

### **324L Ethnographic Writing (30825) Th 3-6 SAC 5.118**

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Ethnography, meaning writing difference, describes entanglements of forms, forces, bodies, practices, media, materialities, sensibilities and structures of living that constitute a world. It composes with what's already composed. It can use social science, art, science, creative nonfiction, auto-ethnography and more. It loves the details. It hones in on angles, possibilities, and problematics – what might happen, what things in process might become, what something might be related to. By writing culture, we are learning to describe the precision of how a whole range of things impact lives.

This course is a writing workshop. We will build conceptual skills through writing; here, thought does not precede writing but takes place in working with words. As writers, we're trying to build our voice, or the ability to develop thoughts by writing with conviction and self-confidence. We are aiming for writing that is clear, direct, descriptive, creative, and actively approaching its object. Write for an audience – your classmates and perhaps also the people you are writing about (what would they think/say about what you've written? Would they recognize themselves in it or be interested in the thoughts you've had?). Read your drafts aloud to yourself.

Over the course of the semester, the students will write five 500 word descriptive, analytical, artful papers. Each piece should be written in four drafts, using the Peter Elbow's method in *Writing Without Teachers*: 45 minutes of fast writing followed by 15 minutes of hard editing to eliminate all but the sentences or sentence fragments you think are true (or that really express your thought, or have real potential).

In seminar, each person will read their work aloud while the others listen carefully and take occasional notes on their own creative lines of thought prompted by each piece (I call this compositional listening). After four readings, we will discuss the four pieces together. Learning to be good readers or listeners is part of the process of learning to be good writers. A writer with skill thinks of her readership and writes to communicate and have an influence.

Writing well begins with reading. There will be reading each week and prompts to link the reading to your writing for the week.

Students will also keep daily writing journals for the first seven weeks. This is fast, associative writing you can do anywhere. The point is to create the habit of making words on paper. I will not read the content but simply check, once a week, that it's been done every day. It can literally be "I'm trying to write and I can't think of anything to say. Oh, but wait a minute, the bus driver just smiled at the student wearing A&M colors. What's happening here? Did anyone else notice? Is this funny?"

There is a final essay, which will be fashioned out of 3-5 of your short pieces and edited, edited, edited. This should be 5-7 pages, double-spaced. Don't try to come up with a single thesis to subsume the separate pieces but, instead, hold your focus on the particularity of each piece and then look for resonances between them as you select the pieces to piece together. They can remain separate, even divided by an asterisk. Or you may find a writing line that allows you to link the three pieces, editing them together.

There will be workshops on ethnography, auto-ethnography, editing, voice, descriptive writing, and

describing a world. There will also be many experiments.

### **Readings**

Books:

Kathleen Stewart. *A Space on the Side of the Road*.

Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers*. (on canvas)

Susan Lepselter. *The Resonance of Unseen Things*.

Ken MacLeish. *Making War at Fort Hood*.

Articles (on canvas):

Bilger, Burkhard. "The Egg Men." *The New Yorker*, Sept. 5, 2005.

Orlean, Susan. "Little Wing: when homing pigeons leave home" Feb 13 & 20, 2006. *The New Yorker*.

Greg Bottoms. *American Apartheid* (excerpt).

### **Requirements and Structure of the class**

Everyone starts with 100 points. Points will be subtracted if you fail to complete assignments or show inadequate development in your written essays.

1. Regular attendance and participation. 14% of the grade (one point off for every unexcused absence)
2. Free-writing journals turned in for the first 7 weeks. 7% of the grade. (one point off each week you miss)
3. Five 500-word pieces to be turned in and read aloud in workshop. 50% of the grade.
4. Final essay. 30% of the grade.

If you are absent for a good reason, talk to me. You can make up the work with additional writing.

January 24.

ethnographic research workshop

writing brainstorm to produce your first paper topic

January 31.

Read: Elbow. *Writing Without Teachers*, chapters 1-2

Sensory ethnography writing experiment.

Workshop on descriptive writing.

Turn in daily free-writing journal.

February 7.

Read: Elbow. *Writing Without Teachers*, chapters 3- 4

Read your 1<sup>st</sup> 500-word piece focused on developing your voice. Bring all four drafts.

Workshop on voice.

Turn in daily free-writing journal.

February 14

Read: Elbow. *Writing Without Teachers*, chapter 5 and appendix essay.

Ethnographic experiment and workshop on worlding.

Turn in daily free-writing journal.

February 21.

Read: Orlean, Susan. "Little Wing: when homing pigeons leave home" Feb 13 & 20, 2006. *The New*

*Yorker*.

Bilger, Burkhard. "The Egg Men." *The New Yorker*, Sept. 5, 2005.

Read your 2<sup>nd</sup> 500-word piece describing or evoking a world. Bring all four drafts.

Turn in daily free-writing journal.

February 28

Read: Susan Lepselter. *The Resonance of Unseen Things*, 1<sup>st</sup> half.

Ethnographic experiment on power and its wide-ranging felt affects.

Turn in daily free-writing journal.

March 7

Read: Susan Lepselter. *The Resonance of Unseen Things*, 2<sup>nd</sup> half.

Read your 3<sup>rd</sup> 500-word piece on power and resonance. Bring all four drafts.

Turn in free-writing journal.

March 14

Read: Greg Bottoms. *American Apartheid* (excerpt).

Read your 4<sup>th</sup> 500-word piece on the learning/performance/creation/contagion of collective sensibilities. Bring all four drafts.

Turn in free-writing journal.

March 28

Read: Ken MacLeish. *Making War at Fort Hood*. 1<sup>st</sup> half

Ethnographic experiment on the assemblage.

April 4

Read: Ken MacLeish. *Making War at Fort Hood*. 2<sup>nd</sup> half

Read your 5<sup>th</sup> 500-word piece on an assemblage or list of things comprising a form or force. Bring all four drafts.

April 11

Select and carefully edit together 3-5 of your 500-word pieces. You may include new pieces if you like. Look for, and create, links, resonances, parallels between them if that works but don't lose the singularities you've developed in each piece. DON'T now impose a single theme in an effort to pull them all together but experiment with developing the thoughts in each piece. Part of that experiment is putting them beside each other and experimenting with their relations. Rewrite at least 5 times. Keep editing for the rest of the semester.

Small group workshops.

April 18

Read: Kathleen Stewart. *A Space on the Side of the Road*. 1<sup>st</sup> half.

Write a list of ethnographic experiments you notice in the book (i.e. the use of the refrain "picture") and a list of other possible ethnographic experiments you can imagine.

Ethnographic experiment on possible methods, models, moods, modes that might be used in different situations.

April 25

Read: Kathleen Stewart. *A Space on the Side of the Road*. 2<sup>nd</sup> half.

Experiment with ethnographic evidence and ethnographic composition.  
1st third of the class reads their final papers

May 2  
2cd third of the class reads their final papers

May 9  
Final third of the class reads their final papers

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### **Rubric for the five 500-word pieces (50% of the grade)**

Your piece should be written in four drafts, using the elbow method (from our first reading, Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*) which is 45 minutes of fairly fast writing followed by 15 minutes of hard editing on what you just wrote to eliminating all but the sentences or sentence fragments you think are true (really express your thought, or start to develop it). Print or write out each draft. **Bring all four drafts with you to class. Please label your final draft.**

The writing should be descriptive and ethnographic. It should be about some aspects of a some world which could be a conversation, a political economic structure, a moment in your life entangled in forms, objects, and sensibilities. The style can be as creative or social scientific as you like.

Remember you are not just reporting dead facts but composing an account of already composed of ways of living and being. You can include descriptions of people, language, places, situations, bodies, events, or objects in your writing. Work with the details (what did that character say, what color was the water in the ocean that day). Your paper may assemble different kinds of significance (explicit meanings, unspoken but visceral bodily feelings, collective sensibilities, differences, infrastructures, etc).

So be a composer. Actively produce a picture of what you're trying to describe. Be creative. Be precise. Be clear (don't use jargon and try eliminating all the words you don't need). Try writing in very short sentences. You can later add some longer sentences into the mix to create a rhythm to the writing as a whole. Be direct. Try to approach your object of description from several different angles (its materiality, its history, its status as an icon, etc) or describe multiple possibilities of what could happen, or how it might affect other things.

Write for an audience – your classmates, an ideal reader, the people you are writing about (what would they think/say about what you've written? Would they recognize themselves in it or be interested in the thoughts you've had?). Try to hear your words, your voice. Try reading your piece aloud.

### **Rubric for the final essay**

The final essay should be written by editing together 3-5 of the short weekly essays. 5-7 double-spaced pages in 12 point. 30% of the grade. Don't try to come up with a single thesis to subsume the separate pieces but, instead, hold your focus on the particularity of each piece and then look for resonances between them as you select the pieces to piece together. They can remain separate rather than be pulled into a single argument, even separated by an asterisk. Or you may find a writing line that allows you to link the three pieces, editing them together. It's up to you.

