

Topics in Ethnography: The Anthropology of the Body

ANTH5403
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 15:30–16:15 (6–27 Jan, 10–24 Feb, 10 Mar–14 Apr)
Tutorial location	NAH 401
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.

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 27 January, which will provide as clear a description of what you intend to write, along with a title and a preliminary list of sources (5–8 references). The research paper 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 Research Paper

- 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 research paper cannot exceed the word limit (exclusive of headings and references) and you must write the total number of words at the end.
- Short research papers 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 research paper and test through Blackboard, which closes down at the time specified.

For the research paper, 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 utilities (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.jsp

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

Week 1 (6 Jan): 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>
- 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>
- Farmer, Paul. 1988. "Bad Blood, Spoiled Milk: Bodily Fluids as Moral Barometers in Rural Haiti." *American Ethnologist* 15, no. 1: 62–83.

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.
- 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.

Week 4 (27 Jan): The exercising body.

Readings

- Petrzela, Natalia Mehlman. 2016. "When Wellness Is a Dirty Word." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 May.
- 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

- Besnier, Niko, Daniel Guinness, Mark Hann, and Uroš Kovač. 2018. "Rethinking Masculinity in the Neoliberal Age: Cameroonian Footballers, Fijian Rugby Players, Senegalese Wrestlers." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 4: 839–872.
- 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.
- Daughtry, J. Martin. 2014. "Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence." *Social Text* 119, no. 2: 25–51.

Week 8 (24 Feb): The disabled body.

Readings

- Kisch, Shifra. 2004. "Negotiating (Genetic) Deafness in a Bedouin Community". In *Genetics, Disability, Deafness*, edited by John Vickrey Van Cleve, 195–227. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Açıksöz, 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* (web link TBA).
- Chen, Nancy N. 2020. "Making Memories: Chinese Foodscapes, Medicinal Foods, and Generational Eating." *Memory Studies* 13, no. 5: 820–832.

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.
- Leshkovich, Ann Marie, and Carla Jones. 2003. "What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?" *Fashion Theory* 7, no. 3/4: 281–300.

Week 12 (24 Mar): 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.

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.
- Miller, Laura. 2021. "Deracialisation or Body Fashion? Cosmetic Surgery and Body Modification in Japan." *Asian Studies Review* 45, no. 2: 217–237.

Week 14 (7 Apr): 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.
- 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

- Romain, Tiffany. 2010. "Extreme Life Extension: Investing in Cryonics for the Long, Long Term." *Medical Anthropology* 29, no. 2: 194–215.
- Allison, Anne. 2023. "The (Un)Social Smells of Death: Changing Tides in Contemporary Japan." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 21, no. 6. <https://apjff.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/article-428.pdf>