

THE IMAGINED BODY
ANTHROPOLOGY 256
COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS

Why are imageries of the human body (and particularly, ‘good bodies’ vs. ‘bad bodies’) so often used in cultures throughout the world to reinforce and reproduce social structural arrangements? Why are idealized bodies so often wielded to ‘police’ individuals into conformity with regimes of racial or gendered or political hierarchy? How and why have societies represented their structures of power and difference to individuals via emotionally compelling and sometimes frightening images of the human body? Since these imageries of body are cultural fictions, we are dealing here with *imagined bodies*: with historically specific ways of representing (for instance) the human fetus or the ‘pretty girl’ or the ‘strong man.’ How do these imagined bodies get put into daily practice? How do these fictionalized bodies interact with social class? Can the individual ‘speak back’ to his or her culture’s repertoire of good and virtuous bodies? How do a society’s core disciplinary practices become instantiated into actual lived bodies?

These are some of the guiding research questions within contemporary cultural anthropology that structure this course. We’ll read a series of book chapters and journal articles along with some of social theorist Michel Foucault’s work on power and disciplinary practice, to get our theoretical bearings. We’ll also explore a series of concrete, book-length case studies about issues of body and power. We’ll look at both non-Western cultures (e.g., Fiji in the South Pacific) and Euro-American cultures (Romania, and the U.S.) to see how social regimes ‘speak’ through often subtle and sometimes directly harmful languages of body, in constituting human worlds. We’ll read a memoir about body, pain, and stigma. Students will conduct brief fieldwork about body at Holy Cross. The emphasis throughout the course will be on reading anthropological and historical research in order to become more aware of and more critical of the imagined body regimes that shape our own lives.