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Office Hours 1:30 – 3:00 Tuesday and Thursday

Contagious Narratives
Winter 2021
T-Th 3:30 – 4:50

Description

In *Contagious*, Priscilla Wald writes, “Disease emergence ineluctably evinces human interconnections on global scale, but the stories of disease emergence fashion the terms in which those connections make sense” (270). For Wald, and for others, understanding the narratives of contagion can help us understand the cultural and social work that diseases do in the world. In this independent study, we will investigate how authors imagine the lifeworlds of those in the grip of contagious outbreak. The course will move in two sections. Beginning with HIV/AIDS epidemic, we will examine Tony Kushner’s masterwork, *Angels in America* and explore a range of responses to HIV/AIDS from queer and queer of color scholars. In the second section, we will examine fictions of virality as they are presented in speculative fiction, engaging Colson Whitehead’s novel *Zone One* and Francis Lawrence’s film *I am Legend*. We will conclude by thinking about our present conditions by examining Marc Lamont Hill’s recent book *We Still Here*. Throughout, we will engage with important secondary literature from scholars including Priscilla Wald, Ramzi Fawaz, Neel Ahuja, Adia Benton, and others. We will be especially attentive to how race, gender, and sexuality relate to notions of susceptibility to disease, how these categories organize government response, and how solidarity within and between these communities has reorganized political and cultural responses to contagion.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to

- Analyze and explain the narrative elements of that produce ideas about disease
- Assess the relationship between narratives of contagion, identity, and justice
- Craft original work relating their understanding of the stories we tell about disease

Required Texts

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*
Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*
Mark Lamont Hill, *We Still Here*

Other readings will be made available on Canvas. All readings will be on electronic reserves at the library.

Grading

Weekly Blog Post	25 points
Discussion	25 points
Flash Essay	25 (4x6) points
Current Events Portfolio	26 points

Class Policies/Code of Conduct

Climate – This course does not harbor belligerent or intolerance speech or behavior toward anyone on the basis of race, gender identity, sexuality, immigration status, or ability. This is true of synchronous discussions, written work, and discussions about this class that extend beyond the.

As Koritha Mitchell writes, “The N-word won’t be used in this class by a person of any race, even if it consistently appears in our texts. The same goes for the “F” word, regardless of a person’s (perceived) sexual orientation or gender expression. And, this is simply not a space in which we call people ‘trash.’”^[1] For more about this, please listen to Prof. Mitchell’s podcast at <http://bit.ly/2TakuU5> or read from her blog, cited below.

The relationship between blackness and policing is directly germane to our course of study. We begin our readings in the midst of Jim Crow America, in which Black Codes reinforced notions of Black criminality. As we will chart in our readings, Black letters have been directly responsive to the social, juridical, and cultural production of Black criminality. We therefore take as axiomatic the concept that black lives matter and use that premise as a position through which to read and understand the relationship between literature and society. We will also read texts from across the 20th century that position police violence, brutality, and murder as a chief force of anti-Blackness and that seek to dismantle racialized policing.

Land Acknowledgement – The Northwestern campus sits on the traditional homelands of the people of the Council of Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa as well as the Menominee, Miami and Ho-Chunk nations. It was also a site of trade, travel, gathering and healing for more than a dozen other Native tribes and is still home to over 100,000 tribal members in the state of Illinois.

Attendance – Class meetings are central to developing working knowledge in our subject matter and to developing the communication skills necessary for life in the 21st Century. You may miss one class with no questions asked. Compounded absences will inevitably affect your participation grade.

Addendum – Due to social distancing requirements, our class will meet electronically. This may present difficulties due to connectivity, availability of safe streaming location, etc. Please be sure to fill out the e-Learning survey and communicate with both me and your TA as to your ability to stream. Please see the guidelines for streaming below.

Religious Holidays –

If you celebrate a religious holiday that will conflict with any of the course requirements, please see me during the first two weeks of class to discuss. We will make sure that you can both meet the course requirements and practice your faith fully.

Preparing for class – Please bring all texts, including print-outs of assigned readings posted to Canvas, with you to class. You may not read posted materials from your computer. I have purposefully designed the course to minimize potential financial burdens, but if you require further accommodations, please let me know so that I can make readings available.

This is a reading intensive class. You should prepare to complete readings before class begins. On day one we will discuss strategies for good active reading, but it is my suggestion that you read in hard copy or with a device that will allow you to annotate whenever possible.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities – Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

Late work – I do not accept work after it is due. A key part of learning is maintaining a working appreciation of your calendar. Extension requests may be considered, but must be requested more than twenty-four hours in advance of a due date.

Academic Integrity – Academic dishonesty and plagiarism will not be tolerated. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to familiarize yourself with the school's policies regarding Academic Integrity.

Course Content – For reasons I will discuss during our course meetings, I do not offer case-by-case content warnings. The unique history of enslavement and dispossession that has shaped black experiences in the Atlantic world and beyond means that we will regularly encounter violent language and themes in the course of our discussion. My approach to these topics is to rigorously confront them so as to better understand and ultimately disempower them.

Writing Assignments – Assignments are to be completed in paragraph form using a standard font, font size, and margin size. Assignments will be turned in via Canvas. All assignments should have a title, your name, and page numbers.

E-Learning – Please follow the guidelines below to make for a SAFE and intellectually productive learning environment.

1. Whenever possible, it is best practice to stream with your camera on. Turn the Wi-Fi on your tablets and phones off so as to ensure they are not using bandwidth. If you are unable to stream video, that's ok. Please stream your audio and do your best to remain focused and active during the discussion.
2. Please be sure to stream in appropriate clothing. If you must stream from your bedroom, please do not lie in bed. You may sit on or in front of your bed. These requests are made not to punish you, but rather to protect the integrity of scholarly enterprise conducted from home.
3. Please use headphones and mute your microphone to avoid ambient noise disrupting your synchronous discussions.

Grade Review – If you wish to have your grade reviewed, you must wait 24 hours and write an explanation of the reasons for your request that incorporates and responds to the feedback you received.

Reading Schedule:

Week One (1/12)
Introduction and Biopower

- Tuesday Jan 12: Course introduction, Syllabus Review, Expectations and Q and A
Thursday Jan 14: Read for class: Michel Foucault, "The Right Death and the Power Over Life"
Kyla Tomkpins, ["We're Not Here to Learn What We Already Know"](#)
Bring to class: An article from a major publication describing disease outbreak OTHER THAN Covid-19

Week Two (1/19)
An Epidemic of Signification

- Tuesday, Jan 19: Read for class: Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*
Thursday, Jan 21: Read for class: Paula Treichler, "An Epidemic of Signification"
Rafael Campo, *What the Body Told Me* (selected poems)

Week Three (1/26)
Affect and Social Movements

- Tuesday, Jan 26: Read for class: Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Perestroika*
Thursday, Jan 28: Read for class: Deborah Gould, "The Emotion Work of Movements"
Ramzi Fawaz, "I Cherish My Bile Duct as Much as Any Other Organ"

Week Four (2/2)
"After" AIDS

- Tuesday, Feb 2: View for class: *United in Anger*
Read for class: Jih Feh Cheng, "How to Survive: AIDS and its Afterlives"
Thursday, Feb 4: Read for class: Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (excerpt)
Celeste Watkins-Hayes, "Injuries of Inequality"

Week Five (2/9)
Biosecurity and Empires of Disease

- Tuesday, Feb 9: Read for class: Richard Preston, "The Ebola Wars"
Adia Benton, "Whose Security"
Thursday, Feb 11: Read for class: Neel Ahuja, "Staging Smallpox"
Corey Byrnes, "Transpacific Maladies"

Week Six (2/16)
Disease Speculations

- Tuesday, Feb 16: Read for class: Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*
Thursday, Feb 18: View for class: Francis Lawrence, *I am Legend*
Read for class: Octavia Butler, "Speech Sounds"
Walter Mosley, "The Nig in Me"

Week Seven (2/23)
Racializing Contagion, Racializing Infrastructure

Tuesday, Feb 23: Read for class: Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*
Thursday, Feb 25: Read for class: Michelle Huang, "Racial Disintegration"

Week Eight (3/2)
Dread

Tuesday, Mar 2: Read for class: Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*
Thursday, Mar 4: Read for class: Jennifer James, "Dread"

Week Nine (3/9)
Pandemic, Policing, Protest, Possibility

Tuesday, Mar 9: Read for class: Marc Lamont Hill, *We Still Here*
Signs Feminist Collective (Enloe, Hammonds, Chen)
Thursday, Mar 11: Read for class: Marc Lamont Hill, *We Still Here*
Signs Feminist Collective (Altschuler and Wald, Tiktin, Patton)
Week 9 (11/16)

Assignments

Discussion Posts:

Each week in which you DO NOT write a Flash Essay, you are responsible for posting a blog post before class on either Monday or Wednesday. Your blog post should include at least one reference to the text or texts under review for the day, should raise a provocative question (if you are the first to post) or respond to the question raised in previous posts. We will use these virtual conversations as ways into the course discussions for our class meetings.

Flash Essays

You are required to write four flash essays during the quarter, although there is no requirement on when you write them, with the caveat that you must write *at least* one essay on the HIV/AIDS unit and one on Whitehead's *Zone One*. Each week, I will post one or two essay prompts after Wednesday's class. You may use these as prompts for writing your essay, or you may derive your own essay topic and argument. Regardless of which you choose, your flash essay should be around 2-3 pages long and should consider all readings for the week. Your job will be to make an argument about the relationship between the texts under review. Your mostly likely path to success will be to engage in a close reading of the primary text and mobilizing secondary materials to support this, but other options are available.

Flash essays are about practicing fast, incisive writing. I recommend that you plan carefully for when you will turn in your work and that wait until the prompts have been released. You will then have until class meets on Monday to write your essay and will have the benefit of our class discussion to inform your discussion.

NOTE: Due to the volume of writing, I am more concerned about your ideas than I am about how you package them. This is not license to ignore the rules of grammar, mechanics, and usage that make for good communication. Nor does it exempt you from citing sources. However, I will take into consideration the volume during grading and we will discuss strategies for writing while you read.

Participation/Discussion

The success of our seminar discussions rests on your collective participation. It is therefore my expectation that everyone participates *every day* we meet. My understanding of your enrollment in the class is that you wish to contribute to a vibrant intellectual conversation. There is thus no option for passing, sitting out, or watching the seminar unfold. Zoom and the stress of the pandemic can make this difficult and we will encounter those hurdles as they emerge. Remember that good participation means *listening* actively. On zoom, I have found that students who turn off their camera for whatever reason, are at a disadvantage in this regard and so I encourage you to stream your video as much as your internet connection will allow. If you must turn off your camera, then take notes while your colleagues are speaking.

If you are on a discussion post week, use that post as an opportunity to leverage your thoughts in the seminar space. If you are instead writing a flash essay, you should come to class with ideas about what you plan to write about and use the class as a space of reflection.

Finally, many of you assume participation means coming to discussion with answers in hand, but good provocative questions can be more helpful to a discussion than a forceful argument about a text or close reading of a passage. But all questions are not created equal, and often, the simplest and most direct question can be the most generative.

Intertext Portfolio

For this project, you are responsible for culling an electronic portfolio of items related to our course. You must include *at least* one element per week from among journalism (either long or short form), creative writing, etc, and you must write a short reflection that addresses each of the pieces in your portfolio.

Dimensions	Developing	Competent	Exemplary
Thesis	The paper lacks a clear thesis statement, and/or the thesis statement is difficult to discern, and/or the thesis is buried in the paper.	The paper has a thesis that responds to the assignment prompt. It emerges early enough in the paper to be useful, although it could be sharpened.	The paper has a clearly articulated and thoughtful thesis expressed early in the paper; the thesis demonstrates a deep understanding of the assignment prompt.
Analysis	The paper is loosely structured; paragraphs are not clearly connected; the logic of the analysis is unclear. The writer is not yet able to produce a clearly developed analysis, or to connect ideas, or these ideas are rote or derivative.	The paper is well structured, but stumbles occasionally in developing a clear analysis. Ideas are sometimes not fully developed and/or are not clearly connected. The writer has good ideas but is still working on expressing them in a cogent way.	The paper is well structured; paragraphs follow each other logically and ideas are fully developed; the writer clearly “maps” the flow of the analysis. There is a sense of the writer’s command of analysis.
Use of textual evidence	The examples are not well developed; quotes are “dropped in” to the text without framing or analysis. Examples don’t relate clearly to the author’s larger claims.	The paper cites examples, but their relation to the writer’s larger claims is not always clear. Primary texts are not always cited, or not cited accurately.	The paper cites appropriate examples from the primary text(s) to support its argument; it is clear how these examples support or illustrate the author’s claims. The primary text(s) is cited accurately.
Communication	The paper is weakly crafted and grammatically unsteady. The student is still developing skills to communicate clearly with an audience. There are numerous typos and errors, and these sometimes or often impede understanding.	The paper is syntactically and grammatically sound. There are errors, but these do not frequently impede the reader’s understanding of the paper. There are typos or other errors that might have been fixed with better proofreading.	The paper is lucid and elegant, and the prose is grammatically sound. There are no (or not a significant number of) typos or other errors to impede understanding.