

Class Title: Familiar Perpetrators: On the Intimacy of Evil in Contemporary American Literature and Popular Culture

Class Instructor: **Assoc. Prof. Mihaela Precup**

Class Description:

This class explores what happens when perpetrators become familiar figures, either because their representation is well-circulated in works of American literature and popular culture, in ways that make the audience feel intimately connected to them, or simply because they are represented by their own family members and friends. By “perpetrators” this class refers to “those who had a hand...in the physical destruction of other individuals” (Strauss 2017), but it also attempts to expand this definition, which does not cover certain other more insidious acts of perpetration, like those that led to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, white nationalism or the “genocide by default” produced during the global pandemic (Gonsalves qtd. in Moran 2020).

Noted attempts have been made to understand the motivations of the perpetrator, such as the controversial Milgram experiment (1961, Yale University) and Zimbardo’s Prison Experiment (1973, Stanford University), which used role play to show that the subjects were influenced by both their environment and their assigned social roles in their decision—however reluctant—to obey orders and inflict pain upon other human beings. However, it was only recently that American literature, popular culture, and academic life witnessed a veritable boom in the production of texts about perpetrators, perpetration, and what facilitates them.

In this class, we examine a variety of primary sources from present-day American literary and popular culture, such as documentary films (*The Act of Killing*, 2012), comics (*My Friend Dahmer*, 2012; *Drawing Power*, 2019), biographical fiction (Eli Saslow’s *Rising out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*, 2018), and other texts that cover acts of perpetration such as genocide, serial killings, sexual abuse and assault, and racially motivated hatred. The theoretical approach of this class includes authors from fields such as memory and trauma studies, perpetrator studies, and gender and sexuality studies.

Class Requirements:

Every student will be asked to participate in one round-table discussion on the assigned readings. Extra points will be awarded for excellent class participation. There will be a final written exam.