Looking for a course off the beaten path this fall? Join me in an anthropological examination of the cultural selection, adjudication and eradication of life unworthy of life. Imagine the post-modern lament: “Now I lay me down to sleep . . . on a gurney, three poisons will soon flow through my veins from head to feet, assuring that I do not wake. Or, perhaps, I might still expire in an electric chair, boiled from the inside out. Then again, I might be made to suffocate in a gas chamber or by dangling from a rope. Maybe a hail of bullets, once reserved for the honorable culprit, will do me in? Why have most of the methods of killing available to states given way to lethal injection? What has this uniform method of eradication done to the ability of law to fit the punishment for a crime to the public sensibilities of its horror? Put in other words: What has become of the spectacle that gruesome methods of killing killer (and a few non-killers) made possible? As I die, who will have the privilege of watching? To the array of carefully selected witnesses, will I appear sympathetic or just hideously pathetic through windows provided them for this purpose? If the killers selected to be killed are deemed to be “life unworthy of life,” why should modern culture struggle to devise humane means to kill such killer? Are all killers killed guilty? What is the difference between factual and actual innocence? Should the difference matter? Who within and across present-day social orders benefits and how from killing killer (and here and there a few non-killers)?

This course offers students an opportunity to consider these and many other questions from a comparative anthropological perspective on the symbolic, moral, and, and financial role of the death penalty in present-day production of U.S and global culture. Comparing and contrasting practices in the United States with those in other nations that retain the death penalty, this course presents the cultural sense that modern humans make as they select among and dispose of the once-human creatures they no longer deem to be worthy of life. Join me in watching the world turn, pushed forward then backward by moral, legal, and financial rationales aim to make morally acceptable selecting to kill killers.