

# ANTH 562: The Practice of Ethnography

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**Section** 35266 | Spring 2021

**Class:** Thursdays 2:00-4:50pm, Online

**Instructor:** Emily Zeamer, Ph.D. | [zeamer@usc.edu](mailto:zeamer@usc.edu)

**Office Hours:** Schedule a meeting: <https://doodle.com/mm/1674682129/zeameroffice>

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## COURSE OBJECTIVES

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Sociocultural Anthropologists use ethnographic research to investigate the complex relationship between culture and human social life, including the relationship between everyday experience and broader historic, political or economic structures and flows. To study social experience and cultural knowledge, Anthropologists collect data through ethnographic fieldwork, which entails intensive social immersion: observing and participating in social activities, and interacting with individuals in a specific community over an extended period of time. The engaged and typically open-ended nature of ethnographic fieldwork allows the anthropologist to develop a complex and contextually rich, holistic view of the “work of culture” in shaping human experience.

This class is designed to introduce students to the practice of ethnographic research as it applies to the discipline of Sociocultural Anthropology; including methods used to collect information on social and cultural phenomena, and approaches to analyzing and interpreting ethnographic data. Instruction covers three interrelated areas:

1. **Field research:** Participants learn ethnographic research methods by applying them to their own, independent project. See [Field Research](#) below for details.
  2. **Research methods and tools:** Course participants will gain experience applying various research techniques and methods to gather research data, including writing ethnographic field notes, collecting documentary photographs, and conducting various types of ethnographic interview. Approaches to managing, organizing and preserving notes and digital field recordings will also be discussed.
  3. **Ethnographic analysis:** Through readings and course assignments, students will gain perspectives on the analysis of ethnographic data and the presentation of ethnographic research. In the final assignment, students will translate raw material from their own field observations into an analytic ethnographic essay.
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## COURSE TEXTS

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Articles and shorter texts, marked (CR) in the **Class Schedule** below, can be found in the course Dropbox folder, via the course site on Blackboard.usc.edu. Texts are available for purchase at the campus bookstore, and most will be on digital reserve at USC Library Course Reserves <https://reserves.usc.edu/ares/>. However, *I do recommend that you read on paper wherever possible:* research shows you will read more deeply with less effort. Reading on paper saves time because you’ll focus better, remember more of what you read, and will waste less time searching the text for your notes.

#### ETHNOGRAPHY & METHOD:

- Boellstorff, Tom, ed. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 0691149518
- Engelke, Matthew. 2018. *How to Think like an Anthropologist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 9780691178783
- Monaghan, John, and Peter Just. 2000. *Social and Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. 0192853465
- Robben, Antonius C. G. M., and Jeffrey A. Sluka. 2012. *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader, 2nd Edition*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 9780470657157
- Spradley, James P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning. 0030444969 (other printings/editions ok)

#### ETHNOGRAPHY (CHOICE):

- Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 0826317243
- Boellstorff, Tom. 2015. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. New edition. Princeton University Press. 9780691168340
- Cassaniti, Julia. 2015. *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 9780801454004
- Gilmore, Lee. 2010. *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 978052-253155
- Ho, Karen Zouwen. 2009. *Liquidated an Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press. 9780822345992
- Muehlmann, Shaylih. 2013. *When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the U.S. Mexico Borderlands*. First edition. University of California Press. 0520276787
- O'Neill, Bruce. 2017. *The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order*. Duke University Press. ISBN 9780822363149\*
- Paxson, Heather. 2013. *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America*. California Studies in Food and Culture, v. 41. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

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#### FIELD RESEARCH

Ethnographic **field research** is a fundamental part of this course, as your own research notes and recordings will supply the backbone of most course assignments, and the final project for the course is an ethnographic essay that draws on research materials you have gathered throughout the semester. With this in mind, you should be prepared to spend the necessary time, **at least 5 hours per week, doing some form of participant-observation fieldwork:** conducting formal or informal interviews, observing and documenting practices, and generally getting to know the people and the community you are studying by spending time with them, either virtually or in person.

Many of you will begin this course with have a broad or narrow **research topic** in mind: a problem, question, or social group you are interested in studying. Building on these ideas, by

week 3, you will identify a **specific site (virtual or real) where you will study, including a specific community with whom you will conduct ethnographic research for your class assignments.** You should choose a community where you have a reasonable expectation of sufficient access – such as the support of key members and the help of willing translators (if needed) – to do effective research.

**If safe and feasible, it is a good idea to choose a community you can meet with in person, at least occasionally, with safety appropriate measures.** But even if you have a local site in mind, you will likely find it expedient to conduct some interviews via phone or video conferencing.

As social lives are increasingly lived in virtual realms, and communities become more mobile and more dispersed, anthropologists have come to recognize that the study of human experience often requires a multi-sited or virtual approach to ethnography. Also, it may happen that as your research progresses, you will discover a better – that is, more interesting, or more accessible – location for your research. If that happens, you may shift to this new research location, but you should plan to stick it out in this new site, even if it takes time to gain rapport. As you will discover, persistence and commitment are the foundation of the strongest ethnographic research.

Ethnographic research is never a linear march toward an identified goal, but a *practice and a process*, marked by unexpected discoveries, both jarring and enlightening. Even mistakes and misunderstandings can become rich sources of insight. Together, we will discuss and document the discoveries and insights gained through the practice of ethnography, testing theories and honing methodologies as we go.

#### **PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

A key ethical value in Anthropology is respecting the privacy of our informants. In this class, in addition to sharing “raw” and unanalyzed ethnographic data, we will also discuss our own experiences, in the field and beyond. So that others may feel safe in sharing potentially sensitive information with one another, all class participants are expected to honor each other’s right to privacy, as well as the privacy of *their* informants.

Put simply, this means that you should **treat all class discussions that deal with personal information – whether that information comes from fellow classmates or their informants – as confidential.** *Avoid discussing these matters with anyone not in the course, or in places where others might overhear your conversation.*

#### **ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION**

This is an intensive seminar course, which meets once per week for 2 hours. Generally, our meetings will focus on the following tasks:

- **Seminar-style discussion** of assigned texts.
- **Work review.** Presentation and/or workshop discussion of completed assignments, including film rushes and work in progress. Schedule TBD.

**Class attendance is mandatory.** Students with more than 3 unexcused absences risk an automatic failure for the course.