

THEORIZING AND WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY

Dr. Fran Mascia-Lees

16:070:540
Wed. 12:35-3:35pm
RAB 305

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“We learn to write ethnographies by reading them” (Rose 1990).

“What does the ethnographer do”? [S]he “writes” (Geertz 1973).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Ethnography—the *sine qua non* of cultural anthropology and the privileged medium of writing and representing the fieldwork experience—has been under close scrutiny since the last few decades of the 20th century when critical approaches exposed hidden assumptions and agendas of the ethnographic project embedded in power relations. Once largely understood as a transparent form of knowledge production resulting from the work of a participant-observer objectively describing a cultural reality, ethnography is more often conceptualized today as an account based on the represented, or evoked, experiences of a fieldworker-self in relationship to others within a given context (see Goodall 2000). In this conception, culture is not seen as external to the anthropologist but as that which is created at the very moment writing is performed, a conceptualization which has had wide-ranging consequences for the discipline. The late 20th century critiques and reformulations of the ethnographic project have produced a large and sophisticated literature that has probed the philosophical, political, epistemological, ethical, and rhetorical issues facing those who choose to study and “write” culture. Drawing on a number of these critical perspectives, this course examines the social, political, cultural and individual contexts in which ethnographic knowledge is produced and consumed. We probe the limits of the validity of ethnographic knowledge through analysis of the restrictions imposed by its fundamental assumptions and irreducible concepts. Emphasis is placed on understanding ethnographies—both old and new—as texts and on the enhancement of students’ skills in reading ethnography closely and critically and writing ethnography with its possibilities and limitations firmly in mind.

We will address a range of theoretical and epistemological such as these:

- What is the nature of ethnographic knowledge production and how are ethnographic texts authorized? How has this changed over time?
- How have unrecognized assumptions and traditions of interpretation shaped anthropologists’ experience and understanding of culture?
- What are the processes that inform the production and consumption of ethnographies?
- What is the relationship of reading to writing in the generation of ethnography and how are interpretive communities formed?
- To what extent does the formal shape of the ethnography express the theoretical framework of the ethnographer and/or the argument that s/he is making in the ethnography?
- What are the interrelationships among theory, fieldwork, writing in the construction of ethnographic texts? To what extent are the formal features and substantive scope of the ethnography shaped by the conditions and methods of fieldwork?
- Who do we surmise to be the intended readers of an ethnographic monograph (e.g., areas specialist readers, general anthropologist readers, other social scientist readers, student readers, action-oriented readers, popular readers, or indigenous readers)? To what extent are the formal features and substantive scope of the ethnography shaped by these intended readerships?
- What is the nature of the interpretive act and how does it operate in the fieldwork encounter and in the description or creation of culture?

- What is the saliency of various forms of ethnographic representation for growing numbers of research projects in anthropology today?
- How do we reflect upon and evaluate our own purpose, intentions, and frames of analysis in reading and writing ethnography?

This course emphasizes the development and enhancement of students' skills in reading, evaluating, critiquing and writing ethnography through the following:

- the close reading and critical evaluation of a range of ethnographies, and a dissection of them as texts, paying attention to such elements as the overall movement of a text, its point of view and authorial voice, the nature of characterizations and content, use of toposes, formal elements of style, and genre.
- reading of some “nuts and bolts” pieces on style and form;
- comparison of ethnography to other forms of cultural representation such as travel writing, film, creative non-fiction, and fiction to bring ethnography as a genre into focus and to explore the possibilities these forms offer the ethnographer for “writing culture”;
- providing assignments in which students model various forms of cultural representation;
- work shopping students' writing to provide them with constructive feedback to use in the process of revising (and re-revising) their work.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Ethnographies:

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Bateson, Gregory. *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View*. Stanford University Press, 1958 (1938).
- Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*, 1996.
- Biehl, João. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. *Nuer Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
- Meyerhoff, Barbara. *Number our Days*. Touchstone, 1980.
- Riles, Annelise. *The Network Inside Out*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Ortner, Sherry. *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Rofel, Lisa. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Stewart, Kathleen. *A Space on the Side of the Road*. Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Tsing, Ana. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Wacquant, Loïc. *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Most of these books are available on-line from one of the big booksellers where you can get them used and therefore cheaper, so I've opted to have you buy your own. All the other reading material is on-line at Sakai.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This seminar will be run as an intensive reading group and as a place for work-shopping your own writing. In the first two weeks each of you will be assigned one article, which you will present to the class. You will also be asked to be the main facilitator of the discussion of the readings twice during the semester, partnered with one of your classmates. Class participation in discussions of the readings and in work-shopping is an important ingredient of your grade (I will discuss the details of work-shopping in class).

After the first two weeks, class time will be broken into two parts: first we will work-shop the writing you have done based on the previous week's discussion; then in the second half of class, we will discuss the

readings for that day, which will provide the basis for your writing experiment for the following week. You will be given two opportunities to revise a piece of writing and the final revision will count as your final writing project. You will be asked to write a one-page commentary (reflection piece) on your revisions and final project, assessing the process which the revised piece has undergone, detailing the choices you've made and drawing on the ideas developed throughout the course from our discussion of the readings.

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

Participation in class discussions and work-shopping	10%
2 Discussion facilitations	20%
2 individual article synopsis/critique	10%
*6 writing "experiments," one mid-course revision, final project	50%
Reflective commentary on final project	10%

***Since students will come to this course with highly variable experiences of writing, and in order to create a non-threatening atmosphere for sharing your writing, your experimental writing (and its revisions) will be graded *only* on your effort and dedication to improving it over the course of the semester, not on the writing itself.**

COURSE OUTLINE

- Week 1: Introduction
- Week 2: *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View*
- Week 3: *Nuer Religion*
- Week 4: *Number our Days*
- Week 5: *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*
- Week 6: *A Space on the Side of the Road*
- Week 7: *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*
- Week 8: *The Network Inside Out*
- Week 9: *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58*
- Week 10: *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*
- Week 11: *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*
- Week 12: *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*
- Week 13: *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture.*
- Week 14: Conclusions

Experiments in Writing:

Workshop: Ethnography and Narrative/Narrative Ethnography
Number our Days and *Veiled Sentiments*

Workshop: Experiential and "Vulnerable" Ethnography
A Space on the Side of the Road and *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*

Workshop: Ethnographies of Global Connections
Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection and *The Network Inside Out*

Workshop: Ethnography by Comparison: Travel Writing and the Entry Narrative
 Levi-Strauss, *C. Tristes Tropiques*.

John L. Stephens, excerpt from *Incidents of Travel in the Yucatan*.

Tony Horwitz. "Love at First Sight" in *Baghdad without a Map*.

Nicole Polier and William Roseberry (1989). "Tristes tropes: post-modern anthropologists encounter the other and discover themselves. *Economy and Society* 18(2): 245 – 264

Mary Louise Pratt, (1986). "Fieldwork in Common Places" in *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, pp. 27-50.

Eric Leeds "For a History of Travel" and "The Mind of the Modern Traveler" in *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*.

Workshop: Ethnography by Comparison: Creative Non-Fiction

Anne Fadiman, (1997). *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.

Alec Wilkinson, (1994). "A Changed Vision of God." *New Yorker* (January 24.):52-68.

Michael Agar, (1995). "Literary Journalism as Ethnography: Exploring the Excluded Middle." In *Representation in Ethnography*, edited by John Van Maanen, pp. 112-129.

Janelle Taylor, (2003). "The Story Catches You and You Fall Down: Tragedy, Ethnography, and Cultural Competence." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 17(2):159-181.

Workshop: Ethnography by Comparison: Fiction and the Short Story

Jhumpa Lahiri, (1999). "Interpreter of Maladies." In *Interpreter of Maladies*, pp. 43-69.

Nathan Englander, (1999). "The Wig." In *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, pp. 81-106.

Gottlieb, Alma and Philip Graham (1994). *Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and a Writer Encounter Africa*.