



Contemporary Ethnographies

ANTH 440

Spring 2020

12:55-2:10, M/Th

Kerwin Hall 202

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Anthropology Department, Hamilton 301

Office Hours: W 2:20-4:40 or by appointment

Course Description: This upper-level undergraduate seminar will examine the history, art, and craft of ethnography. Ethnography is a powerful medium for presenting research, as it portrays people's lived experiences and situates them within broader political and historical contexts. Today ethnography is a method that crosses disciplinary boundaries, but in this class we will address anthropological understandings in particular. As we build familiarity with the components of ethnographies, we will consider how those components are organized, framed, and utilized. What constitutes ethnography, and how is it done? The class is organized around five pervasive themes (ethnographic authority, history and memory, culture and meaning, place, and human agency). For each of these themes, we will ask: how is this theme addressed in

contemporary research? What conventions of writing are associated with it? What is working in the text, intellectually and emotionally? What ethical dilemmas are associated with the presentation of ethnographic research? We will assess the relationship between ethnography and theory, writing style, the author's intentions and goals, the presumed audience, and the generative ways in which theory arose from ethnography throughout the project.

We will read works that are complex and multilayered in their exposition: articles and excerpts from historical texts that shade in the contours of ethnographic work. We will also read a few full ethnographies that represent the state of contemporary ethnographies and/or push the boundaries of what ethnography is and can be.

Course Format:

This class is a seminar. Students are expected to do all the reading and take an active part in shaping and advancing discussion. Our classes will have a mix of short exercises or student-led presentations about the reading, lectures by the instructor, class discussion, writing activities, and concise student presentations of chosen ethnographies.

Course Objectives:

- Understand how ethnographers combine theories, methods, and reflection into innovative analyses
- Analyze goals and applications of ethnographic writing
- Understand the place of contemporary ethnography within its historical formation
- Appreciate how methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks shape ethnographic writing
- Understand developing trends in ethnographic research
- Be able to articulate the relevance and importance of ethnographies as products of anthropological research

Required Readings

The following books can be obtained new or used from the campus bookstore or an online bookseller. If you have difficulty purchasing the books, please contact the instructor. These books are also on 3-hour reserve at the library.

- Ogden, Laura. 2011. *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tsing, Anna. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Verdery, Katherine. 2018. *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*. Duke University Press.

All other course readings will be available on Blackboard, as links, or in class. All readings marked (*optional*) are also available on the class website but are not required work for the class.

Grading

Major assignments and their percentage of student grades are as follows:

Class preparation/participation	30%
Critical ethnography analysis	15%
Discussion facilitation and essay	20%
Final paper/presentation	35%

A: Superior, original, thoughtful work in completion of all requirements;

B: Very good work in completion of course requirements;

C: Satisfactory work in completion of course requirements;

D: Unsatisfactory or incomplete work in course requirements and/or a failure to meet minimum attendance requirements;

F: Failure to meet minimum course standards for assignments, participation, and attendance.

CLASS REQUIREMENTS:

PARTICIPATION

This is a seminar that requires your active participation. There are many ways to participate constructively in class, including speaking spontaneously during class discussion and preparing contributions to the class before we meet. Please prepare to participate in the way that is most comfortable for you, or come to office hours early in the semester to discuss how we can best facilitate your participation. Attendance (15%) and participation (15%) in class discussions will count for 30% total of your final grade. This large percentage of your grade is based on random attendance taking, participation in class discussions, informal presentations of your thoughts/analyses/reflections on the readings, and occasional in-class writing responses.

The readings for this class have been carefully curated. Reading the assigned articles and books is critical in this class. (Conversely, the optional readings are merely suggestions, rather than requirements. I may refer to them in class sessions but I have provided them in case you'd like to draw on them for your assignments or after the class is finished.)

The best way to prepare for the expected level of participation is to actively read the assigned articles. For each reading, you should seek to understand the main argument or thesis (the author's goal); the evidence the author provides to support that argument, and the methods used to collect evidence; whether you are convinced by the author's argument (and if not, why not); and the significance of the reading. After considering these things, what questions does the reading raise for you? What ideas does it generate? Reading actively will leave you with questions about the readings, their relationship to one another and to current events, and to class themes. You should bring multiple questions about the readings to every single class. Formulating these

questions requires you to reflect on what you have read, and is one of the best ways to increase your understanding of the readings and prepare you for class discussions

LEADING DISCUSSION:

Once during the semester, you (along with one or two other students) will be in charge of interpreting the week's assigned readings and leading class discussion. This interpretation and discussion should together take around 30 minutes, and is worth 20% of your grade. You will use this time to introduce us to some themes in the day's readings, find two places in the text where we can get started with discussion, and finally leave us with a discussion question we can work on for around 10 minutes in pairs. If you have any technological requirements, you should inform me before the start of class to allow sufficient time for set-up.

In order to do well on this presentation, you will need to collaborate in advance with the other student and together demonstrate command of the material. Excellent presentations/discussions will also integrate previous insights from class readings and discussions or help the class think productively and creatively about the assigned readings. As part of your discussion leading, you will submit a critical reaction to the readings. This 500-750 word critical essay on the required/recommended readings for that week will offer comments, raise questions, and suggest further lines of inquiry (etc.) with the aim of stimulating class discussion. Each critical essay could include: (1) a statement of the theoretical point or issue that you believe is the most significant in each reading (try for one sentence per reading) and/or in the set of readings as a whole; (2) how the readings are relevant to the theme or unit or—if there are a series of articles—a comparison and contrast of the authors' views on the subject of that class; (3) how the readings fit into your own experience and views, what you agree/disagree with and why; (4) what you might see differently and how as a result of these readings; and (5) at the end of your essay, leave one or two questions for online class discussion. You will submit these by Wednesday evening at 5:00 p.m. to the class Blackboard site. This is a firm deadline, since this essay and your questions will give time to other students who are required to read your responses and begin formulating responses to your questions before coming to class. I encourage you to come to office hours (as a facilitator group or alone) if you have questions about the readings.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS PRESENTATION:

Once during the semester, you will also present a critical analysis of an ethnography of your choosing. Ideally, this ethnography will be useful for your final paper. Your presentation will be no longer than 10 minutes. There is no written component required for this assignment, but you are welcome to use visual aids like slides, etc. (If you have any technological requirements, you should inform me before the start of class to allow sufficient time for set-up.) The presentation should analyze and critique a few of the elements of ethnographies that we lay out in the first weeks of the class.

FINAL PAPER:

You will write a final paper in three parts for this class. First, you will submit a one-paragraph proposal to the instructor during office hours the week of Feb 10. Second, you will present your ideas to the class (along with a detailed paper outline) after spring break. Third, your final paper will be due the final day of class. The final paper (3500-4000 words, excluding footnotes/references) will present a critical ethnographic analysis that engages with one of the five class themes (history, agency, place, culture and meaning, and ethnographic authority).

CLASS SCHEDULE

Readings: All assigned readings and assignments are due the day they are listed in the syllabus. You are expected to have completed the readings/assignments before class.

A. ETHNOGRAPHIC AUTHORITY:

In this unit we'll identify characteristics of ethnographies so that we have a basis for understanding the ethnographies we'll read this semester. We'll also consider what it means to produce ethnographic knowledge, and consider how theory emerges from ethnographic research. Some questions we'll consider in this class that will extend over the course of the semester include: What constitutes an acceptable ethnographic subject or source? How do we see and interpret research and writing as ethnographic, across diverse ("traditional" and "nontraditional") sources? Amidst various disciplines that engage in anthropological methodologies, how do anthropologists in particular define and delimit ethnography?

JAN 13: Introductions & Ethnographies as Texts**Monday:**

- Syllabus review, in-class writing exercise

Thursday:

- Marcus and Cushman. "Ethnographies as Texts." 1982. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 11. pp. 25-69.
- Read THREE book reviews from *American Anthropologist* Vol 121: 3, September 2019 (pdf available under BB tab 'Misc Readings').
- Ethnography selection activity, discussion leader sign-up

JAN 20:**Monday:**

- No class, MLK Jr. Day

Thursday:

****this class will meet online during class time.*

- Clifford, James. 1983. "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 2: 118-146

- (optional) Tuhiwai-Smith, Linda. "Imperialism, History, Writing, and Theory." Ch 1 in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- (optional) Da Col, Giovanni and David Graeber. Pp vi-xv (ONLY) in "Foreword." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2011.

B. PLACE

How do anthropologists draw boundaries around the locations and populations that they study? We'll address what it means to be engaged in particular locations for fieldwork, how those ideas have changed over time, and the implications of these changes for ethnographic fieldwork and analysis. We also examine a multi-sited ethnography of capitalism at the end of this unit, and consider the work of contemporary anthropologists engaged with big questions in multiple places.

JAN 27:

Monday:

- Marcus, George E. 1995. "Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95-117.
- Gupta, A. and J. Ferguson. "Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 7, No. 1, Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference (Feb., 1992), pp. 6-23.

Thursday:

- Kelly, William. "Caught in the Spin Cycle: An Anthropological Observer at the Sites of Japanese Professional Baseball." In S. Long (ed.), *Moving Targets: Ethnographies of Self and Community in Japan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

FEB 3, Monday:

- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, 2015. Part I in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

Thursday:

- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, 2015. Part II in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

FEB 10, Monday:

- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, 2015. Part III in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

Thursday:

- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, 2015. Part IV-end in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

- Screening of *The Last Season*. Dir. by Sara Dosa. First Run Features, 2015. 80 min. Location TBD. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/movie/the-last-season/id1052284148>

C. CULTURE AND MEANING

Ethnographic “data” is only useful when it is explained and analyzed within the situated knowledge of cultural understandings. How do ethnographers understand experiences and events, connecting bodily sensations, bodily ways of knowing, and social interpretations to cultural tendencies? By drawing the links that they do in their ethnographies, are you able to get a sense of how not only the ethnographer but also the individuals who appear in their books construct meaning out of those experiences? In what ways do ethnographers describe or differentiate cultures without reifying them? These readings help elucidate how, through the format of ethnographies, researchers come to discover and describe particular aspects of culture that are meaningful to those among whom they conduct their research.

FEB 17, Monday:

- Guerts, Kathryn Linn. “On Rocks, Walks, and Talks in West Africa: Cultural Categories and an Anthropology of the Senses.” *Ethos*. Vol. 30, No. 3 (Sep., 2002), pp. 178-198
- Favret-Asaada, Jeanne. “The Way Things are Said.” Pp 3-24 in *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, trans. from French by Catherine Cullen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 [1977].

Thursday:

- Feld, Stephen. “Dialogic Editing: Interpreting How Kaluli Read Sound and Sentiment” *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 2, No. 2 (May, 1987), pp. 190-210.

D. AGENCY

Anthropologists generate knowledge not only through applying and engaging with theories generated by scholars, but also by privileging the meanings and frameworks of the communities who we work with. In this unit we’ll discuss how individuals and groups operate to create social change in their lives and what conditions may prevent them from doing so. We’ll also examine ways that ethnographies may be vehicles for social change. In what ways might they fall short of their intended aims? Are there ways in which they may they inadvertently be harmful? As part of this discussion we also consider how anthropologists illustrate and lay bare their own positions within their ethnographies.

FEB 24, Monday:

- Verdery, Katherine. Preface-Ch 1 (pp. xi-110) in *My Life as a Spy*.

Thursday:

- Verdery, Katherine. Ch 2-Excursus (pp 111-194) in *My Life as a Spy*.

MARCH 2, Monday:

- Verdery, Katherine. Ch 3 (pp 195-276) in *My Life as a Spy*.

Thursday:

- Verdery, Katherine. Ch 4-Epilogue (pp 277-297) in *My Life as a Spy*.

MARCH 9:

- **No class, spring break**

E. HISTORY

No ethnography, as Comaroff and Comaroff write, “can ever hope to penetrate beyond the surface planes of everyday life, to plumb its invisible forms, unless it is informed by the historical imagination—the imagination, that is, of both those who make history and those who write it” (1992:xi). If ethnography is “a historically situated mode of understanding historically situated contexts” (1992:31), how do anthropologists explore how particular worlds are made and transformed? How do they narrate and analyze the processes that reciprocally shape subjects and contexts, thereby identifying social change through time? In this unit, we consider how history and memory are invoked in ethnographic works that examine historical shifts.

MARCH 16, Monday:

GUEST LECTURE

- Schafft, Gretchen and Zeidler, Gerard. 2011. Intro, Ch 1, and Ch 9 from *Commemorating Hell: The Public Memory of Mittelbau-Dora*. University of Illinois Press.
- (optional) Schafft, Gretchen. 2002. Ch “Scientific Racism in Service to the Reich” in *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*. University of California Press.

Thursday:

- Nelson, Christopher. 2008. “The Heritage of His Times: Teruya Rinsuke and Ethnographic Storytelling.” Ch. 2 in *Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance, and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa*. Duke University Press. Pp 58-88.
- Field, Norma, 1993. “Okinawa: A Supermarket Owner.” Ch. 1 (pp 33-107) in *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: Japan at Century’s End*. Vintage Press.
- (optional) Inoue, Masamichi, 2007. “The Rape Incident.” Ch. 2 (pp 31-69) in *Okinawa and the U.S. Military: Identity Making in the Age of Globalization*. Columbia University Press: New York.

MARCH 23, Monday:

- **Student Presentations**

Thursday:

- **Student Presentations**

MARCH 30, Monday:

- Ogden, Laura. 2011. Beginning-through to start of Ch 2. in *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Thursday:

- Chs 2- through to start of ch. 4 in *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
(student discussion co-leads)

APRIL 6, Monday:

- Ogden, Laura. 2011. Ch. 4- through to start of ch. 6 in *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Thursday:

- Ogden, Laura. 2011. Ch 6-end in *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
(student discussion co-leads)

F. ETHNOGRAPHIC AUTHORITIES

In this unit, we return to the questions of ethnographic authority that initially framed our semester of inquiry. How do new collaborations in ethnographic form throw questions of authority and authoritativeness into question? What is gained, or lost, in these collaborations?

APRIL 13: Monday:

- Myers, Natasha. 2012. Poaching Mushrooms: Lessons from the Matsutake Worlds Research Group. In Poaching at the Multispecies Salon. Kroeber Anthropological Society, 100(1): pp 139-141.
- Matsutake Worlds Research Group, 2009. "A New Form of Collaboration in Cultural Anthropology: Matsutake worlds" *American Ethnologist*. Vol. 36, No. 2. pp. 380-403

*****We will revisit all of the ethnographies we read in class this day, and have a group discussion about ethnographic conventions.***

Thursday:

- Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, "Wind and Power in the Anthropocene" (Duke UP, 2019). Podcast (linked here [New Books in Anthropology](#) and also

available at <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/new-books-in-anthropology/id425195053>
(student discussion co-leads)

APRIL 20, Monday:

- ***NO CLASS: ATTEND CAMPUS EARTH DAY CELEBRATIONS***

Thursday:

******Final papers due in class. Class discussion of papers, end-of-course celebration, class evaluations.***

Thursday, APRIL 30:

- *Final exam scheduled for 11:20-1:50, in case we need to make up a class.*

CLASS POLICIES:

Attendance and participation

If you anticipate the need to miss class for religious holidays, approved participation in University activities, or other reasonable outside commitments you should inform the instructor in writing (hard copy) during the first two weeks of class. After the first two weeks of class, the instructor will not approve absences. Since learning that the health center charges you for appointments, I will no longer accept doctor's notes (except in extreme cases of repetitive absences). Many students have legitimate reasons to miss one or two classes over the course of the semester. If you miss more than that you will be participating less, missing important lecture content, and your grade will likely suffer. If you do miss class, get notes from a classmate and then speak with the instructor about any questions you may have.

Respectful engagement

You may disagree with statements made by others in class or things you encounter in the readings. Understanding different interpretations is part of what anthropology is about, and respectful disagreement can be a productive way of thinking through difficult issues. This class is a safe space for sharing diverse viewpoints. Don't be afraid to talk, and always be respectful of others.

Tech policy

This class has an offline/old-school tech policy. No phones, laptops and tablets, etc. unless you opt-in (by discussing your reasons with the instructor during office hours). You **may**, however, use these devices to access assigned readings during class discussions. This policy is designed to enable you to learn the materials while minimizing distractions. Various studies¹ suggest that taking notes with pen and paper results in better recall and retention than note taking with a

¹ Pam A. Mueller and Daniel M. Oppenheimer. The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking. *Psychological Science* June 2014 vol. 25 no. 6 1159-1168.
Carrie B. Fried, In-class laptop use and its effects on student learning, *Computers & Education*, Volume 50, Issue 3, April 2008, Pages 906-914.
Yamamoto, Kevin, Banning Laptops in the Classroom: Is it Worth the Hassles? *Journal of Legal Education*, Vol. 57, 2008.

laptop or tablet; think about it! Audio or video recording of the class is not allowed without the express permission of the instructor.

Late Work

Timely completion of the assignments is important. Unexcused late work will be marked down by half a letter grade for every day it is late. Excuses will be granted for emergency situations only.

Contacting the Instructor

I am happy to discuss course readings, discussions, and assignments with you, please come to office hours or make an appointment! You can also get in touch with me via phone or email, though please note that I generally do not respond to phone messages or emails received after 5:00 p.m. until the following day. I will usually respond to messages within 3 working days unless I am traveling.

Course Content

I reserve the right to change the content and schedule of this course syllabus during the semester.

Disabilities

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please notify the instructor with a letter from the Academic Support and Access Center (885-3360, www.american.edu/ocl/asac/) as soon as possible so that we can make the proper arrangements.

Academic Integrity

American University holds its students to the highest academic standards, and violations to academic integrity like plagiarism, inappropriate collaboration, dishonesty in examinations or assignments, using your own previously submitted work, and fabrication of data are unacceptable. By enrolling at AU and registering for class you have acknowledged your commitment to the Academic Integrity Code found here: <http://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/code.cfm> I am required to report violations of academic integrity to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, whose policy it is to fail students for the course. Please talk to the instructor, your TA, or a reference librarian if you are unsure of what plagiarism is.

Resources

AU has many resources designed to help students with difficult academic and personal circumstances. Academic Support Services include time management, reading, note taking, and test-taking strategies, among other things; and in 2013 over 7,000 students used AU counseling services. These resources can generally be found at the Office of Campus Life's Academic Support and Access Center (www.american.edu/ocl/asac/). Please come and see the instructor if you are having trouble locating any of these resources.

Emergency Preparedness

In the event of a weather or health related event, please note that AU policies state that "Faculty will communicate class-specific information to students via AU e-mail and Blackboard...students are responsible for checking their AU e-mail regularly and keeping themselves informed of emergencies."

