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. We will watch excerpts from the movies in class, but you can view the movies on your own. You are required right from the beginning to keep a “Cancer Journal,” preferably with daily entries. The journals are due by 12:00 midnight on the Sunday before class. Send the journals directly to me via e-mail. You may comment in your journal on class readings and discussions, movies, newspaper and magazine articles you come across, and/or experiences in your daily life. Three short response papers (3-5 pages) on any of the recommended readings, and a final research paper (15 pages) are also required. Directions as to how to write the papers will be given in class. 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.

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Bals hem, Martha Cancer in the Community
Dubos, Rene Mirage of Health
Beauvoir, Simon de A Very Easy Death
Korda, Michael Man to Man
Lerner, Barron The Breast cancer wars
Patterson, James The dread disease (out of print, photocopies will be provided)
Sontag, Susan Illness as metaphor
Steingraber, Sandra Living Downstream
Tolstoy, Leo The Death of Ivan Ilyich
Weinberg, Robert One Renegade Cell
Part A: Cancer definitions

September 13
Introduction: Overview of the course and introduction to cancer studies
Film: Caro Diario

September 20
Human health and cancer in the post-modern era
Read:
Dubos, Rene Mirage of Health (Chapters 1, 2, 6, 7, 8)

September 27
Biomedical definitions: cells, growth and genes
Guest: Dr. James Amatruda
Read:
Kluge, Eike-Henner “Patenting Human Genes (e-reserve)
Judson, Horace “The greatest surprise for everyone” (e-reserve)
Gibbs, Eayt “Untangling the roots of cancer “ (e-reserve)
Weinberg, Robert, 1998 One Renegade cell (optional)

October 4
The search for the cure and the politics of the war against cancer
Read:
Lerner, Barron The Breast Cancer Wars (Chapters 1, 26, 7, 9, 11, 12)
Lock, Margaret, 1998 “Breast Cancer: Reading the omens’ Anthropology Today (e-reserve)
First short paper due

Wednesday October 6 (optional)
9:50-12:00 Meet Dr. Susan Love (Breast cancer specialist and activist)
1:00pm Keynote lecture by Dr. Susan Love at Jewett Auditorium

October 11
No class, fall break
October 13 (Wednesday is Monday schedule)
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)


Film: Safe

October 18
Cancer in social history
Open Class at Davis Museum

Read:
Patterson, James The Dread Disease (excerpts, e-reserve)

Film: Dark Victory

Part B: Discourses/Cultures of carcinogenesis

October 25
Guest: Professor David Hess

Read:
To be announced

November 1
Industry, chemicals and pollution

Read:
Beltham, Martha Cancer in the Community

Film: Erin Brockovich

Second short paper due

November 8
Personal battles: the illness narrative genre

Read:
Sontag, Susan Illness as metaphor
Korda, Michael Man to Man
Erenhreich, Barbara “Welcome to cancerland” (e-reserve)

Film: Magnolia
November 15  
Cancer metaphors in the literature of the modern era

**Read:**
- Tolstoy, Leo *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
- DeBeauvoir, Simone *A Very Easy Death*

**Film:** One true thing

November 22  
Anthropological encounters with oncology

**Read:**
- Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good *American Medicine: The quest for Comptenece* (selected readings)
  - “Clinical Realities and Moral Dilemmas”
  - “A comparative analysis of the cultures of biomedicine”
  - “The biotechnical embrace” “American Oncology and the Discourse on Hope”
  - “Cultural Studies of Biomedicine”
  - “Medicine on the edge: Conversations with oncologists”
  - “Oncology and narrative time”

**Third short paper due**

November 29  
Cultural understandings of cancer: Race and ethnicity

**Read:**

December 6  
Cancer activism and conclusion

**Guest:** Sarah Little (WCCP)

**Read:**
- Steingraber, Sandra, 1997, *Living Downstream*

**Film:** Blue vinyl

Papers due Tuesday December 21, 4:30 pm

Have a nice break