

SOAN 301
THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S CRAFT



Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson working in the mosquito room, Tambunam, 1938 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)

Dr. Kirsten Scheid

Class Meeting Time: Monday, 2-4:30

Office Hours: Mondays 4:30-5:30, Tuesdays 3:30-4:30, and Thursdays 11:30-12:30

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Justification: Anthropology or any socio-cultural research is not simply the gathering of data. Analysis always involves a narrative, putting facts in order, weighting them, categorizing them, and designating causes and effects. Doing this entails theory but also the ability to handle and apply that theory, as well as the ability to relate and express it. Thus, every socio-cultural account involves choices of how to plot and figure the data to make an argument. Certain arguments can be made only when using certain styles, and the final application of arguments writes out certain elements, draws attention, shows connections and overlooks other ones. Attention to the crafting of ethnographies will help you to understand the choices of theory, methodology, and style that have been made to create classic anthropological knowledge and will be made by you to create your own. Because of the emphasis on how accounts are formed and seem responsible to real human lives, reading socio-cultural analyses this way will also be helpful to students investigating specific social fields such as economics, politics, and linguistics, as well as students delving into literary and philosophical texts that purport to “capture” humanity.

Course Learning Objectives: This course exposes you to the classic ethnographies of anthropology in order to provide a strong background for fieldwork and argumentation. Second, the course aims to provoke critical thinking by making you analyze the elements and contexts through which ethnographic experiments become books about humanity. Further, the course will encourage you to develop evaluative skills by teaching you techniques for reading works “at each other,” to assess their relative value in terms of theoretical and social debates just as much as in terms of the given research problema.

Course Learning Outcomes: At the end of this course you should be able to identify the basic anthropological methods used in the production of specific ethnographies, to recognize the applications of theory to particular types of data, and to analyze the impact of stylistic components on an ethnography’s main arguments. Building on all of this, you should be able to evaluate the anthropological projects that have defined our discipline, and to situate classic and contemporary works in their larger social and biographical contexts. You should be able to prepare a report on an author-ethnographer’s corpus and impact on the field. This means you will have learned how to assess impact and influence of a single work or body of thought. Lastly, you should be able to justify your own choices of method, theory, and style that will launch your Masters’ thesis.

Course Requirements: Each week four students will prepare short reports (1500 words max.) on a single ethnography. One student will report on the method, another on the theory, a third on the style.

Graduates: will make **five reports** total (two of one type of report, one of the other three; which type you double is up to you), none on the same book. Please see the “Definitions of Components” section for more information on the reports you should prepare. The **final paper** will require you to take your own original field data and “write it up” in the spirit of three different ethnographers encountered during the semester.

Undergraduates: will make **four reports** (one of each type) and a **final paper** that will require you to take your own original field data and “write it up” in the spirit of three different ethnographers encountered during the semester.

Assessment and Evaluation:

Graduates: Each report will be worth 15% of your final grade. You must bring reports printed to class and submit them electronically to Moodle. Your electronic copy will be returned by the next week with my comments, suggestions, and grading. These annotated reports, minus the grades, will be posted to Moodle for common use. Your final is worth 25%. Needless to say, participation in class is very important. Failing to attend and contribute consistently to class discussion will affect your final grade negatively.

Undergraduates: Each report will be worth 10% of your final grade. You must bring it typed to class and submit it electronically to Moodle. Your electronic copy will be returned by the next week with my comments, suggestions, and grading. These annotated reports, minus the grades, will be posted to Moodle for common use. Your final is worth 30%. Participation is worth 30%.

Course Structure: Our task this semester is to read 14 ethnographies chosen for their impact on the field or their innovativeness. While our texts date from between 1920 and 2015, we will not read them in chronological order. The reason for this is to avoid an implied teleology and to encourage finding linkages and making comparisons between books written in similar modes or on similar topics. Rather we will look at how different ethnographies handle related topics such as economy, gender identity, piety, state practices, imagination, racism, peripherality, and modernity. The final list of books depends on the interests of the students registering for the course.

Selected Texts (all our available for free as PDFs; those with UBKS have been ordered to the University Bookstore, but hard copies are optional):

Marcel Mauss, 1924. *The Gift* -UBKS

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 1993. *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*.

Philippe Bourgois, 1995. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* -UBKS

Bronislaw Malinowski, 1922, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*

Ilana Feldman, 2008. *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule 1917-1967*

Yael Navaro-Yashin, 2012, *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* -UBKS

Abdellah Hammoudi, 2005, *A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage*

D. Asher Ghertner, 2015, *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi* -UBKS

Ghassan Hage, 1998, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*

Michael Herzfeld, 1988, *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village*

Saba Mahmood, 2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* -UBKS

Holly Wardlow, 2006. *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society*-UBKS

Paul Farmer, 1992. *Aids and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*.

Jean and John Comaroff, 1991, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*

Additional texts will be consulted to help with style analyses (such as Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* and James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*), but these will be assigned as we move through the semester, according to need and capacity.

SOAN 301 The Ethnographer's Craft: Topic Reports

Style:

This will be the most directly accessible topic: the issue of writing style (or presentation generally). What tone, language, tense, images, sense of voice, narrative person, dialogue, and so forth becomes part of how the argument is made? Look for metaphors, sentence construction, retractions, circumventions, double negations, and so on. How does the writer claim authority? Is the writing “experience-far” or “experience-near”? How are counter-anthropologists or “enemies” created and deployed to move the text along towards a conclusion? Is the text conclusive? Does it have a particular beginning, and end? Actually, introductions are very telling – how does the author draw you into the ethnography? Does the author explain how he or she has gotten there in the first place? Lastly, how is the text structured? What stages does it move through to make its argument?

Method:

What training has the ethnographer undertaken? (You will have to look at the schools and professors, usually invoked in the acknowledgements section, and do a bit of Internet research to get a sense of what those professors train people to do.) What does the ethnographer assert or imply constitutes a good way of getting data? More importantly, what kind of data does the text utilize, and how has it been collected? (Note that the actual method used to produce the ethnography may not conform to what the author holds to be ideal.) Where is the ethnographer in the text as a data-gathering entity? How is time/history/change handled (this is another aspect of data collection)?

Theory:

What sorts of interpretations does the ethnographer declare herself to be making? If none (rarely) what sorts of presentations of interpretation are there? What analytical predecessors or analytical enemies are invoked, and how are they handled to advance a particular theory (or combination)? Is the theory said by the author to “grow out of” the data? If so, what are some good examples of that? Are there any bits of data that do not fit? What does the author do with them? Look for how the writer’s theoretical foundations are presented. All writers cite their “ancestors” explicitly or implicitly, sometimes both. Delving into the sources of thinking for any text will heighten your awareness of its limitations, connections, and tactical advantages. How has an author mobilized a certain thinker (for Mahmood, the thinkers are Butler, Foucault, Aristotle) or concept (for Mauss, reciprocity) and how have they refracted that legacy to shed new light (and shadows)? What arguments is the text taking up, building on, challenging?

Corpus:

Relate the text to the author’s career to gain a sense of how it grew out of previous problems the author had addressed and it was, itself, problematized by later writings. We talk of “early Marx” or “late Marx” to recognize that a writer’s interests and strengths shift with time, and to recognize the vitality of the author’s thinking mind. This is an important exercise to keep us from simplistically condemning an author for “failing to take something into consideration,” and, likewise, to heighten our awareness of how

ideas are interrelated through specific life experiences, especially local and global contexts. What about the non-textual part of the ethnographer's life, is this related to any other scholarly or non-scholarly pursuits, interests, struggles? Contexts change, how does the ethnographer?

In researching for your report, you are free to use internet wisely, but also you must get to the library, see the book's connections (from the index and then the bibliography), see shelf organizations, check out book reviews in prominent journals, among others: Current Anthropology, American Anthropologist, American Ethnologist, Annual Anthropology Review, Anthropology Today, Anthrosource.net, Jstor (on campus). If you need an article from Anthrosource but you find you do not have access to the article, send me an e-mail with the link and I will reply with the attachment. (Be sure to check your AUB account so it doesn't bounce!)

Your report should be prepared in printed form for class. It need not be in complete sentences and proper grammar; an extensive outline will do. This printed report should be submitted to me at the end of class, AND sent to me electronically. (I will use the latter version to make comments for your keeping.)

Please time your report and make absolutely sure that it does not exceed 15 minutes. I will have to stop you at 15 minutes and it will be awkward for both of us. **8 minutes** is a healthy length. Make sure you have your name, the date, the topic, and the text you are discussing at the top of your report. Number pages please.