ANTHROPOLOGY 202A (PROSEMINAR A)

THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY
SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND DISCIPLINARITY
FALL, 2021 (COURSE CODE 60700)

Tom Boellstorff, Professor, Department of Anthropology
Meets Tuesdays, 2:00pm–4:50pm
Office hours: see online signup
First meeting: Tuesday, September 28, 2:00pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is the first quarter of the three-quarter proseminar sequence required for graduate students in the Ph.D. program in the Irvine Department of Anthropology, and is open only to first-year graduate students in the program. In this term, students will explore the history of anthropological theory and ethnographic practice. It is organized around an in-depth discussion of the relation between notions of culture and notions of society in the formation of anthropology as an academic discipline and mode of inquiry. The course will pay particular attention to the emergence of anthropology out of nineteenth-century concerns over the nature of the “primitive” and evolutionary theory, and continue with the formalization and institutionalization of the discipline throughout the twentieth century. The course will also attend to some of the discipline’s internal and external criticisms and reformulations, as well as the debates over its core analytical concepts. The course is centrally concerned with canonicity and inclusion in anthropological theory and practice, and how frameworks of decolonization and transformation contribute to debates over anthropology’s past, present, and future.

The course has the following four overarching goals, all equally important (they are not listed in a ranking):

1) Learning various histories of anthropological theory and practice, so that you can forge an analytical, methodological, and political toolkit for your future work. This includes interdisciplinary engagements that have characterized anthropology since its beginnings.

2) Honing your writing skills in terms of crafting effective methods of presenting analysis, theory, and data in multiple scholarly voices for varied audiences and publics. This includes
nuts-and-bolts strategies for time management and organizing your writing practice more generally.

3) Developing skills in “power skimming”—engaged, tactical, and considered strategies for reading large numbers of authors and texts. This involves the ability to scan and organize multiple texts, take effective notes, organize and triage work in terms of relevance to your scholarly goals and relevant disciplinary imperatives, and balance reading with “down time” for self-care. Through this strategy you can develop multiple modes of reading—one of the most important skills you can learn. Moving beyond the binarism of “read” / “didn’t read” is transformative; it will serve you in everything from preparing your documents for advancing to candidacy, to writing articles and books, to preparing syllabi of your own.

4) Mastering collaborative and coalitional scholarly work, using our cohort as exemplar but also key instantiation that will deeply shape your future career.

COURSE READINGS

Each week there are 6 readings, listed in alphabetical order. You will pick three of these readings to focus on. As noted in the syllabus, if the reading is a longer reading (like a book), pick two chapters to focus on, skimming through more of the text if you have time. In other cases, sections to focus on are listed for you. Try to look briefly at readings other than the three you focus on, but you can rely on your fellow students and myself to lead the discussion.

Books and book chapters will be provided to you on in a Google Drive folder. You will be able to access articles based on the bibliographic information provided. One way our library justifies its budget is the number of downloads that take place. Additionally, this provides you with the opportunity to practice locating and downloading scholarly work.

The readings are grouped roughly in terms of theme, but the syllabus has also been organized to intentionally place different frameworks and time periods in conversation. The fact that a reading appears earlier in the syllabus has no relation to its importance. Many important authors and topics appear later in the quarter, or in the Winter or Spring prosemantics. Multiple readings address questions of fieldwork and writing under conditions of disruption and exclusion.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1) Six précis (goo.gl/vttStV)
You do six (6) précis, which we will share. This means you can choose 4 weeks (including Week 1) in which you do not have to do a précis. Each précis should be 2,500–3,500 characters in length. This is approximately 400–500 words, or 1.5–2 double-spaced pages, but you will be assessed based on character count. Each précis should take the form of critical questions, commentary, and analysis for three of the week’s readings. A précis can link the readings for a particular week to earlier course readings or readings from outside the course, but particularly the latter of these is discouraged. Avoid
negative critiques; focus on generous engagement, linking texts to our discussions. (If possible, look briefly at readings for the week that you do not include in your précis.)

A précis must be uploaded onto the course’s Google Forms website before the beginning of class. A précis can never be turned in late. If you do not attend class, or leave class early, any précis you submit that day will not be counted. Each précis counts for 5% of your overall grade, so the 6 précis together constitute 30% of the overall grade. Please note that falling even one précis short will thus severely impact your grade. You will receive only partial credit for a précis that does not meet the minimum requirements discussed above. Plan ahead and do not find yourself in a situation where you fail to complete six précis.

I encourage you to do additional précis beyond the six required: it is a nice way to participate in class discussion, build up an archive of notes on the course, and practice scholarly commentary. If you do any additional précis, they can replace an earlier précis that only received partial credit.

2) Four short essays
You will write four short essays during the course, with the following minimum word limits:

Essay #1: 1,500 words (10% of overall grade)
Essay #2: 2,000 words (15% of overall grade)
Essay #3: 2,500 words (20% of overall grade)
Essay #4: 3,000 words (25% of overall grade)

The word limits are inclusive of title, endnotes, and references (I will use the word count function of Word to confirm this). The essay should be emailed to me at tboellst@uci.edu by the deadline. The essay is a chance for you to write analytically about some topic related to the course readings. You can use any course reading that we have discussed up to the time the essay is due: engaging with other readings is discouraged and cannot be done without my permission. Even though the essays are short they should include a title, sections, and bibliography: we will discuss scholarly writing in class.

The précis and essays are the only course requirements: there is no midterm or final. The course grade will be calculated as follows:

6 précis times 5 points per précis = 30 points
4 papers = 10 points, 15 points, 20 points, 25 points (70 points total)
Total = 100 points

You will be assigned a letter grade as follows: A+ 96.7–100; A 93.4–96.6; A- 90.9–93.3; B+ 86.7–89.9; B 83.4–86.6; B- 80–83.3; C+ 76.7–79.9; C 73.4–76.6; C- 70–73.3; D 65–69.9; F 64.9 and below.

Students with disabilities: to quote from my colleague Karen Nakamura’s syllabus, “If you need a reasonable (or even unreasonable) accommodation, please let me know and I’ll make it happen. This goes triply for folks with non-visible disabilities or who pass or mask or compensate. No need to do that here.” The Disabilities Services Center has many resources; registering with them can help ensure appropriate arrangements in all your courses (see www.disability.uci.edu/).


Course Schedule

Week 1: Orientations

Week 2: Evolution to function

Week 3: Exchange and knowledge
Deloria, Ella Cara. Waterlily. 1988. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. {read: two chapters of your choice; more if you wish.}


**Friday of Week 3, 5:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time—Essay #1 due**

**Week 4: History and the human**


**Week 5: Language/structure, self/community**


Friday of Week 5, 5:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time — Essay #2 due

Week 6: Structure, cognition, ecology


Week 7: Rethinkings


**Friday of Week 7, 5:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time—Essay #3 due**

**Week 8: Feminist and queer interventions**


Newton, Esther. 1979. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. {read: two chapters of your choice; more if you wish.}


**Week 9: Reframings**


**Friday of Week 9, 5:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time—Essay #4 due**
Week 10: Futures

Berry, Maya J., Claudia Chávez Argüelles, Shanya Cordis, Sarah Ihmoud, and Elizabeth Velásquez Estrada. 2017. “Toward a Fugitive Anthropology: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field.” Cultural Anthropology 32 (4): 537–65. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.05.


*September 15, 2021 version*