

~AMAZONIAN SOCIETIES~



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

Class Schedule: M/W/F 11:00-11:50 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. It is a vast geographic region comprising much of the continent of South America; it is a plethora of diverse human societies both urban and rural, indigenous and non-indigenous, large and small-scale. 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 can be argued that it is only as a consequence 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”.

Ethnographies of Amazonian societies reveal the possibilities, indeed the presence, of radically different ways of understanding what it means to be human. Collectively, these ethnographies posit an emphasis on humanity as a moral condition and affective position that is potentially taken up by any and all 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 is defined 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 speaking of a radical alterity in Amerindian systems of thought and being, this literature walks a fine line between championing the idea of truly deep human diversity and reinforcing deeply problematic stereotypes of Amerindians as isolated and primitive. The picture is further complicated by the social reality of Amazonia today, which includes many indigenous peoples participating in and protesting against national governments, the global economy and international human rights and conservation projects. What does this increased contact and participation in modern forms of economy and polity mean? If Amazonian philosophies of being, power, and the environment are as radically different from their Western counterparts as the anthropological literature would claim, how can we best approach an understanding of these philosophies in the twenty-first century? How are we to situate such knowledge about what it means to be human? Can it be argued that Amerindian philosophies of being change when Amerindian peoples 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 alternative 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 severe global socioeconomic equality? Is such a proposition merely the latest naïve romanticism?

In this course, we will critically analyze the complex interplay between the Western imagination and Amazonia, 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. We will also examine how these indigenous theories contribute to broad philosophical questions and debates concerning the meanings of humanity, nature, and change.

The course is organized around a series of themes of enduring theoretical importance in anthropology, including personhood, ritual and symbolism, economics, gender, cosmology, political structure, 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, the “naturalness” of competing for wealth, the privileging of reason over morality, and society as a force 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 Amazonian 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, alterity, subjectivity, the soul, and nature through an increased familiarity with alternative, Amazonian 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

Attendance, Discussion, Meaningful Participation: 30%

Essay 1 (2000 words): 20%

Essay 2 (2000 words): 20%

Final Written Exam (cumulative): 30%

Attendance, Meaningful Participation, Discussions (30%)

- a. Attendance of all classes is a course requirement. Absences that result from “not feeling well”, sleeping through your alarm, or having travel plans are not excused absences. Only severe illnesses (with documentation from a medical office), participation in scheduled athletic events for a UMW sports team, and family emergencies will be excused. Please do not email me with requests to excuse absences due to other reasons. Should you miss a class due to severe illness, athletic event, or emergency, you are responsible for making up the lost class time. You should seek notes from a classmate and 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 discussions, 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 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.

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 from it.

c. Leading Discussion: all students will be assigned several days for “leading” the class in discussion. You will not be expected to give a formal presentation, but simply provide an overview of the reading and relevant topics, and guide the rest of the class through a group discussion by providing key questions, talking points, debatable subjects raised by the author, etc. Your preparations for your discussion days, as well as your participation in the other days, will factor largely into your attendance/participation grade.

d. Meaningful participation is not the same as skimming through the readings and coming to class. You will need to

(1) **take notes** on the readings while you are doing them in addition to taking notes during class

(2) **formulate at least 2 questions** about the assigned reading each day and bring them with you to class

(3) constantly seek to **draw out the similarities and differences** between the different readings and discussion topics

(4) seek out the connections between different aspects of Amazonian practices and beliefs in order to **formulate a more holistic understanding** of Amazonian sociality and

(5) **make connections** between what we cover in this class, broader issues in anthropology, and broader issues in the world around you.

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.

With discussion-based courses, you get out of it what you put in.

2. Two 1500 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 (educated and informed opinion) in relation to the topic. 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 in your essay
- Demonstrate your command of the relevant theoretical issues/positions covered in your essay topic
- Demonstrate critical thinking. In other words, your essay will need to be more than a review of the literature and 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.

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.

3. 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, you will need to stay on top of the materials throughout the semester and review again over the last couple of weeks of the semester. Cramming will not work for this format. The exam will consist of 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 themes and issues 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%

*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 to undergo 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.

*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.

Online Resources

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

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>

Cultural Survival

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

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 the "Announcements" on Canvas.*

Class Schedule:

Monday, January 11

No Class (Conference at Tulane University)

Wednesday, January 13: Introductions and review of syllabus

Friday, January 15: "Lost Tribes: Indigenous People and the Social Imaginary", Stuart Kirsch

Monday, January 18

No Class: Martin Luther King Day

Wednesday, January 20: “Babies, Bodies and the Production of Personhood in North America and a Native Amazonian Society”, Beth Conklin and Lynn Morgan (on Canvas)

Friday, January 22: Review and plenary in-class debate. Topics: personhood, the body and environment in comparative perspective (prepare by reviewing the previous assigned readings)

Monday, January 25: Pierre Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki...*

Wednesday, January 27: Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki...*

Friday, January 29 Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki...*

Monday, February 1: Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki...*

Wednesday, February 3: Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki...*

Friday, February 5: Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki...*

Monday, February 8: Pierre Clastres: “The Duty to Speak” and “Of Torture in Primitive Societies”, from *Society Against the State* by Pierre Clastres (on Canvas)

Wednesday, February 10: George Mentore: “Society, Body and Style: An Archery Contest in an Amerindian Society”

Friday, February 12: Second review of materials and second in-class debate. Topics to include Amerindian notions of power, pain and death.

Monday, February 15: Overing and Passes, *Love and Anger...*

Wednesday, February 17: Overing and Passes, *Love and Anger...*

Friday, February 19: Overing and Passes, *Love and Anger...*

Monday, February 22: Overing and Passes, *Love and Anger...*

ESSAY ONE DUE

Wednesday, February 24: Overing and Passes, *Love and Anger...*

Friday, February 26: Peter Gow: “The Perverse Child: Desire in a Native Amazonian Subsistence Economy”

Monday, February 29

SPRING BREAK

Wednesday, March 2
SPRING BREAK

Friday, March 4
SPRING BREAK

Monday, March 7: Stephen Hugh Jones: “Yesterday’s Luxuries, Tomorrow’s Necessities: Business and Barter and Northwest Amazon”

Wednesday, March 9: Review and discussion of Gow and Hugh-Jones. Topics include theorizing exchange and value in Amerindian societies; the problematics of Western notions of ‘materiality’ in relation to indigenous ontologies; notions of ‘change’.

Friday, March 11
NO CLASS (Invited lecture at Columbia University)

Monday, March 14: McCallum, Cecilia: *Gender and Sociality in Amazonia: How Real People are Made*

Wednesday, March 16: McCallum, Cecilia: *How Real People are Made*

Friday, March 18: McCallum, Cecilia: *How Real People are Made*

Monday, March 21: McCallum, Cecilia: *How Real People are Made*

Wednesday, March 23: Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo: “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism”

Friday, March 25: Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo: “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism” CONT’D: keep reading and trying to work out what he’s saying...

Monday, March 28: Film viewing (title TBA)
ESSAY TWO DUE

Wednesday, March 30: Vilaça, Aparecida: “The Relations between Funerary Cannibalism and Warfare Cannibalism: The Question of Predation”

Friday, April 1: Scherberger, Laura: “The Janus-Faced Shaman”

Monday, April 4: Kohn, Eduardo: select passages from *How Forests Think*

Wednesday, April 6: Course, Magnus: select passages from *Becoming Mapuche*

Friday, April 8: Londono-Sulkin, Carlos: select passages from *People of Substance*

Monday, April 11: Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert: select passages from *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*

Wednesday, April 13: Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert: select passages from *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*

Friday, April 15: Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert: select passages from *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*

Monday, April 18: Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert: select passages from *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*

Wednesday, April 20: Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert: select passages from *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*

Friday, April 22

LAST DAY OF CLASS: REVIEW FOR FINAL EXAM

~Final Exam: 12:00-2:30pm on Wednesday, April 27th