American Epidemics

Professor Kim Adams
Office Hours: Wednesday 2-4
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.

Assignments

Grant Proposal
The first assignment solicits grant proposals for the study of epidemic disease. We are researching the history of disease. Why does this history matter? Students will develop a fictional proposal for humanities based research on a real disease not covered by this course. Proposals will include a project abstract, methods section, and reference list.

Podcast Assignment
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. We will run an in-class workshop on recording, audio editing, and writing for audio prior to the assignment.

Digital Archive Assignment
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.

Final Essay
For the final essay, students will write a research paper that addresses the cultural impact of epidemic illness in the United States. Students will discuss potential research topics in class, submit a 300 word paper proposal, followed by an outline, and draft for peer editing. Papers can cite course materials, but must include outside research, documented in a properly formatted bibliography. Essays will be 10-15 pages, typed in Times 12-point font with 1 inch margins, using MLA or Chicago style formatting.
**Grading**
Attendance and Participation – 15%  
Grant Proposal – 15%  
Podcast Assignment – 20%  
Digital Archive Assignment – 20%  
Final Essay – 30%

**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 bring a copy of the course readings to every class.** You can print out the digital text, purchase the book, if available, borrow it from the library, or bring a device that allows you to access the digital materials in class. I recommend you choose a device other than a cell phone. If you plan to use digital copies, please discuss with me in advance how you will minimize disruption to fellow students.

**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. Please take notes by hand, on paper, unless there is a compelling reason for you to do otherwise.

**Disability Disclosure Statement**
Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Director of Accessible Education as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**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.
Schedule of Readings

Week 1: Invisible Bullets
   Read: “On the nature and manners of the people” pp.25-69

Week 2: Small Pox

Week 3: Malaria

Week 4: Yellow Fever
   Matthew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With A Statement of the Proceedings that Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*. Philadelphia: Printed by the Author, 1793. (selections)

Week 5: Cholera

Week 6: Equine Influenza

Week 7: Leprosy
*The True Story of Kaluaikoolau as Told by His Wife, Piilani*. Translated by Frances N. Frazier. Kauai Historical Society, 2001. (selections)

Week 8: Bubonic Plague

Week 9: Typhoid

Week 10: Influenza of 1918

Week 11: Syphilis

Week 12: Polio

Week 13: HIV/AIDS

Week 14: Coronaviruses
Readings on SARS-CoV2 (aka COVID-19) to be based upon contemporary sources as the pandemic unfolds.