

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Department of Anthropology

Anthropology 597SE

Semiotics of Embodiment

Spring 2015

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 1:30pm-3:30pm

Course Meetings

Tuesdays, 10:00am-12:45pm, Herter 101

Course Description

Recent discussions of the “ontological turn” in anthropology and critical theory more broadly have largely ignored a long history of semiotic insights regarding the nature of concepts such as materiality, agency, subjectivity, and mediation. In efforts to reinvigorate these dialogues, this seminar focuses on processes of (dis)embodiment from a semiotic perspective. We begin by reviewing key theories of semiotic mediation, embodiment, and materiality, including those of Peirce, Heidegger, Mauss, Derrida, Butler, Latour, and Mead. After engaging these theoretical perspectives, we will read a set of recent ethnographies that analyze (dis)embodiment and materiality, including Hankins’ *Working through Skin*, Ralph’s *Renegade Dreams*, Harkness’ *Songs of Seoul*, Carr’s *Scripting Addiction*, and Manning’s *Semiotics of Drink and Drinking*. Collectively, these theoretical and ethnographic perspectives will provide seminar participants with a rich set of conceptual and methodological frameworks for apprehending the body’s capacity for contingency, causality, and consequentiality.

Required Texts

We will read the following books in their entirety:

Briggs and Briggs, *Stories in the Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling during a Medical Nightmare*
Carr, *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*
Hankins, *Working Skin: Making Leather, Making a Multicultural Japan*
Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea*
Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*
Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*
Manning, *Semiotics of Drink and Drinking*
Ralph, *Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago*

The other required readings for this course will be uploaded to Moodle in PDF format.

Guidelines and Requirements

1. Discussion facilitations

Each week a group of students will be designated as the discussion facilitators; each student will facilitate discussion during two weeks throughout the semester. For the weeks in which you sign up to facilitate discussion, you are expected to collaborate with your fellow discussion facilitators to develop a set of discussion questions and a creative way in which to guide the discussion. Your group will prepare a handout with your reflections on the reading(s) and your discussion questions. This handout should be approximately 1-2 single-spaced pages; make enough copies to distribute to everyone in the class on the day of your facilitation. Feel free to bring in any audiovisual media to supplement your handout. There is no possible way that you could get to all of the issues covered in the reading, so focus on whatever ideas interest you most.

2. Critical responses to the readings

Each week you will compose a short critical response to the readings. The goal of these responses is to identify and evaluate the themes and analytical approaches that emerge from your engagement with the readings and course discussions. These short responses (400-500 words; roughly one single-spaced page) should synthesize the authors' arguments and present your point of view on their analyses. The goal of this exercise is to encourage you to stay current with the readings and to develop a dialogue across weeks/readings. Hard copies of responses are due at the beginning of each class.

3. Final paper

The final paper will focus on a topic of your choice, but must draw on themes from this course to analyze a particular set of language-related practices and/or processes. The paper should be 10-15 pages (double-spaced, Times New Roman font); please include a title, page numbers, a bibliography, and citations in the convention of your choice as long as the format is consistent throughout the paper. In Week 6 (March 10), please come prepared to discuss the final paper topic during class. This will serve as a collective brainstorming session. You must submit your final paper via email by Friday, May 8 at 5pm.

Course Schedule

Students are expected to come to class having carefully reviewed all of the readings assigned for a given week.

Week 1 (January 20): Introduction

Week 2 (January 27): From Semiotic Ideologies to Embodied Practices

1. Kockelman, Agent, Subject, Person, Self
2. Keane, Semiotics and the Social Life of Material Things
3. Selections from Munn, The Fame of Gawa
4. Chumley and Harkness, Qualia

Week 3 (January February 3): Legibility, Malleability, Recognition

1. Selections from Butler, Bodies that Matter
2. Selections from Valentine, Imagining Transgender
3. Valentine, Sue E. Generous: Toward a Theory of Non-Transexuality
4. de Vries, Transgender People of Color at the Center: Conceptualizing a New Intersectional Model
5. Fanon, The Negro and Language and The Fact of Blackness (from Black Skin, White Masks)
6. Selections from Povinelli, The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism/The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality/Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism

Week 4 (February 10): Virtuality and Disembodiment

1. Kockelman, Huckleberry Finn Takes the Turing Test: Transformation of Ontologies and the Virtuality of Kinds
2. Agha, Regrouping Identity
3. Bonilla and Rosa, #Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States
4. Selections from Boelstorff, Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human
5. Inoue, The Listening Subject of Japanese Modernity and His Auditory Double: Citing, Sighting, and Siting the Modern Japanese Woman
6. Inoue: Speech without a Speaking Body: "Japanese Women's Language" in Translation

NO CLASS ON FEBRUARY 17 – PRESIDENTS' DAY SCHEDULE

Week 5 (February 24): Regimenting Embodied Experience

Carr, Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety

NO CLASS ON MARCH 3 – I WILL BE AWAY FOR A PRESENTATION

Week 6 (March 10): Bodies in Labor

Hankins, Working Skin: Making Leather, Making a Multicultural Japan

NO CLASS ON MARCH 17 – SPRING BREAK

Week 7 (March 24): Consuming Bodies

Manning, Semiotics of Drink and Drinking

Week 8 (March 31): Qualia: Embodiment in Context

Harkness, Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea

Week 9 (April 7): Disabling Bodies

Ralph, Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago

Week 10 (April 14): Narrating and Disavowing Bodies

Briggs and Briggs, Stories in a Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling during a Medical Nightmare

Week 11 (April 21): Beyond the Body

Kohn, How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human

Week 12 (April 28): Reconstituting Embodiment

Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory

Some questions to consider while reading ethnographies, language-focused and otherwise (adapted from Susan Gal's 2004 seminar "Ethnographies of Language" at the University of Chicago):

1. Argument and contribution

How well is the theoretical argument laid out? Does it encompass the introduction and the more descriptive chapters? Is the argument lean, or does it become repetitive? Likewise, how well is the empirical argument laid out? What does the author see as the relative importance of these kinds of argument? What does the author see as his/her primary contribution?

2. Analysis and supporting evidence

What is the relationship between the theoretical apparatus introduced early in the monograph and the analysis in the rest of it? Is there a disjunction between them, or an appropriate fit? Does the evidence that the author supplies fit the theoretical framework within which it is laid out? Is it adequate to support the author's claims? Are there obvious indications of evidence that has been left out? Does the author pursue the argument with appropriate ruthlessness? Are there places where the author becomes evasive?

3. Authority

How does the author establish the authority to speak to the issues discussed in the monograph? How does the author represent his/her field experience within the text s/he is writing? Do you find the author a credible witness to the events and patterns being described and analyzed? What presence does the author establish as ethnographer within the interactions that are being analyzed? Does the author establish a distance between a self-as-ethnographer and a self-as-analyst (and/or some other kind of self, such as member of a particular kind of community of origin), and if so, how? What kinds of literary tropes and conceits are employed in making the analysis believable?

4. Field methods

Did linguistic questions or sociological questions, or both, provide the starting point for the research? What was the principal social unit of study (e.g., individual, social network, community, "society" or "culture," region)? What relationship does the author seek to draw between insider and outsider perspectives, and how are these approached in the conduct of the fieldwork? In the author's research, what relationship is there between such methods as linguistic elicitation, other types of interviewing, text collection and analysis, participant observation, recording of observable behavior (at what level of detail?), collection of demographic statistics, etc.?

5. Technical handling of evidence

How, and to what extent, does the author use technical linguistic arguments to advance claims about society? Does s/he show appropriate command of the methodologies being used? Are these methods mere “tools” in the service of the ethnographic analysis, or does the author move the analytic methods forward in and of themselves, by subjecting them to critical discussion or showing a novel interpenetration between phenomena that are most often called “linguistic” and phenomena that are most often called “social”? (Note that these questions could be reversed: To what extent are an author’s uses of social categories and concepts mere “tools” in the service of a linguistic analysis? How well does the author command the relevant sociological concepts and social theories?) Are more technical aspects of linguistic analysis avoided in the analysis? If they are not avoided, do the more technical arguments help lay out the contours of the argument or do they tend to obfuscate it?

6. Intertextuality

How is the monograph situated in relation to other currents in the discipline(s)? What is the literature on which the author draws, and why? What apparatus does the author use to point the reader to other relevant writing? Is there conspicuously relevant writing that is being omitted? Does the author’s scholarly apparatus tend to help supply supporting arguments, or supply foils for attack, or does it serve as scholarly window dressing? To what extent is the monograph conceived of as a self-contained whole? To what extent is it contextualized by other writing by the author and by the author’s immediate co-workers/collaborators/colleagues? To what extent do the analytical priorities and strategies reflect emphases developed in the area literature?

7. Ethnographic constraints

To what extent do the analytical priorities and strategies reflect ethnographic constraints, including conditions of field research? Does the author use native accounts in the analysis, and if so, how? Are they part of the evidence? Are they part of the analysis? To what extent does the author draw on native interpretive traditions? In which sectors of the community are such interpretive traditions vested? Does the author work through a native field researcher, and if so, how (or can you not tell)? What kinds of social selection are evident in the ethnography? How do gender, race, class, social status, and age play into the selection of “informants”?

8. Textual evidence

Does the author provide specific textual evidence for the analysis? If so, how is it handled? Are texts presented in the native language? What kinds of transcription practices are followed? Do the texts reflect particular kinds of social settings? Do they reflect particular kinds of linguistic registers? Is the author aware of such possible reflections, or is all linguistic evidence treated as equivalent?

9. Community (social unit)

How does the author conceive of the community or social system under study? Are linguistic practices seen as distributed evenly through a community? Who is treated as “experts” or “masters” of language or of particular kinds of linguistic practices? Who is seen as having authoritative opinion about social relations and situations?

10. Audience

Who is the audience for the work? What kind of reader is inscribed in the text, and how? Do the methodologies used in the work invite larger readerships or limit them? How readable is the work, and by whom? What standing does it have as a literary work?

11. Language, culture, social relations

For the author, what are the boundaries of “language” and “the linguistic”? How does the writer conceive the relationship between language and nonlinguistic aspects of culture and social relations? How is language conceived, and how is speaking linked to or distinguished from other aspects of social action? Is silence part of the object of study?

12. Consequences

What are the “real world” consequences of the work? If it is implicated in particular applied practices, what are they? What impact might the author’s view of the people being studied, and their language, culture, and society, have on them? What are the implications of the author’s views of language and social relations for the way we conceive of our own society?

13. Fruitfulness

To what extent does the monograph advance a line of questioning such that either the evidence or the method can be used in other ethnographic settings? Does the work provide sufficient ethnographic richness that it could supply grist for a quite different analytical mill? Does the work inspire new and interesting questions about language and social life? Do you see it as intellectually consequential?