Critical Ethnographic Methods:
Research, Design, Technique, Execution

Course Description

Doing violence to those we seek to represent comes with the territory.
Misrepresentation is part of telling stories about people’s lives, our own included.
The issue is whether to skirt or to face head on such complicities (Lather, P. 1999:4)

How can ethnography provide the tools to understand, change, and critically analyze the
world in which we live? This intensive graduate research methods class is a hybrid
seminar/practicum in which students engage in critical readings of ethnography and social
theory while performing ethnographic exercises aimed at instilling an ethical approach that
is attuned to the complexities of life worlds. During each seminar meeting we will spend the
first half of the meeting discussing the readings and contextualizing the course, and the
second half discussing research design and mini-ethnography preparations. By the end of
the quarter you will have developed a systematic research design and conducted mini-
ethnographic fieldwork, culminating in a short ethnographic essay.

Course Assignments/Requirements

- **Weekly Response Papers**: Submit a one-page response to weekly readings
  beginning week 2. Try to work all of the assigned texts into your analysis by reading
  across them. You may also wish to speculate about the relevance of the reading(s)
  for your project. Please email me the responses no later than the beginning of class.
  You need not turn in a response the week you are facilitating discussion.

- **Facilitate discussion**: Each student is responsible for facilitating discussion of the
  readings during one class session.
  On the day of the presentation, please distribute an outline to the class that includes
  your main points and discussion questions.

- **Research design proposal**: Propose a critical ethnographic research project by the
  fourth seminar meeting.

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1 Many thanks to Professor Kheshti for sharing her ETHN 202 syllabus, which I have
borrowed heavily in preparing this syllabus.

• **Ethnographic Field notes:** Four sets of field notes (1-2 pp) submitted under the themes you identify as most salient for your ethnographic research.

• **Oral Presentations:** 1) Critique of a book of your choice; 2) Presentation of your research.

• **Ethnography:** Final project will be a critical ethnography presented in written, sonic, visual or performative form (12-15pp). For those who plan to turn in a visual or performative project, please also turn in a 5pp. reflection paper on the doing of the ethnography.

### Course Readings


• All other readings available through the course’s library eReserves page.

### Schedule of Readings and Discussions

**Week 1: Introduction**

Please be prepared to discuss possible research sites for your fieldwork this quarter. Start where you are; the best places are places that you know best. The goal is to capture and archive the quotidian lived experiences of the communities that you care about.

**Week 2: What Is Critical Ethnography?**

**Discussant: America**


**Week 3- American Anthropology and Ethnographic Hegemony in the Pre-War US**

**Discussant: Jael**

There is a genealogy of critical ethnographic methods that is as old as American anthropology. To what did these methods emerge in opposition? From what historical circumstances did critique arise?


Assignment 1: Email me the full citation of the book that you have selected for your critique

**Week 4. Research Design pt. 1**

**Discussant: Shamel**

Consider this week the numerous conditions that constitute the ethnographic encounter and to what degree and how these complex interactions constitute the conditions to which methods must respond.

• Lucy Mae Burns. 2012. Intro and Ch. 2 in *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire*. NYU Press.
• Zora Neale Hurston. Introduction & Ch. 1 in *Mules and Men*.

Assignment 2: Research Design due

**Week 5 - Research Design pt. 2**

**Discussant: J-Mo**

What experience does your ethnography represent? While much ethnography seeks out subjugated knowledges, what forces complicate the capacity to represent these knowledges? Whose knowledge does it become when it is translated and interpreted through a scholarly lens and archived for scholarly posterity?


**Week 6 -- Ethnographic Objects/Ethnographic Subjects**

**Discussant: Martin**


**Assignment 3: field notes due**

**Week 7—“Fieldsites”**

**Discussant: Daniel**
What happens when diasporic subjects make origins and homelands into fieldsites? Similarly, what happens when cultural productions are traced as ethnographic objects?


**Assignment 4: field notes due**

**Week 8: Critiquing a Book’s Methodology**
For this assignment, select a book and, using what we have learned in the course, provide a 15-minute oral critique of its methodology:

- What is the book about?
- How did the author go about producing and making claims to knowledge?
- What methods did the author use? Do you believe those methods were conducive to answer the study’s particular questions and make its particular claims to knowledge and knowing? If so, how? If not, why?
- Do you believe the methods matched/enhanced/contradicted the epistemological understandings underlying the topic being studied?
- What do you believe are some of the methodological strengths and weaknesses of this study and why?
- What did you learn from this critique about conducting ethnographic research? How might this knowledge direct you in thinking about your own study?
- What are some of the noted absences and silences in this study? Or what is this study’s methodology silent? Why? With what consequences? How, if at all, does this study deal with the ethical issues and those pertaining to power?

**Assignment 5: field notes due**

**Week 9: Interpretation, Analysis and Writing**

**Discussant: Leslie**

**Assignment 6**: field notes due

**Week 10: Writing: Making Meaning**
Presentations. Each student will have 10-15 minutes for a presentation, followed by a 5-10 minute discussion of the research.

**Assignment 7**: Critical Ethnography due Wednesday of Finals Week