

## Contemporary Ethnographies

ANTH 440, Spring 2013  
Mondays, 5:30-8:00 p.m., Hurst 10

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Office Hours: Mondays, 8:00-9:00 p.m. in Hurst 10;  
Wednesdays, 2:45-5:45 p.m. in Hamilton 311; and by appointment

This seminar will explore the art, craft, history, and politics of ethnography. Fundamentally, the course will be a space for each seminar participant to come to a personal understanding of what ethnography is, what it has been, and what it can be. For my part, I believe much of ethnography's power lies in its ability to sensitively portray some of the complexity of human lives, including both people's lived experience and the political, economic, social, and historical contexts shaping people's lives. I believe ethnography's power also stems from its ability to engage readers both emotionally and intellectually, building understanding about other human beings and provoking new ways of seeing the world. In this power, I believe that ethnography has tremendous—though often unrealized—potential as a tool for social change. At the same time, the research and writing of ethnography raise serious ethical questions to which we will pay careful attention.

Throughout the semester, we will dedicate considerable attention to ethnography as a form of writing and a mode of representing one group of human beings to another group of human beings. We will compare how ethnography has been practiced across different disciplines (anthropology, sociology, and others), and we will compare it to other forms of writing, expression, and knowledge production, including journalism, creative/literary/narrative nonfiction, fiction, documentary film, radio, photography, poetry, and more. Because I believe that the best way to learn about and understand ethnography is to do ethnography, each seminar participant will conduct and write a mini-ethnography over the course of the semester.

Structurally, the class will be a discussion-based seminar. As such, and as an upper-level undergraduate course, the course assumes continually active and thoughtful participation from every participant. The classroom will be a space for passionate, engaged discussion. Everyone will be encouraged to express views freely and to dissent with others, including me, while recognizing the responsibility to respect others' right to express themselves freely. Beginning with the syllabus and throughout the semester, seminar participants will have opportunities to shape the direction of the class, choose subjects of discussion, and improve the course design through regular feedback.

### **PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE**

Careful and thoughtful reading and active participation in class, in addition to written assignments, are the most important elements of this course. I expect advance notice for any classes you will miss, just as I will inform you if I must miss any classes.

Throughout the semester, I will send emails to supplement and clarify class discussions and, occasionally, to modify reading or other assignments. I consider these emails to be an important part of the course and required reading.

If you send me an email and do not get a response within a few days, I apologize in advance. My delay is likely because I have gotten overwhelmed by the large quantity of email that I get on a daily basis. If the issue is pressing, call me or talk to me in class.

*Because this class stresses active participation in class discussions and respect for all course participants, computers, mobile phones, and other personal electronic devices may **never** be used in the classroom. If there is a good reason to make an exception to this rule (e.g., a learning or disability issue requires such use), please come speak to me. Especially in a class dedicated to the careful and detailed study of ethnographic writing, I **do not** encourage the use of e-readers. They may, however, be used in the seminar only if they are used to examine course readings and for no other purposes. If an e-reader is used for other purposes, it will no longer be permitted in the classroom. Thanks for your understanding and assistance.*

### **WEEKLY CRITICAL REACTION PAPERS**

Each week (*except when another writing assignment is due*), I expect you to submit a 1-2-page double-spaced “critical reaction” paper in response to the assigned readings for the week. The critical reaction must be submitted typed and on paper (i.e., not by email) during class. Your reaction should offer thoughtful reflection about each week’s readings. While summarizing the main points of each reading will be helpful, go beyond summary to offer your own original thoughts about the texts. These thoughts should include commentary about both content and writing style, and often about the ethical issues each ethnography raises.

In this way, the reactions should help you to work through and organize your thinking about the readings and clarify the key issues you want to discuss each week. The papers can include your ideas, critiques, questions, challenges, inspirations, uncertainties, connections, comparisons, concerns, applications, implications, and other thoughts. A good place to start would be to answer the questions suggested at the end of this syllabus in “Suggestions for Academic Reading.” I will not grade the reactions, but thoughtful, focused papers will indicate effort and engagement in the course and improve my overall assessment.

The reaction is also an opportunity to ask any general questions about the class, anthropology, and things that are confusing in the course. You can also use it to give me feedback of any kind about the seminar, my teaching, ways I could improve the course, and general frustrations or inspiration. I also welcome emailed questions (best if the question is pressing; call if it is urgent) as well as anonymous questions or comments placed in my mailbox in the Anthropology Department on the ground floor of the Hamilton building.

### **CLASS FACILITATION**

Once during the semester, you and another seminar participant will be asked to serve as facilitators for part of a day’s discussion. The aim is to stimulate discussion with one provocative

question or argument that addresses the key substance of the week's readings and what you and your partner think we should be discussing. Groups will have a maximum of 5-7 minutes to present materials aimed at spurring constructive conversation. Most likely, you will want to frame the week's readings in some way, but do not simply regurgitate what everyone will have read already. Be sure to offer *one* critical question or argument about the readings and topics at hand that provides a lively springboard for discussion and critical thinking. Think carefully about how best to engage the class creatively and don't be afraid to take risks. *Do not*, however, simply summarize the material, offer a perfunctory powerpoint, tell us what you liked and didn't like, provide biographical material about authors, substitute a long video clip for a thoughtful presentation, or read a long list of questions. Generally, groups will facilitate discussion during the second half of each class period. If you have any technological requirements, you should inform me before the start of class to allow sufficient time for set-up.

### ASSIGNMENTS SUMMARIZED

- 1) Class facilitation (once during semester)
- 2) Informal meeting with me (by February 4)
- 3) 1-paragraph Ethnographic Project Topic Description describing research site and research focus (February 18)
- 4) Approx. 5-paragraph Ethnographic Project Proposal describing in about one paragraph each: research site(s); focus of research and central research question asked; methods to be used; ethical concerns; and project significance (March 4)
- 5) 6-8 Page Book Review of an Assigned Ethnography briefly summarizing the book and offering a critical analysis, addressing strengths and weaknesses, of its content and mode of representation (April 1)
- 6) 8-minute Ethnographic Project Presentation (April 29, May 6)
- 7) 15-20 Page Ethnographic Project Final Paper and maximum 800-word Summary for Research Participants or Op-ed (May 6)

Anyone interested in working with a non-profit organization off campus and getting a **Community Service-Learning Program add-on credit** should speak with me right away. For more information, see: <http://www.american.edu/ocl/volunteer/CBLR-How-to-Apply-for-CSLP.cfm>

### WRITING REQUIREMENTS

All written assignments must be double spaced, 12-pt. font, with 1-inch margins on all sides, and comply with generally accepted rules of writing, style, and proper academic citation. For guidance, see the American Anthropological Association style guide:

[http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style\\_guide.htm](http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style_guide.htm); the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (see <http://thewritesource.com/mla.htm>); or the *Chicago Manual of Style* (see <http://library.osu.edu/sites/guides/chicagod.php>).

All writing assignments must be turned in on paper (i.e., *not electronically*) at the beginning of the class on which they are due, unless indicated otherwise. If there is a legitimate reason why you must turn in a paper late, you should contact me *more than 24 hours before* the due date to

explain the problem and make other arrangements. For help with your writing beyond the classroom, visit the Writing Center, Battelle-Tompkins 228 (885-2991 for appointments), the Academic Support Center Writing Lab, or feel free to see me.

### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

By registering for this class and at the university, you have acknowledged your awareness of the Academic Integrity Code (<http://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/code.htm> or see the “Student Handbook and Planner”). You are responsible for familiarizing yourself and complying with all its standards of academic conduct, including those related to plagiarism. I take plagiarism and academic dishonesty very seriously, and I am required to report cases to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, whose policy is to fail students for the course. Please read the university's Academic Integrity Code closely, and be sure to ask me if you have any questions.<sup>1</sup>

Special Note: In addition to plagiarizing others, it is possible to plagiarize oneself when using your own previously written material without proper citation. To avoid self-plagiarism and related academic dishonesty, you must cite any and all material that you have written for any purposes other than this class. If you want to use material written for another class in this course, you must ask for advance permission to do so.

### **MY RESPONSIBILITIES**

I pledge to the best of my ability to make this as enriching and exciting an academic experience as possible for everyone; to come prepared to lead engaging class sessions; to create a safe and nurturing academic environment in the classroom that encourages the free exchange of ideas; to remain open to—and encourage—all dissent, critique, suggestions about the class, and other feedback; to adapt the course as appropriate in response to feedback; to meet personally with course participants during my office hours and at other times by appointment or otherwise to discuss any aspect of the course; to read carefully and return all written assignments in a timely fashion; and to be fair in my evaluation and grading.

### **LEARNING AND LIFE RESOURCES**

If you encounter any difficulty this semester for any reason that affects your participation in the course, please don't hesitate to speak with me. In addition to the department's assistance, the university offers a variety of learning and life resources. See:

<https://my.american.edu/content.cfm?load=includes/help.cfm> or the following:

Academic Support Center: 885-3360, MGC 243, [www.american.edu/ocl/asc](http://www.american.edu/ocl/asc).

Counseling Center: 885-3500, MGC 214, [www.american.edu/ocl/counseling](http://www.american.edu/ocl/counseling).

Disability Support Services: 885-3315 (V/TDD), MGC 206, [www.american.edu/ocl/dss](http://www.american.edu/ocl/dss).

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Manson, Academic Affairs Administrator, College of Arts and Sciences, American University, Washington, DC, email communications, January 8, 2008, January 8, 2009.

*If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please notify me in a timely manner with a letter from the Academic Support Center or Disability Support Services so that we can address your needs.*

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender & Ally Resource Center: 885-3347, MGC 201, [www.american.edu/ocl/glbta](http://www.american.edu/ocl/glbta).

International Student and Scholar Services: 885-3340/50, Butler 410, [www.american.edu/ocl/iss](http://www.american.edu/ocl/iss).

Judicial Affairs and Mediation Services: 885-3328, Butler 408, [www.american.edu/ocl/jams](http://www.american.edu/ocl/jams).

Multicultural Affairs: 885-3651, MGC 204, [www.american.edu/ocl/oma](http://www.american.edu/ocl/oma).

New Student Programs: 885-3303/74, Butler 407, [www.american.edu/ocl/orientation](http://www.american.edu/ocl/orientation).

Student Health Center: 885-3380, McCabe Hall 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, [www.american.edu/healthcenter](http://www.american.edu/healthcenter).

### **PRIMARY TEXTS**

All these texts should be available in the campus bookstore, on 2-hour reserve in the library, and at inexpensive prices when purchased (often used) online. All other required readings will be available on Blackboard, on 2-hour reserve in the library, on the internet, or in class.

Duneier, Mitchell. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1999.

Ho, Karen. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.

Gill, Lesley. *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

Gregory, Steven. *The Devil behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Birds: A Novel*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012.

### **CLASS SCHEDULE**

All assignments and readings are due on the date indicated.

#### **Notes for where to find texts**

B=Book

BBc=Blackboard "Course Reserves"

BBo=Blackboard "Other Readings"

**January 14: Introductions and Welcome**

**January 21: NO CLASS, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. HOLIDAY**

**January 28: History, Theory, Classic Works**

Liebow, Elliot. "Men and Jobs." *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro [sic] Streetcorner Men*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. 19-45. BBo

Myerhoff, Barbara. "'So What Do You Want from Us Here?'" *Number Our Days*. New York: Touchstone, 1978. 1-19. BBc

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. Excerpts. BBo

American Anthropological Association. Code of Ethics.  
[http://www.aaanet.org/coe/Code\\_of\\_Ethics.pdf](http://www.aaanet.org/coe/Code_of_Ethics.pdf)

Forte, Max. "How to Protect Yourself from an Anthropologist: A Code of Ethics from the Bottom Up (2.0)." Zero Anthropology, September 21, 2008.  
<http://zeroanthropology.net/2008/09/09/how-to-protect-yourself-from-an-anthropologist-a-code-of-ethics-from-the-bottom-up/>

*Ethnographic Writing Selections PDF*. BBo

Clifford, James. Introduction: Partial Truths. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. 1-26. BBc

Behar, Ruth. Introduction: Out of Exile. *Women Writing Culture*. Ed. Ruth Behar. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. 1-32. BBo

**February 4: Duneier, through Part II**  
**INFORMAL MEETING WITH ME DUE BY THIS DATE**

Ted Conover public reading, SIS, 7-9:30

**February 11: Duneier, Part III-end**

**February 15-17: Lavender Languages Conference**

Attendance required for at least one session, with at least one paragraph added to your critical reaction for February 18 critically analyzing the session(s) attended.

**February 18: Gregory, through chap. 3**  
**ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECT TOPIC DESCRIPTION DUE**

**February 25: Gregory, chaps. 3-end**

**March 4:** Ho, through chap. 3  
**ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECT PROPOSAL DUE**

**March 18:** Ho, chaps. 4-end

**March 25:** Gill, through chap. 5

**April 1:** Gill, chaps. 6-end  
**BOOK REVIEW DUE**

**April 8:** Powers, all

**April 15: Ethnographic Project Research**

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Chaps. 1-2. BBo

**April 22: Ethnographic Project Research**

Farmer, Paul. "On Suffering and Structural Violence: Social and Economic Rights in the Global Era." *Partner to the Poor: A Paul Farmer Reader*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 328-49. BBe

**April 29: Presentations and Discussion**

Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language." 1946. BBo

**May 6: Presentations and Discussion**

**FINAL ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECT PAPER AND SUMMARY/OP-ED DUE IN CLASS**

### **SOME MAJOR SEMINAR OBJECTIVES**

By the end of the semester, my objective is that each of us will be able to:

- Work cooperatively and constructively with other seminar participants, building a rich, thoughtful, and supportive learning environment;
- Define for oneself what ethnography is and can be as a methodology and form of writing;
- Understand some of the important history of ethnography and its major theoretical and methodological debates;
- Read, analyze, and critically discuss ethnographic works;
- Understand and use key ethnographic methods;
- Write a short work of ethnography;
- Speak more effectively in public and more effectively communicate original ideas to others.

**EVALUATION (AND, UNFORTUNATELY, GRADING)**

I expect your full participation in all aspects of class sessions and the completion of all assignments. My evaluation and (what I hope you will find to be) constructive feedback on your work will primarily come in the form of written comments returned to you on your assignments.

Although I wish all our classes could be pass/fail, AU requires me to assign final grades. Therefore, I will assign final grades in accordance with the following distributions and AU guidelines:

Seminar participation, completion of critical reactions, class facilitation, and final project presentation: 50%

Final project paper: 40%

Summary or Op-ed: 10 %

Improvement and effort: Bonus

A: Superior, original, thoughtful work in completion of all course requirements;

B: Very good work in completion of course requirements;

C: Satisfactory work in completion of course requirements;

D: Unsatisfactory or incomplete work in course requirements and/or a failure to meet minimum attendance requirements;

F: Failure to meet minimum course standards for assignments, participation, attendance.<sup>2</sup>

I will assign grades on the final papers in accordance with the following guidelines:

A: Excellent, publishable or near publishable work showing effort and originality well above expectations;

A-: Very strong and thoughtful work showing considerable effort and originality;

B+: Good, fulfilling all the requirements of the assignment, but not going much farther;

B and below: Did not fulfill all the requirements of the assignment and/or showed less effort than expected in the course.

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<sup>2</sup> See "Guideline of a General Education Syllabus," online document, available at <http://www.american.edu/academics/gened/faculty.htm>.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACADEMIC READING

Underlining/highlighting and detailed note-taking are essential parts of reading assigned academic texts. Another useful way to ensure that you read carefully and are well prepared for class (and for academia generally) is to answer most or all of the following questions for each assigned text. I strongly suggest writing out the answers and any other thoughts inspired by a reading. These notes will later help you write papers, prepare for exams, and employ your readings in future classes and other academic work.

### *Suggested Questions to Ask of Each Reading*

- 1) What is(are) the main argument(s) or thesis(es) of the work? What was the author's goal or aim in writing? What was the author trying to accomplish?
- 2) What evidence does the author provide to support the main argument? What research methods did the author employ to collect evidence? What other key authors or theories does the author build upon, advance, and/or critique?
- 3) Are you convinced by the author's argument? Why or why not? How is the text helpful? What, if anything, is missing from the analysis, discussion, or the presentation of data? How is the text problematic, weak, or even dangerous? How could it be strengthened or improved (perhaps linked to the work of others)? Don't just critique! Think critically about how an analysis can be usefully improved and built upon.
- 4) What is the significance of the text—both for academic thought and the larger world? Might it help us understand related issues?
- 5) What questions does the reading raise for you? What other thoughts, ideas, or inspiration? What parallels do you draw with other ideas or writing? Where does the work take your mind? Write down any notes, thoughts, or glimmers, no matter where they might take you. They will likely be helpful later.

**And keep the notes!** They will be incredibly helpful for future papers, other classes, comprehensive exams, dissertations and theses, and teaching (to this day, I use my notes from my college classes).

Many also find that maintaining an organized bibliography using Endnote or another computer software program greatly assists future research and writing.