

The Ethnographic Essay

8N:355; Sec I: Forms of the Essay
Mondays, 2:30-5:20 pm, W244 AJB
Professor Bonnie S. Sunstein
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Fall Semester, 2007
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As I undid necklaces of words and restrung them, as I dressed up hours of rambling talk in elegant sentences and paragraphs of prose, as I snipped at the flow of talk, stopping it sometimes for dramatic emphasis long before it had really stopped, I no longer knew where I stood on the border between fiction and non-fiction.

Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman* (16)

Required Texts:

Sunstein, B.S. and Chiseri-Strater, E. *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*. New York: Bedford/St.Martin's. 2007. Third Edition

Required reading, your choice:

- One ethnographic "text" (an extended ethnography, a collection of shorter pieces, a documentary film, audio-essay, or video) of your choice and an in-depth review for your colleagues.
- A comprehensive look at one professional journal--multiple issues--which you will analyze and review for your colleagues in class.
- Readings related to your ethnographic essay, cited and annotated in the *Works Cited* section of your essay

ICON resources:

- selection from Bohannen, Paul and Dirk van der Elst. *Asking and Listening: Ethnography as Personal Adaptation*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press. 1998
- selection from Bateson, Mary Catherine. *Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way*. New York: Harper Collins. 1994.
- other selected essays (TBA)

Course Objectives:

In this course, we'll explore the contemporary ethnographic essay--as it appears in the disciplines of English, American studies, communications studies, cultural studies, journalism, and the interpretive social sciences (anthropology, education, folklore, sociology). Although the common readings represent those fields, you will want to pursue (and share with colleagues) your own combination of interests as you follow your own work plans.

We will consider the features of ethnographic essays by reading, researching, and writing them. The ethnographic essay is cultural critique; the result of a relationship between what goes on in a culture and how it appears on paper. And, of course, that relationship depends on the lenses and tools of the writer. We will engage in, as John Van Maanen writes, "the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others." Together we will attempt to define and re-define what we might mean by "the ethnographic essay."

This course will offer you an opportunity to:

1. Experience brief ethnographic fieldwork: collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. Engage in writing exercises designed to enhance the fieldwork process.
2. Develop a working sense of the form (s) of the ethnographic essay (distinguished from other essay forms: reminiscence, oral history, character sketch, travelogue, etc, by virtue of its cultural focus).
3. Read and hear others' "readings" of recent published and unpublished experiments with such form--in journals, books, and on film.
4. Write an ethnographic essay. Experiment with and document your processes as you write by writing a commentary, acknowledgements, and an annotated reference section.
5. Develop a critical vocabulary to describe the features of ethnographic text--and your role as a researcher/writer, by creating a research portfolio.

And here are some of the ways you'll accomplish the above goals:

Since our emphasis is on the form of the essay, we will focus on issues of crafting and interpreting ethnographic text. Actual field experience is helpful but not essential; it will remain in the background. You may choose to work with one small slice of fieldwork research you'll actually do, reshaping it in response to each issue we discuss each week--or you may want to experiment with writing or data you already have.

Over the semester, you'll produce these documents (percentage "weights" will depend upon your own disciplinary focus, plans, and needs):

1. A working portfolio, organized and re-organized sets of representative (not all) fieldnotes and transcripts, reading and writing exercises, reflective commentaries, collected artifacts, etc. *Due for evaluation and re-evaluation three times during the semester.*
 2. One or two "one-pagers," responses to the week's reading, shared with your colleagues in class
 3. A one or two page review of a journal which publishes what we might call ethnographic essays in the field of your choice, which you'll write, photocopy, share, and present to your colleagues in class
 5. An ethnographic essay in two parts: the 15-20 page essay, and a 10 page commentary/analysis which discusses and documents your process.
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Class Schedule:

Consider each class session a “workshop,” in which you bring drafts to the table. These categories, and the box exercises will guide your drafting process.

Week/Date	Topic	Due
August 27	Stepping in and Stepping Out: Understanding Cultures	Subculture Exercise (FW, Box 1) Miner, Zollo, Nikolic
September 3 (no class)		
September 10	Asking Ethnographic Questions	FW: Ch 1. Box 3, Ch 2, Box 4 readings: Elbow, Didion, Scudder, Lambert, Bateson
September 17	Fieldnotes and Sources	FW: Ch 2, Boxes 5, 6, 8 Bohannen and VanDerElse
September 24	Positioning	FW: Ch 3, Boxes 9, 10, 11 Naylor, Walker, Angus, Sunstein
October 1	The Ethics of Entry	FW, Ch 3, Boxes 12, 13 Kincaid, Hann, Downing
October 8	Researching Place: The Spatial Gaze	FW, Ch.4, Boxes 16-18 Hemmingsen, Orlean, Iyer PORTFOLIO I
October 15	Fieldwork and Conferences	FW, Ch 5., Boxes 20-24 <i>submit timeline, schedule</i>
October 22	Researching People: The Collaborative Listener	FW, Ch 5, Box 19 in class, 20-24 Singer, Marshall, Edwards, Sacks JOURNAL REVIEWS
October 29	Researching Language: The Cultural Translator	FW, Ch. 6, Boxes 25, 26, 27 (choose)
November 5	Researching Archives: Locating Culture	FW, Ch 7, Boxes 28-31 (choose) Ball, Shultz, , Eighner, Townsend PORTFOLIO II
November 12	FieldWriting: DOWNDRAFT to Updraft	FW: Ch. 8, Box 32 or 33 BOOK REVIEW
November 19	<i>Thanksgiving Break: NO Classes</i>	FW, Ch.8 Lamott, King, Sunstein, Murray
November 26 December 3 December 10	Writing and Synthesizing FLARE Poster Session: 12/4	DRAFT WORKSHOPS AND PORTFOLIO III
December 17	Presentations	<i>Essay and Commentary</i>

...the optimal fieldworker should dance on the edge of a paradox by simultaneously becoming one of the people and remaining an academic. The term participant-observer reflects even as it shapes the fieldworker's double persona.(180)
Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth, 1989

Notes to you:

- Handouts and readings may change due to your interests and our personal and professional resources.
- The activities of this course demand collaborative efforts and shared leadership, so please give notice when you cannot contribute and when you cannot attend class. Absences or lack of preparation may result in a failing grade.
- Please double-space all papers and use appropriate margins, include citations and consistent bibliographic form, and submit a copy of your original, as I may want to keep it. Although I like to consider any course paper as a draft, I also like to consider it as a "publication," a manuscript submitted to a "public," or in this case a potential larger audience.
- Reserve the right to change our plans when we decide to invite relevant researchers, take a collective fieldtrip of our choosing, and/or hold an ethnographic film or radio festival
- By the end of the semester, we ought to have built a list of syntactical, rhetorical, and aesthetic issues specific to the writing of ethnographic texts. And it should appear somewhere in your portfolio
- Remember to acknowledge people and processes in your commentaries: the "process" documents that will appear both in your portfolio and with your finished essay.

The fieldworker must choose, shape, prune, discard this and collect finer detail on that, much as a novelist works who finds some minor character is threatening to swallow the major theme, or that the hero is fast talking himself out of his depth. But unlike the novelist...the fieldworker is wholly and helplessly dependent on what happens....One must be continually prepared for anything, everything--and perhaps most devastating--for nothing.

Margaret Mead, *Letters from the Field: 1925-1975*; New York: Harper and Row. 1977
