Of Course—Anth 269: The Anthropology of Rock and Roll

When people hear the phrase “rock and roll music,” artists such as Elvis, Chuck Berry, Bruce Springsteen, and Neil Young might come to mind. Most people do not immediately think of anthropological theories of ethnic identity formation or of 20th Century German political economists. But that’s not the case for the 230 students who were recently enrolled in ANTH 269: The Anthropology of Rock and Roll. They’re accustomed to hearing Karl Mare and Karl Polanyi referenced in the same breath as musical artists N.W.A., Santigold, and Bad Brains. Or in seeing their professor put a photo of Bronislaw Malinowski on the same PowerPoint slide as the shock-rocker G.G. Allin.

“The Anthropology of Rock and Roll” is a new introductory course that uses examples of popular music as case studies to expose undergraduate students to some of the major concepts and themes in socio-cultural anthropology. Most students enter the class expecting a lighthearted review of the history of rock and roll. Instead, through discussions of rock music, they get an in-depth exposure to some of the most serious issues studied by socio-cultural anthropologists, including racism, class struggles, homophobia, sexual violence, and drug abuse. In addition to learning about the connection between popular music and anthropology, the students also learn how to critically evaluate music production, including techniques such as overdubbing and studio mixing, to understand how music is recorded and how “culture” influences our interpretation of sound.

The main goal behind this new course is our new hire, Full-Time Lecturer Jason De León. Professor De León is an economic anthropologist who has conducted archaeological and ethnographic research in Mexico, Panama, and the United States. In his newest project, he examines the artifacts left by undocumented migrants along the Mexico-Arizona border to provide evidence for the economics of human smuggling and the life histories of Mexican and Central American migrant women and children. He hopes to include undergraduates in this research. A former punk rock’er turned academic, Professor De León is excited to finally have the opportunity to bridge his love of loud amplifiers with political economy theory. His favorite aspect of the rock and roll class is convincing students that anthropology is something they can find everywhere, including on their iPods.

STUDENT COMMENTS ABOUT THE COURSE:

“The most diverse and meaningful anthropology course I’ve ever taken, which was a result of Mason’s passion and personal knowledge of the topics of the course.” —Steven Ritchie, Junior, Pre-major

“I went into the course looking for an easy ‘cultural study of music’ class, and came out with a high appreciation and understanding of politically and culturally charged music and how that surrounds it. I will not be able to watch another sexually violent music video or listen to a Marxist-economics-based hip hop song again, without analyzing and critiquing its background and cultural constructs. Professor De León does an excellent job at engaging students and demystifying society through his fervid openness and passion. It was a class I was sad to see end.” —Kelly Thora, Sophomore, Anthropology

“I thought it was a spectacular class that wove the culture of rock music into discussions of anthropology, addressed meaningful topics of human social organizations and crises with a mix of class struggles, homophobia, sexual violence, and how “culture” influences our interpretation of respect and humor. And yeah, it totally rocked.” —name withheld

“This course gives me a real sense of purpose in Anthropology in the modern world, the discourses impact our lives that take place in recreational realms, and the important choices we make as music consumers.” —Michael Galtney, Junior, Anthropology

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“Of course I have loved loved loved hip-hop music!” —Michael Galtney, Junior, Anthropology

“Karl Marx would have loved loud hip-hop music!” —name withheld

New Faculty: Assistant Professor Ben Marwick

Ben Marwick joined the Department of Anthropology as an assistant professor in March 2008, coming to us from The Australian National University in Canberra. Ben began his career studying human behavioral ecology and environmental archaeology during the period 40,000-50,000 years ago in northwest Thailand. Since coming to UW, he’s been extending that work in a number of directions. One very exciting direction with great relevance for today involves exploring the archaeological record for evidence of climate variability. Using a set of marine bifaces collected in northern Australia, Ben is looking at the changes in the distribution of oxygen and carbon isotopes throughout the mid- to late Holocene as a marker for changes in climate through time. Other new research has taken him both further back and more forward in time. Further back in time, he is continuing his work in Thailand to examine hominin ecology and technology during the Middle Pleistocene. Later in time, he is working in the neighboring country of Laos as part of the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project. Ben has been involved in three field seasons of survey and excavation that are investigating the transition from hunter-gatherer to agricultural modes of subsistence. He is also reaching into later periods with recent fieldwork in the Lia National Museum in Luang Prabang, examining the craft traditions of bronze Buddha statues.

The final new direction for Ben is into Australian and zone archaeology and geomorphology. In collaboration with one of his PhD advisers, he has been involved in three field seasons of analyzing patterns in stone artifact scatters, surface geology and geomorphology in arid South Australia. The archaeology of this region is unique because of the very high density of artifacts and sites. Ben and his colleagues have developed a number of new mobile geographic information systems to collect and manage this rich data.

Since arriving, Ben has taught courses in anthropology and archaeology, including the undergraduate honors class, ‘Archaeology in Film’, ‘Greenarchaeology’ and ‘Archaeology and Explanation’. The film class is one of Ben’s most popular classes. In the summer of 2008—while he was teaching the class for the first time at UW—he actually played the part of a professor of archaeology in a full-length feature film to be released later in 2009. In 2009 he will also teach a new course called ‘Mainland Southeast Asian Archaeology’. He is currently the Honors Program Coordinator for the Anthropology Department and affiliated with the UW Center for Statistics in the Social Sciences and the UW Quaternary Research Center. Welcome, Ben!
Note from the chair

Hello everyone! I am thrilled to be the new person offering greetings from the chair’s office in the Department of Anthropology. Last year, acting chair Alison Wylie stated that it had been a year of transitions, with more in store. And I am pleased to say that I am the final step in our chair transition process—what some have called “musical chairs.” I had the wonderful experience of working with former chair Miriam Kahn and acting chair Darlis Keys by way of serving on their executive committees, and last year with acting chair Alison Wylie by serving as her associate chair. They have all been tremendous role models and generous mentors as I have settled into this new position.

I am delighted to have been part of the team that produced this 2009 issue of AnthropoLog (which includes Miriam Kahn, who founded AnthropoLog in 2001, our extraordinarily talented graduate students Andrew Cowan, Mark Madsen, and Lauren Rhodes). This same team spearheaded our 2009 Spring Outreach event, the theme of which was “Anthropology in Action.” This year’s event showcased the usefulness of anthropology beyond the academic setting and highlighted the public participation of several of our faculty members. Lecturer Holly Barker, who for twenty years has been working with Marshall Islanders, both in the South Pacific and in the Pacific Northwest, discussed her collaborative, activist efforts. She works with Marshallese who, after serving as unsuspecting participants and victims in U.S. nuclear weapons testing during the Cold War, are now speaking up to claim their environmental and health rights. Professor Steve Harrell talked about his recent work in southwest China, which involves collaborations on social and environmental interactions around Yanguan Primary School. As founder of the Cool Mountain Education Fund, he supports education as an effective means of promoting environmental stewardship and socioeconomic development in this rural community. And finally, I was our third presenter, describing how my work on female genital cutting in Africa has moved beyond its original focus on health consequences and cultural meanings to the third realm of global politics. For example, I recently helped in the re-drafting of the United Nations policy on female genital cutting; I have also served as an expert witness in local asylum hearings.

This year we have celebrated several outstanding achievements of our faculty. Gene Hunn received the “American Publishers Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence” for his new book, “A Zapotec Natural History.” Devon Peña was elected chair of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, the nation’s oldest and most prominent scholarly organization dedicated to the study of Mexican-origin people in Mexico and the United States. And in front of a standing-room only crowd at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Lorna Rhodes received the Society of Medical Anthropology’s Career Achievement Award. What an exciting year!

We are also very pleased to welcome two new colleagues, Sameeta Amrute has joined our sociocultural anthropology program. Her dissertation, “Producing Mobility: Indian IT Workers in Germany,” explores how Indian information technology workers create circulating economies and sustain new forms of kinship and connectivity at home. We also welcome our new lecturer, Jason De Lado. Although his dissertation research at Pennsylvania State University focused on Mesoamerican archaeology, his current research and much of his teaching integrate archaeology and sociocultural anthropology in creative ways. He has added some exciting new courses to our curriculum, including “Anthropology of Rock and Roll,” which is featured in the “Of Course” section of this issue of AnthropoLog.

In this issue of AnthropoLog you’ll find news about some of our exciting curriculum innovations and recent events in the Department of Anthropology. We are, indeed, lucky to have so much to be celebrating, and are happy to be able to share this with all of you. And for those who enjoy receiving these updates, please note that next year we will be moving to an online only version of AnthropoLog. Thus, we ask you to help us update your email contact list by visiting our website at http://depts.washington.edu/anthweb. We look forward to staying in touch with all our friends of anthropology!

Best,
Betina Sheli-Duncan
Drs. Peter and Amy Eby Establish the Gerald G. Eck Student Support Fund for Undergraduate Honors Students

The Department of Anthropology is pleased to announce the foundation of another new endowment to support our students. The Gerald G. Eck Student Support Fund will provide financial support specifically to our undergraduate honors students. Moreover, it will honor the distinguished career and contributions of Dr. Gerald Eck, who recently retired after thirty-three years of service to the UW’s Department of Anthropology.

Drs. Peter and Amy Eby established the Eck Fund to assist honors students with tuition, study abroad, research travel, and other expenses associated with education and building a research career. Dr. Peter Eby, currently an Assistant Professor of Radiology at the UW School of Medicine and Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, received his bachelor’s degree currently an Assistant Professor of Radiology at the UW School of Medicine and Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, received his bachelor’s degree from the UW Department of Anthropology. He has been involved with honors from our department in 1993. Dr. Eby initially chose anthropology for his major because he thought the subject matter was exciting. But when he took a two-quarter upper-division course on human fossils and evolution from Dr. Eck, he was enthralled. The course quickly became his favorite. By the end of the course, Dr. Eck had encouraged Peter to sign up for the department honors program, and agreed to supervise his senior honors thesis on the evolution of the hominid pelvis.

Dr. Eby credits Dr. Eck with providing the encouragement and support that led him to medical school at Vanderbilt University. Upon returning to Seattle in 2000 (with his wife Dr. Amy Eby), Dr. Peter Eby completed a residency in radiology, and was asked to join the UW faculty in 2005.

When the University recently approached faculty with a “challenge grant” opportunity, offering to match donations 1:1 up to $10,000, the Ebys jumped at the chance to give back to the University community. Dr. Eby specifically wanted to give to the Department of Anthropology because, compared to medicine, anthropology receives far less funding. As Dr. Eby said, “Dr. Eck stood out as someone who really helped me at a crucial stage in my career and education. He definitely helped me succeed as an undergraduate, which facilitated my getting into medical school.” If you’re interested in contributing to the Gerald G. Eck Student Support Fund, there are two ways to do so. One is to send a check (made out to “Department of Anthropology” with the Gerald G. Eck Fund” listed in the memo line of your check) to the Chair, Department of Anthropology, Box 353300, University of Washington, Seattle WA 98195. Or, go to the department webpage (http://depts.washington.edu/anthweb) and click on “Alumni and Friends,” then on “Make a Gift,” and then on “View Other Funds for this Department.” We thank Drs. Peter and Amy Eby for establishing this wonderful fund. And we thank you for considering making a donation to it.

New teaching initiatives in Medical Anthropology and Global Health

“Seattle is becoming a new center for global health research.” This headline in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer highlighted a major trend that has been developing over the last decade in our corner of the world, one in which the Department of Anthropology has played an active role. The number of faculty who work on health and disease from the molecular to the global level has been growing steadily, as have the connections and collaborations with other health research programs and centers in the Puget Sound region. The number of students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels interested in these timely topics has also grown. In response to these developments, the anthropology department recently launched a collection of new curricular initiatives, collectively called “Medical Anthropology and Global Health,” or MAGH for short.

Department Chair Bettina Shell-Duncan spearheaded the effort. “The department has a number of top-notch scholars working in this area, in both sociocultural and biocultural anthropology. We already had considerable course offerings, but found it was hard for students to navigate the many resources available. MAGH will help them integrate the resources in our programs with those around campus, and to have some recognition of what they’ve learned.”

For undergraduates, MAGH represents a “track,” or one way that they can select their coursework to develop a coherent set of knowledge and skills that cuts across the traditional sub-disciplinary boundaries within anthropology. Students can select from more than 20 courses relating to health and illness, and take the new “Capstone Cases in Medical Anthropology and Global Health.” The program is proving popular among students planning to continue their anthropology education after graduation, as well as those going into the medical professions. As Newsweek recently reported, social science majors have become increasingly attractive to medical schools because they bring skills that the health professions are coming to value more and more. Whether it be a greater understanding of cultural diversity, more familiarity with the evolutionary causes of disease, or an awareness of the political and economic contexts within which people make their medical decisions, health professionals with anthropological training are well poised to “treat the whole person.” For students wishing to take that path, MAGH provides ideal preparation.

Graduate students can approach the MAGH experience in two ways. One is as an undergraduate taking coursework that uniquely integrates approaches from social, cultural, medical and biocultural anthropology. A second is to enroll in the PhD (IMPH) concurrent-degree program. As Shell-Duncan says, “This program grew out of the awareness that many of our students were finding their own ways to take advantage of the intellectual resources in the School of Public Health. We wanted to coordinate the effort and make it easier for everyone.” In the past, students who completed an MPH on their own along with their anthropology PhD have been actively recruited on the job market for both academic and applied health positions. According to MAGH faculty affiliate Rachel Chapman, “Next year is the first where the streamlined concurrent degree program will be in place. We’re already seeing a tremendously strong pool of applicants for next year, and we’re excited about the prospects.”

MAGH is just the first of a number of tracks that the department is developing to help students highlight themes within their undergraduate coursework. Others currently under consideration include environmental anthropology, transnational studies, and applied anthropology. Stay tuned for more information as these develop.

For more information on MAGH, including information on becoming a community affiliate of the program, please contact Steve Goodreau (goodreau@u.washington.edu).
The 3.2 million-year-old fossil specimen of Australopithecus afarensis, known affectionately around the world as “Lucy,” was a star of the show. The importance of Lucy, and indeed paleoanthropology, is that fossils give us a window into the world of our distant ancestors, in this case, an African world with animals and plants that at first seem surprisingly mysterious to our eyes. But we soon connect... to the young female who died in the prime of her life, just think, if we are connected to Lucy, what does this say about our relationship to all the people with whom we share the planet?

Many colleagues, friends and students have told me what a memorable experience it was for them to see Lucy. But what struck me the most was the enthusiasm of total strangers. Every time I visited the exhibit (which I did at least half a dozen times), people stopped and listened to me as I was explaining parts of the exhibit to the friends or family members I was with. These strangers pressed me with questions (that I was only too happy to answer). Who are you? How do you know that? Where do you come from? These are questions that are very relevant. And, just think, if we are connected to Lucy, what does this say about our relationship to all the people with whom we share the planet?

Lucy’s Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia c. 3.5 million years ago. Known as “Lucy,” has been on display for the first time outside of Ethiopia in the world-premier special exhibition Lucy’s Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia. Courtesy of the Houston Museum of Natural Science.