Ethnography as Practice and Genre

ANTH 2841
Fall 2019

Tuesdays 9:45-11:45 am
Peabody 12

What is ethnography, as a mode of witnessing, a method of research, a form of storytelling? How is it distinct from other ways of producing knowledge about human experience? How do ethnographers understand and engage with the ethics and politics of fieldwork and writing? This seminar raises these and other questions underlying the practice and genre of ethnography. It delves into the issues of participation, power, and perspective; the nature of evidence; the reliability of representation; the relation between description and interpretation and between narrative and theory; and the role of different viewpoints and of the author’s voice. Through close reading and discussion of selected texts, the course examines ethnography’s epistemology, ethics, politics, and poetics. Experience in ethnographic research is not required in order to enroll; however, students who have previously conducted fieldwork, even if limited in scope, and are preparing on doing it again in the future will benefit from this seminar the most.

This course draws inspiration from and builds on the legacy of Mary Steedly, a professor of anthropology at Harvard (1990-2018), who taught an undergraduate seminar on ethnography as both a way of studying human communities and a way of writing about them.

Required books (in the order in which they are assigned):


The books are available for purchase at the Harvard COOP and have been placed on reserve at the Tozzer Library. Books marked with a star symbol (*) are available online through HOLLIS. All shorter readings are accessible through the course website on Canvas.

**Assignments and Grading:**

**Attendance**

Attendance is mandatory with the exception of absence for reasons of illness, religious holiday or official university business. To apply for the absence, please email me at least 2 hours before class begins, documenting the reason for the absence to the best of your ability. If you miss class, you are responsible to contact a classmate to obtain notes on the materials covered. If you have two unexcused absences, your final grade will be reduced a full letter (A to B, A- to B-, etc).

Final grades will be assigned based on the following assignments:

- Active Participation: 20%
- Weekly Reviews: 20%
- Leading Class Discussion: 20%
- Two Written Assignments: 40%

**Active Participation:** This is a discussion-based class. Careful preparation for each of the seminars and informed contribution is expected. Always bring an electronic or print copy of that day’s readings, your reading notes, and your response papers (see below) to class. Come to the seminar ready to share your reflections and critique, raise questions, and engage graciously in a conversation with your peers.

**Weekly Reviews:** These 2-page papers give you an opportunity to react to and reflect on the assigned readings. It is expected that each of you will develop your own preferred style for writing these short, informal review essays. For example, you can summarize and unpack the main arguments, or you can select one or a few quotes (or a short paragraph) that draws your attention, then analyze them, either on their own terms or by comparing them to other readings covered in this class that address similar issues. Beginning with the second week of the course, response papers should be submitted via Canvas by 2pm on the Monday preceding Tuesday’s class.

**Leading Class Discussion:** Each week two students will initiate discussion by raising a set of issues and questions related to the readings. Students will briefly introduce some of the main points of the readings assigned for that day and pose some questions for class discussion. Then, they will contribute to the discussion by raising new questions and critical points. A sign-up sheet will be circulated at the beginning of the second class (September 10).
Written Assignments: For the first written assignment, select two ethnographies (one of them must have been published during the last decade; the other can be as old or as new as you please) and write a 5-7-page double-spaced essay in which you critically analyze them through the lens of a question or an issue discussed during the first half of the semester (weeks 2-7); the first essay is due by 5pm on Wednesday, October 16. For the second written assignment, choose another issue we have grappled with in this course (it must be different from the one you selected for the first assignment) and write a synthetic essay of 10-12 pages that examines it through references to a variety of readings discussed throughout the semester; the second essay is due by 5pm on Wednesday, December 11. Further details for both written assignments will be provided in class at least two weeks before each deadline.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: September 3  
Course Introduction

Week 2: September 10  
Ethnographic Inquiry: History, Epistemology, Politics (1)


Week 3: September 17  
Ethnographic Inquiry: History, Epistemology, Politics (2)


**Week 4: September 24**

**In the Field: Subjectivity, Positionality, Violence**


Berry, Maya, Claudia Chávez Argüelles, Shanya Cordis, Sarah Ihmoud, and Elizabeth Velásquez Estrada. 2017. “Toward a Fugitive Anthropology: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field.” *Cultural Anthropology* 32: 537-565.

**Week 5: October 1**

**Asymmetries of Power**


**Week 6: October 8**

**Event, Memory, Narrative**


**Week 7: October 15**  
**Ethnography and Theory**


**Week 8: October 22**  
**Collective Authorship**


*Discussion with Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer (via Skype)*

**Week 9: October 29**  
**Ethnographer as Storyteller**


**Week 10: November 5**

**Ethnography and Poetry**


**Week 11: November 12**

**Ethnography of Entanglements**


**Week 12: November 19**

**Ethnographic Refusal**


**Week 13: November 26**

**Ethnographic Lettering**


**Week 14: December 3**

**On Writing**