

UCL DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY NEWSLETTER

ANTHRO NEWS

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UCL



Welcome

The academic year 2010/11 has been a resounding success for the Department of Anthropology. We were awarded three new lectureships – in Paleoanthropology, Environment & Development and Medical Anthropology – and one new Teaching Fellow Post in Design Anthropology.

This expansion of the Department will allow us to expand research fields as well as our offering of exciting new courses. New cross-section collaborations in teaching and research have been fostered by our new research and reading groups. These have proved a magnet for staff and students. Three exciting workshops emerged out of these activities and enabled our students to hear internationally-renowned anthropologists and to participate in debates that will shape the direction of our work in the years to come.

Our activities extended as well into the more everyday – but crucial! – areas of the department: redesigning our website and redecorating the walls of our department corridors with a student-led photographic exhibition that brings to the fore the huge creative talent and varied research of our graduate students.

On the staff side, there were also many things to celebrate: the monographs published by Rebecca Empson on Mongolia and Daniel Miller on Facebook; the EPSRC grant awarded to Jerome Lewis in collaboration with Geomatic Engineering; the Provost Teaching Excellence Award given to Caroline Garaway; the creation of the Network on Science, Medicine and Society by David Napier; and the leadership role taken by Ruth Mace in the Network on Understanding Behaviour that will command attention across College during the following year. On the administration side, we have been welcoming James Emmanuel as Masters secretary and Martin O'Connor as Departmental Administrator.

This term's newsletter again highlights our department's greatest strength: the diversity of people, research and ideas that exists here. This is exemplified in our main feature on field research, where a member of each section of the department gives a personal view of how they go about this key professional activity. You can also read about Mongolia, contemporary cosmologies, intelligent machines, and why it's important to distinguish between snakes and fennel seeds.

I wish you all the best for the rest of term and the summer ahead.

Professor Susanne Kuechler, Head of Department

Profile

Chris Pinney



Chris Pinney is Professor of Anthropology and Visual Culture with research interests in India. His publications combine contemporary ethnography with historical archaeology of particular media. His current book projects include: *Photography and Anthropology*, *Zoom: Seeing and Believing in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, *Lessons From Hell*, and *Visual Encounters*.

What are you reading at the moment (not work)?

Matterhorn by Karl Marlantes – the ubiquitously advertised novel (thinly disguised auto-biography) about the Vietnam war, one of those books that is lauded as beautifully written but is actually atrocious (devoid of any metaphorical complexity), but gripping, (perhaps because of that lack).

Why and how did you become an anthropologist?

I've recounted this so many times that I can no longer recall if it's actually all true, but: I was born in Sri Lanka and we moved to Europe when I was six. The boat stopped at Bombay and I spent a day exploring the docks with my father (he had worked as a shipping agent in Colombo for about 15 years). The sunlight, the swarming labouring bodies, the smell of bunker fuel, must all have laid the Kipling-esque seed for my future return (or something like that). I think lots of anthropologists have geographically or culturally marginal childhoods and fieldwork is a kind of 'return'.

Who has been the greatest influence on your career?

Well, quite a lot of people: Pukhraj, Prittiballa, Babulal, Nirmala, Bapu. Ambaram, Mangilal, Naggu, Dhanna, Pannalal, Ishvar and at least 300 other people in a village in central India to whom I owe everything. But also the literary theorist Homi K. Bhabha who I first met in 1992 when I invited him to a conference at SOAS responding to a lecture

“I spent a year working as a kitchen porter in Hammer-smith Hospital as a homage to Friedrich Engels.”

by Carlo Ginzburg (someone from whom I've also learned a fantastic amount). He (Homi) persuaded me to write a book about 'vernacular' Indian photography and also showed me how centrally important Derrida and others are to a new practice of anthropology. I'm

also greatly indebted to my PhD supervisor Alfred Gell who was an extraordinary person: I think he gave me the courage to do my own thing in my own style and not worry about "audience". Also Jonathan Parry, my second supervisor, whose commitment to field research, and commitment to testable hypotheses, is exemplary.

Which anthropologist would you most like to be stuck with on a desert island?

A magically resuscitated W.H.R. Rivers or Claude Lévi-Strauss (or preferably both) but also Julius Lips the great Cologne radical primitivist-leftist who fled the Nazis, founded the department at Howard and then returned to Leipzig (in what was then East Germany).

What do you do to relax?

I'm a passionate horticulturalist and have an allotment. I'm really quite obsessed with growing vegetables. Apparently I can become quite pretentious about the subject (having once appeared in *Private Eye's* "Pseud's Corner" on the subject of "allotment bricolage"). I'm also quite a serious collector of British 1930s leftist poetry and "little magazines", and also of early classical vinyl recordings (i.e. 1952 through to early stereo). I'm in no way a "completist", just an enthusiast.

What's your favourite song /piece of music?

I'd be torn between having to choose between Bach's first suite for cello (BMV1007), Shostakovich's

8th string quartet (op. 110) and Kick Out the Jams by the MC5. Media is very important to me and if I had the Bach on vinyl I'd prefer the Paul Tortelier recording; on CD I'd prefer the Pierre Fournier recording, but if it was shellac then the classic Pablo Casals 1936 recordings would be fabulous. (Music is always materially incarnated). I've got a big collection of early Indian 78 recordings (mostly music but I'm especially keen on political speeches – I have Gandhi recorded in 1924, and Subhash Chandra Bose broadcasting from Tokyo in 1942) and I love the crackles (the 'modernist surface') as much, or maybe more than the song/voice (the 'referent').

In the light of the current climate of funding uncertainty, what would you do if you lost your job?/were not an academic?

I'd try and become a market gardener, which I think I'd be really good at, but I could probably always become a US Art Historian again.



What annoys or frustrates you most about the state of our discipline?

The alacrity with which so many anthropologists relinquish the disci-

pline's subversive potential as what Foucault called a "counterscience".

What was the most embarrassing moment of fieldwork?

In 1982 I was s(h)itting in the jungle, in central India (I mean early in the morning, like all the other villagers who didn't have a latrine) when a very large black krait (*Bungarus caeruleus*) came towards me at considerable velocity. I started running towards higher ground where a cattle herder (Ishwar, now a firm friend) was standing with some buffaloes. He looked surprised as I rushed towards him,

"I think lots of anthropologists have geographically or culturally marginal childhoods and fieldwork is a kind of 'return'."

clutching my waterpot and trousers, and I shouted "snake" very loudly. I thought I said 'snake' (in Hindi *sarp/samp*) but actually in my terror shouted *saumph!* (dried fennel seeds). So I became known as the man who "can't tell the difference between snakes and dried fennel seeds". That has taken a long time to live down.

What's the worst job you've ever done?

After I graduated from LSE, I spent a year working as a kitchen porter in Hammersmith Hospital as a homage to Friedrich Engels. My colleagues were fantastic but it was mostly cleaning floors.

What is the best thing about UCL?

Its "radical tradition" (and what I hope will be its radical future). Also the courageous and foresighted students that organized the UCL Occupation and invented amazing applications like Sukey (an anti-kettling device).

What historical figure(s) would you most like to have met?

The Buddha, Leon Trotsky, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Walter Benjamin.

What do you most like or admire about the people you worked amongst?

Their resilience, generosity, and sense of the absurd (also their amazing ability to grow vegetables!). They are also puzzlingly kind and (mostly) incredibly gracious.

Tell us one thing your students might not know about you.

If you see me with my iPod I'll probably be listening to Bring Da Ruckus by the Wu-Tang Clan. This was a 'gift' from one of my sons who loaded it on my iPod when his was broken. I discovered it on my iPod on a trans-Atlantic flight, was perturbed at first, but now am almost addicted.

From the Field

For most anthropologists the word 'fieldwork' has a magical ring about it. When we enter 'the field' we are not simply doing our research, we are *living* our research. We are not just entering another physical space but also an intellectual and emotional one. The field takes over and becomes an alternative way of life, lived in a heightened state of focus.

Exhilarating, exasperating and exhausting by turns, the experience of fieldwork unites us as professionals. Yet we all do it differently. The three insights below represent three personal perspectives from across the three sections of our department. While each writer takes a different approach, they all evoke a love for the challenges and rewards of our peculiar research practice.

Danny Miller

Danny Miller is Professor of Material Culture with research interests in material culture, clothing, consumption, media, digital anthropology and transnational domestic labour. His most recent publications include: *Tales from Facebook*, *Global Denim* and *Stuff*.

We have never previously met, I introduced myself for the first time half an hour ago and yet here I am looking through your wardrobe, making personal comments on the fit of your jeans, for example asking if you keep the smallest size jeans you were ever able to wear. What persuaded you to let me do this?

Well the first thing was I wasn't entirely unannounced, a leaflet came through your door a couple of days ago explaining who we were and why we were doing this research.

Secondly I am not on my own, since you are not about to allow a middle aged man through your front door. But I came with a presentable young woman who didn't look like she was there with any dubious intention.



I had explained that you were part of a sort of random sample, which consisted of your street. That we had a commitment to work with people on your street and no other street so it was very important to us that you took part. It helped that we had said we would be around the street for a whole year and could come any time, but you had decided that since you were not busy we could come in straight away. We explained that the reason we chose to work this way was because most academics tended to label people as "working-class" or "women" or "Somalian" or some such and that we didn't like to do that because you automatically would interpret your research results in terms of class or gender or whatever category had been chosen.

Working on random streets without assuming anything about the people seemed a more honest and open way of conducting research. This seemed reasonable, and you were also reassured by a discussion of an ethics form and a promise that everything would be kept anonymous and nothing you said would be traced back to you.

"Working on random streets without assuming anything about the people seemed a more honest and open way of conducting research."

As it happens, one reason you let me in is that you are actually quite into the topic of jeans. It's what you wear most days. You have seven pairs but four of them are special and you only wear for parties and when you have to look good. It's the other three you wear everyday even though they are the cheap ones and the least shaped, in fact with two of them you couldn't remember what the label was, which is one of the reasons we came up to the wardrobe to have a look.

Whoever you are – as the researcher - let me just say "thanks."

Volker Sommer



Volker Sommer is Professor for Evolutionary Anthropology, UCL's Pro-Provost for Africa and a member of the Great Ape Specialist Group of the IUCN. His most recent publications include *Apes Like Us. Portraits of a Kinship* and *Primates of Gashaka: Socioecology and Conservation in Nigeria's Biodiversity Hotspot*.

"I just find it fascinating." That's one of the pivotal sentences that I encounter time and again in applications and interviews of prospective students who want to study anthropology. However, while many assert an allure with foreign cultures, they are often perfectly foggy about the underlying academic content. If it comes to biological anthropology, exotic people are replaced by furry monkeys. Scientific reasoning is again hard to come by. Applicants may have read introductory literature. But pictures of a blond and pretty Jane

Goodall gently touching hands with an infant chimpanzee have often a far greater impact on the choice of career.

You might think that I will tell these hopefuls to sort out their thoughts. But I don't. Instead, I reassure them that a passion for Goodall's chimpanzee adventures, or Dian Fossey's gorilla tragedy, or Biruté Galdikas' orang-utan exploits qualifies them perfectly well to pursue primatology. I say this, because I believe that academic skills can be learned. But a love for wild animals cannot. And without that, you had better not go anywhere near our wild kin.

This untidy conviction - fascination equals qualification - has to do with my own childhood. I grew up in a village in the German heartlands, frolicking in the farms tended to by my mother's and father's families. But I wasn't interested in domesticated animals; they were too tame for me, too unchallenging, devoid of mysteries. I loved "wild" creatures: deers, boars, and tiny game such as beetles, ants and butterflies. I pursued them at forest edges and in the mighty oak woods nearby.



During my doctoral studies I was influenced by the engaging lectures of Christian Vogel, a comparative morphologist who realized that

studying bones could only tell us so much about the forces that brought about a particular design in morphology and behaviour. What was required was studies "in the flesh". And thus began my career as a fieldworker...

Since then, I have spent more than a decade in the midst of monkeys and apes – amongst temple monkeys in the Great Indian Desert, amongst gibbons in Thailand's haunting Khao Yai rainforest, and amongst chimpanzees in Nigeria's mountainous and remote Gashaka-Gumti National Park.

My fieldwork experience is of the old-fashioned type, with extended periods as a solitary researcher in places far away from my native lands. Quite a stereotype, isn't it? What I like in particular about working with wild animals is that I cannot force results. I have to be patient – something, that doesn't otherwise go with my nature. I have to wait, and days or weeks may go by when nothing of particular interest seems to happen, when data collection is a rather boring routine.

But then, something extraordinary might occur – and I witness behaviours that perhaps no other human being has ever seen. Such as when I stumble upon a python with a deer sticking out of her fangs. Such as when a thick ray of sun jets right through the dark canopy and onto the forest floor. Where a gibbon tries to catch the golden beam. It is during these moments that I treasure it most to be sweaty and scratched up.

Allen Abramson



Allen Abramson is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology with research interests in the logical tendencies and dialectical properties of transforming cultural worlds. His research is underpinned with studies in myth, ritual and gender, especially in the Oceanic context, as well as strong interests in relations connecting land, death and value.

I've got two golden rules for fieldwork. My first golden rule is not to ask questions. Generally when people respond to questions – particularly 'why?' questions – they idealise. They're talking about what they want their society to be rather than what it is. So ethnographic fieldwork begins with the rejection of interview methods. Ethnography is about tapping into existing lines of communication – listening to what people are saying as they do things and observing how they label (or pointedly 'signify') things.

My second golden rule is that you have to enter into intense relationships with people and place. You can't do fieldwork by living outside

a village, arriving in the morning and leaving in the afternoon. You need to build the kind of relationships that take you to the heart of practice. But there's a psychological cost in this – it can be tough.

In the kind of anthropological fieldwork I've done in the Pacific it's very difficult to leave the field. You are constantly in the experiment. I remember forcing myself to stay through weekends to learn about the church, sitting through very long three-hour services and in the end I couldn't hack it and realised that I needed time away from the village. Before that, the usual way I 'stole' any private space was by sleeping (which I then did too much!). For such intense experiments, you have to make sure you've thought through the personal side of things. You have to choose ethnographic contexts that are psychologically as well as intellectually inappropriate.

“When you arrive in Polynesia as a European you are basically installed as a chief, which is a kind of quasi-God. You need to break free from the aristocratic straightjacket.”

I found working in Fiji very difficult. The reason it's difficult is that Polynesian society is very much dominated by aristocratic rules and protocols. When you arrive in Polynesia as a European you are basically installed as a chief, which is a kind of quasi-God. You need to break free from the aris-

tocratic straightjacket. So I joined the gang in the village called the Green Army – a pretty boisterous group of young men of my own age. The power (*mana*) of the most honoured people lies in their being stationary – the more *mana* you have the more stationary you are. This is very damaging to an anthropological project. The Green Army defined their power transgressively by moving around in the bush. So I became mobile and learnt about the transgressive side of society in Western Polynesia.

“To me, field research involves an element of surrender.”

To me, field research involves an element of surrender. When you arrive in a fieldwork community you surrender to people's good will and you surrender to people's ideas of how best to introduce you to their lives. Intellectually we try to be in control of the whole work, but tactically we put down some of our defences so that we can be absorbed and understand a society from our informants' point of view. In fact, understanding exactly how we are absorbed once we have surrendered is a great place to start learning about cultural 'others'.

Meet the Students

Michael Mansbridge

BSc Anthropology



What were you doing/studying before you came to study at UCL?

I came to UCL immediately after taking A levels in English literature, maths and physics. I chose these topics so as to keep my university course options as broad as possible.

What attracted you to study anthropology?

I considered studying engineering or music at university, but was at-

“My dissertation allowed me to integrate current findings in neuroscience with fossil evidence and studies in ethnomusicology.”

tracted by the breadth and diversity of topics covered by anthropology at UCL. As someone with interests in both the humanities and the sciences, I wanted to explore a wide range of subjects from which I could develop more concrete career aspirations.

What attracted you to come to UCL?

I was brought up in the Cumbrian countryside, and so was eager to experience city life. As a renowned university in central London, UCL was an obvious first choice.

What do you hope to do after this course?

This year I plan to take a break from education; I am currently job searching in London and am considering travelling abroad next summer. I may return to university within the next few years, however, to study for a master's degree.

Tell us a little about your undergraduate dissertation.

Music is one of my main interests, and I was fortunate to be able to focus upon this aspect of human experience in my dissertation. I studied the potential evolutionary processes that have led to our ability to perceive musical rhythm. This was a highly enjoyable topic, allowing me to integrate current findings in neuroscience with fossil evidence and studies in ethnomusicology.

How do you find living in London?

I love living in London, and plan to continue living in this city after my graduation. It is clear that UCL's location places you right in the heart of one of the world's greatest cities, and the opportunities for entertainment are inexhaustible.

What do you like best about the course?

I particularly love the breadth. I have been able to study modules as diverse as primatology, anthropology of religion and even Mandarin Chinese. This is coupled with a gradual allowance of subject specialisation; by the time you start the third year, there are people doing the same degree who are undertaking entirely different modules. Anthropology is undoubtedly a friendly department, despite the diversity of academic interest. I like the common room with its relaxed atmosphere and several departmental parties are organised every year.

Traben Pleasant

MSc Social and Cultural Anthropology



What were you doing before you came to study at UCL?

I served four years in the United States Marine Corps and then took a job in California with a company that assists the physically and mentally disabled. I worked with a five year old and two seven year old

boys to try to challenge their trouble areas or characteristics and to assist them in performing 'normal' social activities.

What attracted you to study anthropology?

I was first attracted to anthropology during my undergraduate studies. I found the entire discipline interesting, especially primatology and cultural anthropology. My affinity

"I have also always wanted to be a firefighter."

for traveling and experiencing new cultures led me to finally major in and graduate with a cultural anthropology degree.

What attracted you to come to UCL?

Initially it was an idea I received from one of my undergraduate professors who is a former UCL graduate. As I further investigated UCL, I learned that it had a very prestigious reputation and a very impressive anthropology faculty. I am enjoying my time here, the decision to study at UCL has proven to be a great one.

What do you hope to do after this course?

I hope to find a job in California or Hawaii where I can put my anthropological knowledge to use, but I have also always wanted to be a firefighter.

Tell us a little about your masters dissertation.

My dissertation has to do with the effects of tourism on culture. I am currently conducting field research in Bocas Del Toro, Panama, a popular tourist destination on the Caribbean side of the country. I'd like draw from my research an understanding of how people construct meaning and perceptions of both the 'hosts and guests' and how they mutually effect the way cultures function in such places.

How do you find living in London?

London is all that I heard it would be and more, it's probably the most diverse and fast paced city I've ever been to. I couldn't believe how many different languages I could hear just on my commute to and from the University. I like the fact that I don't need a car in London and that there is constantly something going, sporting events, theatre, art exhibitions, lecture series and of course plenty of pubs.

What do you like best about the course?

Along with learning anthropology, I enjoy the variation of people one can find in this course. No two professors or students are alike, everyone has a unique background and each professor has a unique area of anthropological expertise.



Katharine Balolia *PhD Paleoanthropology*



What were you doing/studying before you came to study at UCL?

I completed an MSc in Research Methods in Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London. I've now changed discipline but the skills gained as part of that course have proven to be invaluable with respect to my current research.

What attracted you to do anthropological research?

I've always been interested in human social behaviour and taking an evolutionary approach to this subject has always made a lot of sense to me. I was attracted to the discipline of Physical Anthropology as studying extinct human species (through examining fossils) seemed like a concrete approach in answering the questions that interest me.

What attracted you to come to UCL?

As well as UCL being a leading research institution, it was the MSc

Human Evolution and Behaviour course that initially attracted me to study here. There has always been a strong Palaeoanthropological tradition in the Anthropology Department at UCL, and this (among other reasons) attracted me to continue on to study for a PhD.

What do you hope to do when you've got your PhD?

I would like to carry on with further research - either in the UK or at a research institution/university abroad. I'm hoping that continuing with post-doctoral research will allow me to expand on results obtained from my PhD research.

Tell us a little about your PhD research.

The main aim of my research is to develop a framework by which to reconstruct the mating system and the nature of male and female relationships in extinct human species. I am interested in understanding at what point in our evolutionary history a monogamous/pair-bonded social structure evolved,

"I am interested in understanding at what point in our evolutionary history a monogamous/pair-bonded social structure evolved."

and whether the shift from a gorilla or chimpanzee like mating system to a pair-bonded, human-like social structure occurred sometime over the last two million years (i.e. with *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis* or with modern *Homo sapiens*).

I do this through examining skull morphology in relation to social behaviour in living great ape species and in humans, and applying these findings to fossil collections to decipher what the likely mating system of extinct human species would have been.

How do you find living in London?

I really like living in London although the daily commute to UCL across London can sometimes be a bit of a chore (I live in Greenwich), especially during rush hour! Having said that, I find that the advantages of living in such a diverse and stimulating social and cultural environment definitely compensate for the drawbacks of living in such a large and densely populated city.

What do you like best about the PhD experience?

It's great to be part of a stimulating academic community, especially at an institution such as UCL where so much great research is being done within evolutionary science. I am also enjoying the opportunity to spend several years working on one large overarching research question - something that might be difficult to do again as my career progresses.

What is the most challenging part?

The organisation and execution of research trips has been quite a challenge, especially when things haven't gone according to plan (my research equipment has malfunctioned several times while collecting

data!). The language barrier in foreign countries has also been testing at times. Despite the challenges, I'm finding doing research as part of a PhD to be a very rewarding experience.

Recently Awarded PhDs 2011

Anna Apostolidou - "Gay Art and Culture in Contemporary Greece"

Piergiorgio di Giminiani - "The Struggle of the People of the Land: land, state and tradition in a Mapuche community of Southern Chile"

Sophie Haines - "Land, Citizenship and Development in southern Belize"

Claudia Ituarte Lima - "Negotiating cultural and environmental rights in the Amazon region"

David Jobanputra - "Tigers, Trees and Teleology: Religious Resistance and Resource Use in Alwar District, Rajasthan"

New Books from the Department

Rebecca Empson

Timothy Carroll talked to Rebecca Empson about her new book: *Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory and Place in Mongolia*.

When asked to interview Rebecca Empson about her newly published book *Harnessing Fortune: personhood, memory and place in Mongolia* (Oxford University Press, March 2011), I was a little startled—I know nothing about Mongolia, and it is far removed from my area of interest. But, as I began to read the first chapter, I was struck with Rebecca's writing style. It is both accessible and insightful, and I was quickly caught up in the details which she expounds with ease.



'*Harnessing Fortune*' brought to mind an image of animal husbandry and the classical personification of luck: Lady Fortuna. Later, I found that this only begins to scratch the surface of the phrase which Rebecca explained to me is the translation of an idiom that expresses what Buriad nomadic herders seek do through daily practice. Wealth, fortune, and prosperity are all parts of the imagery, alluding to numerous forms of economic, social, and political wealth, as well

as to the luck with which one acquires, or harnesses, that fortune.

In her book Rebecca draws a parallel between the way fortune is harnessed through various household practices and the way in which the events of history are made explicit in daily life. As third generation migrants from Siberia, the Buriad carry an intense history of political persecution in Mongolia. During the socialist period many of the male population were sent to labour camps or killed. Rather than looking at this as a national discourse, Rebecca seeks to understand how this trauma is experienced locally: how it is internalized and challenged in local discourse and practice. She found, for example, that the idea of rebirths within families allowed for those who had disappeared to be remembered, as they made their appearance in families as the sons and daughters of people in the present.

Rebecca also looks at how understandings of wealth and fortune have changed in the shift from a planned to openmarket economy. What happens when fortune is not always mobile in animal herds, but becomes stationary through the increasing ownership of (landed) property? What conflicts arise through this transformation, and how are ideas about inheritance affected? Here we learn of the intense economic transformations that have affected this corner of Asia.

It is, Rebecca says, through the process of long-term fieldwork and the process of writing that theoretical insight is generated, and this

process should be made transparent. 'It is through our stumbling blocks that we find our options', she comments, and 'fieldwork is the result of someone's network of possibilities'. Because of this, Rebecca sought to document the process of fieldwork, and so the book is written in a very honest way, opening with a lovely narrative of how she came to her field location, and the difficulties associated with that.



Harnessing Fortune is an excellent resource, not only for the rich ethnography, but also for the transparent approach to fieldwork, ethnography, and anthropological theory which Rebecca demonstrates throughout the work. The wide range of themes addressed in this book (everything from kinship to politics, shamanic practice to economic, and material culture to cultural memory) make it an excellent recommendation to specialists and the casual observer alike.

For more information about the book, and a 20% discount code when ordering through Oxford University Press, visit Rebecca Empson's UCL staff page at: www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/r_empson.

Workshop

Contemporary Cosmologies

Beata Switek reports on an international event of cosmological importance hosted here in the Anthropology Department.



Where should we serve the biscuits? - the question that baffled us, the postgraduate volunteers, for a good few minutes earlier that day had long lost its urgency by the evening. Questions of an all together different calibre replaced that of the morning. In what ways can the ethnographic study of ‘cosmologies’ contribute to the contemporary anthropological theories? How can we harness cosmological explorations for the understanding of the present-day world in its multiplicity? These questions were tackled on the 11th and 12th of May 2011 during a workshop on ‘Contemporary Cosmologies and the Cultural Imaginations’ hosted by UCL Anthropology – but only once the biscuits had been served.

Over the two days the speakers explored how local cosmologies, i.e., the ways in which people imagine the world around them, influence such fields as modern markets,

political landscapes, environmental discourse, digital media and popular cinema. Following the presented papers we crossed the globe several times moving from India to the Solomon Islands, from China,

“The crowds were hardly surprising given the intellectual weight in the room.”

Taiwan, and Mongolia to Russia, and further to Mozambique and Vanuatu, to finish the journey in Trinidad. In the context of globalisation it was a timely endeavour to highlight the part that cosmological thinking has to play in accounting for the differences and similarities between culturally-informed concepts – a key to advancing ever more critical intercultural communication.

The seminar room remained filled to the brim over the course of the two days with students from UCL, as well as other London depart



ments at Goldsmiths and LSE, and further afield from Sussex, Oxford, Cambridge, and more. The crowds were hardly surprising given the intellectual weight in the room including staff from our department,

guests from a range of UK universities, Bergen, Copenhagen, Jerusalem, Indiana, and Chicago. We were excited to have in our midst such celebrated figures as Marshall Sahlins, Don Handelman, Bruce Kapferer, and Knut Rio, but everyone had their individual favourites.

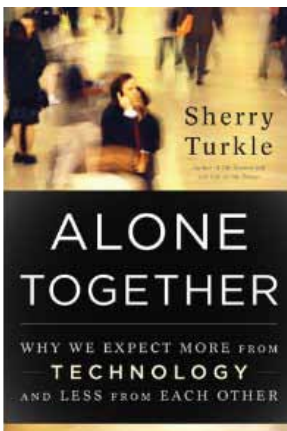


The idea for this workshop emerged from the meetings of the Cosmology, Religion, Ontology and Culture research and reading group (CROC), while the event itself was orchestrated by Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad with the financial support of UCL Anthropology, UCL Grand Challenges, and the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen.

Book Review

Slaves to the machine?

Lane DeNicola reflects on Sherry Turkle's latest work on human-computer relations, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*.



<http://www.amazon.com/Alone-Together-Expect-Technology-Other/dp/0465010210>

In early June I just managed to make it to Sherry Turkle's talk over at LSE on her new title out from Basic Books. She's been a central figure since my early days in grad school, and this title—billed as the final installment in a kind of quasi-trilogy with her two other seminal works on human-computer relations (*Life on the Screen* and *The Second Self*)—has created quite a splash.

I've yet to read the book (full disclosure) but, in brief, it treats a subject of great contemporary relevance and concern – our ever-increasing reliance on 'intelligent' machines. The first part looks at how people readily attribute human feelings to quasi-human machines, such as robot companions. As these become more sophisticated, they will form an ever

larger role as functioning members of society. The second part of the book exposes our growing addiction to online life and the many new ways in which we form relationships mediated through



technology. We are, it seems, becoming neurotic in our attachment to these new interfaces.

For those unfamiliar with Turkle's work, she has been at MIT for roughly three decades, a "Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology" and so is very much a fixture within the intellectual landscape of the field of STS. Her formal academic training at Harvard was in the fields

"We are increasingly reliant on 'intelligent' machines."

of sociology and psychology, but she often describes her approach as "ethnographic" and in fact she self-identifies as an anthropologist in the prologue of *Alone Together*.

I certainly don't consider myself a disciplinary flag-waver, but part of what gives her work such relevance to my own is this self-identification and the tacit "We" of her title. Her previous work was in many ways among the best I've encountered on its topics, yet I've always marvelled that it

could be so analytically incisive and nuanced in its observational detail on the one hand and, on the other, so universalizing and exclusively focused on the American context. A non-trivial part of the buzz

around *Alone Together* is its strong contrast with the optimism of her earlier works. She confirmed the claims of a New York Times reviewer during her talk, suggesting that in this volume "all is not well." My guess is that I will find her trepidation refreshing, but from what I've seen and heard to date *Alone Together* promises little in the way of sorely needed cross-cultural (or interdisciplinary) innovation in the study of digital media and IT. In some ways this is a banal and not especially useful observation, just one obvious example of long-standing disciplinary schisms, but I think (in the spirit of rapprochement) it illuminates a yawning chasm that trained anthropologists have yet to help bridge.

New Appointments

Dr Dena Freeman - Lecturer in Sustainability, Environment and Development

Dena is currently exploring new research on the anthropology of well-being – looking at the interplay of economic, social, cultural, cognitive and physiological factors in the human experience of being well. She is a specialist on Southern Ethiopia, having conducted research in the Gamo Highlands since 1995. Since receiving her PhD from the LSE in 1999, she has held a number of teaching posts and fellowships as well as done consultancy work with several organizations dealing with international development and corporate social responsibility.

Dr Joseph Calabrese - Lecturer in Medical Anthropology

Joe received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 2006 studying anthropology and clinical psychology. His research focuses on culture and mental health, the integration of modern and traditional medical approaches, postcolonial revitalization movements, personal transformation, and anthropological studies of the culture of medicine. Joe's fieldsites have included the Navajo Nation, Haiti, and those with severe mental illness in Chicago and Boston. His current project is in the Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan, studying the integration of modern psychiatric services, traditional medicine and Tibetan Buddhism.

Dr Matt Skinner - Lecturer in Palaeoanthropology

Matt focuses on questions about the growth and development, diet, taxonomy and evolutionary history of living and extinct primates, including fossil hominins. He received his PhD from George Washington University in 2008, and current research projects use state of the art imaging techniques to analyse the enamel and dentine tissues of primate teeth to help answer questions about tooth crown morphology and the architecture of living primates and fossil hominins. Matt has participated in field excavations in Kenya, Ethiopia, Canada, France, Germany, East Timor, the Republic of Georgia, and Hungary.

Dr Adam Drazin - Teaching Fellow: Culture, Materials and Design

Adam obtained his PhD in anthropology at UCL in 2001, on the material culture of care in Romania. Returning to UCL, he is running the new MA programme in Culture, Materials and Design. He aims to promote the broad spectrum of ways in which anthropology engages with design and materials, and explore how dialogues with institutions in the private and public sectors can advance anthropological understandings, particularly through the use of object-focussed design methodologies. He has conducted research on Irish-Romanian homes and worked as a design anthropologist with companies including Intel and HP Labs.

Brain teaser



Can you identify which members of UCL Anthropology academic staff are represented in the following anagrams?

She nukes nuclear

No Arsenal lamb

Welt this camera

Ill nerdy man

Bridal marathon

Cover picture by Luke Freeman: Menswear department, Tsinjoarivo market, Western Madagascar

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