

ENGLISH 660: BIOETHICS AND LITERATURE (WINTER, 2018)

Instructor: Mary Wood
mewood@uoregon.edu

445 PLC, 541-346-3010
Office hours: W 12-3

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course will explore the ways that literary and cultural texts from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first have engaged with bioethical dilemmas and discourses. We will work with a broad definition of “bioethical” but will focus on two main areas: 1) medical and bio-technological innovations (actual and imagined) that have led writers to rethink understandings of “humanness” and “life” and 2) literary representations of unequal access to health and well-being. Topics will include constructions of race in relation to reproductive technologies, the unequal global burden of illness and unequal access to health care, the implications of assisted reproduction, understandings of mind and brain, and confrontations of discourses about genetic editing technology with disability theories. Our objects of study will be medical texts and popular science-focused publications as well as novels, short stories, and films.

GOALS OF COURSE: The goals of this course are both content-oriented and methodological. Students will learn to interpret texts in the context of historical and contemporary bio-medical discourses. At the same time, we will study as a group various methods of interdisciplinary research and writing, considering how to interpret primary and secondary works in medicine, biology, law, anthropology, and sociology as well as how to apply these works to literary and cultural texts. Central to the course is an archival project in which students practice this methodology, doing research in collections that are not strictly speaking literary but can help illuminate the exchange, and often the thin line, between literary and non-literary forms of knowledge production. We will study the conditions of production and reception of various kinds of texts related to bio-medicine and literature. Students will have the option either to write a traditional academic seminar essay or to create (independently or with one or two other students) an online exhibit about one of the archival collections in UO Special Collections.

Books:

Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., *Elsie Venner*

Janet Frame, *Faces in the Water*

Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*

Rebecca Kukla, *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers' Bodies*

Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome*

Texts are available in the UO Duck Store, in local independent bookstores (Tsunami, Black Sun, J. Michael's, Smith Family), and through online outlets. Other, shorter works, listed under the reading schedule below, are available on Canvas.

WORK REQUIREMENTS:

1)**Read!!** Please have each work read by the day it's listed on the syllabus.

2)**Post and Comment**—Please post a reading response each week by Sunday at midnight on Canvas. Write at least one comment on another person's post.

3)**Article presentation**—Each student will present **one** article to the class over the course of the term. Articles are listed under each week below. We'll divvy them up during the first two weeks. These will be **brief**, 10-15-minute presentations that convey to the class the main argument of the article, with one or two examples of how the argument is developed. **You only need to read the article if you are presenting it.** Of course, you are welcome to read any of the articles listed, especially if they are related to your final project. You can include any of the course readings in your final project bibliography.

4)**Archive assignment (group presentation)**—Students will work in groups of two or three to research an archive in UO Special Collections. I will provide you with a list of possible choices and the class will visit Special Collections early in the term so that you may see them for yourselves before you make a decision. Groups will present a brief Power Point or Omeka overview to the class and offer some possible research questions. We will spread these presentations out over 3 weeks or so. Students may then choose to pursue these archive-based research questions for their final essay or exhibit for the class OR they may write more a conventional paper based on the readings and ideas of the course (see below).

5)**Final project option: essay (about 10 pages)**—Write an essay on a topic of your choice, focused on 1)one or two texts read in class OR 2)archives used in your presentation OR 3)a literary text of your choice related to both the class topic and your own research interests. This essay should have a clear thesis, be free of grammatical and spelling errors, quote from the text for support and illustration of ideas, and provide close readings of language and scenes from the text. The essay should also refer to 7-10 relevant scholarly works on the topic and should include a Works Cited page at the end. **Students will turn in a thesis statement and three annotated bibliographic references by Monday, March 5th, and then the first five pages of the essay on Monday, March 12th. The essay is due on Canvas Wednesday, March 21st, by midnight.**

6)**Final project option: online exhibit**—Independently or as part of a team of 2-3 students, create an exhibit based on archival materials you explored for your Archive Project above. This exhibit should include photographs of materials,

excerpts of text, a bibliography of works that help contextualize the materials, and your own writing that offers guidance and interpretation as viewers navigate the website. I strongly suggest that you use Omeka as a platform for the exhibit. We will have an Omeka workshop as part of the seminar, thanks to Professor Heidi Kaufman and the resources of Digital Humanities. **Students will turn in a list of three bibliographic references, annotated, by Monday, March 5th and a link to the work in progress on Monday, March 12th. The exhibit should be completed and uploaded to Canvas by Wednesday, March 21st, at midnight.**

I would like to plan an open meeting early in Spring term at which you can present your exhibits if you so choose. We will invite Heidi Kaufman of Digital Humanities and Linda Long of Special Collections to come give feedback on the exhibits.

7) A note on accommodations: It is my intention to make any needed accommodations in order that all students can participate fully and effectively in this class. Please contact me directly or via Accessible Education (<https://aec.uoregon.edu/>) to request any accommodations.

Grade Breakdown:

Attendance and participation: 10%

Posts, comments, and article presentation: 15%

Archive Project: 25%

Archive Exhibit or Final Essay: 50%

READING SCHEDULE:

Week One (January 8th)—Genetics, Bodies, Identity

Read: Ruha Benjamin, "Cultura Obscura: Race, Power, and 'Culture Talk' in the Health Sciences." *American Journal of Law and Medicine*, 43 (2017), 225-238.

Octavia Butler, "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (NY: Seven Stories Press, 2005).

Week Two (January 15th)—No Class. Genetics, Bodies, Identity continued

Read: Holmes, *Elsie Venner*

View in class excerpt from John Frankenheimer's 1996 film *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Don Taylor's 1977 version of the same H.G. Wells' 1896 novel.

Week Three (January 22nd)—Genetics, Bodies, Identity continued

Read: Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA*, especially Introduction and Chapters One, Three, Four, Five, Seven, Eight Nine.

Week Four (January 29th)—Genetic technologies and disability

One-hour visit to UO Special Collections

Individual students present on the following:

Wasserman, David and Asch, Adrienne, 2012, “Selecting for disability: acceptable lives, acceptable reasons”, comment on “Physicians' duties and the non-identity problem” *American Journal of Bioethics*, 12(8): 30–31.

Garland-Thomson R. The case for conserving disability. *J Bioeth Inq.* 2012;9(3):339-355.

Bayefsky MJ. Imposing genetic diversity: an imposition on reproductive freedom. *Am J Bioeth.* 2015;15(6):27-28.

Roberts, Dorothy, and Jesudason, Sujatha, 2013, “Movement intersectionality: the case of race, gender, disability, and genetic technologies”, *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2): 313–28.

Week Five (Feb. 5th)—Imagining the Future of Pregnancy and Reproduction

Read: Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*

Omeka workshop.

Week Six (Feb. 12th)—Imagining Pregnancy and Reproduction in the Present

Read: Kukla, *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers' Bodies*

Individual students present on the following:

Chapter 7 from Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (NY: Vintage, 1997)—“The Meaning of Liberty”.

Perry, Constance, 2011, “Commentary: Unacceptable risk in pregnancy: whose choice and whose responsibility?”, *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 11(5): 64–5.

Schmitz, Dagmar, 2013, “A new era in prenatal testing: are we prepared?”, *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 16(3): 357–364.

Hallgrimsdottir, Helga Kristin, and Benner, Bryan Eric, 2014, “‘Knowledge is power’: risk and the moral responsibilities of the expectant mother at the turn of the twentieth century,” *Health, Risk, and Society*, 16(1): 7–21.

Week Seven (Feb. 19th)—Understandings of Mental Illness and the Brain

Read: Frame, *Faces in the Water*

Archive presentations begin

Week Eight (Feb. 26th)—Understandings of Mental Illness and the Brain

Individual students present on the following:

Chapter from Gail Hornstein, *Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness* (NY: Routledge, 2018).

Arthur Kleinman, "How Is Culture Important for DSM-IV?" in Juan E. Mezzich and Horacio Fabrega, Jr., *Culture and Psychiatric Diagnosis* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1996).

Archive presentations.**Week Nine (March 5th)—Mental Illness and the Brain, continued**

View in class excerpts from Joseph Green's 1962 film, *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, Darren Aronofsky's 1998 film *Pi*, and the 2016- Netflix Duffer Brothers series *Stranger Things*.

Individual students present on the following:

Chapter from Jonathan A. Metzl, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011)

Charlie Gere, "Brains-in-vats, giant brains and world brains: the brain as metaphor in digital culture," *Stud. Hist. Phil. Biol. & Biomed. Sci.* 35 (2004) 351–366

Jonathan Beckwith, "Whither Human Behavioral Genetics," in Erik Parens, Audrey Chapman, and Nancy Press, eds., *Wrestling with Behavioral Genetics: Science, Ethics, and Public Conversation* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 2009).

Archive presentations.

Thesis statement due for final essay. Three annotated bibliographic references due for all projects.

Week Ten (March 12th)—Spillover, discussion of final projects, and conclusions. First five pages of final essays due. Link to exhibit in progress due.

Final essay or exhibit due on Canvas by midnight on Wed., March 21st.