

Literature, Medicine, and Culture: Pandemics
Course director: Bernice Hausman

Course Description:

Literature, Medicine, and Culture (LMC) provides students with an opportunity to consider contemporary medicine and treatment in relation to historical experiences, ideas, and imagination. Course readings explicitly pose questions about the present in relation to the past, about the challenges of modern therapeutics and how they affect enduring ideas about human nature, and about the experience of illness from the patient perspective. Students will enhance skills in reading, interpretation, and analytic writing. They will also build on their Humanities and Systems knowledge base concerning the cultural contexts of illness, treatment, and care.

The thematic focus of the April 2020 offering of LMC, **Pandemics**, will allow students to build knowledge about historical pandemic experiences to contextualize what they are going through right now. Course materials will focus on four pandemics: **plague, cholera, Spanish flu, and HIV/AIDS**. Readings will focus on human experience, medical and political responses, literary expression of human response, and cultural differences and similarities. Students will meet for small group discussion in Zoom, personalizing their experience and helping them to develop leadership skills in seminar-style learning.

Course Goal:

Students who have completed this course will have

- Increased their knowledge base about historical pandemics, including literary responses to pandemic experience.

Learning Objectives: After completing the course, students will be able to

- Identify outbreak narratives and other rhetorical features of storytelling about infectious disease;
- Identify and describe historically consistent elements of the human experience of pandemics;
- Critically analyze humanities and social science scholarship on pandemics; and
- Apply knowledge about historical pandemics to the current pandemic moment.

1. How this course will run.

a. Online course management:

This course is fully online. Students enrolled in LMC: Pandemics will use **Canvas** as the online course management site. Canvas will have links to online course readings (hyperlinked to the syllabus) and some course readings in Files. The Assignments tab will have all assignments and will be the mechanism for handing in assignments.

The **syllabus** (this document) has information for each class's readings. The **framing document** along with some readings will be in the Files folder for that class period (Class 1, Class 2 etc.); other readings are accessible by **links** on the syllabus.

b. Small group meetings with Zoom:

Students will be assigned to a small group, which will meet for 1-1.5 hours twice per week via Zoom. For each Zoom meeting, there will be a list of questions to help structure discussion; groups must upload a written document that traces the discussion in response to these questions, as well as any other issues that came up and were discussed by the group in that session. *Students are responsible for ensuring that all members of the group participate, come to Zoom class meetings prepared by having read the assigned readings, and thoughtfully contribute to the group's conversation and final document.* These documents will be uploaded into Canvas via the assignments page, one per group.

Each class meeting will start on Zoom in one large group to answer any questions before students enter into their small-group Zoom meetings. The instructor may offer a short framing presentation before students will break into small groups for discussion of the reading materials and to answer the questions.

c. Out of class work:

To prepare for the twice-weekly Zoom discussions, students will read materials assigned for each class period. The instructor will also supply a Framing Document (in Files) that will provide notes and ideas to help students understand the materials assigned. Please note that there is more reading for the course than is typical for a Humanities selective. That is because there is less in-class (i.e., Zoom) time allotted.

d. Instructor access:

The instructor will hold virtual office hours weekly. These office hours will be conducted in Zoom, and students will be notified of the time weekly. The instructor is also available by email at any time during normal business hours at bhausman1@pennstatehealth.psu.edu.

e. Final assignments:

At the end of the course, students will submit **a final paper** that asks them to use several sources read for the course and apply what they learned from those sources to understanding an element of the current coronavirus outbreak. The full assignment, due date, and rubric for the course are all in the Assignments section of Canvas.

In addition, at the end of the course students will submit **a formal self-evaluation** the Assignments section of Canvas. This ungraded assignment requests that students discuss and evaluate their engagement with class topics, small-group discussions, the written answers to

questions submitted by the small groups, and their work on the final paper. The self-evaluation also asks that students relate how the work done for class (readings, discussions, writing assignments) affected their own experiences of the coronavirus pandemic.

f. Extenuating circumstances and course flexibility:

In the event that testing centers open up and students must take time to prepare for or take the USMLE Step 1 exam, elements of the course organization will be adjusted to accommodate this change of situation. If students become ill and cannot complete the course in synchronous fashion, accommodations can be made for asynchronous completion. Please contact the instructor with any questions or problems that you have with timely course completion.

g. A word about the readings:

Students should read generously and try to figure out the *arguments*, the *theories* on which the arguments are based, and the *evidence* that is deployed to support them. Fiction read for the course should be approached as documentary evidence of both experience and interpretation of experience—the rendering of a point of view artistically. Reading closely and well is one of the most important epistemological (knowledge-making) tools of the humanities, and this course is meant to provide opportunities for students to practice reading critical materials outside of biomedical fields.

The readings are eclectic and wide-ranging, from literature to history to social science. They are meant to challenge students to think creatively and to consider how social science and humanities disciplines explain, frame, and intervene into pandemic experiences. If students find themselves in disagreement with the arguments or portrayals, *that is fine*. Sometimes the perspectives that make one think are ones that people seem at first glance objectionable or wrong. Students should not be afraid to voice disagreements in small-group discussion or in writing assignments.

2. Reading Schedule (with links for online materials):

Class 1, April 7: *Introduction to epidemics and the outbreak narrative*

Excerpts from *Contagious*, by Priscilla Wald, **Introduction: read pp. 1-11, Chapter 1**

“Imagined Immunities,” read in full. (in Files)

“What Is an Epidemic?” by Charles Rosenberg. (in Files)

“The Masque of the Red Death,” by Edgar Allen Poe. (in Files)

“History in a Crisis—Lessons for Covid-19,” by David Jones (in Files)

Optional: “Mary Mallon (1869-1938) and the History of Typhoid Fever,” by Filio Marinelli et al. (in Files)

Optional: “Typhoid Mary, Villain or Victim?” Historical notes for NOVA film on Typhoid Mary, [link](#)

Optional: “Yes, There Really Was a Typhoid Mary,” *Washington Post*, [link](#)

Class 2, April 9: *Plague*

Introduction to *The Decameron*, Boccaccio. [link](#) (Read only the introduction, unless you are inclined to read farther. To get to it, you will need to scroll down until you see the work “introduction,” followed by “To the Ladies.” Don’t worry—the intro is only around 10-12 pages.)

The Decameron Web: Plague. [link](#)

Excerpt from *The Plague*, Albert Camus. (in Files)

Image of plague doctor sculpture: [link](#)

Optional: “Inside the Living Hell of London in the Plague Year,” by Clive Irving, *The Daily Beast*. [link](#)

Optional: “The Remarkable Story of Eyam: The Village that Stopped the Plague,” [link](#)

Optional: “The Dancing Plague of 1518,” by Ned Pennant-Rea [link](#)

Class 3, April 14: *Cholera*

Excerpt from *The Cholera Years*, by Charles Rosenberg. (in Files)

Excerpt from *Love in the Time of Cholera*, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. [link](#)

“Stories in the Time of Cholera: Race and Public Health in Venezuela,” by Charles Briggs and Clara Martini-Briggs. [link](#)

Optional: Victorian Web: Cholera. [link](#)

Class 4, April 16: *Spanish Flu #1*

From *Dartmouth Medicine* 2006, “Cold Comfort,” by Laura Stephenson Carter. (in Files)

“The Perpetual Challenge of Infectious Diseases,” by Anthony Fauci and David Morens. (in Files)

“In Gauze We Trust,” by Nancy Rockafellar (in Files)

Optional: Scientific “Triumphalism and Learning from Facts: Bacteriology and the ‘Spanish Flu’ Challenge of 1918,” by Eugenia Tognotti (in Files)

Optional: “‘Destroyer and Teacher’: Managing the Masses During the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic,” Nancy Tomes (in Files)

Optional: See these links for two volumes of collected articles on the Spanish flu: [link](#), [link](#)

Optional: See this link for an online archive of historical news articles and materials in the US on Spanish flu: [link](#)

Class 5, April 21: *Spanish Flu #2*

Pale Horse, Pale Rider, by Katherine Anne Porter. [link](#) (*Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is the name of the book as well as the name of the final novella in the book. Please read only the novella. It is the third of three in this online text.)

“It’s as Bad as Anything Can Be”: Patients, Identity, and the Influenza Pandemic,” by Nancy Bristow (in Files)

Class 6, April 23: HIV/AIDS in America

AIDS timeline (in Files)

Understanding AIDS, a pamphlet sent to all Americans in 1988 by the Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop. (in Files)

Poetry by Paul Monette, [link](#), [link](#) (this is a performance of the poem “Here”), [link](#)

“AIDS Then and Now,” by Abigail Zuger. (in Files)

“Maria,” by Mahlon Johnson. (in Files)

“The Epidemics America Got Wrong,” by Jim Downs. [link](#)

Optional: “AIDS, HIV, and the Cultural Construction of Reality,” by Paula Treichler (in Files)

Class 7, April 30: HIV/AIDS in Africa and Haiti

AIDS in South Africa info (in Files)

“Sending Sickness: Sorcery, Politics, and Changing Concepts of AIDS in Rural Haiti,” by Paul Farmer. (in Files)

“AIDS, Science, and Governance: The Battle Over Antiretroviral Therapy in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” by Nicoli Natrass. (in Files)

“Siyayinqoba Beat It!” TV show in South Africa about HIV/AIDS, [link](#) (this link is to a description of the show)

“Siyayinqoba Beat It!” YouTube excerpts, [link](#) (this is just one video clip—if you poke around you can find others)

Excerpt from *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, by Phaswane Mpe. (in Files)

Optional: “On Suffering and Structural Violence,” by Paul Farmer. (in Files)

Class 8, April 30: *Medical Ethics in the Age of Coronavirus*

Ethics materials on coronavirus from the Hastings Center, [link](#)

New York Times articles on ethics and approaches to pandemic suppression, [link](#), [link](#)