2026 FOUR FIELD SYMPOSIUM



OCTOBER 30, 2026
MICHIGAN UNION

THE WORK OF DEATH

M | ANTHROPOLOGY

PROGRAM

1 p.m. | Opening Remarks

Maureen Devlin
Associate Professor of Anthropology

Raven Garvey
Associate Professor of Anthropology, UMMAA Associate Curator

1:10 p.m. | Session 1

MODERATORS: Jesse Weaver, Ally Sabo

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Tiffany Fryer, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, UMMAA Assistant Curator

"Unequal Even in Death: The Ongoing Journey to Reclaim and Restore a Black Cemetery in Ypsilanti, MI"

LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Alaina Lemon, Professor of Anthropology

"Dead Channels"

BREAK

2:10 p.m. | Session 2

MODERATORS: Calli Quire, Wendi Xu

BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Beverly Strassmann, Professor of Anthropology

"Death by Sibling Competition"

SOCIOCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Scott Stonington, M.D., Associate Professor of Anthropology

"Primed Conjuncture: How the Phenomenology of Pain Entangles the Work of Death in Thailand"

BREAK

3:10 p.m. | Discussion and Q&A

MODERATORS: Timilehin Ayelagbe, Arantxa Bertholet del Barrio, Zoe Zhang

CLOSING REMARKS: Andrew Marshall,
Department Chair, Professor of Anthropology

Please join us for a reception after the program.

SPEAKERS



Tiffany C. Fryer is a U-M assistant professor of anthropology and an assistant curator of historical and contemporary archaeology and ethnology at UMMAA. She is also a co-founder of the Center for Community Archaeology & Heritage, a new joint venture between UMMAA and the Kelsey Museum. Her research is focused on three interconnected areas of interest: political violence and colonialism; cultural heritage, collective memory, and materiality; and historical archaeologies focused on the intersections of race, indigeneity, and gender. Fryer is currently co-leading field projects in Quintana Roo, Mexico, and Ypsilanti, Mich., both of which explore questions of race and violence in their respective contexts, and which center community-based research practices.

"I present the work of the Woodlawn Cemetery Restoration Project, a community effort to document, protect, and restore a Black cemetery in Ypsilanti that for decades provided a dignified burial place for Black residents of Washtenaw County who were often systematically barred from other options at a time when even death was insufficient to protect them from the injustices of local de facto segregation practices."



Alaina Lemon is a linguistic, sociocultural, and historical anthropologist. Her publications and film work, based on field and archival research in Russia and the Romani diaspora, contrast interactions in stage rehearsals, acting classes, sound studios, and on film sets with encounters in the markets, on the Metro, at kitchen tables, and around TVs. Much of this work focuses on divisions of access to communicative channels, and the ways those divisions shape knowledge and authority. With a focus on struggles over meta-communicative expertise and on fears and fantasies around the powers of communication to traverse social, temporal and spatial distances, her research traces seemingly minor threads of interaction through institutions and infrastructures and across borders.

"Contradictions cluster around 'dead' channels. Their peculiar assemblages — linking sentients with materials by which they attend to each other — afford shifting perspectives regarding which channel components 'live' in the first place. The semiotic affordances of channel assemblages, however, do not generate all the contradictions. To explore what else does, this presentation engages anthropological discussions of political and existential struggles to access and invigorate channels, and accounts of efforts to restrict or kill our own channels and those of others."

LIVESTREAM

FULL ABSTRACTS

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Beverly Strassmann is a biological anthropologist who has conducted fieldwork among the Dogon of Mali since 1984. Her primary research design is a longitudinal cohort study that tracks the health of two generations of people from infancy and early childhood to adulthood. By studying epigenetic inheritance via genes in the placenta, she seeks to identify novel mechanisms that transmit adverse phenotypes from mothers to offspring in utero. Her research is guided by life history theory and human behavioral ecology, and emphasizes the ways in which culture often builds upon biology.

"Although family members are often close genetic relatives, they can also be major competitors for scarce resources. In research on the Dogon of Mali, I found that children were two times more likely to die if the paternal grandmother was alive, and that women faced a tradeoff between the number of offspring born and the number successfully reared. My talk will shed light on these findings by using longitudinal data on the survival of maternal siblings."



Scott Stonington is a medical and cultural anthropologist and an internal medicine physician. His research addresses the globalization of biomedical ethics and expertise, including end-of-life decision-making in Thailand, and global debates over the use of opiates for pain management. Stonington accompanied patients in Northern Thailand as they navigated severe pain within a fraught ethical environment, from Thailand's brutal drug war, to the Buddhist-based value for pain as a spiritual path, to a broader global ambivalence about how best to treat pain. His secondary research agenda addresses medical epistemology in the U.S., specifically how health practitioners decide what constitutes true and/or useful knowledge and how this affects patients.

"In 1990s Thailand, globalizing biomedical ideologies and Buddhist spiritual practices combined into a movement to find enlightenment by facing death. The countermovement that followed posited that focusing on death without relieving symptoms was inhumane and anti-Buddhist, and that pain should be treated with opioids despite deep stigma. The debate revealed opposing but entangled metaphors of death as brimming with inspiration and pain as morally dangerous. Cancer emerged as a détente, the result of and solution to a 'primed conjuncture' between death and pain — a political entanglement made by phenomenological linkage, but variable in its political manifestation."