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Intimate, Familiar and Strange, or Why I Don't Teach a Class on Sleep

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By Matthew Wolf-Meyer

One of the insights into teaching provided to me by [Donald Morse](#), one of my undergraduate professors, was to never teach the same class twice. But, simultaneously, not to overburden oneself by developing a new course every year. His model, which I've entirely stolen, was to teach one-third texts he knew intimately, one-third texts he was familiar with, and one-third texts that were strange to him – he might have learned about them through a citation or a friendly recommendation. He's a literature professor, and so the task of swapping out one novel for another is a little easier than it is in the social sciences when a swap-out requires finding a monograph on a similar-enough topic; but I find that the framework does two things to the classes I teach: first, it forces me to cast my classes as thematically expansive rather than topically narrow, and secondly it provides a mechanism for me to dig up old texts that I may have avoided previously – or parts of familiar texts that I don't typically use – as well as guide my engagement with contemporary scholarship.

The downstream effects are more profound, and have led to me rethink my own scholarly work, both in terms of my contributions to the anthropology of medicine and science, and my ongoing research projects and what unifies them. The best example of this is a course I teach entitled [The Biology of Everyday Life](#), which is an upper division anthropology course, and which I developed because faculty and students kept asking me to teach a course on sleep – which was the last thing I wanted to do after a decade of doing research on sleep in American society – the basis for my first book, [The Slumbering Masses](#). A course on sleep seemed too narrow, both in that [there is very little social scientific research on sleep](#) and that I would always know exactly how the course would end – there was simply no surprise in it for me.



Reconstruction drawing of the communal latrines at Housesteads Roman fort (Vercovicium) on Hadrian's Wall. This site is now in the care of English Heritage (2010). Copyright English Heritage.

The Biology of Everyday Life is organized around as many basic biological functions as I can fit into a 10-week quarter, brought together by a frame provided by Marcel Mauss' [The Notion of Body Techniques](#), Norbert Elias' [The Civilizing Process](#), Jean Briggs' [Inuit Morality Play](#) and Mary Douglas' [Purity and Danger](#). So, in weeks one through five, we work through this theoretical frame about socialization, the relationship between biology and society, and how disgust is socially constructed. Then, in weeks six through ten, we focus on one or two biological processes in each week – you can see a version of the syllabus [here](#) – to explore how particular biological experiences vary around the world and over time. The gist is that as much as biological processes are universal, cultural expectations of the normal, and social organization lead to very different expressions of those biological processes, akin to Margaret Lock's theorization of '[local biologies](#).' Sleep is the obvious one: whereas modern Americans tend to be consolidated nightly sleepers, people around the world sleep in very different ways and this impacts ideas about health, normalcy and everyday life. The course focuses in turn on breathing, sex, eating, menstruation, sleep, and excrement.

There were some challenges in developing the syllabus. One of them is that it's an anthropology course, and so I really tried to get as many readings as I could from scholars in the field. Unfortunately, anthropologists haven't written extensively about all of the biological processes I wanted to include. There is a ton of anthropological

scholarship about sex (or at least sexual identity, if not actual sexual practices) and food (if not eating), but breathing and excreting seem to escape anthropological attention for the most part. Over time, mostly predicated by necessity, I've loosened my reliance on anthropologists, as I've found other scholarship that helped fill gaps, and feel more confident about the anthropological content of the argument of the course if not all of the individual authors.

The first time I taught *The Biology of Everyday Life*, I tried to use one ethnography as a case study to structure weeks five through ten, but I had a hard time finding one that worked perfectly. I supplemented the ethnography with a bunch of articles and book chapters, and found it to be an uneven teaching experience: I found I kept needing to make excuses for why the ethnography I had chosen didn't cover the topics we were talking about in class that day or week. So, the next time I taught the course, I switched out the one ethnography for six, and allowed students to pick which one of the six ethnographies they would read. In class, we would draw out examples from each of the six ethnographies. This worked okay, but since I allowed democracy to rule, half of the class decided to read one ethnography and only handfuls of students read any of the other ethnographies, placing an undue burden on the small groups of students who read the less popular books. In the third iteration, I dropped the ethnographic monograph and substituted more articles and book chapters, which ended up working the best. It ensured that students all had a broad swath of reading to draw from, and stopped that awkward problem of not having an ethnography fit all of the requirements. Now, after four iterations, the class has finally reached some kind of homeostasis.

Over the first few revisions of the class, I didn't think too much about the intimate/familiar/strange division – it pretty much fell into that ordering without any effort on my part. But now, as I plan for the next iteration of the class, the need to update some of the material is starting to feel pressing. There are some readings that I know are impossible to remove – like Mauss and Elias. But others seem like they might be able to be substituted, and in so doing, I push myself to find equivalent material. It can be hard to lose something that I've become intimate with, but it seems like Briggs' *Inuit Morality Play* is on the chopping block next time around. And as much as I enjoy *Purity and Danger*, most students don't – beyond the central concept of purity and danger they find the references too obscure. The double whammy of Elias and then Douglas is a little much for most students; but what can I put in its place? In addition, a number of the articles and book chapters have begun to show their age, and they might be swapped out for newer scholarship. And as much as I love showing my students David Cronenberg's [The Fly](#) just when they think they're beyond disgust, it's probably time to switch it out for something new – maybe John Waters' [Pink Flamingos](#).

This is basically the state of my [Introduction of Medical Anthropology](#) course, where the foundation of intimate texts is well established, and what changes with regularity are the ethnographies that we read. Over the first few iterations, I had a hard time finding an ethnography of Traditional Chinese Medicine that ran parallel to the books on American biomedicine and Ayurveda that structured the course. Similarly, I had a difficult time finding an ethnography of medicine in Africa that wasn't about biomedicine. But now that I use Karen Flint's [Healing Traditions](#), an excellent history of transnational medicine in South Africa, and Mei Zhan's [Other Worldly](#), it might be time to switch out the biomedicine and Ayurveda ethnographies...

This intimate/familiar/strange structure means that as a teacher I can never get totally comfortable – there's always something new on the syllabus. And, for the most part, that's okay with me. I don't know if I would suggest it to someone with a much greater teaching load than mine, since adding new content is a burden. With one or two classes under revision, it's not a huge burden, but if it were more than that it might prove too much of a distraction. But, the up side of constant revision is that it provides me with a framework to read both new and old scholarship. I found in the past that my interest in other people's scholarship was egocentric: I was just looking for people who were working on what I work on or that could do something for me in relation to something I was writing. Now, when it comes time to integrate new material, the impulse is more ethnological, and it means I'm constantly expanding the frameworks I'm fitting material into.

The biggest challenge lies ahead: this spring I teach our 400-student, 8-teaching assistant *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* course. Right now, all of the material is in the familiar stage, and my aim is to have my lectures reach a kind of homeostasis over the first two years. Instead of changing what I'm lecturing about, the moving parts will be ethnographies selected by the teaching assistants to use in their sections – they'll each choose an ethnography to focus on in their sections, hopefully choosing something that they find relevant to their own research, and which they can use to explore key ideas from the main lecture. This means that every couple of years, as the teaching assistants leave for fieldwork and new ones take their places, new ethnographies will be added to the syllabus, which I'll need to become familiar with, and may make their way onto the foundational syllabus, slowly changing it over time.

I find the real benefit of this intimate, familiar and strange way of doing things is that it helps me think about my own research and scholarship in a much more expansive way. It also gets me to think about the field and other people's work in a much different way than I used to, and often from a different perspective than how they think about their work – I'll get a

little fixated on some minor reference to toileting behaviors or breathing techniques that an author mentions in passing. Now I frame all of my research under the rubric of ‘the biology of everyday life,’ which you can see in [my book about sleep](#), which is framed as much around the biology of everyday life as it is the history and contemporary practice of American medicine – and that is entirely the function of teaching *The Biology of Everyday Life*. Moreover, it pushes me to be much more ethnological in my thinking, and this in turn has led to very different arguments and new article manuscripts based on these arguments. Embracing the familiar and the strange also means that I can rely on other scholars to provide me with data – which, in a discipline that continues to overvalue the individual ethnographer, helps me think beyond myself as a scholar and to think critically about the larger world that my work, and my student’s lives, are a part of.

If you have any suggestions for new, strange stuff to read, listen to, or show – or old things I might have missed – please suggest them in the comments section below.

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