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Mar 10

Announcements: A Take on Dr. Lisa Duggan's "Normativity and Its Discontents"

by American

Studies

In case you missed **Dr. Lisa Duggan's** recent talk at UT, you're in luck: undergraduate **Cole Wilson** has provided this wonderful write-up of the event with a few of its takeaways. Enjoy!

AMS :: ATX is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.





Lisa Duggan was invited by the American Studies Department, in conjunction with UT's English Department, Anthropology Department, and a whole host of other offices and programs as the AMS Department's bi-annual Spring Speaker. Her presentation centered on the role of diagnosis in the American security state and the rewriting of neoliberalism.

Duggan opened with a discussion of her coming to this project as a sexologist and theorist interested in Disabilities Studies, namely, diagnosis in post-9/11 America. She looked to the Showtime program *Homeland* for one case study in order to understand how diagnosis figures into post-empire US culture and the security state, and the ways that the ways we interpret diagnoses are embedded in our understandings of empire. For an overview of the show, [click here](#).



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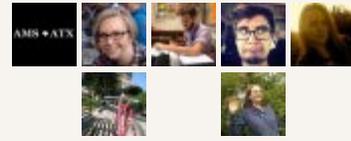
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She chose this program due to the show's focus on its protagonists' mental illnesses. Carrie Mathison suffers from bipolar disorder, but often abandons her medication in order to summon stunning detective work, ultimately at the cost of her sanity. As Duggan put it, she "flies off the rails" in exchange for fits of brilliance. But, Duggan argues, this is justified by her diagnosis. The same goes for Nicolas Brodie, a CIA agent who suffers from PTSD after his years of being a POW. In a crescendo, Brodie attempts to assassinate the Vice President with a suicide vest. Despite this attempted terrorist attack, in a cliché mode no less, Duggan argues that the viewers sympathize with Brodie due to his diagnosis. He exhibits what Duggan calls "humanized terrorism."

This is all juxtaposed with Abu Nazir, a grossly ambiguous terrorist figure whose race, location, and affiliation are all skewed in order to present a vague villain that preys on both racial and dogmatic stereotypes of Arab men. He is American islamophobia incarnate. His lack of a diagnosis, argues Duggan, produces a character that is villainized on all fronts because he is simply a "terrorist."

Beginning her second case study on Ayn Rand, Duggan opened with a few videos in order to set the tone for those of us who haven't read *Atlas Shrugged*. The 2011 movie trailer, the GOP's embrace of Ayn Rand, and a Simpson's rendition of the

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classic novel, all illustrated Rand's continued cultural prevalence.

Duggan began with an observation of Rand's justification of cruelty. Coined "optimistic cruelty," a play on Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism," she states that *Atlas Shrugged* illustrates the desirability of selfishness through its protagonists' embrace of capitalism. This again is an example of American neoliberalism being rewritten in contemporary America: her fantasies mobilize consent of neoliberalism.

But, how does *Atlas Shrugged* represent contemporary America, being decades old? According to Duggan the Great Recession of 2008 brought about record sales of the novel. Moreover, as an audience member asserted, high schoolers and middle schoolers are still being prescribed novels and essays by Rand. The word "indoctrinated" was readily thrown around after this statement.

Duggan wrapped up her presentation by noting how Rand "solicits anti-government fantasy in industry" and how she makes neoliberalism attractive, even with its innate cruelty. She goes on to discuss how this attractiveness and fantasy produce a sense of rebelliousness, pointing to Steve Jobs and Donald Trump, who both played, or play, the role of the rebel in a neoliberal America.

Her argument was compelling, insightful, and engaging. If you missed her talk, you can read up on this subject in her book *The*

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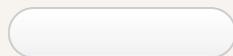
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