

1. Course overview

Content and scope: What can illness narratives tell us about what it means to be a good citizen in contemporary U.S. culture? How have bodies become the site for what Michel Foucault has called biopolitics? How can the War on Cancer and the War on Terror be seen as mutually constitutive, for example, with significant implications for contemporary U.S. cultural studies? How can terminal illness be linked with what might be called terminal injustice, in which oppressions related to race, class, gender, sexuality, species, and environment seem impossible to overcome? This course will explore these questions and more in relation to theories of biopolitics, posthumanism, animality studies, disability studies, and American studies, while also focusing on representative memoirs, novels, plays, films, and other cultural texts. Critical discussions will be organized around issues such as: Foucault's formulation of biopower and biopolitics; animals and animality in relation to biopolitics; breast cancer in relation to feminism; AIDS in relation to homophobia; psychiatric diagnoses in relation to constructions of race; the cultural politics of Lance Armstrong and "Live Strong"; constructions of humans and nonhumans at the end of life; cultural politics related to illnesses as diverse as cancer, Alzheimer's disease, Down syndrome, and muscular dystrophy theoretical lines of inquiry, such as increasingly "radical" interventions against threats to life—whether from rogue cancer or terrorist cells or from diseased and contagious animal bodies--which construct divisions between grievable life and collateral damage. Our primary goal will be to use readings, class discussions, and critical writing assignments to explore the cultural politics and implications of illness narratives in contemporary U.S. culture.

Teaching: Seminar, two hours per week for ten weeks, 20 hours total. Attendance is obligatory in at least 8 out of 10 seminars.

Examination: the grade for the course is based upon a 10-page semester paper. Students are given the opportunity to submit an optional draft of the paper or problem statement for feedback before final submission.

2. Course objectives

I believe the learning outcomes adequately describe the knowledge that students should have acquired after finishing the course.

Learning outcomes:

After completing this course you:

- have an overview of key ways illness has been represented in U.S. literary texts, along with the significance and implications of those representations;
- know important recent theoretical developments in the fields of biopolitics, cultural studies of illness, disability studies, animal and animality studies;
- can engage key texts with close reading, while connecting those texts to theoretical debates and issues related to race, class, gender, sexuality, and species;
- can analyze literary texts in relation to dominant discourses and historical and cultural contexts.

3. Assessment

Grades, dropouts: 15 registered, 1 ikke møtt;

grade distribution: 2 A (14%), 6 B (43%), 4 C (29%), 0 D, 1 E (7%), 1 F (7%)

Appropriate content, level, prerequisites: yes

Student evaluations (mid-term): (14 responses out of 15 [93%])

Professor rating (1-5, 5=highest): avg.= 4.9

Course rating (1-5, 5=highest): avg.= 4.6

Student responses were generally very positive at the mid-point of the course, indicating that the professor was engaging, knowledgeable, good at relating to students and explaining difficult theories and concepts, while also balancing effective lectures with class discussions in an atmosphere that was safe and encouraging. The texts and course materials were generally praised for their diversity in terms of genre and theoretical issues, as well as being seen as interesting, relevant, and even eye-opening. Suggestions included requiring more theory as secondary readings, rather than having an additional list of recommended sources. Some students suggested having more practice analyzing individual texts, either through shorter assignments for a portfolio or through online discussions.

Student evaluations (end of course): (5 responses out of 14 invitations [36% response rate: not very representative]). There were generally positive responses among those few given at the end of the course, including calling attention to the ways the professor created an effective atmosphere for discussion and engaging with students. One student suggested including even more theory, while another suggested possibly requiring a short presentation so that each student would have that kind of opportunity to participate. Several comments were superlative, including: “One of the most interesting courses I’ve taken here”; “A great course with very interesting texts”; and, “It is probably one of the most eye-opening and meaningful courses I have ever taken.”

4. Changes since the last periodic evaluation

This is the first time this course has been taught.

5. Suggestions for improvement

This course was particularly interesting for me to teach while I was engaged in my own research on these texts and topics. The next time I teach it I think I will take the suggestion of several students and assign more theoretical texts in conjunction with the primary texts each week. This will help to give them more background in biopolitics in particular, while also modeling for them the kinds of analysis privileged in the course. One change I made in response to the mid-term evaluations was to match up specific recommended secondary sources with each class session, rather than the more general list of recommended sources that we started with. I also like the idea of encouraging more analysis and participation, whether through portfolio assessment, student presentations in class, or Fronter discussions. I will think further about which of these methods might best fit together in the future.