

**ANTH 620**  
**SPECIAL TOPICS IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY:**  
SELF, IDENTITY AND AGENCY

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

One of the critical contemporary questions in anthropology is the place of the individual in relation to culture. Informed by post-structuralist critiques of Enlightenment thinking, questions of structure and agency, self and subjectivity are important to understand how individual subjects operate within a cultural milieu. The focus of this course is how to theorize the place of the individual as a subject operating in a complex social field. Some of the key questions that we will address include the following. If individual identities and actions are constructed and constrained within a particular social reality, how then can subjects act with intentionality? To what extent do cultural actors have agency in the actions that they take? Do people actively recognize and chose their subject position(s)? How do actors come to take up or identify with particular identities or subject positions? How are subjects able to resist, elude or transform social conditions? What are the limits of subjectivity? Is oppositional consciousness possible? How are cultural meanings embodied and selves defined?

In addition to reading key theoretical works on these issues, in this course we will focus on anthropological interpretations and analyses of these questions. We will also attend to the ways cultural meanings and contexts shift over time, particularly in the context of globalization, producing new discourses that follow, interrupt, support or supersede earlier discourses and create the possibility of multiple subject positions, disidentifications, and mestiza consciousness.

The following will inform our weekly readings and discussion: 1) critiques of theoretical and epistemological approaches to theories of the self; 2) assessments of the utility of different theoretical approaches to self, identity and agency, and 3) ethnographic case studies that explore the ways historically and culturally constituted subjects take on, reproduce and reconstitute their subject positions.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

**Session leader:** Each student will be required to make up discussion questions and direct class discussion for two sessions. Counts for **10%** of your grade.

**Mid-term:** Questions will be handed out one week before the paper is due. You will chose one question to answer. The paper should be 5-6 pages long.

**Final Paper:** You will analyze one of the ethnographies listed below for your final paper. Your paper will subject this ethographic reading to the various theoretical formulations that we have discussed this semester. Explore how it addresses the issues of self, identity, subjectivity and agency in relation to the theorists we've discussed. Ask what it does well, what it doesn't address, what could be enhanced by attention to certain questions or to a particular analytical bent. Final paper due Dec. 14.

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|------------------------------|-----|
| 1) Mid-term paper, 5-6 pages | 30% |
| 2) Final paper, 8-10 pages   | 40% |
| 3) Session leader (2x)       | 20% |
| 4) Class participation       | 10% |

**Required texts: Available at Von's Books.**

Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice

Rabinow, Foucault Reader

Ortner, Anthropology and Social Theory

Moore, A Passion for Difference [out of print, get used copy via Abebooks or Amazon]

**Course readings:**

Additional readings from books will be sent to students as pdfs via e-mail.

Journal articles can be accessed on-line.

Anthropology journal articles (in **bold**) can be accessed through HSSE library at:

<http://www.lib.purdue.edu/#databases>, choose Anthrosource, click Go. It will take you to the AAA Anthrosource home. Use browse function to locate item.

*Choose one of the following ethnographies for the final paper (purchase on your own):*

- Armstrong, Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994.
- Ewing, Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis and Islam.
- Goldstein, Laughter out of Place: Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown
- Herzfeld, Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State
- Lindquist, The Anxieties of Mobility: Migration and Tourism in the Indonesian Borderlands.
- Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject
- Pine, Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras
- Robbins, Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society
- Wardlow, Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society

**IN CASE OF EMERGENCIES: In the event of a major campus emergency, course requirements, deadlines and grading percentages are subject to change that may be necessitated by a revised semester calendar or other circumstances. In the event that changes are necessary, I will post information on Blackboard or via the class e-mail list. Or you may contact me via my email address or at 496-7400 (Dept. telephone).**

**Course evaluation:**

*During the last two weeks of the semester, you will be provided an opportunity to evaluate this course and your instructor. To this end, Purdue has transitioned to online course evaluations. On Monday of the 15<sup>th</sup> week of classes, you will receive an official email from evaluation administrators with a link to the online evaluation site. You will have two weeks to complete this evaluation. Your participation in the evaluation is an integral part of this course. Your feedback is vital to improving education at Purdue University. Consider it part of your responsibility as a member of this class to participate in the evaluation system.*

## COURSE READING ASSIGNMENTS

Aug. 25 Introduction

### Key theoretical readings

- Aug. 27 Geertz, From the native's point of view: On the nature of anthropological understanding, in Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpetive Social Science Reader*, pp. 225-241.
- Sept. 1 Ortner, Practice theory in *Culture/Power/History*, pp. 372-411.
- Sept. 3-8 Bourdieu, ch. 3-5
- Sept. 8-10 Swidler, What anchors cultural practices, in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, pp. 74-92.
- Sept. 15-17 Foucault, pp. 179-213, *The Foucault Reader*  
"Two lectures," pp. 78-108, in *Power/Knowledge*  
"Subjectivity and truth," "The hermeneutic of the subject," 87-106, and  
"Technologies of the self," 223-251 in *Ethics*.

### SELF

- Sept. 22 Harris, Concepts of individual, self, and person in description and analysis. **American Anthropologist** 91(3), 1989.  
Ewing, The illusion of wholeness: Culture, self and the experience of inconsistency, **Ethos** 18(3), 1990
- Sept. 24 Ewing, Can psychoanalytic theories explain the Pakistani woman? Intrapsychic autonomy and interpersonal engagement in the extended family, **Ethos** 19(2), 1991
- Sept. 29 Murray, What is the Western concept of the self? On forgetting David Hume. **Ethos** 21(1), 1993.  
Holland and Skinner, Contested ritual, contested femininities: (Re)forming self and society in Nepali women's festival, **American Ethnologist** 22(2), 1995.
- Oct. 1 Strauss and Quinn, Anthropological resistance, pp. 12-47, in *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, 1997.  
Dalton Spirit, self and power: The making of colonial experience in Papua New Guinea, in *Power and the Self*, 2002
- Oct. 6 Moore, ch. 2 "Embodied selves" in *A Passion for Difference*

### IDENTITIES

- Oct. 8 Hall, Who needs identity? Ch. 1 in *Questions of Cultural Identity*

### OCTOBER BREAK

- Oct. 15 Holland and Lave, *History in person*, Intro, pp. 3-33
- Oct. 20 Moore, Ch. 3, Fantasies of power and fantasies of identity  
Willis, 'Tekking the piss,' in *History in Person*
- Oct. 22 Alcott, Ch. 4, 7-8, Real identities, The phenomenology of racial embodiment, Racism and visible race, in *Visible Identities*
- OCT. 22 FIRST PAPER DUE**

Oct. 27 Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*, p. 1-34.

### AGENCY

Oct. 29 Ortner, Ch. 6, Power and projects: Reflections on agency, in *Anthropology and Social Theory*

Bohman, Practical reason and cultural constraint: Agency in Bourdieu's theory of practice, in *Bourdieu Reader*

Nov. 3 Keane, From fetishism to sincerity: On agency, the speaking subject and their historicity in the context of religious conversion, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39(4), 1997.

Mahmood, Docile agents, **Cultural Anthropology** 16(2), 2001

### SUBJECTIVITY

Nov. 5 Ortner, Ch. 5, Subjectivity and cultural critique, in *Anthropology and Social Theory*

Nov. 10 Moore, Ch. 4, "Bodies on the move"

Nov. 12 Fajans, Jane. 2006 Autonomy and Relatedness. Emotions and the Tension between Individuality and Sociality. *Critique of Anthropology* 26 (1): 103-119.

Lansing, Cognitive machinery of power: Valeri's *Taboos*, **American Ethnologist** 30(3), 2003

### *Trans-subjectivities*

Nov. 17 Blackwood, Trans-identities and contingent masculinities, *Feminist Studies*

Besnier, Niko. 2002 Transgenderism, locality, and the Miss Galaxy beauty pageant in Tonga. **American Ethnologist** 29(3):534-566.

### *State power and subjectivity*

Nov. 19 Friedman, The intimacy of state power: Marriage, liberation and socialist subjects in southeastern China, **Amer Ethno** 32(2), 2005.

Nov. 24 Discuss final papers

### THANKSGIVING BREAK

Dec. 1 Matza, Moscow's echo: Technologies of the self, publics and politics on the Russian talk show, **Cult Anth** 24(3), 2009

Dec. 3 NO CLASS

### *Madness and social suffering*

Dec. 8 Biehl, Good and Kleinman, Intro: Rethinking subjectivity and Lovell, Hoarders and scrappers: Madness and the social person, pp. 315-340, in *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*

Dec. 10 Wrap-up