ENVST 424: Reading Environmental Ethnography

This course explores the research methodology of ethnography, particularly as it is applied to Environmental Studies. We will focus on work from the field Environmental Anthropology. By reading finished ethnographies together, we will consider the practice of ethnography “backwards,” in a manner that allows us to learn from the methodological design, and ultimate path, each author took to arrive at the analysis presented in each book. Our goal is to acquaint ourselves with the ways that qualitative data can and do function as “data,” and the ways in which they can enrich quantitative data forms for a more robust understanding of 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. Four Exercises (15% each for 60%)
3. Final paper (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.
The 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. (https://culanth.org/fieldsights/citation-matters-an-updated-reading-list-for-a-progressive-environmental-anthropology). We use Boellsdorf, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor’s *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton University Press 2013). This handbook on ethnographic methods specifically because we are in a virtual class this year, the pandemic year. In addition to discussing the complexity of methods like “participant observation” in a world of virtual sociality, the Boellsdorf et al handbook gives a good foundational overview of “traditional” ethnographic methods as well as a treatment of the history of the method in anthropology and sociology.

**Readings**

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

**Physical copy in Bobst library or purchase in paperback:**


Perec. *An Attempt at Exhausting Place in Paris* (held in physical copy at Bobst) or purchase (https://www.strandbooks.com/search-results?page=1&an%20attempt%20at%20exhausting%20place%20in%20paris&searchVal=an%20attempt%20at%20exhausting%20place%20in%20paris&type=product)

**Books available online via Bobst e-book central:**

Radhika Govindrajan. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalaya*


Stephanie Newell. *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos*

**Open Access Books:**


*As a seminar, this course depends on active participation. You are required to come to 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 it 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.

DISABILITY DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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.


WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Jan 28
Meet online for course overview. Order/acquire any needed books and complete the readings for next week.

Feb 2
Session One: Stories or Data?


Boellsdorf Chapter 3: "Ten Myths about Ethnography"

Feb 4
Session 2: Stories or Data? Prepare your own answer to, “How/are stories data?” + read for discussion:

Perec. An Attempt at Exhausting Place in Paris (held in physical copy at Bobst) (recommend reading while imagining yourself in a cafe)

Feb 9
Session 3: What is ethnography? We will continue to discuss Perec + Prepare a summary of main points from the reading below to discuss.

Chapter 2 of Boellsdorf: "Three Brief Histories"

Feb 11
Session 4: Exercise One: Seeing Carefully. We will discuss your experience and your list when we meet for class. Prepare carefully.

Exercise 1: Pick a window in your current residence. Sit by the window for one hour, watching the outside world uninterruptedly. Note down everything you see, in the form of a list, and produce a document that emulates Perec’s An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris. This exercise is the first step in learning how to see your surroundings in a new way, and will serve as a foundation for the following two assignments. You will notice patterns that you may not have noticed before. If any circumstances prevent you from completing the exercise, please be in touch with the professor.
Feb 16
Session 5: How does one “do” ethnographic research? We will focus on the challenge of iterative research questions and design.

Chapter 4 of Boellsdorf: Research Design and Preparation (9 pp)

Feb 18
No Class Meeting (Monday schedule)

Finish reading *The Peregrine*

Feb 23
Session 6: Description as Data? We will discuss *The Peregrine*. Bring carefully prepared notes and questions for discussion.

Consider: *What does this book do to our understanding of the way the environment and humans are connected? How does it accomplish this?*


Feb 25
Session 7: Exercise 2: Seeing through other eyes

Exercise 2: Try to imagine your current domestic space from the perspective of another person who cohabits with you, or from the perspective of a nonhuman. What do they notice in these surroundings that you might not? How is their relationship to the space you inhabit different from yours? What are some architectural features they might rely on, which you do not? If you choose a person, feel free to talk to them about these differences. This exercise will serve as a second step in having you see your surroundings in new ways. Note down your observations carefully. Write 500 words describing and analyzing your notes. You can add photos or a video to this text, if you think visuals would contribute to your general points. Your essay is due on March 1.

March 2
Session 8: Discussion of Exercise 2

Also watch and prepare to discuss:
Doing Ethnography Remotely

March 4
Session 9: Connections Beyond Place / Virtual Worlds

Chapters 5 & 6 in Boellsdorf: "Participant Observation and Interviews in Virtual Worlds"

March 11
Session 10: Connections Beyond Ourselves.
Reading session Chapters 1-4 of *Animal Intimacies*. Take notes on Method.

Radhika Govindrajan. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalaya*

March 16
Session 11: Chapters 5-6+ Epilogue of *Animal Intimacies*. Take notes on Method for discussion in class today. Could this book be written in remote ethnography? Why or why not? And how?

Radhika Govindrajan. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalaya*

March 18
Session 12: Our Responsibilities to One Another. Prepare to discuss:
Boellsdorf Chapter 8: Ethics

Scheper-Hughes The Primacy of the Ethical in Current Anthropology

Watch the “Ethics in Anthropology” entry in the Dartmouth Ethnology Lab: https://anthropology.dartmouth.edu/research/ethnography-lab-videos

March 23
Session 13: Tracing Connections

Listen to Waste
Patrick O’Hare - "Waste" in the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology

March 25
Session 14: Exercise 3

Exercise 3: Pick one of the elements you included in your list for Exercise 1. Scale up, and learn about aspects of this element that remain invisible to you. Say you pick a public bus. You might want to research where this public bus goes, and what it represents as part of a larger transportation network. When was it first used? How was it funded? How many people ride it? What is the demographic that uses it? See whatever you can find based on primary and secondary sources. Use this one element you pick as a lens through which you can understand the place where you live. Please communicate your findings in the form of a research paper, which combines empirical research and analytical reflection. A bibliography in a standard citation format must be included.

March 30

April 1
Session 16: Narrative and Dirt.

By this session, you will want to choose and start reading the ethnography you will review for your final paper project, due at semester’s end (discussion May 4 and paper due May 6). This 15-20pp paper will "excavate" the methodological approach through which the author derived the data in the book. It will address the kinds of data that form the basis of the book's key claims, and reflect on how the qualitative data and methodological approach enhance (or hinder) our understanding of the book's central environmental issue or problem.

Some book recommendations are below, and we will share others in class. You may also choose your own. Please communicate your choice, once you have made it, to the instructor.

Howe, C. 2019. Ecologics
Lyons, K. Vital Decomposition
Hoover, E. The River is in Us
Raffles, H. Book of Unconformities

April 6

Session 17: Narrative and Dirt II

April 8

Session 18: Narrative and Dirt III


April 13, Session 19: Excavating Ethnographic methods

Exercise 4: Write the methodology for Histories of Dirt, working backward to excavate the full approach to data collection and analysis. Prepare a statement on the data types that were central in this study, and how they were derived.

Listen: Dirt

April 15
Session 20: Water

April 20
Session 21: Water II

April 22
Session 22: Water III
Last third

Listen:
Water

Additional references from this episode, for interest:
*Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* by Benjamin J. Pauli
*City Water Matters: Cultures, Practices and Entanglements of Urban Water* by Sophie Watson

April 27
Session 23: Energy and Ethnography

The Power of Oil
Gokce Gunel "Leapfrogging to Solar"

April 29
Session 24: Thinking 'backward' about ethnographic analysis.

Boellsdorf Chapter 10: Analysis

May 4
(Final) Session 25: Deconstructing a research method. We will discuss your final paper projects, the ethnographies you chose, and why. We will also discuss the ethnographic/research design you uncovered.

May 6
Final papers are due
Assessment:
The four exercises build on each other, and are weighted equally in order to demonstrate that good ethnographic field notes depend on preliminary observations as much as they do on the augmentation and refinement that happen over time. The pedagogical justification for weighting them equally extends from the idea that while they may differ slightly in length (although for all exercises the maximum length is 5 double spaced pages), the simplicity of the first exercise, for example, is extremely deceptive. One appreciates the degree of that deceptiveness only in completing all four exercises. As far as sample deliverables: prior to Exercise 1, the students read a full book as an “example” of the kind of listing that they complete in that exercise. The sample that precedes Exercise 2 is the book that we read immediately prior (The Peregrine). The example-setting that precedes Exercise 3 is a lecture on “Tracing Connections,” which covers ideas of scale and perspective in ethnographic methodological practice and analysis. Exercise 4 follows several sessions (March 30, April 1, April 6, April 8) for which we have been engaging as a class in the work of methodological excavation. The example is demonstrated via lecture, discussions, and examples we will consider in those sessions.