

## **PERSONAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

Fall 2000

Tuesday/Thursday 10:00-11:20

169 Davenport Hall

### ***Nancy Abelmann***

Office Hours: Thursday, 3:30-5:15

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"If a person's understanding of self has not been altered by some event, then there would be no impetus for **personal anthropology**. Once the dislocation has occurred, an individual must then go about reworking an understanding of his or her relationship to existing cultural narratives ... **Personal anthropology** is not static ... Housed memories and the dream world greatly affect the way in which a person comes to understand identity and one's relationship to one's landscape."

"**Personal anthropology** is the identification of one's current sense of consciousness in relation to an evaluation of past understandings of the self. The formation of identity is therefore a perpetual exercise of the mind and imagination ... For me to assume the task of mapping myself in a personal anthropology, it is essential to examine how my current understanding of my identity was formed based on the various cultural narratives I have heretofore confronted. To do this I must first distinguish how my conception of folk psychology has arisen. Not surprisingly, my family has basically been the medium from which my understanding about cultural narratives has been communicated ... The sociological imagination permits the individual to map his or her identity in relation to the cultural narratives presented by the historical circumstances in which they live. Specifically, we compare these narratives to those adhered to by our family and friends. This context, however, is one of perpetual change and growth, and as a result the sociological imagination must account for these modifications. This constant state of contingency requires the individual to reevaluate his or her own sense of consciousness without ever finalizing one definitive map. When the cultural narratives surrounding an individual do not act in accordance with his or her value system, a conflict arises that directly requires a personal response. This response is what constitutes **personal anthropology**."

"There are no specific criteria or guidelines for the issues that one must talk about in a **personal anthropology**. While it may be useful for one to talk about their childhood in order to understand who they are, this is not required. If someone must discuss the effects that peanut butter has had on their lives, this is permissible. What is useful in talking about one person's life, may not be useful in discussing others. Even though there may appear to be some universal criteria such as race, culture etc. there are always exceptions so absolutes are not useful. While I agree with C. Wright Mills that one must look at the big picture in order to understand the small one, I must confess that I personally have to strain to imagine

anything sociologically.”

“Place and class are inherently linked for me, in that the suburb I am from was almost completely middle to upper middle class. I define myself, as Stuart Hall points out, not with these indicators, but as being someone who does not want to be from St. Charles or a part of the suburban middle class. I believe that Hall’s statements concerning this represent how we can choose to define ourselves either through where we are, or through where we wish not to be. I simply haven’t found the place I want to be.”

“...**Personal anthropology** could be the scrutinizing of what connects a person to the world surrounding that person. It makes a claim that what we think about others says a lot about what we think about ourselves. What **personal anthropology** creates is a type of map, not just of spaces, but one extending through time and imagination, elaborated through consciousness and memory.”

“In my opinion, **personal anthropology** is not a systematic way to organize and record a person’s life history. Rather, it is a set of ideas and theories that can be used to interpret already written personal accounts ... I think that consciousness and displacedness should be the central interpretive devices through which we can start to analyze autobiographical works, thus engaging in a **personal anthropological** monograph.”

- Final Papers from Anthropology 280, Spring 1998 and Fall 1998.

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

“Personal Anthropology” is not a formal subfield in anthropology. This is nice because it gives us freedom to consider what the possibilities are for a personal anthropology. Many agree that anthropology is a reflexive discipline -- in that we reflect upon ourselves through thinking about Others (people and places); this is this sort of reflexivity that I hope we achieve in this course. Many of the primary readings are memoirs (or fiction/memoirs) in which the writers have in some way attempted to reflect critically on themselves and their place and times. A number of the writers focus particularly on the ways in which the world revealed itself to them, that is the ways in which they began to see themselves in their world (often in childhood). I hope that you will find the readings interesting and provocative and that they will encourage you to reflect on your “place” in the world. You will notice that interspersed among the memoirs/ autobiographies/ novels there are days are devoted entirely to theoretical readings; some write of the intersection of history and biography, others about the ways in which memories are “housed”, and still others about the place of storytelling in social life. All of the book length works are informed by their own “theories” (although not referred to as such) of life, childhood, memory etc.; part of our task is to think about the ideas and assumptions informing these works -- the theoretical readings should help us in that effort. My hope, then, is that the vocabularies and abstractions of the theoretical works will inform and enhance your reading of the personal narratives. One of your tasks in this class is

to think about the sorts of abstractions (idioms/theories) that you think work best for the course books and more generally for your own understanding/ philosophy of an effective and meaningful personal anthropology. Also, these idioms and abstractions should provide all of us with a shared language to enrich our classroom discussion (and your writing) and through which we can debate and disagree. Above I have typed - unedited! - selections from the final papers from this course a couple of years ago; these passages should give you a feeling for the various ways in which students fashioned their senses of a personal anthropology. As you will see, this class relies on your ongoing engagement with the readings and with your peers (both in class and outside of class in WebBoard, a computer conferencing environment).

### **GRADING/REQUIREMENTS**

10 WebBoard posts\*: 60%  
A quote and a comment\*\*: 10%  
Final paper\*\*\*: 20%  
Attendance/participation\*\*\*\*: 10%

#### **\*(post details)**

(1) Posts are due by 9 PM the evening before the class meeting. You are responsible for reading your classmates' posts.

(2) 6 of the posts will be devoted to book-length works; 4 of the posts will address theoretical days (that is the theoretical selections of that day in the syllabus). The syllabus is marked with days for which you can post -- there is choice: 6 of 8 for the book-length works (**BP** = book post), and 4 of 6 for the theoretical works (**TP** = theory post).

(3) 6 of the posts will be solo (that is you write them alone); 4 should be done in pairs (each time with a different classmate) -- in this case the written post will report on the conversations that the two of you have had about the readings.

(4) Posts will be graded as follows: 4 (distinguished); 3 (good); 2 (poor); 1 (of no value). Should you complete more posts than required I will only count those with the highest grades. I will not hand posts back -- but feel free to ask me at any point about how you are doing; email is fine -- and come to office hours (they are for you).

(5) Feel free to respond to those posts that precede yours -- this makes it more fun. You should also feel free to refer (by name) to the ideas/statements of your classmates.

(6) **OVERARCHING POINT:** I have designed this class to build: that is, our discussions should constantly refer back to earlier readings and discussions. The best posts will be ones that do that sort of integrative work. That is, the posts should

attempt to integrate both the assigned readings of the day and the readings of the day with ongoing classroom discussions and readings. The length is not prescribed, but generally I think they should be 1/2 - 1 page of single spaced typed pages; they will likely be several paragraphs long. The writing can be informal ("I" is most welcome), but your prose should nonetheless be well-organized and error free; most important, the reader should be able to follow the connections between the sentences and the paragraphs and your points should be illustrated when possible. None of this, however, precludes very personal thoughts and/or connections that you would like to draw.

My hope is that this computer environment will enhance our class for several reasons: (1) you will have access to students' responses to readings before classroom discussion; (2) I will be able to get a sense of how you are responding to reading outside of class; (3) student discussion can continue outside of class; and (4) you will have another medium for communicating with me.

**Note:** Attached to this syllabus are six examples of outstanding posts from former classes (they refer to three of the books that you will read).

*It is critical that you be present for our WebBoard training session on **Tuesday, August 29 at 11:00**. The place is not decided. (We can walk over together from class).*

**\*\* (a quote and a comment details)** On all days for which you have not posted prior to class, you should bring a quote and a comment on that quote on a piece of paper (handwritten is fine). You need not copy the whole quote -- just indicate the source, page number, paragraph number and opening words. The quote can be anything that grabs you for any particular reason. The comment (1-2 sentences) should merely tell us why it grabbed you. I will collect these, but mostly they will be props that we use in class.

**\*\*\*(final paper details)**

8-15 pages (25%) (**Due by Noon on Monday, December 11** in my mailbox in the Anthropology Department, SW corner of Davenport Hall): You have, over the semester, read 8 books in full, all of them entirely or partly/loosely autobiographical. This course has been founded on the idea that these writings represent ways (strategies, writing styles, theories etc.) of contextualizing/mapping the self. The overarching goal of this final paper is to introduce us to your own theory/method/idiom of "personal anthropology." That is, you should provide an extended argument for a particular kind of personal anthropology. You should make this argument/introduction by referring eclectically to ideas/theories/ vocabularies and examples from the course readings (the book length and the theoretical selections). I hope that in preparation for this paper you will review the course readings, revisit our classroom discussions, and look back over your own posts and those of your classmates.

To elaborate: you should introduce us to: (a) your own understanding of a “personal anthropology,” including the assumptions and theories that it entails (e.g. ‘because I think of identity as X, personal anthropology must include...’ or ‘because I assume the self is...’); (b) the methods that this understanding requires (e.g. ‘thus we need to pay attention to how memories are housed’ or ‘thus it is important to consider childhood in terms of...’). In sketching this theory and methods of personal anthropology I hope that you will refer to a variety of readings (theory and memoir/ fiction). I would imagine that you will refer to the idioms (i.e. the particular vocabulary) and examples (the way they employ these concepts through their narratives) of these writings to help you delineate your personal anthropology. In other words, use the constructs to help make your case (e.g. ‘it is important to consider people’s personal narratives as ‘interpretive devices’ as described by Steedman’). Remember, it is fine to elaborate concepts by drawing on the examples of the authors (e.g. ‘we can understand what Bruner means by spontaneous autobiography in his discussion of Mrs. Goodhertz...’ or ‘Halbwach’s idea of collective memory is exemplified by the story of...’).

Feel free also to use short or extended personal examples (yes, go ahead, get personal) in this paper (e.g. ‘in order to best sketch what Snow calls ‘personal event narratives’ for my family, you would need to understand XYZ’ or ‘certainly in my case in order to understand how I came to map myself you would need to understand my family’s ‘canonical stories’ - in Bruner’s sense’). You might decide to include some experimental personal writing (i.e., in an appendix) that you refer to in the more standard body of the paper. I am very open to you experimentation with this paper but I do want to see, as aforementioned, that you have used this paper to help you synthesize the readings and discussions (off and on-line) of the semester. Feel free, at any point (yes, plan ahead) to begin talking to me about your plans for this final paper.

General Note 1: Please feel free to cite each other’s ideas (from real-class time and from WebBoard) in your papers.

General Note 2: The paper should well organized. That is, from sentence to sentence, and paragraph to paragraph I should be able to discern logical connections and the development of an argument. You should provide page numbers for the ideas and quotes that you take from the readings (e.g. Personal Anthropology is a critical.... (Steedman 1986:5) or Steedman (1985:5) says, “Personal Anthropology is a critical....”). Please include a bibliography of cited works.

**\*\*\*\*(Class attendance and participation details)**

This class relies entirely on your keeping up with (i.e. reading for) and coming to class. This class has no exams and there will never be a need to memorize any material. The class (and each of you) will succeed if all of us are willing to read, respond, and discuss. **I am interested primarily in your honest, open, and on-time engagement with the material.**

**Extra credit**

In addition to the conferences to which you will make your required 10 posts, I hope

that you will initiate some topics/posts that will become interesting discussions. My hope is that these will be places for you to follow up on some themes that you really care about. In determining your final grade, I will consider the extent (and nature) of your participation in this computer environment.

## **OFFICE HOURS**

I really hope to see each of you there; if the time doesn't work let me know and we will schedule something else. Sometime before Thanksgiving Break I will schedule appointments with each of you to discuss your thoughts/plans for the final paper.

## **READING MATERIALS**

### **Undergraduate library reserve**

All Books and a copy of the Reader are on reserve.

### **For purchase**

#### **Books we will read in full**

Dillard, Annie. 1987. An American Childhood. NY: Harper & Row Publishers.

Emecheta, Buchi. 1986. Head Above Water: An Autobiography. Fontana

Hurston, Zora Neale. 1990. Their Eyes Were Watching God. New York: Harper & Rowe.

Levi, Primo. 1987. Moments of Reprieve: A Memoir of Auschwitz. New York: Penguin.

Lewis, C.S. 1955. Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Maxwell, William. 1980. So Long, See You Tomorrow. New York: Vintage International.

Rodriguez, Richard. 1981. Hunger for Memory. Boston: David R. Godine.

Steedman, Carolyn. 1986. Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives. London: Virago.

#### **Books we will **NOT** read in full**

Berger, John and Jean Mohr. 1982. Another Way of Telling. New York: Random House. (NOTE: the assigned selections are largely photographic).

Hurston, Zora Neale. 1970. Mules and Men. New York: Harper and Row.

**The reader...**

Will be available at Dup-It Copy Shop (808 South 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Champaign; 337-7000) which by Friday August 25. I have ordered copies for all of you, but it is often still best to call ahead.

**SCHEDULE**

**August 24, Thursday Introduction**

**August 29, Tuesday**

Lemert, Charles. 1993. Social Theory: Its Uses and Pleasures. In Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings. Boulder: Westview Press. Pp. 1-3. **READER**

Steedman. Stories In Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives. Pp. 5-7.

Mills, C. Wright. 1959. The Promise (selections) in The Sociological Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 3-13. **READER**

**WEBBOARD INSTRUCTION** (place to be announced)

**August 31, Thursday (BP #1)**

Dillard. An American Childhood. Pp. 3-125

**September 5, Tuesday**

Bruner, Jerome B. 1990. Autobiography and Self (selection). In Acts of Meaning. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pp. 123-138. **READER**

Winder, Robert. 1997. Editorial: The Memoir. Granta 58: 7-12. **READER**

**September 7, Thursday**

Dillard. An American Childhood. Pp. 126-255.

**September 12, Tuesday (TP #1)**

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1950. The Collective Memory. NY:Harper & Row. Pp. 35-41, 44-49, 55-68,156-7. **READER**

**September 14, Thursday**

Maxwell. So Long, See You Tomorrow. Pp. 3-71.

**September 19, Tuesday (BP #2)**

Maxwell. So Long, See You Tomorrow. Pp. 72-135.

Bachelard, Gaston. 1958. The House/ From Cellar to Garret/ The Significance of the Hut (selection). In The Poetics of Space. Boston: Beacon Press. Pp. 8-10, 12-17. **READER**

**September 21, Thursday (TP #2)**

Snow, Catherine E. 1990. Building Memories: The Ontogeny of Autobiography. In Dante Cicchetti and Marjorie Beeghly, eds. The Self in Transition: Infancy to Childhood. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Pp. 213-242. **READER**

Meyer, John W. 1986. Myths of Socialization and of Personality. In Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellberry, eds. Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Pp. 208-221. **READER**

**September 26, Tuesday**

Rodriguez. Hunger of Memory. Pp. 3-110.

**September 28, Thursday (BP #3)**

Rodriguez. Hunger of Memory. Pp. 110-195.

**October 3, Tuesday (TP #3)**

Byng-Hall, John (interviewed by Paul Thompson). 1990. The Power of Family Myths. In Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds. The Myths We Live By. Pp. 216-24. **READER**

Ochberg, Richard L. 1994. Life Stories and Storied Lives. In Amia Lieblich, Ruthellen Josselson, eds. Exploring Identity and Gender: The Narrative Study of Lives. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Pp. 113-144. **READER**

**October 5, Thursday**

Hall, Stuart. Minimal Selves. In Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Liwdeburg, eds. Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1996. Pp. 114-119. **READER**

**October 10, Tuesday**



Steedman. Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives. Pp. 1-2, 25-61, 98-124.

**October 12, Thursday**

White, Merry I. And Robert A. Levine. 1986. What Is an *li Ko* (Good Child)? In Harold Stevenson, Hiroshi Azuma, and Kenji Hakuta, eds. Child Development and Education in Japan. NY: W.H. Freeman & Co. Pp. 55-62. **READER**

Kuhn, Annette. Rememberance. 1991. In Jo Spence and Patricia Holland, eds. Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography. London: Virago Press. Pp. 17-25. **READER**

**October 17, Tuesday (BP #4)**

Steedman. Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives. Pp. 3-24, 140-144.

**October 19, Thursday**

Levi. Moments of Reprieve. Pp. vii-66.

**October 24, Tuesday (BP #5)**

Levi. Moments of Reprieve. Pp. 67-128.

Berger, John and Jean Mohr. Marcel or the Right to Choose - A Framed Portrait of a Woodcutter. In Another Way of Telling. Pp. 7-39, 59-71.

**October 26, Thursday (TP #4)**

Briggs, Jean L. 1992. Mazes of Meaning: How a Child and a Culture Create Each Other. In William A. Corsaro and Peggy J. Miller, eds. Interpretive Approaches to Children's Socialization. (New Directions for Child Development 58). S.F.: Jossey-Bass Publishers. Pp. 25-49. **READER**

Miller, Peggy J. 1994. Narrative Practices: Their Role in Socialization and Self-construction. In Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, eds. The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-narrative. NY: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 158-179. **READER**

**October 31, Tuesday**

Hurston. Their Eyes Were Watching God. Pp. vii-104.

**November 2, Thursday (TP #5)**

Bruner, Jerome. 1991. "Self Making and World Making." Journal of Aesthetic Education. 25.1 (Spring 1991 ).Pp. 67-78. **READER**

Bruner, Jerome. 1994. In Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, eds. The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-narrative. NY: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 41-54. **READER**

**November 7, Tuesday**

Hurston. Their Eyes Were Watching God. Pp. 105-195.

**November 9, Thursday (BP #6)**

Hurston. Mules and Men. Pp. xv- 90.

Hurston, Zora Neale. 1991 (1942). My Birthplace - My Folks. In Dust Tracks on a Road. NY: Harper Perennial. Pp. 1-17. **READER**

**November 14, Tuesday (BP #7)**

Lewis. Surprised by Joy. Pp. vii-117.

**November 16, Thursday**

Lewis. Surprised by Joy. Pp. 118-238.

**THANKSGIVING BREAK!!!**

**November 28, Tuesday (TP #6)**

Appadurai, Arjun. 1991. Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology (selection) In Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present. Richard G. Fox, ad. Pp. 197-202. **READER**

Rushdie, Salman. 1991. Imaginary Homelands (selection). NY: Viking. Pp. 9-21. **READER**

Berger, John and Jean Mohr. 1982. if Each Time... In Another Way of Telling. Pp. 131-275

**November 30, Thursday (BP #8)**

Emecheta. Head Above Water. Pp. 1-126.

**December 5, Tuesday**

Emecheta. Head Above Water. Pp. 127-229.

**December 7, Thursday OPEN**

