

Topic in Ethnography: The Anthropology of the Body

ANTH5403
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Spring 2025

DRAFT SYLLABUS: SOME DETAILS MAY BE REVISED

Lecture time	Tu 10:30–12:15
Tutorial time	Tu 13:30–14:15
Lecturer	Niko Besnier
Office hours	Online and by appointment
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Course Description

The body plays a major role in how human beings develop a sense of self and identity; it is through the body that humans operate in the world; the body is a source of pleasure and pain; and it gives humans advantages and disadvantages in the socio-economic contexts in which they live (e.g., on the job market, in intimate relationships, in politics, on social media). However, these dynamics can differ widely across and within societies; for example, in some societies, people view plumpness as an attractive attribute, while in others it is a sign of ill health and moral depravity. Because anthropologists are concerned with context and comparison, they are in prime position to shed light on these patterns, relate them to other aspects of social life and cultural systems, and make theoretical inferences from what they observe. This course will explore how anthropologists go about understanding the body and will provide you with analytical tools to better understand how humans relate to their own body and the bodies of others.

Learning Outcomes

- An understanding of how the body is shaped by society, culture, politics, economics, and history
- An understanding of how anthropologists approach these questions and shed light on them in ways that complement and sometimes challenge other approaches
- An appreciation of how social and cultural theory is needed to understand the constitution of the body beyond commonsense
- An appreciation of how a focus on the body can shed light of larger questions in anthropology and the social sciences

Course Format

The lectures will discuss the readings in their broader contexts and introduce other materials of relevance. You will benefit from the lectures only if you have done the

required readings ahead of time. You are welcome to ask questions and raise discussion points during lectures. Tutorials will be interactive, with additional time for questions and discussion.

Physical presence is a basic requirement for the course. Absences are generally only permitted with a medical doctor's note or in case of a personal emergency. If you have to miss class, please e-mail me beforehand and it is your responsibility to obtain notes from your fellow students.

Assessment

Sit-Down Examination (40%)

The examination will consist of a set of questions bearing on the readings and content of the lectures. This is an "open book" examination, meaning that you are authorized to consult your lecture notes and the readings while working on it. The date of the examination will be provided in the final version of the syllabus.

Research paper (40%)

You will write a paper focused on a research topic of your own choosing relevant to the topic of the course. Your paper will engage with the ideas presented in at least two of the readings for the course. The maximum length is 2,000 words. You will submit a one-paragraph paper proposal by the end of the 5th week of the semester, which will provide as clear a description of what you will write in the paper, along with a title and a preliminary list of sources (5–8 references). The due date will be provided in the final version of the syllabus.

Participation and Discussion Board Postings (20%)

Participation: Participation includes doing the readings, coming to all the lectures and tutorials, asking questions, and taking part in tutorial discussions.

Discussion board postings: In the course of the semester, you are required to make five substantial contributions to the discussion board (minimum 100 words), due on Friday before 17:00, which can be an informed comment on the readings or the lectures or a response to another student's comment.

Practicalities Relevant to the Book Review and Examination

- You must write clearly, concisely, and in an organized fashion. Your texts must begin with an introduction and end it with a conclusion, use sections, section titles, and paragraphs. If relevant, you must use a standard method of citing and referencing sources.
- You will not be penalized for grammar, vocabulary, or spelling mistakes, although you are invited to be as careful as possible with language, using your computer spellchecker.
- Remember to write your name and the name of the course, and to provide a title to your assignment.

- The exam answers and book reviews cannot exceed the word limit (exclusive of headings and references) and you must write the total number of words at the end of your answers and book review.
- Book reviews have no footnotes and make very limited use of quotes, and only list references cited in the text.
- Submit your files in a format that can be opened with MS Word.
- You must submit each assignment through Blackboard, which closes down at the time specified.

For the book review, you will receive a one-point penalty for each of the following:

- Exceeding the word limit or failing to provide a word count
- Failing to provide your name and the title of the assignment.

Study materials

Selected readings, all required. Students are expected to have done the readings ahead of course meetings and to be able to discuss them when called upon.

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism is a serious offense. Using AI-based writing programs (such as ChatGPT) is considered to be plagiarism. Students are required by university policy to submit all take-home assignments to VeriGuide. A take-home assignment without a signed declaration from VeriGuide will not be graded.

University Policy on Academic Integrity:

http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_htm_files_%282013-14%29/p06.htm

University Policy on VeriGuide:

https://academic.veriguide.org/academic/login_CUHK.aspx

Grade Descriptors

- A** Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. The argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. The work goes beyond merely summarizing key ideas. The work clearly differentiates between the position of the author versus the position(s) the author wishes to challenge. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims.
- A-** Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.
The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.
- B** Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.
The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence. There is some confusion over what position the author has taken versus the position(s) the author wishes to challenge.
- C** Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged or the paper fails to directly address the prompt. The argument and the writing is not clear.

- D Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes. The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing.
- F Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements. The work has failed to respond to the assignment prompt.

Programme

Please do the readings *ahead* of course meetings and bring questions and comments to the meetings.

Week 1: The body at the convergence of society, culture, politics, and history: from Marcel Mauss to Michel Foucault and beyond.

Readings

- Mauss, Marcel. 1973. "Techniques of the Body." *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1: 70–88. (First published 1923.) <https://bit.ly/3n0nd3q>
- Foucault, Michel. 1984. "The Body of the Condemned." In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 170–178. New York: Pantheon. (First published 1975.)
<http://www.faculty.umb.edu/heike.schotten/readings/Foucault,%20The%20Body%20of%20the%20Condemned.pdf>

Week 2: The body, its boundaries, and its excretions.

Readings

- Douglas, Mary. 2001. "Secular Defilement." In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, 30–41. London: Routledge. (First published 1966.) <https://bit.ly/3rFH9wo>
- Farmer, Paul. 1988. "Bad Blood, Spoiled Milk: Bodily Fluids as Moral Barometers in Rural Haiti." *American Ethnologist* 15, no. 1: 62–83.

Week 3: The fat body, the thin body.

Readings

- Hardin, Jessica. 2018. "Embedded Narratives: Metabolic Disorders and Pentecostal Conversion in Samoa." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 32, no. 1: 22–41.
- Lester, Rebecca J. 2017. "Self-governance, Psychotherapy, and the Subject of Managed Care: Internal Family Systems Therapy and the Multiple Self in a US Eating-Disorders Treatment Center." *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 1: 23–35.

Week 4: The exercising body.

Readings

- Besnier, Niko. 2011. "Shaping the Modern Body." In *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation*, 183–204. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lucia, Amanda L. 2018. "Saving Yogis: Spiritual Nationalism and the Proselytizing Missions of Global Yoga." In *Asian Migrants and Religious Experience: From Missionary Journeys to Labor Mobility*, Bernardo E. Brown

and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, eds., 35–50. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Week 5: The sporting body.

Readings

- Besnier, Niko. 2012. "The Athlete's Body and the Global Condition: Tongan Rugby Players in Japan." *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 3: 491–510.
- Brownell, Susan. 1995. Chapter from *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Week 6: The racialized body.

Readings

- Roth-Gordon, Jennifer. 2013. "Racial Malleability and the Sensory Regime of Politically Conscious Brazilian Hip Hop." *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 18, no. 2: 294–313.
- M'Charek, Amade. 2020. 'Tentacular Faces: Race and the Return of the Phenotype in Forensic Identification'. *American Anthropologist* 122, no. 2: 369–380.

Week 7: The sensing body.

Readings

- Classen, Constance. 1997. "Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses." *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153: 401–412.
- Daughtry, J. Martin. 2014. "Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence." *Social Text* 119, no. 2: 25–51.

Week 8: The disabled body.

Readings

- Açıksöz, Salih Can. 2012. "Sacrificial Limbs of Sovereignty: Disabled Veterans, Masculinity, and Nationalist Politics in Turkey." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 26, no. 1: 4–25.
- Hartblay, Cassandra. 2017. "Good Ramps, Bad Ramps: Centralized Design Standards and Disability Access in Urban Russian Infrastructure." *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 1: 9–22.

Week 9: Wrapping the body.

Readings

- Durham, Deborah. 1999. "The Predicament of Dress: Polyvalency and the Ironies of Cultural Identity." *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 2: 389–411.
- Buggenhagen, Beth. 2012. "Fashioning Piety: Women's Dress, Money, and Faith among Senegalese Muslims in New York City." *City & Society* 24, no. 1: 84–104.

Weeks 10: Beautifying the body.

Readings

- Turton, David. 2004. "Lip-Plates and the 'People who Take Photographs': Uneasy Encounters between Mursi and Tourists in Southern Ethiopia." *Anthropology Today* 20, no. 3: 3–8.

- Mallon, Sean. 2010. "Samoan Tattooing, Cosmopolitans, Global Culture." In *Tatau: Samoan Tattoo, New Zealand Art, Global Culture*, edited by Sean Mallon, Peter Brunt, and Nicholas Thomas, 15-34. Wellington, New Zealand: Te Papa Press. [copy available on Blackboard]

Week 11: Modifying the body.

Readings

- Edmonds, Alexander. 2007. "The Poor Have the Right to Be Beautiful': Cosmetic Surgery in Neoliberal Brazil." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2: 363–381.
- Brownell, Susan. 2005. "China Reconstructs: Cosmetic Surgery and Nationalism in the Reform Era." In *Asian Medicine and Globalization*, edited by Joseph S. Alter, 132–150. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. [copy available on Blackboard]

Week 12: The traumatized body.

Readings

- Caton, Steven C., and Bernardo Zacka. 2010. "Abu Ghraib, the Security Apparatus, and the Performativity of Power." *American Anthropologist* 37, no. 2: 203–211.
- Allen, Lori A. 2009. "Martyr Bodies in the Media: Human Rights, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Immediation in the Palestinian Intifada." *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 1: 161–180.

Week 13: The aging body.

Readings

- Lamb, Sarah. 2019. "On Being (Not) Old: Agency, Self-care, and Life-course Aspirations in the United States." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 33, no. 2: 263–281.
- Aulino, Felicity. 2017. "Rituals of Care for the Elderly in Northern Thailand: Merit, Morality, and the Everyday of Long-term Care." *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 1: 91–102.

Week 14: The dying and dead body.

Readings

- Bernstein, Anya. 2015. "Freeze, Die, Come to Life: The Many Paths to Immortality in Post-Soviet Russia." *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 4: 766–781.
- Allison, Anne. 2023. "The (Un)Social Smells of Death: Changing Tides in Contemporary Japan." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 21, no. 6.

Week 15: Conclusion: The body as a fulcrum.