

**ANGR 280B**  
Spring 2021 Syllabus  
**Core Seminar in Cultural Anthropology**  
Professor Nancy Postero  
Wednesday 12-3pm, SSB 269

**I. Description of the course:**

This course attempts to do the impossible: give you the foundational texts for a complex and ever-changing discipline, all in ten weeks. This year, I have decided to make a big change. Instead of trying to teach you a canon, which is already always out of date and biased in some way, I have chosen a set of contemporary ethnographies. While my selection is necessarily the process of my own interests and biases (as well as some of your requests), I have tried to pick a set of books that represents some of the most interesting and cutting-edge themes and methods in the field. The goal is to provide you with a “critical theoretical tool-kit” to help you theorize your own work and evaluate the work of others.

In contrast to previous years, I am not teaching you “theory” this year. Which theory will be helpful to you depends so much on your topics, your field sites, your data, that instead of introducing you to the theory on which I rely, I am giving you examples of how contemporary anthropologists match their evidence with theoretical frameworks. I hope this raises the question: what is theory? Whose theory? Who are the experts? What is the canon? What conceptual and theoretical choices do ethnographers have to make? I have also selected a set of works that displays a spectrum of methodological choices—from classic participant observation and discourse analyses, to storytelling, poetry, activist anthropology, and refusal. This is intended to prompt you to consider which methods might be most helpful for your own work.

**II. Responsibilities of Participants:**

You will be required to read, discuss, make presentations to your classmates, and write three short papers:

**A. Reading:** There will be quite a lot of reading in the course, so you must be ready to do that reading and participate in the discussions. All the texts will be found in electronic form on the UCSD Library website.

**B. Discussions and Class presentations:** Each class meeting, one or two participants will prepare a short commentary with questions for the rest of us to consider in our class discussion. The presenters will make brief in-class presentations and then facilitate the discussion. All participants should be prepared to contribute to the discussion, and to respond to the comments of the presenters. This means that you should give yourself some time after you read the

material to THINK about it. Bring questions, ideas, and critical analysis. This does not mean merely criticisms. For each reading, you should think about what contributions the author makes and how that might be useful, as well as what the limitations might be. I usually go around the room at the end of our class and ask everyone to say what they consider the biggest contribution and the most salient critique. So, even if it is not your week to present, you should BE PREPARED and write down a few questions and ideas ahead of time.

As I am sure you know by now, graduate school is a multi-level learning process. This class is intended to give you theoretical and methodological tools, but it is also a part of the socializing process of the discipline. In our field, you must be able to articulate ideas and to have analytical debates with colleagues. There is no better place to develop these skills than in a class of mutually supportive peers. This requires two things: that you be brave and try out your ideas in public, and that you be kind and cooperative with your fellows. Remember that your colleagues are the biggest asset you have.

**C. Papers:** You will write three short papers analyzing the readings.

1) The first paper will be a **book review** of one of the books on our syllabus. The paper should be 3-5 pages long. In it, please answer the following:

- a. How is the book organized? What difference does that make?
- b. What choices did the author make about their positioning, voice, authorial authority, etc.? How does their identity or history play into the meaning and impact of the book?
- c. What is the object of study? Is this a book about a system, a structure, a group of people, a community, a global process? How does this affect the author's choice of method?
- d. What is the main argument of the book? Where is that laid out and how is it supported throughout the text?
- e. Who is the author in dialogue with? Is this book critiquing, building on, or setting aside other works? Why?
- f. What kind of evidence does the author provide to support the argument?
- g. What contributions does the book make for the discipline? For the world? For you? How can you use this theory, method, or argument going forward in your own research?
- h. What critiques do you have of the book? Why?

2) Now that you have some experience critically reading and analyzing an ethnography, the next step is to **write a review that is publishable**. For the second paper, pick another one of the books on the syllabus and pick a particular academic journal that you think would be an appropriate venue for a review but that has not already reviewed this text. Examine their format and write a review in the length and format the journal requires. (They tend to be fairly short.) Each

class member will read one other classmate's reviews and give constructive feedback. I encourage you to submit it for publication after getting feedback from me and your classmates!

3) The final paper will be oriented to your own research project. Write a 5-7 page paper a) describing the issues/challenges you are facing as you develop your own research project and b) proposing some answers in dialogue with the authors we have read in class. I don't expect you to know what your main argument will be at this point, because you have not yet done the research (but maybe you have a hypothesis). However, some of issues we analyze in the first assignment will be relevant to your proposed project: What is the object of your study? What methods are you considering? What is your position vis-à-vis your topic/interlocutors? Who are you in dialogue with? What theoretical framework might help you think and from where does this framework emerge? What contributions do you hope to make and why? Please reference at least two, if not more, of the authors from the syllabus.

### III. Course Readings and Assignments:

**Week One:** Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk interruptus: Political life across the borders of settler states*. Duke University Press, 2014.

(Indigenous anthropology, refusal methodology, settler colonialism, won multiple awards including Sharon Stephens Prize (AES), Best first Book award (NAISA), and Lora Romero Award (ASA).)

<https://anthropology.columbia.edu/content/audra-simpson>

**Week Two:** Teaiwa, Katherina Martina. 2015. *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

(Ontology, development, global capital flows, climate change)

<https://researchprofiles.anu.edu.au/en/persons/katerina-teaiwa>

**Week Three:** Kristina M. Lyons, *Vital Decomposition: Soil Practitioners and Life Politics* (Duke University Press, 2020)

(science, politics/war, epistemology, life and death)

<https://anthropology.sas.upenn.edu/people/kristina-lyons>

**Week Four:** Savannah Shange, *Progressive dystopia: abolition, antiblackness, + schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press, 2019

(abolition theory, education, critical race theory, won Gregory Bateson Book Prize from Society for Cultural Anthropology)

<https://www.savannahshange.com>

**Week Five:** Juno Salazar Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation*, Duke University Press, 2018.

(decolonization, Sarawak, human-non-human relations, extinction/Anthropocene, won 2019 Rosaldo Prize from the Association of Feminist Anthropology)

<https://sts.cornell.edu/juno-salazar--parreñas->

**Week Six:** Varma, Saiba. *The Occupied clinic: Militarism and care in Kashmir*. Duke University Press, 2020.

(the co-imbriation of military and medical care, medical/psychological anthropology, humanitarianism, winner Edie Turner First Book Prize in Ethnographic Writing.)

<https://anthropology.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/faculty-profiles/saiba-varma.html>

**Week Seven:** Hodzic, Saida. *The twilight of cutting: African activism and life after NGOs*. Univ of California Press, 2017.

(feminist anthropology, postcolonialism, NGOs, governmentality, won 2018 Rosaldo Prize from the Association of Feminist Anthropology).

<https://anthropology.cornell.edu/saida-hodžić>

**Week Eight:** O'Neill, Kevin, 2019. *Hunted, Predation and Pentecostalism in Guatemala*. University of Chicago Press. (Religion, drug addiction, anthropological ethics)

<https://kevin-oneill.net>

**Week Nine:** Speed, Shannon. *Incarcerated stories: Indigenous women migrants and violence in the settler-capitalist state*. UNC Press Books, 2019

(migration, story-telling, settler colonialism, multicriminality, neoliberalism)

<https://anthro.ucla.edu/person/shannon-speed/>

**Week Ten:** Klima, Alan, 2019. *Ethnography #9*. Duke University. (spirits, capitalism, financial practices, winner of the 2020 Gregory Bateson Book Prize from the Society for Cultural Anthropology).

<https://anthropology.ucdavis.edu/people/klima>