

Project 3 | Assignment 5

This is the final assignment of the course (Drum roll please!), an assignment that asks you to make a judgment about a book's value. Throughout the course, we have examined various representations of pandemic illness—linguistic, fictional, and now historical. In each mode, the lived experience of illness is appropriated into metaphors, an invented story, or a journalistic account (what today is called “long form journalism”). In each project, we have asked ourselves: What does X form of representation make visible, and what does it occlude? For example, when we speak of illness in terms of the metaphor of battle, those who become well or otherwise survive are “victors,” while those who decline have, in effect, “lost” their battles; either end of the spectrum is haunted by the troubling assumption that one can somehow will one's way toward health, even in the face of what is commonly referred to as “impossible odds.” The metaphor, in other words, highlights attributes like courage and heroism (which hold cultural value) but occludes experiences such as prolonged, inconclusive suffering and death.

This is also to say that public representations of human experience are better suited to accomplish some things, but insufficient to accomplish other things. As Pamela Gilbert explained, maps of urban sites may allow us to glimpse a tangle of city streets and the boundaries of a neighborhood, and to represent the frequency of illnesses or deaths at various addresses, but maps cannot represent the experience of those illnesses and deaths. Still, as she points out, maps were tremendously popular in the nineteenth-century (they still are) because they allow us easily conceptualize a multiform phenomenon (like an enclave in a city) in a coherent way: Victorian maps facilitated the understanding of a neighborhood as a certain kind of “social body,” a metaphor that Johnson refers to:

the city was best understood as a creature with its own distinct form of volition, greater than the sum of its parts: a monster, a diseased body. . . The observers of the time were detecting a phenomenon that we now largely take for granted: that “mass” behavior can often diverge strikingly from the desires of individuals that make up the mass. Even if you had the time to write it all down, you couldn't tell the story of a city in its entirety, you had to move one level up the chain, to the bird's-eye view.¹

You might disagree with Johnson's claim that moving “one level up the chain, to the bird's-eye view” allows you to glimpse the city in its entirety, but we can see why maps are appealing: they seem to offer a synoptic view, even if they blur and obfuscate street-level details. We can imagine that the Kleinmans may likely raise concerns about Johnson's image of the city as “a monster, a diseased body” for reasons similar to those they bring forward in their argument about the insufficiency of mortality data, or the Disability Life Years calculations they offer as evidence.

The project gives you an opportunity to apply a concept, originally developed to analyze a phenomenon in one context, to a different but related context (in much

¹ Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2006, 91.

the same way as you applied Fineman legal concept to Mullen's novel). Here, the source and target contexts are closer in kind, but it is your job to argue for why it is both appropriate and valuable to apply the Kleinmans' work to Johnson's account of the 1854 cholera epidemic in London. Here's the question I ask that you respond to in an argument (approximately 1500 words in length):

Steven Johnson's work focuses on the production, distribution, and reception of John Snow's "ghost map," (itself an appropriation of human suffering) and Johnson himself, by composing an historical narrative, also represents (or, perhaps, fails adequately to represent) the suffering of Londoners effected by the pandemic. Drawing upon the work of Arthur and Joan Kleinman, how do you assess Johnson's representation of the epidemic? In other words, do you anticipate that if they were to review *The Ghost Map*, they would be concerned about Johnson's "appropriation of suffering" for reasons that parallel their concerns about the representations of suffering they turn to in their essay? Or, would likely have some other response?

Remember that you are being asked to make a judgment, and to explain the basis on which you make that assessment. You are also making selective use of the Kleinmans' insights, not all of which may be productively applied to the case of *The Ghost Map*. You should aim not to distort the Kleinmans' concepts in order to shed light on Johnson's work. Nor should you slight Johnson's work in order to make smart use of the Kleinmans. Successful essays will be incisive but fair. Please upload your draft to Moodle by **Sunday, November 8 at 11:00 p.m.**