

Topics in Ethnography: The Anthropology of the Body

ANTH2403
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Spring 2025

Lecture time	M 12:30–14:15 (6–27 Jan, 10–24 Feb, 10 Mar–14 Apr)
Lecture location	UCC 110
Tutorial time	M 14:30–15:15 (6–27 Jan, 10–24 Feb, 10 Mar–14 Apr)
Tutorial location	UCC 110
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 many fundamental sensations, such as pleasure and pain; and it gives human beings 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 why 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 focus on the readings in their broader contexts and introduce other relevant materials. Students will benefit from the lectures only if they have done the required readings ahead of time. Students are welcome and encouraged to ask questions and make comments during lectures. Tutorials will be interactive, with additional time for questions and discussion.

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

Assessment

Take-Home Test (40%)

The take-home test will consist of three broad questions bearing on the readings and content of the lectures. This is an "open book" test, meaning that you are authorized to consult your lecture notes and the readings while working on it. The questions will be made available on 14 April 9:00 and the answers will be due on 16 April 17:00.

Book Review (40%)

You will choose one ethnographic monograph focused on the body and write a critical review of it following a specific format. You may consult the lecturer about your choice, but you must do so by 27 January. You have the entire term to work on this assignment, but you are encouraged to begin as early as possible. You will find a handout that outlines the specifics of this assignment on Blackboard. The book review is due on 14 April.

Participation and Discussion Board Postings (20%)

Participation: Participation includes demonstrating that you have done the readings ahead of tutorials, attending all the lectures and tutorials, and participating in tutorial discussions.

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

Practicalities Relevant to the Test and Book Review

- 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 asked to be as careful as possible with language, using your spellchecker.
- Remember to write your name and the name of the course, and to provide a title to your assignment.
- The test answers and book review cannot exceed the word limit (exclusive of headings and references) and you must write the total number of words at the end.
- 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 your book review and test 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_hm_files_%282013-14%29/p06.htm

University Policy on VeriGuide:

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

Grade Descriptors

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| 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

Week 1 (6 Jan): The body at the convergence of society, culture, politics, and history: from Marcel Mauss to Michel Foucault and beyond.

Readings

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2005. "The Peasant and His Body." *Ethnography* 5, no. 4: 579–599. (First published 1962.)

Week 2 (13 Jan): 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>

Week 3 (20 Jan): The fat body and the thin body.

Readings

- Sobo, Elisa J. 1994. "The Sweetness of Fat: Health, Procreation, and Sociability in Rural Jamaica." In *Many Mirrors: Body Image and Social Relations*, edited by Nicole Landry Sault, 132–154. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Week 4 (27 Jan): The exercising body.

Readings

- Archambault, Julie Soleil. 2021. "In Pursuit of Fitness: Bodywork, Temporality and Self-Improvement in Mozambique." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 4: 521–539.

Week 5 (3 Feb): No class.

Week 6 (10 Feb): The sporting body.

Readings

- Borenstein, Hannah. 2021. "Labouring Athletes, Labouring Mothers: Ethiopian Women Athletes' Bodies at Work." In *Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age*, Niko Besnier, Domenica Gisela Calabrò y Daniel Guinness, ed., 65–82. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Week 7 (17 Feb): The sensing body.

Readings

- Classen, Constance. 1997. "Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses." *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153: 401–412.

Week 8 (24 Feb): The disabled body.

Readings

- Açiksöz, Salih Can. 2012. "Sacrificial Limbs of Sovereignty: Disabled Veterans, Masculinity, and Nationalist Politics in Turkey." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 26, no. 1: 4–25.

Week 9 (3 Mar): No class.

Week 10 (10 Mar): The well body.

Readings

- Besnier, Niko. 2024. "Wellness." *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (online).

Week 11 (17 Mar): Undressing and dressing the body.

Readings

- Frank, Katherine. 2010. "Body Talk: Revelations of Self and Body in Contemporary Strip Clubs." In *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface*, edited by Adeline Masquelier, 96–121. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Week 12 (24 Mar): Beautifying the body.

Readings

- 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 13 (31 Mar): 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.

Week 14 (7 Apr): The aging body.

Readings

- Keimig, Rose K. 2020. "Chronic Living and Delayed Death in Chinese Eldercare Institutions." *Anthropology and Aging* 41, no. 1: 17–30.
<https://anthro-age.pitt.edu/ojs/anthro-age/article/view/210>

Week 15 (14 Apr): The dying body and the dead body.

Readings

- Allison, Anne. 2023. "The (Un)Social Smells of Death: Changing Tides in Contemporary Japan." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 21, no. 6. <https://apjjf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/article-428.pdf>