

ANTH204 The Anthropology of Meaning

TR 10:05-11:25

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Zoom office hour: Mondays, 10:00-11:00 <https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/87566237997>

### Overview and Intent:

“What is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything?” This is not a question for 14 weeks of study. “42” will not suffice. And unlike Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker*, Arthur Dent, anthropology is (currently) earth bound. Our aims are more modest, yet also framed by big questions. At the most basic and simple level, anthropology is the study of humanity and what makes our species unique. Is it the possession of language and symbolic representations? Is it our cognitive complexity? Is it religion? Is it our differentiated social groupings? Is it merely sustained bipedalism that freed our hands to build, grow, and create? This course studies these questions in three parts designed to explore how meaning is inscribed on our terms, concepts, things, and peoples, how anthropologists ‘find’ and study meaning, and how people live meaningful lives.

### **Part One: How do humans make meaning?**

Symbolism, in words and images and acts, is one of the of the key markers of humanity. The field of social anthropology and ethnography began with looking to “the Other” to understand their systems of language, the value of things and signs, and how symbolic representations relate to a group’s social structure and perception of the world (worldview). We begin our course with an exploration of the semiotic relationship between sounds and images and the social and cognitive categories that organize and express people’s perceptions and experiences of life. Understanding who people are (individually, group-identities, alterity), how they should act (ethics, morality, idealism, deontology), and what their lives mean (religion, cosmology) begins with the basics: “what is a sign?” (Peirce).

### **Part Two: How do anthropologists study meaning?**

It is common for contemporary ethnographies to begin with a moment of self-reflection, or a statement of acknowledged bias in perception. ‘I am situated here, so I see this.’ Often, this is but a brief blip in a long monograph on x group, in x place, at x time that is essentially a work of interpretation, contextualization, and translation. Part 2 begins with Geertz’s interpretative anthropology and a discussion of the ethnographic mission, and then reviews the methodologies of symbolic and structuralist anthropology. We will explore how anthropologists’ observations and analyses of rites, daily routines, and representations (writings and the arts) can bring about a broader understanding of social life.

### **Part Three: How do people experience meaning?**

Our final section expands on how ‘meaning’, the terms, classifications, rites, and symbols discussed in Parts 1&2, are made manifest in the ‘real world.’ Symbols populate our landscapes. The theoretical divisions and qualifications placed on objects’ and subjects’ assignation of ‘value’ or ‘purity’ or ‘belonging’ are applied to daily life and actuated in

people's everyday decisions from what to wear, what to eat, and who to see. Social constructs of race, gender, class, and sexuality are active forces in individual people's lives and contribute to individuals' perceptions of their selves, and others. Simply, people act on ideas. Meaning is operationalized by educational institutions and governments. Meaning is also inscribed in our media, from TV to ethnographies, the relationship between signification and interpretation create influential representations that affect our perceptions of ourselves and others.

Delivery:

The primary delivery method of this course synchronous zoom lectures on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:05-11:05. These will be recorded (audio and a/v) and posted to MyCourses.

Slides will be posted on MyCourses.

There will be three conferences, which will *replace* a zoom lecture (TR, 10:05-11:05), led by myself and the TAs. After the add/drop date (Jan 22<sup>nd</sup>), the class will be divided into set groups for conferences. My session will be recorded and posted to MyCourses.

**\*\*\*Conference dates: Jan. 28, Feb. 16, March 18\*\*\***

Evaluation:

**\*\*\*Assignments due 11:59pm EST: Feb. 11, March 11, Apr. 8\*\*\***

**Written Assignments:** There will be three written assignments each worth 20% of your final grade and designed to cover the material in Parts 1, 2, and 3, in turn.

**Assignment 1, Social and Linguistic Realities (20%):**

Disseminated on MyCourses on January 26<sup>th</sup> and discussed in **Conference 1 on Jan. 28<sup>th</sup>.**

**Due Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>.** Goal is to consolidate the material in Part 1 through an analysis of a classic debate in the field of linguistic anthropology: Are the limits of your language the limits of your world (Wittgenstein and "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis") or are the limits of your language social (Bernstein, Ahearn)? You will have a choice of prompts to compose an essay on this issue (2-4 pages, double-spaced).

**Assignment 2, Armchair [Symbolic] Anthropology (20%):**

Disseminated on MyCourses and discussed in **Conference 2 on Feb. 16<sup>th</sup>. Due March 11<sup>th</sup>.**

The intent of this assignment is to provide an experience with symbolic analysis and methods of anthropological interpretation explored in Part 2. In a short paper (2-4 pages, double-spaced) you will practice one anthropological method of symbolic analysis and interpretation on a subject of your choosing. Methods will include: life history interview; linguistic or symbolic coding of a sermon, small segment of scripture, or any piece of rhetorical, opinion piece in a newspaper, vlog, or blog; ritual (remote) observation; or order and classification at the grocery store.

**Assignment 3 (20%):** Disseminated on MyCourses and discussed in **Conference 3 on March 18<sup>th</sup>. Due April 8<sup>th</sup>.** Final assignment focuses on Part 3 material on power,

representation, and social categories (race, gender, class) through contemporary, local, debates concerning Bill 21 and Bill 101. Four short-answer questions (paragraph to a half page, double-spaced, in length) (5pts/question).

**Take-home Final Exam (40%):** Comprised of essays and short-answer questions. Open-book, 72 hours to complete, due according to McGill University exam schedule **(TBD)**.

**Part 1 How do humans make meaning?**

**Week 1 (.5) Introducing ‘Meaning:’ ‘It’s life, and life only’**

Jan 7 Syllabus discussion, no reading

**Week 2 Language and Society (“A rose by any other name...”)**

Jan 12 Introduction to Language and Semiotics

Ahearn, Laura M. 2012. Chapter 1: “The Socially Charged Life of Language.” In *Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*, 3-30. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=4714036>

Backup link to ebook: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/960760046>

Jan 14 Representing the World through Signs and Syntax

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. [Excerpt] “Science of the Concrete.” In *The Savage Mind*, 1-22. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pdf on MyCourses

Guest Lecture, Jessica Dolan (Ph.D., McGill)

**Week 3 Social Reality: The Order and Classification of Existence Part 1 (“The sun’s not yellow, it’s chicken.”)**

Jan 19 The Construction of Social Reality

Durkheim, Emile and Marcel Mauss. 2002 (1903). “The Social Genesis of Logical Operations.” In, *Rules and Meaning*, edited by Mary Douglas, 32-37. Taylor and Francis Group.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1222881>

Backup link to ebook: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/731827>

Schutz, A. (1953). “The Frame of Unquestioned Constructs.” In, *Rules and Meaning*, edited by Mary Douglas, 18-20. Taylor and Francis Group.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1222881>

Backup link to ebook: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/731827>

Jan 21 The Socio-linguistic Construction of Time

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 2002 [1940]. "Time is not a Continuum." In, *Rules and Meanings*, edited by Mary Douglas, 75-81. Taylor and Francis Group.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1222881>

Backup link to ebook: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/731827>

Schieffelin, Bambi B. 2002. "Marking Time: The Dichotomizing Discourse of Multiple Temporalities. *Current Anthropology* 43, (Supplement August-October): S5-S17.

<https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1086/341107>

Backup link to ejournal: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/45001881>

**Reminder: Add/Drop Deadline Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup>**

**Week 4 Social Reality Part 2 ("the good, the bad, and the ugly")**

Jan 26 Thinking back, thinking forward: Towards an Anthropology of Values

**Find Assignment 1 on MyCourses.**

Graeber, David. 2001. Chapter 1: "Three Ways of Talking about Value." In, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of our Own Dreams*, 1-22. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1057/9780312299064>

Backup Link to ebook: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/46822270>

Jan 28 CONFERENCE 1 (Summarize Part 1, Aid with Assignment 1)

**Week 5 Social Reality Part 3: Pervasive Duality ("clowns to the left of me, jokers to my right...")**

Feb. 2 Embodied concepts

Hertz, Robert. 1960 (1907). "The Pre-Eminence of the Right Hand: A Study in Religious Polarity." 89-113. Rodney and Claudia Needham, trans. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/619924530> HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access

Pdf on MyCourses

**Feb 4 ZOOM BREAK, NO CLASS, SHORT AUDIO**

Douglas, Mary. 2008 (1979). "Taboo." In, *Magic, Witchcraft and Religion*, edited by Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers.

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/68373489> HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access (pages 64-68)

Pdf in MyCourses (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pp. 50-54)

Douglas, Mary. 1979 (1966). "The Abominations of Leviticus." In, *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach, Fourth Edition*, edited by William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, 149-152.

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/4136443> HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access Service

Pdf on MyCourses.

## **Part 2 How do anthropologists study meaning?**

### **Week 6 Grand Narratives and Generalizing Metaphors Part 1 ("The world is a vampire.")**

Feb 9 Ethnography, the Art and Science of Interpretation

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Chapter 1: Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 3-30. New York: Basic Books.

<https://hdl-handle-net.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/2027/heb.01005>

Backup link to ebook: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/737285>

Feb 11 It's cliché because it's true?

**\*Assignment 1 due, 11:59pm EST, upload to MyCourses.**

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 2003 (1980). [Excerpt] *Metaphors we live by*, 1-32. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/51817207> HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access Service

Pdf on MyCourses.

### **Week 7 Grand Narratives and Generalizing Metaphors Part 2 ("Between thought and expression lies a lifetime")**

Feb 16 CONFERENCE 2 (Assign and discuss Assignment 2; Key terms from Ortner)

Ortner, Sherry B. 2002 [1973]. "Key Symbols." In, *A reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Michael Lambek, 158-167. Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers.

Pdf in MyCourses.

Feb 11 Sensing meaning

Palmeirim, Manuela. 2010. "Discourse on the invisible: senses as metaphor among the Aruwund (Lunda)." *Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16 no. 3: 515-531.  
<https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2010.01637.x>  
Backup Link to ejournal: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/45640491>

### **Week 8 Ritual: Meaning in Action ("Try on your love...try on your smile...try out your God...try on His coat")**

Feb 23 Social Structure and Meaning in Ritual Actions

Turner, Victor. 2002 (1969). Liminality and Communitas. *Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Michel Lambek, 358-373. Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers.  
Pdf in MyCourses.

**Feb 25** Anti-ritual, Anti-structure, and Ritual Structure All the Same

Seamone, Donna Lynne. 2013. "Pentecostalism: Rejection Ritual Formulism and Ritualizing Every Encounter." *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 27, No. 1, Special Issue, The Denial of Ritual and Its Return, pp. 73-84. Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew H. Strathern.

<https://proxy.library.mcgill.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001998030&scope=site>

Backup Link to ejournal: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/56018593>

### **Week 9 Reading Week**

#### **Part 3 How do people experience meaning?**

**Week 10 Epistemology & Power ("They use force to make do what the deciders have decided you must do")**

Mar 9 Categorical Confirmation and Madness

Clark, Jeffrey. 1992. "Madness and Colonisation: The embodiment of power in Pangia." In *Oceania*, 63 (1) Alienating Mirrors: Christianity, Cargo Cults and Colonialism in Melanesia, 15-26.

<https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1002/j.1834-4461.1992.tb00365.x>

Backup link to ejournal: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/60622386>

Mar 11 Institutional Power and Pedagogy

**\* Assignment 2 due, 11:59pm EST, upload to MyCourses**

Davis-McElligott, Joanna. "HANDS UP, DON'T SHOOT: Teaching Black Lives Matter in Louisiana." In *South: A Scholarly Journal*, 50 (2): 114-125.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26610372>

Backup link to ejournal: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/957693489>

**Erica Lagalisse (Ph.D, McGill), guest lecture**

**Week 11 Local Politics of (mis/under)Representation: Bonjour/Hi, and Loi 21&101 (“Ça va donc bien mal su’a rue principale. Depuis qu’y ont construit le McDonald.”)**

Mar 16 Secularism and Sanctified Landscapes

Kaell, Hillary 2017 “Marking Memory: Heritage Work and Devotional Labor in Quebec’s Croix de Chemin.” *In Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader*. Kristin Norget, Valentina Napolitano, and Maya Mayblin, eds.

<https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1525/california/9780520288423.003.0011>

Backup link to book: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/952200151>

**Mar 18 CONFERENCE 3 (Discuss Assignment 3 and local political debates)**

**Week 12 Marking Selves and Distinguishing Others (“I’ll be your mirror, reflect what you are, in case you don’t know”)**

Mar 23 and 25 “All the world’s a stage”

Goffman, Erving. Introduction (1-17) and Chapter 1, Performances (17-76). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, New York: Double Day Anchor Books.

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/256298> HathiTrust Emergency Temporary

Access Service

Pdf on MyCourses

**Week 13 Marking Selves, Distinguishing Others...with Style (“Go ahead, Mr. Businessman, you can’t dress like me.”)**

Mar 30 “Taste” and “Class”

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. “Conclusion: Classes and Classifications.” 466-484 and [Excerpt] “Postscript” through “The ‘Taste of Reflection’ and the ‘Taste of Sense’” section 485-191. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press.

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/10323218> HathiTrust Emergency Temporary

Access Service

Pdf on MyCourses

Apr 1 Classy Sexy (Manolo Blahniks) versus Trashy Sexy (white, plastic stilettos)

Skeggs, Bev. 2005. “The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation.” *Sociology* 39(5S): 965-982.

<https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1177/0038038505058381>

Backup link to ejournal: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/316301008>

**Week 14 Wrap and Review (“say what you mean, mean what you think, and think anything, why not?!”)**

Apr 6 Representation and Interpretation

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1997. “The Interpretation of Culture(s) after Television.” In *Representations*, 59, Special Issue: The Fate of “Culture”: Geertz and Beyond, 109-134.

<https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.2307/2928817>

Backup link to ejournal: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/45953560>

**Apr 8 Review Session for Group 1 (Half class assigned to attend)**

**\* Assignment 3 due, 11:59pm EST, upload to MyCourses**

**Week 14.5 Review Continued**

**Apr 13 Review Session for Group 2 (Second half of class to attend)**

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information). (approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

“L’université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)”).

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.” (approved by Senate on 21 January 2009 - see also the section in this document on Assignments and evaluation.)

“Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue).”