Cultures of Cancer

Course description
This course critically examines cancer as a pervasive disease and a metaphor of global modern cultures. Students will be exposed to the ways cancer is perceived as a somatic and social standard within locally constructed cognitive frameworks. They will investigate the scientific and emotional responses to the disease and the ways cancer challenges our faith and spirituality, our ways of life, notions of pollution and cleanliness and our healing strategies. This approach to cancer is comparative and inter-disciplinary and focuses on how specialists in different societies have described the disease, how its victims in different cultures have narrated their experiences, how causality has been perceived, and what interventions (sacred or secular) have been undertaken as therapy and prevention. Cancer epitomizes the narrative of western biomedical history, which focuses on the march of science and the ideas of the great doctors that led to the conquering of disease. This course looks beyond the western biomedical paradigm and looks at the historical, political, economic and cultural factors that shape our understanding of illness and disease.

Requirements
It is important that you try to go through as much of the required readings as possible. We will run the class as a seminar: therefore participation in class discussions will count towards your grade. You can watch the recommended films at the library. You are required right from the beginning to keep a “Cancer Journal,” preferably with weekly entries about cancer in your daily life, (hearing, for example, about the mother of a classmate who is undergoing chemotherapy, reading an article in the newspaper, watching a documentary on television) etc. You should use this forum also to comment on the weekly class readings, since there are no other written requirements. You may send the journals to me via e-mail by Sunday evening so I can read
them before class. A mind-term, a final research paper (10 pages) and a final exam are also required (more details will be given out in class).

Class performance 20%
Journals 20%
Mid-term exam 20%
Final paper 20%
Final exam 20%

The following books should be available at the bookstore for purchase. They have also been placed on reserve at the library. The rest of the readings are, or will be, on e-reserve.

Balshem, Martha Cancer in the Community
Korda, Michael Man to Man
Lorde, Audre The Cancer Journals
McMullin Juliet and Diane Weiner (eds) Confronting cancer: metaphors, advocacy and anthropology
Patterson, James The Dread Disease
Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr Cancer Ward
Sontag, Susan Illness as metaphor
Stoller, Paul Stranger in the village of the sick: A memoir of cancer, sorcery and healing
Weinberg, Robert One Renegade Cell
Part A: Cancer definitions

Monday, September 13
Introduction: Human health and cancer in the post-modern era
Film: Caro Diario

Monday, September 20
Cancer in historical perspective
Read:
Dubos, Rene Mirage of Health (Chapters 1 and 3) (e-reserve)
Patterson, James The Dread Disease (Prologue and Chapter 1) (e-reserve)
Film: Dark Victory

Monday, September 27
Biomedical stories: cells, growth and genes
Read:
Weinberg, Robert, 1998 One Renegade cell
Kluge, Eike-Henner “Patenting human genes” (e-reserve)
Judson, Horace “The greatest surprise for everyone” (e-reserve)

Monday, October 4
Cancer as a public health problem and its epidemiology
Read:
DiGiacomo, Susan M. 1999 “Can there be a “cultural epidemiology?”’’ Medical Anthropology Quarterly 13(4): 436-457 (e-reserve)
Frankenberg, Ronald , 1993,“Risk: Anthropological and epidemiological narratives of prevention” In Knowledge, Power and Practice: The anthropology of medicine and everyday life, edited by Shirley Lindenbaum and Margaret Lock, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp.219-244 (e-reserve)
Lock, Margaret, 1998 “Breast Cancer: Reading the omens’

Anthropology Today (e-reserve)

Film: Safe

Monday October 11, No class, fall break

Tuesday, October 12
Mid-term examination

Part B: Anthropological encounters with cancer
Monday, October 18
Anthropological fieldwork in cancerous settings

Read:
Juliet McMullin and Diane Weiner “Introduction: An anthropology of cancer” IN Confronting Cancer
Beltham, Martha Cancer in the Community
Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good (e-reserves)
   “American Oncology and the Discourse on Hope”
   “Medicine on the edge: Conversations with oncologists”
   “Oncology and narrative time”

Film: Erin Brockovich

Monday October 25
Cultural perceptions and moral reasoning: anthropological understandings

Read:
Hunt, Linda, 1998 “Moral reasoning and the meaning of cancer: Causal explanations of Oncologists and patients in southern Mexico.” (e-reserve)
Chavez, et al. “Structure and meaning in models of breast and cervical cancer risk factors: A comparison of perceptions among Latinas, Anglo Women and Physicians” (e-reserve)
Chavez, Leo “Wasting away in neoliberal-ville: Mexican immigrant women’s views on cervical cancer, social inequality and gender relations.” IN Confronting cancer
Erwin, Deborah “The witness project: narratives that shape the cancer
experience of African American women.” IN Confronting Cancer
McMullin, Juliet “Experiencing diagnosis: views from Latina cervical
cancer patients.” IN Confronting Cancer
Weiner, Dianne “Changing views of cancer: three decades of southern
California native perspectives.” IN Confronting Cancer

Monday, November 1
Cultural disparities in cancer prevention and treatment:
anthropological ethics
Read:
Heurting-Roberts, Suzanne “Self and other in cancer health
disparities: negotiating power and boundaries in US society.” IN
Confronting cancer
Matthews, Holly “Cancer support groups and health advocacy: one
size doesn’t fit all.” IN Confronting Cancer
Kagawa-Singer, Marjorie “Where is culture in cultural tailoring?” IN
Confronting cancer
Lee, Simon “Notes from white flint: identify, ambiguity and
disparities in cancer.” IN Confronting Cancer

Part C: The illness narrative Genre

Monday, November 8
Personal Encounters and the War metaphor
Guest: Paul Stoller
Read:
Sontag, Susan Illness as metaphor
Stoller, Paul Stranger in the village of the sick: A memoir of cancer,
sorcery and healing

Monday, November 15
Personal Encounters and gender matters
Read:
Korda, Michael Man to Man
Lorde, Audre The Cancer Journals
Erenhreich, Barbara “Welcome to cancerland” (e-reserve)
Film: Magnolia

Monday, November 22
Cancer metaphors in literature
Read:
Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr Cancer Ward
Film: One true thing

Part D: Cultures of Carcinogenesis

Monday, November 29
Industry, environmental pollution and Cancer activism
Guest: Sara Frost Azzam (Wellesley Cancer Prevention Project, WCPP)
Read:
Carson, Rachel Silent Spring, Chapter 4 (e-reserve)
Karakasidou, Anastasia “The elusive subversion of order: Cancer in modern Crete, Greece.” IN Confronting Cancer
Film: Blue vinyl

Monday, December 6
Conclusion and student research presentations

Papers due Monday, December 20 by 4:30 p.m.

Enjoy the winter break