

Writing Ethnography for Social Change¹

ANTH 640-001, Spring 2011

Mondays, 6:45-9:20 p.m., Battelle-Tompkins 248

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Office Hours: Battelle-Tompkins T-49, Tue 5:30-6:30 pm, Thu 9 am-12 pm, and by appointment

This writing and ethnographic research intensive course will explore the art, craft, and politics of ethnography. I have designed the course with the belief that ethnography has the radical potential to be a force for social change by sensitively portraying the lived experience and context of human lives, by engaging readers emotionally and intellectually, and by building understanding and provoking new ways of seeing the world.

The course will thus be a writing seminar aimed at improving the quality and impact of participants' ethnographic writing and maximizing the potential our writing has to be a tool for social change. We will pursue these aims by conducting ethnographic research, by writing ethnography, and by reading ethnographically-informed works. Over alternating weeks, we will 1) write, analyze, and collaboratively edit short ethnographic writing assignments based on semester-long investigations, and 2) read, analyze, and dissect exemplary ethnographic works that will serve as models for our writing.

The seminar defines *ethnography* broadly, considering texts ranging from the traditional ethnography of anthropology, sociology, and related disciplines, to the work of journalism, creative nonfiction, fiction, film, radio, photography, poetry, and beyond. We will focus on works aimed at nonacademic audiences with an explicit interest in effecting social change.

The course demands a commitment not just to improving one's own writing but also to working collaboratively with the rest of the class to assist one another's writing (and improving one's work in the process). This will require the ability to give and receive constructive criticism and advice in an environment of trust, cooperation, and mutual respect. Active participation in all facets of the seminar (writing, reading, discussion) is assumed.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND WRITING

This course holds that the writing and "doing" of ethnography are inseparable. Course participants will pursue both crafts through a semester-long ethnographic project of your choosing. You will need to conduct ethnographic research in a research site for about five hours per week. The site(s) of your research should be somewhere where you will have regular access (perhaps near your home or work). The project can continue prior research and may be usefully seen as an exploratory project leading toward future thesis, dissertation, or other research.

Throughout the conduct of your project, you will be responsible for protecting the safety of all research participants and abiding by all other ethical standards of anthropology (see the

¹ This course is inspired by and draws on a class taught by Mitchell Duneier at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, entitled, "Seminar in Urban Ethnographic Research," Department of Sociology, Spring 2002.

American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics: <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethicscode.pdf>). Students interested in writing about ethnographic research that they have recently conducted can make special arrangements to use that research as the basis for their writing.

Throughout the semester, we will write four short papers, each of which must be a *maximum* of two double-spaced pages, focused on different skills of ethnographic writing. The assigned books and other assigned ethnographic excerpts will serve as models for these exercises.

Please bring three copies of each paper to class. On the day when the class will discuss your paper (which will happen at least once during the semester), please bring a copy for everyone in class (that includes me). If you need me to make copies for you, you must email your paper at least 24 hours in advance or bring it to my office up to 15 minutes before class starts.

The four papers, as well as an initial one-paragraph assignment and a project proposal, will culminate in a final paper of about ten double-spaced pages (minimum). (Students writing about previously conducted research will need to produce larger finished projects that should be agreed upon early in the semester.)

You will not be able to paste together the previous assignments to complete the final paper, but you will be able to draw upon and incorporate some of your earlier writing in the ten-page paper. I encourage you to pursue publication of the final work (ten pages is about the length of an average popular magazine feature article—3,000 words) and/or to incorporate it into future research and writing (e.g., an academic article, thesis, dissertation, book). This will mean thinking about your longer-term intentions, future venues for the work, and the kind of writing style that will match your intentions as you design the project.

BOOK REVIEW AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

You will also write a 5-7 page (maximum) double-spaced textual analysis of one of the assigned books. The review should briefly summarize the book before discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the textual strategies employed by the author. You should also discuss the relative effectiveness of the book as a tool for social change and how the writing may have influenced the book's impact. Like any good book review (or academic paper), the paper must offer original ideas about the reviewed work.

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; 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/chicagogd.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.

“HOW TO READ” ;)

For each book we read, please identify at least one exemplary passage to share with the class that you believe offers a model for effective ethnographic writing. Be prepared to explain why the passage is effective and the specific writing techniques from which we can learn.

In addition to considering the content of each work, please consider the following questions as you read:

What textual strategies make this work effective and why?

How can the work be a model for our writing? What strategies should we avoid and why?

What methodological strategies make this work effective and why? Which do not?

What textual strategies make this work potentially effective as a tool for social change and why?

What textual strategies limit the work’s potential to effect change and why?

CLASS LEADERSHIP

At least once during the semester, you and other students will be asked to prepare a 5-10 minute presentation aimed at stimulating class discussion with one provocative question or argument that addresses the key substance of the week’s readings. This is, in part, an exercise in pedagogy and presentation skills, so think about how best to creatively engage the class. *Do not* simply summarize the material, tell us what you liked and didn’t like, provide biographical material about authors, substitute a long video clip for a thoughtful presentation, or offer an unfocused list of questions. Craft an engaging, creative, and focused presentation that is a lively springboard for discussion and critical thinking. Don’t be afraid to take risks. You should point to specific passages as part of your presentation, and you may want to offer one passage for the class to analyze in depth. Each member of the group must participate in the presentation. Generally presentations will take place mid-way through each class period. Please allow sufficient time if you have any technological aids that will require setting up.

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.²

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.

Because this class stresses active participation in class discussions, computers and other personal electronic devices may not be used in the classroom unless a learning or disability issue requires such use.

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 to take advantage of. 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.

Counseling Center: 885-3500, MGC 214, www.american.edu/ocl/counseling.

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

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 make arrangements to address your needs.

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

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

Judicial Affairs and Mediation Services: 885-3328, Butler 408, www.american.edu/ocl/jams.

Multicultural Affairs: 885-3651, MGC 204, www.american.edu/ocl/oma.

New Student Programs: 885-3303/74, Butler 407, www.american.edu/ocl/orientation.

Student Health Center: 885-3380, McCabe Hall 1st Floor, www.american.edu/healthcenter.

² Michael Manson, Academic Affairs Administrator, College of Arts and Sciences, American University, Washington, DC, email communications, January 8, 2008, January 8, 2009.

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 all dissent, critique, suggestions about the class, and other feedback; to adapt the course as appropriate in response to student feedback; to meet personally with students 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.

PRIMARY TEXTS

All 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.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Holt Paperbacks, 2002. 978-0805063899 [cheapest paperback edition]

Bourgois, Philippe. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge UP, 2002. 978-0521017114

Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Harper Perennial, 2005. 978-0060838584 [cheapest paperback edition]

Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. 978-0374525644

Kidder, Tracy. *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*. Random House, 2004. 978-0812973013

Jackson, John L. *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. University of Chicago Press, 2005. 978-0226390017

Optional: Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Harper Paperbacks, 2006. 978-0060891541

CLASS SCHEDULE

All assignments and readings are due on the date indicated.

Notes for where to find texts

B=Book

BBe=Blackboard E-reserves

BBx=Blackboard External Links

January 10: Introductions: Ethnography and Social Change

January 17: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday—NO CLASS

**January 24: Histories of Ethnographically-Inclined Writing and Social Change
PARAGRAPH ASSIGNMENT DUE**

“Ethnographic Writing Selections.” BBx

“Writing for Social Change Selections.” BBx

Zinsner, William. “Writing about a Place.” P

January 31: Ethics, Methods, and Writing

Farmer, Paul. “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below.” *In Social Suffering*. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds. Pp. 261-283. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997. BBe

Duneier, Mitchell. “Appendix.” *In Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1999. BBe

D’Andrade, Roy, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. “Objectivity and Militancy: A Debate.” *Current Anthropology* 3, no. 6 (1995): 399-440. BBx

Bourgois, Philippe. “Confronting Anthropological Ethics: Ethnographic Lessons from Central America.” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 1 (1990):43-54. BBx

American Anthropological Association. “Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association.” June 1998. BBx

Orwell, George. “Politics and the English Language,” 1946. BBx

**February 7: Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. B
MEETING WITH DAVID DUE**

1-PARAGRAPH PROJECT PROPOSAL DUE

Describe your semester-long ethnographic project. The description must include your research site(s), the focus of your investigation and central research question, the ways in which you will safeguard your research participants, and any other ethical issues you will have to confront.

**February 14: Participant Observation and Description
2-PAGE PAPER DUE**

February 21: Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. B

**February 28: Writing about People; Editing
2-PAGE PAPER DUE**

March 6-13: SPRING BREAK

March 14: Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. B
Selections from Farmer, Paul. *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*.
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. BBx

**March 21: Dialogue and Quoting
2-PAGE PAPER DUE**

March 28: Kidder, Tracy. *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*. B

**April 4: Capturing Structural Forces and History
2-PAGE PAPER DUE; BOOK REVIEW DUE**

April 11: Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. B

**April 17, 12-4pm, Battelle-Tompkins T-30: SPECIAL DOUBLE-CLASS
John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. B**

Ethnographic Exposé and Ethnographies of Empire [Read one Silverstein and Scheper-Hughes]

Silverstein, Ken. "Their Men in Washington: Undercover with D.C.'s Lobbyists for Hire." *Harper's Magazine*, June 2007: 53-61. BBx

Silverstein, Ken. "Invisible Hands: The Secret World of the Oil Fixer." *Harper's Magazine*, March 2009: 53-61. BBx

Silverstein, Ken. "Shopping for Sweat: The Human Cost of a Two-Dollar T-Shirt." *Harper's Magazine* January 2010: 36-44. BBx

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. "The Ethics of Engaged Ethnography: Applying a Militant Anthropology in Organs-Trafficking Research." *Anthropology Now*, September 2009: 13-14.
BBx

**May 2 (Time and Place TBD): Final Edits, Final Thoughts, Next Steps
DRAFT FINAL PAPER DUE IN CLASS**

May 5, 5 p.m.: FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY MAILBOX

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 critique of your work will primarily come in the form of written comments returned to you on your assignments. Because I am required to assign final grades, I will do so primarily based on class participation, the quality of and energy devoted to assignments, and improvement over the course of the semester. I will assign grades in accordance with the following distributions and AU guidelines:

- 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.³

³ See "Guideline of a General Education Syllabus," online document, available at <http://www.american.edu/academics/gened/faculty.htm>.