

Rutgers University
Department of Anthropology
Spring 2021

Writing Ethnography

01:070:417 (3 credits)
Mon 12:35-3:35pm, via Zoom

Meeting ID: 957 2610 1398
Password: writing

Instructor: Prof. Bridget Purcell
Contact: bridget.purcell@rutgers.edu
Office Hours: Thursdays 1pm-2pm, or by appointment. Use this link:

“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 (20%):** Your lively, thoughtful participation in class is both encouraged and expected. By class time, you should be prepared to discuss your understanding of the readings, to articulate the author's key arguments, and to pose questions on points of particular interest or confusion.
- **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 assignments, 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 evening before each class (so, every Sunday evening during the first half of the semester). It is important that you post your weekly writing exercises on time. I cannot accept late submissions. We will circulate and workshop your writing the following day, during the second half of class. On week 8, you will compile these exercises and submit them along with a brief cover letter, and I will assign them a cumulative grade.
- **Weekly writing assignments, weeks 8-14 (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, engaging with theories, etc.) The "deliverables" will vary, from outlines to short videos to annotated bibliographies. You will post these on Canvas the night before each class (so, every Sunday evening during the second half of the semester). It is important that you post on time. I cannot accept late submissions. We will workshop your assignments the following day, during the second half of class. On week 14, you will compile these exercises and submit them along with a brief cover letter, and I will assign them a cumulative grade.
- **Final paper (30%)** 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 Monday, May 10 at 11:59pm.

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

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

Week 1 (1/25)
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 (2/1)
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 (2/8)
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 (2/15)
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 (2/22)

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 (3/1)

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 (3/8)

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.

****Spring Break****

Week 8 (3/22)

Theorizing

Cerwonka, Allaine and Liisa H. Malkki. 2007. *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*. Selections.

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

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

Week 9 (3/29)

Interviewing 1

Briggs, Charles. 1986. *Learning How to Ask*, selections.

Glass, Ira. 2017. “On Structuring Stories, Asking Hard Questions.” *Columbia Journalism Review*. (Or listen to the podcast interview: <https://www.cjr.org/turnaround>)

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

Week 10 (4/5)

Interviewing 2

Riley, Kathleen. 2021. “Methods; Methodology in Linguistic Anthropology: Interviews; Techniques.” p. 1-7.

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

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

Week 11 (4/12)

Sensing

Pink, Sarah. “The Future of Sensory Anthropology/The Anthropology of the Senses” pp. 331-333.

Taylor, Laurie. 2014. “Sensory Multiculturalism in an East End Market” (28 minutes). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03nt9w0>

+ a project of your choosing from the Sensory Ethnography Lab. <https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/>

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

Week 12 (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 of your choosing.

Workshop: Annotated bibliography

Week 13 (4/26)

Imaging

Taussig, Michael. 2011. *I Swear I Saw This: Drawing in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*. pp. xi-xii, 1-9.

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

How To with John Wilson. HBO 2020.

Workshop: Pictures, still and moving

Week 14 (5/3)

(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
<p>12:35-3:35pm class meets</p>			<p>12 pm bp sends weekly email</p> <p>2-3pm bp office hours</p>	<p>-reading, writing-</p>	<p>-reading, writing-</p>	<p>-reading, writing-</p> <p>11:59pm weekly exercise due</p>

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]
- 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]

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.