

Writing Ethnography

Anthropology 540 (16:070:540) Spring 2021

Thursdays 2:15-5:15pm
Asynchronous remote

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Course description

The ethnographic author is under closer scrutiny than ever before. She writes about culture in a field increasingly saturated with explicit power, criticism, and resistance. Old certainties – centered on the credibility of European and North American authors – are melting away. The course addresses you, the students, as current and future authors. I hope to equip you to navigate both the politics and practices of crafting ethnographic text. Regarding the former, we will examine authority, reflexivity, and fiction. Regarding the latter, we will confront squarely writer's block, English grammar, and minutiae of style. Ultimately, the course offers a space of experimentation, where junior ethnographers will consider writing – in its humane and mechanical aspects and as a lifelong calling.

Reading

Most of the reading is available as downloadable PDFs on the Canvas site for this course. Once you register, you will gain access to the site. Copyright restrictions do not allow me to upload PDFs of the books below. You will have to purchase them or check them out from a library. (Unfortunately, Rutgers' library reserves are not operating for hard copies during the pandemic.) For purchases, I recommend the used book known as Advanced Book Exchange. In parentheses, you will find the prices at the Advanced Book Exchange as of November 2020.

- Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. (\$10)
- Bejarano, Carolina Alonso, et al. 2019. *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (\$25 from publisher).
- Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press (\$4).
- Graeber, David. 2018. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. New York: Simon and Schuster. (\$13)
- Holding, Ian. 2005. *Unfeeling*. London: Simon and Schuster (\$4).
- Livingston, Julie. 2019. *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (\$23)
- Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (\$17)

Presentation

Each student will take charge of a week of the course. He or she will be responsible for contributing thematic questions and summaries and critiques of some or all of the recommended reading.

Short writing assignments

Students will submit five short pieces in the course of the semester. The class will determine the format of these assignments beforehand. Possibilities range from essays of one to five paragraphs, analytic or descriptive texts, excluding the passive voice partially or entirely.

Final paper

By 4 May, each student will submit a 15-20 page paper written along the lines of one of the short writing assignments. Prior to that deadline, each student will circulate an electronic copy to the class by 26 April. In pairs, students will comment on each other's paper and engage in general discussion of the papers at the class meeting on 29 April.

Grading

The grade rests on (1) in- class participation, (2) the presentation of reading material during one of the seminars, (3) effort and improvement in the short writing assignments, (4) the presentation of another student's draft final paper at the end of the course, and (5) the student's own final paper, with attention to effort and improvement in writing.

Auditing

Auditors must do all the work for the course, with the exception of the final paper and the presentation.

Syllabus

Week 1 (21 January): introduction

Week 2 (28 January): Ethnography as writing

Clifford, James. 1986. "Introduction: partial truths." In James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 1-26.

Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Introduction.

Part 1: Ways to be a writer

Week 3 (4 February): The author

- Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Chapter on Malinowski.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Pp. 1-25.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1989[1967]. *A Diary in the Strictest Sense of the Term*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. With two introductions by Raymond First. Pp. xi-xxxii, 1-54, 258-98. **Ordered from lib. 11 Nov**
- Crapanzano, Vincent. 2015. *Recapitulations*. New York: Other Press. Chapter 13 (pp. 265-78). **Book ordered from ILL, 11 Nov**
- Crapanzano, Vincent. 1985. *Waiting: the Whites of South Africa*. New York: Vintage. Introduction (pp. xiii-xxii).

First short writing assignment due: description of an encounter.

Week 4 (11 February): Books that own informants

- Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Chapter 3.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1940. *The Nuer: a Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1 (35 pp). Scan at office
- Maybury-Lewis, David ??
- Turnbull, Collin. **Ordered from ABE, 17 Nov**
- Joan Didion?? *The White Album* **Ordered from ABE, 17 Nov**
- Certain places seem to exist mainly because someone has written about them. Kilimanjaro belongs to Ernest Hemingway.
—Joan Didion, *The White Album* (1979:146)

Week 5 (18 February): Informants who own books

- Makereti. 1986[1938]. *The Old-Time Maori*. Auckland, New Zealand: New Women's Press. Pp. v-xi, xv, 19-59. **Not in library. Scan my copy**
- Bejarano, Carolina Alonso, et al. 2019. *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Whole book (148pp).

Week 6 (25 February): Writing with and against power (colonialism)

- Gluckman, Max. 1955[1965]. *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. Oxford, UK: Basil. Chapter 6 (pp. 137-65).
- Audra Simpson. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Chapters 1,2,4,5,6, Conclusion (160pp).

Second short writing assignment due: description of an encounter in a context of power.

Week 7 (4 March): Writing with and against power (capitalism)

- Saboo, Kartikeya. 2020. "Glory: public life, political expression, and the uses of the black body for racial capitalism." Unpublished ms. **He will send me on 18 Dec**
- Graeber, David. 2018. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Preface, Chapter 1-3 (100pp).
- Hughes, David McDermott. 2017. *Energy without Conscience: Oil, Climate Change, and Complicity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Introduction and Chapter 3 (53pp)
- Smith, Jessica. 2019. "Boom to bust, ashes to (coal) dust: the contested ethics of energy exchanges in a declining US coal market." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 25(1):91-107.

Part 2: Forms of Writing

Week 8 (11 March): Giving voice

- Malkki, Liisa. 1995. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 1-104. – **shorten assignment and scan. Ordered from library, 11 Nov**
- Brown, Karen McCarthy. 1991. *Mama Lola: a Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Preface, Introduction, Chapter 1 (pp. 1-33).
- Watts, Laura. 2018. *Energy at the End of the World: an Orkney Islands Saga*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 1-26,189-94, 287-99. **Ordered from library, 11 Nov**

Third short writing assignment due: relation of an event in someone else's life.

Spring break

Week 9 (25 March): Thing-centered stories

- Livingston, Julie. 2019. *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Whole book (128pp).
- Raffles, Hugh. 2010. *Insectopedia*. New York: Vintage. Pp. 267-297.

Week 10 (1 April): Oral history and vernacular

- Hurston, Zora Neale. 1963[1935]. *Mules and Men*. New York: HarperCollins. Chapter 1-5 (90pp). **Ordered from EZ Borrow, 11 Nov**
- Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. Preface, Chapters 1,2,4, Epilogue book (110pp).

Fourth short writing assignment due: a folk story related and interpreted.

Week 11 (8 April): The assisted autobiography

Mintz, Sidney. 1960. *Worker in the Cane: a Puerto Rican Life History*. New York: W.W. Norton. Chapters 1-3 (35pp). **Ordered from library, 11 Nov**

Kopenawa, Davi and Bruce Albert. 2013. *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Trans. by Nicholas Elliott and Alison Bundy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Forward, Setting the Scene, Words Given, Chapters 1,2,16,24, Words of Omana, How this Book was Written, Appendices B and D (approx. 110 pages).

Week 12 (15 April): Memoir and Travelogue

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1974. *Tristes Tropiques*. Trans. by John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Atheneum. Chapters 1,4,8,9,10,16,17,22,25,26,27,29,30,31,37.

Behar, Ruth. 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*. Boston: Beacon. Pp. 34-89.

Elliott, Denielle. 2014. "Truth, shame, complicity, and flirtation: an unconventional, ethnographic (non)fiction." *Anthropology and Humanism* 39(2):145-58.

Fifth short writing assignment due: memoir or travelogue.

Week 13 (22 April): The dark arts of fiction

Hughes, David M. 2010. *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Chapter 5.

Holding, Ian. 2005. *Unfeeling*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Narayan, Kirin. 1999. "Ethnography and fiction: where is the border?" *Anthropology and Humanism*. 24(2):134-47.

-- 2007. "Tools to shape texts: what creative nonfiction can offer ethnography." *Anthropology and Humanism* 32(2):130-44.

Sword, Helen. 2012. *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Chapter 14.

Draft final papers must be circulated by email by Monday 26 April at 10am.

Week 14 (29 April): Paper presentations (We may need to go an extra hour at this class meeting)

Final papers are due on Tuesday 4 May.