**Anthropology 332**

**Topics in Contemporary Anthropology**

*Spring 2020 | Tuesdays 2:30-5:15*

Professor Christopher Dole 204 Morgan Hall cdole@amherst.edu

Office hours: Wednesdays, 3-4:30

The aim of this advanced seminar is to introduce students to a selection of major concepts, theories, and debates inspiring, informing, and disrupting anthropology today. The central themes of this year’s seminar will include, among others: affect, materiality, borders, sovereignty and citizenship, multispecies ethnography, and decolonization. Alongside these themes, the course will also explore “ethnography” as simultaneously a method of inquiry, mode of theory-making, and genre of writing. With this in mind, one of the goals of this course is to introduce students to the possibilities and challenges of ethnographic research and writing.

**Readings.** The following books are available at Amherst Books:

Yael Navaro-Yashin. 2012. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Duke University Press.

Jason De Leon. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Audra Simpson. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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

Susan Lepselter. 2016. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. University of Michigan Press.

Kirin Narayan. 2012. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Checkhov*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

All other readings will be accessible through either a course reader or the course’s Moodle site.

**Classroom & technology**. No electronic devices (computers, tablets, etc.) are to be used during class time without permission.

# Course requirements.

The most important requirement of this class is that you pay close attention—in class as well as while reading, listening, or viewing.

Attendance is mandatory and students are expected to complete reading assignments on time and to participate in class discussions. Attendance is particularly important in that the course will not be relying on a textbook but a number of cases, ethnographic examples, or dialogues that will be framed in the

classroom. Moreover, the classroom is a place for us to struggle with ideas together. As such, classroom discussion also offers a setting for you to get feedback on ideas that you may incorporate into your papers, so it is certainly to your benefit to work them out collectively before you hand them into me.

Attendance is also important because, upon missing your third class session, you will fail the course. The evaluation of participation will be based on both your attendance and involvement in class discussion.

In addition to your participation in class discussion (which will be worth 15% of your final grade), you will be evaluated based on the following assignments:

1. “Armchair Anthropologist” (10% of your grade). Each of you will be assigned to be an “armchair anthropologist” one day this semester. On your assigned day, come to class ready to present and share your ideas for ten minutes about that day’s readings. I would like you to provide a platform for that day’s readings in any way you wish. Ideally, you should try to get your colleagues excited about and interested in the readings for the day. You could approach this in a number of ways: 1) Bring in some questions the readings brought up for you and that can kick off our discussion in class; 2) Bring in a show-and-tell object (film clip, song, media story, etc.) that you can use to illustrate, provoke, or challenge something about the readings (*hint: this is my favorite*); 3) Highlight a passage in the reading(s) and lead your classmates in interpreting it; 4) Give a meta-reflection on your own experience of reading the texts for the day (what was difficult, easy) that invites others to share their experiences; 5) Something else. I envision that the remainder of class will implicitly or explicitly return to or elaborate on some of the points your introduction raises. You (which may be a group) should take it seriously and time yourself to ensure you have enough time for your presentation. Please send any visuals or images to be projected to me by midnight the night before you present (I can also photocopy handouts for you to distribute). If you are assigned to present on a day an assignment is due, please email me to discuss an extension on the written assignment (if you’d like).
2. Writing assignments.

Papers 1 & 2 (together worth 45% of your grade). These will be 5-7 page papers written in response to a prompt I distribute well in advance of their respective deadlines, which will be February 26 and April 8.

Paper 3: “Ethnographic Writing Portfolio” (15% of your grade). For your final assignment, you will compile your ethnographic writing exercises (and any accompanying images, sounds, videos, etc.) into a portfolio. The portfolio will also include additional analytic and a self-reflexive sections. The portfolio is due Tuesday, May 13.

1. Ethnography Lab (together worth 15% of your grade): One of the goals of this course is to introduce you to the possibilities and challenges of ethnographic research and writing. With this in mind, over the course of the semester, you will complete a series of short writing assignments based on your own, original ethnographic research. Please note that the goal of this course is to *introduce* you to the possibilities and challenges of ethnographic research. This is not a methods course. As such, these projects will be modest and supplemental to the readings and other assignments.

Assignments are, obviously, due on the assigned day. If you have a serious problem meeting a deadline, talk with me *beforehand*. Otherwise, late assignments will be marked down one letter grade for each day it is late.

Needless to say, plagiarism of any sort is not allowed. If you have any questions about what is or is not considered plagiarism, see:

https://[www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/conduct-community-standards/acadhonesty](http://www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/conduct-community-standards/acadhonesty)

**Access**. This course has been designed with the aim of actively supporting a wide range of learning styles and abilities. If there are ways that this can be improved, please let me know. Students requiring accommodations are expected to contact me so that we can discuss options for meeting course expectations.

# Course outline.

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| **1. introductions & orientations** | **|** | **1/28** |
| **2. what is theory?** | **|** | **2/4** |

Robin Kelley. 2002. “When history sleeps: A beginning.” In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination.* Beacon Press, pp. 1-12.

Sara Ahmed. 2017. “Bringing feminist theory home.” In *Living a Feminist Life.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 1-18.

Gina Athena Ulysse. 2017. “The passion in auto-ethnography: Homage to those who hollered before me.” In *Because When God is Too Busy: Haiti, Me and the World.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 72-74. [poem]

Zoe Todd. 2018. “The Decolonial Turn 2.0: the reckoning” *anthrodendum*

(https://anthrodendum.org/2018/06/15/the-decolonial-turn-2-0-the-reckoning/)

***Reading prompt****: Read through the entire syllabus and come to class with any questions. Especially for our initial readings, keep an honest “reading journal” that captures the experience of reading a text. When did you feel connected to the writer or text? Disconnected? How long did it take you to finish the readings? Did you find yourself reacting emotionally to any part of the text? What did you feel? Did you get bored or distracted while reading? When? Why? Where were you? How many times did you check social media/your phone? How was reading the poem different than reading the other texts? Over the semester, these reading journals will merge with your “field notes.”*

***Writing Prompt****: Bring to class (to share with others) one single-spaced page of writing that addresses or is inspired by (some aspect of) the following set of questions: What definition of “theory” do you bring to this class? Jot down a few words that you associate with theory. Who makes theory? Where? Toward what ends? What do you conceive of as the relationship between theory and practice (or thinking and doing, perhaps)? How does Kelley and Ahmed’s autobiographical style challenge some of these initial conceptions? Ahmed argues that we should not cite “white men.” What does she mean (be sure to read footnote 8)? How does Ulysse’s poem intersect the other readings? Reflect on whether and how any of these readings resonate with your own life experiences.*

## what is ethnography? | 2/11

Bronislaw Malinowski. 1922. “Introduction.” In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* pp. 1-25.

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. 1997. “Discipline and practice: ‘The field’ as site, method and location in anthropology.” In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1-46.

Paul Dourish, “Reading and Interpreting Ethnography.” In *Ways of Knowing in HCI*, Olson and Kellogg, eds. New York: Springer. (selections)

Kirin Narayan. 2012. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Checkhov*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Preface and Chapter 1.

***Ethnography Lab****: Be prepared to discuss in class two potential sites where you’d like to conduct research over the course of the semester. See the “ethnography lab handout” for guidance on picking a site.*

## affect | 2/18

William Mazzarella. 2009. “Affect: What is it Good for?” In *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization*. Edited by Saurav Dube, 292-309.

Andrea Muehlebach and Nitzan Shoshan. 2012. “Post-Fordist Affect” *Anthropological Quarterly* 85(2): 317-344.

Kathleen Stewart. 2010. “Atmospheric Attunements.” *Rubric* 1:1-14.

***Ethnography Lab****: Anthropologists participate firsthand in social worlds that are often unfamiliar to them and they produce written accounts and analyses of these worlds, which we call “ethnographies.” There is, however, much writing that precedes this writing of social worlds.*

*Foremost, for the anthropologist, is the “fieldnote.” This sort of writing is essential to the process of analysis, and is a mixture of personal reflections, observations, and provisional analytic thoughts about these reflections and observations****. Over this week, spend at least two hours at your “field site” taking detailed field notes****. (I will distribute a handout in class that gives more detailed instructions.) By the* ***end of the day on Sunday****, elaborate your notes into a one-page (single- spaced) “ethnographic text” and upload it to the course moodle site. This text will not have an argument. Instead, it will explore some facet of your observations that struck you as, well, noteworthy. As such, it will be a mixture of description and speculation (about what you think explains what you are observing).*

## affect + objects | 2/25

Susan Lepselter. 2011. “The Disorder of Things: Hoarding Narratives in Popular Media.”

*Anthropological Quarterly* 84(4): 919-947.

Natasha Schull. 2012. *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas.* Princeton University Press, Introduction and Chapter 1.

Kirin Narayan. 2012. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Checkhov*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, “Place” (Chapter 2)

***Ethnography Lab****: I want you to return to your field site and spend* ***at least one hour*** *observing and taking notes. By the* ***end of the day Sunday,*** *complete (and upload to moodle) the exercises on the following pages of Narayan: 29 [first], 31 [both], 36, 40, and 41.*

## affect + objects + place | 3/3

Yael Navaro-Yashin. 2012. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Duke University Press.

***Ethnography Lab****: With this and the previous week’s readings, we have been exploring—among other topics—the agency of objects. With this in mind, I want you to return to your field site and spend* ***at least one hour*** *observing and taking notes. This time, I want you to pay particular attention to the agency of objects in this space. What objects “have the most” agency? How do they exert their agency? How is agency distributed between people and things? Write and submit a one-page, object-oriented ethnographic text by the* ***end of day Sunday****. For this writing, I want you to specifically work on incorporating ideas from the readings into you text.*

## life + death | 3/10

Michel Foucault. 1978. “Right of Death and Power over Life.” In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*.

New York: Vintage, pp.133-145.

Achille Mbembe. 2003. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15(1): 11-40.

Jasbir Puar. 2017. “’Will Not Let Die’: Debilitation and Inhuman Biopolitics in Palestine.” In *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press, pp.127-154.

***Ethnography Lab****: This seems like an appropriate point in the semester to learn something new about your field site by talking to people who use, inhabit, or move through the space. For this week, begin thinking about and planning how you’ll approach or interview someone related to your field site. It may be someone who is regularly present in this space, or who makes decisions about how it is ordered/regulated. I’ll leave this up to you. After spring break, you will begin interviewing and writing about actual people, drawing on the exercises in Narayan (e.g., “Person” and “Voice”).*

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| **[8. spring + break** | **|** | **3/17]** |
| **9. life + death + borders** | **|** | **3/24** |

Jason De Leon. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

***Ethnography Lab****: By this point, you have likely developed some ideas—even “theories”—about your field site. This is a good time to begin exploring these further by talking to actual people. We will set aside time in class today to begin discussing interviewing techniques. In preparation for this discussion:*

* 1. *Listen to the podcast or read the transcript (or both) of* “Q&A: Ira Glass on structuring stories, asking hard questions”

Podcast, on The Turnaround (with Jesse Thorn): https://maximumfun.org/episodes/the- turnaround/ira-glass

Transcript, in *Columbia Journalism Review*: https://[www.cjr.org/special\_report/qa-ira-glass-](http://www.cjr.org/special_report/qa-ira-glass-) turnaround-npr-jesse-thorn-tal.php

* 1. *Develop a set of questions for your prospective interviewee.*

## borders + refusal | 3/31

Audra Simpson. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.

***Ethnography Lab****: By class this week, I want you to have completed one interview. Transcribe and bring to class a section of the interview that you found particularly interesting, compelling, or unsettling.*

## worlds otherwise | 4/7

Anna Tsing. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press.

***Ethnography Lab****: We will set aside time at the end of class to continue discussing interview transcripts.*

## the other-worldly + affect | 4/14

Susan Lepselter. 2016. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. University of Michigan Press.

***Ethnography Lab****: Like last week, we will set aside time at the end of class to continue discussing interview transcripts.*

## ethnographic writing workshop | 4/21

Kirin Narayan. 2012. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Checkhov*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, “Person” (Chapter 3) and “Voice” (Chapter 4).

**Complete and bring to class** the writing exercises on the following pages of Narayan:

* + From the chapter “Person” – *47, 49 (what you can), 52, 54, and 65.*
	+ From the chapter “Voice” – *70, 75, 84, 89.*

## conclusions | 4/28