

## Virtual Ethnographic Methods University of Chicago | Summer 2020

**Instructor: Dr. Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela**  
**TA and collaborative co-instructor: Harini Kumar**

**Description:** “Virtual worlds are places of imagination that encompass practices of play, performance, creativity and ritual.” – Tom Boellstorff, from *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*

The virtual is increasingly embedded into our everyday life. In-person social life is deeply inflected by what goes on online, and inversely — today’s social movements are a case-in-point. Today, vast domains of social life now take place online, mediated by for-profit platforms, cultural norms, and government policy. This course invites students to retool conventional ethnographic methodologies for the physical/virtual nexus by way of the senses.

**Course Goals:** This course has both practical and conceptual goals. (1) Students will develop an ethnographic methods portfolio, and in the process should begin to develop ethnographic research skills – ethics, fieldnotes, participant observation, interviewing, and multimodal ethnography. Building on a weekly ethnographic research method, students will learn to update and apply those skills to virtual/remote research, and (where possible) back again to the physical world. (2) Students should also recognize and begin to develop answers to conceptual questions that have been raised with respect to ethnographic research. These questions concern the nature of knowledge produced by ethnographic research: In what way can the qualitative be “objective?” Some questions concern the relationship between “being there” physically, and engaging virtually with others: How might the virtual/in-person distinction be useful for, or hinder ethnographic research? Other questions concern the social position of the researcher in ethnographic research: What is the power relationship between the researcher and the group being studied? (3) Students should learn to read ethnographic methods texts and distill questions of key relevance, teach their classmates about particular methods, try their hand at carrying out small-scale virtual/remote research exercises, and “write up” their findings onto a multimedia class portfolio.

**Course requirements:** To complete the course successfully students are expected to (1) Do the reading. (2) Attend and participate in class. (3) Complete the four assignments listed on the syllabus, which require you to prepare in advance and contribute to an in-class activity (Monday reading responses, Wednesday group teach-in (aka group presentation), Friday write-ups, Friday workshopping (aka individual presentation and feedback), (4) Drawing from your own Friday write-ups - to be submitted weekly - select and submit for publication one expanded and curated final "write-up" to be posted on a Class Portfolio. You will be graded on how well you master the practical skills and conceptual issues raised in the course. Primary evidence for this will be the weekly write-ups and final Class Research Portfolio (aka Class Blog) posts, but class participation and assignments will also provide relevant evidence.

**Premises:** Given the exceptional circumstances in which this course is being taught, a few premises help guide the arc of the course. (1) In order to do virtual ethnography, one must build on a foundation of "real world" ethnography. (2) Virtual (and especially remote) ethnography is a new frontier of methodological inquiry, presenting our class with an opportunity to contribute original knowledge to this conversation. (3) Due to the short, intensive, experimental nature of the class, it provides a far from exhaustive survey of emerging ethnographic methods. (4) The class is an invitation to, together, think critically about ethnographic methods by way of retooling them for the virtual world.

### Weekly Assignments and Grading

**Informed, cooperative participation [20 points]:** Participation means attendance; it also means active, substantive contributions to discussion with zoom cameras on at all times during class. **Attendance is required.**

If you are forced to miss a class due to an extremely urgent or emergency situation, then you are required to post a reading response (1 page double spaced) on the class's canvas discussion board. If no response is posted, or if the absence is unexcused, you will incur a 4 point deduction in participation grade.

**Monday weekly reading responses [5 points each]:** Reading responses for Monday's readings are due Sunday by 8pm. Rigorous and critical engagement with the readings is expected. You will receive feedback on your responses by Weds.

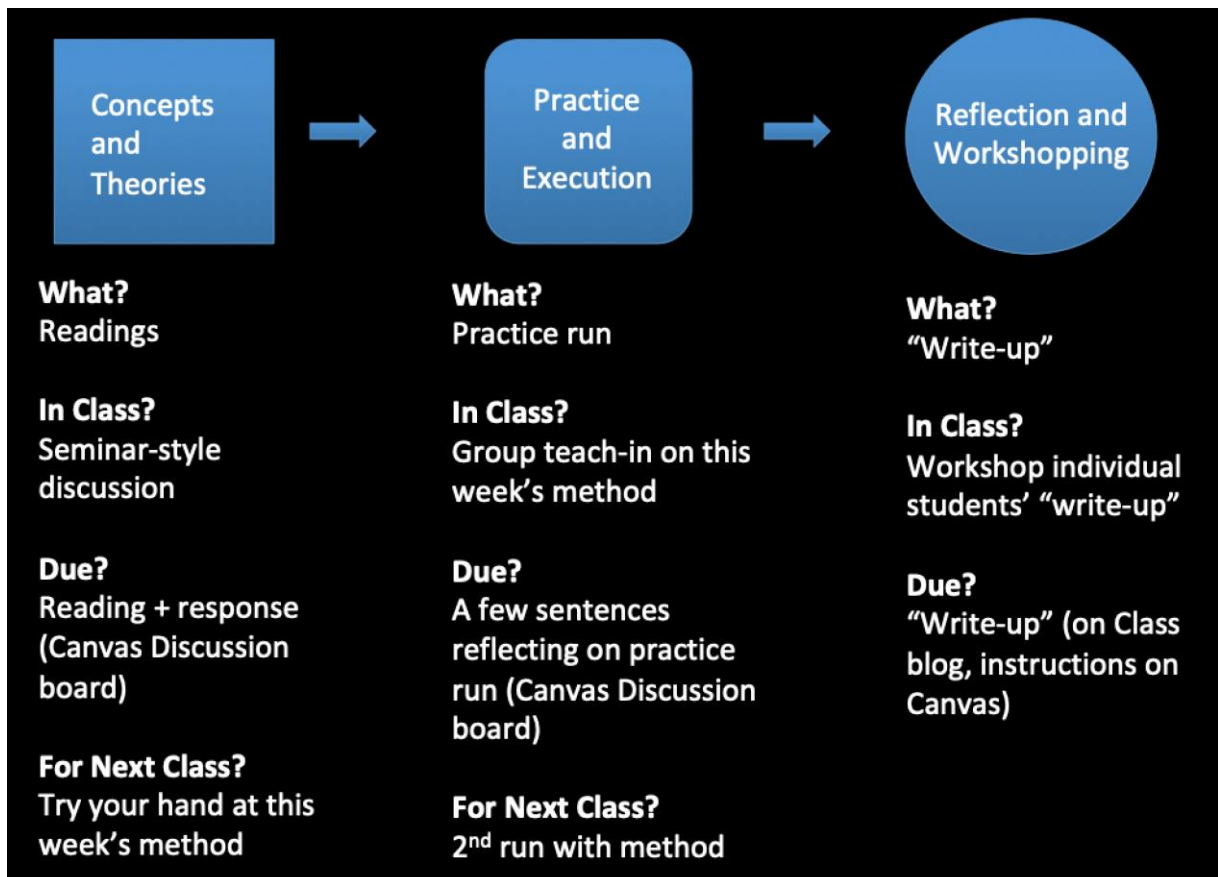
**Wednesday group teach-in [one-time, 10 points]:** Pre-assigned groups of 4-5 students will prepare a lesson for classmates on the ethnographic method of the week. Classmates are expected to already be trying their hand with the method for Weds. The goal will be to further equip classmates for trying their own ethnographic exercise. Those who aren't presenting are to post one paragraph with tips (what to look out for, what worked well, what didn't work) for others on Canvas discussion board.

**Friday weekly Write-Ups [5 points each]:** "Write-ups" of ethnographic exercise (discussed Weds) due Friday by 5pm (to be posted on Class Blog (aka research portfolio)).

**Friday Workshopping [one-time, 10 points]:** 5-6 students will present their Write-Up for 10 minutes, followed by a 20 minute collective workshop intended to collectively brainstorm best practices, point out any ethical issues, and draw out further avenues for research.

**Final Class Portfolio Publication submission [one-time, 20 points]:** Students will further develop and expand upon a Friday Write-Up blog post. These final write-ups will, if accepted, be published on our class portfolio and will serve as a scholarly resource for the University of Chicago and the broader scholarly community.

### Weekly Class Progression (for M, W, F class arrangement):



**Required Texts:**

- Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press.
- Collins, Samuel Gerald, and Matthew Slover Durlington. *Networked Anthropology: A Primer for Ethnographers*. 1st Edition. London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.
- Horst, Heather A., and Daniel Miller. *Digital Anthropology*. Taylor & Francis, 2013.
- Hine, Christine. *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

**COURSE READINGS****Unit 1: The Ethics and Politics of Ethnography**

- Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press.
- Gupta and Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’ Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference.” In *Culture, Power Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, eds. A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), (pp. 33-51).
- Pandian, Anand, Chitra Venkataramani, and Marieke Wilson. “Virtual Pedagogy: New Media for the Anthropological Classroom.” *Anthropology News* 50, no. 4 (2009): 26–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1556-3502.2009.50426.x>.
- Fernando, Mayanthi L. 2014. “Ethnography and the Politics of Silence.” *Cultural Dynamics* 26 (2).

**Suggested Readings:**

- Braverman, Irus. “Captive: Zoometric Operations in Gaza.” *Public Culture* 29, no. 1 (81) (January 1, 2017): 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-3644457>.
- Jobson, Ryan Cecil. “The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn: Sociocultural Anthropology in 2019.” *American Anthropologist* 122, no. 2 (2020): 259–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13398>.
- Driscoll, Catherine, and Melissa Gregg. “My Profile: The Ethics of Virtual Ethnography.” *Emotion, Space and Society* 3 (May 1, 2010): 15–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2010.01.012>.

**Wednesday: Guest Speaker 1**

**Friday Write-up Prompt and Example:** [https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRVB4OznprJLzgR5u7VMDxrtEtfvzz1wVsmBtiQuKFIRX8VZLkFP-3Bsh-KdcvH4\\_GaKc\\_uv\\_haM-ZV/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRVB4OznprJLzgR5u7VMDxrtEtfvzz1wVsmBtiQuKFIRX8VZLkFP-3Bsh-KdcvH4_GaKc_uv_haM-ZV/pub)

**Unit 2: Fieldnotes**

- Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 7 (pp. 113-126), Excerpt (pp. 85-88).
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 2013. *Social Anthropology*. Routledge. Chapter 4, Fieldwork and the Empirical Tradition.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Second Edition. University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1-3 (PDF Pages 67-339).
- Miller, Daniel, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman, and Xinyuan Wang. *How the World Changed Social Media*. UCL Press, 2016.

**Suggested Readings:**

- Hendrickson, Carol. “Visual Field Notes: Drawing Insights in the Yucatan.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 24 (November 1, 2008): 117–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7458.2008.00009.x>.

- Middleton, Alexandra. 2020. "Sketching toward Alternate Openings in the Field." Visual and New Media Review, *Fieldsights*, February 13. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/sketching-toward-alternate-openings-in-the-field>
- Sanjek, Roger, ed. *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1990. (Pgs. 47-71):

**Wednesday:** Guest Speaker 2

**Friday Write-up Prompt:**

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTmQDQsJjL\\_1HeneiXXSvsQZXsIB6--dBmtDer9hyCFZRenFIHI-7xe3OaW5Lk1ED1ae9tqmlqr\\_kv0/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTmQDQsJjL_1HeneiXXSvsQZXsIB6--dBmtDer9hyCFZRenFIHI-7xe3OaW5Lk1ED1ae9tqmlqr_kv0/pub)

### Unit 3: Participant Observation

- Hine, Christine. 2015. *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic. Intro, Chapters 1-2.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 2013. *Social Anthropology*. Routledge. Chapter 4, Fieldwork and the Empirical Tradition.
- Bonilla, Yarimar, and Jonathan Rosa. 2015. "“#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States.” *American Ethnologist* 42 (1): 4–17.
- Günel, Varma, and Watanabe. 2020. "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography." Cultural Anthropology Blog: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>

**Suggested Readings:**

- McKenna, Brad, and Hameed Chughtai. "Resistance and Sexuality in Virtual Worlds: An LGBT Perspective." *Computers in Human Behavior* 105 (April 1, 2020): 106199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106199>
- Agar, Michael. "Making Sense of One Other for Another: Ethnography as Translation." *Language & Communication* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 38–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2010.05.001>.

**Wednesday:** Guest Speaker 3

**Friday Write-up Prompt:** <https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTeChjJOrtAuOiv93Qf4fRLZDvUwvWxuLLyuoAKUt1pCtYVv70ggqWS6F8ILkelMippJTnhWNGrbI5W/pub>

### Unit 4: Interviews

- Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 6.
- Sunstein, Bonnie Stone, and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater. 2011. *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*. Macmillan. Chapter 5, excerpt (pp. 219-233). Box 20 (pp. 222-225), Box 22 (pp. 242-243)
- Berry, Maya J., 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 (4): 537–65.
- Ralph, Laurence. 2014. *Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago*. University of Chicago Press. Preface, Chapter 2.

**Suggested Readings:**

- Gerard Forsey, Martin. "Ethnography as Participant Listening." *Ethnography* 11, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 558–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138110372587>.
- Pink, Sarah. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. 2nd edition. London: SAGE, 2015: 71-93

**Wednesday:** Guest Speaker 4

**Friday Write-up Prompt:** <https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSgCfNcN5spSee9GdrmHMCYL0oVlgieXaZlGgG2mSLqUVCfecPazyNQjgvyggv7yPnI3D2vROrdbBU8/pub>

### **Unit 5: Multimodal Ethnography: Image, video, sound, text**

- Culhane, Dara, and Denielle Elliott. 2016. *A Different Kind of Ethnography: Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies*. University of Toronto Press. Chapter 1 (pp. 1-18).
- Collins, Samuel Gerald, Matthew Durlington, and Harjant Gill. 2017. "Multimodality: An Invitation." *American Anthropologist* 119 (1): 142–46.
- Favero, Paolo. "Curating and Exhibiting Ethnographic Data," in Hjorth, Larissa, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway, and Genevieve Bell. 2017. *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*. Taylor & Francis (pp. 275-287).
- Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. 2019. *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford University Press. Excerpts.

#### **Suggested Media:**

- "Opinion | The Scars of Being Policed While Black - The New York Times." Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/opinion/the-torture-letters-police-violence.html>.
- Lemelson, Robert, and Briana Young. "The Balinese Cockfight Reimagined: Tajen: Interactive and the Prospects for a Multimodal Anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 4 (2018): 831–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13144>.
- "Tajen: Interactive." Accessed December 1, 2020. [tajeninteractive.com](http://tajeninteractive.com).

**Wednesday:** Guest Speaker 5

**Friday Write-up:** [https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSGH6DAwGk0cMjGaatdBpVu1bs6H2LO0j8LzWWCX\\_RYwBKSp0UVvbamjgRBMOfyGrR7dd3kbnN\\_1S7/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSGH6DAwGk0cMjGaatdBpVu1bs6H2LO0j8LzWWCX_RYwBKSp0UVvbamjgRBMOfyGrR7dd3kbnN_1S7/pub)