“I cannot help wondering how it is that the authorities can produce such smooth and exact histories in cases of hysteria. As a matter of fact the patients are incapable of giving such reports about themselves. They can, indeed, give the physician plenty of coherent information about this or that period of their life; but it is sure to be followed by another period in which their communications run dry, leaving gaps unfilled, and riddles unanswered; and then again will come yet another period which will remain totally obscure and unilluminated by even a single piece of serviceable information. The connections—even ostensible ones—are for the most part incoherent, and the sequence of different events is uncertain.”

—Sigmund Freud, Dora: Analysis of a Case of Hysteria

“Colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: ‘Who am I in reality?’”

—Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

“A simple place to start is here: we’re sensitive. We feel things hard and fast. We feel things quiet and deep. We feel things huge and open. We feel things heavy and slow.”

—The Icarus Project, Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness

Mental illness often comes into public consciousness in the United States through the specter of violence, such as in the many recent horrific mass shootings: at Sandy Hook Elementary School, at the screening of Dark Knight Rises in Aurora, Colorado, of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and others in Tucson, Arizona, and of 32 students and faculty at Virginia Tech in 2007. The media frenzy that accompanies these tragic events presents a picture of mental illness that is at best limited and at worst harmful. In this course we will explore mental illness as a category of analysis that comes into being through a multiplicity of discourses, practices, and institutions. We will look at a variety of cases studies about the experience and event of mental illness in diverse families and communities presented in a variety of genres and forms—psychological and sociological analyses, documentary and feature films, graphic and prose memoirs, and through interviews with people who deal with mental illness in their daily lives. Our goal is to expand and complicate our understanding of mental illness, as well as to think broadly and creatively about effective ways to treat mental illness and generate personal and social health and well-being.