

**Bates College (Winter 2008)**  
**Anthropology 333**  
**Culture and Interpretation**

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157 Pettengill  
Office hours: T 1:30 – 4:00 p.m.

**Course Description**

The seminar examines the concept of “culture”—a concept central to anthropology and widely used in public discourse—so as to better understand the varied and *contested* ways in which the term is employed. We take as our point of departure the work of Clifford Geertz: one of best known anthropologists of the second half of the twentieth century who died in 2006. We aim first to understand what Geertz means by an interpretive approach to culture and the ways in which the ethnographies produced by anthropologists are intricate works of interpretation. We then examine critiques of and alternatives to Geertz’s approach and the ways in which the culture concept has been questioned, qualified, and extended.

**Objectives**

A central objective of the course is to have students learning how to decode cultural meaning, how to grasp what interpretive ethnography entails, by *doing* it. You will participate in a semester-long group research project that identifies a significant question and applies an anthropological approach to address it. (For a complete description of the project, please refer to the accompanying handout.)

**Readings**

You are expected to **read closely** and **think critically** about the readings. I recommend that you take notes, pose questions about the author’s argument, and identify underlying assumptions. **I will post questions on Lyceum** each week to facilitate your understanding of the readings and our discussion of them in the seminar. I encourage you to answer them in preparation for class. **You will also be asked to post a question to the News Forum** on the class Lyceum page on each week’s readings. **Your questions should be posted by 10:00 p.m. on Wednesday nights.**

By 12:00 noon on Thursdays, starting on January 17<sup>th</sup>, each student should post to the Weekly Readings Discussion Board on Lyceum, **an analytical summary of that week’s assigned reading**. You are responsible for posting at least seven of these summaries over the course of the semester. (The assignment is described more fully in an accompanying handout.)

You are expected to read the assigned texts according to the schedule indicated on the syllabus and to bring your copy of the text with you to class. The course meets only once per week; many of the assigned texts are complex; some of them are long. I urge you to budget enough time to get through the readings before class: falling behind will be detrimental.

Course books are available for purchase at the **Bates College Bookstore** and are on reserve in **Ladd Library**. Some of the articles and book chapters listed on the syllabus are available on **Lyceum**. You should check the Lyceum site for the course regularly to download reading and discussion questions and to find any additional readings or assignments.

Paul du Gay et al, Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman

Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures

Sidney W. Mintz, Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History

Sidney W. Mintz, Sweetness and Power

### **Requirements and Grades**

- Being well prepared for class, engaged participation in discussion, and regular attendance are all expected. Analytical reading summaries and questions and the leading of seminar discussions, will also be used to determine participation grades (25%).
- Research paper including progress reports and final presentations (25%).
- Take-home mid-term exam (25%)
- Take-home final exams (25%).

Outstanding work in one or more of the categories above may serve to boost your overall grade in the course.

### **Seminar Meetings**

January 10 Introduction

Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in The Interpretation of Cultures, pp 3 – 30

Clifford Geertz, New York Times obituary (Lyceum)

David Berreby, "Unabsolute Truths; Clifford Geertz," New York Times Magazine (April 9, 1995, Lyceum)

January 17 We will revisit Clifford Geertz's, "Thick Description" and also discuss his "From the Native's Point of View," in Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology, pp 55-70 (Lyceum)

(January 21) Martin Luther King Jr. Day  
 Note that you are required to take part in the activities for MLK Day and write an essay based on your participation. Essays are due Friday, January 25<sup>th</sup> at 4:00 p.m.

January 24 Sidney Mintz, Worker in the Cane

January 31 Sidney Mintz, Worker in the Cane

Paul du Gay et al, Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman, introduction and section 1: pp 1 – 40.

Groups to present provisional titles and one-page summaries of research project along with a working bibliography

February 7 Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in The Interpretation of Cultures, pp 412-453

William Roseberry, “Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology,” in Roseberry, Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History, and Political Economy, pp 17-29 (Lyceum)

Vincent Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description,” in James Clifford & George Marcus, (eds), Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, pp 51-75 (Lyceum)

(February 8) Life history interviews due

February 14 Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in Richard G. Fox, ed., Recapturing Anthropology: Writing in the Present, pp 137-162 (Lyceum)

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” in Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (eds), Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology, pp 33-51 (Lyceum)

(February 15, 4:00 p.m.) Take-home mid-term exam due

Winter Recess

(Monday, February 25) Presentation and film discussion on the PBS film, *Feel Like Going Home* with Corey Harris, Bates class of 1991 and MacArthur Fellow

February 28 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Adieu, Culture: A New Day Arises," in Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World, pp 97-116 (Lyceum)

Meeting with Corey Harris

Progress reports on research projects

March 6 Paul du Gay et al, Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman, sections 2, 3,4, & 5: pp 41 – 109 (also, be sure to review section 1 of DuGay).

Stuart Hall, Representation and the Media (video in class)

March 13 Syllabus flex time

March 20 Sidney Mintz, Sweetness and Power

March 27 Sidney Mintz, Sweetness and Power

April 3 Presentations on research projects  
Papers due April 4, 4:00 p.m.

Take-home final exams due April 11, 4:00 p.m.