

**Professor Margot Weiss**

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This course takes up the provocation of a "decolonial" or "abolitionist" anthropology in contemporary ethnographic writing and theory. In 2020, Ryan Cecil Jobson, building on Savannah Shange, urged us to "let anthropology burn": to abandon its liberal humanism, especially the tendency "to refuse complicity in the structures of dispossession taken up as topics of research" (261). This abolitionist call--widely cited, debated, and reckoned with--marks a major turn in cultural anthropology. In refusing the discipline's standard liberal/progressive forms, arguments, and methods--an end to anthropology as it is currently practiced--this new turn seeks an opening into a more liberatory, otherwise anthropology.

The last major "turn," which reorientated the entire field of cultural anthropology for decades, was in the 1980s: what is usually called "writing culture" (after George Marcus and James Clifford's 1986 book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*). The 1970s-1980s heralded new era of reflexivity (and interest in positionality), a new ethical position on representation (and its complex politics), a critique of ethnography's traditional forms (and writerly modes), and a discipline-wide reckoning with anthropology's history and politics, especially in relation to colonialism (and neo-colonialism). For the past forty+ years, the field has grappled with the core questions raised in this turn.

In this advanced reading-centered seminar, we will take up the possibilities and provocations of the new decolonializing/abolitionist turn. We will consider interventions in anthropology's usual epistemologies, from arguments on decolonizing and abolitionist anthropology, to the politics of witnessing and ethnographic refusal, approaches to more-than-human anthropologies, queer/ing anthropology, the craft of ethnographic storytelling, and experiments in ethnographic poetry and fiction. Designed as a true seminar and organized around collaborative study, we will reflect together on the challenges and potentials of new forms of ethnography as way of knowing, form of argument, and genre of representation. The centerpiece of our course is the collaborative close reading of a series of cutting-edge ethnographies that challenge the boundaries of disciplinary practice and push toward an otherwise anthropology.

**Course Readings**

1. Jason Pine, 2019. *The Alchemy of Meth*. U of Minnesota Press. 9781517907716
2. Laurence Ralph, 2020. *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence*. Chicago. 9780226650098
3. Ana-Maurine Lara, 2020. *Queer Freedom : Black Sovereignty*. SUNY. 9781438481104
4. Nomi Stone, 2019. *Kill Class: Poems*. Tupelo Press. 9781946482198
5. Elizabeth Povinelli, 2021. *The Inheritance* Duke UP 9781478014034
6. Savannah Shange. 2019. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*. Duke 9781478006688

*Books we will read (largish) parts of:*

- E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea : Black Gay Men of the South*. 9780807872260

- Maya Stovall, 2020. *Liquor Store Theater*. Duke. 9781478011125

These books should be available at the RJ Julia Bookstore. They are also on reserve at Olin. You are welcome to buy the books elsewhere and in any format that works for you. All of the articles we'll be reading for this course are available on the course Moodle.

### **Course Assignments**

- Participation and discussion ----- 25%
- 5 Reading Reflections (~3 page) ----- 45%
- Final paper or project (optional if taking course CR/U) ----- 30%

### Participation

This seminar is designed for an active learner; your participation is crucial to its success. Aim for a collective approach; our discussion should allow us each to think out loud, with each other. Come to class ready to ask questions, to think about what is at stake, and to begin to forge your own analysis. In this class, we value "half formed" thoughts –do not feel that you need to master the material in order to comment on it. When responding to the material and each other, aim to be generous, sympathetic, and supportive readers and listeners. Your participation should be grounded in the reading; pointing us to relevant sections of an ethnography or article or to a particular quote is most productive. Remember, participation does not just mean talking, it means contributing to our collective learning – asking questions and expanding others' insights is often as useful as (maybe even more useful than) making declarations. To aid in class discussion, please bring in particular quotations or pages that you wish to discuss.

### Reading Reflections

Our course is clustered in themes, typically with one day of ground-clearing, positional, or theoretical essays and one day where we bring that material to bear on an ethnography. On the day that we'll be discussing the ethnography, please bring to class a short (~3 page) reflection/reading paper that begins to connect the analytical readings to the ethnography.

These papers give you a chance to connect and synthesize analytical material/concepts with ethnographic readings. You'll want to isolate one core intervention (for instance, in our unit on "Suffering, Survival, Witness," you might pick Deb Thomas's "witnessing 2.0" or Joel Robbins's "suffering slot"), define/unpack that intervention (~1 page), and then show how the ethnography (in this example, Laurence Ralph's *The Torture Letters*) illustrates, undermines, extends, contests, builds on, etc. that intervention. Be specific with this part too -- you don't have space for a full book review; instead, you'll want to find a couple of moments in Ralph that really showcase what you think "witnessing 2.0"(etc.) does or can do (or, if you like, fails to do).

As with most things anthropological, you'll want to tackle high-level argument/analysis in a way that is grounded in concrete and specific stories: balancing conceptual arguments with ethnographic detail and particularity--the more specific, the better (use quotes from people interviewed, particular stories that illustrate your point, excerpts that show the writing style you are analyzing, etc.). Use these papers as a way to distill the core of a particular issue for yourself. Think of them as a relatively informal first draft of what could be a much longer paper, and keep it as tightly focused as possible: don't waste space with extensive introductions, conclusions, or repetition. If something comes up in class and you want to revise your paper, you may (a final version is due by Friday)--but I encourage you to be less perfectionist with these and instead use them to develop and record your ideas as you move through the course.

### Final paper or project (optional if taking course CR/U)

Your final assignment is a paper/project of 8-10 double-spaced pages (or equivalent). Broadly, the paper/project must be relevant for the course. It might be an expansion of one of your Reflection Papers, a research paper on a new topic, a piece of your own ethnographic writing (any style, any project), or a review essay (of 2 or 3 ethnographies in rel. to a specific question). If you'd like to do something creative / otherwise, just let me know. You'll want to choose a topic in which you are particularly interested, as a way to think about the possibilities of an otherwise anthropology (in topic, form, genre, method, you name it). If you are having trouble coming up with a topic, meet with me early in the term so that we can brainstorm together. You will need to meet with me to discuss your ideas; a ~1-page proposal, with a sketch of the project (research questions, sources, arc), is due April 15. Final papers are due May 12 by 10pm (this is the scheduled exam period for this class)

### **Course Policies**

**1. Absences:** You may miss 1 class without explanation or penalty: think of this as a sick (or health) day, and take it when needed. No need to let me know or provide detail unless you are dealing with something serious, in which case we should have a more detailed conversation that will likely include your Class Dean. Missing 3 or more classes is grounds for No Credit.

**2. Extensions:** In a typical semester, I rarely grant extensions, except for emergency situations and as disability accommodations—in part because I have found that pushing off work can make things worse for the procrastinators and anxious among us (myself included) and a crappy paper turned in while ideas are fresh is often better, pedagogically, than a “perfect” one turned in much later or not at all. However, this semester there is the small matter of the Ongoing Global Pandemic. So, if you are having any difficulty with deadlines, please be in touch and let's talk about it.

**3. Office Hours:** I have office hours on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays; schedule an appointment using my online calendar: <http://calendly.com/margot-weiss>. Please come and talk to me about course material, dynamics, or any concerns or ideas you might have. If you cannot make any of my available times, email me and we will work out an alternative time to meet.

### **Students with Disabilities**

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a disability as defined by the ADA. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible. If you have a disability, or think that you might have a disability, please contact Accessibility Services in order to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. Accessibility Services is located in North College, rooms 021/218, or can be reached by email ([accessibility@wesleyan.edu](mailto:accessibility@wesleyan.edu)) or phone (860-685-2332).

### **Honor Code**

All work must be done in compliance with the Honor Code. If you need help with proper citations or you have questions on how to avoid plagiarism, let me know or contact the **Writing Workshop**: <https://www.wesleyan.edu/writing/writingworkshop/index.html>

## Course Schedule

NOTE: in keeping with a more collaborative style, this syllabus is subject to change!

### Week 1: Introduction: Beyond "Writing Culture" Toward an Otherwise Anthropology

#### Jan 31: Otherwise, Possible, Critical, Decolonizing

- An Otherwise Anthropology [link](#)
- Anand Pandian, 2019. "Introduction" to *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times*
- D. Soyini Madison, 2011. "Introduction to Critical Ethnography: Theory and Method" *Critical Ethnography Method, Ethics, and Performance*
- Watch: "The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn? Race, Racism, and Its Reckoning in American Anthropology" [link](#)

in class: free write toward otherwise

rec: Orin Starn, 2015. "Introduction" to *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*

rec: Faye Harrison, 2016. "Theorizing in Ex-Centric Sites," *Anthropological Theory*

rec: John Jackson, 2012. "Ethnography Is, Ethnography Ain't" *Cultural Anthropology*

rec: Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane, 2017. "Imagining" in *A Different Kind of Ethnography: Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies*

(rec): Aimee Meredith Cox, "Afterword: Why Anthropology?" [link](#)

### Weeks 2 + 3: Storytelling and the Craft of Ethnographic Writing

#### Feb 7: Storytelling, Theory, and Writing (otherwise stories)

- Carole McGranahan, 2020 "Anthropology as Theoretical Storytelling" *Writing Anthropology*
- Kirin Narayan, 2012. "Story and Theory" in *Alive in the Writing : Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*
- Savannah Shange, 2019. "Play Aunties and Dyke Bitches: Gender, Generation, and the Ethics of Black Queer Kinship," *The Black Scholar*
- John L. Jackson, 2005. "Real Fictions" in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*
- (rec): Michael Jackson, 2002. "Preface" to *Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*

in class: free write toward otherwise stories

(rec): Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 2015. "The Power in the Story," in *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*

(rec): Ruth Behar, "Read More, Write Less" *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment*

(rec): Didier Fassin, 2014. "True life, real lives: revisiting the boundaries between ethnography and fiction." *American Ethnologist*

(rec): Paul Stoller, 2007. "Ethnography/Memoir/Imagination/Story." *Anthropology and Humanism*

(rec): Helena Wulff, 2021. "Writing anthropology," *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*

(rec): Darcy Alexandra, 2015. "Are We Listening Yet? Participatory Knowledge Production through Media Practice: Encounters of Political Listening"

#### Feb 14: Storytelling Ethnography

- Jason Pine, 2019. *The Alchemy of Meth*. U of Minnesota Press.

reading reflection #1 due

**Weeks 4 + 5: Suffering, Survival, Witness:  
The Representational Politics of Empathy**

**Feb 21: Witnessing 2.0 and the Suffering Subject**

- Deb Thomas, 2019. "Introduction" to *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair* ("Doubt" and "Gallery 1" also in .pdf)
- Joel Robbins, 2013. "Beyond the suffering subject: toward an anthropology of the good" *JRAI*
- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1991. "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness," in *Recapturing Anthropology*
- Whitney Battle-Baptiste, 2020. "Writing to Live: On Finding Strength While Watching Ferguson" in *Writing Anthropology*
- (rec): excerpt from Ruth Behar, 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*

in class: free write toward otherwise vulnerabilities

(rec): Adia Benton, 2020. "Mourning, Survival, and Time: Writing Through Crisis" in *Writing Anthropology*

(rec): Angela Garcia, 2016. "The Blue Years: An Ethnography of a Prison Archive" *Cultural Anthropology*

(rec): Gilberto Rosas and Carlos Martínez-Cano, 2018. "Witnessing "Zero Tolerance" at the Border" *Anthropology News*

(rec): Carole McGranahan, 2020. "Ethnographic witnessing Or, hope is the first anthropological emotion" *Journal of Legal Anthropology*

(rec): Naisargi Dave, 2014. "Witness: Humans, Animals, and the Politics of Becoming," *Cultural anthropology*

**Feb 28: Ethnographic Witness, Ethnographic Responsibility**

- Laurence Ralph, 2020. *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence*. Chicago  
reading reflection #2 due

**Weeks 6 + 7: Other Beings and (Partial) Relations:  
Queer and More-than-Human Anthropologies**

**Mar 7: Queer Relationalities**

- Ana-Maurine Lara, *Queer Freedom : Black Sovereignty*. SUNY.

--> Prof. Lara visits my other class March 1 if you want to crash!

in class: free write toward otherwise relationalities

>>>Spring Break<<<>>>Spring Break<<<>>>Spring Break<<<>>>Spring Break<<<

**Mar 21: More-than-Human Anthropologies**

- S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, 2010. "The emergence of multispecies ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology*
- Eduardo Kohn, 2008 "How dogs dream: Amazonian natures and the politics of transspecies engagement" *American Ethnologist*

- Eva Hayward, 2010. "Fingeryeyes: Impressions of Cup Corals" *Cultural Anthropology*
  - Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Feifei Zhou, *Feral Atlas: The More-than-Human Anthropocene* (online)
  - (rec) Marisol De La Cadena, 2021. " Not Knowing: In the Presence of . . ." in *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis* -- with -- Marisol De La Cadena, 2015. "Preface: Ending This Book Without Nazario Turpo" in *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*
    - (rec): Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar 2011. "Interspecies" *Social Text*
    - (rec): Elain Gan, 2021. "Diagrams Making Multispecies Temporalities Visible" in *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis*
- reading reflection #3 due

## Weeks 8 + 9 + 10: Experiments in Ethnographic Genre

### Mar 28: Challenges to Ethnographic Form: Graphic/Image

- Elizabeth Povinelli, 2021. *The Inheritance*. Duke.
- In class: Lochlann Jain, 2019. *Things That Art: A Graphic Menagerie of Enchanting Curiosity*  
 In class: Miyarrka Media, Paul Gurrumuruwuy, Jennifer Deger, Enid Gurunulmiwuy, Meredith Balanydjarrk, James Ganambarr, and Kayleen Djingadjingawuy. 2019. *Phone & Spear*.  
 in class: free draw otherwise
- (rec): Rachel Douglas-Jones, 2021. "Drawing as Analysis: Thinking in Images, Writing in Words" in *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis*
  - (rec): Graphic Ethnography issue of Anthropology News [link](#)
  - (rec): Michael Taussig, 2011. *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*
  - (rec): Andrew Causey, 2016. *Drawn to See: Drawing as an Ethnographic Method*.
  - (rec): Sherine Hamdy, 2017. *Lissa: a story about medical promise, friendship, and revolution*.

### April 4: Ethnographic Poetry

- Nomi Stone, 2019. *Kill Class: Poems*. Tupelo Press.
  - Nomi Stone, tbd.
- Nomi joins us in class!
- (rec): Nomi Stone, 2020. "Poetry and Anthropology" in *Writing Anthropology*
  - (rec): Selection of poetry from *Sapiens* and *Anthropology and Humanism*
  - (rec): anthropod: "What Does Anthropology Sound Like: Poetry: Darcy Alexandra [link](#)
  - (rec): "On Queer Poetics, Writing Courageously, and Becoming Otherwise: An Interview with Nomi Stone" by Amanda Newell [link](#)

### April 11: Multimedia/Film/Performance Ethnography

- *Sweet Tea*
    - E. Patrick Johnson and John L. Jackson, documentary "Making Sweet Tea"
    - Excerpts of Johnson, *Sweet Tea*
    - in class: performances of Johnson, *Sweet Tea*
  - Maya Stovall, *Liquor Store Theater*
    - in class: dance performances of Maya Stovall
- reading reflection #4 due

**April 15:** final paper/project proposal due

**Weeks 11 + 12: New Epistemologies:  
Abolition Anthropology and the Politics of Refusal**

**April 18: The Politics of Unknowing/Refusal**

- Catherine Besteman, 2020 "On Ethnographic Unknowability" in *Writing Anthropology*
- Kamala Visweswaran, 1994. "Refusing the Subject" in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*
- John Jackson, 2013. "Thin" in *Thin Description*
- Audra Simpson, 2016. "Consent's Revenge" *Cultural Anthropology*
- Ryan Cecil Jobson, "The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn" + commentaries in *AA*

in class: free write toward refusal

(rec): Audra Simpson, 2007 "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship" *Junctures*

(rec): Sherry Ortner, 1995 "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*

(rec): Openings and Retrospectives on "Theorizing Refusal," 2016, *Cultural Anthropology*

(rec): Savannah Shange, 2019. "Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality, and the Refusal of Ethnography" *Transforming Anthropology*

--> Savannah's new FA on abolition if it is out! <--

(rec): James Clifford. 1983. "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations*

**April 25: Abolition Anthropology**

- Savannah Shange. 2019. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*.

Savannah joins us in class!

reading reflection #5 due

**Week 13: Conclusion**

**May 2: Review & wrap-up**

Final papers due: May 12 by 10pm (this is the scheduled exam period for this class)