Writing Religions and Cultures: Ethnographic Practice
Religion / Anthropology 699 Fall 2011
Tu 3:30 - 6:15  504 Hall of Languages

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Office hrs.: Th 12:30-1:30 or by appointment

Course description

This seminar explores a range of aims, strategies and genres for writing religion in multiple contexts of culture, history and politics. Because so many aspects of religious experience are ineffable, invisible and inexpressible, to chronicle and analyze such experiences poses particular challenges to academic analysis. Yet anthropologists, sociologists and religionists prolifically produce ethnographies of religion. Particular theoretical positions often inform and inspire ethnographic writings on religion; we attend to theory as a force not only shaping practice, but also evolving from it. A number of authors on this syllabus acknowledge their own identities altered in the field, whether in temporary experiments or permanent transformations. Others retain distance but grapple with its implications for their comprehension. If there is any commonality, it is an insistence on keeping in mind the conditions of knowledge as situated in social, political, economic, historical, hierarchical, colonial, familial circumstances and interpersonal relations.

The syllabus moves through various intersections of visible and invisible realms and powers. Some scholars simply limit description to tangible or documentable elements: ritual paraphernalia and action, oral and written texts, social and institutional networks, economic infrastructure, recorded historical developments and so forth. Others attempt to evoke just those aspects of human experience that defy words or reason – whether faith and conviction or the effective agency of spirits and sorcerers. Issues permeating the semester's readings include embodiment, emotion, ethics, identity, knowledge, power and well-being, as well as the nature of religious communication. This edition of 699 is particularly concerned with readability: how to transmit depth and complexity in lucid, flowing, engaging, accessible prose.

Some seminar sessions are designated "workshop" sessions; we will read Syracuse faculty and advanced graduate student writings and have a chance to discuss with the authors both the intimate engagements of fieldwork, and the process by which – after the fact -- a text emerges. In addition, we will have two guests (Anand Pandian, Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University and Corinne Dempsey, Religious Studies, Nazareth College) to discuss one of their recent publications with us.

Readings

Seven books containing required readings should be available at the University Bookstore. They have also been placed on 1-day reserve in Bird. In addition, a number of articles and book sections will be accessible either through Blackboard course reserves or Blackboard course documents. On the syllabus these appear with the author's last name, an abbreviated title, and PDF in parentheses.

Note our course site is
ANT/REL.699.Merged.FALL11.Writing Religions and Cultures 35136.1121c
Books


*suggested summer / escape reading:*

Fieldwork: A Novel by Mischa Berlinski (Picador). This engrossing and enjoyable work of fiction raises a number of issues important to the course including the fuzzy boundary between fiction and ethnography and the perils of incorporation into other cultural and religious worlds. It attempts to penetrate the minds not only of a dedicated anthropologist but of dedicated Christian missionaries as well as describing the rituals of an imaginary Thai hill tribe and poking fun at academic trends. This is not required! But it would be lovely if some of us were ready to discuss this book at our first meeting. It can also serve as justifiable escape reading during the semester.

Articles


Responsibilities

seminar process  All participants should be committed to faithful attendance and diligent reading of all required materials. Responsibility for commenting and raising questions on each week's syllabus readings, and posting your "talking points" on blackboard, is shared by all seminar members. In class you will have a chance to recapitulate your thoughts as discussion starters. Posts must be submitted 24 hours before class meets -- by 3 pm on Mondays.

writing  Every student will pursue a research topic related to the course content, but independently conceived, and produce a substantial paper. This may be a critical study via secondary sources of any issue related to the ethnography of religion. Or it may involve limited fieldwork with a locally accessible religious group (broadly defined). The project will build, under the instructor's supervision, through stages of abstract (week 6), outline or preliminary draft with bibliography (week 10), oral presentation (weeks 10-15), and final product: about 20 pages due at the end of the semester.

speaking  Beyond regular participation raising points and responding in our weekly conversations, each seminar member will give one coherent and succinct (about 10-minute) oral presentation – based on their individual writing before it is complete; this will allow you to discuss your ideas and benefit from group feedback.

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<th>Week/Date</th>
<th>Topic/Readings</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>introductory frameworks and issues (2 weeks)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Tu 8/30</td>
<td>organization, introductions, opening questions, fictions of fieldwork</td>
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<td>2 Tu 9/6</td>
<td>in defense of &quot;being there&quot; Borneman and Hammoudi, all</td>
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<td>rituals revisited (2 weeks)</td>
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<td>3 Tu 9/13</td>
<td>certainties: writing visibility Turner, E. Experiencing Ritual (all); Turner, V. &quot;A Performance of Ihamba Analysed&quot; (PDF) Recommended: Engelke, &quot;Endless Conversation . . . &quot; (PDF)</td>
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<td>4 Tu 9/20</td>
<td>doubts: rethinking fieldwork experience, faraway and close to home Clark-Deces, Encounter Never Ends (all); Orsi, &quot;Have you ever prayed . . . &quot; (PDF) • guidelines for research project distributed •</td>
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<td>what makes good ethnographies? arts (and crafts) of description, reflection, interpretation (6 weeks)</td>
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<td>5 Tu 9/27</td>
<td>living religion in a cosmopolitan center Bender, Heaven's Kitchen (all)</td>
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workshop one: Burdick, Gold, Wadley  
Burdick, Singing Voice; Gold, Sweetness and Light; Wadley, Sacred Cow Dung (PDFs)  
• abstracts due for research projects •

NO CLASS ON TUESDAY THIS WEEK because:

SPECIAL EVENT: On WEDNESDAY October 12 at 6 pm, in 441 HL: Corinne Dempsey, (Religious Studies, Nazareth College), SU Religion PhD alum, will join us for a discussion of a chapter from her latest book. Pizza will be served and we will welcome non-class members -- but only if they read the chapter: Dempsey, "Ritualized Ethnography" (PDF). Please try to organize your schedules in order to attend.

Haunting, in Viet Nam  
Gustafsson, War and Shadows (all)

Toiling, and ethical selfhood, in South India  
Pandian, Crooked Stalks (all)  
**Guest: Anand Pandian (Anthropology, JHU) will join our seminar and respond to your questions**

Note: Professor Pandian is also presenting a South Asia seminar this same day at 12:30 pm; details TBA

*student presentations will be slotted into weeks 10-15*

Returning, to Sierra Leone  
Jackson, Life Within Limits (all)  
• outlines / preliminary drafts due in class •

thinking like a mushroom and other experiments in sustainable ethnographic practices (4 weeks)

Recent reflections on method, identity and knowledge  
Atay, "Nowhere Land"; Fisher, "Person-Centered Approach"; Harvey, "Research as Guesthood"; Lee and Ingold, "Fieldwork on Foot"; Matsutake Worlds, "New Form of Collaboration"; Okely, "Fieldwork as Free Association" (PDFs)

workshop two: Hall, Klepinger-Mathew, Shulman  
Klepinger-Mathew, "Yoga in Our Blood"; Shulman, "Shakti's New Voice"; Hall, "Ancestors of Blood and Spirit" (PDFs)

THANKSGIVING BREAK!

Recent reflections on participation, friendship, ethics, aftermaths  
Bornstein, "Harmonic Dissonance"; Cook, "Ascetic Practice"; Gardner, "Location and Relocation"; Gold, "Shared Blessings"; Scheper-Hughes, "Ire in Ireland"; Grindal and Salamone, Bridges to Humanity (3 selections) (PDFs)
workshop three: Nicole Wilson (3:30-4:15)

plus wrapping up

Wilson, *Negotiating Axes of Identity* (selected excerpt); Narayan, "God of Doorways" (PDFs)

•• Final papers will be due at noon on Thursday 15 December ••