CULT 860: Critical Ethnography (Spring 2016)
Wednesday, 7:20—10 PM, Innovation Hall 211
Prof. Roger Lancaster
Office Hours: Wed, 4—7 PM, 3rd Floor Enterprise Hall

Ethnography—literally, ‘writing about (a) people (or culture)’—is a powerful method for examining social practices in specific settings. And because it asks after what people actually do and think (as opposed to what they would do or think if they acted according to an abstract theoretical paradigm), it also provides a means for both testing and developing theories of culture. Long associated with cultural anthropology (and qualitative sociology), ethnographic methods are taken up today by cultural studies practitioners in many fields (including English, folklore, history, etc.).

This course will survey classical and contemporary ethnographies, laying out the basic methodology of participant-observation fieldwork while asking key questions about the ethnographic product and how the technique has changed over a hundred years. How have ethnographic techniques served contradictory aims: colonial snooping or spying on the one side and liberationist aspirations on the other? What procedures might distinguish critical ethnographic practices from their power-serving alternatives? How do successful ethnographies connect the ‘micro’ setting to the ‘macro’ system? Lastly, how have critical ethnographies grappled with varied forms of social inequality (gender, sexuality, race, class) and what insights have they gleaned from people’s everyday practices? (Anthropology is emphasized, and rightly so: The discipline is uniquely identified with ethnographic techniques.)

APPARATUS: Readings listed are the minimal per week, which everyone will read. Each week, students will bring to class a short list of points to be discussed and will actively participate in seminar conversations, with each student coordinating for one book. In addition, students will write professional-grade, standard-format 600-1000-word book reviews for three books (to be read in their entirety, due Friday 5 PM via email on the week the book was read). Finally, students will complete a short (3,000-word, roughly five single-spaced pages) ethnographic exercise in some approved social field of her choosing. Final projects are due Saturday, 7 December, 5 PM.

(Book Reviews: See these simple instructions on book reviews: https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/03/27/essay-writing-academic-book-reviews.)

EVALUATIONS: Grading will be weighted as follows:
Class Presentations/Participation: One third
Book Reviews: One third (roughly ten percent each)
Ethnographic Essay: One third (due Saturday, 7 December, 5 PM)

BOOKS:
Jessica Bruder, Nomadland OR Marc Augé, No Fixed Abode
Jason de Leon, The Land of Open Graves
Eduardo Kohn, How Forests Think OR Kathleen Stewart, Ordinary Affects
Siegfried Kracauer, The Salaried Masses
Jack London, People of the Abyss
Roger Lancaster, Life is Hard
Jeffrey Lane, The Digital Street
Juan José Martínez D’Aubuisson, A Year Inside MS-13
Margaret Mead, Coming of Age in Samoa
Hortense Powdermaker, After Freedom
Scheper-Hughes, Death Without Weeping
Carol Stack, All Our Kin

WEEK 0 (8/28): Welcome & Introductions
  • Bronislaw Malinowski, “Subject, Method, and Scope” from Argonauts of the Western Pacific

WEEK 1 (9/4): Peering into the Pit (1903)
  • Jack London, People of the Abyss, with a foreword by Micaela di Leonardo. Read di Leonardo’s introduction, preface, and book

WEEK 2 (9/11): The Ethnographic Veto (1928)
  • Margaret Mead, Coming of Age in Samoa

WEEK 3 (9/18): A Frankfurt School Study of the Emergent White-Collar Class (1930)
  • Siegfried Kracauer, The Salaried Classes (entire book)

Pitch and brainstorm your preliminary ideas for an ethnographic project.

WEEK 4 (9/25): Race/Class in Indianola, Mississippi (1939)
  • Hortense Powdermaker, After Freedom, Introduction and Parts 1, 2, 3 and 6.

  • Vine Deloria, “Anthropologists and Other Friends,” from Custer Died for Your Sins (1969)
  • Gerald Berreman, “Bringing It All Back Home,” from Reinventing Anthropology (1972)
  • Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist,” from Reinventing Anthropology (1972)
  • Talal Asad, “Introduction,” Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter (1973)

Submit brief proposal for your ethnographic project. Attend to your subject, method, and scope: 300 words.

WEEK 6 (10/9): Culture of Poverty or Culture of Poor People? (1974)
  • Carol Stack, All Our Kin (Entire book)

WEEK 7 (10/16): Dialogy, the ‘Writerly’ Moment, and Its Others (1980-90s)
  • Eric Wolf, “Introduction” from Europe and the People Without History (1982)
  • Johannes Fabian, from Time and the Other (1983)
• Trihn T. Minh-ha, “The Language of Nativism,” from Native, Woman, Other (1989)
• Fay Harrison, from Decolonizing Anthropology (1991)

  • Roger Lancaster, Life is Hard

WEEK 9 (10/30): Towards a Womanist Ethnographic Practice (1992)
  • Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Death Without Weeping; read Introduction and Chapters 1, 5, 6, 8, 10

WEEK 10 (11/6): Thinking Like A Forest (2008)
  • Eduardo Kohn, How Forests Think, Introduction, chapters 1—4, Epilogue.
  OR, alternative reading:
    • Kathleen Stewart, Ordinary Affects

  • Jason de Leon, The Land of Open Graves

  • Jessica Bruder, Nomadland
  Or, alternative reading:
    • Marc Augé, No Fixed Abode

  • Jeffrey Lane, The Digital Street

  • Juan José Martinez D'Aubuisson, A Year Inside MS-13 (entire book)

Final projects are due Saturday, 7 December, 5 PM.