

**American Epidemics**  
Spring 2021  
FYSEM-UA 815  
Wednesday 12:30-3:00pm

Instructor: Kim Adams  
Virtual Office Hours:  
Thursday 12:00-2:00 pm  
and by appointment

From colonial ailments to global pandemics, disease has shaped the United States. This course places the coronavirus outbreak of 2019/2020 in historical perspective, examining the wide-ranging effects of contagious disease in American life, literature, and culture. Together we will seek to understand epidemics as biological forces and social events. Beginning with the metaphor of “invisible bullets” that the Algonquin peoples of the Chesapeake Bay used to describe settler colonial diseases, the class will trace the history of the nation through epidemics, addressing the social and political impact of a different disease each week. We will read historical accounts, critical texts, and literary works; listen to podcasts, watch films, observe art, and explore online archives. Students will learn to approach disease as an object of humanistic inquiry, and examine intersectional questions of race, gender, colonial power, economic privilege, and national belonging through medical history. We will find strategies for critiquing and comprehending the inequities and anxieties of the present through moments of biological crisis in America.

**Please note that this syllabus is a live document, subject to change in response to the class dynamic and the ongoing pandemic in which we are living.**

### **Readings**

All course readings will be available digitally through the course website. Many of the course readings are also available in book form, and can be found in the bookstore and online. **You are required to read the texts before class each week and to have a copy of the text open and available to reference during our class discussion.**

### **Academic Accommodations**

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Student Accessibility as early as possible in the semester. They can be reached at [mosescsa@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsa@nyu.edu)

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is a necessary component of this class and your entire academic career. Please familiarize yourself with the policy on the college’s website. Academic integrity is not simply about cheating or breaking rules. Rather, it is a positive thing: the development of habits and character traits that allow us to thrive in our academic lives with integrity.

### **Content**

In this course we will be reading and talking about challenging issues across the intersections of gender, race, class, ability, nationality, sexuality, and ethnicity. In the classroom we will approach these issues and each other with intellectual and emotional care and generosity.

### **Attendance**

You are permitted two absences for the entire course. More than two absences will count against your final grade. If you must miss class due to illness or religious observance, please let me know *in advance*. In case of illness, your absence will be excused once you have provided me with a doctor’s note. True presence involves not only physically being there, but also a strong sense of attention being paid, an absence of electronic devices that disturb others, and a consistent attitude of respect toward your fellow learners. Silence your phone, turn on your camera, pay attention to your classmates, and contribute to the discussion.

## **Assignments**

All assignments are due at 5:00 pm on the due date. Papers should be typed in Times 12-point font with 1 inch margins, using MLA or Chicago style formatting.

### **Digital Archive Assignment - Due Feb 26**

Using the “Influenza Encyclopedia” as a model, students will work in groups to curate their own disease specific digital archives. These sites will combine materials from our class readings with outside research. Students will use WordPress to build their site, write a brief (500-800 word introduction) and captions (c. 50 words) for each image, audio clip, document, or other file they include. We will run an in-class workshop on WordPress to help build these projects.

### **Research Paper Part 1 – Draft due Friday, March 19, final due March 29**

Students will write a research paper that addresses the cultural impact of epidemic illness in the United States. The essay will be completed in two parts. Students will write a 5-6 page paper for the midterm that focuses on a specific illness addressed in this course. They work with student writing tutors on their draft, and a complete bibliography that anticipates the final essay.

### **Podcast Assignment – Due Friday April 16**

For this assignment students will produce a short (3-5 minute) audio story about a particular, individual experience of an epidemic. You will have the option of conducting an oral history—interviewing someone who experienced one of the diseases covered on our syllabus—or pursuing archival research on a historical figure who appears in our course readings. You are welcome to focus on the same topic as your research paper for the podcast. We will run an in-class workshop on recording, audio editing, and writing for audio prior to the assignment.

### **Research Paper Part 2 – Draft due Friday April 30, final due May 12**

The final essay will be an expanded, 10-15 page research paper, based upon the paper written for the midterm. This paper can add another disease, or expand on the chosen topic from the midterm. Students will work with writing tutors to complete their revisions. Papers can cite course materials, but must include outside research, and a properly formatted bibliography.

## **Grading**

Attendance and Participation – 20%

Podcast Assignment – 20%

Digital Archive Assignment – 20%

Research Paper Part 1 – 15%

Research Paper Part 2 – 25%

## **Writing Tutors Program**

In this class, we are fortunate to have help from the Undergraduate Writing Tutors Program. Writing tutors are well-trained peers who provide feedback on drafts of writing assignments. Their role is to encourage and challenge students to strengthen their writing and clarify their ideas. Over the course of the semester, you will meet with a tutor for two writing conferences, focused on the final research paper, to help generate clearer writing and stronger thinking about the content. The tutors are not copy editors, but they will also look for patterns of grammatical error, and help you learn how to correct these errors. The writing tutors’ main goals are to help students become better writers over the long term. Students are required to submit drafts of their papers on time for written feedback and attend two scheduled, 30-minute long, one-on-one conferences. Writing tutors should receive *complete drafts* from students, not outlines or rough notes. *Late submission* of drafts to tutors and *missed conferences* will be noted, and incorporated into your final grade.

## Schedule of Readings

Feb 3: Influenza of 1918

Malcolm Gladwell, "The Deadliest Virus Ever Known," *New Yorker*, 29 Sept 1997

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/09/29/the-dead-zone>

Michael Wilson, "What New York Looked Like During the 1918 Flu Pandemic," *New York Times*, 6 April 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/nyregion/spanish-flu-nyc-virus.html>

Feb 10: Influenza of 1918

Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Random House, 1936. pp.179-264.

John Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*, Penguin Books, 2004. Selections: "The Swarm" pp. 91-106; "The Pestilence" pp.231-252.

Explore: Online resource, "Influenza Encyclopedia: The American Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919." [www.influenzaarchive.org](http://www.influenzaarchive.org)

Feb 17: Equine Influenza

Sean Kheraj, "The Great Epizootic of 1872-73: Networks of Animal Disease in North American Urban Environments." *Environmental History*. Vol 23, No 2 (July 2018) pp. 495-521.

Raymond Malewitz, "On the Origin of 'Oops!': The Language and Literature of Animal Disease." *Critical Inquiry*. Vol 45 (Summer 2019) pp. 839-858.

### **In-Class WordPress Workshop**

Feb 24: Cholera

Edgar Allen Poe. "The Masque of the Red Death" *Graham's Magazine*. Vol 20, No 5 (May 1842) pp.257-259.

Altschuler, Sari. "The Gothic Origins of Global Health." *American Literature*. Vol 89, no. 3 (Sept 2017): 557-590.

### **Digital Archive Assignment Due Feb 26**

March 3: Invisible Bullets

Thomas Hariot. *A Briefe and True Report of the Newfound Land of Virginia*. London, 1588.

Read: "On the nature and manners of the people" pp.34-44

David S. Jones. "Virgin Soils Revisited," *William and Mary Quarterly* (October 2003), 703-742.

March 10: Small Pox

Cotton Mather. *Wholesome Words: A Visit of Advice, Given Unto Families that are Visited with Sickness; by a Pastoral Letter, Briefly Declaring the Duties Incumbent on All Persons in the Families, that Have Any Sick Persons in Them*. Boston: D. Henchman, 1713.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/NO1375.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

Margot Minardi. "The Boston Inoculation Controversy of 1721-1722: An Incident in the History of Race." *William and Mary Quarterly* vol. 61, no. 1 (January 2004) pp. 47-76.

March 17: Yellow Fever

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, "A Narrative Of the proceedings of the Coloured People during the awful calamity in Philadelphia, in the year 1793" in *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. Philadelphia: Lee and Yeocum, 1888. pp. 33-51.

Rana Hogarth. "The Myth of Innate Racial Differences Between White and Black People's Bodies: Lessons From the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." *American Journal of Public Health* (October 2019). pp.1339-1341.

**Research paper part 1 draft due to writing tutors Friday, March 19**

March 24: Syphilis

Harriet Washington, "A Notoriously Syphilis-Soaked Race': What *Really* Happened at Tuskegee?" *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. Doubleday, 2006, pp.157-185.

<https://archive.org/details/medicalapartheid0owash/mode/2up>

or

<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6101226>

Read Part 1, Chapter 7

Roberts, Mary Louise. "The Price of Discretion: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and the American Military in France, 1944-1946," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 4 (2010): 1002-1030.

**Research paper part 1 due Monday March 29**

March 31: Typhoid

Priscilla Wald, "The Healthy Carrier." *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Duke University Press, 2008. pp. 68-113.

Listen: Radiolab, "Patient Zero" WNYC, Nov. 14, 2011.

<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/episodes/169879-patient-zero>

April 7: Bubonic Plague

Nayan Shah, "Plague and Managing the Commercial City." *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. University of California Press, October 2001. p.120-157.

Listen: "Disease and Power: The Bubonic Plague in Hong Kong and San Francisco" Columbia Libraries Podcasts, Jan. 5, 2021

<https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/podcasts/podcast/disease-and-power/>

**In-Class Podcast Workshop**

April 14: Leprosy

*The True Story of Kaluaikoolau as Told by His Wife, Piilani*. Translated by Frances N. Frazier. Kauai Historical Society, 2001. (selections TBA)

[https://bobcat.library.nyu.edu/permalink/f/ci13eu/nyu\\_aleph000727142](https://bobcat.library.nyu.edu/permalink/f/ci13eu/nyu_aleph000727142)

Michelle Moran. "Creating a Colonial Disease." *Colonizing Leprosy: Imperialism and the Politics of Public Health in the United States*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

pp.47-73.

[https://bobcat.library.nyu.edu/permalink/f/ci13eu/nyu\\_aleph000541932](https://bobcat.library.nyu.edu/permalink/f/ci13eu/nyu_aleph000541932)

**Podcast Due Friday April 16**

April 21: Polio

Oshinsky, David M. "The Biggest Public Health Experiment Ever," *Polio: An American Story*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. pp. 188-213.

Daniel Wilson, "Passing in the Shadow of FDR: Polio Survivors, Passing, and the Negotiation of Disability." *Disability and Passing*, ed. Jeffrey Brune and Daniel Wilson. Temple University Press, 2013. pp.13-35

April 28: HIV/AIDS

Sontag, Susan. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

[https://archive.org/details/illnessasmetaphoosont\\_o](https://archive.org/details/illnessasmetaphoosont_o)

Rafael Campo, "The Changing Face of AIDS" *Diva*, Duke UP, 1999. pp.42-59.

Explore: Keith Haring Drawings from 1988, 1989, 1990

<http://www.haring.com/!/year/1988>

**Research paper part 2 draft due to tutors Friday April 30**

May 5: Coronaviruses

Laura Eichelberger, "SARS and New York's Chinatown: The Politics of Risk and Blame During an Epidemic of Fear." *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 65 (2007) pp.1284-1295.

Readings on SARS-CoV2 (aka COVID-19) to be based upon contemporary sources as the pandemic unfolds.

**Final Version of Research Paper Due May 12**