

University of Wisconsin, Madison
English 457: Topics in American
Literature and Culture Since 1900

Psychedelic Imaginaries

Professor Ramzi Fawaz
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Class Meetings: T 6-8:30,
Ingraham 223

Office hours: T 3-5 PM,
or by appointment on Zoom.

Zoom link:

<https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/95073505741>



Course Description: Today’s media landscape explodes with infinitely branching multiverses, stunning animated dreamscapes, hyper-saturated hallucinations, and mind-bending fantasy worlds. Superheroes jump between multiple dimensions while switching costumes, identities, and powers. Scientists enter alien environments and transform into trees. Laundromat owners meet countless versions of themselves across time and space. And space travelers ingest hallucinogenic substances to navigate the cosmos. How do we make sense of these dazzling, surreal, and sometimes terrifying images of life turned inside out? And how do we explain our popular craving for such psychedelic flights of the imagination?

This advanced seminar will explore recent US-American popular culture that grapples with psychedelic experience. Psychedelics, like LSD (or “acid”) and psilocybin (or “magic mushrooms”), are a class of drugs, which create mind-altering and consciousness-expanding effects. The signal feature of psychedelics is their ability to stimulate a radical tuning up of the senses, which is experienced as a hallucinogenic state but lived differently by each person. In the 1960s, US-American countercultural youth turned on to psychedelics as a way to access a broader range of human perceptual capabilities. Many also claimed that psychedelic experience expanded their understanding of categories like race, gender, sexuality and other forms of human difference by giving them an cosmic sense of connection with the human species. Today, medical researchers are studying psychedelics as an effective treatment for a numerous mental health crises like depression, anxiety, addiction, and trauma, thereby inaugurating what many consider a new psychedelic renaissance. In this class, we will ask what role art and culture can play in harnessing the best aspects of psychedelic experience in aesthetic or creative form. This includes studying how hallucinatory, kaleidoscopic, and viscerally intense literature, film, television and visual culture can shake us out of habituated ways of thinking, broaden how we grasp human diversity, and provide ways of better responding to the large-scale catastrophes of our time.

In addition to reading about the history, aesthetics, and cultural politics of psychedelics in the US context, we will watch the following films: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015), *Waves* (Shults, 2019), *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-verse* (Persichetti, 2018), *My Octopus Teacher* (Ehrlich and Reed, 2020), and *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (Daniels, 2022); view select episodes of the streaming television series *Undone* (2019), *Lovecraft Country* (2020), *Midnight Gospel* (2020); and read the following literature: Jenny Slate’s *Little Weirds* (2019) and Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*.

What are we learning?

As a special topics course in US literature and culture since 1900, this advanced seminar offers students from any discipline or educational background an in-depth look at a specific aspect of the US-American cultural experience. By the end of this term, students will have gained:

- 1) a strong understanding of the historical significance of psychedelic drugs to the social, political, and artistic life of US-Americans since the 1960s.
- 2) a better grasp on how psychedelics have been used as a means to reinvent, disorganize, or altogether dissolve seemingly fixed categories of racial, gender, and sexual difference and identity. At the same time, an honest assessment of the ways that psychedelic drug

use by white US-Americans has often erased, negated, or appropriated the experiences of Mexican, Native American, and South American indigenous cultures who use these substances for spiritual or healing practices.

- 3) significant knowledge about how the neurochemical effects of psychedelic drugs, including their ability to increase connections across various parts of the brain, can influence or transform how we think about the study of literature.
- 4) a highly refined capacity to register, articulate, and analyze one's own visceral or affective experiences of art, literature and culture. This includes developing a wider vocabulary to talk about how one is impacted or transformed by encounters with aesthetic or creative life.
- 5) and an expanded imagination about how the study of literature can have a meaningful relationship to other dimensions of human lived experience. This includes the ability to hone our perceptual awareness, cultivate ethical values, enrich our spiritual life, and help us conceive of other perspectives on the world.

Disclaimer: This class does not in any way encourage, support, or condone the actual taking of psychedelic drugs, which remain illegal substances outside of therapeutic settings.

Rather, we are considering how psychedelic experience, as an intensified sensory phenomenon, can provide a potent framework for understanding the lived, material impact that art and culture can have on our relationship to the world. At the same time, however, we will honor the fact that the taking of psychedelic drugs in countless historical time periods, geographical contexts, and interpersonal settings throughout human history have had meaningful, life-transformative effects on people from all walks of life.

What are we reading?

The texts below are required. They are available for purchase at the University Bookstore or online. I recommend Bookshop.org, BetterWorldBooks, Powell's Bookstore or other independent online retailers that support local booksellers. All readings marked with * will be available on the course website. You must bring copies of readings to class with you either in print or on electronic tablets. All course films will be streamed online. Should you wish to experience our course films on a big screen, I will be offering Monday night film screenings at an on-campus location (TBD).

- Jenny Slate, *Little Weirds* (2020)
- Jeff Vandermeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014)

This is a reading intensive, advanced cultural studies seminar. This means you will need to manage your time well, plan ahead for each week of reading and viewing, and commit significant time to prepare for our discussions. Officially speaking: the credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, and other student work as described in the syllabus. That is roughly ten hours of work a week. If you are putting in this kind of time and still struggling to keep up with the course readings, we will thoughtfully trim readings as we go along. At all times, the syllabus may be subject to change at my discretion as an instructor.

What do we have to write?

In addition to our weekly readings, this course has four major assignments, including a short reflection paper, weekly online discussion posts, a take-home mid-term exam, and a final research paper. The last three assignments will be completed with a group. While many people tend to dislike group work, it is extremely rewarding to develop a long-term intellectual dialogue with fellow students, receive mutual support, and build new friendships. At the beginning of the term, I will place you into randomized groups of 3-4 members. You will work with this unit for the entire semester, gaining knowledge of each other's strengths, negotiating collective writing and research, and providing one another feedback. I will also have policies in place to ensure all members of a group are pulling their weight.

- 1) **Short reflection paper—10%:** in the first two weeks of class, I will ask you to engage in a high-intensity activity for a minimum of 30 minutes, and write a short 3-4 reflection paper about your experience. This might include take a long run or bike-ride, engaging in a competitive sport, listening to a long techno music mix with your eyes closed, sitting in a sensory deprivation tank, doing indoor rock climbing etc. Whatever activity you choose must be safe for your body, but should mobilize or stimulate your senses in a heightened way. The reflection paper will ask you to describe this experience in depth and analyze some of its effects on how you view or interpret sensory data.
- 2) **Weekly Online Discussion and Group Engagement—10%:** at the start of the semester, I will assign people to groups of 3-4 members. You will work with this group on every assignment in the course, forming a small intellectual community that will help keep you motivated throughout the term. Every week, the members of one group will be responsible for developing a substantive set of response to a pre-circulated question or task related to that week's reading. These are mini-essays around 500 words that should be well written and organized in thought and execution. You should have an original argument or stake a distinct position and incorporate at least 1-2 direct citations from the week's reading in making your claims. These posts must be online by 8 PM on Monday evenings before our class meetings the following evening; they should not take more than 1-2 hours of your time to formulate. Every group will offer online posts three times throughout the semester. The rest of the class is responsible for reading these posts before our class meeting.
- 3) **Take-home mid-term exam—20%:** halfway through the term, each group will need to complete a take-home mid-term exam. You will be asked to explain a handful of key concepts from our course in your own words, substantively answer a series of short questions, and craft a long-form essay response to an analytical question. All elements of the exam must be completed collaboratively. You will be given two weeks to complete this assignment.
- 4) **Final research paper—20%:** a final 8-10-page group research essay in which you will offer a sustained analysis of a novel, film, comic book, work of art, or other popular culture production we did not discuss in the class (I will provide a list of possible

choices). You will need to draw upon three outside or secondary sources related to the social, psychological, artistic, or historical study of friendship.

The remaining 40% of your grade rests on your dedicated engagement in our class discussion. This is, without a doubt, where most of the magic happens in a seminar. The heft of this percentage is intended to stress how important it is for you to bring your A-game every week. Note: All assignments will be submitted through Canvas as .docx documents. There will be a link to submit each paper under the Assignments tab on the course Canvas site.

Attendance Policy: Attendance and participation at every class session is mandatory. That means not only showing up, but being awake, attentive, and actively engaged in our meetings. Most importantly, this includes coming to class having completed that day's reading (and viewing) assignments, taken careful notes on all these items, and prepared to engage in dialogue about them. I will grant each student one excused absence for any reason; all other unexcused absences will incur the 5% participation grade deduction listed above. The following four class sessions will take place over Zoom: September 27, October 18, November 15, and November 22. All course policies and procedures will be in effect, and students will be expected to sign in to our Zoom sessions with their video turned on. We will use the office hours Zoom link above to convene for these sessions.

Covid-19: I am acutely aware that the conditions of the Covid pandemic might create obstacles to a consistent attendance record. Please inform me of all unforeseeable absences, such as those caused by severe illness or a personal emergency, as soon as possible. I will do everything in my power to accommodate unexpected changes in anyone's personal circumstances. **Your health and wellbeing is paramount. If you feel serious symptoms of illness you should not attend class but rest and recover. With this in mind, however, remember that anytime you miss a class session, you lose the opportunity to participate in a completely original intellectual event that can never be reproduced or adequately conveyed after the fact. This loss is no small thing.** Moreover, during a period of intense stress and isolation under the disorganizing conditions of the pandemic, our class sessions can provide an uplifting weekly anchor in the storm, connecting you to a larger intellectual and social community. You should make every effort to attend as consistently as possible. General tiredness, irritability or feeling "stressed out" are not legitimate excuses to miss class. Finally, while the university no longer requires the use of masks, I support anyone's choice to use them for their personal health.

Email etiquette: Whenever you write an email to a professor, you should always begin with a formal salutation (such as Dear Professor or Dr. Fawaz) and sign off with an appropriate ending followed by your name (Sincerely, All Best, Have a wonderful day etc.). You should read all emails from your professors carefully to ensure you receive appropriate instructions and details about course assignments and schedules. **Finally, I cannot stress enough that you must reply to any email individually directed to you by a professor, and provide a specific explanation for any absences.** I will underscore again: a general statement that you are exhausted or overwhelmed will not suffice as an excuse for an absence. If you are at any time struggling with your mental health, or your state of mind is preventing you from completing work or attending class, please inform me immediately and reach out to university Mental Health Services at

<https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/> or 608-265-5600 to receive appropriate care and attention.

Disability Support Services At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, Suite #2104 at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

How do we talk to on another?

At its core, psychedelic experience is *intense*. It amplifies all of our sensory capabilities to an extreme degree; it expands our cognitive ability to make meaning out of the world's countless objects, landscapes, textures, and relationships; and it stimulates the entire gamut of our emotions. This is also often what art does as it enters our awareness and affects, or impacts, us in unpredictable ways. Since we will not be taking any actual psychedelic substances in this class, we will attempt to use art and culture to activate a similarly intense perceptual experience in each of us. The intensification of all aspects of life can be lived as something exceptionally joyful, uplifting, and transformative, but also terrifying, unsettling, and confusing. In the various cultural texts we read and view, you will encounter numerous types of intensified existence. This will include: a woman traveling at light speed through multiple dimensions encountering different versions of herself; a man watching his mother grow old, die, and be reborn over and over until the end of the universe; a daughter bending the laws of space and time to discover who murdered her long lost father; a diver becoming best friends with an ingenious octopus in the freezing depths of the Atlantic ocean; a warrior mother leading an army of feminist rebels against a monstrous death cult; and a Black messiah from another planet spreading the gospel of an "altered destiny" where white supremacy no longer exists. In the face of these extraordinary, enchanting, strange, scary, and moving stories, our job is to remain open to the spectrum of affects, emotions, and sensations that comprise the human experience, and to thoughtfully grapple with our complex, sometimes painful, but most often transformative responses to them.

With this in mind, I want you to be positively influenced by the conversations we have. This might mean being open to changing your mind, defending your position with substantial arguments, or simply listening and thinking through what others are saying about the works of art and literature we discuss. Sometimes it will just involve sitting with your discomfort. Under no circumstance, however, should anyone ever be personally attacked. We are all flawed and will make mistakes, including saying things that might seem off-base, accidentally mischaracterizing other people's ideas or identities, or simply stating incorrect information. When this happens, others should generously chime in and offer thoughtful corrections, or an alternative perspective; the point is not to punish anyone or moralize at them but to collectively uplift our consciousness. In other words, we should practice being intellectual friends to one another. At the same time, I want to encourage you to take risks, get involved, and debate one another with care, even when it might feel easier to bow out of a controversial conversation. I guarantee the rewards of participating will be extraordinary. Below are best practices for class discussion:

1. All students must speak at least once in every class session.
2. Regardless of what we discuss, we will treat one another with respect, knowing that we may not always agree on other peoples' conclusions, interpretations, or claims.
3. Anything you bring up in class is up for discussion and others are free to agree, disagree, or respond to what you have said in a respectful way.
4. **You must always begin by responding to what other students have said before you or inform the class that you intend to move the dialogue in a new direction.**
5. Practice making arguments, not stating opinions. This requires you to always have your reading materials with you in class and to be able to point to specific moments or features of a text to support your ideas.

(All reading and viewing for Week 1 should be completed before our first class session)

Week 1—Flinging Open the “Doors of Perception”

Tuesday, September 13

Michael Pollan, selections from *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Tells Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (2019)

Keith Williams, Osiris Sinuhé Gonzáles Romero, Michael Braunstein, and Suzanne Brant, “Indigenous Philosophies and the ‘Psychedelic Renaissance,’” *Anthropology of Consciousness*, July 30, 2022.

Week 2—The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience

Tuesday, September 20

Screening: **The Midnight Gospel**, Episode 8: “The Mouse of Silver” (Netflix)

Aldous Huxley, selections from *The Doors of Perception* (1954)

Ido Hartogsohn, “Introduction” in *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century* (2020)

Christopher Letheby, “The phenomenology of psychedelic therapy,” in *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2021)

Robin Wall Kimmerer, selections from *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013)*

Arun Saldanha, “Psychedelic Whiteness,” in *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (2007)

Week 3—Acid Drag, or Remaking Self and Society in the Psychedelic 60s

Tuesday, September 27

Screening: *The Cockettes* (Weber and Weissman, 2002)

Ido Hartogsohn, “Chapter 8: American Trip,” and “Chapter 9: LSD and the 1960s,” in *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century* (2020)

Malik Gaines, “The Cockettes, Sylvester, and Performance as Life,” from *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (2017)

****Assignment #1 Due Sunday, October 2 by 11:30 PM****

Week 4—Black Psychedelia

Tuesday, October 4

Screening: *Sun-Ra: Space is the Place* (Coney, 1974)

Screening: *Lovecraft Country*, Episode 7: “I am.” (HBO)

Emily Lordi, “The Radical Experimentation of Black Psychedelia,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022

Darieck Scott, “Introduction: Fantastic Bullets,” in *Keeping it Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (2022)

Week 5—The Re-enchantment of the World Part I

Tuesday, October 11

Screening: **Marcel the Shell with Shoes On** (Fleisher-Camp, 2022)

Jenny Slate, selections from *Little Weirds* (2022)

Jane Bennett, “The Wonder of Minor Experiences,” in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (2001)

Week 6—The Re-enchantment of the World Part II

Tuesday, October 18

Screening: *Undone, Season 1* (2019) [Available on Amazon Prime]

Gloria Anzaldúa, selections from *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)

Michael Jay, “Chapter 1: Cactus Mysteries” and “Chapter 2: The Devil’s Root,” in *Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic* (2019)

Week 7—Thinking Like a Multiverse Part I

Tuesday, October 25

Screening: **Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse** (Ramsey, Persichetti, Rothman, 2018)

Merlin Sheldrake, “Introduction: What is it Like to Be a Fungus?” and “Living Labyrinths,” from *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change our Minds, & Shape our Futures* (2020)

Arun Saldanha, “Reontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Race,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24.1 (2006)

****Group Midterm Exam Due Sunday, November 6 by 11:30 PM****

Week 8—Thinking Like a Multiverse Part II

Tuesday, November 1

Screening: **Everything, Everywhere, All At Once** (The Daniels, 2022)

Norman Fischer, selections from *Training in Compassion: Zen Teachings on the Practice of Lojong* (2013).

Anne Anlin Cheng, “‘Everything Everywhere All at Once’ is a deeply Asian American film,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2022:

<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/05/04/everything-everywhere-asian-american-pessimism/>>

Week 9—The Future Belongs to the Mad

Tuesday, November 8

Screening: **Mad Max: Fury Road** (Miller, 2015)

The Invisible Committee, *NOW* (2017)*

Week 10—Blackness as a State of Ecstasy

Tuesday, November 15

Screening: **Waves** (Shults, 2019)

Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, “The Black Ecstatic,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24.2-3 (2018)

Week 11—The Surprise of Otherness

Tuesday, November 22

Screening: **My Octopus Teacher** (Ehrlich and Reed, 2020) [Available on Netflix]

Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003)

Week 12—On Learning to Surrender Part I

Tuesday, November 29

Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (2014)

Week 13—On Learning to Surrender Part II

Tuesday, December 6

Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance* (2014)

Week 14—Spirited Away

Tuesday, December 13

Screening: **Spirited Away** (Miyazaki)

Ramzi Fawaz, “Literary Theory on Acid,” *American Literary History* 34.1 (Spring 2022)

****Group Final Research Paper Due Sunday, December 18 by 11:30 PM****