

**Anth S423**

**Title:** The Anthropology of Possible Worlds, Summer 2025

**Instructor:** Paul Kockelman (paul.kockelman@yale.edu)

**Time:** Monday, Wednesday, Friday (1:00-3:15)

**Place:** Canvas/Zoom

**Office Hours:** Tuesdays, 1:00-3:00, Office 311, 10 Sachem (by Appointment)

**Teaching Fellow:** TBD

**Description:** This course focuses on the nature of possible worlds. That is, worlds different from (what is taken to be) the actual world in various respects. Such possible worlds include not only literary worlds (Narnia, the world of Winnie the Pooh), ideological worlds (the world according to liberals or conservatives), psychological worlds (what someone remembers to be the case, wishes to be the case, or believes to be the case), environmental worlds (niches, habitats, possible environmental futures), virtual worlds (the World of Warcraft), physical worlds (various portions of the putative multiverse in accordance with the laws of physics), and--most of all--ethnographic works in which the actual and possible worlds of others are represented (the world according to the ancient Maya). We won't be focused on the contents of such worlds per se, but rather on the range of resources agents have for representing, regimenting, residing in and, most generally, worlding such worlds; and the roles such resources play in mediating cultural values, social relations, semiotic practices, and physical processes.

**Requirements for Students (Undergraduates or Graduates):**

1. 30% of the grade (30 points, and so 2 points per class) is based on attendance. This means coming to class, on time, being ready to participate, and being fully engaged with the class. Any absence requires a note from your doctor.

2. 30% of the grade (30 points, and so 2 points per assignment) is based on written responses to the day's readings. These are due before 1:00, on the day we discuss them. They are to be uploaded to Canvas (under Assignments, for the Class in question). They should be at least 750 words, but no more than 900. These are not graded for writing style. They must constitute clear evidence that the student carefully did the reading, and so is ready to actively participate in the seminar. For example, they may provide an outline of the readings. And they may answer the following kinds of questions: what were the key terms and definitions offered by the author, what were the key arguments they made? How do these relate to the theme of possible worlds, and how may they relate to earlier readings, or discussions we have had in class? No late assignments will be accepted.

(There is no reading response due for the first class. Two sample reading responses have been uploaded to Canvas, to give students a better sense of the requirement.)

3. 15% of your grade (15 points, and so 1 point per class) is based on a student's active participation in class. In particular, each student should have 2-3 questions, or comments, that they want to present to the class, based on the readings for that day's class, or any other aspect of the class that may come up.

4. 25% of your grade (25 points) is based on the final essay. This should consist of a careful summary, synthesis, extension, and critique of 4-5 readings in class, possibly in relation to some possible world that interests you, and/or some topic or line of argument (regarding possible worlds) that interests you. We will discuss possible topics, and students' particular topics, as the course proceeds. These are due Sunday, June 30th, at midnight. As the course is underway, and through our close analysis of each of the readings, we will discuss strategies for topic-choice, the relation between evidence and argument, conventions of scholarly citation, strategies for generating and assessing novel formulations, and various genres of the essay form itself. Through these step-by-step processes, students will produce demonstrably singular essays, while learning the craft of essay writing, the ethics of academic integrity, and the pleasures of creative scholarship. No late final essays will be accepted. They should be between 3,500 and 4000 words long.

#### **Additional Notes:**

1. For students unsure about Yale's stance on plagiarism, please see the following link:  
<http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/advice-students/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism>
2. List of readings will follow, organized by classes (of which there are 15). Some of the readings are quite long and dense by themselves. I will guide students to particular sections and concepts in these readings as course progresses. I reserve the right to add and/or prune readings as we go. Starred readings (\*) are optional.
3. All readings will be posted on Canvas.

#### **Readings Follow....**

##### **Week 1, First Class: Literature and Philosophy**

Speech Sounds, Octavia Butler

On the Plurality of Worlds, David Lewis (pages 1-5)

##### **Week 1, Second Class: Philosophy and Physics**

Monadology by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (paragraphs 53-58)

Parallel Universes by Max Tegmark (pages 41-51, focusing on multiverse I)

**Week 1, Third Class: Witches and Worlds**

Evans-Pritchard: Two Chapters from Witchcraft among the Azande

**Week 2, First Class: Logic and Linguistics**

Youri Zabbal: Lecture Notes on Basic Set Theory

Youri Zabbal: Lecture Notes on Propositional Logic

**Week 2, Second Class: Class 3: Borges on Lotteries, Libraries, Labyrinths**

Borges: The Library of Babylon

Borges: The Lottery of Babylon

Borges: Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis

Borges: The Garden of Forking Paths (Recommended, not Required))

**Week 2, Third Class: Virtual Worlds**

Dibble: My Tiny Life, chapters 1 and 2.

**Week 3, First Class: Performativity**

Austin: How to Do Things with Words (first three chapters)

**Week 3, Second Class 5: A Deeper Description of Worlds**

Youri Zabbal: Lecture Notes on Predicate Logic Syntax

Youri Zabbal: Lecture Notes on Predicate Logic Semantics

**Week 3, Third Class: Ways of World-Making**

Nelson Goodman: 'Words, Works, Worlds' in Ways of Worldmaking.

**Week 4, First Class: Alien Life Forms, Languages, and Worldviews**

Ted Chiang: Story of Your Life

#### **Week 4, Second Class, Magic, Virtuality, and Performativity**

Malinowski: Magic, Science, Religion: pages 50-67

Tambiah: The Magical Power of Words: pages 185-203

#### **Week 4, Third Class: Modality in Language and Culture**

Angelika Kratzer: What Can and Must Can and Must Mean (ch 1, first two sections).

Angelika Kratzer: The Notional Category of Modality (ch 2, first four sections).

My class notes called 'Kratzer Notes, by Kockelman.pdf' try to break down her arguments, and ground them in earlier readings. They are not required, but you may find them helpful.

#### **Week 5, First Class: From Representations of the World to Residence in the World**

Gibson: Theory of Affordances

Von Uexkull: Theory of Meaning

#### **Week 5, Second Class: Anthropologists on Worlds and Worlding**

Ong: Worlding Cities (read only the section called 'worlding practices')

Pina-Cabral: World, an Anthropological Perspective

Heywood: Anthropology and What There Is

#### **Week 5, Third Class: Review and Discussion**

No readings due for today. But come prepared with questions about any of the material in the class, or your final papers.

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Class Ends Here, But Some of the Following Reading

May be Substituted in if There is Interest

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#### **Week 4, Second Class: Hopi Language, Thought, and Worldview**

Benjamin Lee Whorf: The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language

[See the second essay in Sapir and Whorf (Two Key Essays) under Files.]

#### **Class 2: Key Themes Continued**

No need to do any new readings. But reread last week's readings with care, now that you know what the course is about.

I know a few of you wanted to hear more about Leibniz's worlds, so I include his Theodicy under Files.

Check out, in particular, sections 7, 8, 9, 19, and 52.

#### **Class 3: Borges on Lotteries, Libraries, Labyrinths**

Borges: The Library of Babylon

Borges: The Lottery of Babylon

Borges: Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis

Borges: The Garden of Forking Paths (\*)

#### **Class 4: Worlds in which There are Witches**

Evans-Pritchard: Witchcraft Among the Azande, chapter 2 and chapter 3.

#### **Class 5: Ways of World-Making**

Nelson Goodman: 'Words, Works, Worlds' in Ways of Worldmaking.

#### **Class 6: The World is All That is the Case**

Wittgenstein: Tractatus, sections 1-3, no matter what; and whatever else after that you can muster.

### **Class 7: Alien Life Forms, Languages, and Worldviews**

Ted Chiang: Story of Your Life

### **Class 8: Hopi Language, Thought, and Worldview**

Benjamin Lee Whorf: The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language

### **Class 9: Modality in Language**

Angelika Kratzer: What Can and Must Can and Must Mean (ch 1, first two sections).

Angelika Kratzer: The Notional Category of Modality (ch 2, first four sections).

My class notes called 'Notes on Kratzer' try to break down her arguments, and ground them in earlier readings. They are not required, but you may find them helpful.

### **Class 10: From Representations of the World to Residence in the World**

Gibson: Theory of Affordances

Von Uexkull: Theory of Meaning

### **Class 11: From Representations of the World to Residence in the World**

Gibson: Theory of Affordances

Von Uexkull: Theory of Meaning

Heidegger: Worldliness of the World

Heidegger's Account of References (p 166-172, in Four Theories of Things) -- useful summary of Heidegger reading, not required.

For the von Uexkull, focus on what he means by environment (Umwelt = Um + Welt = around/surrounding + world). And focus on his examples of the world of spiders, ticks, and cows. For the Heidegger, focus on his notion of references (section 17), but try to read sections 14-19.

### **Class 12: From Truth to Felicity, Magic, and Ethnography**

Tambiah: The Magical Power of Words (focusing on second half of article, beginning page 188, especially his reanalysis of Trobriand Ritual)

Austin: How to Do Things with Words (first three chapters; all very short; focusing on chapter 2)

Tambiah on Wittgenstein's Comments on Frazier: from Science, Magic, and Religion, pages 51-64.

Wittgenstein: Comments on Frazier's Golden Bough (Chapter 2 in The Mythology in Our Language). This is a difficult chapter, and is optional. The Tambiah section offers a nice selection and interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks.

### **Final Class: Worlds and Worlding Practices, a Review**

I have some notes, almost in essay form, that summarize and synthesize many of the readings we've done. I've posted them under Files as 'Class Notes on Worlds and Worlding Practices.pdf'. They are still rough, and they don't cover all the readings, but I think you'll find them useful. I would like to spend the last day of class NOT reviewing the course per se, and hence I've put up these notes. I'd rather spend the class developing a few more ideas, answering questions, and/or having a discussion. So please read these notes carefully (but no need to turn in notes on them), and come prepared with questions, comments, and criticisms.