
Vulnerable Bodies

*An Anthropology of Disability, Contested Illness, and the Politics of Legitimacy*¹

Fall 2026 Tuesdays, 12:00 – 2:45 PM, Peabody 12

Professor Gabriella Coleman

Office Hours: On Monday afternoon (2-3) by Zoom and Wednesday afternoon by appointment
(Detailed policies, assignment breakdowns and more are in the Assignment Booklet).

OVERVIEW Course Description

This seminar examines the cultural experiences and politics of disability and contested illness. Drawing on academic scholarship, film, and popular writing, it explores how bodies are shaped and rendered vulnerable across historical periods and social contexts. Although disability and contested illness are distinct, the premise of the course is that there are fruitful overlaps, and each prompts us to ask about bodily vulnerability. One major current in disability politics has worked to de-medicalize the disability experience. Patients with contested illnesses—chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, long COVID, and Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS)—face the opposite struggle: they fight to gain medical legitimacy in the first place. Yet the way these patients talk about their experiences draws on the disability movement’s virtues and victories, notably self-determination and the validation of lived experience (“nothing about us without us”). This course asks where and when these two worlds meet, and how thinking through them together clarifies their points of connection and disconnection.

We will consider both the domain of disability and the domain of contested illness at various scales: at the level of individual experience, collective identity, and movement building, and as a critical perspective from which to explore cultural assumptions about productivity, intelligence, health, social value, and scientific and medical dogmatism, overreach, and uncertainty. We examine the fields and conditions that result in the development of various kinds of bodily vulnerability—industrial poisons, medical treatment regimes, poor building practices, the human-made environment, the demands of unregulated capitalism, warfare, and medical dogmatism.

The course proceeds roughly chronologically. We begin by discussing twentieth-century eugenics for how it systematized enduring logics of ableism, and proceed to the currents and movements that emerged to oppose them (including anthropology), the continuation of ableist logics today in genetic screening and the drive for optimization and biohacking, the rise of disability politics and theory, and finally present-day discourse and practices surrounding chronicity, contested illnesses, and conditions that fall outside conventional medical knowledge (long COVID, toxicity-related conditions, Lyme, and others). Throughout, we engage questions of vulnerability and legitimacy across different historical moments, paying attention to which kinds of lives are valued in different societies, which healing practices are deemed acceptable, and how particular kinds of bodies come to be devalued and marginalized.

REQUIREMENTS Assessment at a Glance

Component	Weight
Participation (in-class contribution + discussion questions × 5)	10%
Weekly reading presentation	15%
Final presentation	30%

¹ Formatted with AI. Thank you to Mariachiara Ficarelli for course development research.

Component	Weight
In-class short exams (three, 15% each)	45%
Total	100%

Full instructions, guidelines, and exam format appear in the Assignment Booklet. In-class exams are 45 minutes each.

AI Policy

This course is designed so that the majority of assignments occur in class. For those assignments that require you to do research and work at home, the use of generative or agentic AI is prohibited for aid in analyzing, drafting, revising, or editing any work submitted in this course. However, you may use AI like a search engine for the purposes of preliminary research, and you may also use it for formatting work (such as handouts and citations) and for designing your slides for your in-class presentation and final presentation. While it is acceptable and in fact encouraged to use AI for formatting and design, it is incumbent on you to check the veracity of all citations and information contained in those materials. You are permitted to use a spell and grammar checker, as needed.

Additionally, for the discussion and final presentation, you are allowed to use notes and an outline, but please refrain from:

1. Reading directly from a paper.
2. Putting detailed notes on your slides or in the "notes" section of whatever slide program you might use (like PowerPoint). You will need to show your command of the material using only basic notes as a cue and guide. You are also not required to use slides or a handout.

PART I • WEEKS 1–4 Foundations: Crip Theory, Eugenics, and Biopolitics

Week 1 • September 8 — What Is Disability Studies? Challenging Common-Sense Ideas

READINGS

Minich, Julie Avril. "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now." *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016).
<https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.9>.

Snyder, Sharon L., and David T. Mitchell. "The Eugenic Atlantic: Race, Disability, and the Making of an International Eugenic Science, 1800–1945." *Disability & Society* 18, no. 7 (2003): 843–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759032000127281>.

Geertz, Clifford. "Common Sense as a Cultural System." *The Antioch Review* 33, no. 1 (1975): 5–26.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/4637616>.

SCREENING

Newnham, Nicole, and James LeBrecht, dirs. *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2020. 1:46:00.
<https://www.netflix.com/title/81001496>. (We will watch most of it in class together)

Week 2 • September 15 — Eugenics in Fascist Historical Times

READINGS

Wilson, Robert A. "Eugenic Thinking in Medicine, Healthcare, and Bioethics." In *Handbook of the Philosophy of Medicine*, edited by Thomas Schramme and Mary Jean Walker, 1–14. Cham: Springer, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8706-2_104-1.

Herzog, Dagmar. *The Question of Unworthy Life: Eugenics and Germany's Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024. (Introduction, chapter 3 and chapter 4. Graduate students please read chapter 1 as well.)

Rutherford, Danilyn. "Disability and the Worship of Work." *Somatosphere*, December 15, 2025.

<https://somatosphere.net/disability-and-the-worship-of-work/>.

SCREENING

Whiting, Glynis, dir. *The Sterilization of Leilani Muir*. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1996. 47:00.

https://www.nfb.ca/film/sterilization_of_leilani_muir/. (We will watch in class together)

Week 3 • September 22 — Human/Animal Boundaries and Eugenic Compassion

READINGS

Taylor, Sunaura. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. New York: The New Press, 2017. (excerpts)

Poje, Kat. "To 'Save from Suffering': Eugenics and Animal Euthanasia in the Early Twentieth-Century American Humane Movement." *Isis* 117, no. 2 (2026): 341–57. <https://doi.org/10.1086/740957>.

COURSE NOTE

Memoirs assigned this week Choose one (students will be presenting on them in the last week of class).

Khakpour, Porochista. *Sick: A Memoir*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2018.

O'Rourke, Meghan. *The Invisible Kingdom: Reimagining Chronic Illness*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2022.

Rehmeyer, Julie. *Through the Shadowlands: A Science Writer's Odyssey into an Illness Science Doesn't Understand*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2017.

Rutherford, Danilyn. *Beautiful Mystery: Living in a Wordless World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025.

Week 4 • September 29 — Selective Reproduction, Genetic Testing, and Assisted Death

READINGS

Asch, Adrienne. "Why I Haven't Changed My Mind About Prenatal Diagnosis: Reflections and Refinements." In *Prenatal Testing and Disability Rights*, edited by Erik Parens and Adrienne Asch, 234–58. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000.

Steinbock, Bonnie. "Disability, Prenatal Testing, and Selective Abortion." In *Prenatal Testing and Disability Rights*, edited by Erik Parens and Adrienne Asch, 108–23. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000.

Rapp, Rayna. "Reproductive Entanglements: Body, State, and Culture in the Dys/Regulation of Child-Bearing." *Social Research* 78, no. 3,): 693–718, 2011.

Johnson, Harriet McBryde. "Unspeakable Conversations." *New York Times Magazine*, February 16, 2003.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/16/magazine/unspeakable-conversations.html>.

Schroeder, Nicole. "Dying a 'Good' Death: Disability and the Assisted Suicide Debate." Disability Visibility Project, January 1, 2025. <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2025/01/01/dying-a-good-death-disability-and-the-assisted-suicide-debate/>.

ASSESSMENT

In-Class Test 1 – multiple-choice and short written answers (45 minutes).

PART II • WEEKS 5–11 Chronic and Contested Illness

Week 5 • October 6 — Illness, Vulnerability and Epidemic, Metaphor and Meaning

READINGS

Butler, Judith. "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." In *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, 12–27. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978. (selections)

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. (sections 1–4, pp. 3–21)

Epstein, Steven. "The Construction of Lay Expertise: AIDS Activism and the Forging of Credibility in the Reform of Clinical Trials." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 20, no. 4 (1995): 408–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/016224399502000402>.

SCREENINGS

France, David, dir. *How to Survive a Plague*. New York: Sundance Selects, 2012. 01:49:00. (I hope we will watch in class together)

Campillo, Robin, dir. *120 BPM (Beats per Minute)*. Paris: Memento Films, 2017. 02:23:00. (a fictionalized account of ACT UP Paris; watch at home)

Week 6 • October 13 — Chronic Illness as Disability and the Fight for Recognition

READINGS

Wendell, Susan. "Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities." *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001): 17–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2001.tb00751.x>.

Dumit, Joseph. "Illnesses You Have to Fight to Get: Facts as Forces in Uncertain, Emergent Illnesses." *Social Science & Medicine* 62, no. 3 (2006): 577–90. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.06.018>.

Hsu, V. Jo, Megan Moodie, Abigail A. Dumes, Emily Lim Rogers, Chelsey Carter, Emma Broder, Daisy Couture, Ilana Löwy, and Emily Mendenhall. "Patients as Knowledge Partners in the Context of Complex Chronic Conditions." *Medical Humanities* 51, no. 1 (2025): 34–38. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2024-012957>.

Iskander, John K., and Stephanie Haridopolos. "Making Invisible Illnesses Visible: Recognizing and Responding to Infection-Associated Chronic Conditions." *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 83, no. 1 (2026): e58–61.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciag240>.

Astor, Maggie. "Doctors Couldn't Help Them. They Rolled the Dice with AI." *New York Times*, April 2, 2026.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/02/well/live/ai-illness-claude-chatgpt.html>.

Week 7 • October 20 — Autism, MAHA, and Diagnostic Politics

READINGS

Grinker, Roy Richard. "Autism, 'Stigma,' Disability: A Shifting Historical Terrain." *Current Anthropology* 61, no. S21 (2020): S55–67. <https://doi.org/10.1086/705748>.

Ginsburg, Faye, and Rayna Rapp. "The Doubled Telos of Modernity: Genetic Screening, Atypical Brains, and Neurodiversity." In *Disability Worlds*, 27–48. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024.

Autistic Self Advocacy Network. "Plain Language Roundup: Explaining 'The Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Report'." Autistic Self Advocacy Network, June 4, 2025. <https://autisticadvocacy.org/2025/06/plain-language-roundup-explaining-the-make-america-healthy-again-maha-report/>.

May, Emily. "Kennedy Described My Daughter's Reality." *New York Times*, April 25, 2025.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/25/opinion/autism-rfk-parent-child.html>.

Iwasaki, Akiko. "Freedom of Scientific Inquiry: Reclaiming Space for Controversy." *Nature Reviews Immunology* 26 (2026): 724–25. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41577-026-01306-1>.

Week 8 • October 27 — Lyme, Chronic Infections, and Paradigms

READINGS

Dumes, Abigail A. *Divided Bodies: Lyme Disease, Contested Illness, and Evidence-Based Medicine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. (excerpts)

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962. (excerpts)

Week 9 • November 3 — Defining Long COVID; Debating Invisible Illness

READINGS

Mendenhall, Emily. *Invisible Illness: A History, from Hysteria to Long COVID*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2026. (excerpts)

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *A Long COVID Definition: A Chronic, Systemic Disease State with Profound Consequences*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27768>. [I will have you skim a few sections as it is very long!]

Reader responses and critique of Mendenhall's *Invisible Illness*

r/cfs. "Community Thread (Critique of Mendenhall)." Reddit, 2026. <https://www.reddit.com/r/cfs/comments/1qkeb27/>.

Mendenhall, Emily. "Thresholds Is a Biological Theory That Incorporates Social and Ecological Realities." Long Covid: An Anthropological Perspective, January 20, 2026. <https://emilymendenhall.substack.com/p/thresholds-is-a-biological-theory>.

Hausmann, Elke. "Commentary on the Long Covid Article by Alan Levinovitz in WIRED Magazine." Long Covid Advocacy, June 3, 2026. <https://longcovidadvocacy.substack.com/p/commentary-on-the-long-covid-article>.

Hausmann, Elke. "'These Are Not Verifiable Conditions'." Long Covid Advocacy, January 17, 2026. <https://longcovidadvocacy.substack.com/p/these-are-not-verifiable-conditions>.

Levinovitz, Alan. "The Painful Truth About Long Covid." *Wired*, June 1, 2026. <https://www.wired.com/story/the-painful-truth-about-long-covid/>.

ASSESSMENT

In-Class Test 2 – multiple-choice and short written answers (45 minutes).

Week 10 • November 10 — Memoir, Mental Health and Care, and the Politics of Rationality

READINGS

Coleman, E. Gabriella. "The Politics of Rationality: Psychiatric Survivors' Challenge to Psychiatry." In *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*, edited by Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip, 341–64. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7494.003.0030>.

Eubanks, Virginia. *A Guide to Open Water Lifesaving: Lessons on Love, Care, and Survival; A Memoir*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2026. (excerpts)

Week 11 • November 17 — Technology, Chronic Illness, and Disability

READINGS

Class visit: with Professor Laura Forlano <https://camd.northeastern.edu/people/laura-forlano/>

Forlano, Laura. "Data Rituals in Intimate Infrastructures: Crip Time and the Disabled Cyborg Body as an Epistemic Site of Feminist Science." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 3, no. 2 (2017): 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v3i2.28843>.

Rentschler, Carrie, and Benjamin Nothwehr. "'Shitty Graphs': Data Intimacy and the Feeling of Numbers in Type 1 Diabetes." *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 48 (2024): 10–38. <https://doi.org/10.3138/topia-2023-0026>.

Schüll, Natasha Dow. "The Data-Based Self: Self-Quantification and the Data-Driven (Good) Life." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2019): 909–30. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2019.0050>.

PART III • Disabling Environments and Wrap Up

Week 12 • November 24 — Chemical Exposures and the Sick Home

READINGS

Shapiro, Nicholas. *Homesick*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025. (excerpts)

Brown, Phil, Stephen Zavestoski, Alissa Cordner, Sabrina McCormick, Joshua Mandelbaum, Theo Luebke, and Meadow Linder. "A Narrowing Gulf of Difference? Disputes and Discoveries in the Study of Gulf War-Related Illnesses." In *Contested Illnesses: Citizens, Science, and Health Social Movements*, edited by Phil Brown, Rachel Morello-Frosch, and Stephen Zavestoski, 79–107. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Coleman, E. Gabriella, and Eric Reinhart. "How MAHA Is Helping Poison Americans While Claiming to Save Them." *Politico*, April 2, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/04/02/rfk-jr-s-maha-movement-has-a-fatal-flaw-00263926>.

ASSESSMENT

In-Class Test 3 – multiple-choice and short written answers (45 minutes).

Week 13 • December 1 — More Habitable Worlds / Disability Justice

READINGS

Student presentations!!

Ginsburg, Faye, and Rayna Rapp. "Disability Worlds / Disability Futures." In *Disability Worlds*, 187–219. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024.

Kafer, Alison. "After Crip, Crip Afters." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021): 415–34. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916158>.