Narratives of Illness

Professor Jim Downs

Fall 2022

Course Description

This interdisciplinary course has two objectives: first, to investigate the various ways that the medical profession, patients, and the state narrate illness; second, to chart the history of medicine and public health, paying particular attention to the changing roles of doctors, the history of disease causation, and how these two phenomena overlap, especially in the mid to late nineteenth century. Drawing heavily on primary sources, the course begins with an overview of the history of medicine from the colonial period to the present in the United States, covering a range of subjects from outbreaks of yellow fever and smallpox to tuberculosis and HIV. Special attention will be given to how biosocial factors, namely racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia, shape both the outbreak and outcome of these epidemics.

After developing this foundation, the second half of the course will draw on work of medical anthropologists and medical humanities scholars to probe the theoretical and conceptual understandings of how biomedical and rhetorical frameworks make disease visible, and how physicians, the state, and patients each develop their own narratives to explain disease. While the first half of the course will be situated mostly in the U.S. and Europe, the readings from the second half of the course will include case studies from Africa, Asia, and South America.

Course Readings


**Course Requirements**

- Contribute to nine discussion boards
- Complete five short papers (1–2 pages)
- Participate in at least three Q&As
- Complete a 15-page historiographical paper or project of appropriate rigor

**Learning Objectives**

1. Investigate the various ways that the medical profession, patients, and the state narrate illness
2. Chart the history of medicine and public health, paying particular attention to the changing roles of doctors, the history of disease causation, and how these two phenomena overlap, especially in the mid to late nineteenth century

**Class Schedule**

**Week 1:** September 22: Introduction to the History of Medicine and Interdisciplinary Analysis

**Readings**

- n/a

**Assignments**

- Discussion Board One

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**Week 2:** September 29: Narratives about the Beginning of Public Health: The International Slave Trade

**Readings**

- Downs, *Maladies of Empire*, Introduction and Chapter 1
- Jamelle Bouie, "We Still Can't See American Slavery for What It Was," *New York Times*, January 28, 2022. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 2 module.)

**Assignments**

- Discussion Board Two
Short Paper One due October 5
  • Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Q&A Session One: Monday, October 3 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 3: October 6: Traditional Narrative of Medicine: Colonial Boston and Smallpox

Readings
  • Margo Minardi, "The Boston Inoculation Controversy of 1721-1722: An Incident in the History of Race," William and Mary Quarterly, 61(1), 47–76. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 3 module.)

Assignments
  • Discussion Board Three
  • Final Paper/Project Question due October 12
    • In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final paper or project will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, a brief description of your research plan, and a justification for why your particular paper or project is worth pursuing.

Week 4: October 13: Changing Narratives of Medical Authority

Readings
  • John Harley Warner, “Power, Conflict, and Identity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Medicine: Therapeutic Change at the Commercial Hospital in Cincinnati.” Journal of American History 73, no. 4 (1987): 934–56. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 4 module.)

Assignments
  • Discussion Board Four
  • Short Paper Two due October 19
    • Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Q&A Session Two: Tuesday, October 18 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET
Week 5: October 20: Narratives about Southern Epidemics

Readings

- Olivarius, *Necropolis* (all)

- Revised Question and Proposed Bibliography due October 26
  1. Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback AND
  2. Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final paper/project.

Week 6: October 27: Global History of Epidemiology

Readings

- Downs, *Maladies of Empire*, Chapters 2–4, 8

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
- Short Paper Three due November 2
  - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Q&A Session Three: Wednesday, November 2 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 7: November 3: War and Sanitation: How the Public Understood Epidemics

Readings

- Downs, *Maladies of Empire*, Chapters 5 and 6
- Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (all)

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven
- Short Paper Four due November 9
  - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
**Week 8:** November 10: Civil War and Freedpeople’s Health

**Readings**

- Downs, *Sick From Freedom* (all)
- Downs, *Maladies of Empire*, Chapter 7

**Assignments**

- Paper/Project Preview due November 16
  - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper
  - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.

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**Week 9:** November 17: The Bacteriological Revolution

**Readings**

- Walzer-Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary* (all)

**Assignments**

- Discussion Board Eight
- Short Paper Five due November 23
  - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

**Q&A Session Four: Tuesday, November 22 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET**

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**Week 10:** November 24: Narratives about Sex, the Seventies and HIV

**Readings**

- *The Normal Heart*, directed by Ryan Murphy (HBO, 2014). (A link to this film can be found in the Week 10 module.)

**Assignments**

- Rough Draft due November 30
  - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first ten pages (at minimum) of your final paper.
• Project: Submissions of the project rough draft will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.

Week 11: December 1: Activist and Patient Narratives

Readings

• Schulman, *Let the Record Show* (all)

Assignments

• Discussion Board Nine

Week 12: December 8: Framing Disease, Disease as Frame

• Reiss, *Bodies in Doubt* (all)

Assignments

• Final Paper/Project due December 14

Q&A Session Five: Thursday, December 8 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET
**Assignment Descriptions**

**Short Papers**

Throughout each term students will complete five short papers. Each of these assignments should be 1–2 pages in length, in 12 pt. font, and double-spaced. Students have the option of responding to a prompt created by their section professor or to one of their own design. Prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings.

**Discussion Board Posts**

Students will respond to nine virtual discussion board posts for each course. Discussion boards are led by your section professor, who will provide an analytical prompt related to course material and instructions for participation. These prompts will give you the opportunity to interact with your fellow students and share your interpretation of course themes.

**Question-and-Answer Sessions**

Throughout the semester the lead scholar of each course will lead five Q&As. Students **MUST** attend at least three of these sessions for each course they are taking. **In order to receive credit for attending each Q&A, you must complete a 1-2 paragraph evaluation within 24 hours of participation.** Note: If you cannot attend three of the five Q&A sessions, you may receive credit by viewing archived Q&As and completing a 1–2 page review of topics covered for each missed Q&A.

**Final Paper/Project**

For the final assignment of each term, you will choose to complete either a 15-page research paper or a research project. The research paper can be a traditional position paper that uses original research to prove a thesis statement or a historiography paper that critically examines how American historians have interpreted the same event differently and why shifts in historical debates may have occurred. Research projects are a public-education tool designed for the general population, teachers, and/or students of varying ages. Sample projects include (but are not limited to) vodcasts, documentary editing and transcription, podcasts, websites, annotated readers, walking tours, or museum exhibits. Lesson plans **will not** be accepted. A 5-page paper narrative must accompany the project. Your section professor must approve research projects.

Both final assignment options require you to ask an open-ended historical question (something that does not have an easy yes or no answer) that you do not yet know the answer to. You will then use the research process (pulling from a variety of resources, mostly primary source documents) to explore that question and create a thesis-driven answer. Regardless of whether you choose to pursue a paper or project, papers and projects are broken down into smaller assignments, or scaffolded, throughout the semester. This method breaks up a large grade into smaller constituent grades and allows students time to incorporate instructor feedback into their assignment.
Scaffolded Assignments

- **Final Paper/Project Proposal (2%)**:

  In roughly 1–2 pages, you should outline the main question, topic, or purpose of your final paper or project. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information on and historical context for your topic (answer the questions who, what, where, and when), a brief description of your research plan (this does not need to be very specific, but should outline how many weeks you plan to research, if you need to schedule research trips or if your sources are published or available digitally, and when you plan to begin writing), and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing (What is the significance of this topic? What does it add to our historical knowledge? Are you filling a gap that other historians have overlooked such as considering race, ethnicity, or gender?)

- **Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (3.5%)**:

  This assignment will give you the opportunity to incorporate the feedback you received on the first draft of your proposal. In addition to incorporating your section professor’s comments, you will also submit a proposed bibliography listing five sources you plan to use in your research for your final product. Each of these sources should be followed by a brief summary (3–5 sentences) of the source and what it will contribute to your research process.

- **Paper or Project Preview (5%)**:

  This will give you the opportunity to show the progress you have made on your final project or paper and get some early-stage feedback from your section leader. For a final paper, this should be roughly the first five pages of what will ultimately be your final submission. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in.

- **Rough Draft (10.5%)**:

  For a final paper, this should be, at minimum, the first ten pages of what will ultimately be your final submission. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in.

- **Final Product (21%)**:

  **Final Paper**: Final papers should be at least fifteen pages in length. These can take the form of research papers or historiographical essays.

  **Final Project**: Much like the final paper option, a final project is meant to prove that you have mastered the content covered by this course. We encourage you to be creative in your approach to this project, though it should be equivalent in rigor and workload to a final paper.