

Department of Anthropology and Sociology (ANSO)

Academic year 2021-2022

ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING

ANSO148- Spring - 6 ECTS

Course Description

“Although writing is an all-consuming fire, it may also reduce one’s life to ashes.” Michael Jackson (2013, 72)

“It’s not enough to stick with empirical studies of apparently real things, for life is much more than that.” Robert Desjarlais (2019, ix)

Why does writing matter in ethnography? In this course, we explore ethnography as a creative practice, an art form, as invention, and as improvisation.

This seminar will be offered as a writing collective, fostering a community of mutual support. We will read each other’s writings, practice how to read attentively and to give productive feedback that is useful for the writers. We will proceed through a series of exercises and workshops as we think about ethnography as a form of writing, a method of witnessing, and as storytelling. We will consider what is novel about ethnographic writing, and how it is different from other forms of writing about the world and human experiences (nonfiction, fiction, poetry, journalism). We will explore strategies for describing characters, scenes, problems, hopes, and the world around us. As part of this, we will also explore the relationship between writing, fieldwork, and fieldnotes, and consider the ethics of ethnographic writing. Additionally, we’ll examine the possibilities and limits of ethnography within the academy.

We will also read and discuss a series of contemporary ethnographic writing including monographs by Michael Taussig, Kathleen Stewart, Jason Pine and Alan Klima, hopefully inspiring students to engage in their own ethnographic writing experiments in the class.

> PROFESSORS

Professeur
[Denielle Elliott](#)

Office hours by appointment

> ASSISTANT

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Syllabus

Schedule and Rooms

Class 1	Thursday April 28	-12:15-16:00	- S7
Class 2	Monday May 2	-10:15-14:00	- S6
Class 3	Thursday May 5	-12:15-16:00	- S7
Class 4	Monday May 9	-10:15-14:00	- S6
Class 5	Thursday May 12	-12:15-16:00	- S7
Class 6	Monday May 16	-08:15-12:00	- S2
Class 7	Thursday May 19	-12:15-16:00	- S6

Class Structure

9:00 – 10:45 Discuss class readings

10:45 – 11:00 coffee break

11:00 – 12:45 In class writing exercises and peer review

Evaluation Criteria (details to be provided)

1. Regular attendance and participation (in class writing exercises and feedback to other students): 10%
2. Free writing journals^[DAE1]: 30%
3. Final paper (evocative writing on a subject related to your field project, 12 pages): 30%
4. Interview on writing life (based on Somatosphere Writing Life series): 30%

Books

Stewart, Kathleen 2007 *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Taussig, Michael 2015 *The Corn Wolf*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pine, Jason 2019 *The Alchemy of Meth: A decomposition*. Duke University Press.

Klima, Alan 2021 *Ethnography #9*. Duke University Press.

Recommended but optional:

Pandian, Anand and Stuart McLean, eds. 2017 *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*. Duke University Press.

Other resources for writing

Alan Klima

<https://academicmuse.org/category/advice/>

The Moth 2022 *How to tell a story: The essential guide to memorable storytelling from The Moth*. Crown.

Somatosphere's Writing Life series

<http://somatosphere.net/series/writing-life/>

Schedule

Introduction (pre readings)

Geertz, Clifford 1973 Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books. PP. 3-32.

Clifford, James 1986 Introduction: Partial Truths. In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press.

Geertz, Clifford 1988 Being There: Anthropology and the scene of writing. In *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. PP. 1-24.

Behar, Ruth 1995 Introduction: Out of Exile. In *Women Writing Culture*, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon.

Exercise: 15 minutes of free writing. Then discuss – our writing strengths, how it feels, what we prefer to write with/on, our writing barriers and weaknesses.

Class 1 Thursday, April 28

Arguments about Ethnography

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph 1991 Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness. In Richard G. Fox, *Recapturing Anthropology*. Santa Fe: SAR Press. PP. 17-44.

Willis, Paul and Mats Trondman 2000 Manifesto for Ethnography. *Ethnography* 1(1): 5-16.

Abu-Lughod, Lila 2000 Locating Ethnography. *Ethnography* 1(2): 261-267.

Shah, Alpa 2017 Ethnography? Participant Observation, A Potentially Revolutionary Praxis. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(1): 45-59.

Shange, Savannah 2020 Chapter 1. #Ourlivesmatter: Toward an Abolitionist Anthropology. In *Progressive Dystopia*. Duke University Press. Here: https://www.dukeupress.edu/Assets/PubMaterials/978-1-4780-0668-8_601.pdf

Sunder Rajan, Kaushik 2021 Introduction: A Problem, a Paradox, a Politics ... and a Praxis. In *Multisituated: Ethnography as Diasporic Praxis*. Duke University Press. PP. 1-28.

In class exercise: Write one to two pages on what your graduate project aims to do. Why are you writing? Why does it matter to you? Why should it matter to others?

Class 2 Monday, May 2

Fieldnotes

Excerpts from

Malinowski, Bronislaw 1989 *A diary in the strict sense of the term*. London: Athlone Press.

Sanjek, Roger 1990 A Vocabulary of Fieldnotes & Examples of Fieldnotes. In *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Edited by Roger Sanjek. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. PP. 92-137.

Wolf-Meyer, Matthew and Denielle Elliott (No date) Introduction. In D. Elliott and M. Wolf-Meyer, eds. *Fieldnotes, Raw and Unedited*. University of Minnesota Press.

In class exercise: Write a conversation involving two or three people. Try to write within those voices. Two pages.

Class 3 Thursday, May 5 **Stories**

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2015 [1995] The Power in the Story. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. PP. 1-30.

Culhane, Dara 2011 Stories and Plays: Ethnography, Performance, and Ethical Entanglements. *Anthropologica* 53(2): 257-274.

Fassin, Didier 2014 True life, Real Lives: Revisiting the Boundaries Between Ethnography and Fiction. *American Ethnologist* 41(1): 40-55.

Paper Boat Collective 2017 Archipelagos, A Voyage in Writing. In *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*. Duke University Press.

Little, Ken 2020 Chapter 1: 'For the time is at hand': Beast-time Somet'ings. In *On the nervous edge of an impossible paradise*. Berghahn Books.

Kazubowski-Houston M. (2021) Absence, Magic, and Impossible Futures. In: Kazubowski-Houston M., Auslander M. (eds) *In Search of Lost Futures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63003-4_11

Optional -- watch before class: Paul Stoller, 2016, *The Burden of Writing the Sorcerer's Burden: Ethnography, Fiction and the Future of Writing*. Available here:
<https://granadacentre.co.uk/paul-stoller-future-ethnographic-writing/>

In class exercise: Write 1-2 pages of ethnographic fiction.

Class 4 Monday, May 9 **Weak Theory**

Stewart, Kathleen 2007 *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stewart, Kathleen 2008 Weak Theory in an Unfinished World. *Journal of Folklore Research* 45(1):

In class exercise: Write 1-2 pages on something that is very difficult for you to talk about or to define.

Class 5 Thursday, May 12
Nervous system Writing

Taussig, M. 2015. *The Corn Wolf*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

In class exercise: Write a descriptive paragraph (200 - 325 words) without using any adjectives or adverbs. The idea is to describe a vivid scene using only verbs, nouns, pronouns, and articles.

Class 6 Monday, May 16
Experiments

Pine, Jason 2019 *The Alchemy of Meth: A decomposition*. Duke University Press.

In class exercise: Write 1-2 pages of an auto-ethnography / ethnographic memoir / intimate ethnography.

Class 7 Thursday, May 19
Hauntologies

Klima, Alan 2021 *Ethnography #9*. Duke University Press.

In class exercise: Write 1-2 pages about something that cannot be seen or touched (delusions, ghosts, phantoms, dreams, the imaginary).