (where A: 85-100; A-: 80-84; B+: 75-79; B: 70-74; B-: 65-69; C+: 60-64; C: 55-59; D: 50-54; F: below 50).

Student Learning: This assignment evaluates students' *understanding* of the reading in question, their ability to *apply* the theory to our current context, and their ability to *critically* discuss both theory and context.

- (2) The **second paper is a term paper, worth 50%**, and should be **6 pages** in length, double-spaced. The topic of this paper is to be designed by you, but must take up sources we have read in the course and be centred on the pandemic and/or colonialism. For this paper, outside research is possible, though not necessary. The paper must be a critical essay, and can either mobilize sources to think our social-political context (choosing a different source than the first essay), or elaborate a critical comparison of two sources from the course. The due date for this second paper will be during the final exam period.

Expectations: The aim of the paper is to *apply* the theories in the reading, but the best papers will also aim to *extend/speak back to the theory* from the perspective of our present social-political context. The paper must be critical. The grading scheme is on the percentage point system (where A: 85-100; A-: 80-84; B+: 75-79; B: 70-74; B-: 65-69; C+: 60-64; C: 55-59; D: 50-54; F: below 50).

**Student Learning:** This assignment evaluates students' *understanding* of the reading in question, their ability to *apply* the theory to our current social-political context, and their ability to *critically* discuss both theory and context.

**(3) Participation is worth 10% and can be fulfilled through multiple modalities:**

- Please be prepared to discuss the reading, to make connections between readings, and to apply the ideas you have read to the pandemic and our settler colonial present, **as well as to use these to question the ideas in the texts.** At the beginning of each class, I will ask you to suggest concepts, ideas, and questions that spoke to you from that week's reading or from our current context in a brain-storming session. Please note that this means you will need to research the pandemic and the settler colonial present *as it is happening*.
- Do NOT come to class in-person if you are sick (whether Covid or otherwise)! Remote participation through the hybrid format counts. But please have your screen on as frequently as you are able, especially when speaking.
- *Volunteer to note-take and review:* Your participation grade can be bolstered by volunteering to be a *note-taker* and to review these notes. I will ask for volunteers, after drop/add period. (Notes will be posted on *MyCourses*, but will not be reviewed by me.)
- *Volunteer to moderate the hybrid part:* This involves monitoring questions and chat comments coming from the remote portion of the class. Since I will not be able to attend to the screen while also lecturing, the moderator needs to let me know when there is a question on Zoom.
- If you are absent for more than three weeks, you can make up participation by submitting questions/reflections for each of the weeks missed. This can be a discussion question that elaborates on a concept in the reading, or a reflection exercise that applies the reading to the pandemic. (No more than 200 words.)

If you require accommodation for any of these assignments, please let me know.

Use of Artificial Intelligence and LLM technology (e.g. ChatGPT) is not permitted in this class.

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*McGILL UNIVERSITY VALUES ACADEMIC INTEGRITY. THEREFORE ALL STUDENTS MUST UNDERSTAND THE MEANING AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHEATING, PLAGIARISM AND OTHER ACADEMIC OFFENCES UNDER THE CODE OF STUDENT CONDUCT AND DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES. See [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)*

*In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.*

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the control of McGill University, assessment tasks in a course are subject to change, provided students are sent adequate and timely communications regarding the change.

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