

ETHNOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS ACROSS CULTURES

A close-up photograph of a person's face, focusing on their striking blue eyes and dark, well-defined eyebrows. The person is wearing a vibrant, multi-colored headscarf with shades of purple, blue, and pink, adorned with small yellow polka dots. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple.

AN INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY

Dr. Francine Barone
Human Relations Area Files
at Yale University

COURSE DESCRIPTION



Through the comparative study of different cultures, anthropology explores the most fundamental questions about what it means to be human. This introductory course encourages students to explore cultural similarities and differences to better understand how culture shapes who we are: our societies, our shared meanings, and our everyday lives. Beginning with unpacking the concept of culture in anthropology, each week covers a different anthropological theme, including love, ritual performance, gender, language, food, and kinship.

Evaluating cultural universals allows students to contemplate the rich diversity of the human experience. With remote learning in mind, wholly online sources on timely topics are interwoven with classic ethnographic accounts to inspire lively class discussions. The cross-cultural and database research skills developed throughout the course provide a solid framework for understanding and analyzing anthropological concerns both within and beyond the social sciences.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Develop an understanding of the concept of **culture** within anthropology

Distinguish between **ethnography** and **anthropology**

Read and **interpret** ethnographic data

Compare and contrast diverse cultural insights and belief systems

View one's personal habits and beliefs within **global social and historical context**

Draw meaningful cross-cultural conclusions about **human universals**

Conduct independent **database research**

REQUIRED TEXTS

This syllabus prioritizes digital resources. The vast majority of the weekly materials (with the exception of the eHRAF Databases) are entirely open access. The recommended free and open-access textbooks for the course are the following:

- Brown, N., Tubelle de Gonzalez, L. and T. McIlwraith (eds.) 2017. Perspectives: An Open Invitation to Cultural Anthropology. (2nd Edition). SACC, American Anthropological Association.
- Dastrup, R. A. 2015. Introduction to Human Geography. PressBooks.
- Stein, F., S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez & R. Stasch. 2018. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology (CEA).
- Wesch, M. 2018. The Art of Being Human: A Textbook for Cultural Anthropology. New Prairie Press.

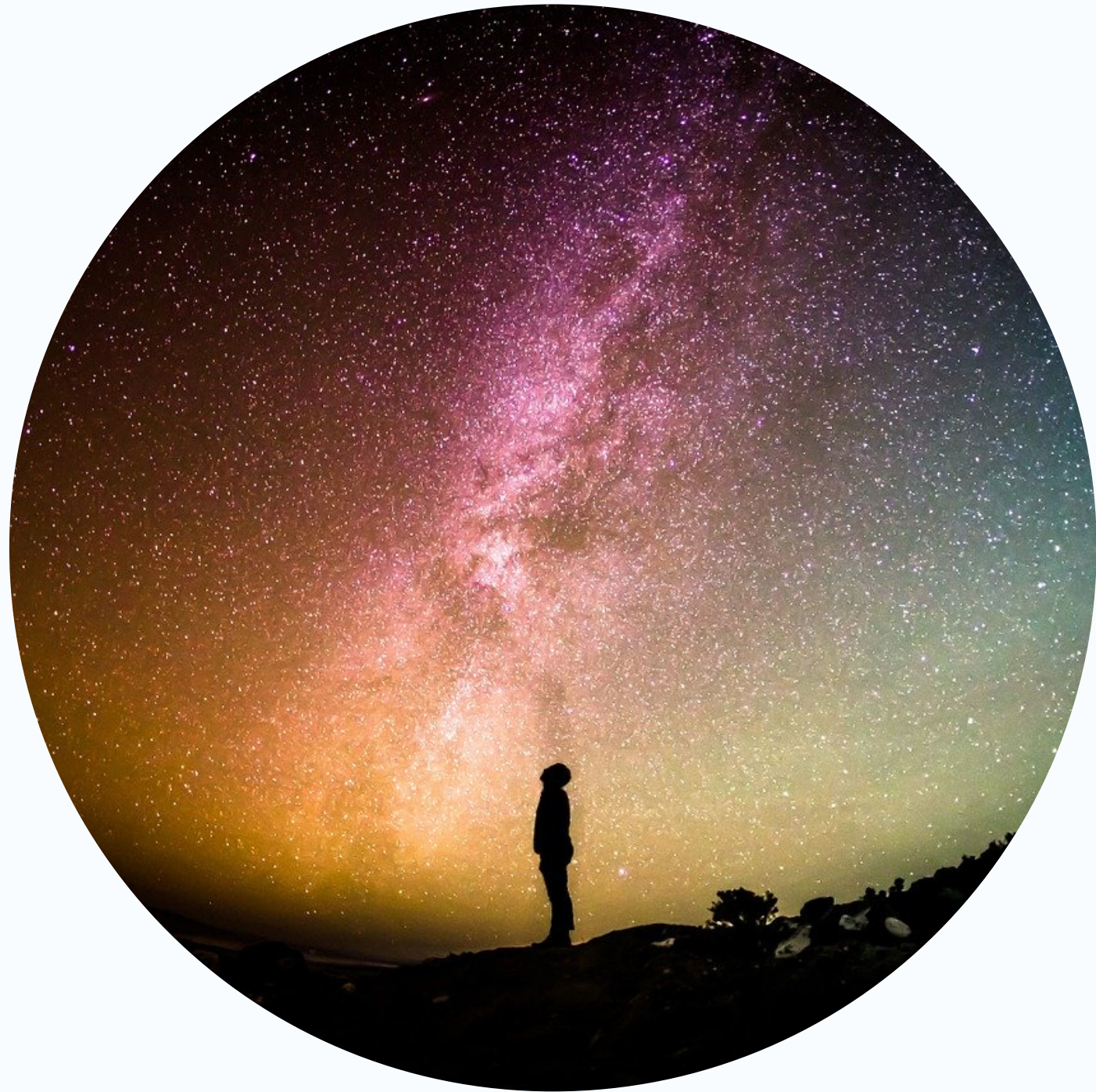


COURSE OUTLINE

ETHNOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS ACROSS CULTURES

UNIQUENESS AND UNIVERSALS: AN INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURE

WEEK 1



According to Horace Miner (1956:503), “The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different people behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs”.

Anthropology and anthropologists have thus acquired the reputation for **making the strange familiar and the familiar strange**.

Taking this as a starting point for the exploration of culture, this week we will ask, what (if anything) makes humans unique? What accounts for cultural variation and difference within and between societies? Why might anthropologists want to draw generalizing conclusions across many cultures?

UNIQUENESS AND UNIVERSALS: AN INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURE

WEEK 1

VIDEO



- [Robert Sapolsky – The Uniqueness of Humans \(~32 mins\)](#)

KEY READING

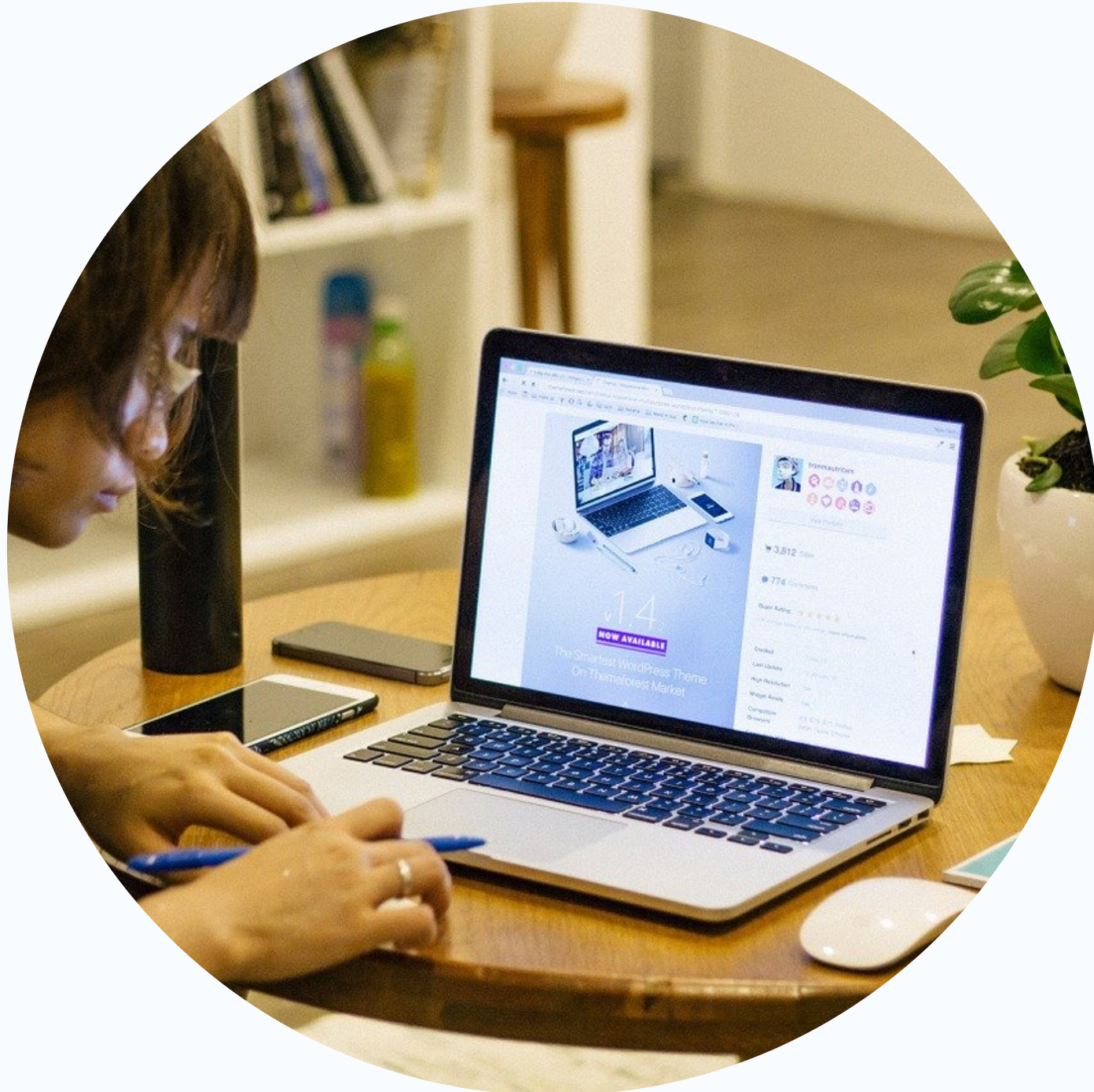
- [Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange](#)
- [The Return of the Comparative Method in Anthropology](#)

TEXTBOOK

- "[Understanding Culture](#)", Introduction to Human Geography: Section 3.2 up to and including "Norms".
- Medeiros and Cowall. "[The Culture Concept](#)", in Perspectives.

ADVANCED

- Miner, H. 1956. "[Body Ritual among the Nacirema](#)".
- Howell, 2018. "[Ethnography](#)", CEA



This workshop will prepare students to conduct research within the eHRAF World Cultures and eHRAF Archaeology databases. It will begin with a brief overview of ethnography, anthropology and cross-cultural research, including the methods employed by cross-cultural researchers. The remainder of the workshop will be a practical guide to browsing, searching, and saving search results in eHRAF. Students will be shown how paragraphs in eHRAF are indexed by subject, as well as encouraged to conduct sample searches and recognize relevant results in preparation for their essay assignments.

VIDEOS



- [eHRAF Video Tutorials Playlist](#)

KEY READING

- [Ch. 1 – Introducing Cross Cultural Research \(PDF\)](#)
- [Ch. 2 – What's your Question? \(PDF\)](#)

ABOUT HRAF

- [History and Development of HRAF Collections](#)
- [HRAF Timeline](#)
- [HRAF Jeopardy Game](#)

DATABASE GUIDES

- [Database Contents: Subjects, Cultures, and Traditions \(PDF\)](#)
- [Search Examples](#)
- [eHRAF User Guide \(WebHelp\)](#)

EMOTIONS IN MOTION: FEELINGS AND THEIR EXPRESSION

WEEK 3



How do different cultures around the world process and express their emotions? Are some peoples more warm and welcoming, while others are cold and stern, or are these merely stereotypes? This week looks at two specific emotions in cross-cultural perspective – fear and anger – to see how they are manifested and controlled in different societies. Do we all have the same fears? How can some cultures be better at controlling tempers than others? A class activity based on the **Atlas of Emotions** allows students to explore their emotions, possible triggers, and varied responses.

EMOTIONS IN MOTION: FEELINGS AND THEIR EXPRESSION

WEEK 3

VIDEOS



- [Are there universal expressions of emotion? - Sophie Zadeh \(~5 mins\)](#)



- [How Culture Drives Behaviours - Julien S. Bourrelle \(~12 mins\)](#)

KEY READING

- [Towards an Anthropology of Fear: Are some things universally terrifying?](#)
- [How do parents around the world teach children to control their anger?](#)

CLASS ACTIVITY

- Explore the [Atlas of Emotions](#)

ADVANCED

- Russel, James A. 1991. "[Culture and the Categorization of Emotions](#)", *Psychological Bulletin*. 110(3): 426-450 (PDF)

DOES ROMANTIC LOVE LOOK (AND FEEL) THE SAME EVERYWHERE?

WEEK 4



You can't eat. You can't sleep. You can hardly concentrate on this sentence. Your heart skips a beat when the object of your affection walks into the room. In lieu of food and rest, you survive on daydreams of kisses and warm embraces. Do all cultures recognize this bizarre affliction as a tell-tale sign of being in love? This week we will discuss whether romantic love and kissing are cultural universals. The video for this topic explores the impact that technology may have on love and relationships. Has technology changed what it means to love? How many different types of love are there?

DOES ROMANTIC LOVE LOOK (AND FEEL) THE SAME EVERYWHERE?

WEEK 4

VIDEO



- [Technology hasn't changed love. Here's Why.](#) - Helen Fisher (~19 mins)

KEY READING

- [Romantic or disgusting? Passionate kissing is not a human universal](#)
- [After Kinship and Marriage, Anthropology Discovers Love](#)

TEXTBOOK

- Wesch, M. [Love in Four Cultures](#), in *The Art of Being Human*. (PDF)

ADVANCED

- Jankowiak & Fischer. 1992. [A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love](#). (PDF)
- Lindholm, C. 2006. [Romantic Love and Anthropology](#). (online/PDF)

GESTURES OF KINDNESS AND RECIPROCITY, OR WHEN NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED

WEEK 5



Gift-giving as a means of displaying kindness and gratitude is one way that we show people that we care about them. In practice, finding the right gift can be stressful and full of potential landmines. What if the recipient hates the gift, or worse, feels **insulted** by it? This scenario gives us a hint that saying “thanks” can sometimes be a thankless experience in our own lives and relationships, let alone throughout cultures all across the globe. This week, we explore the anthropological perspective on gifts and other types of exchange, including reciprocity (generalized, balanced, and negative) and redistribution of wealth. We will also look at the language of exchange and the various forms a thank-you can take.

GESTURES OF KINDNESS AND RECIPROCITY, OR WHEN NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED

WEEK 5

VIDEOS



- [What is a gift economy? - Alex Gendler \(~4 mins\)](#)



- [Gift-Giving – Anthropology Matters \(~7 mins\)](#)

KEY READING

- [Thanks, but no thanks: Expressions of gratitude in eHRAF World Cultures](#)

TEXTBOOK

- Wesch, M. [The Power of Language](#), and [Creating the Good Life](#) (pp. 307-312 only), in *The Art of Being Human*. (PDF)
- Lyon, S. [“Economics: Modes of Exchange”](#), (pp. 127-135 only) in *Perspectives*, (PDF)

ADVANCED

- Malinowski, B. 1920. [Kula: The Circulating Exchange of Valuables in New Guinea](#). (eHRAF)
- Murdock, G. 1970. [Rank and Potlach Among the Haida](#). (eHRAF)
- Mauss, M. 1954. [The Gift](#). (PDF)



Winston Churchill notably proclaimed, “We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us.” How do the spaces we inhabit become places we embody? The concept of “home” goes well beyond the bricks and mortar (or wood or clay) of the dwellings in which we reside. How many memories of your home are of the structure itself, and how many of are the relationships that were nurtured inside of it? This week explores the concepts of house and home as both material and cultural constructions, and introduces the idea of place-making in urban anthropology.

VIDEO



- [Where is home? – Pico Iyer \(~14 mins\)](#)

KEY READING

- [Home Truths: An Anthropology of House and Home](#)
- [On Placemaking: An Anthropologist's Perspective](#)

TEXTBOOK

- Samanani, F. and J. Lenhard. 2019. "[House and Home](#)", Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology.
- Ember, C. 2014. "[Dwellings](#)" in C. R. Ember, ed. Explaining Human Culture (HRAF).

ADVANCED

- Lawrence-Zuniga, D. 2017. [Space and Place](#). Oxford Bibliographies.
- Bourdieu, P. 1970. "[The Berber house or the world reversed.](#)" *Social Science Information*. 9(2): 151-170. (Paywall)



Do all peoples conceive of time in the same ways? What does the past, present, or future mean for different cultures? How do we mark major milestones throughout the year, or events within our lifetimes? The videos for this week consider different ways of thinking and speaking about time and space, including deciphering the ancient Aztec calendar stone. The key readings focus on how two annual events – the spring and winter solstices – are celebrated around the world, and how these festivities mark time, space, and our place within the world.

VIDEO



- [How Do Different Cultures Think About Time?](#) (~5 mins)



- [The Aztec Sun Stone \(The Calendar Stone\)](#) (~6.5 mins)

KEY READING

- [Celebrating the Vernal Equinox](#)
- [Winter Solstice Celebrations Around the World](#)

TEXTBOOK

- Antrosio, J. 2020. "[Time](#)", *Living Anthropologically* (Cultural Ecology 2020).

ADVANCED

- "Chapter III: Time and Space", (pp. 94-138) in Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1940. [Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People](#). (eHRAF)
- Zeitlyn, D. 2015. "[Looking Forward, Looking Back](#)", *History and Anthropology* 26(4): 381-407.

DEFINING SELFHOOD: GENDER, SEXUALITY, IDENTITY AND POWER

WEEK 8



Is gender a product of culture, or of biology? How does society shape our understanding of gender, including gender roles and identities? This week will explore the connections between gender and power by focusing on the manifestation of female agency across societies. Even from within restricted or oppressed conditions, ethnographic data shows that women can assert authority and control over themselves and others in creative ways; for instance, by leveraging access to areas of society where men have little to no interest or jurisdiction. We will follow this up with ideas about fatherhood and masculinity around the world. Lastly, this week will examine the question of fixity or fluidity of gender categories by exploring pronouns. What insights can gender nonconforming children give us about the origins and/or mutability of gender as a cultural construct?

DEFINING SELFHOOD: GENDER, SEXUALITY, IDENTITY AND POWER

WEEK 8

VIDEO



- [The power of women's anger - Soraya Chemaly](#) (~12 mins)



- [How to talk \(and listen\) to transgender people - Jackson Bird](#) (~6 mins)

KEY READING

- [Women, Gender and Power in eHRAF](#)
- [An Anthropology of Dads](#)
- [She? Ze? They? What's in a Gender Pronoun](#)

TEXTBOOK

- “Gender”, in Explaining Human Culture (HRAF)
- Wesch, M. Becoming Our Selves, in *The Art of Being Human*
- Mukhopadhyay, C. Gender and Sexuality, in *Perspectives*
- Wilson, A. Queer Anthropology, CEA.

ADVANCED

- Schäfers, M. 2017. “Voice”, CEA
- Lozios, P, and E. Papataxiarchis. 1991. “Gender and Kinship in Marriage and Alternative Contexts” (eHRAF)
- Dubisch, J. 1993. ““Foreign Chickens’ and Other Outsiders: Gender and Community in Greece”. (eHRAF)

“YOU’RE, LIKE, REALLY PRETTY”: ON BODIES AND BEAUTY STANDARDS

WEEK 9



Do you feel beautiful today? Is physical beauty perceived in the same ways everywhere in the world? This week we will explore how culture shapes the body and our perceptions of it. Western beauty standards promoted by the fashion industry, popular media – and perpetuated by each of us when we scroll through social media and like all the “pretty” people and things – have become ubiquitous, arguably encroaching upon every corner of the globe. But what about the majority of bodies in the world that are not tall, skinny, or white? What other perspectives on beauty exist?

“YOU’RE, LIKE, REALLY PRETTY”: ON BODIES AND BEAUTY STANDARDS

WEEK 9

VIDEOS



- [Documentary on Societal Beauty Standards \(~7 mins\)](#)



- [How People Define Beauty Around the World \(~4 mins\)](#)

KEY READING

- [“I have worth”: female body confidence and perceptions of beauty around the world](#)

TEXTBOOK

- Anderson-Fye E.P. [Anthropological Perspectives on Physical Appearance and Body Image](#). pp. 15–22. (PDF)
- Wesch, M. [The \(Un\)Making of the Modern Body](#) and [The Dynamics of Culture](#) in *The Art of Being Human* (PDF)

ADVANCED

- Gomółka, A. 2017. [“Ugliness: A Cultural History”](#) [book review]
- Nagar, I. & Virk, R. 2017. [“The Struggle Between the Real and Ideal: Impact of Acute Media Exposure on Body Image of Young Indian Women”](#), SAGE Open.

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL: RITUALS, RITES OF PASSAGE AND LIMINALITY

WEEK 10



Anthropologist Victor Turner defined ritual as "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers". The subject of much anthropological analysis, rituals can in fact be secular or religious. They may mark major milestones for a society or community, constitute a rite of passage for individuals, or be enacted through more subtle behaviors in everyday life. Do all cultures have the same types of rituals? This week's videos introduce Van Gennep's three stages of rites of passage and Turner's concepts of *liminality* and *communitas* in order to explore rituals as acts of social performance as well as personal transition. A case study of Cajun Mardi Gras ritual traditions from eHRAF World Cultures highlights the inversion of cultural norms symbolized by its carnival-like indulgences.

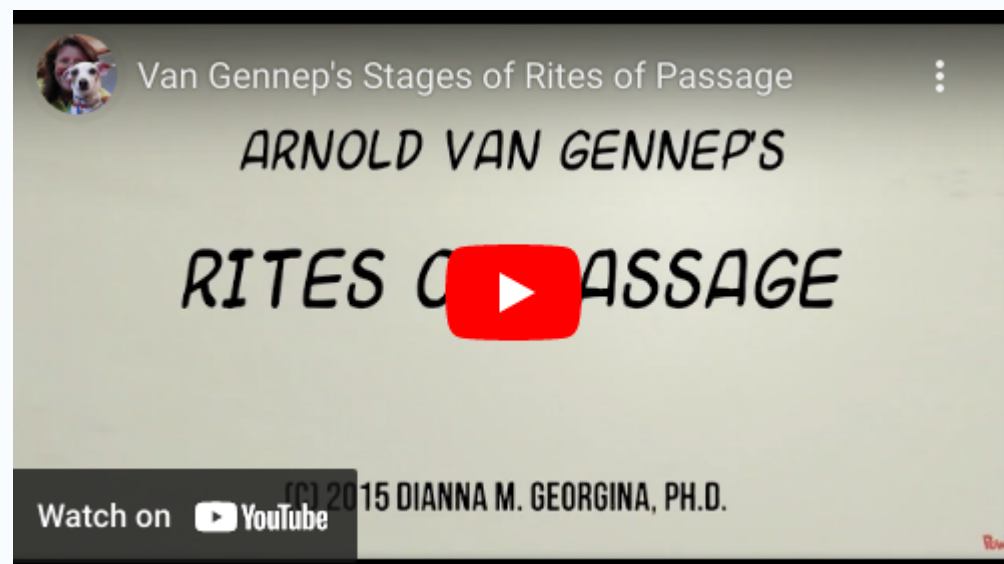
LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL: RITUALS, RITES OF PASSAGE AND LIMINALITY

WEEK 10

VIDEOS



- [History of Ideas – Rituals \(~13 mins\)](#)



- [Van Gennep's Stages of Rites of Passage \(~2 mins\)](#)

KEY READING

- [Laissez les bon temps rouler! Mardi Gras and Cajun Traditions in eHRAF](#)

TEXTBOOK

- Henninger-Rener, S. "[Religion](#)" in Perspectives
- Griffith, L. "[Performance](#)", in Perspectives. Read section "Ritual as Performance".

ADVANCED

- Brown, G. 2003. "[Theorizing ritual as performance: explorations of ritual indeterminacy](#)". *Journal of Ritual Studies*.
- Sjorslev, I. 1987. "[Untimely Gods and French Perfume: Ritual, Rules and Deviance in The Brazilian Candomble](#)", (eHRAF)

WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY: DEALING WITH MISFORTUNE, MAGIC, AND A ZERO-SUM UNIVERSE

WEEK 11



Why do some guys have all the luck? Why do bad things happen to good people? These are questions we often find ourselves asking when life seems distinctly unfair. In a zero-sum universe, one person's good fortune is believed to come at the expense of another's misfortune. Anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's fieldwork and research on witchcraft and sorcery in Africa – detailed in his classic account, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* – is a rich starting point for exploring how other cultures view misfortune and malice in the absence of a belief in “chance” or “coincidence”. Rural Irish folktales about fairies and their magic in eHRAF provide a fun case study for cultural comparison.

WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY: DEALING WITH MISFORTUNE, MAGIC, AND A ZERO-SUM UNIVERSE

WEEK 11

VIDEO



- [Strange Beliefs: Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard](#) (begin at 07:30; ~45 mins)

KEY READING

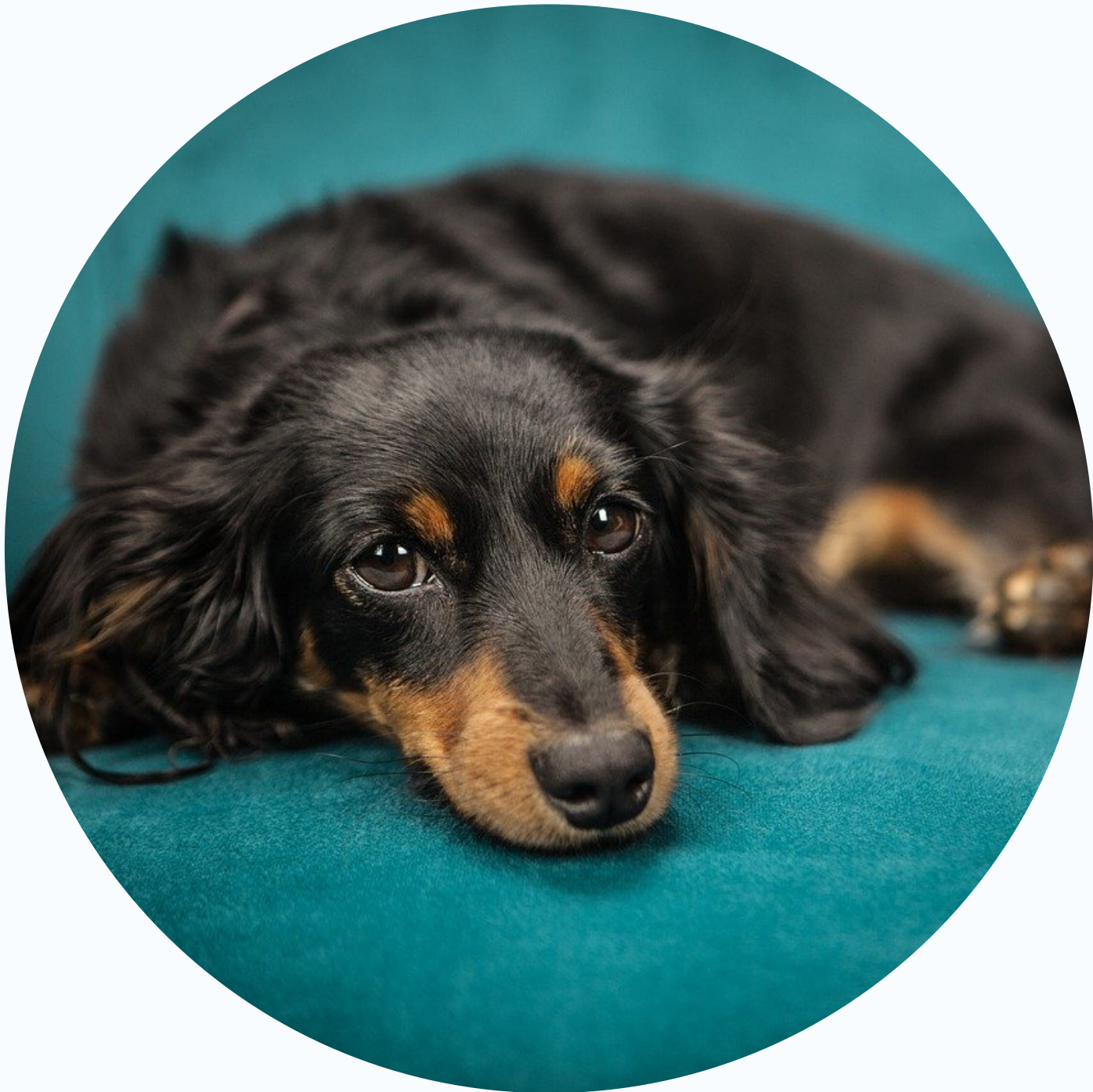
- [Luck of the Irish: Folklore and fairies in Rural Ireland](#)
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1937. "[Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande](#)". Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 69-70.

TEXTBOOK

- Benussi, M. 2019. "[Magic](#)", CEA
- Espírito Santo, D. 2019. "[Divination](#)", CEA

ADVANCED

- Malinowski, B. 1935. [Coral Gardens and Their Magic](#), Vol. 1. (eHRAF)
- LeVine, R. 1963. "[Witchcraft and Sorcery in a Gusii Community](#)" (eHRAF)
- Beattie, J. 1963. "[Sorcery in Bunyoro](#)" (eHRAF)



You may have noticed by now that the internet is full of cat photos and cute puppy memes. It is clear that the human love of pets is a powerful and global phenomenon. For many pet owners, their furry (or scaly) domestic companions transcend any simple categorization of non-human animal. Indeed, research shows that it is a growing global trend for pet owners to consider their animals to be full members of their families, to dote upon them as they would children or romantic partners, and to thereby develop strong mutual bonds of dependency, love, and support. What can anthropology tell us about the relationship between humans and their fur babies?

VIDEO



- [A Brief History of Dogs - David Ian Howe \(~4 mins\)](#)



- [Why We Love Dogs More Than Humans \(~4 mins\)](#)

KEY READING

- [Unconditional Love: Is devotion to pets a cultural universal?](#)

TEXTBOOK

- White, T. and M. Candea. 2018. "[Animals](#)", Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology

ADVANCED

- "[Chapter 10: The Sacrificial Role of Cattle](#)", pp. 248-271, in Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1956. "Nuer Religion." (eHRAF)
- Leach, E. 1989. "[Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse](#)" (Paywall)



Food is powerful and omnipresent within human society. We need to eat to survive, yet the enjoyment of food is about much more than nutrition alone. The symbolic ability of food to connect people to time, place, and relationships makes it a diverse field of study for anthropologists. We all have strong feelings about foods that we love or hate. Is pineapple an acceptable topping for pizza? How do you feel about black licorice? And let us not get the British or Australians started on Marmite. Some aspects of food and eating are universal, such as commensality – the act of eating together with others. This practice, found the world over, reinforces strong bonds of family and friendship. Food can also be a marker of social distance, as you will rarely share a meal with people you dislike (Thanksgiving dinner notwithstanding!). This week will take an ethnographic look at culinary adventures, including the social life of cheese, pandemic eating habits, and the delights of chocolate and its origins in Mesoamerica.

VIDEO



- [The History of Chocolate – Deanna Pucciarelli](#) (~4 mins)



- [American Kids try Dutch Food](#) (~5 mins)

KEY READING

- [The Social Life of Cheese](#)
- [Craving Comfort: bonding with food across cultures](#)
- [The Mesoamerican origins of chocolate](#)

TEXTBOOK

- Nahum-Claudel, C. 2016. "[Feasting](#)", CEA
- Fox, R. 2014. [Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective](#) (PDF)

ADVANCED

- Mintz, S., and C. M. Du Bois. 2002. "[The Anthropology of Food and Eating](#)". (online)
- Douglas, M. 1972. "[Deciphering a Meal](#)". (online)

THANK YOU FOR EXPLORING

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Curated & Produced by

Dr. Francine Barone

Human Relations Area Files
at Yale University

francine.barone@yale.edu



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