

IHSS 6410: Ethnography

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Fridays, 9-11:50 AM; Sage 5711

Student consultation hours: Wednesdays 1-3, Fridays 12-2; Webex meetings available on request

Course Description

How do ethnographers know the world? What are their methods and objects? How does this influence their production of texts and claims to objectivity? In this class we seek answers to these questions through two interrelated tasks: The first is reading ethnographies in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies to direct our attention to ethnographic objects and ways of knowing them. The second is practicing ethnographic practice through the development of an ethnographic research project. This will require students to develop a pilot project—or continue an ongoing one—and conducting a series of interviews and descriptions of processes. By juxtaposing these two practices—one based on student research and the other based on close readings and discussion—we can come to some preliminary understandings of how and why ethnographers collect the data they do, how they analyze it, and how they contribute to ongoing scholarly, policy, and public conversations.

Ethnographers believe—whether they admit it or not—that the data collected through ethnographic practice demands presentation in generic forms. Because of this, a key element in our discussion of texts will be how they are structured formally, how those structures motivate their content, and what ethnographic genres do, rhetorically. Reading ethnography is also vital to conceptualize how to rally ethnographic data in convincing ways. To these twin ends, we'll read several foundational ethnographies from the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, many of which set or catalyzed trends. We'll also consider some more marginal ethnographies and consider why they might have been (and might continue to be) marginal to anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies.

Learning outcomes:

Students will become fluent in the formal analysis of published ethnography;

Students will discern the role of disciplinary norms in ethnographic research and writing;

Students will develop confidence in producing discipline-appropriate ethnographic writing;

Students will gain skills in analyzing academic writing through peer review.

Assignments

Ethnographic Research Paper (20 points; plus 10 components, each worth 4 points; 60 points total): You will write an original ethnographic research paper based on research that you conduct during the course of the semester. This will include Pitching a Project, Designing a Methodology, Assembling Resources (e.g., identifying supporting scholarly material), conducting no less than 4 interviews, describing two processes, and writing a Rough Draft. Your interviews and process descriptions may provide the basis for your paper, or you can select to use only some of them; you may also conduct more interviews or describe more processes, depending on your research project. Your paper should abide by generic conventions relative to your field, but must include an interpretive argument and a literature review (based on your Assembled Resources). Additional details about each of these components will be discussed in class.

Two Peer Assessments (8 points total; 4 points each): You will conduct a peer review of the rough drafts turned in by your fellow students. Read [this](#) for tips on peer review.

Four leadership memos (32 points total; 8 points each): At four points in the term you will lead class discussion. In order to facilitate this, you should prepare notes based on the assigned reading that address the following questions: what theories structure the author's overarching argument?; if it is a book, how does the overarching argument integrate arguments in each chapter of the book?; what kinds of evidence does the author employ?; how is this evidence produced, methodologically?; how does the evidence reflect theoretical commitments? You will be leading class discussion with one or more of your fellow students; it may be useful to plan how you will lead discussion and to distribute readings to ensure that all of them are covered. Your leadership memo should be your own and reflect your engagement with the text. Memos should be approximately 1500 words. Please deposit your leadership memos in [this folder](#) no later than the start of class on the day that you are leading discussion. Please title your memos based on the text and your name, e.g., Total Confinement_Wolf-Meyer.

Course Materials

Books will be ordered to the RPI Bookstore. Additional materials will be made available in [this folder](#).

Crapanzano, Vincent. *The Fifth World of Forster Bennett: Portrait of a Navajo*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Elliott, Denielle, and Matthew Wolf-Meyer, eds. *Naked Fieldnotes: A Rough Guide to Ethnographic Writing*. University of Minnesota Press, 2024.

Ivy, Marilyn. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Linger, Daniel Touro. *No One Home: Brazilian Selves Remade in Japan*. Stanford University Press, 2001.

Martin, Emily. *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture -- From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS*. Beacon Press, 1994.

Munn, Nancy D. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Duke University Press, 1992.

Pine, Jason. *The Alchemy of Meth: A Decomposition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Rapp, Rayna. *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: A Social History of Amniocentesis in America*. Routledge, 1999.

Rhodes, Lorna. *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*. University of California Press, 2004.

Willis, Paul. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Columbia University Press, 1981.

Wolf, Margery. *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility*. Stanford University Press, 1992.

Schedule

28.8.26: What is Ethnography?

Elliott, Denielle, and Matthew Wolf-Meyer, eds. Introductory Material. In *Naked Fieldnotes: A Rough Guide to Ethnographic Writing*. University of Minnesota Press, 2024.

Garfinkel, Harold. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Blackwell, 1984. **[Chapters 1 + 2]**

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. BasicBooks, 1973.

Marcus, George E. "Ethnography in/of the World System." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117.

Rhodes, Lorna A. "The Anthropologist as Institutional Analyst." *Ethos* 14, no. 2 (1986): 204–17.

4.9.26: Person-Centered Ethnography

Pitch a Project Due

Crapanzano, Vincent. *The Fifth World of Forster Bennett: Portrait of a Navajo*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003. **[read the whole book]**

Linger, Daniel. "What Is It Like to Be Someone Else?" *Ethos* 38, no. 2 (2010): 205–29.

11.9.26: Scaling Up the Person

Design a Methodology Due

Linger, Daniel Touro. *No One Home: Brazilian Selves Remade in Japan*. Stanford University Press, 2001. **[read the whole book]**

18.9.26: Institutionalizing the Person

Assemble Resources Due

Rhodes, Lorna. *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*. University of California Press, 2004. **[read the whole book]**

25.9.26: Adding Up Perspectives

First Interview Due

Martin, Emily. *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture -- From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS*. Beacon Press, 1994. **[read the whole book, including appendices]**

Martin, Emily. "Anthropology and the Cultural Study of Science: From Citadels to String Figures." In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. University of California, 1997.

2.10.26: Social Practice as Process

Graeber, David. "Three Ways of Talking about Value." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. Palgrave, 2001.

Munn, Nancy D. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Duke University Press, 1992. **[Chapters 1-5]**

9.10.26: 4S in Toronto—No Class This Week

16.10.26: Macro Processes vs. Subjective Experiences

Interviews 2-4 Due

Ivy, Marilyn. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. University of Chicago Press, 1995. **[Chapters 1, 4 + 5]**

Willis, Paul. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Columbia University Press, 1981. **[Chapters 1-3 + 7]**

23.10.26: Mediating Subjectivity

Describe a Process Due

Anderson, Benedict. "The Origins of National Consciousness." In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." In *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. Duke University Press, 1997.

Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. University of North Carolina Press, 1991. **[Introduction, Chapters 2 + 3]**

30.10.26: Socio-Technological Mediations

Rapp, Rayna. *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: A Social History of Amniocentesis in America*. Routledge, 1999. **[Chapters 1, 2, 5 + 7]**

Rapp, Rayna. "Moral Pioneers: Women, Men and Fetuses on a Frontier of Reproductive Technology." In *Embryos, Ethics, and Women's Rights*, edited by Elaine Hoffman Baruch, Amadeo F. D'Adamo, and Joni Seager. Routledge, 1988.

6.11.26: Documenting Processes

Describe a Process Due

Brenneis, Donald. "Reforming Promise." In *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge*, edited by Annelise Riles. University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Hull, Matthew S. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. University of California Press, 2012. **[Introduction + Chapters 2-3]**

13.11.26: Wrestling with Ethnography

Taussig, Michael. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. University of Chicago Press, 1987. **[read as much as you can/dare]**

20.11.26: Ethnography's Stakes

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 3 (1995): 409–40.

Wolf, Margery. *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility*. Stanford University Press, 1992. **[read the whole book]**

27.11.26: Thanksgiving—No Class This Week

4.12.26: Affective Ethnography

Rough Draft Due

Behar, Ruth. "The Vulnerable Observer." In *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Beacon Press, 1996.

Pine, Jason. *The Alchemy of Meth: A Decomposition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019. **[read the whole book]**

11.12.26: What could Ethnography be?

Peer Reviews Due

18.12.26: Final Papers Due by Noon

Policies:

Students taking the course Pass/Fail must earn a C to receive a Pass.

Disability access: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute strives to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers based on a disability, please let me know immediately so that we can discuss your options. To establish reasonable accommodations, please register with The Office of Disability Services for Students. After registration, make arrangements with the Director of Disability Services as soon as possible to discuss your accommodations so that they may be implemented in a timely fashion. DSS contact information: dss@rpi.edu; 518-276-8197; 4226 Academy Hall.

Academic Integrity – Student-teacher relationships are built on trust. For example, students must trust that teachers have made appropriate decisions about the structure and content of the courses they teach, and teachers must trust that the assignments that students turn in are their own. Acts that violate this trust undermine the educational process. The [Rensselaer Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities](#) defines various forms of Academic Dishonesty and you should make yourself familiar with these. In this class, all assignments that are turned in for a grade must represent the student's own work. In cases where help was received, or teamwork was allowed, a notation on the assignment should indicate your collaboration.

The first violation of academic integrity results in null grade for that assignment. The second violation results in failure of the course. Violations of academic integrity may also be reported to the Dean of Students.

If you have any question concerning this policy before submitting an assignment, please ask for clarification. In addition, you can visit the following site for more information on our [Academic Integrity Policy: Students Rights, Responsibilities, and Judicial Affairs](#).

Contacting Me: I only check my email between 9-11 AM on weekday mornings and during my office hours. I will always respond to emails within 24 hours, except for emails received on Fridays, which will be responded to on the following Monday. If you would like to set up a time to talk, please contact me ahead of time, either by email (wolfmm@rpi.edu) or in person before or after class. **I am happy to set up a time to meet during normal business hours (i.e. Monday-Friday, 9 AM-5 PM) even if it doesn't fall within my dedicated office hours.**

Style Matters: All written work should be double-spaced, 12 point font, in Times New Roman, with 1 inch margins on all sides, and page numbers. Citation should look like this: (Author Year: Page), e.g. (Wolf-Meyer 2009: 408), which follows Chicago 17th. Using a reference manager (e.g. Zotero) will make this easy. Failure to meet these standards will result in a reduced grade.

Research Paper Break Down

Pitching a Project—In a page (~300 words), address: what is the problem you're seeking to understand? Where is it located? Who are the people involved? What kinds of processes are central to the problem? This should comprise a paragraph (or more) and lay out the empirical foundation of the study. In another paragraph, address: How will you access the place? What do you need to know to answer the questions that you have? How will you proceed in collecting the answers to these questions? This should be a first draft of your methodology.

Designing a Methodology—In a page (~300 words), describe what you will do in order to answer the questions laid out in the Pitching a Project assignment. This should include a list of questions that you will ask people who are involved in the fieldsite (i.e., an interview schedule) as well as a list of processes you seek to observe and how you will set about observing them. What do you need to observe and how does it relate to the questions you have?

Assembling Resources (e.g., identifying supporting scholarly material)—Identify two literatures that motivate your project with 5-10 items associated with each. Check out [this summary](#) of writing literature reviews. You should write 1-2 paragraphs about each (~1500 words total) of the literatures that you've identified that discuss main themes in the literature and how they relate to your project. Seek to have a motivating question distilled from each of the literatures that your ethnographic project can answer.

Interviews (four times)—Develop your preliminary interview schedule (from Designing a Methodology) into a formal interview schedule. It should be ~15 questions long and organized in a logical way. You may diverge from the schedule, but it is important to have to ensure that you are getting answers to the questions that you have. Plan on your interviews to be 60 to 90 minutes long. You must record them (using Voice Memo on an iPhone is fine and you can also check out better recorders from Karen Osborne [osbork2@rpi.edu]) and prepare a transcript to turn in. (Voice Memo automatically generates a transcript.) You should highlight the important parts of the interview.

Describing a processes (twice)—Observe a process or conduct additional interviews about other people's participation in a process. Describe it in as much detail as possible. Who are the actors involved? What objects are involved? Are there bureaucratic elements to the process? What is being moved from one state to another? What does the state change entail among the actors? The context? These descriptions should be no less than ~600 words long each.

Rough Draft—Assemble your pieces into an ethnographic article manuscript. You should follow the steps laid out in [this series](#). Your final piece should include an introduction, your literature reviews, a map of the paper's contents and your argument, at least two empirical sections that relate to your argument, and a conclusion. This should be 6000-8000 words. You should also include a bibliography. Your rough draft will be peer reviewed by two of your peers to provide you with instructions for your revision.