

**VU, LLTI AND LMTA ETHNOLOGY DOCTORAL STUDY COURSE
DESCRIPTION**

Course title	Field (branch) of science, code	Institution	Department
SOCIOCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY THEORIES	Ethnology, 07H	VU	ATSI
Mode of study	Number of hours	Mode of study	Number of hours
lectures:	10	consultations:	10
independent study:	170	seminars:	10
Number of credits:	8 ECTS		
Course description			
Course The aim of this course is to systematically introduce doctoral students to contemporary theoretical paradigms in sociocultural anthropology and ethnology and to the major academic debates shaping the discipline’s intellectual agenda in the twenty-first century. The course is based on the premise that anthropological theory is not an abstraction separate from empirical research: it is integral to research practice, informing the formulation of research questions, fieldwork methodology, and the interpretation of ethnographic data. The course focuses particularly on the theoretical foundations of doctoral dissertation projects. Consultations are tailored to each student’s research needs, integrating broad theoretical frameworks with ethnographic and theoretical scholarship relevant to a particular region. Students are encouraged to assess theoretical models critically, not only as explanatory tools but also as epistemological positions with methodological and ethical implications.			
Learning outcomes and competencies developed Upon successful completion of this course, doctoral students will: Demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the main contemporary theoretical approaches in anthropology, their origins, and their interconnections. Critically analyze epistemological, ontological, and methodological questions raised in theoretical debates. Identify connections between theoretical perspectives and specific traditions of ethnographic research. Integrate regional ethnographic studies with broader theoretical perspectives and justify this integration in their dissertations. Independently apply theoretical interpretive strategies to fieldwork materials or ethnographic texts. Critically evaluate the application of theoretical concepts in different cultural and regional contexts, recognizing risks of transcription and universalization. Participate constructively in academic discourse, defending theoretical positions with			

reasoned arguments and evaluating alternative perspectives.

Develop competencies in designing and conducting cross-cultural research grounded in theoretical reflection and ethical responsibility toward research participants.

Be prepared to conceptualize and write theoretical dissertation chapters demonstrating a deep understanding of contemporary anthropological thought.

Course content:

The course covers the following topics, with brief explanations:

1. Overview of contemporary anthropological approaches and methodologies – An introduction to major theoretical transformations in twentieth- and twenty-first-century anthropology, from structuralism to the ontological and posthumanist turns.

2. Concepts of personhood: sociality beyond humanity – How anthropologists conceptualize personhood and sociality by including nonhuman beings, animals, and objects.

3. The body and embodiment – Phenomenological theories of the body, considering it both as an expression of social order and as an agentic creator of the experienced world.

4. Kinship theories – The development of kinship studies from structuralist models to contemporary perspectives informed by reproductive technologies and gender studies.

5. Place, space, landscape, and narrative – How place and space are constituted through practices, memory, and narrative, and how they relate to migration and transnationalism.

6. Economic anthropology: exchange, gifts, and value – Major paradigms in economic anthropology, from Mauss's theory of the gift to ethnographies of late capitalism and global commodity chains.

7. Symbolic anthropology: symbols, ritual, and transformation – Traditions of interpretive anthropology (Geertz, Turner, Douglas) and theories of symbolic systems and ritual processes.

8. The ontological turn in anthropology – Key concepts of the ontological turn (Viveiros de Castro, Descola, Latour) and its critical relationship to the tradition of cultural relativism.

9. Local knowledge, authenticity, and heritage politics – Discourses of authenticity, the ethics of protecting Indigenous knowledge, and the anthropologist's role in cultural heritage policy.

10. Power, politics, and statehood – Theories of power and domination (Foucault, postcolonialism) and their application in ethnographies of state institutions, violence, and citizenship.

Reading list

Core readings

BENDER, Barbara & WINER, Margot (eds.). 2001. *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*. Oxford: Berg.

CALLON, Michel. 1986. Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. In: John Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge*, pp. 196–233. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

DESCOLA, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Foreword by Marshall Sahlins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

INGOLD, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.

KOHN, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

MULLIN, Molly & CASSIDY, Rebecca (eds.). 2007. *Where the Wild Things Are Now: Domestication Reconsidered*. Oxford: Berg.

POVINELLI, Elizabeth. 2016. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

STRATHERN, Marilyn. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

TSING, Anna. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo. 2014. *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Minneapolis: Univocal Press.

Additional readings

APPADURAI, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

BARNARD, Alan. 2000. *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CARSTEN, Janet. 2004. *After Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CLIFFORD, James & MARCUS, George E. (eds.). 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

CSORDAS, Thomas J. (ed.). 1994. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential*

Ground of Culture and Self. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DAS, Veena & POOLE, Deborah (eds.). 2004. *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.

DOUGLAS, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.

GEERTZ, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

GRAEBER, David. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave.

HALLOWELL, Alfred Irving. 1960. Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View. In: Stanley Diamond (ed.), *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, pp. 19–52. New York: Columbia University Press.

HARAWAY, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

HOLBRAAD, Martin & PEDERSEN, Morten Axel. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

LATOUR, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

MARCUS, George E. & FISCHER, Michael M. J. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

MAUSS, Marcel. 1990 [1925]. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. London: Routledge.

MOORE, Henrietta L. & SANDERS, Todd (eds.). 2014. *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

ORTNER, Sherry B. 1984. Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26(1): 126–166.

STRATHERN, Marilyn. 1981. *Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon, a Village in North-West Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

TURNER, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

TURNER, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine.

VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo. 1998. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian

Perspectivism. <i>Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute</i> , 4(3): 469–488.	
Consulting faculty: name, surname, academic degree	Major publications in the field (branch) of science over the past five years
Donatas Brandišauskas, Professor, PhD	Brandišauskas, Donatas. forthcoming 2026. Reindeer, Predators, and Gold: Multispecies Livelihood and Trust in Siberia. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Windle, M., Tumurbaatar, T., Zhang, C., Li, Y., Brandišauskas, D., Piezonka, H., Yadam, O., Gantul-ga, A., Kertanis, R., Taylor, W. 2025. Understanding the origin of reindeer riding in Northeast Asia through animal paleopathology and collaborative archaeology. <i>Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research</i>, 57(1), 2493391. Brandišauskas, D. 2025. Emplaced Power and Generation of Luck: The Use of Anthropomorphic Wooden Carvings by the Evenks of East Siberia and Russian Far East. <i>Power of Objects</i>. Bloombury Press. Brandišauskas, D. 2025 Human/animal collectives on the move: reindeer individualities and caravan among Evenki in the taiga. <i>Arctic Anthropology Hanbook</i>. (ed. F. Stammer, P. Vitebsky and I. Krupnik). Routledge Press. Brandišauskas, D. 2024. From relatives to enemies: emplaced Evenki relationships with wolves in the changing environment of East Siberia and the Russian Far East. In <i>The benefits of the cold and domestication: a new understanding of human - animal partnerships for survival in extreme environments</i> ed. Florian Stammer and Hiroki Takakura. Routledge Press. D. Brandišauskas. 2024. Otherness and ontology of luck among animist people. Ed. Viktoras Bachmetjevas „Other as a Journal“. Lithuanian Institute of Culture. Jefanovas, Aivaras and Brandišauskas, Donatas. 2024. Wolves as Enemy of the Soviet State: Policies and Implications of Predator Management in Yakutia. <i>Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics</i>. Jefanovas, Aivaras and Brandišauskas, Donatas. 2024. Contemporary Wolf Hunters in the Taiga of Yakutia. <i>Sibirica, Berghahn Journals</i>. Brandišauskas, D. 2023. Rock art research in Southeast Siberia: history of ideas and ethnographic interpretations. <i>Siberian Worlds</i> (edited volume by J. Ziker and V. Davydov). Routledge Press. Pp. 575-587.

Approved at the meeting of the Ethnology Doctoral Committee of VU, LLTI and LMTA
on June 29 2026, No. R6-11.

Chair of the Doctoral Committee

dr. Giedrė Šmitienė