

Introduction to Medical Humanities: Disease Narratives

Fall 2021

Instructor: Kim Adams

Office Hours: Wednesday 1- 4 pm and by appointment

How do we know sickness from health? How can you tell if a treatment works? Symptoms and biomarkers abound, yet much of the work of medicine is narrative. EKGs must be read. X-rays interpreted. Patients tell their histories, and the care team writes their notes and treatment plans. Narratives shape our experience of illness, and the larger social structures that produce and attempt to cure it.

This class uses narratives of disease to introduce students to the critical medical humanities. The syllabus is divided into three units based on the etiology of the diseases examined. In each unit, we will read a longer work (a novel, a play, and a collection of essays) and a series of shorter critical texts. Our goal is to put these works in conversation with each other and to distill the power of narrative across different forms and genres of knowledge production.

In this class students will learn how to analyze and compose different narrative forms (academic essays, journalistic articles, podcasts, etc.) as distinct from their content. Students will also gain knowledge of the social determinants of health and the biological mechanisms of illness, and experience writing, speaking, and producing digital content.

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 Office of Accessible Education as early as possible in the semester. They can be reached at oe-contactus@stanford.edu

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a necessary component of this class and your entire academic career. Please familiarize yourself with the [honor code](#) on the university'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*. 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, pay attention to your classmates, and contribute to the discussion.

Assignments

Presentation

Students will work in groups to read, analyze, and present one version of the story of leprosy in Hawaii, based upon our class readings. See Week 3 for details.

Podcast

Students will work in pairs to produce a podcast on activism and illness. Each podcast should be structured as a conversation, and tell the story of one event or individual in the history of medical activism. Students may choose subjects covered on the syllabus, but may also explore outside topics.

Synthesis Paper

For the final paper, students will connect one or more topics from the syllabus with their own experience of Covid-19. The present pandemic will be approached with rigorous analytical skills and a careful eye to the power of outside narratives to shape our experience of the world. Papers should reflect a historical and critical understanding, and reference class readings as well as outside research. Students will submit an abstract and outline in advance of the deadline.

In-Class Writing

At the beginning of each class students will answer a short writing prompt related to the longer reading for the unit. These prompts will focus on close reading skills, asking the student to analyze specific passages in relation to the larger themes of the class. Writing assignments will be done in a shared GoogleDoc, visible to all students for the purposes of supporting class discussion, and graded on completion.

N.B.

Students taking the class for five units will complete all the above assignments. Students taking the class for three units will be complete all the assignments except for the synthesis paper.

Grading

5 units
Presentation: 15%
Podcast: 20%
Synthesis Paper: 25%
In-Class Writing: 10%
Attendance: 10%
Participation: 20%

3 units
Presentation: 20%
Podcast: 25%
In-Class Writing: 15%
Attendance: 15%
Participation: 25%

Schedule of Readings

Week 1: What is The Medical Humanities?

Monday, September 20

Rafael Campo, “‘The Medical Humanities,’ for Lack of a Better Term.” *JAMA* Vol. 294, No. 9 (Sept 2005).

Wednesday, September 22

Jill Lepore, “[What Our Contagion Fables are Really About.](#)” *New Yorker*, 23 March 2020.

Unit 1: Bacterial and Fungal – Ling Ma, *Severance*. Picador, 2018. 305pp.

Week 2: Tuberculosis

Monday, September 27

Read *Severance*

Wednesday, September 29

from Samuel Kelton Roberts, Jr., *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Read: “Incorrigibility and the Construction of the Racialized Sick Role” pp.147-160

Week 3: Leprosy

Monday, October 4

Read *Severance*

Wednesday, October 6

Read one of the following, based on your group assignment.

The True Story of Kalaikoolau as Told by His Wife, Piilani. Translated by Frances N. Frazier. Kauai Historical Society, 2001. pp. 3-40.

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.

Jack London, “Koolau the Leper.” *The House of Pride and Other Tales of Hawaii*. New York, The MacMillan Company, 1912.

Class presentations this week.

Week 4: Typhoid Fever

Monday, October 11

Finish *Severance*

Wednesday, October 13

Listen: Radiolab, “[Patient Zero](#)” WNYC, Nov. 14, 2011.

Class held on Zoom.

Unit 2: Viral and Parasitic – Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. Theatre Communications Group, 2013. 290pp.

Week 5: Malaria

Monday, October 18 **Class held on Zoom.**

Read *Angels in America* Part One. Prepare to read aloud in class.

Wednesday, October 20

Podcast workshop. Class held on Zoom.

from J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Read: “Malaria, Mosquitoes, and Plantations of Sugar and Rice.” pp.52-57 and “Slave Risings and Surinam’s Maroons” pp. 195-198

Week 6: Cholera

Monday, October 25 **Class held on Zoom.**

Read *Angels in America* Part Two. Prepare to read aloud in class.

Wednesday, October 27

Class visit from Olga Ovcharskaia on Russian folk rituals for cholera.

Maxim Gorky, "Orlóff and His Wife," selection. in *Orlóff and His Wife*. Trans. Isabel Hapgood. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.

Week 7: HIV/AIDS

Monday, November 1

Watch *Angels in America*, HBO miniseries.

Wednesday, November 3

Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On*. St. Martin's Press, 1987.

Read: Chapter 38, "Journalism" pp. 384-393

Unit 3: Environmental and Hereditary – Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*. Aunt Lute Books, 1980. pp. 116

Week 8: Cancer

Monday, November 8

Read *The Cancer Journals*, Introduction and Part I

Wednesday, November 10

Olivia Banner, "Structural Racism and Practices of Reading in Medical Humanities." *Literature and Medicine* 34 no. 1 (Spring 2016) pp.25-52.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2016.0001>

Friday, November 12

Podcast Assignment Due at midnight.

Week 9: Addiction

Monday, November 15

Read *The Cancer Journals*, Part II

Wednesday, November 17

Carl Hart. "Dope Science: The Truth about Opioids" in *Drug Use for Grown-Ups: Chasing Liberty in the Land of Fear*. Penguin Press, 2021.

Week 10 Cancer

Monday, November 29

Read *The Cancer Journals*, Part III

Wednesday, December 1

Elaine Freedgood, "On Not Fighting Lung Cancer." Unpublished manuscript. pp. 1-18.

Wednesday, December 8

Synthesis Paper Due