

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: John E. Sawyer Seminar on the Comparative Study of Cultures: Chronic Conditions: Knowing, Seeing & Healing the Body in Global Africa

Summary: The University of Kansas Sawyer Seminar will bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to set a new agenda for interdisciplinary research in the medical humanities. The goal is to offer novel ways of thinking about the historical, cultural, and structural processes that have given rise to chronic health conditions among Africans, African immigrants, and African Americans. Seminar leaders and participants will address critical questions about how anti-black racism and symbolic violence have combined with structural inequalities to predispose minoritized populations to particular illnesses sometimes referred to as “chronic.” Through a focus on communities that share African roots, Seminar participants will trace how legacies of slavery, colonialism, and segregation have rendered black bodies particularly vulnerable to misapprehension, oppression, and exploitation in medicine. The Kansas African Studies Center, in collaboration with the Spencer Museum of Art and the Hall Center for the Humanities, will organize eight public lectures and four performances, which will be held at venues at the University of Kansas and throughout the state of Kansas. Public lectures will be held at KU’s main campus in Lawrence, as well as the KU Medical Center’s campuses in Kansas City, Salina, and Wichita. Drawing on SMA's experience with collaborative community art projects, KU scholars and clinicians will work with visual artists through two humanities-based “labs” that complement the themes of the Seminar. In these participatory and experimental spaces, they will build online exhibits of digital objects, including podcasts and other multi-sensorial representations of their work. The public-facing events will bring a wider public into the broad-ranging dialogue about the vital role the humanities and arts play in contributing to a more humane healthcare experience. The Seminar also supports one postdoctoral fellowship and two graduate fellowships over 2019-2020.