

Critical Ethnography/Ethnographies
CA731S.01
Amended for times of COVID-19

Anne Allison
Spring 2020
M 3:05 – 5:35 Friedl #216

Office Hrs: T: 1-3
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Ethnography has long been the method and signature of anthropology as a discipline. As Bronislaw Malinowski put it in the 1920s, ethnography entails capturing the “imponderabilia” of everyday life by “being there”—getting inside the skin, as it were, of a culture, a people, a place. And as Margaret Mead insisted in her own work starting at the same time, anthropology is a form of cultural critique: our study of customs and behavior elsewhere can be used to critique—and change—everyday life “at home.” But how precisely do we practice ethnography today at a moment of transnational migration, mobile lifestyles, consumer citizenship, and deterritorialized subjectivities? And what are the parameters of ethnographic critique when the dynamics of us/them, elsewhere/home are so contested, contradictory, and complex?

These are the issues we address in this class: a critical look at the methodology of ethnography by looking critically at ethnographies. Where are we at in the field of anthropology today in terms of ethnography—as an investigatory method, a writing practice, a social/political critique, a discipline? Is “being there” still a foundational expectation of our work; what precisely is the anthropologist intending to “capture;” and what are the dynamics (and ethics and politics) of the anthropological relationship? When everydayness is one of warfare and terror, for example, and “being there” involves a blogosphere, refugee camp, or court of law, how does one navigate the terrain of positionality, accountability, and intervention? And, how does one write this all up, in what kind of language, with what genres of storytelling, and targeted to what audience(s)?

The course is organized in two parts. The first three weeks are spent reviewing a number of essays written on the ethnographic method. Starting with Malinowski’s iconic statement (in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922) and the introduction to Mead’s classic *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) we read articles by Clifford, Fischer, and Marcus written as part of the *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* wave (1986) of critique (and self-critique) of anthropology, as well as feminist critiques of this (arguably masculinist) critique. In addition, we look at more recent work—by Pandian, Fortun, Ingold, Rabinow, Rees—rethinking the spatial and temporal dimensions of the ethnographic project, what aligns (or differentiates) anthropology from ethnography, the possibility of studying objects beyond/other than humans, and ways to “design” ethnography to diversify what/who/how we study the contemporary/fragmented world of today. For the rest of the semester, we dive into the work of ethnography itself. For six weeks, this will entail reading entire ethnographies, from beginning to end (with some divvying up of chapters). For three weeks, we will shift this up, looking at: journal-length ethnographic articles (from the journal *Cultural Anthropology*), introductions from three ethnographies (whose authors—Josh Reno, Jerry Zee, Gökçe Günel—will lead the discussion), and the work-in-progress alongside her already-published-monograph by an exciting anthropologist (Angela Garcia) who will join us in class.

Throughout, we will be applying the same rubric of questions to each of these ethnographies: What is the object of study (and how it is defined, organized, and mapped out); what strategies and techniques (ethnographic and otherwise) are used to carry it out; what are the theoretical premises, literatures, and arguments; how does the author position herself and others throughout the text (voice); what genre(s) of storytelling and writing are employed; what audience is being targeted; and how does or could the book work as critique (and what kind)? Throughout we will keep returning to the same questions: where is—or could be—ethnography today and how does—or could it—work as critique? So, we will be both critiquing ethnography and thinking of it as critique itself.

TEXTS

- Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism: US Oil in Equatorial Guinea*
- Lisa Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*
- Julie Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable*
- Gabriella Lukács, *Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy*
- Kevin Lewis O'Neill, *Hunted: Predation and Pentecostalism in Guatemala*
- Anand Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times* (also on sakai)
- Caitlin Zaloom, *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost*

articles are posted on our Sakai site

WORKLOAD - amended

Original: Weekly **reflections**, one-two pages, due by classtime on Monday. Total of eight during the semester (at least one during the first two weeks of readings). Papers should be written about the reading being discussed that week. So, for the week we read Livingston, reflection papers that week should be on Livingston. I request hard copies of reflections and timely turn-in.

-Two six to eight-page **critical essays**, each on a specific ethnography. These should be critical analyses honing in on a specific aspect/angle/mode of the ethnographic method employed. No late papers accepted.

-One twelve-fifteen page **paper**. Topic—up to you (could be comparative—comparing two or three different authors/ethnographies or your OWN ethnographic essay, but please run the topic by me.)

Amended:

IDEAL (A): Total of three critical essays, Essay #2 and Essay #3 (on topic of your choosing, to be run by me by zoom chat) to be turned in anytime before the end of the semester. Reflection papers- optional. Class attendance-mandatory.

ALTERNATIVES:

(B): Instead of three short critical essays (one of which you've already done), one more essay, at least ten pages long. Topic—either on topic given you for essay # or one of your own choosing, to be run by me. Reflection papers-optional. Class attendance-mandatory.

(C): Essay # 2, turned in anytime. Instead of a third shorter essay or one long essay, turn in robust reflection papers on all of the remaining readings (so a total of three more). Class attendance-mandatory.

-Class: Mandatory for the final four weeks unless you really really can't make it.

-Grading: Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory for final grade

-Class discussion. Seminar-style as in this will be organic, give-and-take, opinions and positions respectfully exchanged. For the first three weeks, I'll take the lead in running the class. After that, I'll do this in coordination with one of you who will circulate a series of questions/issues to organize discussion—to be posted the night before (Sunday) on our sakai site by 6 pm. These initial remarks/questions will start the class after which we will go into a more seminar-like exchange.

-I'm very accessible and would like this class to be as enjoyable/productive/useful as possible. Please seek me out during office hours (or make an appointment). I also ask that you each come and see me at least two times during the semester—once to discuss your final papers.

SCHEDULE

1/8 (W) introduction

Read (in class): Bronislaw Malinowski, "Introduction: The Subject, Method and Scope of the Inquiry," from

Argonauts Of the Western Pacific

-Margaret Mead, "Introduction," *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western*

Civilization

1/13 The ethnographer and the ethnographic: expedition, fieldwork, story-telling, text

Read:

-James Clifford, "Introduction" from James Clifford & George Marcus, eds, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*

-George Marcus & Michael Fischer, "Ethnography and Interpretive Anthropology," from Marcus & Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*

-Nancy Lutkehaus, "Margaret Mead and the "Rustling-in-the-Wind-in-the-Palm Trees" School of Ethnographic Writing," in *Women Writing Culture*

-Tobias Rees, Chapter 3 "On Fieldwork" – (ONLY pages 70-80) from *After Ethnos*

-Anand Pandian, "Introduction: An Ethnographer among the Anthropologists" and Chapter 1 ("The World at Hand: Between Scientific and Literary Inquiry") from *A Possible Anthropology*

Optional:

-George Stocking, "The Ethnographer's Magic: Fieldwork in British Anthropology from Tylor to Malinowski"

-Ruth Behar, "Introduction: Out of Exile," in Behar & Gordon, eds., *Women Writing Culture*

-Orin Starn, "Introduction," *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*

1/20 Martin Luther King Day – no class

1/27 The (un)timeliness and here/thereness of the field: Rethinking its possibilities

Read:

-Paul Rabinow & George E. Marcus with James D. Faubion and Tobias Rees, "The Anthropology of the Contemporary" in *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*

-Anand Pandian, Chapter 2 ("Method of Experience: Reading, Writing, Teaching, Fieldwork") from *A Possible Anthropology*

-Tim Ingold, "Anthropology contra Ethnography," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* vol. 7(1):21-6 (2017)

(<http://dx.doi.org/10.14328/hau7.1.005>)

-Daniel Miller, "Anthropology is the Discipline but the Goal is Ethnography," *HAU* vol. 7(1):27-31 (2017)

(<http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau7.1.006>)

-Kim Fortun, "Figuring Out Ethnography" in Faubion and Marcus, eds, *Fieldwork: Learning Anthropology's Method in a Time of Transition*

-Tobias Rees, "On Fieldwork" -pages 80-96, Chapter 1 ("On Anthropology"), Chapter 2 ("Of the Human") in *After Ethnos*

-Akhil Gupta & James Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice: "The Field" as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology,"
Pages 12-18, 32-40, in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*

Optional:

-Alpa Shah, "Ethnography? Participation Observation, a Potentially Revolutionary Praxis," in *Hau* 7(1):45-59 (2017)

(<http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau7.1.008>)

-Anand Pandian, Chapter 3 ("For the Humanity Yet to Come: Politics, Art, Drama, Fiction") from *A Possible Anthropology*

2/3 Life Beside Itself

Read: *Life beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*, Lisa Stevenson

2/10 Hunted

Read: *Hunted: Predation and Pentecostalism in Guatemala*, Kevin Lewis O'Neill

***PAPER #1 DUE ON 2/14

2/17 Angela Garcia

Read: "The Halfway House"

-"Introduction" and "Suicide as a Form of Life" in *The Pastoral Clinic: Addiction and Dispossession along the Rio Grande*

2/24 Self-Devouring Growth

Read: *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable*, Julie Livingston

3/2 Journal articles: Cultural Anthropology

Read: "Ethnography in a Shell Game: Turtles All the Way Down in Abidjan," Sasha Newell, *CA* vol. 34, No. 3 (2019)

<https://doi.org/10.14506/ca34.3.01>

-"Wildfires at the Edge of Science: Horizonizing Work amid Runaway Change," Adriana Petryna, *CA* vol. 33, No. 4 (2018)

<https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.4.06>

-"Kin-Work in a Time of Jihad: Sustaining Bonds of Filiation and Care for Tunisian Foreign Combatants," Alyssa Miller, *CA*

Vol. 33, No. 4 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.4.07>

3/9 – SPRING BREAK

3/16 Invisibility by Design

Read: *Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy*, Gabriella Lukács

***PAPER #2 DUE 3/20

3/23 Indebted

Read: *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost*, Caitlin Zaloom

3/30 The Licit Life of Capitalism

Read: *The Licit Life of Capitalism: US Oil in Equatorial Guinea*, Hannah Appel

4/6 Introductions: Three Introductions to Ethnographies

Read intros: -Josh Reno, *Military Waste*

-Gökçe Günel, *Spaceship in the Desert*

-Jerry Zee, *Continents in Dust: Experiments in a Chinese Weather System* (not yet published)

4/13 Wrap-up

*****FINAL PAPER DUE 4/20**