

**Contemporary Anthropological Theory (ANTH 4008)**  
***with a focus on crisis and the chronic***\*

Spring 2017 – Tuesdays 6:10 – 8:00 p.m. – Duques 361

**INSTRUCTOR**

Chloe Ahmann ([chloeahmann@gwu.edu](mailto:chloeahmann@gwu.edu))

Office Hours: 3:00–5:00 p.m. at 2114 G Street #B101

This is a capstone research seminar in which students will produce original research papers that in one way or another investigate the concepts of *crisis* and/or the *chronic*. Anthropologists have long been concerned with the experience of crisis as a moment of heightened social action, set apart from the “imponderabilia of everyday life” (Malinowski 1922). But crisis is a privileged designation—a moment of rupture—that incites action and brings contradictions to light. In this class, we will not only examine contemporary scholarship on crises and the sociocultural mechanisms marking moments as significant events, but also those forms of insecurity, precarity, and disorder too “slow” to achieve recognition as disasters.

Based on our shared conversations about time and event (roughly the first third of the course), each student will develop an original research project related to these topics, culminating in a 20-page capstone paper. Students may focus their research on any time period and use any methodology that is deemed appropriate, but all students will be expected to engage in primary-source research. For example, a student in archaeology might investigate the recovery of artifacts in crisis situations; bioanthropology students might examine the body’s response to trauma (crisis) or malnutrition (the chronic); budding linguists might look at the rhetoric attached to either of these conditions in today’s public media (the “crisis” in Flint, the diabetes “epidemic”); and socioculturalists could attend to the effects of conditions that fail to meet a “crisis” threshold. **Students are welcome to write with this political moment**, exploring the “crisis of liberalism” invoked in the wake of the election, examining chronic conditions of disaffection motivating votes for the president-elect, thinking through the moment’s normalization, and so on. Crises of concept are also ripe for investigation.

After several weeks of collective reading and discussion, most of this course will focus on individual research and writing, as well as on reading and commenting on one another’s work.

---

\* As in something that persists for a long time, not Dr. Dre’s debut studio album.

**Prerequisites:** ANTH 2008, Methods course

**Learning Outcomes:** As a result of completing this course, students will be able to

- Discuss several of the major developments in sociocultural anthropological theory over the last four decades, interrogating how they inform contemporary anthropological debates on the topics of crisis and chronicity.
- Demonstrate the ability to critically marshal evidence—based on both primary and secondary sources—and apply contemporary anthropological theory to data in order to substantiate a sustained scholarly argument.
- Demonstrate the ability to master and critically assess ideas sufficiently enough to present those to student colleagues in a format that stimulates critical discussion.
- Demonstrate the ability to critically apply anthropological theory in reviewing the original research of peers.

**Evaluation:** This class has no tests or examinations. Your grade will be based on

- Attendance, preparation, and participation (30% – besides contributions to discussion, this includes effort put forth in peer review, in-class activities, and Blackboard posts throughout the course of the semester)
- Your paper proposal and annotated bibliography (10%)
- Your rough draft (15%) and presentation (5%), and
- Your final capstone paper (40%)

**Blackboard Posts:** During the first few weeks of collaborative reading (and occasionally at other points in the semester) you will be expected to post short reflection papers (about 250 words) on Blackboard. You should also read each other's postings before class. Responses should be posted by 9:00 a.m. on the day of class. These are not formal papers, but rather an opportunity for you to react to and reflect on the readings for the week. *Do not summarize the readings.* Raise questions the readings pose for you, think about how they relate to other things we have read, and/or consider how they fit into the course as a whole. These postings are intended to help you organize your thoughts about the readings and to create a space for dialogue before we come together in class. Each posting should conclude by raising a question or identifying an idea that you would like to discuss in class (i.e., I didn't understand what the author meant by X; was intrigued by idea Y and would like to explore if further; I saw a connection or contradiction between what this author argues and what another text proposed, and I'd like to discuss it). The weeks requiring Blackboard posts are indicated in the course schedule below. **Late posts will not be graded.**

**Late Work:** Late work will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade for each day late; no work will be accepted more than one week after the due date. In-class assignments cannot be made up.

**Attendance:** We only meet once a week, and you are expected to be present at all classes. Attendance is a core requirement, and is captured within your participation grade. If you must miss class, I ask that you communicate with me in advance.

**Participation Standards:** In a course such as this, talking about ideas is just as important as reading and writing about them. The more adept we are at discussing ideas, claims, points of evidence, and judgments, the more nuanced and sophisticated our reading, thinking, and writing will be. As with your written work, the *quality* of your contributions is far more important than the *quantity*. In other words, simply talking a lot does not mean you will receive high marks for participation. I will evaluate your participation according to the following scale:

- A: Exceptional contributions showing critical analysis of readings and classmates' ideas, both in discussion and on Blackboard
- B: Useful contributions, particularly questions that further group discussions
- C: Minimal contributions that do not demonstrate completion of readings and/or adequate critical engagement with those readings
- D: Listening, even politely and attentively, without contributing

**Readings:** Common readings for the course will be posted on Blackboard. After the first few weeks of common readings, students will be expected to read additional secondary scholarship to frame their research papers. You are only required to purchase one book for this class:

- Biehl, João. 2005. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

You may also benefit from purchasing these texts if you are looking for more guidance on research and ethnographic writing:

- Narayan, Kirin. 2012. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Turabian, Kate. 2009. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Citation Style:** All papers are expected to conform with the *Chicago Manual of Style*, available here: <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/16/contents.html>.

**Average Expected Time Commitment:** Students will spend two hours per week in class. Required reading for seminar meetings and written response papers / research projects is expected to take, on average, 5–7 additional hours per week.

**Academic Integrity:** You are expected to adhere to GW's Code of Academic Integrity, which states, "Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information." For the remainder of the code, see: <https://studentconduct.gwu.edu/code-academic-integrity>.

**Writing Support:** As this is a writing-intensive course, you may choose to seek support from the University Writing Center, which provides support from the very early stages of brainstorming, through drafting, revising, and polishing your final work. For more information, visit <https://writingcenter.gwu.edu>.

**University Policy on Religious Holidays:** Students should notify faculty during the first week of the semester of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance. Faculty should extend these students the courtesy of absence without penalty on such occasions, including permission to make up examinations.

**Support for Students Outside the Classroom (Disability Support Services):** Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office in Rome Hall, Suite 102, or by phone at 202-994-8250, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. Please also make me aware of necessary accommodations no later than the second week of class. For additional information, please refer to <https://disabilitysupport.gwu.edu>.

**University Counseling Center:** The University Counseling Center offers 24/7 assistance and referral to address students' personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include crisis and emergency mental health consultations, confidential assessment, counseling services, and referrals. Call 202-994-5300 or visit <https://counselingcenter.gwu.edu> for more information.

**GW Haven:** If you are experiencing unwanted attention, particularly if it has been sexual in nature, GW's Haven offers a variety of support services, including counseling, medical care, university assistance, and legal guidance. Haven maintains a 24/7 Sexual Assault and Consultation Hotline (202-994-7222) that can provide help if you or someone you know has experienced sexual violence. Haven operates through GW's Title IX Office and will do their best to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### **PART ONE: COLLECTIVE READING**

**Week One (1/17): Introduction and goals of the course** – How have scholars traditionally thought about the categories of “crisis” and the “chronic”? What sorts of experiences fail to breach thresholds of crisis and occasion remediation? What would it mean to rethink crisis as a context of lived experience, rather than an exception, trauma, or aberration?

- Vigh, Henrik. 2008. “Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline.” *Ethos* 73(1): 5–24.

**Week Two (1/24): Crisis – BLACKBOARD (due at 9:00 a.m.)** – What is a crisis? What does it *do* to apply that label to a situation? What are the different ways in which crises are made and managed? Are crises opportunities for change?

- Roitman, Janet. “Crisis.” *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*. Access here: <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/crisis/>.
- Klein, Naomi. 2007. “Introduction – Blank is Beautiful: Three Decades of Erasing and Remaking the World.” In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, pp. 3–26. New York: Picador.
- Redfield, Peter. 2005. “Doctors, Borders, and Life in Crisis.” *Cultural Anthropology* 20(3): 328–361.
- *Choose one of Cultural Anthropology’s blog series on the topic of crisis (available here) and reflect on its short essays in light of this week’s readings, OR watch The Big Short (available on Netflix) and consider the 2008 economic crisis in the context of our course.*
  - <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/243-beyond-the-greek-crisis-histories-rhetorics-politics> - on the Greek financial crisis
  - <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/911-refugees-and-the-crisis-of-europe> - on the refugee crisis
  - <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/989-crisis-of-liberalism> - on the most recent US presidential election

**Week Three (1/31): Time and event – BLACKBOARD (due by 9:00 a.m.)** – What is an event? How do events structure history and human experience? What sorts of happenings don’t “count” as events? How can we (as people, as scholars) attune to conditions that remain beneath the level of crisis? What sorts of politics become possible in doing so?

- Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2011. “The Child in the Broom Closet” (excerpts). In *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*, pp. 1–6, 11–16. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Stoler, Ann. 2013. “The Rot Remains: From Ruins to Ruination.” In *Imperial Debris: On Ruin and Ruination*, pp. 1–35. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Al-Mohammad, Hayder. 2012. “A Kidnapping in Basra: The Struggles and Precariousness of Life in Post-invasion Iraq.” *Cultural Anthropology* 27(4): 597–614.
- Shapiro, Nick. 2015. “Attuning to the Chemosphere: Domestic Formaldehyde, Bodily Reasoning, and the Chemical Sublime.” *Cultural Anthropology* 30(3): 368–393.

**Week Four (2/07): Chronicity – BLACKBOARD (due at 9:00 a.m.)** – What is chronicity? How does it differ from crisis? What do time and event look like under conditions of slow, protracted suffering? What opportunities exist within the “chronic” for attracting attention and occasioning change?

- Cazdyn, Eric. 2012. “Introduction.” In *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness*, pp. 1–12. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nixon, Robert. 2011. “Introduction.” In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, pp. 1–14. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Adams, Vincanne, Taslim Van Hattum and Diana English. 2009. “Chronic Disaster Syndrome: Displacement, Disaster Capitalism, and the Eviction of the Poor from New Orleans.” *American Ethnologist* 36(4): 615–636.
- Ahmann, Chloe. 2016. “‘It’s exhausting to create an event out of nothing.’ Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time.” Draft manuscript.
- *Bring in a news article of your choice related to this week’s topic.*
- **By now, you should be thinking concretely about paper topics.** I invite you to pursue research on any topic broadly related to our theme that interests you, so long as there is scholarship on your topic from multiple perspectives. Your research question, in other words, needs to be one for which there could be multiple answers. With this in mind, I offer one caution: *please stay away from any topic about which you feel so strongly that you are unwilling to take seriously perspectives that are not your own.*

## **PART TWO: WRITING IN ANTHROPOLOGY**

**Week Five (2/14): Writing in anthropology – BLACKBOARD (due at 9:00 a.m.)** – Consider today’s ethnography (by Biehl) as a bridge between our first four weeks of content and our emerging focus on ethnographic writing. What can we learn about crisis and chronicity through Biehl’s portrait of Catarina? What does it take to *represent* conditions of protracted suffering – in other words, to write about life lived without event? What does human agency look like in such situations?

- Clifford, James. 1986. “Partial Truths.” In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, pp. 1–26. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Biehl, João. 2005. "Introduction," "Part One: Vita," and some of "Part Two: Catarina and the Alphabet." In *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, pp. 1–91. Berkeley: University of California Press.
  - I'm only requiring that you read part of this book, but consider skimming (or reading) the rest. It's beautifully written and an excellent example of contemporary ethnography.

**Week Six (2/21): Evidence in anthropology** – Today, we are concerned with the topic of evidence. What counts as evidence in any given context? How is evidentiary value established? That is, how does a text, object, image, set of data, or other material become "evidence"? For *whom* is it evidence? What alternative interpretations of the evidence are possible? How is evidence linked to specific claims and how does it relate to larger debates and scholarly conversations? For this week's class, prepare a five-minute presentation that outlines your research question and working hypothesis, as well as a preliminary "so what" statement (at this point in your research, it is not expected that you be such an expert on the scholarly debates in your field that you can articulate a *scholarly contribution*, though you should be thinking along these lines). In addition to this tightly focused presentation, bring in three sources of evidence that will be used to support your argument (at least one should be primary source material). We will discuss both "evidence" in general and *your* evidence in particular.

- Engelke, Matthew. 2008. "The Objects of Evidence." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14(s1): S1–S21.
- Turabian, Kate. 2009. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
  - Skim Chapters 1, 2, and 5.

**Week Seven (2/28): Research proposal and annotated bibliography due (at 9:00 a.m.) – No Class** – Each student will set up a one-on-one meeting with me to discuss proposals.

- Your research proposal (about 500 words) should outline your area of inquiry, specific research questions, working hypothesis, a discussion on the forms of evidence you will use to support your argument, and a statement on your project's scholarly significance. In addition to your proposal (i.e. above and beyond the initial 500 words), you should include an annotated bibliography of ten secondary sources (contemporary anthropological theory) related to your research. Annotations can be short—a few sentences each—and will help me understand what preliminary research you've conducted so I can provide better feedback on your proposal.
- An additional component (optional, but very likely helpful for you) is a timeline: when will you conduct data? How many interviews will you seek to do each week? When do you plan to read your secondary sources? When do you hope to start writing?

**Week Eight (3/7): Arguments in anthropology – BLACKBOARD (due at 9:00 a.m.)**

– For this week’s discussion, bring in one article related to the research topic you are pursuing (from your annotated bibliography); identify the components of the argument and compare the way it is structured with one of the other pieces we have read together so far, using the guiding questions below (one set for each article – *this will comprise your Blackboard post*). Come prepared to discuss your findings, draw conclusions about the way arguments are constructed within anthropology, and share initial thoughts on the argument you will develop in your research paper.

1. Write out the full citation for the text, using appropriate formatting.
2. What is topic of the text and what is its scope?
3. What is the main argument made in the text (not the topic, but the implicit and/or explicit argument)? Note why you think this is the main argument.
4. To whom is this argument addressed? In other words, who are the main audiences? How do you know that these are the main audiences?
5. How does the author articulate the scholarly significance of this argument?
6. What pre-existing texts does the author(s) of the work you are analyzing use to support this argument? Mention specific sources that seem especially central as well as what categories those fall into (interviews, scientific papers, geological surveys, popular narratives in journals, etc.).
7. Make note of one pattern, anomaly, or rich contrast within the text. Include relevant locating information (e.g., section title, page numbers) and explain the “work” this feature performs within the article.
8. Identify what and whom is neglected. What audiences are marginalized or left out? What evidence is *not* used? How might the evidence that is used be differently interpreted? In other words, what is outside the argument and where are its edges?
9. Reflecting on your answers to questions 2–8, draw one or two connections between this text and the other you have consulted for this assignment.

**Week Nine (3/14): SPRING BREAK – No class.**

**PART THREE: CRAFTING YOUR PROJECT**

**Week Ten (3/21): Methods Workshopping** – For this week’s discussion, we will workshop project methods, paying particular attention to participant observation sites and interviews. Please bring one interview guide you have designed to collect data for your project and having already conducted one interview. *Come prepared to discuss how it went.*

**Week Eleven (3/28): Making a scholarly contribution – BLACKBOARD (due at 9:00 a.m.)** – Prepare a five-minute presentation and short Blackboard post that articulates the key contemporary scholarly debates with respect to your research topic (and our course theme); explain how your research will contribute anew to those debates.

**Week Twelve (4/04): Rough drafts due (at 9:00 a.m.) – No class** – Rough drafts should be at least 15 pages long, cite evidence from at least 12 sources, and be properly formatted. They should be thoughtfully organized, with an introduction, coherent sentences and paragraphs, clear transitions, and a conclusion. The higher the quality of your draft, the higher the quality of the feedback you will receive. Please send rough drafts to me and to the two students I have assigned as your peer reviewers.

**Week Thirteen (4/11): Peer reviews due (at 9:00 a.m.)** – Each person in class will have examined and critiqued two other rough drafts. Peer reviews should be substantial and should focus on each paper's central argument, its contribution, its forms of evidence, and its style and structure. They can include comments directly inserted throughout each draft, but should also include a narrative review and critique of at least 300 words. Please send peer reviews to me and the students whose papers you have reviewed. We will meet briefly as a class to discuss common trends in the peer reviews.

**Week Fourteen (4/18) – Preliminary research presentations and critique (Part I)** – Half the class will prepare ten-minute presentations based on their research projects and peer reviews, and will receive questions and feedback from the class.

**Week Fifteen (4/25) – Preliminary research presentations and critique (Part II)** – The other half of the class will prepare ten-minute presentations based on their research projects and peer reviews, and will receive questions and feedback from the class.

**Final papers due on May 1 (at 9:00 a.m.)** – Your final research paper should be about 20 pages long (+/- two pages, *not including references*), incorporating multiple perspectives and representing the final articulation of your research this term. It must include a bibliography of at least 15 scholarly sources (i.e., books or journal articles; newspaper articles may be used but will not count toward this threshold), engaged with and cited throughout the body of your paper. Some sources will inevitably be more central to your argument, and will be engaged throughout. Others will serve as reference material and may be cited in passing.