ENVST 424: Environmental Qualitative Methods: Cultural Lifeways and Environmental Change

This course examines the pivotal role that cultural differences can play in producing, understanding, and addressing environmental change. We will explore ideas of what, exactly, culture is, when it matters, and how we can study it more carefully. We will then develop basic methodological skills in qualitative methods, using the tools of ethnography to study cultural lifeways in practice. Our overall goal is to produce more sophisticated and refined analyses of the relationship between the environment and societies, and to enrich standard, quantitative approaches environmental change.

Course Objectives

1. Define key theoretical concepts in ethnography.
2. Identify and analyze key strategies and techniques for ethnographic research.
3. Undertake, apply and evaluate ethnographic research.
4. Explain the function and utility of quantitative and qualitative research strategies for understanding environmental change.

Assignments

1. Class attendance and active participation* (15%)
2. Two Reading Quizzes. These can come at any time! (5% each for 10%)
3. Four Exercises (10% each for 40%)
4. Independent research project: research question due October 4, field work is conducted throughout the semester, and final paper is 15-20pp + a bibliography of at least 10 scholarly sources related to your topic. We will cover the specific structure and components of this paper in class. (25%)

Course Commitments

- Mutual respect: careful listening and active discussion with everyone in the class. We are in this together.
- Careful and thorough engagement with course materials is the only way to get the most out of the class.
- Clear communication regarding unavoidable absences or incomplete work: If any circumstance hinders your participation in this course, please speak with me in advance.
- Give credit where credit is due: plagiarism is a serious offense. We check all work to be sure it is original and your own.
- Please be patient with e-mail. I try to respond to class e-mail within 24 hours, but this cannot always be guaranteed. Your best bet: speak to me directly just before, or just after, a class meeting.
- Please note that to assure fairness in grading, late assignments are never accepted.
Our reading list builds on the goals of the *Reading List for a Progressive Environmental Anthropology* by Guarasci, Moore and Vaughn (2018), to reconstitute the field of Environmental Studies with contributions by women, people of color and indigenous authors.

**Readings**
All readings are available through Brightspace or Bobst Library e-resources. You are required to read assigned texts **before class, by the day they are listed on the syllabus**. The Brightspace site will be the most updated resource for weekly readings, assignments, and other materials.

**Expectations and Requirements:**
As a seminar, the success of our learning community depends on active participation. Your commitment to the class is a commitment to meet the requirement that you attend **every** class and **participate** through sharing comments and/or written answers to prompts. Absences are excused for observance of religious holidays and illness, but please notify me in advance. Unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade. This is in fairness to your colleagues and to ensure that we create an active learning community for sharing our ideas and considering new ones. Hearing and listening are vital parts of ethnographic practice, so your presence also gives us a chance to think about the methodological process as we learn about it.

**Honor Code:**
All written work in this course must be original and composed exclusively by you, the author. You must acknowledge in writing any assistance you receive from the literature, other students, textbooks, internet, or any other source. Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be immediately referred to the Dean’s office. All students must adhere to the academic integrity policies of NYU.

**Accommodation:**
Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980  http://www.nyu.edu/csd.

**Safety:**
Remember to adhere to the most recent guidelines for protection against Covid 19 (NYU’s vaccination policy, social distancing, indoor masking). Please contact me directly if this is of concern.
**Weekly Schedule**

**Sept 8: What is ethnography? Why do ethnography?**
First meeting: course overview. You will introduce yourself and find out a bit about your colleagues. We will explore the question, “what is culture?” and start thinking about research questions that explore intersections of social lifeways and environmental change.

To prepare for class:
- think of a way you would like to introduce yourself: you might bring an object, something you have created, something you’ve written, a story…be creative! You will have a maximum of five minutes to introduce yourself.
- Consider the following questions and take a few notes on the way you might answer them:
  - What is “culture” to you?
  - Do you think there is a difference between ‘ecology’ and ‘ecologies’? Is one ‘nature’ or many ‘natures?’ Why or why not?
  - What are the environmental issues that concern you most, and why? How/are these issues social problems? In what ways?

**Sept 13 & 15. Stories or Data?**
What counts as data and why? How/do humans experience environmental change differently? What is cultural difference and why does it matter for understanding environmental change? Read and take careful notes on these articles. What are the main arguments of each piece, and why do those arguments matter for the way we study and respond to environmental change?

Prepare three substantive discussion questions for each article. Be prepared to share your notes and questions in our class meetings today and Wednesday.


Chapter 2 of Boellsdorf et al. "Three Brief Histories" in *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*. (on Brightspace)

Boellsdorf Chapter 3: "Ten Myths about Ethnography" (on Brightspace)

Listen to [this podcast](#)

**Sept 20 & 22. Research Questions and Research Fields for Environmental Ethnography**
This week we will consider aspects of social life and social change that are not well represented by quantification. We will consider environmental research questions that may be better served through qualitative study and we will begin to trace methodological approaches to such questions by exploring the ways that ethnographers delineate their research field.

Prepare three substantive discussion points for each article. Be prepared to share your notes and questions in our class meetings today and Wednesday.


Sept 27 & 29: Is the non-human world "social?"

Prepare three substantive discussion questions for each article. Be prepared to share your notes and questions in our class meetings today and Wednesday.


Your research question is due in class on October 4. Each student will present a ten-minute talk on their research question. It must address the following: 1. What is your "how" or "why" question? 2. Why do you want to study it? 3. Who will you learn among in order to study this question, and why this specific group? 4. Why should we care about your work -- what is its broader importance?)

Oct 4 & 6: Learning to see through other eyes: Ethics for encountering and representing social worlds beyond our own

Research Question is due Oct 4.

Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (on Brightspace)


*We will not meet on Oct 11. Happy Fall Break!

Oct 13: Attentive Immersion: Ethnographic fieldwork as practice

This week you should be working on your field project, focused on gathering as much participant observation data as possible in your field notebook. Note that Field Exercise One is due for presentation on October 20.


Chapters 1-4 of Radhika Govindrajan. Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalaya

Oct 18 & 20: Seeking Connections Beyond Ourselves.
On Monday we will discuss Chs. 1-4 of Animal Intimacies.

**On Wednesday each student will present their Exercise One:** Share one instance of participant observation related to your research project for this class. In a ten minute presentation, report your approach, findings, and the ways this instance leads to your further, iterative plan for participant observation.

*We will not meet on Oct 25:* Use this session for further field work on your project. For the next two weeks, undertake as much participant observation and note-taking as you are able. The more you learn, the more robust your analytical stance as we move through our research phases.
Oct 27: Seeking Connections Beyond Ourselves II / Interviews in other social worlds.


Nov 1 & 3: Interviews and Immersion / Wednesday quiz and discussion on Animal Intimacies.

On Monday, we will continue to discuss interview methods; on Wednesday we will finish our discussion of Animal Intimacies. Field Exercise Two presentations are due next week.


Chapters 5-6+ Epilogue of Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalaya.

Nov 8 &10: Interviews and Immersion: Fieldwork Reports.

Field Exercise Two: Each student will give a ten minute presentation on one (or a small set of) interview(s). How did you choose your interviewee? What techniques did you follow? What did you learn? How are your interview outcomes informing your participant observation work?

Nov 15 & 17 Encounters as Data: Field Notes and Field Reports

Field Exercise 3 is due November 22.


**Nov 22: Your Research Reports**

Field Exercise 3: Come to class prepared to share/present at least one page of field notes from the participant observation aspects of your qualitative research. Organize the information in a way that allows for a presentation-style description of the data, the way they relate to your larger project, and some preliminary analytical patterns or attributes that you are finding in your observational data collection.

*Nov 24 No Class: Happy Thanksgiving!*  

**Nov 29 & Dec 1: Issues of Scale**  


**Dec 6 & 8: The Material Environment and Society in Qualitative Perspective**

Field Exercise 4 is due next week.


**Dec 13: From qualitative data to a conceptual map**

Field Exercise 4: Assemble all of the data you’ve collected thus far, and identify insights, patterns, and further questions that your research has raised thus far. Make a map of your field site that draws from these insights. If you’re interested in GIS and have the skills, you can create a map or story board, but if you’re interested in narrative strategies you can make a more descriptive map. Be creative! We will discuss each student’s map, paying attention to how visual depictions of qualitative data foreground some aspects of a case study and background others. We will also consider how visual strategies can reveal the priorities of the mapmaker. Each student will present for a maximum of 10 minutes.

**Dec 20**

Final papers are due