Thanatopolitics, Black Existentialism, and Literature
Course: 669-Topics in African American and Africana Literature and Culture
Instructor: Shona N. Jackson
Meets the following Requirement(s):
1) One course organized around concepts, issues, or themes, and
2) Literature, 1800-present

This course examines the growing theoretical trend of Biopolitics, particularly its thanatopolitical orientation, together with 20th and early 21st century black existentialism (Africana Philosophy), including its pessimistic turn. Emerging primarily, though not exclusively, out of a “return” to Michel Foucault’s work, Biopolitics has become a sustained field of inquiry in the American academy. It is a shift that has found special relevance for those studying race and power and it has given Foucault new value in an arena for which his work has been problematic. The course will introduce students to Bio and Thanato-politics, examining how they are constituted, developed, and how they come to bear on current understandings of race, being, subjection, power, and blackness. The course pairs the discussion of Bio/Thanatopolitics with a focus on black existentialism in order to use this conjuncture to offer new readings of black, diasporic literary and other cultural production, including art, videos, and television. The continually evolving theorization of the politics of life/death will be used to think through the precarity of black being in the modern world and also at this specific moment of the hypervisibility of violent and spectacular death as a mechanism of state control. From Achebe to Beyoncé, from Africa to the Caribbean, students will have the opportunity to develop nuanced readings of classic and contemporary 20th and 21st century black diaspora literary/cultural production as they explore the ontological function of diasporic texts and the role of black philosophical thought in the face of the politics and practice of death.