

Anthropology 251
Fall 2008
Anastasia Karakasidou
PNE 347
Office Hours: Tuesdays 11:00-12:30 or by appointment

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 disciplines 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

Class participation: It is important that you try before you come to class to go through as much of the required readings as possible. We will run the class as a seminar and participation in class discussions will count towards your grade. You will be assigned a number of readings during the semester, for which you will be responsible to lead the class discussion.

Cancer Journals: You are also required right from the beginning to keep a "Cancer Journal," with 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, checking out a site on cancer survivors etc). You should use this forum also to comment on the weekly class readings, since there are no other written requirements. I would like to read your journals three times during the semester.

A mid-term exam and a final research paper (12-15 pages) are also required (more details will be given out in class).

Your final grade will be calculated by taking into consideration:

Class performance 20%

Journals 20%

Mid-term 30%

Final paper 30%

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 and the recommended films are on e-reserve.

Balshem, Martha [Cancer in the Community](#)

Korda, Michael [Man to Man](#)

Lorde, Audre [The Cancer Journals](#)

Lowy, Ilana [Between Bench and Bedside](#)

Patterson, James [The Dread Disease](#)

Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr [Cancer Ward](#)

Sontag, Susan [Illness as metaphor](#)

Steingraber, Sandra [Living Downstream](#)

Weinberg, Robert [One Renegade Cell](#)

Part A: Cancer definitions

Tuesday, September 2

Introduction: Human health and cancer in the post-modern era

Film: Caro Diario

Tuesday, September 9

The social history of diseases: 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

Tuesday, September 16

Biomedical definitions cancer

Read:

Weinberg, Robert, 1998 One Renegade cell

Kluge, Eike-Henner "Patenting human genes" (e-reserve)

Judson, Horace "The greatest surprise for everyone" (e-reserve)

Tuesday, September 23

The search for the cure and the politics of the war against cancer

Read:

Lowy, Ilana From Bench to Bedside

Tuesday, September 30

First Cancer Journal due

Cancer as a public health problem and its epidemiology

Read:

Workshop report "Application of biomarkers in cancer epidemiology." In Toniolo P. et al. (editors), International Agency of Research on Cancer, Lyon, IARC Scientific Publications No. 142, p. 1-18 (e-reserve)

Parkin, D.M. "The global burden of cancer." Cancer Biology 8:219-235, 1998. (e-reserve)

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)

Film: Safe

Tuesday, October 7
Mid-term examination

Tuesday, October 14, no class, fall break

Part B: The illness Narrative Genre

Tuesday, October 21
Anthropological encounters with western biomedicine and oncology

Read:

Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good (e-reserves)
 “American Oncology and the Discourse on Hope”
 “Medicine on the edge: Conversations with oncologists”
 “Oncology and narrative time”

Taussig, Michael, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Patient.”(e-reserve)

Lock, Margaret, 1998 “Breast Cancer: Reading the omens’ Anthropology Today

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)

Tuesday, October 28
No class, Tanner Student Conference

Tuesday, November 4
Personal Battles

Sontag, Susan Illness as metaphor
Lorde, Audre The Cancer Journals

Tuesday, November 11
Second Cancer Journal due
Personal Battles (cont.)

Read:

Korda, Michael Man to Man
Erenreich, Barbara “Welcome to cancerland” (e-reserve)

Film: Magnolia

Tuesday November 18

Social inequality and disparities in cancer treatment

Read:

Suzanne's chapter in the forthcoming SAR book –

Paula Braverman: Health Disparities and Health Equity: Concepts and Measurement.

Ann Rev PH 2006 27:167-94.

Tuesday, November 25

Cancer metaphors in literature

Read:

Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr Cancer Ward

Film: One true thing

Tuesday December 2

**Industry, chemicals and cancer activism
and pollution**

Read:

Beltham, Martha Cancer in the Community

Carson, Rachel Silent Spring, Chapter 4 (e-reserve)

Steingraber, Sandra, 1997, Living Downstream (Prologue, Chapters 1,2,3.11.12, and Epilogue)

Film: Erin Brockovich

Film: Blue vinyl

Tuesday, December 9

Third Cancer Journal due

Conclusion and student research paper presentations

Papers due Friday, December 19, by 4:30 pm

Have a wonderful winter break