

~AMAZONIAN SOCIETIES~



Course Instructor: Professor Laura Mentore (lmentore@umw.edu)

Class Schedule: T/R 11:00-12:15 in Monroe 213

Office: Monroe 410 Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 1-3pm, and by appointment

Description

The term ‘Amazonia’ does not refer to a single place or people. Also known as lowland South America, Amazonia is a vast geographic region comprising much of the continent of South America, inhabited by a diverse array of human societies both urban and rural, indigenous and non-indigenous. Amazonia is also an iconic image that has long stirred Euro-American cultural imaginings of “the Other”—from the romanticized Noble Savage to the filthy cannibal. It is arguably as a consequence of the history of these European imaginings that the diverse indigenous peoples of lowland South America have come to be studied and known within the anthropological literature as “Amerindians”.

In this course, we will critically examine the role of the European imagination in constructing our sense of what the term ‘Amazonia’ means, while also delving into literature based on the research of anthropologists who have spent time living in and studying indigenous or Amerindian societies. These ethnographic studies speak to the possibility, indeed the presence, of peoples who live according to radically different ways of understanding what it means to be human and to relate to a wider environment. A common thread between Amerindian societies is their emphasis on humanity as a moral condition and affective position that is potentially taken up by any beings (those that Western thought distinguishes between as human, animal, plant, and non-living material). Rather than a singularly unique, bio-species identification as Western science would have it, humanity tends to be defined in Amerindian philosophies as a perspective or way of looking at the world and your place within it. To see yourself as human is to be human.

In stressing the radical differences between Western and Amerindian systems of thought and ways of being, this literature often walks a fine line between championing the idea of human diversity and reinforcing deeply problematic stereotypes of Amerindians as isolated and exotic or detached from us. The picture is complicated by the socioeconomic realities of Amazonia today, which include many indigenous peoples being involved in social and environmental movements, protesting against their national governments, entering into the global economy, and partnering with (or in some cases, resisting) international conservation groups. What are the implications of this increased contact and participation in modern forms of economics and politics? If Amazonian philosophies of being, power, and the environment are as radically different from their Western counterparts as the anthropological literature would have it, how can we best approach an understanding of the role these philosophies can play – and are playing - in the twenty-first century? How are we to situate such knowledge about what it means to be human? Can it be assumed that Amerindian philosophies simply change when Amerindians come into closer contact with Western forms of social organization, notions of value, and identity? Is there a role for anthropology in relaying Amerindian philosophies in such a way that they might offer the kind of substantive alternatives that Western knowledge so desperately needs as it confronts the detrimental consequences of its own limitations, as witnessed in the forms of climate change and unprecedented global socioeconomic inequality? Is such a proposition merely the latest naïve romanticism?

In this course, we will critically analyze the complex interplay between the Western imagination, textual representations, and Amazonian lived realities, with ethnographic studies of Amerindian societies as our primary source. We will consider the specific ways in which anthropology

produces, reinforces and/or deconstructs various genres of knowledge about the region and its inhabitants. Through readings, discussion and select films, we will examine how indigenous theories of humanity, nature and society have been interpreted in anthropology, and how these indigenous theories contribute to broad philosophical questions and debates.

The course is organized around themes of enduring theoretical importance in anthropology, including personhood and identity, ritual and symbolism, economics, gender, cosmology, political forms, and the environment. Ultimately, the ethnographies of Amazonia challenge many of the ideas that we take for granted, both in other academic disciplines and in our culture in general, for example: the notion of the autonomous individual, the need for a State to maintain social order, the “naturalness” of competing for wealth, the privileging of reason over morality and emotion, and society as an entity that is separate from and dominant over nature.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Identify, describe and compare main features of various Amerindian societies
- Articulate an understanding of major themes and debates in the anthropology of Amazonia (both in writing and discussion)
- Understand the difference between ethnography and theory, and critically examine how they relate to each other in the anthropology of Amazonia
- Develop a more critical understanding of Western (Euro-American) cultural assumptions about power, subjectivity, the soul, humanity and nature through an increased familiarity with indigenous perspectives on the world.
- Recognize the invaluable contributions of indigenous knowledge and practices to anthropology, philosophy, and the sciences while also recognizing the ethical dilemmas of exchanging/appropriating knowledge across cultures
- Demonstrate a critical understanding of ways in which Amazonian peoples, environments and materials are involved in global political, economic and environmental processes

Graded Assignments

1. Attendance, Meaningful Participation, Discussion: 30%
2. Essay 1 (1500-2000 words): 20%
3. Essay 2 (1500-2000 words): 20%
4. Final Written Exam (cumulative): 30%

Attendance, Meaningful Participation, Discussions (30%)

- a. Attendance of all classes is a course requirement. See below for more details. Should you miss a class, you are still responsible for doing the reading and need to make sure that you know what you missed in class. You should seek notes from a classmate, meet to discuss the reading, and/or consider coming to office hours to review the material.
- b. You are required to complete all assigned readings **before class** on the day for which they are assigned. Class time will largely consist of discussion, either as a class or in smaller groups. In order for class time to be productive and interesting, you will need to come prepared to actively discuss the readings, ask questions, and express your viewpoint on various topics and debates. I will not provide lecture-style summaries of the readings- you are expected to know them already and to have tried your best to understand the author's main points. You should bring to class your notes on the reading, including what you think were the dominant themes, a summary of the author's main argument, and any points of contention that the reading raised for you. Try to also draw comparisons between the various readings in terms of how the authors approach their material, what they are arguing, and how they carried out their research. I will ask you to refer to your notes during our class discussions.

Keeping up with the assigned readings is crucial, not only for your grade but for the overall success of the course. Because this is a small, upper-level class, you will be given a good deal of responsibility and freedom as far as choosing discussion topics and deciding which topics you are most interested in focusing on later in the semester. The idea is to allow you to have input on the content and focus of this course so that you gain something meaningful and relevant from it. This only works, though, if you come to class prepared and willing to push yourself and your classmates to engage in a higher level discussion about the material.

- c. As part of your grade for participation/attendance/discussion, I will periodically ask you to answer a series of questions based on an upcoming assigned reading. These handouts are aimed at increasing your critical reading and analytic skills, and will help me to identify things I may need to focus on more in my teaching. In addition to good class notes and your notes on the readings, these handouts will help you when it comes to revising the course material for the final exam.

On all the materials we will cover, there is a wide range of legitimate and compelling viewpoints that can be argued for or against. You are encouraged to share your own interpretations of, and problems with, the readings. The extent to which you do this will factor into your attendance/participation grade and will also help you in the written components of the course. Remember, with discussion-based courses, you get out of it what you put in!

Two 1500-2000 word essays (20% each)

For the two essay assignments, you will be given a list of 2-3 essay topics from which to choose, approximately one week prior to the due date. Essay topics will focus on one or more of the

readings and class discussions. Further information and guidelines on the essays will be provided closer to the date. Generally, in the essays, you will be expected to do the following:

- Formulate your own thesis argument in relation to the essay prompt. This should be clearly stated in summarized form at the beginning of your essay and then further explicated (unpacked and argued for) throughout the essay
- Provide a concise and accurate summary of main ideas covered in the reading/s (or particular sections) that you are engaging with in your essay. This will require directly engaging with and referencing the readings(s), and demonstrating your comprehension of them.
- Demonstrate your command of the relevant theoretical points covered in your essay topic. To do this, you will need to have a firm grasp of things I talk about in class, and ideally seek out additional sources (e.g. other anthropological texts) on those points where needed. This could include topics like personhood, ritual, symbolism, gender relations, exchange/reciprocity, kinship, cosmology, and many others that we will cover in the course.
- Demonstrate critical thinking. In other words, your essay will need to be more than a review of the literature and a summary of class lectures. You will need to develop an original argument of your own in relation that contributes something new, and follow it through to a logical conclusion.
- Include a comparative component. This could entail an analysis of multiple readings on a particular theme or a comparison of an author's viewpoint with your own viewpoint or a viewpoint developed in class discussions. You should never present your thesis argument as a "matter of fact", but acknowledge that it is one position in relation to others.

Your essay will need to include proper citations of literature. You may cite additional literature beyond the assigned readings for this course, but you will need to make it clear how/why it is relevant. If you wish to include outside sources, it is advised that you discuss this with me beforehand. I will not read or provide feedback on draft essays, but you are encouraged to discuss your essay with me before the due date, either during office hours or through email.

Final Exam (30%)

There will be a sit-down, cumulative final exam held during the scheduled time slot for this course as listed on the UMW exam schedule. To be prepared for this exam format, it is crucial that you stay on top of the reading materials throughout the semester and review that material over the last couple of weeks of the semester. Cramming does not work for this exam format. The exam will consist of written responses to essay-style questions. You will be graded on the content, depth, coherency, and length of your responses. Your responses should demonstrate a grasp of the ethnography of Amazonia as well as the broader anthropological themes covered

during the semester. We will discuss the format of the final exam in more detail closer to the time.

Grading Scale

In keeping with the University's grading system, the following numerical divisions will be used to determine letter grades: A: 94-100; A-: 90-93; B+: 87-89; B: 83-86; B-: 80-82; C+: 77-79; C: 73-76; C-: 70-72; D+: 67-69; D: 60-66; F: <60%

*Late assignments will be penalized by 1/3 of a letter grade for each day that they are late. (a paper turned in one day late that I would normally give a B will receive a B-, and so forth). I reserve the right to not accept excessively late submissions, in which case you will be issued a 0.

*As a general policy, I round up letter grades that are within 0.1% of the next highest grade. For example, an 89.9 = A- whereas an 89.8 = B+

General Requirements, Expectations and Course Policies:

Attending *all classes* is a course requirement. In the case of participation in a UMW athletic event, a serious illness or family emergency, you need to email me and provide documentation when possible. Weddings, family vacations, club/social events, leaving early for Thanksgiving, and other non-emergency absences are NOT excused and will affect your attendance/participation grade.

Per UMW guidelines for all courses, you are expected to spend approximately two hours preparing for each day of class. That is a bare minimum guideline. Some readings may take you more than two hours to complete depending on the length of the reading and your reading pace. This time should also be used doing the assigned readings before the class period for taking notes on the readings, formulating questions for class discussion. Additional time will need to be set aside for your essays and reviewing for the final exam. Please build reading time for this class (and your other classes!) into your schedule as a hard commitment.

I have a **zero tolerance** policy for plagiarism and other infringements upon the University of Mary Washington Honor Code. Any violations or suspected violations will be reported to the Honor Council and will undergo an official review. You are expected to follow the University of Mary Washington Honor Code during all class periods and on all assignments.

Please review the Honor Constitution online at:
www.umw.edu/studentaffairs/docs/umw_honor_constitution.pdf.

There is no provision for extra credit in this course.

Cell phone use during class is extremely disrespectful to the instructor and other students and disrupts everyone's focus. Please turn cell phones off and put them away before the start of class. Please do not plan on accessing the readings via cell phone or using your phone to take notes. In

my experience, it creates too much ambiguity and distracts other students. Use of a cell phone during class will count against your participation grade.

Laptops are not allowed in class without the instructor's prior permission, and are strictly for note-taking in that case. I prefer that you take notes on paper because this is a discussion-based class and in my experience, laptop screens can create barriers to meaningful discussion. They also can distract other students in a small class setting. Any use of a laptop during class-time for anything other than approved note-taking (e.g. using the internet) will count against your participation grade.

Recordings: To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor. Any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. Students who wish to record lectures or class activities for study purposes must inform me first. Students with approved accommodations from the Office of Disability Resources permitting the recording of class meetings must present the accommodation letter to me in advance of any recording being done. On any days when classes will be recorded, I will notify all students in advance. Distribution or sale of class recordings is prohibited without the written permission of the instructor and other students who are recorded. Distribution without permission is a violation of educational privacy law. This policy is consistent with UMW's Policy on Recording Class and Distribution of Course Materials.

Title IX: Please review the statement on Title IX, which is provided in hard copy and available in Canvas files. This statement is considered a part of this syllabus. Abiding by this statement is part of the course agreement between the instructor and students.

Inclusion, Accessibility and Accommodations:

It is very important to me that students feel comfortable and respected for who they are in my classes. If there is anything I can do to help ensure this in your case, please do not hesitate to email me or see me after class/during office hours. If there is anything in particular that you think I should know about your life circumstances that will enable me to better support you in this class within the reasonable parameters of my role as your professor, please consider talking to me about it at the beginning of the semester.

The Office of Disability Resources has been designated by the University of Mary Washington as the primary office to guide, counsel, and assist students with disabilities. If you receive services through that office and require accommodations for this class, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible to discuss your approved accommodations. I will hold any information you share with me in strictest confidence and will make every effort to support you however I can. If you have not made contact with the Office of Disability Resources and have reasonable accommodation needs (note taking assistance, extended time for tests, etc.), I will be happy to refer you. The office will require appropriate documentation of disability. The Office of Disability Resources is located in Lee Hall, room 401. Phone: 540-654-1266. Email: ods@umw.edu

Online Resources related to Amazonian Studies

The following websites are useful sources for familiarizing yourself with Amazonian Societies and some of the political and social issues that indigenous peoples face. I do not necessarily endorse any of the views or objectives they express, but they're worth checking out.

Cultural Survival

<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/>

The Society for Anthropology of Lowland South America

<http://www.salsa-tipiti.org>

Instituto Socioambiental (Brazil)

http://www.socioambiental.org/home_html

Museu do Indio, Brazil

<http://www.museudoindio.org.br/>

Museu Nacional, UFRJ

<http://acd.ufrj.br/museu/>

Amazon Press- Amazon Revista

<http://www.amazonpress.com.br>

The Amerindian Peoples Association of Guyana

<http://www.sdn.org.gy/apa/>

Reading Schedule

* All course readings will be available on Canvas unless otherwise specified

* Readings are subject to change depending on the pace of our discussions and the topics that you all express the most interest in reading about. You will be given advance notice of any changes through an "Announcement" on Canvas.

Tuesday, August 28:

Review of syllabus and course objectives; Introductions

Thursday, August 30:

"Lost Tribes: Indigenous People and the Social Imaginary", Stuart Kirsch

Tuesday, September 4

"Lost and Found: contesting isolation and cultivating contact in Amazonian Ecuador" by Casey High

Thursday, September 6

“The Conquistadors of the Jungle: Images of the Spanish Solider in Piaroa Cosmology” by Joanna Overing

Tuesday, September 11

Review Article: Amazonian Anthropology” by Joanna Overing

Thursday, September 13

“Babies, Bodies and the Production of Personhood in North America and a Native Amazonian Society”, Beth Conklin and Lynn Morgan

Tuesday, September 18

Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians by Pierre Clastres

Thursday, September 20

Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians by Pierre Clastres

Tuesday, September 25

Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians by Pierre Clastres

Thursday, September 27

Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians by Pierre Clastres

Tuesday, October 2

Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians by Pierre Clastres

ESSAY ONE prompts handed out

Thursday, October 4

“Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism” by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

Tuesday, October 9

“The Glorious Tyranny of Silence and the Resonance of Shamanic Breath” by George Mentore

ESSAY ONE DUE (hard copy in class)

Thursday, October 11

People of Substance by Carlos Londono Sulkin

Tuesday, October 16: NO CLASS: FALL BREAK!

Thursday, October 18

People of Substance by Carlos Londono Sulkin

Tuesday, October 23

People of Substance by Carlos Londono Sulkin

Thursday, October 25

People of Substance by Carlos Londono Sulkin

Tuesday, October 30

“Men Control Women? The Catch-22 in the Analysis of Gender” by Joanna Overing

Thursday, November 1

“A Surprising Walk to the Farm: the political efficacy of women’s practices” by Laura Mentore

Tuesday, November 6

To Weave and Sing by David Guss

Thursday, November 8

To Weave and Sing by David Guss

ESSAY TWO prompts handed out

Tuesday, November 13

To Weave and Sing by David Guss

Thursday, November 15

To Weave and Sing by David Guss

ESSAY TWO DUE (hard copy in class)

Tuesday, November 20

The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert

Thursday, November 22: NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK!

Tuesday, November 27

The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert

Thursday, November 29

The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert

Tuesday, December 4

The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert

Thursday, December 6: Last day of class

In-class review of readings, notes, discussion points

~ Final Exam: Thursday, December 13 12:00-2:30PM ~