

Return to Empire: The Anthropology of War and Imperialism

Anthropology 509-003 - Topics in Anthropology I

Fall 2024

Wednesday 3:30 to 6:00

Alumni Building 0205

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For questions about enrolling, contact

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The conclusion of the Cold War coincided with a new period of globalization, leading many scholars, policy makers and commentators to anticipate a time of worldwide peace and prosperity. As the United States emerges from more than two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan with a global network of military bases and conflicting strategic objectives, it is only too clear that this possibility was not realized. Historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists, military theorists, and social critics have struggled to make sense of these events. Cultural anthropologists have also turned their attention to the contemporary experience of war, building on their critiques of earlier forms of colonialism and imperialism, as well as anthropology's involvement in these projects.

This course explores this new anthropology of war, with a focus on ethnographies of continual war, violent peace, and traumatic aftermaths. We will be particularly concerned with the everyday dimensions of conflict, thinking about the ways in which bodies and spaces both shape and are shaped by the experience of war. How do ordinary people live with the material and remembered traces of violence? How does war change our ways of knowing and doing? What about the anticipation and preparation for future conflict?

Here are some of the topics that these new and compelling ethnographies take up:

- » Training soldiers for war in the California desert and the mountains of North Carolina
- » Caring for the restless ghosts of the war dead in Vietnam
- » Soldiers and their families living with wounds that will not heal in the United States
- » Building utopian communities in spaces filled with land mines in South Korea
- » Understanding a soldiers' commitment to sacrifice in Afghanistan
- » Fighting a remote war from Nevada with drones and sensors
- » Remembering the Cold War commitment to total war
- » Living in a base town in North Carolina and South Korea
- » Exploring the tension between women's rights and military imperialism in Haiti
- » Unraveling the contradictions of colonial anti-colonialism in Japan, the Philippines, and Diego Garcia Island

This course is open to advanced undergraduates and graduate students



Christopher T. Nelson is a cultural anthropologist with nearly thirty years of research experience in Okinawa, Japan. His work explores the relationship between history and memory; trauma, sacrifice, and everyday life; storytelling, ritual, and performance. He also served as an infantry officer in the United States Marine Corps.