Rutgers University

Department of Anthropology

Spring 2022

**Writing Ethnography**

01:070:417 (3 credits)

Tues 3:50-6:50pm

RAB-003

*On 1/18 & 1/25, class will be held on Zoom. Use this link:*

<https://rutgers.zoom.us/j/93666078618?pwd=RmgwTXhLWDZqSUtlV3lKOTNDQ2NWZz09>

Instructor: Prof. Bridget Purcell

Contact: bridget.purcell@rutgers.edu

Office Hours: Thursdays 1pm-2pm, or by appointment. Use this link:

<https://rutgers.zoom.us/j/91731070923?pwd=L0JqZmFJR3Z6MW5NNXpYRHJjc00vZz09>

Co-Instructor: Prof. Hilary Symes

Contact: hilary.symes@gmail.com

Office hours: Mondays 4-5pm, or by appointment. Use this link:

<https://temple.zoom.us/j/95686956372>

“How else can one write but of those things which one doesn’t know, or knows badly? It is precisely there that we imagine having something to say. We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other.”

– Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.xxi

**Course Description:** This course explores the narrative, descriptive, and interpretive conventions of ethnography, with a strong focus on the practice of student writing. Tacking back and forth between reading and writing assignments, we will explore how research experiences are transformed as they are written down—before, during, and after fieldwork.

Each week, we will explore a key theme (person, place, voice, story-telling, self), by discussing both that week’s readings (in the first half of class), and our own writing (in the second half of class). The readings are intended to a) exemplify great ethnographic writing, both classic and experimental, b) explicitly reflect on some aspect of the craft, and c) introduce wider disciplinary debates on the ethics and politics of ethnography. The weekly writing exercises will help you to link our class readings with experiences outside of class. You may either use these writing exercises to develop and reflect on an ongoing writing project (e.g., a thesis), or choose a fresh topic to write on each week. Starting in the second half of the class, you will develop one of your ethnographic vignettes into a polished piece of ethnographic writing.

**Assignments and Grading:** The success of this seminar relies on your commitment to complete all required readings, to participate actively in class discussions, and to creatively engage with course concepts and themes in your written work. Grading will be based on:

* **Attendance and participation** (25%): Your lively, thoughtful participation in class is both encouraged and expected.You should come to each class having completed that week’s reading and writing assignments, and you should be ready to engage your classmates in discussions, workshops, and peer review sessions. *For real, participation is very important in this class!* Any unexcused absence will impact your participation grade.
* **Presentation** (10%): In the first half of class (weeks 2-7), you will give a short presentation analyzing the craft and mechanics of an ethnographic text, unpacking the author’s literary techniques and stylistic choices. Choose from the readings marked \*.
* **Weekly writing exercises, weeks 2-7** (20%). Each week during the first half of the semester, you will complete a series of short writing exercises. The product will be approximately 1-2 double-spaced pages per week, which you will post on Canvas the day before each class (so, every Monday by 5pm during the first half of the semester). We will circulate and workshop your writing the following day, during the second half of class. At the end of week 7 (Thurs 3/3), you will compile these exercises and submit them along with a brief cover letter, and I will assign them a cumulative grade, in lieu of a midterm.
* **Weekly writing exercises, weeks 9-14** (20%): During the second half of the semester, you will develop one of your vignettes into a piece of original ethnographic writing. Each week, we will work on developing some aspect of your project (interviewing, reviewing related literatures, using images and videos, etc.) The “deliverables” will vary, from outlines to short videos to annotated bibliographies. You will post these on Canvas the day before each class (so, every Monday by 5pm during the second half of the semester). We will workshop your exercises the following day, during the second half of class.
* **Final paper** (25%) The final paper is a piece of original ethnographic writing, which should reflect the work you’ve done throughout the semester. We will discuss this assignment in detail, beginning in week 8. It should be 7-10 pages double spaced. Due Thursday, May 5 at 11:59pm.

**Course Materials:** You must have a hard copy of the following required book. All other readings can be found on Canvas, under Resources.

* Narayan, Kirin. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Week 1 (1/18)

**Writing Together**

Narayan, Kirin. 2012. Preface to *Alive in the Writing.*

Behar, Ruth. 2007. “Ethnography in a Time of Blurred Genres.” 32(2), pp. 145-155.

Workshop: Freewriting

Week 2 (1/25)

**Description**

\*Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. “After Objectivism.” *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. pp. 46-62.

Emerson, R.M., R.I. Fretz, and L.L. Shaw. 1995. “Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research” pp. 1-10.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. “Thick Description.” Selections.

Workshop: Observe a social process or event, and write a short description.

Week 3 (2/1)

**Story-telling**

Narayan, Kirin. 2012. Chapter 1 in *Alive in the Writing.*

\*Geertz, Clifford. 1972. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” *Daedalus* 101(1), pp. 1-7.

\*Ralph, Laurence. 2015. “Becoming Aggrieved: An Alternative Framework of Care in Black Chicago.” *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Sciences* 1(2), pp. 31-41.

Workshop: Narrate a scene or event with dramatic potential.

Week 4 (2/8)

**Place**

Narayan, Kirin. 2012. Chapter 2 in *Alive in the Writing.*

Raffles, Hugh. 2002. “Intimate Knowledge.” UNESCO/Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 325-335.

\*Stewart, Kathleen. 1997. “An Occupied Place.” *Senses of Place*. Eds. Stephen Feld and Keith Basso. School of American Research Press, pp. 137-166.

Workshop: Describe a place, using all of your senses

Week 5 (2/15)

**Person**

Narayan, Kirin. 2012. Chapter 3 in *Alive in the Writing.*

Fassin, Didier. 2014. “True Life, Real Lives: Revisiting the Boundaries Between Ethnography and Fiction.” *American Ethnologist* 41(4), pp. 40-55.

\*Garcia, Angela. 2008. “The Elegiac Addict: History, Chronicity, and the Melancholic Subject.” *Cultural Anthropology* 23(4), pp. 718-746.

Workshop: Introduce a person, in a scene or through a portrait.

Week 6 (2/22)

**Voice**

Narayan, Kirin. 2012. Chapter 4 in *Alive in the Writing.*

\*Alexievich, Svetlana. 2006. *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. Selections.

Biehl, João. 2005. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. Selections.

Workshop: Present a dialogue, with attention to the textures, tones, and cadences of voice.

Week 7 (3/1)

**Self**

Narayan, Kirin. 2012. Chapter 5 in *Alive in the Writing.*

\*Hurston, Zora Neale. 1935. *Mules and Men*. Harper & Row. Selections.

\*Walley, Christine J. 2010. “De-industrializing Chicago: A Daughter’s Story” in *The Insecure American*. pp 113-139.

Workshop: Narrate a moment of revelation or humiliation that shifted your perspective.

Due this week: your compiled exercises (weeks 1-7) along with a cover letter (due Thurs 3/3)

Week 8 (3/8)

**Taking Stock, Looking Ahead**

This week, we’ll meet in smaller groups (3 students per group) to reflect on & discuss your body of writing over the past 7 weeks, identifying patterns, strengths, and areas for improvement. You will also begin considering which exercise to develop for your final paper.

**\*\*Spring Break\*\***

Week 9 (3/22)

**Theorizing**

Narayan, Kirin, *Alive in the Writing*. Revisit Chapter 1, and this time respond to the *second* prompt on p. 22.

Kelley, Robin D.G. 1994. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class,* pp. 1-13.

Workshop: Choose the vignette that you would like to develop for your final project. Select the three most important “background ideas” or theories that it expresses.

Week 10 (3/29)

**Interviewing 1**

Briggs, Charles. 1983. “Questions for the Ethnographer: A Critical Examination of the Role of the Interview in Fieldwork.” pp. 233-261.

Workshop: Write a set of interview questions for someone connected with your final project.

Week 11 (4/5)

**Interviewing 2**

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater. “Researching People: The Collaborative Listener” in *Fieldworking*. pp 219-270.

Jesse Thorne and Ira Glass, 2017. “On Structuring Stories, Asking Hard Questions.” On *The Turnaround* podcast (Listen here: https://www.cjr.org/turnaround)

Studs Terkel and Michael Lenehan. 2008. “Translating from Speech to Prose.” (recommended)

Workshop: Interview someone connected with your project. Transcribe a 5-10 minute segment of the conversation.

Week 12 (4/12)

**Sensing**

Nakamura, Karen. 2013. “Making Sense of Sensory Ethnography” p. 132-135

Pink, Sarah. 2015. Ch 2 in *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, pp. 1-24 (skim & use as a resource)

+ Peruse a selection of projects from the Sensory Ethnography Lab at <https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/> (*Threatened Soundscapes in Mongolia; Sweetgrass; People’s Park; Leviathan*).

Workshop: Create a multi-sensory vignette, in any format

Week 13 (4/19)

**Analyzing**

Gullion, Jessica Smartt. 2016. “Integrating the Literature,” pp. 113-115.

Belcher, Wendy. 2009. “Reviewing the Related Literatures.” pp. 139-168.

+ 2-3 scholarly articles/chapters related to your project

Workshop: Annotated bibliography & in-class mini-presentation

Week 14 (4/26)

**Imaging**

Hamdy, Sherine and Coleman Nye. 2017. *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution* (all graphic novel sections).

Phillipe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg, 2009. *Righteous Dopefiend*. Introduction (especially discussion of photography p. 12-15, & explore how they use pictures throughout the book.

Pink, Sarah. 2008. “Walking with Video.” *Visual Studies*, pp. 240-252.

Wilson, John, 2020. “How to Cover Your Furniture.” *How To with John Wilson*, S1 E4. HBO.

Workshop: Pictures, still and moving

Alternative (substitute) unit, if helpful/needed

**(Re)structuring**

McPhee, John. 2013. “Structure: Beyond the Picnic-table Crisis.” *The New Yorker*, pp 1-21.

Belcher, Wendy. 2009. “Advancing Your Argument” and “Strengthening Your Structure,” pp.

67-96, 171-186.

Workshop: Visualize the structure of your final paper, both as an outline and as a map

**Appendix A**

Weekly Schedule

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Mon** | **Tue** | **Weds** | **Thurs** | **Fri** | **Sat** | **Sun** |
| -reading, writing-  **4-5pm**  hs office hours  **5:00pm**  weekly exercise due | **3:50pm-6:50pm**  class meets | **2-3pm**  bp office hours | **12 pm**  bp sends weekly email | -reading, writing- | -reading, writing- | -reading, writing- |

**Appendix B**

Learning Goals

**SAS Core Curriculum Learning Goals**

* Communicate complex ideas effectively, in standard written English, to a general audience, and respond effectively to editorial feedback from peers, instructors, and/or supervisors through successive drafts & revision. [[WCr]](http://sasundergrad.rutgers.edu/academics/requirements/core/cognitive-skills-and-processes-writing-and-communication#WCr)
* Communicate effectively in modes appropriate to a discipline or area of inquiry; evaluate and critically assess sources and use the conventions of attribution and citation correctly; and analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights. [[WCd]](http://sasundergrad.rutgers.edu/academics/requirements/core/cognitive-skills-and-processes-writing-and-communication#WCd)

**Departmental Learning Goals**

* Identify, explain, and historically contextualize the primary objectives, fundamental concepts, modes of analysis, and central questions in the major field and demonstrate proficiency in the use of this knowledge
* Demonstrate proficiency in the use of critical thinking skills
* Express knowledge and proficiency in writing about central issues in the major field.
* Express knowledge and proficiency in speaking about central issues in the major field.

Appendix C

**Additional Course Policies**

**Accommodations:** Students seeking accommodations should consult the Office of Disability Services at <http://disabilityservices.rutgers.edu>, dsoffice@rci.rutgers.edu, or (848) 445-6800. You should do this as soon as possible, but definitely before assignments are due. Students who suspect they may have an undiagnosed learning disability or other disability may visit the Office of Disability Services for assessment and guidance.

**Absence reporting:** If you should need to miss class for any reason, please let me know prior to the class meeting. This is a courtesy, but it does not excuse the absence. In some circumstances (religious observance, serious illness, certain athletic events), your absence may be formally excused, given appropriate documentation.

**Academic Integrity:** Please, familiarize yourself with the principles and policies of academic integrity. <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>. If you have questions, ask me. I cannot tolerate plagiarism or intellectual dishonesty.