

# Medicine, Body, Culture



**Professor:** Dr. Elyse Ona Singer

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**Office:** Dale Hall Tower 517

**Office Hours:** Friday, 12:00pm-2:00 pm or by appointment.

**Class time:** M, W 3:00-4:15

**Classroom:** Dale Hall Tower 102

**TA:** Veda Pai, [veda.s.Pai-1@ou.edu](mailto:veda.s.Pai-1@ou.edu)

## Course Description:

What does it mean to be healthy or sick? What kind of help do you seek to get well, and why? Medical anthropologists seek to understand the factors that influence health and wellbeing, the meaning and experience of being unwell, and the ways in which illness and health resources are unevenly distributed around the world. This undergraduate course offers an intensive introduction to the field, covering its history and theoretical debates, research techniques, and central scholars. Through books and articles, ethnographic film, and a graphic novel, we will explore a variety of topics that are of concern to medical anthropologists including addiction, biotechnologies, plastic surgery, and care in and beyond the United

States. You will hone your ethnographic interviewing skills, learn how to write like an anthropologist, and create your own photo essay on a pressing public health issue in your community. By the end of the course, you will understand how medical anthropology fits into the discipline as a whole, be fluent in key concepts, theories, and scholars in the field, and be able to describe the cultural underpinnings of Western biomedicine, the system of healing that has attained hegemonic status at the global level.

### Course Grade:

FINAL GRADE	DUE DATE	VALUE BREAKDOWN
Participation and Attendance	Throughout the term	10%
Transcribed Ethnographic Interview of an Illness Episode	10/31/23	15%
Short Midterm Essays	10/20/23	20%
Illness Narrative Paper	11/19/23	25%
Photo Essay of a Community Public Health Issue	9/25/23	10%
In-class Final Exam	12/14/23	20%
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100%</b>

### Required Books

- Fadiman, Anne. 2012. *The Spirit Catches you and You Fall Down*.
- Hamdy, Sherine. 2017. *Lissa: A Story About Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution*
- Biehl, João. 2005. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*.
- Kalanithi, Paul. 2016. *When Breath Becomes Air*.

**Assignments:** (You will find more specific detail on each assignment on the course website).

#### I. Participation and Attendance (10%):

This course demands rigorous engagement with texts, regular participation, and timely submission of all assignments. I expect students to read all texts in full and come to class with reflections, questions, and critiques. Please have readings handy to refer to during class sessions. It will be important to bear the following questions in mind when reading:

When was the work published and how does that matter to the argument?

What is the author's argument? What are the most significant examples the author uses to substantiate the argument?

Does the author make a convincing case? Why or why not?

Does this text refer to anything we have read or discussed previously in class?

What lingering questions did you have after reading?

II. **Transcribed Ethnographic Interview of an Illness Episode (15%):**

Students will identify and interview a person of their choice about an illness episode or health event that the interviewee has experienced, record the interview with permission, and transcribe the interview. Topics may include but are not limited to childbirth, COVID-19, mental health struggles, diabetes, and more. We will spend time in class discussing how to write an interview schedule and we will practice ethnographic interview techniques. Potential interview questions may include: When did the illness begin? To what do you attribute it? What steps have you taken to remedy the problem? Do you have health insurance? What do you think the sickness does, or how does it work? How severe is the sickness? What do you fear most about this condition? Students are encouraged to meet with the professor to discuss paper topics prior to conducting their interview.

III. **Short Midterm Essays (20%):**

The midterm essays stand in for a midterm exam. Students will complete *five* short answer, analytic essays at home. This is a chance to showcase what you have learned halfway through the term through readings and class discussions. Your essays will be graded on clarity of prose, the degree to which you answer the questions and follow the prompt for each question, and how thoroughly you demonstrate that you understand course concepts through citing and explaining authors we have read this term.

IV. **"Illness narrative" Paper (25%):**

Students will write an illness narrative (7 to 10 pages) modeled on Arthur Kleinman's formulation. Directions will be distributed on Canvas closer to the date and I will hold ethnographic writing workshops in class. Anthropologists aim to integrate theoretical concepts and perspectives with ethnographic or interview-based data. This means that anthropologists will use social theory to elucidate a particular experience or quote from a participant. In this course we will discuss a range of theoretical concepts in medical anthropology that will be relevant to your papers such as critical medical anthropology, interpretive medical anthropology, disease etiology, the political dimensions of the doctor-patient relationship, medicalization, the cultural weight of biomedical diagnoses, health disparities along axes of race, gender, and class, and more. Everything we will read will provide conceptual frameworks to draw on in your illness narrative paper. Papers will be graded based on incorporation of theoretical concepts, and ethnographic writing style. Students should incorporate five scholarly references, at least three of which are not on the syllabus.

V. **Photo Essay of a Public Health Issue in your community (15%):**

A photo essay is a series of photographs selected to tell a story. Photo essays may contain text but generally allow the photographs, or rather the subjects depicted in the photographs, to tell the story. Each student will create a photo essay to document a public health issue either on or off campus. (Examples include: COVID-19, intimate partner violence, binge drinking etc.). The curation of photographs, the sequence, and juxtaposition are all important aspects of the project. A photo essay usually does not need any more than approximately 10 images. Images can include captions if those captions enhance the visual narrative or add important information. The absence of a caption however can also have an impact on the

reader. For extra credit on this assignment, students may workshop their photo essays with the entire class prior to submission to get feedback on sequence, color, angle, and more.

VI. **Final Exam (25%):**

The final exam will be cumulative, covering material before and after the midterm. The exam will be held in class and closed note. It will consist of multiple-choice questions, definitions of key terms and concepts, as well as a long analytic essay that asks you to reflect on the role of medical anthropology in the world.

WEEK	DATE	READINGS
<b>Biomedical Knowledge vs. "Belief"</b>		
Week 1.1	8/21/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evans-Pritchard, E. E. "The notion of witchcraft explains unfortunate events." Good, Byron J. et al. (Hg.): <i>A Reader in Medical Anthropology. Theoretical Trajectories, Emergent Realities</i>. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell (2010): 18-25.</li> <li>Moran Thomas, Amy. 2013. "A Salvage Ethnography of the Guinea Worm." <i>In When People Come First: Critical Studies in Global Health</i>, Biehl and Petryna, eds. Biehl and Petryna, eds.</li> </ul>
Week 1.2	8/23/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Davenport, Beverly Ann. 2000. Witnessing and the Medical Gaze: How Medical Students Learn to See at a Free Clinic for the Homeless. <i>Medical Anthropology Quarterly</i> 14(3): 310-327.</li> <li>D.W., Blumhagen. 1979. "The Doctor's White Coat: The Image of the Physician in Modern America." <i>Annals of Internal Medicine</i> 91(1): 111-116.</li> <li>Kleinman, Arthur. 1995. "What is Specific to Biomedicine?" <i>Writing at the Margin: Discourse between Anthropology and Medicine</i>. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 21-40.</li> </ul>
<b>Medicalization and De-Medicalization</b>		
Week 2.1	8/28/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kaw, Eugenia. 1993. "Medicalization and Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery." <i>Medical Anthropology Quarterly</i> 7(1): 74-89.</li> <li>Parens, Erik. 2013. On Good and Bad Forms of Medicalization. <i>Bioethics</i> 27(2): 28-35.</li> </ul>

Cultures of Biomedicine		
Week 2.2	8/30/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good, Byron J., and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good. "Learning medicine: the constructing of medical knowledge at Harvard Medical School." <i>Knowledge, Power and Practice: The Anthropology of Medicine and Everyday Life</i> (1993): 81-107.</li> <li>• Martin, Emily. 1991. "The Egg and The Sperm: How Science has Constructed a Romance based on stereotypical male-female roles." <i>Signs</i> 16(3): 485-501.</li> </ul> <p><b>In-Class: Clips of Documentary, <i>Becoming a Doctor</i></b></p>
Structural Vulnerability and Structural Competency in Health		
Week 3.1	9/4/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hamdy, Sherine. 2008. "When the State and your Kidneys Fails: Political Etiologies in an Egyptian Dialysis Ward." <i>American Ethnologist</i> 35(4): 553-569.</li> <li>• Helena Hansen, Robert Rohrbaugh, and Joel Braslow. 2017. "Structural Competency for Psychiatry Residents: A Call to Act on Systemic Discrimination and Institutional Racism." <i>JAMA Psychiatry</i> Online First December 20.</li> </ul>
Week 3.2	9/6/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bourgois, Philippe et al. 2017. <i>Structural Vulnerability: Operationalizing the Concept to Address Health Disparities in Clinical Care.</i></li> <li>• Kleinman, Arthur and Peter Benson. 2006. "Anthropology in the Clinic: The Problem of Cultural Competency and How to Fix it."</li> <li>• Patricia Zavella. 2016. "Contesting Structural Vulnerability through Reproductive Justice Activism with Latina Immigrants in California." <i>North American Dialogue</i> 19(1): 36-45</li> </ul>
Interpreting Illness		
Week 4.1	9/11/23	<p><b>Assign Illness Narrative Paper</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kleinman, Arthur. 1988. "Chronic Pain: The Frustrations of Desire." Chapter 5 <i>In The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing &amp; the Human Condition.</i> Pg 89-99.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mattingly, Cheryl. The concept of therapeutic 'emplotment'." <i>Social science &amp; medicine</i> 38.6 (1994): 811-822.</li> </ul>
Week 4.2	9/13/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kalanithi, Paul. 2016. <i>When Breath Becomes Air</i>. New York: Random House. READ: Pg 1-99.</li> </ul>
Week 5.1	9/18/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kalanithi, Paul. 2016. <i>When Breath Becomes Air</i>. New York: Random House. READ: Pg 100-225.</li> </ul>
Week 5.2	9/20/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Martin, Emily. "The Body at War." <i>In Flexible bodies: Tracking immunity in American culture from the days of polio to the age of AIDS</i>. Beacon Press, 1994.</li> </ul>
<b>Visualizing Illness</b>		
Week 6.1	9/25/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hamdy, Sherine. 2017. <i>Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution</i> Read the first half of the graphic novel</li> </ul>
Week 6.2	9/27/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hamdy, Sherine. 2017. <i>Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution</i> Read the second half of the graphic novel</li> </ul>
<b>Critical Medical Anthropology; Disparities in Health</b>		
Week 7.1	10/2/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Singer, Merrill. 1990. "Reinventing Medical Anthropology: Toward a Critical realignment." <i>Social Science &amp; Medicine</i> 30(2): 179-187.</li> <li>Singer, M., Valentin, F., Baer, H., &amp; Zhongke, J. 1992. "Why does Juan Garcia have a drinking problem? The perspective of critical medical anthropology." <i>Medical Anthropology</i> 14(1): 77-108.</li> </ul>
Week 7.2	10/4/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gravlee, Lance. 2009. "How Race Becomes Biology: Embodiment of Social Inequality." <i>American Journal of Physical Anthropology</i> 139: 47-57.</li> <li>Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1985. "Culture, Scarcity, and Maternal Thinking: Maternal Detachment and Infant Survival in a Brazilian Shantytown. <i>Ethos</i> 13(4): 291-317.</li> </ul>

Gender, Citizenship, and Social Abandonment		
Week 8.1	10/9/23	<p>Indigenous Peoples' Day: No Class</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment READ: Introduction (1-24) and A Zone of Social Abandonment (35-43) Citizenship (56-66), Society of Bodies (75-80)</li> </ul>
Week 8.2	10/11/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment</li> <li>READ: Ex-Human (85-91), The House and the Animal (92-98), Social Psychosis (102-107) Public Psychiatry (123-125), Her Life as a Typical Patient (126-129), Medical Science (146-150), End of a Life (151-158)</li> </ul>
Week 9.1	10/16/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment READ: Care and Exclusion (163-170), Women, Poverty and Social Death (179-186), Pharmaceutical Being (199-206),</li> </ul>
Week 9.2	10/18/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment READ: Ties (209-223), Pain (271-273), Human Rights (274-277), Gene Expression and Social Abandonment (282-291), A Genetic Population (297-306), A Lost Chance (307-309)</li> </ul>
Week 10.1	10/23/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment Skim: The Dictionary READ: Conclusion, Postscript, and Afterward (353-396)</li> </ul>
Biomedical Encounters: Disease Etiologies and Explanatory Models in Health		
Week 10.2	10/25/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fadiman, Anne. The Spirit Catches you and you Fall Down. <i>READ: Ch's 1,2,3,5</i></li> </ul>
Week 11.1	10/30/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fadiman, Anne. The Spirit Catches you and you Fall Down. <i>Read: Ch's 6, 7, 8, 9</i></li> </ul>
Week 11.2	11/1/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fadiman, Anne. Spirit Catches you and you Fall Down. <i>Read: Ch's 13, 15, 17, 18</i></li> </ul>
Week 12.1	11/6/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fadiman, Anne. Spirit Catches you and you Fall Down. <i>Read: Ch 19 and Afterward</i></li> </ul>
Week 12.2	11/8/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Taylor, Janelle. 2003. "The Story Catches You and You Fall Down: Tragedy, Ethnography, and 'Cultural Competence.'" <i>Medical Anthropology Quarterly</i> 17(2): 159-181.</li> </ul>

Care, the Body, and the Body Politic		
Week 13.1	11/13/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stevenson, Lisa. 2012. "The Psychic Life of Biopolitics: Survival, Cooperation, and Inuit Community." <i>American Ethnologist</i> 39(3): 471-659.</li> <li>Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Margaret Lock. 1987. "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology." <i>Medical Anthropology Quarterly</i> 1(1): 6-41.</li> </ul>
Week 13.2	11/15/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Garcia, Angela. 2015. <i>Serenity: Violence, Inequality, and Recovery on the Edge of Mexico City</i>. <i>Medical Anthropology Quarterly</i> 29(4): 455-472.</li> <li>Cooper, Amy. 2015. "The Doctor's Political Body: Doctor-Patient interactions and sociopolitical belonging in Venezuelan State Clinics." <i>American Ethnologist</i> 42(3): 459-474.</li> <li>Suh, Siri. 2015. "Right Tool," wrong "job": Manual Vacuum aspiration, post-abortion care and transnational population politics in Senegal. <i>Social Science &amp; Medicine</i> 135: 56-66.</li> </ul>
Biotechnologies and the Remaking of the Body		
Week 14.1	11/20/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plemons, Eric. 2017. <i>The Look of a Woman: Facial Feminization Surgery and the Aims of Trans Medicine</i>. Durham: Duke University Press. READ: Introduction and Chapter Three</li> </ul>
Week 14.2	11/22/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Buchbinder, Mara. 2018. <i>Choreographing Death: A Social Phenomenology of Aid-in-dying in the United States</i>. <i>Medical Anthropology Quarterly</i> 32(4): 481-497.</li> <li>Cromer, Risa. 2018. <i>Saving Embryos in Stem Cell Science and Embryo Adoption</i>. <i>New Genetics and Society</i> 37(4): 362-386.</li> </ul>
Week 15.1	11/26/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteer Photo Essay Presentations and Goodbye</li> </ul>



**Makeup Policy:**

If you miss an exam, you should contact the professor immediately to make it up. You will have up to two weeks to do so, after which you will earn a 0 for the exam.

**Late work:**

For every day that an assignment is late, you will lose 2 points on the final assignment grade. After two full weeks, the assignment will no longer be accepted and will receive a zero.

**Academic Integrity:**

The overall goal of this course is your learning. In order to demonstrate that you have reached this goal, the work you turn in needs to be your own. This includes putting written work into your own words and citing your sources, as appropriate to avoid plagiarism. Penalties for serious offenses include a zero on the assignment and egregious offenses can even result in expulsion from the university, so it is important to understand expectations. The most serious offenses can often be avoided by citing sources—when in doubt, cite it! As part of our work together we will talk about how to cite sources accurately and responsibly, both to avoid plagiarism and strengthen your arguments.

**Religious Observance:**

It is the policy of the university to excuse the absences of students that result from religious observances and to reschedule examinations and additional required classwork that may fall on religious holidays without penalty.

**Reasonable Accommodation Policy:**

The Accessibility and Disability Resource Center is committed to supporting students with disabilities to ensure that they are able to enjoy equal access to all components of their education. This includes your academics, housing, and community events. If you are experiencing a disability, a mental/medical health condition that has a significant impact on one or more life functions, you can receive accommodations to provide equal access. We support students with temporary medical conditions and pregnancy. To discuss potential accommodations, please contact the ADRC at 730 College Avenue (405-325-3852 or [adrc@ou.edu](mailto:adrc@ou.edu)). You may also speak with me if you have any questions. I am happy to accommodate you.

**Title IX Resources and Reporting Requirement:**

Anyone who has been impacted by gender-based violence, including dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, harassment, and sexual assault, deserves access to resources so that they are supported personally and academically. The University of Oklahoma is committed to offering resources to those impacted, including: speaking with someone confidentially about your options, medical attention, counseling, reporting, academic support, and safety plans. If you would like to speak with someone confidentially, please contact [OU Advocates](#) (available 24/7 at 405-615-0013) or another confidential resource (see [“Can I make an anonymous report?”](#)).

You may also choose to report gender-based violence and discrimination through other means, including by contacting the [Institutional Equity Office](mailto:ieo@ou.edu) ([ieo@ou.edu](mailto:ieo@ou.edu), 405-325-3546) or police (911). Because the University of Oklahoma is committed to the safety of you and other students, I, as well as other faculty, Graduate Assistants, and Teaching Assistants, are mandatory reporters. This means that we are obligated to report gender-based violence that has been disclosed to us to the Institutional Equity Office. This includes disclosures that occur in: class discussion, writing assignments, discussion boards, emails and during Student/Office Hours. For more information, please visit the [Institutional Equity Office](#).

### **Adjustments for Pregnancy/Childbirth Related Issues:**

Should you need modifications or adjustments to your course requirements because of documented pregnancy-related or childbirth-related issues, please contact me or the Accessibility and Disability Resource Center at 405/325-3852 as soon as possible. Also, see the Institutional Equity Office [FAQ on Pregnant and Parenting Students' Rights](#) for answers to commonly asked questions. I am happy to accommodate you.

### **Mental Health Support Services:**

If you are experiencing any mental health issues that are impacting your academic performance, counseling is available at the University Counseling Center (UCC). The Center is located on the second floor of the Goddard Health Center, at 620 Elm Rm. 201, Norman, OK 73019. To schedule an appointment call (405) 325-2911. For more information, please visit [University Counseling Center](#).

### **Writing Assistance:**

The Writing Center here at OU is a resource I encourage you to use. As a writer you will want to seek feedback from many different readers. The writing consultants at the writing center are able to talk with you about your writing--at any stage in the process and for any course you are taking. You can make an appointment (online or in person and you can drop in whenever they are open. The OU Writing Center offers both in-person and online appointments, as well as workshops, retreats, and other services. I urge you to visit the [Writing Center](#) for more information. The OU Writing Center welcomes all writers and does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, marital status, veteran status, or disability. We consider difference to be a seed for learning, writing, and a just society.

### **AI Statement**

Students are not allowed to use advanced automated tools (artificial intelligence or machine learning tools such as ChatGPT or Fall-E 2) on assignments in this course. Each student is expected to compete each assignment without substantive assistance from others, including automated tools.