

# Weedy Anthropology: Agriculture, Environment, and the Politics of the Peripheral SYLLABUS

## Contact Information

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**Office Hours:** By appointment.

Preferred Mode of Contact: Email

Expect responses weekdays within 48 hours of email receipt.

## Course Description

What do weeds have to do with anthropology? Weeds offer opportunities to critically examine anthropologists' fascination with the feral, peripheral, ambiguous, and non-productive. Weeds unsettle and destabilize assumptions about culture and nature. While weeds grow and thrive in sites of human disturbance, they also shift in meaning and value—in the case of lawn grass, from a non-domesticated weedy nuisance to a thriving domesticated suburban landscape. Through engaging selected weekly readings and themes, we will explore the histories and possibilities of anthropological engagements with weeds as a subject and the political use of “weediness” to tackle contemporary environmental, agricultural, and social problems. Students will undertake original research on a weedy subject or on the concept of the weedy, culminating in a final paper and a field guide entry.

## Course Objectives

- Develop critical anthropological reasoning skills.
- Gain familiarity with primary, observational, and original research.
- Define and offer a unique perspective on the concept or subject of weeds, weediness, and the weedy and their relationships to anthropological thinking.
- Apply the concept of weediness to other topics and social contexts.

## Class Format

This is a seminar course. This means that the class is primarily comprised of discussion-based participation. Students will therefore be expected to attend each class and critically analyze and share their perspectives on the assigned course materials.

## Evaluation

Participation	15%
Reading Reflections (x3)	30% (10% each)
Original Research Exercise`	15%
Research Project (4 components):	40% (Breakdown below)
Proposal	5%
Detailed Outline	5%
Final Field Guide Entry	10%
Final Paper	20%

All assignments must be digitally submitted on Canvas in a Word Document or PDF format.

**Participation (15%):**

This is a seminar course, meaning that it is discussion-based. Your participation is therefore critical for the success of the course. Participation includes the following components:

- Attendance
- Preparation for class (i.e., reading assigned texts before class and taking notes)
- Verbal contributions to in-class discussions
- Written contributions to Quercus discussion forums

A handout will be made available on Quercus at the beginning of the course on how to effectively prepare for class.

**Reading Responses (10% x 3, 30% total):**

During this class you will be responsible for submitting **three** reading responses. Reading responses should identify the argument or thesis of a given reading, briefly summarize the text, and offer a relevant analysis or reflection about the reading. Reading responses build communication and writing skills and an in-depth engagement with the assigned texts. They should be 1–2 double spaced pages in length (max 500 words). Reading responses for that week should be received the day before the class by 8pm.

**Original Research Exercise (15%, Due [DATE] by 11:59pm on Canvas)**

In addition to reading responses, you will submit a low-stakes original research exercise on media, archival sources, news articles, podcasts, films, and/or other sources you have found as you have begun researching your final paper topic. For these exercises, you will describe how you found a minimum of **two** sources, how they relate to a weekly theme and reading, and provide a very brief analysis on why they could be helpful for your research project. Preferably, these research materials will feature in your final paper and field guide entry. This breakdown should be around 2–3 pages (max 750 words) and submitted through Quercus. A detailed handout will be provided on Quercus that will list possible materials, research databases you could turn to, and the evaluation criteria.

**Research Project (40% Total)**

Drawing on weedy elements of your research interests (be it weeds, weedy things, or weediness), you will create a final paper and related field guide entry that features your original research into a weedy subject. Throughout the course, you will conduct independent research on your chosen topic. You should feel free to use an eclectic variety of sources—journal articles, books, archival materials, ethnographic data, popular media, film, photography, among others—to craft your final paper and field guide entry.

This research project is broken down into smaller assignments so that you can receive feedback and guidance on your progress, ideas, and analysis. You will ultimately produce two final documents for your research project: 1) a Final Paper, and 2) a Weedy Field Guide Entry. The Field Guide Entry will be a succinct and creative snapshot of your final paper. You have the option of submitting your field guide entry as a written document, or you can discuss with the instructor submitting in an alternative format (photo essay; podcast; film; etc.). I will work with the seminar to develop your individual entries into a cohesive Weedy Field Guide. The purpose of the final paper and field guide entry are to showcase and critically analyze the research materials you have found in your final paper, as well as communicate your findings clearly and effectively for a wide readership in the field

guide entry. A detailed handout for all the components of the Research Paper and Weedy Field Guide Entry and evaluation criteria are available on Quercus.

***Component 1: Proposal (5%, Due [Date] by 11:59pm)***

You will submit a 250–300-word proposal of your research project and entry. In addition, you should list 3 course materials, 3 external peer-reviewed sources, and 2 primary sources (which could include interviews, media, newspaper articles, archival sources, photographs, etc.) that you have unearthed during your research. The purpose of submitting a proposal is so that the instructor can provide detailed feedback and suggestions to aid your research further and ensure its relevance.

***Component 2: Detailed Outline (5%, Due [Date] by 11:59pm)***

You will submit a one-page outline of your project, including your introductory “hook,” your draft thesis statement or argument, the structure of your paper, the key terms you will be using from the course materials, and the methods you are using or plan to use to complete your research. By submitting an outline, the instructor can further help you hone your arguments and approaches, as well as narrow or broaden the scope of the paper and ensure its continued relevance to the course.

***Component 3: Final Paper (20%, Due [Date] by 11:59pm)***

You will write a 7–10-page research paper (maximum 2500 words; the wordcount/page count does *not* include bibliography and figures), based on your proposal, outline, independent and original research, and any feedback you have received from the instructor. Your final papers should have a strong, argumentative thesis, include evidence of thorough research, demonstrate understanding of literature and key terms, and apply anthropological concepts from the course.

Overall, your final research paper should endeavour to answer the following questions:

- In what sense is the proposed topic “weedy”?
- What broader historical and cultural structures or processes is the topic embedded within? In other words, how is the weedy topic *in the world*?
- What is the social and anthropological significance of the “weedy”?

***Component 4: Weedy Field Guide Entry (10%, Due [Date] by 11:59pm)***

Inspired by *Feral Atlas*, you will design a short and creative entry to a Weedy Field Guide. The entry should be between 500–750 words and succinctly capture the most interesting or compelling element of your final paper and your research process. In this entry you can also feature audio recordings, film, photographs, illustrations, maps, narrative, timelines, etc. You do *not* have to summarize your research paper. Instead, you should seek to showcase how the weediness of your chosen subject allowed you to think differently about a larger context or problem.

**Required Readings**

PDFs of all readings (listed in the week-by-week breakdown) are available on the course’s Canvas page. All readings are PDFs of chapters, journal articles, and miscellaneous online anthropological content.

Some weeks there will be extended/optional readings. You are strongly encouraged to read some of the optional readings to assist in the development and support of your research project.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### Week 1—Syllabus Review and Assignment Guidelines

Read: Course Syllabus

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### Week 2—Weeds in History (Part I): The Archaeology of Domestication and Agriculture

Read: Snir, Ainit, Dani Nadel, Dani, Iris Groman-Yaroslavski, Yoel Melamed, Marcelo Sternberg, Ofer Bar-Yosef, and Ehud Weiss. 2015. "[The Origin of Cultivation and Proto-Weeds, Long Before Neolithic Farming.](#)" *PLoS One* 10, no. 7: e0131422.

Langlie, BrieAnna S., Natalie G. Mueller, Robert N. Spengler, and Gayle J. Fritz. 2014. "[Agricultural Origins from the Ground Up: Archaeological Approaches to Plant Domestication.](#)" *American Journal of Botany* 101, no. 10: 1601–17.

*Extended Reading:*

Harlan, Jack R., and J. M. J. demWet. 1965. "[Some Thoughts about Weeds.](#)" *Economic Botany* 19, no. 1: 16–24.

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### Week 3—Weeds in History (Part II): Environmental History and the Production of Weed-Free Landscapes

In-Class Librarian Visit: Conducting original and library-supported research with a Research Librarian

Before Class:

Take field notes at a local gardening store. Pay particular attention to how “lawn care” is marketed, how products are displayed, the cost of various lawn inputs, and anything else of note. Bring your notes with you to class.

Read: Falck, Zachary J. S. 2010. *Weeds: An Environmental History of Metropolitan America*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press. (Selections)

Robbins, Paul. 2007. *Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press. (Selections)

*Extended Reading:*

Neale, Timothy. 2019. "[A Sea of Gamba: Making Environmental Harm Illegible in Northern Australia.](#)" *Science as Culture* 28, no. 4: 403–26.

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## Week 4—On Weeds and Weedy Things

Read: Schuster, Caroline E. 2021. "[Weedy Finance: Weather Insurance and Parametric Life on Unstable Grounds](#)." *Cultural Anthropology* 36, no. 4: 589–617.

Tsing, Anna. 2017. "[The Buck, the Bull, and the Dream of the Stag: Some Unexpected Weeds of the Anthropocene](#)." *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 42, no 1: 3–21.

*Extended reading:*

Swanson, Heather Anne, Marianne Elisabeth Lien, and Gro B. Ween, eds. 2018. *Domestication Gone Wild: Politics and Practices of Multispecies Relations*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. (Selections)

*Due this week: Original Research Exercise (Deadline: [Date] by 11:59pm)*

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## Week 5—Heuristics of Weediness (Part I): Agency

Read: Kawa, Nicholas C. 2016. "[How Religion, Race, and the Weedy Agency of Plants Shape Amazonian Home Gardens](#)." *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment* 38, no. 2: 84–93.

Paredes, Alyssa D. 2021. "[Weedy Activism: Women, Plants, and the Genetic Pollution of Urban Japan](#)." *Journal of Political Ecology* 28, no. 1: 70–90.

*Extended Reading:*

Chudakova, Tatiana. 2017. "[Plant Matters: Buddhist Medicine and Economies of Attention in Postsocialist Siberia](#)." *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 2: 341–54.

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## Week 6—Heuristics of Weediness (Part II): Anthropocene

Read: Hetherington, Kregg. 2019. "Introduction: Keywords of the Anthropocene." In *Infrastructure, Environment, and Life in the Anthropocene*, edited by Kregg Hetherington, 1–13. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Tsing, Anna L., Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou, eds. 2021. *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. <https://feralatlantlas.org/> (Engage as you see fit).

*Due this week: Research Project Proposal ([Date] by 11:59pm on Canvas)*

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## Week 7—Weeding and Weeding Out (Part I): Race and the Plantation

### Before Class:

Identify an example of a plantation. This could be in your community or a commodity (tea, cacao, coffee, bananas, rubber, palm oil) that you might commonly use. If possible, bring a commodity from this plantation to class.

Read: McKittrick, Katherine. 2013. "[Plantation Futures](#)." *Small Axe* 17, no. 3: 1–15.

Wynter, Sylvia. 1971. "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation." *Savacon* 5: 95–102.

Jegathesan, Mythri. 2021. "[Black Feminist Plots before the Plantationocene and Anthropology's 'Regional Closets'](#)." *Feminist Anthropology* 2, no. 1: 78–93.

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## Week 8—Weeding and Weeding Out (Part II): Race and the Plantation

Read: Nongbri, Natasha. 2016. "['Plants out of Place': The 'Noxious Weeds' Eradication Campaign in Colonial South India](#)." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 53, no. 3: 343–69.

Neale, Timothy. 2016. "[Settler Colonialism and Weed Ecology](#)." *Engagement* (The Anthropology of the Environment Association blog). November 2, 2016.

McWilliams, James E. 2011. "[Worshipping Weeds: The Parable of the Tares, the Rhetoric of Ecology, and the Origins of Agrarian Exceptionalism in Early America](#)." *Environmental History* 16, no. 2: 290–311.

*Due This Week: Research Project Outline ([Date] by 11:59pm on Canvas)*

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## Week 8—Weedscapes: Ecologies of Weed(s) (Part I)

Read: Argüelles, Lucía, and Hug March. 2021. "[Weeds in Action: Vegetal Political Ecology of Unwanted Plants](#)." *Progress in Human Geography* 46, no. 1: 44–66.

Jones, Bradley M. 2019. "[\(Com\)Post-Capitalism: Cultivating a More-than-Human Economy in the Appalachian Anthropocene](#)." *Environmental Humanities* 11, no. 1: 3–26.

### *Extended reading:*

Myers, Natasha. 2017. "[Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing the Ecological Sensorium in a 10,000-Year Old Natural Cultural Happening](#)." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 3, no. 2: 1–24.

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## **Week 9—Weedscapes: Ecologies of Weed(s) (Part II)**

Guest lecturer: [Subject]; [Lecturer]

Read: TBD

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## **Week 10—Weedy Field Guide Planning Session and Presentations**

Before Class: Prepare a *brief* presentation (5 min max) to introduce the weedy topic you are exploring in your final paper. This introduction should also include a discussion about interesting sources you've found and your tentative approaches or arguments that will feature in your research paper. This presentation will *not* be graded.

In Class: We'll go around the room, conduct our introductions. There will be a brief Q&A after each introduction to ask clarifying questions and provide preliminary suggestions. Then, we will work together to plan the outline of our Weedy Field Guide. Students will receive extra credit if they would like to have a hand in the final design and form of the field guide.

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## **Week 11—Writing, Research, and Peer Review Workshop**

Before Class: Print out a copy of your project outline and/or research paper draft. This will be shared with one other student.

In Class: This writing and research seminar will include a peer review workshop. Each student will be given in advance of class a handout that will help them review another students' project outline or draft and provide meaningful comments and suggestions to improve the clarity, scope, and relevance of their work.

*Field Guide and Final Paper both due [Date] by 11:59pm on Canvas*