The Vulnerable Body: Anthropological Understandings

Course Description
This course begins with the assumption that the human body is a unit upon which collective categories are engraved. These categories can vary from social values, to religious beliefs, to feelings of national belonging, to standards of sexuality and beauty. Readings in this course will concentrate around the classic and recent attempts in the social and historical sciences to develop ways of understanding this phenomenon of “embodiment.” We will begin with an overview of what is considered to be the “construction” of the human body in various societies. We will investigate how the body has been observed, experienced, classified, modified, and sacralized in different social formations. We will then trace the emergence of clinical biomedicine in early-modern Europe. We will read about specific diseases and epidemics. And, we will follow the transformations in body perceptions and embodiment practices that occurred through the concerted efforts of missionaries and colonialists around the globe. We will explore representations and techniques of body modification that take place presently in both the modern West and the Third World. The focus will be on the “closed” modern body as it attempts to simultaneously reproduce itself and delineate the physical and imagery margins between itself and the wider socio-political context. The course will end with an attempt in understanding cancer as the disease of the industrialized “vulnerable” modern body.

Course Requirements
Class Participation 20%
Short papers 40%
Final research paper 40%

Class attendance is required. Assigned readings should be completed before coming to class. Your participation in class discussions will affect your grade. You are required to write two short papers (3-5 typed pages). The first should be an “ethnography” of your body, while the second should be a book or film review. More details about the short papers will be given in class, but keep in mind that you need to incorporate class readings in your short papers. A final research paper will also be required. The topic for your final paper should be discussed and approved before the middle of April. You will be required to make a small presentation in class on your paper topic.

Required Readings
The following books (although we will not read them in their entirety) have been ordered and should be available for purchase at the Bookstore. The rest of the readings will be posted on e-reserve.

Feldman, Alan Formations of violence: The narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland
Foucault, Michel Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison
Kleinman, Arthur The Illness Narratives
Martin, Emily The Woman in the Body: A cultural analysis of reproduction
McNeill, William Plagues and peoples
Murphy, Robert The body silent
Petryna, Adriana Life Exposed
Sertimeakis, Nadia The Last Word
Sontag, Susan Illness as Metaphor
Taussig, Michael Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man
Tuesday, January 31  
Introduction to the course  
Film: The body beautiful

Tuesday, February 7  
Human bodies in biological evolution and prehistory  
Read: McNeill, William Plagues and Peoples Introduction, Chapters 1, 2,3

Tuesday, February 14  
European transformations: The “closing” of the modern body  
Read: Foucault, Michel Discipline and Punish  
“The body of the condemned”  
“Generalized punishment”  
“Docile bodies”

Tuesday, February 21  
Colonized bodies and the body as a site of resistance  
Read: McNeill, William Plagues and Peoples, Chapter 4  
Taussig, Michael Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man, Chapters 1,2,7,8

Tuesday, February 28  
Political violence and the modern body  
Read: Feldman, Alan Formations of violence, Chapters 1,2,3,4  
Film: Saving Private Ryan  
First short paper due

Tuesday, March 7  
Cultural embodiment: Classical perspectives on body symbolism and theoretical trends  
Read: Turner, Victor The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual (Introduction and Chapter 6)  
Van Gennep, Arnold The Rites of Passage (Chapter 6)  
Csordas, Thomas “Somatic Modes of Attention” Cultural Anthropology 8(2): 135-156, 1993  
Film: Naya: The story of a !Kung woman
Tuesday, March 14  
Adoring the dead  
Read:  
Seremetakis, Nadia *The Last Word*, Chapters 1, 2, 4, 8, 9

Tuesday, March 21  
No class, spring break

Tuesday, March 28  
The body as scientific object: Introducing biomedicine  
Read:  
McNeill, William *Plagues and Peoples*, Chapter 6  
Foucault, Michel “The politics of health in the 18th century”  
“The birth of biopolitics”  
Film: *The forgotten village*

Tuesday April 4  
The body and its malcontents: Illness and metaphors  
Read:  
Kleinman, Arthur *The illness narratives*, Chapters 1, 2, 3  
Sontag, Susan “Illness as metaphor”

Tuesday, April 11  
Gendered bodies: Reproduction in the modern era  
Read:  
Martin, Emily *The Woman in the body*, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 12

Tuesday, April 18  
No class, Monday schedule

Tuesday, April 25  
The dysfunctional Body  
Read:  
Murphy, Robert *The body silent*, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6  
Second short paper due

Tuesday, May 2  
The exposed body  
Read:  
Petryna, Adriana *Life Exposed* Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 6  
Film: *Black rain*

Tuesday, May 9  
Student presentations

Final papers due Friday, May 19 by 4:00pm