

## ANTH8891: ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

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**COURSE MEETING TIME(S):**  
**Time: 11:15AM-2PM Wed.      Place: 4030 Smith Lab**



### **COURSE DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES**

It's official. Geologists have formally proposed the Anthropocene as our current geological epoch. This means *Homo sapiens* is now recognized as the primary force shaping the planet. So why are some anthropologists – myself included – worried about how this will affect our view of humanity and its future?

As Anand Pandian and Cymene Howe remark, the Anthropocene is a “present armed with teeth.” It has potential to garner recognition and support for the humanities and social sciences, but it also risks projecting a vision of an all-too-human world. If we begin to perceive everything on the planet as shaped by the human presence, it may be difficult to avoid falling victim to our own self-obsession. How do we know that the

Anthropocene isn't just a piece of mirrored glass from which we see the world? We look through it and see others, but we also get distracted by our reflection dancing on the surface, always staring back at us.

In the past one hundred years, science and technology have vastly expanded our capacity to transform the global environment. But in our tendency to see the "human" everywhere, we sometimes lose sight of how various forces and lifeforms that make up our environment are constantly pushing back against us. The Anthropocene should remind us that while our technologies have expanded our ability to impact the planet, a much broader array of elements is constantly thwarting our attempts to wrest control of the world around us.

This course is an open experiment in both reading and writing ethnography that attempts to make sense of the Anthropocene. By the end of the course, students in this seminar will:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the Anthropocene as a proposed geological epoch in addition to the many alternative frameworks that have emerged in response to this time period
2. Develop ethnographic approaches and experiments in writing in and of the Anthropocene
3. Generate novel case studies of Anthropocenic objects
4. Present new re-framings, critiques, and experiments in thinking about Anthropocenic futures

### **REQUIRED TEXTS**

De la Cadena, Marisol. *Earth beings: Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*. Duke University Press, 2015.

Howe, Cymene, and Anand Pandian. "Lexicon for an Anthropocene yet unseen." *Theorizing the Contemporary*. *Cultural Anthropology website*, [www.culanth.org/fieldsights/803-lexicon-for-an-anthropocene-yet-unseen](http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/803-lexicon-for-an-anthropocene-yet-unseen), 2016.

Kawa, Nicholas C. *Amazonia in the Anthropocene: people, soils, plants, forests*. University of Texas Press, 2016.

Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

## ASSIGNMENTS

### ***Ethnographic Reading Responses (7x 10 points each)***

Throughout the semester, students will be required to write brief responses to assigned readings. These writing exercises will not necessarily require synthesis or analysis of the assigned texts, but rather draw on the conceptual tools from the readings to develop ethnographic sketches of Anthropocenic objects, ecologies, and relations. Prompts for each response will be provided by the instructor a week before they are due. The responses should range between 400 and 600 words.

***Show & Tell (10 points):*** Each student will present an object that embodies some aspect of human-environmental relations in the Anthropocene. Students will be asked to discuss the individual story behind the object as well as what the object might teach us about Anthropocenic ecologies and the ways humans develop meaningful attachments to or cultivate an active neglect of the world around them. A sign-up sheet will be distributed the first week of class to assign individual presentation dates.

***Final Project (70 points total):*** Each student will develop a paper centered on a human-environmental problem or phenomenon unique to the Anthropocene. These projects will be carried out in four steps:

1. Annotated bibliography (10 points) – After carefully choosing a topic, identify scholarly research that will inform your paper. Find at least 15 different articles that will help support your investigation. For each article, do the following: a) provide the complete reference (author, title, year, publication); b) summarize the reference in two to three sentences; c) assess its strengths and weaknesses; d) describe its usefulness for your term paper. Follow Chicago style guidelines for formatting of references. You may also want to use this resource: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/01/>
2. Paper prospectus (15 points) – You will write a one-page prospectus that will provide a general overview of your term paper. This summarizes the main idea or research question driving the paper, the organizational structure of it, and the primary arguments it intends to make.
3. Mini-conference with poster presentations (20 points) – Everyone will present their paper in poster format at the end of the course in a mini-conference. Both presenters and audience will be evaluated. Audience members are expected to be engaged and make critical and constructive comments that help presenters to improve their paper. The mini-conference will be held during the last two class sessions.
4. Final paper (25 points) – The final term paper should range between 12 to 15 pages. It will employ an ethnographic approach to describe and explain a human-environmental problem or phenomenon unique to the Anthropocene. It will also use and cite relevant sources, including course readings.

**TOTAL: 150 points**

**GRADING SCALE**

100- 92.0%	A
91.9-90.0%	A-
89.9-88.0%	B+
87.9-82.0%	B
81.9-80.0%	B-
79.9-78.0%	C+
77.9-72.0%	C
71.9-70.0%	C-
69.9-68.0%	D+
69.9-60.0%	D
<60.0%	E

**DISABILITY SERVICES**

Students with disabilities (including mental health, chronic or temporary medical conditions) that have been certified by the Office of Student Life Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office of Student Life Disability Services is located in 098 Baker Hall, 113 W. 12th Avenue; telephone 614-292-3307, [slds@osu.edu](mailto:slds@osu.edu); [slds.osu.edu](http://slds.osu.edu).

**COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT STATEMENT**

All students should become familiar with the rules governing academic misconduct, especially as they pertain to plagiarism and cheating. Ignorance of the rules is not an excuse and all alleged cases of academic misconduct will be reported to the committee on academic misconduct.

**COURSE SCHEDULE:**

Week 1: Welcome to the Anthropocene  
Readings: Crutzen 2002

Week 2: Anthropos as Geologic Force  
Readings: Moore 2014; Steffen et al. 2007; Steffen et al. 2011; Zalasiewicz et al. 2008

Week 3 “Arts of Noticing” in the Anthropocene  
Readings: Tsing

Week 4 Are we actually in the “Capitolocene”?  
Readings: Tsing

Week 5 Blasted Landscapes / Finding Hope in Late Capitalist Ruins  
Readings: Tsing

Week 6 Earth Beings

Readings: De la Cadena

Week 7 Non-Human Agents and Agencies

Readings: De la Cadena

Week 8 Politics across Species & Ontological Divides

Readings: De la Cadena

Week 9 Representing the Anthropocene

Readings: Lexicon readings

Week 10 Object Lessons for the Anthropocene

Readings: Lexicon readings

Week 11 The Ordinary in the Anthropocene

Readings: Stewart

Week 12 Affect & the Anthropocene

Readings: Stewart

Week 13 Amazonia in the Anthropocene: Part 1

Readings: Kawa

Week 14 Amazonia in the Anthropocene: Part 2

Readings: Kawa

Week 15: Learning How to Live and Die in the Anthropocene

Readings: Scranton

Week 16: Final Presentations