

ANTH 3410: Ethnographic Field Experience



Mondays & Wednesdays, 2:50 AM – 4:30 PM, Northeastern University

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Office Hours: M and W 1:50 to 2:50 and by appointment

What is Anthropology? What is Ethnography? Ideally, what should ethnography achieve?
What is Fieldwork? What is Data? How do you keep fieldnotes?

Who is the anthropologist? Who is the subject? What happens when the anthropologist is both? What is the ethnography and ethnographer's impact upon a particular context?

How do you do an anthropology of X (law, medicine, media, material objects, science, trash, property, race, space, class, fashion, food, economics etc.)?

Ethnographers respond:

[T]he challenge is to produce an account of urban contemporary city life that demonstrates the intricate interlinkages among how residents are housed, how land is used, how work and income are created, where people can circulate and congregate, how residents can access critical knowledge and use the city as a resource for knowledge, and how residents can effectively register their ideas, needs, and aspirations and participate in the critical processes that determine their livelihoods and rights. (Abdoumalig Simone, “Ambivalent Exceptionalities,” *Current Anthropology* October 2015)

The newer formats open up lots of possibilities – for accessibility in ways that would have been beyond reach for many standard documentaries. They are also exciting in that they allow for a different kind of participatory involvement on the part of audiences and different ways of playing with narrative that are about telling stories in non-linear ways. But, at the same time, one of the challenges is that it can be harder to get people to emotionally invest in a non-linear story rather than to just surf over something. ... We're most excited about the possibility of narratives that move across genres, morphing in the process to take advantage of one form's particular strengths – so with *Exit Zero*, you can start with Chris W's book, with its social analysis of class and the impact of deindustrialization, to the linear documentary, with its focus on family history, relationships, and narratives, and on into (hopefully!) the world of interactive storytelling that has the potential to open up the participatory experience for audiences in new ways. (Chris Walley and Chris Boebel, from MIT Open Documentary Lab)

This course explores ethnographic field methods that are the cornerstone of the discipline (such as participant observation and immersive fieldwork) and introduces newer methods that have generated much debate over issues of ethics, legitimacy, and representation.

This course will run as a workshop. All students are expected to come up with their own independent research topics, which they will investigate throughout the semester. We will also form working groups of 3 – 4 students to generate ongoing discussion, dialogue, feedback and critiques for each student project. We will spend **Monday** sessions discussing readings. **Wednesday** sessions will be spent discussing your field progress.

I believe strongly in learning (fieldwork) by doing. The fieldwork exercises and the fieldnotes project are ways for you to practice ethnography, and to learn anthropological ways of collecting and analyzing data in context.

IRB protocols for research with Human Subjects: See Northeastern University's policy on Classroom research: http://www.northeastern.edu/policies/pdfs/Policy_on_Classroom_Research.pdf
Note the special conditions listed under III a – c which designates our classroom research's exemption from IRB review.

All readings, unless specified as “*recommended*,” are required reading. PDFs are available on Blackboard. If they are not on Blackboard, please use the library databases to obtain the readings. Fieldnotes policy: It is important that you maintain the practice of taking and keeping fieldnotes, as well as other forms of documentation for your fieldwork. Buy a notebook for writing down your observations, and sketching ideas, sites, and situations. These initial hand-written and hand-drawn observations will stimulate the more thoughtful and reflexive weekly fieldnotes that you will type up and turn in to the professor and to your writing group. Fieldnotes, unless noted, are always due at 5 PM the Tuesday before we meet.

Academic Integrity:

Please read Northeastern University’s policy on academic integrity, with especial attention to fabrication: <http://www.northeastern.edu/osccr/academic-integrity-policy/>

Know that I take academic integrity very seriously. Much like the fieldwork process and ethnographic writing, this class requires trust and truthfulness to enable student learning of the practices and principles of ethnographic research and representation.

Grades: Possible grades range from A+ to F

Your final grade depends on the satisfactory completion of the following assignments:

Attendance and classroom participation:	10%
Fieldnotes:	20%
Fieldwork assignment 1:	20%
Fieldwork assignment 2:	20%
Fieldwork assignment 3:	10%
Final Proposal:	20%

-----READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS-----

Week 1: Thinking ethnographically – Part 1

9/4: Labor Day, No Classes National Holiday

9/6: Introductions

- Start formulating ideas for your semester-long fieldwork project. For students who are simultaneously enrolled in Senior Seminar, please consult with me to determine how you can utilize this class to expand on your senior seminar projects.

WEEK 2: Thinking Ethnographically – Part 2

September 11 and 13th

- Assignment: Look up working anthropologists’ bios and CVs. You can find these by looking at most university and college-level anthropology department websites. Read one of their most recent journal articles. Which projects were you most interested in? Why? Assess and critique the work, paying particular attention to the role of research design and methods in the analysis presented. Write up a short description of the anthropologist’s bio, and your assessment of their work. i.e. “In your view, what makes this ethnographic project most interesting?” Be prepared to share your findings with the class on our second meeting (9/13)

Readings for Class:

1. Carole McGranahan’s article “What is Ethnography? Thinking ethnographically without fieldwork.”
2. Read/See the website for the ethnography and art project ART + Village + City curated by the Global Urban Humanities Initiative at UC Berkeley. <http://artvillage.city>

Week 3: What is Fieldwork? What is Data? How do you design a project?

September 18 and 20

Readings for Class:

1. Irving Goffman – “On Fieldwork”

2. Carol Hendrickson, "Ethnographics" pp. 31-39
3. Kirin Narayan, Chapter 1 from *Alive in the Writing*

• Assignment: Using Narayan's 5 minute free-writing exercises in Chapter 1 (pg. 6: "Beginning with the words 'I most hope to write'" & pg. 8: "Sketch the first steps that brought you to your project, mentioning specific people or ideas.") describe the theory and the story behind your fieldwork project. Circulate these passages to the entire class on blackboard on the Tuesday before class.

• Fieldwork Assignment 1: Participant Observation of Public Space.

Find a site that functions effectively (or surprisingly?) as public space. This can be an outdoor park, an interior space, a commercial or non-profit space. Carry out an observation on two different days. Go once in the morning, and once again in the afternoon/evening. What do you notice about the space? How do people use the space? What are people doing? What interactions, if any, occur there? Does the space and its constituents change according to the different times of day? Write a 1.5 to 2 page single-spaced analysis of your observations. Include ethnographic descriptions and excerpts from your fieldnotes as evidence for your conclusions. **DUE WEEK 5.**

Week 4: "Challenging" Ethnography: Police, Fear, and the City

September 25 and 27

Readings for Class:

1. Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing*, Preface & Introduction.
2. Monique Skidmore, "Darker than midnight: Fear, vulnerability and terror making in urban Burma (Myanmar)." *AE* 30 (1): 5 – 21.
3. *Recommended:* Paul Stoller: "In defense of ethnography". http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-stoller/in-defense-of-ethnography_b_8028542.html

• Finalize your fieldwork project topic. Begin keeping fieldnotes this week. Work on assignment 1.

Week 5: Feminist Critiques and Writing Culture

October 2 and 4

Readings for Class:

1. Read Margery Wolf, Intro and Chapter 2 to *A Thrice Told Tale*
2. Read Ruth Behar

• **First set of fieldnotes due 10/4.** Circulate them to your assigned writing group on the Tuesday (5 pm) before class.

• **Assignment 1 DUE in class 10/4.**

Week 6: Autoethnography and Authorial authority

October 9 and 11

10/9 Columbus Day (or Indigenous Peoples Day) – National Holiday No Class

Readings for Class:

1. John Van Maanen – Chapter 3 – *Realist Tales*, pp. 45 – 72 & Chapter 4 – *Confessional Tales*, pp. 73 –

100.

2. Deborah Reed-Danahay, Introduction, From Auto/Ethnography.
3. Highly recommended: Kirin Narayan – “How Native is the Native Anthropologist?”

• Second set of fieldnotes due. Circulate them to your writing group on the Wednesday (5 pm) before class.

Week 7: The (auto)ethnography of class, loss, and landscape in Southeast-Chicago

October 16 and 18

Readings for Class:

1. Chris Walley’s Exit Zero introduction (pp.1 – 11), and Chapter 3 “Places Beyond,” pp. 89-116.

Watch in class: Film trailer (8 min) from Exit Zero.

• Third set of fieldnotes due 10/18. Circulate them to your writing group on the Tuesday (5 pm) before class.

Week 8: Public anthropology: Working with vulnerable populations

October 23 and 25

Watch film: EITHER Living Quecha OR The Cats of Mirikitani

Readings for Class:

1. Philippe Bourgois, “Lumpen Abuse: The human cost of righteous neoliberalism” in City and Society 23(1): pp. 2-12.
2. See the Center for a Public Anthropology website: <http://www.publicanthropology.org>

- No fieldnotes due this week.
- Start narrowing down interview subject possibilities for the life history assignment.

Week 9: Capturing life-cycles *with a focus on Age and aging

October 30 and November 1

Readings for Class:

1. Jan Breman’s interview in New Left Review: “A Footloose Scholar.”
2. Ruth Behar, “Goodbye Comadre” on Savage Minds blog.
<http://savageminds.org/2015/01/06/goodbye-comadre/>
3. Excerpt from Rudolf Mrazek’s A certain age. Chapter 1: Bypasses and Flyovers & Postscript: Sometimes Voices

• Fourth set of fieldnotes due 11/1. Circulate them to your writing group on the Tuesday (5 pm) before class.

•Fieldwork Assignment 2: Life History (due week 10 instead of fieldnotes): Additional guidelines for this assignment will be given out in class.

Identify an interview subject, preferably someone with considerable life experience (50 and above).

Conduct an interview with that person to obtain their life history. Transcribe the interview. Code it for narrative themes. Analyze the transcript and write up your analysis of the interview material. What did you learn? How did your questions shape the interview? Reflect on the method of conducting life histories as an ethnographic method. What are its strengths and weaknesses? Keep a recording of the interview for purposes of data verification. Turn in the transcript and your single-spaced 2 - 3 page essay.

Week 10: A Visual interlude: Visual anthropology, Visual epistemologies and Ethics

November 6 and 8

*Life History assignment due.

We will look at documentary images by anthropologists to assess their ways of seeing, knowing, and representing. What do these “ordinary,” documentary images that are untouched by digital or manual aesthetic manipulation convey? How do they work as ethnographic data?

3/13

Readings for Class:

1. David MacDougall and Lucien Taylor, Introduction: “Visual Anthropology and the Ways of Knowing.”
2. Read AAA policy on how to evaluate visual media:
http://www.aaanet.org/about/Policies/Guide_Visual.cfm
3. Recommended reading: Patricia Spyer and Mary Steedly, Introduction to Images that Move. SAR Press, 2013.

• Life History assignment due. No field notes this week.

Week 11: Images and Ethics

November 13 and 15

Watch before class: Grizzly Man (dir. Werner Herzog)

Readings for Class:

1. Sara Perry and Jonathan S. Marion. “State of the Ethics in Visual Anthropology” VAR 26 (2), 2010.

• Fifth set of fieldnotes due 11/15. Circulate them to your writing group on the Wednesday (5 pm) before class.

• Field Assignment 3: Photo Essay, GIF, or 20 second video.

By this point in the semester, you will have arrived at a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the complexities of your research project, and of your informants’ lives and experiences. How would you capture the sensory elements that infuse your project? Assemble a photo essay or a short video with strong, informative, and meaningful images that convey some of the central ideas of your ethnography. Be mindful of the ethical concerns that underlie visual representations of human subjects. You are encouraged to collaborate with your informants to produce these images, and to share them in advance with your informants to obtain their consent for the classroom use of these images. Attach captions or an explanatory “artist’s statement” with your images. Due week 13.

Week 12: Sensory Ethnography (content adapted from Cultural Anthropology supplemental teaching materials)

November 20 and 22

How is sensory awareness important for ethnographers? What are the differences and interrelations between representation, presence, and empiricism in ethnographic practice? How can sensory ethnography deal with these issues? What are the benefits and limitations of sensory approaches for the work of anthropologists?

11/20

In Class: Watch the trailer for Leviathan (dir. Lucien Castaing-Taylor).

Readings for Class:

1. Pink and Howe's debate on Sensory anthropology in Social Anthropology.
2. Lisa Stevenson & Eduardo Kohn's VAR piece "Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream." VAR May 2015.
3. Recommended: Sarah Pink: "Digital-Visual-Sensory-Design Anthropology: ethnography, imagination and intervention"

11/22

• Sixth set of fieldnotes due 11/22. Circulate them to your writing group on the Tuesday (5 pm) before class. Workshop initial project conclusions in your working groups.

Week 13: Data & Fieldwork in the Digital Age

November 27 and 29

*Photo essay/Video DUE

Readings for Class:

1. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States." *American Ethnologist* 42 (1), 2015: 4-17.
2. Noelle Stout, "Bootlegged: Unauthorized Circulation and the Dilemmas of Collaboration in the Digital Age" VAR 30 (2), 2014.

11/29

Workshop a draft of your final proposal.

• Final Writing Assignment: Write a proposal for an ethnography based on your fieldnotes as a whole. Knowing what you know now, how would you improve upon the research design of the project? How would you write the methods section of your proposal? If you had an additional 3 months in the field, what additional research would you do? What sites would you travel to? How would your fieldwork change? Workshop a rough draft in class. The proposal will serve as your final paper for the class, due 12/6, unless otherwise specified.

Week 14: Final Presentations

December 4 and December 6

Student Presentations: Reflections and Evaluations

Proposals due Friday 12/6

**syllabus is subject to changes by the instructor*