

# Health and Healing in African American History

History Seminar # 01:506:401:03

Wednesday, 2-5pm

Room CI-203, School of Communication and Information

Spring 2023

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Instructor: Adam Biggs

Drop-in Hours & Location: TBA

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*"History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations."*

- James Baldwin, 1965

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**Course Description:** This course explores how health, healing, and healthcare activism have shaped African American lives. During the semester, we'll explore African American encounters with illness, disability, and the health care system; examine racial health disparities; the impact of segregation on health care provision; and devote significant time to unpacking the nuances of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. In addition, we'll explore the relationship between health care and criminal justice and consider how mental health has been weaponized as a tool to justify incarceration. Furthermore, we'll explore the different ways health and healing have served as an impetus for social justice activism and consider the therapeutic relief activism, itself, can provide for those suffering from the endemic pangs of racial discrimination.

**Texts:** The works listed below can be purchased in the university bookstore and should be available at reasonable cost. Other materials will be provided during the semester.

(1) Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (orig. 1980, 2020)

(2) Kiese Laymon, *Heavy* (2019)

(3) Susan M. Reverby, ed. *Tuskegee's Truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study* (2012)

**Course Learning Objectives:** Throughout the semester, we will be learning to...

- (1) *Explore, reflect on, and characterize* the experiences of African Americans dealing with illness and disability.
- (2) *Analyze* the various ways race has shaped (and continues to shape) medical understandings of health and healing.
- (3) *Identify* the various ways African American healers and healthcare activists have sought to address African American healthcare needs.
- (4) *Wrestle with* problems, conflicts, and tensions related to African Americans and health that have no apparent resolution.
- (5) *Have epiphanies* that provide insight into ourselves and the society we live in.

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*"Intelligence is not received. It is constructed through the struggle to comprehend and change the world."*

— Paulo Freire

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### **Our Endeavors**

*Meetings:* Our meetings will be opportunities to discuss the materials we study, share our work, exchange feedback, and engage in a variety of exploratory and experimental exercises designed to build community and facilitate learning.

*Weekly Journals:* You'll be invited to submit journals prior to the first meeting of each week. These are generally intended to facilitate our discussions and other assignments. While you should feel free to complete them however you find most useful, you might consider ...

- Reflecting on your experience. How did it feel to study these materials?
- Highlighting quotes you found meaningful or significant.
- Identifying and explaining vocabulary/keywords, concepts, or theories that seem noteworthy. (We may build a shared list of these.)
- Keeping track of questions that you might like to discuss in class, pursue in the future, or just chew on a bit more. These might include (but need not be limited to) something you found difficult/confusing to process or suggestive/compelling in some way.
- Making a list of unassigned but related sources (and topics) you might study more about in the future. We may compile a shared (Zotero?) list of these sources at the end of the semester.

*Other Endeavors (shared/sharable):* These assignments are intended to help us establish meaningful connections with the materials, explore our curiosities, experiment with different approaches, and confront difficult questions. If, however, they don't feel productive, we will modify them....

#1: Health Centric Oral History Project [see sample]

#2: Letter to an Inmate (~1200-1500 words) [see sample]

#3: Op Ed Essay on the Meaning of Health and Healing in Tuskegee (~1200-1500)

#4: Exploratory Historical Newspaper Research Project

*Portfolio and Final Reflections:* At the end of the semester, you'll be asked to submit a portfolio of your work as well as a final reflection on the most meaningful things you've learned and will take away from the course.

### **Course Policies**

*Assessment:* There is no standardized grading rubric for this course. We will meet regularly to discuss your personal goals at various points throughout the semester and determine how best to apply them to the coursework. You'll receive feedback (but not a letter grade) largely in the form of questions and comments (from me as well as other students) to generate a constructive dialogue (rather than simply evaluate) your work. You will also have ample opportunities to self-evaluate, revise, and resubmit any work you choose. You'll submit a portfolio at the end of the semester and have significant input in determining your final grade.

*Disability (and all other) Accommodations:* If you have a disability or other extenuating circumstances that require accommodations to complete the work for this course, please let me know. On a case-by-case basis, we will make the appropriate arrangements for you.

*Academic Integrity:* The foremost goal of this course is to cultivate your intellectual growth and character. **Making mistakes, taking risks, and venturing failure are important parts of the learning process that we will invite, not punish.** Plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty undermine these efforts. Avoid them, please.

## -Projected Course Calendar-

- Jan 18: **On Meaningful Learning - Introductions and Course Overview**
- Ken Bain, *What the Best College Students Do* (2012) [selections]
  - Farah Griffin, *Read Until You Understand* (2021) [selections]
  - Eric Schwitzgebel, "How to Tell If You're a Jerk" [[essay](#)]
  - Cornel West, "Race Matters" (2003) [[lecture](#)]
- Jan 25: **On Black Health Experiences**
- Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (orig. 1980)
  - Jerald Walker, "Breathe" [[essay](#)]
  - Stephanie Dutchen, "Field Correction: Race-based Medicine, Deeply Embedded in Clinical Decision Making, Is Being Scrutinized and Challenged" [[article](#)]
- Feb 1: **On Black Health Experiences**
- Kiese Laymon, *Heavy*
  - Linda Villarosa, "Medicine" *1619 Project*
  - Elise Mitchell, "Unbelievable Suffering: Rethinking Feigned Illness in Slavery and the Slave Trade"
  - Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (1989) & *Black Is...Black Ain't* (1994) [film selections]
- Feb 8: **#1: HEALTH CENTERED ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**
- Feb 15: **On Black Trauma, Mental Health, and the Prison Industrial Complex**
- Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) [selections]
- Feb 22: **On Black Trauma, Mental Health, and the Prison Industrial Complex**
- Jonathan Metzl, *The Protest Psychosis* (2009) [selections]
  - Cartwright, Samuel "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race" (1851)
  - Martin Summers, "Diagnosing the Ailments of Black Citizenship: African American Physicians and the Politics of Mental Illness, 1895-1940"
- Mar 1: **On Black Trauma, Mental Health, and the Prison Industrial Complex**
- Allen Hornblum, *Acres of Skin* (1998) [selections]
  - Bryan Stevenson, "Mitigation" *Just Mercy* (2014)
  - *The Fear of Thirteen* (2015) [documentary]
- Mar 8: **#2: LETTER TO AN INMATE**
- Mar 11-19th **SPRING BREAK**
- Mar 22: **On Tuskegee**
- Survivors testimonies in *Tuskegee's Truths* (p.132-149)
  - "An Interview with Nurse Rivers" in *Tuskegee's Truths* (p.321-339)

- “Selected Letters...1932-1972” in *Tuskegee’s Truths* (p.73-115, select pages)

Mar 29:

**On Tuskegee**

- Susan Smith, "Neither Victim nor Villain: Eunice Rivers and Public Health Work" in *Tuskegee’s Truths* (348-64)
- Susan Reverby, "Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study: Nurse Rivers, Silence, and the Meaning of Treatment" in *Tuskegee’s Truths* (365-85)
- Susan Reverby, “Suffering and Resistance, Voice and Agency: Thoughts on History ...” in *Precarious Prescriptions: Contested Histories of Race and Health in North America* (2014)
- Susan Reverby, “Escaping Melodramas” ([lecture](#))

Apr 5:

**On Tuskegee**

- Vanessa Northington Gamble, “Under the Shadow of Tuskegee” in *Tuskegee’s Truths* (p. 431-442)
- Karen Kruse Thomas, *Deluxe Jim Crow: Civil Rights and American Health Policy, 1935-1954* (2011) [selections]
- Samuel Roberts, *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (2009) [selections]

Apr 12:

**#3: OP ED ESSAY ON THE TUSKEGEE STUDY**

Apr 19:

**On Health, Healing, and Civil Rights Activism**

- Susan Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired* [selections]
- Vanessa Northington Gamble, [“Outstanding Services to Negro Health’: Dr. Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, Dr. Virginia Alexander, and Black Women Physicians’ Public Health Activism.”](#) *American Journal Public Health* Vol. 106, No. 8 (August 2016): 1398-1404
- Thomas Ward, *Out in the Rural* [selections]

Apr 26:

**On Health, Healing, and Civil Rights Activism**

- Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul* [selections]
- Karen Kruse Thomas, “Hill Burton and the Deluxe Jim Crow Hospital” in *Deluxe Jim Crow* [selections]
- Barbara Berney, *Power to Heal: Medicine and the Civil Rights Revolution* (2018) [film]
- Dan Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole* (2021) [selections]

May 4-10:

**#4: HISTORICAL NEWSPAPER RESEARCH PROJECT & PORTFOLIO**

## **--Sample Assignments--**

### **I. HEALTH CENTRIC ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT**

1. Choose someone from an older generation in your family or community. (Grandparents and great-grandparents usually work well!) Contact them in advance and explain that you'd like to interview them about the most memorable health-related experiences they can recall. These might include (but need not be limited to) childbirth, illnesses, disabilities, injuries, treatments, or recoveries. They may have stories about their own health experiences or those of friends/family members for whom they served as care-providers or simply as witnesses. Some memories, like those concerning the death of a loved one, may be difficult for them to share. Let them know you value their experiences, appreciate their willingness to share, and that their stories need not go beyond our discussions.
2. Schedule a time to meet with them (virtual meetings and telephone conversations are fine) and be prepared to record your conversation. You may find that audio recordings work better than videos. Sometimes taking notes by hand works best of all.
3. Use these questions as inspiration (but not scripts) for your own...
  - a. What are some of the most noteworthy illnesses, afflictions, or disabilities they remember from their childhood? How did it affect them and how were they cared for?
  - b. What kind of health care do they remember receiving as a child? Did they go to a professional and, if so, what are some of their most outstanding memories of those experiences? Did they have a dentist? If so, what do they remember?
  - c. Did they ever rely on folk or domestic remedies? If so, what were they? Where did they get them and how were they applied?
  - d. Did they have friends or family members who became significantly ill or had disabilities? What were those experiences like? How did they cope with them? What parts of those experiences stand out most to them.
  - e. If they have memories of loved ones who passed, what were some of the most notable aspects of their experience?
  - f. (Keep in mind that mental illness is a viable health issue.)
4. Submit a recording and write-up/summary of the interview and your experience.

### **II. LETTER TO AN INMATE - PREWRITING EXERCISE**

1. Briefly envision the person you're writing to. They can be someone you know personally, someone you've read about or heard of, or someone you've imagined based on the sources we've studied. With them in mind, what's your greatest fear as you prepare to write?

2. How do you imagine using the materials we've studied to connect with the person to whom you're writing? What do you think would be particularly compelling for them?
3. What do you imagine would be a meaningful response or reaction to your letter?