

Bates College (Winter 2012)

Culture and Interpretation (ANTH 333)

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 2:40 – 4:30, Fridays 4:00 – 5:00 or by appointment

Course Description

The seminar is about how we make and interpret meaning. We examine the concept of “culture”—a concept central to anthropology and widely used in public discourse—to better understand the varied and *contested* ways in which the term is employed. As a starting point, we consider the interpretive approach to culture exemplified in the work of Clifford Geertz—one of the best known anthropologists of the second half of the twentieth century—and the ways in which the ethnographies produced by anthropologists are intricate, “thickly descriptive” works of interpretation. We then discuss critiques of and alternatives to Geertz’s interpretive approach and ways in which the culture concept has been questioned and qualified. Through the historically and materially grounded work of Sidney Mintz, another leading figure in twentieth century anthropology, we reflect comparatively on how Mintz’s emphasis on history and power enlarges interpretive understandings of social reality. We seek more confidently to grasp these theoretical approaches and their implications, and the methods of participant-observer ethnography, by applying them to various aspects of everyday experience.

This is a writing intensive (W2) course. Assignments are designed to give you opportunities to practice different kinds of writing commonly encountered in anthropology: these include field notes, concise summaries of an argument of the sort used in an annotated bibliography, analytical questions, the analytical essay, the life history essay and the research proposal or paper.

Readings & Books Ordered

You are expected to **read closely** and **think critically** with and about the assigned texts, to take notes, pose questions about the author’s argument, and identify underlying assumptions.

Books and articles are to be read according to the schedule indicated on the syllabus and you should **bring your copy of the text with you to class along with reading discussion questions posted to Lyceum**. The course meets only once per week; many of the assigned texts are complex, some are long. To better understand them I recommend reading them more than once. I urge you to budget enough time each week to get through the readings before class.

Course books are available for purchase at the Bates College Bookstore and are on reserve in Ladd Library. Some of the articles and book chapters listed on the syllabus are available on **Lyceum**. You should check the course Lyceum page regularly to download reading and discussion questions and to find any additional readings or assignments that may be posted. Paul du Gay et al, Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman

Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures

Naomi Klein, No Logo

Sidney W. Mintz, Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History

Sidney W. Mintz, Sweetness and Power

Requirements and Grades

- Being well prepared for class, engaged participation in discussion, and regular attendance are all expected. These will count, along with short assignments, discussion questions, reading summaries, and your level of preparedness, understanding and ingenuity leading seminar discussions, to determine participation grades. (25%)
- Participant observation & field notes. (15%)
- An analytical essay. (15%)
- A life history paper (20%)
- A thesis proposal (or a research paper for those who are already working on their senior theses). (20%)
- 5% bonus points

Seminar Meetings

Jan 10 Introduction

Reflexivity & An Interpretive Approach to Meaning

Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”
In, The Interpretation of Cultures pp 3-30 *

Ruth Behar, “The Vulnerable Observer” (Lyceum)

Begin working on ethnographic participant-observation assignment this week. The readings below provide introductory advice and training on fieldwork. (Your completed field notes are due for peer-review by 1:00 p.m., Jan 21st)

Kathleen M. Dewalt and Billie R. Dewalt, with Coral B. Wayland, “Participant Observation,” in H. Russell Bernard ed., Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology (Lyceum)

Michael Angrosino, Doing Cultural Anthropology

Jan 16 Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Students are required to attend either the Keynote talk by Professor Julian Agyeman, or the film screening and discussion of *Blood in the Mobile*. For one of these presentations I would like you to prepare a one-page, two-paragraph, response paper that: (i) summarizes the talk or film and, (ii) reflects on or discusses the *interconnectedness* (whether historical or in the present day) between different socio-cultural systems *and the implications of this interconnectedness for our analysis and understanding of “culture.”* (Your response paper is due in class on Jan 17th)

Jan 17 Geertz, “Thick Description” (Be sure to re-read “Thick Description” as well as “From the Native’s Point of View”)

Geertz, “From the Native’s Point of View” (Lyceum) *

Supplementary readings:

Clifford Geertz, New York Times obituary (Lyceum)

David Berreby, “Unabsolute Truths; Clifford Geertz,” New York Times Magazine (April 9, 1995, Lyceum)

Participant observation fieldwork must be completed this week; exchange field notes with peer review partner by Saturday and hand in revised draft in class next Tuesday.

Jan 24 *How Things Mean: Representations, Discourse & Power*

Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation.” In Representation: Cultural Representations & Signifying Practices (Lyceum)

Documentary film screening, Representation & the Media

You should be actively thinking about a possible topic for your research proposal. The Anthropology thesis guidelines as well as the books listed below (Ladd Library reserves) may help you to think through what a proposal involves.

Colin Robson, How to Do a Research Project: A Guide for Undergraduate Students (in particular, chapters 2, 3 & 4 pp 18 - 94)

Joseph A. Maxwell, Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach

David Wilkinson, The Researcher’s Toolkit: The Complete Guide to Practitioner Research

Jan 31 *Foregrounding Political Economy through an Ethnographic Life History*

Sidney Mintz, Worker in the Cane, Preface and chapters 1 – 4: ix - 98

Supplementary reading:

Sidney Mintz, excerpts from “Cañamelar...” In, Julian Steward et al, The People of Puerto Rico (Lyceum)

Research Proposal Preliminary Outline: Partner with another student in the class to share and give each other feedback on your ideas for the project. Meet with your partner once or twice. Share your ideas with each other; exchange first drafts of your outline, make comments, and revise accordingly. (The task list on p 69 in Robson as well as his discussion of methods in Chapter 4 may be of help)

Write up a preliminary one-page outline of your proposed research project. This should include:

- A statement of your topic
- One or two sentences that explain why this topic is important and why it interests you
- Your preliminary ideas about possible framing questions for the project (note that an analytical or framing question for research is not the same thing as an interview question)
- Your ideas about how you plan to approach the topic: the data or evidence you plan to use and the method(s) you will use to collect them
- On a separate page, list two or three books or articles from scholarly journals you have identified that appear to be relevant to your topic

Feb 7 Discussion of Mintz, Worker in the Cane, chapters 5 – 9: 99 – 277 *

Documentary film screening, Shattering the Silences

Be thinking about a suitable subject for your life-history paper. Your interviews need to be done and the paper completed by March 6th; bear in mind also that you will most likely need to schedule more than one interview session. So, especially if you are doing the interviews over the Winter Recess, you need to plan ahead, contact your interviewees and make appointments.

Feb 14 A Geertzian Interpretive Analysis & Some Critiques

Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” In The Interpretation of Cultures pp 412 – 453 *

William Roseberry, “Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology.” In Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History, & Political Economy pp 17 – 29 (Lyceum) *

Vincent Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic description.” In, James Clifford & George Marcus, ed., Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography pp 51–54 & 68-76 (Lyceum) *

Winter Recess

Feb 28 The Politics of Representation

Akhil Gupta & James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference.” In Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology pp 33 – 51 (Lyceum) *

Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture.” In Richard G. Fox, ed., Recapturing Anthropology: Writing in the Present pp 137 – 162 (Lyceum) *

Read as a supplement to the essay by Gupta & Ferguson above:

James Ferguson, "Paradoxes of Sovereignty & Independence." Chapter 2 in, Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order pp 50 – 68 (Lyceum)

Mar 6 The 'Life Histories' of Commodities

Paul DuGay et al, Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman, Introduction and sections 1 – 3: 1 - 74

(Be sure to read the appendices and attempt the activities as you go through the book.)

Life history paper due

Thursday, Mar 8 Guest Lecture, Professor Marvin Sterling, Department of Anthropology (Indiana)

Mar 13 Contested Meanings / Contesting Representations

Paul DuGay et al, Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman, sections 4 & 5: 75 – 120 *

Documentary film screening, Beyond Beats & Rhymes

Mar 20 Contesting Representations II

Naomi Klein, No Logo. Chapters 1 - 3, 9, & 12 – end of book, pp 3 – 85, 195 – 229, & 279 – 458 *

Presentation of research papers

Mar 27 Writing Ethnographic Histories of Globalization

Sidney Mintz, Sweetness & Power, Introduction and chapters 1 & 2: xv - 73

Apr 3 Sidney Mintz, Sweetness & Power, chapters 3 -5: 74 – 214 *

Apr 6 4:00 p.m. research proposals due

*The asterisks indicate items for the analytical summaries