

Project 2 | Assignment 1

Our second project focuses on the influenza pandemic that rolled across the globe with incredible fury from 1918 – 1920. The so-called “Spanish Flu” ravaged United States communities at an especially complex moment in American history. At the same moment, soldiers began returning from what was at that time the deadliest war in human memory. The Progressive movement was afoot. Embraced by some and rejected by many, it was a political force that struggled to elevate the status of women, to energize solidarity among the labor force, to improve the quality of impoverished lives in urban squalor, and to redistribute the extreme wealth of big business conglomerates. Though the period was filled with social unrest, political instability, and the challenges of war, given the epidemic’s force, it remains curious why a major pandemic in this country has been generally forgotten. Though it has recently been brought to mind during our current pandemic, the 1918 epidemic (its historical details and even its “lessons”) doesn’t show up in history books, hasn’t been commemorated in public memorials, was never highlighted in the fabric of cultural memory.

Historians have pondered this absence and have attempted to correct this stunning aporia. Nancy Bristow, a professor of U.S. history at the University of Puget Sound is one of those reclaimers. Noting an odd gap between public memory of the event and private reminiscences, she asks: “What made it possible for a culture to forget an event so significant and so fully remembered in the lives of so many people?” I ask you to read the Introduction and first chapter to her book *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) in order to learn about the behavior and effects of the pandemic and to glimpse citizens’ responses to uncertainty, suffering, and death.

Much like our current pandemic, the Spanish Flu effected Americans unequally. Young adults were especially vulnerable as were members of the working-class. Soon, we will read a fictional account of the epidemic’s effects on a small mill town in Washington state, where we will observe what aspects of regular life change and are transformed by the pandemic, and what aspects remain unchanged. Both that novel and Bristow’s chapters will allow us to pay attention to how the exigency of an epidemic affects social roles and responsibilities of everyday citizens.

For either Tuesday, September 22 or Thursday, September 24 (depending on when your Reading Group convenes), I ask that you read the “Introduction: Lost Worlds” and chapter 2 “The Whole World Seems Up-Side-Down’: Patients, Families, and Communities Confront the Epidemic” from Bristow’s historical account. Please be prepared to summarize her work by describing her materials, method, and yield (see the handout on “Summaries” on Moodle). As a starting point, I would like you also to be prepared to talk about how the 1918 epidemic transformed social roles.