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

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. Some 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 imposed by social, political, economic, historical, hierarchical, colonial, familial and interpersonal contexts.

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.

Several half-sessions of the seminar are designated "workshop" sessions; we will read both 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. Right now I have commitments from four students writing fieldwork-based dissertations (two from Religion and two from Anthropology) and two faculty colleagues willing to participate in such sessions.

Two other special events: On 25 October, anthropologist Anand Pandian (Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University) will join our class to discuss his book Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India. SU Religion alum Corinne Dempsey will come to Syracuse for a special Wednesday evening meeting -- with food! – to talk with us about her new book (date TBA).

Because I have been in India since July 2010, living in a provincial town without library resources and with excruciatingly slow internet, I do not expect to be able to complete the syllabus until early August after significant library footwork. This partial list of readings, either "certain" or "possible," would provide a sense of course content.

suggested summer 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.

Books (certain)


Books (possible)


Articles (certain)

Dempsey, Corinne. TBA (from her latest, in press book)

**Articles (possible)**


**Workshop sessions:** Selected published and unpublished writings by John Burdick, Ann G. Gold, Airen Hall, Laurah Klepinger-Mathew, Angela Shulman, Susan S. Wadley, Nicole Wilson.

**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.

**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).