

BRENDA CHALFIN, Ph.D.

Department of Anthropology
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(Feb 2025)

Current Position

Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
2013-present

Director, Center for African Studies, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
2016- 2022

Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
2007-2013

Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
2001-2007

Research Areas

Waste, Cities, Infrastructure, Urban Environments, Sanitation, Materiality, Plastics, Ports, Off-shore Oil, Maritime Frontiers, Bureaucracy, International Organizations, Borders, Interdisciplinarity, Architecture, Design, Political Anthropology, Economic Anthropology, Anthropology of the State, Governance, Biopolitics, Science and Technology Studies, Political Economy, Globalization, Commodities.

Education

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Ph.D. Anthropology, 1998

Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, B.A. Anthropology, Magna cum Laude, 1986

External Affiliations and Advisory Appointments

Visiting Scholar, Department of Global Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark, 2022-23

Visiting Scholar, Aarhus School of Architecture, Denmark, Spring 2023

International Advisory Board Member, Danish Social Science Research Council grant, "Port politics. Logistics, Political orders and New hegemony in the land-sea nexus," 2019-2022

Research Fellow, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 2018-2021.

International Advisory Board Member, Finish Academy of Sciences Grant, "Transit, Trade and Travel," 2016-2021

International Advisory Board Member, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Grant, "Port Efficiency and Public Private Capacity in Ghana," 2018-2022

Visiting Researcher/Research Affiliate, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 2022, 2016, 2012, 2010-11, 2008-9, 2000-01, 1994-5, 1990

Residential Fellowships

Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2015-16

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington DC, 2005-2006
 Institute for Advanced Study, School of Social Science, Princeton, NJ, 2002-2003

External Grants

US Department of Education, Title VI Award, UF CENTER FOR AFRICAN STUDIES 2022-2026, Total Award \$290,000 per annum for Foreign Language Area Studies Program, University of Florida, Office of Research, Advancing Racial Justice Initiative, “Black Student Storytelling Project,” PI, \$60,000.

US Department of Education, Title VI AWARD, UF CENTER FOR AFRICAN STUDIES 2018-2022. Total Award \$580,000 per annum for National Resource Center and Foreign Language Area Studies Program.

US Department of Education, Title VI AWARD, UF CENTER FOR AFRICAN STUDIES 2014-2018. Total Award \$650,000 per annum for National Resource Center and Foreign Language Area Studies Program.

National Science Foundation, PI, with Co-PI Donald Berces (UF PhD student), The Emergence and Impact of Law in Oceanic Space,” Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant. Cultural Anthropology and Law, Social and Behavioral Sciences Division, \$23,946. Awarded August 2015. Award # 00097895/00123631.

Social Science Research Council and Mellon Foundation, Oceanic Studies: Seas as Sites and Subjects of Inquiry, Co-Chair Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship Workshop, Summer 2014, \$10,000.

Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad, US Department of Education, “Socializing the City: Middle Class Lives and High-Modernist Urban Planning in Ghana’s Port City of Tema,” \$67,000, June-December, 2011.

Overseas Development Institute, Africa Power and Politics Program, Department for International Development (UK), “The Changing Architecture of Customs Administration and the Developmental State in Africa,” \$60,000 (in conjunction with UF Center for African Studies), 2008-2009

US Dept. of Education, Center for Business Education and Research, University of Florida Summer Research Award (\$18,000), Summer 2006, Summer 2007

Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research
 Post-Doctoral Grant (\$15,000) to fund research in Ghana
 “Working the Border: Constructing Sovereignty in the Context of Liberalization,” 2001

National Science Foundation, Cultural Anthropology Program
 Small Grant for Exploratory Research (\$25,000) to fund research in Ghana
 “Working the Border: Constructing Sovereignty in the Context of Liberalization”, 2000

Book Manuscripts (single authored)

Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana, Duke University Press, 2023

Neoliberal Frontiers: An Ethnography of Sovereignty in West Africa, University of Chicago Press, 2010

Shea Butter Republic: State Power, Global Markets & the Making of an Indigenous Commodity, Routledge, 2004

Refereed Journal Articles

- “Experiments in Excreta to Energy: Sustainability Science and Bio-Necro Collaboration in Urban Ghana,” Cambridge Journal of Anthropology, November 2020, 38(2): pp.88-104
- “Durable Bodies and Disposable Things: Waste Work and the Dialectics of Precarity in Urban Ghana.” Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, March 2019, 89(3): pp.499-520
- “On-shore, off-shore Takoradi: Terraqueous urbanism, logistics, and oil governance in Ghana.” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, October 2018. 37(5): pp. 814-832.
- Co-authored by Xhulio Binjaku. “EXCREMENTA I: Welcome to Excrementa,” Limn Issue 9: Humanitarian Goods, October 2017. <https://limn.it/articles/excrementa-i-welcome-to-excrementa/>
- “EXCREMENTA III: The Leader in Upscale Sanitary Solutions?” Limn Issue 9: Humanitarian Goods, October 2017. <https://limn.it/articles/excrementa-iii-the-leader-in-upscale-sanitary-solutions/>
- “Wastelandia’: Infrastructure and the Commonwealth of Waste in Urban Ghana.” Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology. Special issue “Infrastructures as Ontological Experiments.” Guest editors Casper Jensen and Atsuro Morita. January 2016. 82(4): pp. 648-671
- “Governing Off-shore Oil: Mapping Maritime Political Space in Ghana and the Western Gulf of Guinea.” South Atlantic Quarterly. Special Issue on “Extraction, Logistics, Finance.” January 2015. 114(1): pp.101-118.
- “Public Things, Excremental Politics, and the Infrastructure of Bare Life in Ghana’s city of Tema,” American Ethnologist, February 2014, 41(1): pp. 92-109.
- “Recasting Maritime Governance in Ghana: the neo-developmental state and the Port of Tema,” Journal of Modern African Studies, v. 48, n. 4, December 2010, pp 573-598.
- “La Renovation du port de Tema. Economic Politique de la frontiere maritime du Ghana” [Recasting the Port of Tema: The political economy of Ghana’s Maritime Frontier], Politique Africaine, n. 116, December 2009, pp. 63-84.
- “Sovereigns and Citizens in Close Encounter: Airport Anthropology and Customs Regimes in Neoliberal Ghana,” American Ethnologist, v. 35, n. 4, November 2008, pp. 519-538.
- “Cars, the Customs Service and Sumptuary Rule in Contemporary Ghana,” Comparative Studies in Society and History, v. 50, n. 2, April 2008, pp. 424-453.
- “Customs Regimes and the Materiality of Global Mobility: Governing the Port of Rotterdam,” American Behavioral Scientist, v. 50, n. 12, August 2007, pp. 1610-1630.
- “Enlarging the Anthropology of the State: Global Customs Regimes and the Traffic in Sovereignty,” Current Anthropology, v. 47, no. 2, April 2006, pp. 243-276
- “Old Commodities in New Niches: The Case of Shea,” Journal of African Economic History, Fall 2004, pp. 51-63
- “Border Scans: Sovereignty, Surveillance and the Customs Service in Ghana,” Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, June- Sept. 2004, vol.11, no. 3, pp. 397-416
- “Border Zone Trade and the Economic Boundaries of the State in North-east Ghana,” Africa, June 2001, vol. 71, no. 2, pp. 197-224
- “Working the Border: Constructing Sovereignty in the Context of Liberalization,” Political and Legal Anthropology Review, May 2001, vol. 24, no.1, pp. 129-148
- Risky Business: Economic Uncertainty, Market Reforms and Female Livelihoods in Northeast Ghana,” Development and Change (The Hague), November 2000, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 987-1008

“Market Reforms and the State: The Case of Shea in Ghana,” Journal of Modern African Studies September 1996, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 421-439

Chapters in Edited Volumes (Peer-reviewed)

- “Artisans of the Plasticene: Poly tanks and Plasticities in Urban Ghana.” In *The Southern Anthropocene*. Ed. Casper Brun Jensen. Routledge. Forthcoming 2025.
- “Popular Infrastructures - West Africa: Beyond ‘for the people, by the people,’” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Ed. Mark Aldenderfer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.
- co-authored with Tarik Dahou, “Governing African Seas in the Neoliberal Era.” Oxford Encyclopedia of African Politics. Nic Chessman ed. Oxford University Press. 2019.
- co-authored with Omulade Adunbi. “Governance,” Critical Terms for the Study of Africa. Gaurav Desai and Adeline Masquelier eds. University of Chicago Press. 2018. Pp.145-163.
- “Mapping Neo-Extractive Frontiers across Africa and Latin America,” Governance in the Extractive Industries: Power, Cultural Politics and Regulation. Lori Leonard and Siba Grovogui eds. Routledge. 2017. Pp.213-219.
- “Endnote: On the Ethnographic Engagement of Keywords.” Keywords of Mobility: Critical Engagements. Noel B. Salazar and Kiran Jayaram eds. Berghahn, 2016. Pp. 171-177
- “Border Security as Late-Capitalist ‘Fix,’” The Blackwell Companion to Border Studies. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan eds. Blackwell, 2012.
- “The North Goes Global: Export Markets and Indigenous Commodities,” The Northern Ghana Reader. Franz Kroeger and Barbara Meier eds., Peter Lang, 2003.
- “The Changing Face of ‘One-Mouth’: Household Labor and Commercial Intensification in Northern Ghana,” At the Interface: The Household and Beyond, Society for Economic Anthropology Annual Proceedings, D. Small and N. Tannenbaum eds., University Press of America, 1999.

Non-Refereed Publications

- ‘Autour d’un Livre,’ Response to Commentaries, “Neoliberal Frontiers: An Ethnography of Sovereignty in West Africa,” Politique Africaine, no. 123, Octobre 2011. Pp. 153-159.
- “Working the Border in Ghana: Technologies of Sovereignty and Its Others,” School of Social Science Occasional Paper, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J., November 2003, Paper Number 16.

Creative Works and Design Charettes

- “POLY-Morph” Designing and Reimagining Plastic Futures. Design Charette. With A.Mumeen Idrissu & S. Adabre, Nuku Studio, Tamale, Ghana, Oct. 17, 2024.
- “Excrementa Estates,” Installation (architectural models, brochures, slide show, posters) prepared with the assistance of Xhulio Binjaku (MA Candidate, Architecture, MIT), Infrastructure Workshop, University of Michigan and University of Witwatersrand Mellon Seminar, Durban, South Africa. July 13, 2016.

Work in Progress

- “Sand as Matter and Method,” Introduction, “Sand” Special Issue, Environmental Humanities journal (Duke), co-authored with Samuli Lahteenaho.

“Polytanks and Plasticities: Water Works and National Metabolism in Ghana.” Article in preparation for Journal of Modern African Studies.

Presentations (Select)

- “Shea – Thinking Pasts & Imagining Futures,” West African Center for Shea Innovation and Research, University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana. October, 14, 2024. Invited.
- “Making the African Plasticene.” Energy, Waste and the Environment Conference, Rice University, Houston, TX, September 12-13, 2024. Invited.
- “Technologies and Metabolisms of Plastics Repair in Urban Ghana,” Technology matters: ethnographies of technological adoption beyond the Western world Panel. European Association of Social Anthropology. July 25, 2024 Barcelona, Spain.
- “Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana,” Dartmouth Architecture Fieldwork Symposium. April 10, 2024. Hanover, NH. Invited.
- “Decolonize the Toilet: Waste Works in Urban Ghana,” Civil Empowerment Seminar Series, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of Maryland, October 11, 2023. *Invited*
- “Fields of Play: An Anthropologist at Aarhus School of Architecture,” Aarhus School of Architecture Research Symposium, Aarhus, Denmark. August 16, 2023. *Invited*
- “Polytanks and Plasticities: Water Works and National Metabolism in Ghana,” European African Studies Conference, Cologne, Germany. June 1, 2023.
- “Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana”, Book talk, Center for African Studies, University of Copenhagen, May 4, 2023; Global Studies and Center for Environmental Humanities, Aarhus University, May 8, 2023; Development Studies, Roskilde University, May 12, 2023. *Invited.*
- “A view from West Africa: Knots of global capital in passageways and buffer-zones.” Roundtable. University of Helsinki, May 22, 2021. (online)
- “Taking Arendt to the Toilet: Excursions in Ethnographic Theory,” University of Helsinki, Department of Anthropology, April 16, 2021. (online)
- “African Shea & Perils of Sustainability,” Sustainable and Wise Use of Forest Plants in African and Asian Tropics” Memorial Symposium for MOU between University of Florida & Kyoto University, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan. January 31, 2020. *Invited*
- “Thinking with & against the Tides: Ghana’s Tema Port Expansion,” Port Politics Public Forum, Danish Institute of International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark. December 5, 2019. *Invited*
- “Maritime Border Cities: Terraqueous Urbanism in Ghana’s Takoradi,”Urbanism at the Margins – Centering African Border Towns and Cities, African Border Research Network (ABORNE), University of Lome, Lome, Togo. Sept. 16, 2019.
- “An Anthropologist on Infrastructure: The Case of Waste.” School of Engineering, University of Washington, March 4, 2019.
- “Excremental Experimental: Human Waste as a Laboratory for Capital in Urban Ghana.” Departmental Seminar. Social Anthropology. University of Oslo. Norway. January 16, 2019. *invited*
- “New Directions in the Study of Maritime Logistics,” Life-cycle of Container Ships: Global Ethnographic Explorations into Maritime Working Lives. Norwegian Maritime Museum, European Research Council. January 15, 2019. *Invited*

- Excremental Experimental: On South-South Infrastructural Alternatives. Infrastructural Design for Informal Economies Panel. International Urban Conference. Africa Center for Cities. University of Capetown. South Africa. Feb. 1, 2018.
- EXCRETA2ENERGY: Human Waste as Laboratory for Capital in Urban Ghana. Towns, Public Areas and Discards: Encounters of the rural and the urban. European Conference on African Studies. Basel, Switzerland. June 30, 2018.
- “Logistics as Governance: Mapping States and Surveilling Seas in the Western Gulf of Guinea.” States of Circulation Conference and Workshop, Danish Institute of International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark. Nov. 3, 2016. *Invited. Keynote Address.*
- “Evacuation: Excrementa Estates,” Presentation and Installation (models, slide show, posters), Infrastructure Workshop, University of Michigan and University of Witwatersrand Mellon Seminar, Durban, South Africa. July 13, 2015. *Invited.*
- “Bodies, Waste, Infrastructure: Vital Politics on Ghana’s Urban Frontier,” Fellows Seminar. Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. May 5, 2016. *Invited*
- “Rethinking Extractive Governance across Regions and Resources,” Governing Extraction Conference. Polson Institute for Global Development & African Studies and Research Center, Cornell University. Oct. 16, 2015. *Invited.*
- “Visualizing a Virtual Maritime: Surveilling Seas and Remapping Governance in the Western Gulf of Guinea,” Spaces, Scales and Routes Conference, Harvard University, Weatherhead Center for International Studies, Cambridge, MA. May 1, 2015. *Invited.*
- “Vital-Infrastructure & Alter-Globalizations in Ghana’s Edge-City of Ashaiman,” Infrastructure Panel, Rethinking Global Cities Conference. Duke University and Mellon Foundation, Duke University, Feb 7, 2015. *Invited.*
- “Toward a General Economy of Excreta: Taking Bataille to the Toilet in Ghana’s Edge-City of Ashaiman.” Socialities of Waste Panel. American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings. Washington, DC. December 4, 2014
- “Comparative Perspectives on Oil and Aqueous Sovereignities,” Ice Law Workshop: International Law, State Sovereignty, and the Ice-Land-Water interface, IBRU Centre for Borders Research, Durham University (UK), June 20, 2014. *Invited*
- “Durable Bodies and the Vitality of Waste: Global Surplus, Urban Circulation and Gender in Ghana’s City of Ashaiman,” University of Bergen, Localizing Globalization: Gendered Transformations of Work in Developing Economies Conference. Oct. 31, 2013. Bergen, Norway. *Invited*
- “Excursions in Multilateral Ethnography: Making Anthropological Sense of the World Customs Organization,” Tax Matters, Wenner Gren Foundation Workshop, April 4-5, 2013, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. *Invited*
- “Off-shore Rigs and Ultra-deep Oil: Global Mobility Regimes and Infrastructures of Risk,” Border and Mobility Dynamics Conference, Reconfiguring Borders and Mobility in times of Crisis panel, Danish Institute of International Studies (DIIS), Center for African Studies, Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. September 26-28, 2012. *keynote presentation.*
- “Risk, Threat and Vulnerability in Ghana’s Off-shore Oil Sector,” Policy Briefing, Center for Democratic Development, Accra, Ghana. July 9, 2012.
- “Transafrican Portscapes,” Interactive Seminar, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Oct. 27, 2011. *Invited*

"Recasting the Port of Tema: The Political Economy of Ghana's Maritime Frontier," Governing the Sea in Africa Conference, Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Center for International Research, EHESS, Paris, May 4, 2009. *Invited*

"Trafficking Sovereignty: Customs Regimes and Material Governance in a Multilateral Age," Paper presented at the Fellows Seminar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Washington, DC. April 18, 2006.

"Airport Anthropology: Globalization and the Shifting Frontiers of Customs, Class and Corruption in Ghana," Institute for Advanced Study, Corruption Seminar, Princeton, NJ, Mar. 12, 2003. *Invited*

"Working the Border: Constructing Sovereignty in the Context of Liberalization," Masters Seminar, Institute for African Studies, University of Ghana, Sept. 21, 2000. *Invited*

UF Graduate Student Supervision

Chair of 20 PhD committees, Member 40+ MA/PhD committees

Service to the Profession

External Reviewer, PhD Defense, Anthropology, University of Lausanne, Sept. 2021.

Chair, External Review, African Studies at Amherst College, Amherst, MA, February 6-8, 2019.

External Reviewer, PhD Defense, Ethnology, University of Copenhagen. December 2018.

External Reviewer, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study Fellowship Program, 2016-2021

Member, External Review Committee, African Studies Program, UCLA, May 2017

Board Member, African Studies Association. 2014-2017.

Chair, African Studies Association, Publications Committee, 2015-2017.

Selection Committee, Burkhardt Fellowship, American Council of Learned Societies, 2016-18

Executive Committee Member, Social Science Research Council, IDRF Program, 2012-15

Executive Committee Reviewer, Center for American Overseas Research Centers, 2012, 2015

Reviewer, American Philosophical Association, Lewis and Clark Award, 2012-2016,

Reviewer, National Science Foundation, Cultural Anthropology Section, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014

Reviewer, ACLS Mellon Foundation Dissertation Improvement Awards, 2009, 2010.

Reviewer, Canadian Social Science Research Council, 2008.

Editorships and service: national and international publications

Member, Editorial Board, African Studies Review (Cambridge University Press). 2017-2018

Member, Editorial Board, Journal of Modern African Studies (Cambridge University Press) 2014-present

Member, Editorial Board, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space (Sage Publications), 2015-2018

Book Manuscript Reviewer: University of Chicago Press, Duke University Press, University of Minnesota Press, Princeton University Press, University of California Press.

Article Manuscript Reviewer for Cultural Anthropology, American Ethnologist, American Anthropologist, Journal of Modern African Studies, Environment and Planning D, Ghana Studies Journal, Comparative Studies of Society and History, African Studies Quarterly, Africa, Ethnos, Current Anthropology, Political Geography.

Service to the University of Florida

Chair, Steering Committee, Associate Dean for Diversity Search, CLAS, 2020-2021
 Member, Graduate Council, UF Graduate School, 2021-2024
 Member, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Committee, CLAS, 2020-2021
 Member, African American Studies Director, Steering Committee, 2019-2020
 Member, Israel Studies Steering Committee, Center for Jewish Studies, 2019
 Member, Advisory Council, Department of Anthropology, 2018-2020
 Signatory and Initiation, Memorandum of Cooperation, University of Ghana, 2019
 Signatory and Renewal, Memorandum of Cooperation, Makerere University, Uganda, 2019
 Member, Search Committee, Digital Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, 2018-19
 Member, Search Committee, Medical Anthropology Africa, Dept. of Anthropology, 2017-18.
 Member, Advisory Committee, Department of Anthropology, 2014-15
 Member, Graduate Finance and Fellowship Committee, Department of Anthropology, 2012-13
 Graduate Coordinator, Department of Anthropology, University of Florida 2009-2011
 Chair, Medical Anthropology and African Studies Search Committee, 2009-10.
 Member, Graduate Educ. Committee, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Florida 2008-9
 Member, Graduate Curriculum Committee, 2008
 Member, Advisory Committee, Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, 2005-2007
 Member, Advisory Committee, Center for African Studies, University of Florida, 2005-2007, 2010-11
 Member, Foreign Language and Area Studies, Graduate Fellowship Committee, 2005-7, 2009, 2012
 Member, Graduate Financial Aid Committee, 2004, 2007
 Member, Anthropology and Center for African-American Studies Search Committee, 2004-5.
 Coordinator, Department of Anthropology Fall Retreat, 2005

Professional Memberships

American Anthropological Association, Society for Political and Legal Anthropology, American Ethnological Society, Society for Cultural Anthropology, Society for Economic Anthropology, Association for Africanist Anthropology, African Studies Association.