Anthropology 349: Seminar in Ethnography and Cultural Processes

Spring 2017
Thursday, 1:30-4:10pm, Sabin 394
Instructor: Thomas Malaby  Office Hours: Wednesday, 1-3pm
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This seminar serves as an introduction to cultural processes as they are presented and analyzed through ethnography. In a sense, this is a seminar on how to read ethnographies, and will provide the student with a strong foundation in critical thinking about and analysis of texts. The logical rigor of an author’s arguments, the descriptive and rhetorical techniques he or she uses, the variety of data and its organization, and the context of the work’s production are key elements of any monograph’s merit, and will provide the subject matter for intensive class discussion. This seminar will focus topically on ethnographies of unheard American voices, broadly defined, but begins with a classic (and very accessible) ethnography of place, morality, and language (Keith Basso’s work on the Western Apache). Our readings will include works from non-anthropologists, that blend memoir with other forms.

The genre of ethnography has long been a distinctive aspect of the anthropological repertoire, and it has often been lauded for having a unique ability to reveal social processes and convey cultural meanings. The challenges involved in achieving these goals have nonetheless continually pushed anthropologists to innovate in their use of the form. In particular, they have made increasing demands on the attention through ethnography to such issues as history, biography and narrative, technology, complex institutional settings, and non-geographically proximate communities. To explore how social processes continue to be confronted and explored through ethnography, this class will intensively read a succession of recent ethnographies, one every three weeks. Each session (except the first) a student will be asked to begin the discussion.

Course Objectives
The goal of the seminar is that, at the end, every student should be fluent in both how to read critically and how to present and discuss their ideas, in addition to gaining a deep familiarity with some of the most important ways technology is transforming our lives. These skills transcend the discipline of anthropology, and are of increasing importance in the workplace, where the ability to assess cross-cultural encounters and the competing accounts they generate is increasingly valued in a globalizing environment.

Course Requirements
Students are expected to attend each class meeting without exception and contribute meaningfully to discussion (50% of final grade; I will overlook only one absence, excused or unexcused, no exceptions). Undergraduates will also be expected to write one short paper in the middle of the term on an analytical topic assigned by the instructor (20%). Graduate students will be expected to write two papers over the course of the semester in the form of scholarly book reviews (15% each), such as might appear in American Ethnologist. Graduate students therefore gain an opportunity to receive feedback on and attempt to master a necessary academic professional skill. For undergraduates, the short paper focuses their attention on the contours and limitations of the ethnographic form. Graduate students will in addition write a final paper for the course comparing two of the course ethnographies (20%); the undergraduates will complete a take-home final exam (30%).

University Policies
A statement of university policies that pertain to this course can be found at: http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf

Course Readings
The four books assigned in this course are available from ecampus. Less expensive outlets may be possible to find online. The books are:


Course Schedule
Week 1 (1/26)
Introduction
Placemaking: Landscape and Morality

We begin with Keith Basso’s remarkable ethnography of the Western Apache and the way they weave together narratives and places to create a moral fabric and respond to individual distress.

Week 2 (2/2)
- Basso, part 1

Week 3 (2/9)
- Basso, part 2

Week 4 (2/16)
- Basso, part 3

Identity, Place, and Poverty

Jennifer Sherman’s book about poverty in northern California links our acquired sensitivity to the meaning of place to the changing landscape of industry and opportunity in the United States.

Week 5 (2/23)
- Sherman, part 1

Week 6 (2/30)
- Sherman, part 2

Week 7 (3/9)
- Sherman, part 3

Property, Culture, and Profit

Matthew Desmond’s award-winning book about housing in Milwaukee raises complicated questions about precarity and the structures (governmental, private, cultural) that shape the possibilities that frame people’s lives.

Week 8 (3/16)
- Desmond, part 1

3/21 — Spring Recess: No Course Meeting

Week 9 (3/30)
- Desmond, part 2
  - [Graduate paper 1 due Friday, 4pm]

Week 10 (4/6)
- Desmond, part 3

Week 11 (4/13)
- Desmond, part 4
  - [Undergraduate paper due Friday, 4pm]

Wisconsin, Politics, and Resentment

Katherine Cramer’s work expands our vision in Wisconsin, conveying the complexity of perspectives that inform political attitudes beyond the state’s major cities.

Week 12 (4/20)
- Cramer, part 1
  - [Graduate paper 2 due Friday, 4pm]

Week 13 (4/27)
- Cramer, part 2

Week 14 (5/4)
- Cramer, part 3

Week 15 (5/11)
- Extended Discussion and Review

Wednesday, May 15th, 4pm
- [Undergraduate Take Home Exam due]
- [Graduate Final Paper due]