

ANTH 150: EXPLORING ANTHROPOLOGY: ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Quentin Mackie

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

“We drive into the future using only our rearview mirror to guide us” – Marshall McLuhan.

Archaeologists study human diversity over time and space primarily through the material remains people leave behind: their stuff. As such, archaeologists have an unusual perspective on human life and culture: our present is the future of their past.

What evidence of past human life remains thousands or millions of years after it was created? What evidence of present-day human life will be knowable 500,000 years from now? What of our stuff will survive the longest, and how might it be interpreted? Using diverse examples such as time capsules, bog butter, green burials, survivalist stashes, medieval hoards, lost shipping containers, dental implants, and the Voyager probes, we will discuss what of the contemporary material world will have lasting impact or provide durable evidence into the deep future, and perhaps find that our leftovers speak louder and more clearly than we know, or might like.

At each moment in the past, as today, the future was incompletely predictable and contained elements of randomness, risk and uncertainty. By looking at our world through the lens of “past futures,” we can hope to gain insight into the (sometimes futile) attempts to predict and pre-adapt to unknown, future events. We can then apply this insight onto archaeological case studies, when people were living, as are we all, in ignorance of what exactly their future, our present, might hold. In this way, studying the history of “the future” may help understand both past and present circumstances of life and human abilities to anticipate and shape their own destinies.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Readings from a variety of sources will be assigned, and through assignments and class discussion integration of material from a number of interdisciplinary and international perspectives sources will be emphasized. Students will gain an appreciation of archaeological method and theory, especially site formation processes, survivorship bias, and interpretive dilemmas.