

SPRING 2023: ANTH 149-10

# Trap Theory: Research Methods in the Anthropology of Technology

WEDNESDAYS, 9–11:30 AM; 113 BRAKER HALL

Nick Seaver

[nick.seaver@tufts.edu](mailto:nick.seaver@tufts.edu)

Office Hours: M-Th 12:30–2:00 pm, online

(sign up at <https://calendly.com/nick-seaver/office-hours>)



"The trap teaches the whole lesson of invention." — Otis Mason

## Overview

This course is an intensive workshop in anthropological research methods, focused on two complementary areas: assembling academic sources and analyzing technological artifacts. Its purpose is to give you experience in the early stages of anthropological research, where you encounter what other people think, pursue questions that pique your interest, and begin to imagine ways you might explore those questions.

Being a one-semester undergraduate course, our scope has been artificially constrained in a few ways. First, in our objects of study: We're focusing solely on technology, and even more narrowly, we're only studying traps. (This is less of a constraint than it might seem.) Our objects of interest will range from holes in the ground covered by leaves to algorithmic recommender systems. By exploring this variety of techniques and devices, we'll think about an array of anthropological concerns: How do physical objects embody ideas about the world? How is the production of material artifacts socially organized? What does it mean for a technology to "work"?

Our second constraint is that we're limiting ourselves to the very early stages of research: although this is an anthropology course, you will not have to talk to people or observe their behavior. Instead, we're focusing on texts and objects—things you will encounter in any anthropological research project, but which many people don't have well-developed methods for engaging. (Artificially keeping real people out of the way will also help you develop a keener sense of the kinds of questions you *can't* answer without engaging people directly.) Our goal is to come up with interesting questions and ways we might answer them; not to arrive at answers. Instead of producing a research paper at the end of the term, you'll produce a research proposal—the kind of thing you might submit to get funding for your project.

The first half of the course focuses on reading methods. Anthropologists do not just go out into the field and start doing ethnography—we read, a lot. Reading is an essential part of the research process, and while college students spend a lot of time reading for class, their classes do not usually require them to spend very much time *finding* things to read. In this part of the course, we'll be practicing techniques for exploring academic literatures—following citations, skimming, summarizing, and so on. Although we'll start from the same set of texts, you will end up following your own paths.

In the second half of the course, I'll introduce some methods for studying technological artifacts from anthropology and adjacent fields. Informed by our explorations in text, we'll be trying to "read" objects, ask questions of them, and think about how to situate them in social and cultural contexts. I've got some methods already in mind, but I've left space so that if you find methods you want to explore in your reading, we can add them to the list.

I've designed this course to be very flexible and open-ended; while we'll focus on technology and the figure of the trap, it's up to all of you where we go with it. Our plans and (especially) specific dates may shift around. Since this is the first time I've run this course or anything like it, we will probably encounter issues that require changing plans. Any such changes will be discussed as a group. I appreciate your patience, your courtesy, and your presence.

## **Learning Objectives**

The work in the course is designed to help you learn a few things:

1. To locate texts, facts, and artifacts in broader social and cultural contexts, thinking critically and generously about concepts, canons, and taken-for-granted categories.
2. To develop a command of a specialized area in the academic literature, following your own intellectual instincts.
3. To develop critical reading and writing skills, including the ability to analyze scholarly arguments and to make your own.

# The Plan

## Reading Phase (Weeks 1-7)

### The point

The goal of this phase is for you to develop a niche command of the anthropological (etc.) literature on traps and trapping. This means that you'll become familiar with commonly referenced sources, understand the variety of topics and arguments within the literature, and find some specific aspect of the literature that you find interesting enough to pursue in more detail.

### Week 1

- **Looking at mousetraps:** We're going to look at some mousetraps.
- **Organize starter texts:** Drawing on my own knowledge of this area, I've assembled a set of starter texts from which our broader reading will grow. I'm going to print out their basic metadata and abstracts and bring them to class. Together, we'll decide on a reading order that seems to make sense and distribute them across the next several weeks.
- **Where are your notes going to go?:** You need a way to gather the readings and your notes on them. We're going to spend some time today going through options and making conscious decisions about how to organize your stuff.
- **What's an annotated bibliography?:** One of your end products of is going to be an annotated bibliography (i.e. a list of sources with short, directed summaries). We're going to talk briefly about what these are and how to make them useful.

### Week 2

- **Starter texts:** Read the week's texts, write a one-paragraph (at least) summary of each.
- **Further reading:** There are four "further reading" assignments for you to complete. You should do each of them once by the end of the first phase. You can do them in any order; however, you'll need to sign up for a presentation slot for one of them. We'll go over what the assignments are today in class.
  - **Browse:** Pick a starter reading, go to its bibliography, and look through every source in it. (You should not read them, but you should look them up online in enough detail to find an abstract that you can read.) *Output: A list of sources with one sentence each saying what you think its deal is, based on what you found. Mark any number of them that you think you'd want to read next.*
  - **Scan:** Find an online database (look at the Tisch resources; Anthrosource is a good one to get started with), pick a search term ("trap"?), and search. (Note whether you're searching article text, titles, keywords, etc., and adjust accordingly.) You should aim for a search term/database pair that gets you between 100–300 results. (The later in the term

you do this one, the more particular your term/database pairs may end up being.) Look at every single result and sort them into a few categories (maybe they're different kinds of articles? maybe they use your search term in different ways?). One way to do this would be to print your results pages to PDF (or paper!) and annotate on them directly. You don't have to read them, but you may need to follow the links on a few as you figure out what's going on. *Output: an annotated and categorized list of search results.*

- **Read:** Find an intriguing source referenced in one or more of the starter readings and read it. Write up a précis that summarizes it and describes where you might go from there, questions it raises, kinds of analysis it might support, methods it uses. (Your writing can be self-centered: you're not describing everything in it for anyone, but rather seeing what you find useful, what you might do with it, as though you're telling a classmate.) This should be more involved than the one-paragraph summaries you're doing for the starter texts. *Output: that one-page (minimum) précis plus an informal presentation to the class.*
- **Brachiate:** This is the same as the previous assignment, except for where you find the reading. You should pick something from either the "Scan" assignment or the bibliography of something you read for the "Read" assignment; you can also read something that someone presented on in class, if it sounded interesting to you. This will start to get more particular to your own interests and may not be explicitly about traps or trapping. *Output: one-page précis; no formal presentation, though you may end up talking about them in small groups in class.*

### Yeah, I didn't read that

Okay, short version: For **Browse**, scope out every source in a starter reading's references; for **Scan**, search for readings in a database and categorize the results; for **Read**, read a source cited in a starter reading; for **Brachiate**, read a source cited in something else.

### Weeks 3-7

- **Starter texts:** Read the week's texts, write a one-paragraph (at least) summary of each. (You should be doing these every week, but you don't have to submit them until Week 8.)
- Two(ish) reading presentation slots each week

### Reading phase output (all due by class in Week 8)

- A trap:** You need to pick a trap—something you can engage with "directly," whatever that means for your choice—to use as an object of analysis for the rest of the term.
- Annotated bibliography 1:** This is a collection of all your summaries of starter texts, plus the texts from **Read** and **Brachiate**; trim those précis down to a paragraph each to fit.
- Reading list:** A list of ten sources you think you'd like to read next (use the **Scan** and **Browse** assignments as sources, look through more reference lists if you want more). One short sentence each explaining why. This is going to be your starting point for

reading during the rest of the term; you may want to coordinate sources with your intended research object.

- **Reflection:** A one-page reflection on where your interests lie now: What questions do you find intriguing? What would you do to learn more about what you want to know? What kinds of sources do you wish you were finding but haven't found yet? This can be informal, but it should be specific enough to inform our plans for phase two.

## Re-group (Week 8)

### The point

This in-between week is where we gather up all the work from phase one and look forward to phase two.

- **Show and tell:** Bring your trap (or some nice representation of it) to class and tell us why you think it's neat. If it's dangerous in some way, talk to me first.
- **What's the anthropology of technology anyway?:** Read this (PDF is in our Canvas files).
  - Bruun, Maja Hojer, and Ayo Wahlberg. 2022. "The Anthropology of Technology: The Formation of a Field." In *The Palgrave Handbook of the Anthropology of Technology*, edited by Maja Hojer Bruun, Ayo Wahlberg, Rachel Douglas-Jones, Cathrine Hasse, Klaus Hoeyer, Dorthe Brogård Kristensen, and Brit Ross Winthereik, 1–33. Singapore: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7084-8\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7084-8_1).
- **Discuss:** Reading phase outputs are due today, and you'll share with each other during class.
- **Re-orient:** Look at the plan for phase two. Is this what it makes sense to be doing, given where we are now? We can change plans here.

## Object Phase (Weeks 9-13)

### The point

The goal of this phase is to turn your newly-trained attention onto one particular trap for the rest of the semester, using it as an object for a range of methods. By this point you'll know that "trap" is a bigger category than it first appears. I hope you picked a good one.

### Week 9

- **Two kinds of sequence:** Read these two essays presenting methods for studying technologies. The first originated with material technical activities; the second in the study of software. Start to think about how you might use either or both in relation to your own trap. (There will be multiple possibilities; you will need to actually turn one in by the end of the semester.)

- Coupaye, Ludovic. 2022. "Making 'Technology' Visible: Technical Activities and the *Chaîne Opératoire*." In *The Palgrave Handbook of the Anthropology of Technology*, edited by Maja Hojer Bruun, Ayo Wahlberg, Rachel Douglas-Jones, Cathrine Hasse, Klaus Hoeyer, Dorthe Brogård Kristensen, and Brit Ross Winthereik, 37–60. Singapore: Springer.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7084-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7084-8_2).
- Light, Ben, Jean Burgess and Stefanie DuGuay. "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps." *New Media and Society* 23:3 (2018): 881–900.

## Spring Break

### Week 10

- **Braindump:** Before class, spend an hour or two writing down things you know or questions you have about your trap. Use the questions on pages 351–354 [here](#) as a guide. Don't spend a lot of time looking things up at this point. (We'll talk more about this in the class before spring break.)
  - Some of these questions may seem hard to answer, confusing, or just uninteresting to you. That's fine! Follow your own interests here. (Though do take a minute to really consider each question—sometimes the weird ones end up being the most productive, once you figure how to answer them.)
- **What don't we know?:** Today we're going to think about absences in our knowledge about our traps and how we might fill them, planning for the last few weeks of class.

### Weeks 11–13

- **Research mode:** For the last three weeks of class, you've got two jobs: learning things about your trap and finding things you want to learn. Class periods will be dedicated to sharing ongoing work with each other, workshopping ideas, and occasionally focusing as a group on shared problems as they emerge.
- **Dossier:** At the end of the semester, you will need to turn in a dossier containing what you know about your trap now. The format and focus can vary depending on your interests.
  - **Dossier plan:** In Week 11, you'll need to register a plan with me for the dossier: What are you going to try and find out between now and the end of the term, how are you going to do it, and what are you going to produce? (We'll talk more about options in class. This plan is not binding, but it shouldn't be changed dramatically without consulting me first.)
- **Research Proposal:** Imagine you're writing a proposal to do a 10-week summer research project on your trap. What's your research question? What's your plan? (More detailed specifications coming in class.)
- **Week 12 is on the computer:** I'll be on a trip in London, so we'll do this one virtually. Probably co-working in Zoom, but maybe something else if someone has a better idea.

## Object phase output (due during finals period)

- Annotated Bibliography 2:** Between Week 8 and the end of the term, you should read 8 more sources and add them to your bibliography. These can be from your reading list submitted in phase 1 or elsewhere; they can be about traps in general or your trap in particular.
- Trap dossier:** This is a document containing what you know about your trap now. The format and focus are up to you.
- Sequence analysis:** Complete and submit the results of either a walkthrough or operatory chain analysis related to your trap, following the examples from the reading.
- Research plan:** Imagine you're writing up a proposal to do a 10-week summer research project on your trap. What's your research question? What's your plan? (More detailed specifications coming in class.)

# The Work

This is a condensed version of the stuff in the plan above, with information about point amounts, so you can see everything you'll need to do at a glance. Given the structure of this class, there are a lot of things, but they're mostly small. You can expect the work for this semester to mostly be a slow burn, rather than focused around one or two periods of intensive work. This means that it's important to keep up as we go!

All submissions should be made through the relevant assignment pages on Canvas, where you can also find more detailed descriptions.

Assignment	Percentage	Due
Attendance	24% (2% each)	Weekly
Further Reading	12% (3% each)	Weekly in phase 1
Annotated Bibliography 1	10%	Week 8
Reading List	2%	Week 8
Phase 1 Reflection	5%	Week 8
Dossier Plan	1%	Week 11
Annotated Bibliography 2	8%	Finals period
Sequence Analysis	10%	Finals period
Research Proposal	14%	Finals period
Trap Dossier	14%	Finals period

## Grading

All assignments but the last two in this course are graded pass/fail, according to whether you meet the basic specifications laid out in the assignment description. This is called specifications grading, or "specs grading," and I've been using it across my classes for the past few years with some success. The idea is that you are rewarded for completing the work; for most of the assignments in my courses (and in this one), grading for "excellence" (such that there's a meaningful difference between a B+ and an A-) doesn't make sense. The point is not to be great—the point is to practice, and practicing is easier and more effective without the burden of performance. If you complete the assignment to the specifications, you get full credit; if you don't, you get no credit and one chance to revise for credit, using my feedback. Revision timelines will be set as needed, but you should expect to turn things around within a couple weeks.

You can think of the threshold for full credit as something like a B/B+, but as you'll see, the comparison to letter grades isn't always meaningful: Say you complete an assignment very well, but are missing one aspect of the specs—under a letter grade system, I might let it slide and just dock some points, but under specs grading you will have a 0 until you revise and fix the issue.

If you have any uncertainty about the specifications for an assignment, please let me know; since this is the first run of this class, there are probably going to be places that I can be clearer for your sake and your classmates'.

The only exceptions to this are the two culminating assignments: Your trap dossier and research plan will receive conventional letter grades and will not be available for revision like the other assignments. (But even there, your grade mostly has to do with your thoroughness and care for the work.)

# The Policies

## Sorry

This is long and wordy. Read it all once; you may need to refer back to the attendance section in particular later on.

## Conduct

I have a few ground rules for participation in this course:

- Treat each other with respect and patience.
- Avoid destructive critique of the readings.
- Participate actively. This course only works if you do.
- Communicate. Let me know when you're struggling or if something isn't working for you, as it happens.

## Attendance

I try to avoid having attendance grades in my courses: I do not want to penalize people who have to miss class for any of the myriad reasons that might come up during the semester. However, this course has been designed around active collaboration during meeting times; we only have 13 meetings, and if you miss any of them, you will be missing a substantial portion of the course (both in terms of content and literal hours). I want you to come to class, I expect you to come to class, and your attendance is crucial to making the course work for yourself and your classmates. While you're in class, I expect that you'll participate actively, responding to your peers and sharing your own work; however, I do not usually enforce this expectation with grade penalties.

I've experimented with very permissive (i.e. no) attendance politics over the past few years, and I've learned that, for some students, extreme flexibility means that they eventually disappear from class and have a hard time getting back into things. This harms their work and deprives the rest of the class of their contributions. So, I'm trying a new policy for attendance this semester that tries to balance these concerns:

- You can miss one course meeting, no explanation needed. (You don't have to email me to explain yourself, feel bad about it, or anything.)
- After that, every absence has to be made up with an extra assignment, due within one week. (No exceptions, unless you arrange something with me *in advance*.)
  - The extra assignments are duplicates of the "further reading" assignments. So say you have a second absence: you could make up for it by reading an article from your to-read list (for instance) and writing a précis by the next class meeting. Each makeup should use a different assignment.

- The idea behind the one-week deadline is to keep you engaged with the course continuously through the term, even if you miss a meeting. Obviously if you miss class due to being very ill, getting back on top of things in one week may be hard. Let me know, and we can extend by a week; the default is one week, though.
- You can make up four absences in this way. At that point, you've missed five meetings, and you might want to consider whether you actually have the time to participate fully in this course. Beyond that, absences will affect your grade and cannot be made up.

## Accessibility

Your success in this class is important to me. If there are any circumstances (personal, health-related, family-related, etc.) that may affect your ability to participate, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to make accommodations for you. The sooner I know about any issues, the better. Any such discussion will remain confidential.

You do not need to [register with the StAAR Center](#) or have a documented disability to request accommodations from me. However, you may find the support they offer useful.

We remain in an ongoing pandemic. Following university expectations, this course is designed to meet in person; if conditions change, I may need to move some meetings online. Please check your email in the mornings before class just in case this ends up happening at the last minute.

## Availability

I try to be a responsive emailer; you should expect a reply within 24–48 weekday hours of emailing me. (Don't use the Canvas inbox thing—it's unnecessary.) If you don't get a reply in that window, please follow up with me as your message may have gotten buried in my inbox. I generally don't answer emails over the weekend or after 5pm.

I hold regular office hours to meet with students. Currently, these are held via Zoom, most days of the week. I use an [online sign-up sheet](#) to make sure that there's enough time for everyone who wants it and to spread you out through the hour. This time is reserved for you, and you should feel free to use it to talk to me about anything: the course, your academic program in general, or whatever you're interested in. You don't need to have a specific problem to sign up, and I enjoy talking with you outside the classroom, so feel free to make use of office hours as often as you like.

## Late Policy

I am generally very flexible around deadlines, guided by a few principles: I do not want to make your life hard for no reason; I value my own time as well as yours; and extensions are not necessarily in your best interest. In general, if you get in touch with me *before* a deadline, we can work something out that balances your needs with mine and does not inadvertently make your life harder later on. I don't automatically deduct points for late work (though in some cases, especially for small assignments, I will simply not accept it).

No matter what, if you find yourself in a situation that requires flexibility, you should let me know and we will work out something that works for both of us. (I am, as a rule, very accommodating, but extra flexibility is something for unexpected issues—not common inconveniences like having work in other classes.)

## **Academic Integrity**

This course, like all your other courses, is predicated on the idea that it's you who's doing the work. If you don't do your own work, then you don't learn, and there's no point in your being enrolled in the class. Most academic integrity issues arise when students get overburdened with work and panic—if you start to find yourself being overburdened, please talk with me so we can find better ways to manage things.

Plagiarism policies tend to focus on the less productive side of this issue, urging students to be "original" and telling them what not to do (buying papers, copying uncited text from other sources or using AI to generate text and passing it off as your own). Don't do any of that, of course, but I encourage you to take a more expansive view of what academic integrity means: Our expressions are not our own. Humans communicate with words and concepts—and within cultures and discourses—that are not of our own making. Communication is a matter of combining existing materials in meaningful ways. Different groups of people have different norms that govern these combinations: blues musicians, attorneys, programmers, poets, and physicists all abide by different sets of rules about what counts as "originality," what kinds of copying and crediting are acceptable, and how one should relate to the materials from which one draws. In light of this, I do not use "plagiarism detection" services like Turnitin (which, incidentally, make money by appropriating your work and encourage a hostile relationship between students and faculty). Rather than expending your energy worrying about originality, I suggest that you think instead about what kind of citational network you are locating yourself in. What thinkers are you thinking with? Where do they come from? How might their positions in the world inform their thoughts? What is your position relative to them? How might you re-shape your citational network to better reflect your priorities or ideals?

In this course, you'll continue to learn the norms of citation and attribution shared by the community of scholars in the social sciences. Failure to abide by these norms is considered plagiarism, as laid out in the [Tufts Academic Integrity Policy](#), which you should familiarize yourself with. I am required to report suspected violations of this policy to the Dean of Student Affairs, and consequences can be severe. I will not spend much effort on detective work—you mostly harm yourself with this sort of thing—but if I catch it, you will find the limits of my flexibility.

## **The Syllabus Is a Living Document**

As mentioned many times above, this is a new course and anything in the plan laid out in this syllabus is subject to revision. All changes will be discussed in class, and I won't impose them unilaterally unless a serious issue emerges. Please let me know if you run into (or anticipate) any

trouble with the plan here, so we can fix it. The current version of the syllabus will always be linked from our Canvas site.

This is version 1.0.