

# Ethnographic Field Methods Methods II

TIME: T, Th 9:40-11:10  
PLACE: 100 Clough

INSTRUCTOR: Prof. Susan Kus  
OFFICE: 105 Clough  
OFFICE HOURS: M 1-2:30, T, Th 2:30-3:30, or  
by appointment

## COURSE STATEMENT

*...it is in the practice of ethnography that the vitality of anthropology resides.”  
Nancy Scheper-Hughes 1992:222*

Participant-observation and ethnography, as every beginning student of anthropology comes to learn, is the methodological core of anthropology. Yet, participant-observation is a critical qualitative method that should be exercised across all disciplines and professions that address the human condition. This course will help us explore this assertion in practice and in discussion around the seminar table.

This course will focus on the “doing” of ethnography by asking you to respectfully, socially, meaningfully, and sensuously engage with a moment in another’s world. One way to describe ethnography is as a compelling descriptive pause to appreciate another way of being in and giving meaning to the world before one begins sustained and systematic social analysis and theorizing.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

During the course of the semester you will engage in a focused piece of ethnographic research in the Rhodes community or the Memphis community. Several short papers on (1) your proposed project, (2) first impressions in the field, (3) material culture, and (4) interviews with informants will contribute to your final project, the production of a short ethnographic piece in writing and for class presentation. (You are strongly encouraged to consider presenting your ethnographic field project in the Rhodes Undergraduate Research Seminar on April 28<sup>th</sup>). You will also be asked to write several short response essays on assigned readings, including the reading of a “classic” ethnography, during the course of the semester.

Class attendance and class participation are very important if you wish to take an active interest in your education and move along the path to enlightenment. Late papers and assignments will not be accepted except in the case of very extenuating circumstances. In such a case, permission to turn in an assignment late must be obtained from the instructor **before** the assignment due date. Such late submissions carry a grade penalty.

**Failure to adequately complete any assignment or to take any exam will result in a failing grade for the course.** Unexcused absences and/or failure to participate in class can lower

your grade. In the case of a significant number (3 or more) of absences the instructor reserves the right to assign a failing grade for the course. You are asked to self-report on absences. Upon returning to class after an absence, you should sign the attendance notebook with the date of the absence(s) and the reason for the absence.

Incompletes are not normally given in this class. In the rare case where an incomplete may be in order, the student must obtain permission from the instructor and complete all paper work for the Registrar **before** the final day of the course.

## COURSE EVALUATION

- 5%..... IRB application & Project proposal
- 5%..... Situating oneself (first impressions of field situation)
- 10%..... What might sensuously and materially matter?  
(senses, space and material culture)
- 10%..... Expert interview(s) (acknowledging informants)
- 10%..... Mid-term (take-home response paper)
- 5%..... Project abstract and public invitation for class presentation
- 35%..... Final paper, presentation and portfolio  
(presentation 10%, paper and portfolio 25%)
- 10%..... Paper on “Classic ethnography”
- 10%..... Class participation & Final Exam (Advice from the field)

## READINGS

### Texts (to be purchased)

Bohannan, Paul & Dirk van der Elst  
1998 Asking and Listening: Ethnography as Personal Adaptation. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland

Van Maanen, John  
1988 Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography Chicago: University of Chicago

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

### Articles

\*Geertz, Clifford  
1973 “Thick description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in The Interpretation of Cultures, New York: Basic Books, pp. 3-30.

\*Kus, Susan  
1997 “Archaeologist as anthropologist: Much ado about something after all?,” in The Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory, Vol. 4, Nos. 3/4, pp. 199-213.

\*Stoller, Eric

1981 "The Reconstruction of Ethnography," in The Taste of Ethnographic Things, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, pp. 125-141.

\* Lutz, Catherine.

1995 "The gender of theory" (chapter 12), in Women Writing Culture, R. Behar & D. Gordon (eds.). Berkeley: University of California, pp. 249-266.

*\*Selected chapters from*

Spradley, James and David McCurdy

1988 The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland.

*One from among the following*

(1) **Stoller, Eric** "'Gazing' at the Space of Songhay Politics," and "Signs in the Social Order: Riding a Songhay Bush Taxi," in The Taste of Ethnographic Things, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, pp. 56-83..

(2) **Guédon, Marie Françoise** "Dene ways and the ethnographer's culture," in Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters, Young & Goulet (eds.). Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1994, pp. 39-70.

(3) **Basso, Keith** "Wisdom sits in places," in Wisdom Sits in Places, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1996, pp. 105-152.

(4) **Behar, Ruth** "The Vulnerable Observer," in The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, pp. 1-33.

(5) **Sharp, Henry S.** "Experiencing meaning," in Anthropology and Humanism, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1996, pp. 171-186.

(6) **Rosaldo, Renato** "Introduction - Grief and a headhunter's rage," in Culture and Truth, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, pp. 1-21.

*A choice of an ethnographic handbook for review and class discussion*

*An ethnography to be chosen from the following*

Argonauts of the Western Pacific by Bronislaw Malinowski

The Nuer by E.E. Evans-Pritchard

The Naven by Gregory Bateson

The Andaman Islanders by Radcliffe-Brown

The Chrysanthemum and the Sword by Ruth Benedict

The Winnebago tribe by Paul Radin



DATE	THEME	READING
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- Ⓢ Readings are due the date under which they are listed
- Ⓢ Normally the first ½ hour of class will be devoted to discussion of field projects

TH--Jan 15 Introduction to class; Ethnography and Ethnology; Ethics

### CHOOSING A FIELD LOCATION

T—Jan 20	Where to begin? And how?	* Chapter from <u>Cultural Experience</u> ; Part I of <u>Asking and Listening</u>
Th—Jan 22	Discussion of IRB review	* Chapter on “Cultural meaning” from <u>Cultural Experience</u> ; Part II of <u>A &amp; L</u>
T—Jan 27	What to note, what to record, etc.	Parts III and IV of <u>A &amp; L</u>
Th--Jan 29	<b>Proposal for term project due</b> (class discussion of proposals)	

### SITUATING ONSELF

T—Feb 3	Paying attention; “nothing that is human is alien to me”	* Geertz; *Individual article
Th—Feb 5		<u>Thrice Told Tale</u> I and II
T—Feb 10		<u>TTT</u> parts III-IV
Th—Feb 12		<u>TTT</u> part V
T—Feb 17	“A general feel”, <b>Statement of first impressions on field location due</b> (class discussion of papers)	

### MATTER AND SENSES - The pragmatics, philosophy and poetics of our material existence

Th—Feb 19	Material girl(s) (and boy[s]) in a material world	<u>Tales of the Field</u> Preface, 1, 2, 3
T—Feb 24	Midterm take-home handed out	<u>Tales</u> 4,5,6
Th—Feb 26		*Kus
T—Mar 2	<b>Midterm due</b>	
Th—Mar 4	<b>Paper on material culture due</b> <b>Classic ethnography to be chosen by this date</b>	

### RECESS

T—Mar 9  
Th—Mar 11

## CULTURAL INFORMANTS

T—Mar 16	The “real” experts, indigenous anthropologists	*Stoller
<b>BE SURE TO BEGIN PACING YOURSELF ON READING THE CLASSIC ETHNOGRAPHY</b>		
Th—Mar 18	The relationship between fieldwork and theory	*Lutz *individual handbook review
T—Mar 23	Ethics (moral dilemmas)	
Th—Mar 25	<b>Paper on experts due</b>	

## FINAL PROJECTS

T—Mar 30	Bringing project to finalization
Th—Apr 1	INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATION
<b>BE SURE TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS ON READING THE CLASSIC ETHNOGRAPHY</b>	
T—Apr 6	INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATION
Th—Apr 8	<b>EASTER BREAK</b>
T—Apr 13	Final project - presentation
Th—Apr 15	Final project - presentation continued

## CLASSIC ETHNOGRAPHIES

T—Apr 20	Classic ethnography presentations
Th—Apr 22	Classic ethnography – presentations continued
T—Apr 27	Final “preening” for Undergraduate Research Seminar (final ethnography paper due)
W—Apr 28	<b>AWARDS CONVOCATION and Undergraduate Research Seminar</b>
Th—Apr 29	Pulling it together -- final exam take home handed out

**FINAL EXAM -- due 8 P.M. Wednesday May 5<sup>th</sup>**

# Project Guidelines

You will be asked to take an “ethnographic” stance<sup>1</sup> in a cultural moment, in a cultural scene. One way to describe a cultural scene is as a “location,” which can be geographic or symbolically constituted, where participants, through repeated shared activities, come to some level of shared understandings. You will be asked to “delve” into the aesthetico-logic of a cultural scene so as to come to some level of understanding and appreciation of how the scene is constituted materially, behaviorally and meaningfully for its participants. How one goes about such “delving” by observing, listening, participating and learning is an important focus of this qualitative methods course. You will further be asked to “translate” your understanding for an audience that is unfamiliar with the cultural scene, all the while taking into account the burden and the challenges of presuming to speak about another (an assignment of much delicacy, indeed.) In this course, you are not being asked to impose formal theory from the top down on your data and experience. If theory is to enter your ethnographic project, it should emerge from the ground up. Consider the following quote from Keith Basso as a description of the challenge before you in this ethnographic methods course:

*Heaven, then, in a few grains of carefully inspected sand....*

*Mulling over imperfect field notes, sorting through conflicting intuitions, and beset by a host of unanswered questions, the ethnographer must somehow fashion a written account that adequately conveys his or her understanding of other peoples’ understandings. ...my own preference is for chronological narratives that move from interpretations of experience raw to those of experience digested, from moments of anxious puzzlement (“What the devil is going on her?”) to subsequent ones of cautious insight (“I think perhaps I see.”) Because that, more often than not, is how ethnographic fieldwork actually unfolds. It is a discomfiting business in which loose ends abound and little is ever certain. But with ample time, a dollop of patience, and steady guidance from interested native instructors, one does make measurable progress. To argue otherwise...is to dismiss ethnography as a valid source of cultural knowledge.... As Isaiah Berlin remarked somewhere, it is better to write of things one believes one knows something about than to anguish in high despair over the manifold difficulties of knowing things at all. And better as well, having taken the plunge, to allow oneself to enjoy it. Doing ethnography can also be a great deal of fun, and disguising the fact on paper, as though it were something to be ashamed of, is less than totally honest.... In crafting one’s prose, as in going about one’s fieldwork, it is always permissible—and sometimes highly informative—to smile and even to laugh.*

*It is permissible, too, to be pleased—and sometimes downright impressed—with things one happens to learn. From time to time, when luck is on their side, ethnographers stumble onto culturally given ideas whose striking novelty and evident scope seem to cry out for thoughtful consideration beyond their accustomed boundaries. Making these ideas available in perusable form is a worthy endeavor....<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> What constitutes an “ethnographic stance” will be the subject of a large number of our class discussions.

<sup>2</sup> Wisdom Sits in Places, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico, 2002, pp. 110-111.

Your participation in this semester long course will come to fruition in a 12-15 page ethnographic project that will include both text and illustrations. You will also be asked to make a formal presentation to the class on your final project. Since the final project will be due before the day of the Undergraduate Research Seminar, you should consider a second presentation (oral or poster) of your project in that setting.

A project proposal and several additional short papers during the semester will contribute to the production of your final ethnographic project.

## GETTING STARTED

You will need to choose a cultural scene either in the Rhodes community or the Memphis community that will be the focus of your ethnographic project and the site of your fieldwork. The project should be something that you are interested in and it should be doable in a semester. Examples of possible field sites include: barber shop or beauty shop, animal shelter, dance studio, hobby shop, florist, restaurant, emergency room, small shop, coffee shop, bookstore, health food store, funeral home, recording studio, theatre group, bar/restaurant, radio station, Latino Connection, neighborhood group, day care center, a group on campus with whom you have no experience (e.g., physics majors, math majors, McCoy Theatre). These are only examples; they are not the limits of your choice for fieldwork. (Last year's ethnographies included work with midwives, an independent bookstore, Huey's, a yarn store and a teachers' lounge.)

You will need permission from the individuals that you will be observing and interacting with to carry out the project, as well as clearance form the Rhodes Internal Review Board on non-medical research involving human subjects.

## "KEEPING IT TOGETHER"

Consideration should be given to how to record and organize the data from your fieldwork. Minimally one should keep a field notebook and a journal. We will further discuss how one should organize a portfolio that will constitute not only the basic data from which you will create your final project but also as a record of your work that will be available for periodic review and final grading.

You will write 4 preliminary papers previous to your final project. While these papers will follow a temporal sequence in their due dates, it is important to recognize the artificiality of this sequencing. Ethnographic field work, itself, cannot always be forced into a schedule convenient to the ethnographer. In particular, the data collection for the last 3 papers should take place simultaneously and continuously throughout the semester.

Below you will find initial guidelines for the 4 papers. Further details and discussion of these assignments will take place in class over the course of the semester.



## PAPER I - PROJECT PROPOSAL

This 3-5 page paper will detail your proposed ethnographic project. Issues that should be addressed in this proposal should include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Defining your field site
- Why you choose this particular cultural scene
- How you will be “positioned” (observer, volunteer, participant, etc.) within the cultural scene you have chosen to investigate.
- Time budget for the project
- How to reciprocate for peoples’ time and cooperation in your study
- Ethical implications of your study and its methodology

## PAPER II - SITUATING ONESELF

This 4-6 page paper will focus on (1) your first impressions in the field (of people, place, rhythms, language, sensorial stimuli, etc.) (2) specifics of how you “situated” yourself in the cultural scene you are investigating, (3) developing a theme that will serve as an organizing focus to your study, and (4) unforeseen questions, obstacles, issues, etc. that have come to your attention.

## PAPER III - MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE SENSES

This 5-8 page paper will specifically focus on the “material” and “sensuous” aspects of the cultural scene you are observing and in which you are participating. You will discuss how the materials and experiences of place, space, adornment, touch, taste, smell, sound, sight, rhythm, etc. constitute the cultural scene and constitute experience and meaning in the cultural scene. You will also face the challenge of how to present these “materials” in both writing and “illustration” (e.g., mapping, diagramming, sketching, recording, photographing, etc.)

## PAPER IV - TALKING TO THE “EXPERTS”

This 5-7 page paper will focus on an expert(s) interview. It will explore the nature of social relations in a field situation, the importance of “informants” to fieldwork, and the challenges (e.g., to tape or not to tape, degree of structuring and formality) of interviewing in the field.

## FINAL PROJECT REPORT

In the final project report of 12-15 pages you will present your findings. Two challenges that will face you are (1) what to present and (2) how to present it. Further discussion of this assignment will take place over the course of the semester.

