FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS WITH BIOMEDICINE:
HEALTH, ETHICS, AND THE NATURE OF DIFFERENCE

Fall 2014
Thursday 2:30-5pm
Bartlett Hall Room 35

Angie Willey, PhD
awilley@wost.umass

Office Hours: Bartlett Hall 11C; Wednesdays 1-3pm and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Through the lenses of disability, critical race, and queer feminisms, this course will provide a forum for the exploration of conceptions of health, ethics and embodiment in overlapping fields such as feminist body theory, science studies, bioethics and health movements, as well as in more creative treatments of these themes. We will embark on a semester-long exploration of what it means to engage bodies ethically as feminists, always in dialogue with biomedical constructions of “the body itself.” The course will revolve around a series of questions that arise when we think, talk, and write across disciplines, genres, and settings about bodies. These questions include (but are not limited to): What is biology? What is “the body”? What is ethics and what does it mean to treat bodies ethically? What is health? What is science? What is feminism? What relationships have been articulated among these concepts? How do we assess and bring into dialogue disparate types of knowledges about bodies?

Over the course of the semester, we will explore a range of types and expressions of ethical concern with bodies and with bio-medical research and practices. Through interdisciplinary inquiry we will begin to map ethical questions and frameworks being proposed, debated and institutionalized across and beyond the academy with regard to the status and practices of biomedicine.

In the first two sections of the course, “Feminists Theorize the Body, Embodiment, and Bio-Ethics” and “Difference as/and Illness,” we will build a shared set of theoretical tools and language for thinking, talking, and writing about bodies, biology, ethics, and difference. In the final section of the class we will look in depth at “gynecology” as a rich site of feminist engagement with the biomedicalization of bodies. Drawing on a wide variety of feminist
engagements, we will touch on topics including trans health issues, menopause, intersex treatment, and sexual dysfunction.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- To provide a critical introduction to thinking about feminist engagements with health and biomedicine as they are institutionalized in various movements and fields of scholarship.

- To contextualize the production and regulation of difference as a concern for feminist “bio-ethics” broadly construed.

- To emphasize the role of the production of normal and abnormal bodies in the formation of the modern self and its social, legal, political, and cultural frames of reference.

- To insist on the necessary relationship between theory and the lived experience of the body.

- To introduce students to a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary materials and methods.

COURSE OUTCOMES:

- An understanding of historical contingency with respect to biology, biomedicine, and ethical concerns surrounding them.

- Ability to apply a range of theoretical perspectives within these fields to particular case studies.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Readings will be available electronically.

STRUCTURE:

The course will be largely discussion based, with a flexible lecture/discussion format. Lectures will contextualize readings, not summarize them: it is imperative that students come prepared (with questions and comments) to discuss the key readings for each class period. You are expected to bring all readings to class with you (see details under “participation”).

ASSESSMENT:

Participation (20%): Attendance (both physical “showing up” and presence) is crucial as the learning goals for this class are cumulative. Excused or unexcused, missed classes must be made up by writing a summary of each text assigned for the class period you are absent. Summaries are due one week from the date of the missed class.

About “good” class participation: “Good” class participation does not necessarily mean talking the most. There are many ways to promote dialogue in class, including asking
questions, noticing if others are silent and trying to make space for more timid voices, allowing silences just to “be” for a few moments (often silence is not emptiness but rather intense thinking), talking to each other and not just to the instructor, reminding yourself that the goal is not to be “right,” but to collaboratively work through issues and problems.

Additionally, you are expected to read closely and come prepared to discuss each author’s argument on its own terms and in relation to the larger themes of the course. You should keep a notebook (digital or old school) of key concepts and quotes with page numbers from each of the readings and bring this to every class. All readings must be brought with you to class.

**Reading journals (40%):** careful reading is engaged reading, and writing is thinking, so in order to facilitate thoughtful engagement with the texts and the concepts they raise, every week you will submit a 1-2 page (single spaced) informal response. Responses may take a variety of forms, so long as they address the texts and are intelligible as responses to our shared readings. Responses will be posted AT LEAST 48hrs before class (By Tuesday at 2:30pm). Students will be grouped into online cohorts. Each week you will write your response paper to your two partners and respond to each of theirs (in a few sentences – asking a clarifying question, posing a challenge, following up on an insight you found useful, etc.). You will take turns summarizing questions and key points from your group’s discussion to bring to class. You will have one “pass.” A response not submitted by the deadline will count as your pass. Any response not posted by the deadline after you have used your pass will result in an automatic loss of two percentage points (this could be the difference between, for example, an A- and a B+), and an for any week in which you do not respond to your group members before class, you will lose an additional point.

**Final project (40%):** For the culminating project you will integrate readings and concepts from sections I & II and apply them to the specific topic of interest, agreed to buy your group and approved by the professor (for example: depression, obesity, breast feeding, cancer, etc.). Your collective aim is peer-education that: 1) explains the historical and cultural context of the topic as a biomedical issue (i.e. its biomedicalization), 2) reflects on the role of conceptions of difference in shaping the issue, 3) articulates a set of concerns and debates that reflect a variety of feminist approaches to and angles on the topic.

Final projects will have both group and individual components. Group components (20%) will include: an annotated bibliography building on the initial reading list for the topic, a bulleted list of 3-5 take home points, and a poster and webpage that draw on that research and make those points accessible. Individual components (20%) include: an analysis of RSS feed results on the topic and/or an existing educational resource and a brief (1-2pg) reflection paper on your contributions to the group project and what you learned about the topic in the process. Detailed guidelines will be distributed and discussed in class.
COURSE SCHEDULE

Part I: Feminists Theorize the Body, Embodiment, and Bio-Ethics

Week 1: Welcome!

Thinking about bodies individual and group exercises.

Course overview, mutual expectations.

Week 2 (Sept 11). Introducing “the body”


Week 3 (Sept 18). Embodiment: Somatophobia, Silence, and Power


Week 4 (Sept 25). Historicizing the biomedical body


*Discuss Group Projects* *1 hour Library Session*

Week 5 (Oct 2). Embodiment part II: Other body stories (online, participatory)

Yvonne Fly Onakeme Etaghene
“Nigerian Dyke Holy Text”

“My Butch Swagger”
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM4lcF2Nuw0#t=90](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM4lcF2Nuw0#t=90)

Beast Ly
“I Notice You” & “Summer Stew”
[http://vimeo.com/skinbeast](http://vimeo.com/skinbeast)

“Queer Vibrations.” *In Media Res.*
[http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2010/05/06/queer-vibrations](http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2010/05/06/queer-vibrations)

Additional shared links on Moodle

Week 6 (Oct 9). What is feminist bioethics?


Scully, J., Baldwin-Ragaven, L., Fitzpatrick, P. “Introduction” in *Feminist Bioethics: At the*


*Presentations*

*Group project preliminary bibliography due.*

**Part II: Difference and/as Illness**

**Week 7 (Oct 16)**


Epstein, Steven. *Inclusion: The politics of difference in medical research*. University of Chicago Press, 2008. (Selections)

Screening: *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making us Sick?* California Newsreel. 2008. & Intersexion

**Week 8 (Oct 23)**


Yvonne Fly Onakeme Etaghene

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Nyfsw8-1cc
Week 9 (Oct 30).

Readings TBA

*Group project updated annotated bibliographies due, group meetings with professor.

Part III: Feminist Health, Ethics, and Difference Case Study: Gynecology

Week 10 (Nov 6). Introduction and history


TBA


Our Bodies Ourselves
http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/about/history.asp

Week 11 (Nov 13). Rethinking Sexual Dys/function


Gupta, K. TBA


Week 12 (Nov 20). Rethinking Menopause


Screening: A Menopausal Gentleman (1998)

[http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/000515761.html](http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/000515761.html)

**Week 13 (Dec 4). Synthesis: Reflecting on Gynecology, bodies, and the ethics of difference**

In-class exercise, group presentations, and farewells