

CMST 7923: Seminar in Ethnography  
Department of Communication Studies  
Fall 2013  
Thursday 3-5:50

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*Ethnographers mix art and science; they occupy a literary borderland. The distinction between literature and science is shrinking.*

John VanMaanen (paraphrased)

Course Description and Objectives:

This seminar is a theoretical and practical introduction to ethnography. While the course is concerned with general questions of purpose, method, and significance – What is ethnography? How does one do it? Why would one want to do it? – we will focus specifically on how ethnography is theorized and practiced in the discipline of communication studies.

Designed primarily as a workshop in ethnographic research, this seminar consists of weekly readings, discussions, activities, and writing assignments that focus on and assist you with your own independent ethnographic projects. Basically, the course will involve you in the business of *doing* ethnography: developing research projects, engaging in participant observation fieldwork, keeping a field journal, finding informants and conducting interviews, analyzing and interpreting data, and reporting research findings. While you will not be able to complete a comprehensive ethnographic project in the brief span of a semester, you will certainly be able to get a “good start” on one, developing both a traditional written report of your research as well as a “visual/performance ethnography,” an alternative means to publishing/sharing your findings.

Required Texts:

Goodall, H.L., Jr. *Writing the New Ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA.: Alta Mira P: 2000.

Lindlof, Thomas R. and Bryan C. Taylor. *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 2011.

Madison, D. Soyini. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 2005.

VanMaanen, John. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: U of Chicago P: 1988.

Wolcott, Harry F. *Ethnography Lessons: A Primer*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast P: 2010.

(I will also share articles with you via email.)

## Recommended Materials:

In addition to the required texts for the course, I recommend that you purchase a field journal and one or two small, pocket-sized notepads. You may also find it useful to have an audio and/or video recorder of some kind and a camera that can take B&W still photos. You should decide if your phone produces photos and video of the quality you might want for a future project/publication.

## Assignments and Responsibilities:

1. Group Contract (10 %) Based on attendance, preparedness, and involvement in class discussions and activities.

The course will be conducted in a spirit of openness and cooperation. We will respect each other and celebrate our unique identities. Your responsibilities to the seminar should develop out of a sense of shared commitment to a common task: helping each other with both the content of the course and the various projects you undertake. I have kept the reading for each week at a reasonable level intentionally. I expect you to keep up with the reading and come to class prepared to discuss your opinions, observations, and any questions you might have. I encourage you to speak up at every class meeting. In addition, your feedback is a valuable teaching tool in this course. Please respond enthusiastically and constructively to each other's work. In a graduate seminar, you should NOT miss class.

2. Journal and Bi-Weekly Writing (25 %)

Each of you will be required to keep a field journal throughout the semester. You should be committed to this journal and write in it at least a few times a week. You might jot down notes from your reading or the class and thoughts and observations regarding what you encounter during your time in the field.

At the end of the semester, you will create a final written report as well as a visual/performance report to share with the class. You will use the notes you take in your journal to create these, so the more you contribute to your journal, the more your journal will be able to contribute to the richness and success of these final projects.

In addition, I will assign specific writing exercises for your journal. On the due date, you will be asked to read parts of them aloud in class, and turn in 1-2 pages of writing which represents this work. At this point, you will receive feedback on your topic, your methods, your writing, etc. Please make sure to bring both journals and the typed portion of writing (to be handed in) with you to class. In a nutshell, "bi-weekly writing" is a brief response that asks you to engage the reading or research subject/object experientially. (Link the theory to your practice.) If done well, many of these writings (along with your field notes) will "snowball" into your final paper.

### 3. Method Assignments (15 %)

In addition to bi-weekly writing, you will be assigned short projects which allow you to test a particular method. These assignments will be specific to a reading assignment and/or to your projects, and you will receive further instructions on each of these a week or two before they are due.

### 4. Final Report (25 %)

While it will probably *not* be ready for publication, your final report will allow you to draw some provisional conclusions and pave the way for future work. The text of the report should be approximately 15-20 pages (typed, double-spaced), plus a list of works cited and endnotes and appendices, if needed. Style and reference matter should be prepared according to MLA guidelines. Since you will receive feedback throughout the semester, I expect these papers to be cogent (sound argumentation and analysis) and clear (organized and well-written). Edit and proofread carefully.

### 4. Alternative Publication (25 %)

Throughout the semester, we will discuss alternative means of publishing/sharing ethnographic findings with a variety of “audiences,” from audio/visual presentations to websites to fully staged performances. Each of you is asked to develop some sort of visual/performative presentation of your ethnographic project. I’ll leave the focus, style, and form of this project pretty much up to you. However, it should be developed in accordance with the models we will study, and it, too, should be considered a culmination of your work during the semester. We will discuss further how this project may be seen as responding to “the crisis in representation.” This portion of your project is due at our last class meeting. Each of you will have 12 minutes to present your work.

## Tentative Course Calendar

### WEEK ONE: INTRODUCTIONS

August

29<sup>th</sup> – Introduction to course and each other; discuss VM ix-44 and M 1-16; conduct campus mini-ethnographies

### WEEK TWO: MORE INTRO; MORE HISTORY

September

5<sup>th</sup> – Discuss L&T 1-30 and G 7-44 (BWW#1: Turn in a clean, edited version of Exercise #1 in G p. 42 in 1-2 pages -- we may share these in class) At the end of class, we'll discuss L&T 71-96.

### WEEK THREE: A PRIMER

12<sup>th</sup> -- Discuss *Ethnography Lessons: A Primer*

#### WEEK FOUR: WRITING STYLES

- 19<sup>th</sup> – Discuss VM 45-124 and G 45-82; You will reveal your subject to the class via BWW #2: Describe your first encounter with your site of research in all three VM styles. (You will choose one description to read/perform to the class; you will hand all written descriptions into me.)

#### WEEK FIVE: GETTING STARTED: METHODS and ETHICS

- 26<sup>th</sup> – Discuss L&T 97-132 (Assignment #1: A Map of Your Site); Discuss M 17-41 and 109-129 and Conquergood.

#### WEEK SIX: PRODUCING DATA

October

- 3<sup>rd</sup> – Discuss L&T 133-169 and G 83-130 and Scheibel; BWW #3: Share significant fieldnote (Turn in: The fieldnote itself and a reflection on its significance to your study.)

#### WEEK SEVEN: PRODUCING MORE DATA

- 10<sup>th</sup> – Discuss L&T 170-240 and Johnson

#### WEEK EIGHT: PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

- 17<sup>th</sup> – Discuss M 149-180; Vignes's *Hang It Out To Dry* script, essay, videos; Hopper's *ELP* BWW #4: Transcribe 3 minutes of an interview conducted. In a paragraph or two, comment on what you learned about: the subject, site, interviewing, or yourself. You may use the exercises in L&T on page 216 as prompts.

#### WEEK NINE: REHEARSAL

- 24<sup>th</sup> – We will not have class this week. Please take this time to continue to visit and reflect on your site and rehearse for Assignment #2: an ELP performance of one of your informants.

#### WEEK TEN: REPRESENTING THE OTHER

- 31<sup>st</sup> – Performances; Readings on writing: Discuss L&T 282-317, M 181-199 and G 131-173

#### WEEK ELEVEN: FIELD WEEK

November

- 7<sup>th</sup> – Fall Break falls during our class this week. Use the extra time (no class, no reading assignments, no writing assignments) to spend quality time visiting and reflecting on your site.

#### WEEK TWELVE: READING WRAP UP

- 14<sup>th</sup> – L&T 318-320, VM 125-144, G 175-198

#### WEEK THIRTEEN: WRITE&WORK/NCA

#### WEEK FOURTEEN: WRITE&WORK/THANKSGIVING

#### WEEK FIFTEEN: PRESENTATIONS

December

- 5<sup>th</sup> – You each have 12 minutes each for your visual/performative presentation.

