Ethnography for Journalists  
JOUR-GA 1022 (WRRII)

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Long-form journalism often looks in depth at people's lives and social worlds over time, and the work of many celebrated journalists has strong ethnographic components, whether pursued consciously or not. Adrian LeBlanc's *Random Family* is one example. Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* and *War* are two more (and Junger, who majored in anthropology, more than once has cited his debt to the discipline). Leon Dash, William Finnegan, Alex Kotlowitz and Katherine Boo are other writers who believe in the payoffs to their journalism of immersive, in-depth research that is essentially ethnographic.

Nobody has invested as much energy thinking about humans as social animals as social scientists have. What have they learned that we can borrow? How is academic ethnography unsuited to a general audience? Can the powers of narrative be harnessed to the enterprise? Is there any role in this for memoir, and the first person voice?

This course has three main, overlapping units. We'll look at the ethnographic tradition in anthropology and sociology, examining how it arose and what questions it aimed to answer. We will read from classic ethnographies as well as newer ones, such as Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999) and Alice Goffman's *On the Run* (2014). We will compare these with work by writers like Kotlowitz, Boo, Anne Fadiman, and Susan Orlean.

At the same time we'll consider ethnographic methods through books like Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979) and *Participant Observation* (1980), and Emerson, et. al, *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes* (1995). Their particular goals and methods will be contrasted with those of journalism, with an eye toward understanding not only what they have in common (the need to cultivate and sustain rapport, for instance; the need to openly take notes, including use of notebook, voice recorder, and video recorder; the challenges of growing close to one's subject) but what they do not—the additional time commitment that is often demanded by ethnography, for example, or the value of certain cornerstones of journalistic research that ethnographers might not consider (capturing quotations, for example, or attention to topicality, or *filtering for story*: being mindful of how a particular scene or interaction might play on the page); and the problem of jargon.

The third and most important unit will be your own writing project. Beginning with the first class, students will brainstorm ideas for their own research. You will identify a person (it could be a bodega owner or burlesque dancer), or small group of people (it could be a girls' soccer team, a group of Masons, or political activists) whose lives you will visit over several weeks. You will also need a realistic backup plan in case the first
falls through. Once ideas are approved, you will begin conducting your own ethnographic research.

My goal throughout will be to help you shepherd raw ethnographic material into strong narrative writing—in other words, to move from "data" to stories. The overarching objective, after all, is not just to teach students of journalism some of what ethnographers already know, but to teach them what many ethnographers would like to know, which is how to write something compelling that can reach a larger audience.

Course structure

Introduction.
The rise of anthropology and sociology and the role of ethnography in both. Research: from interview to participant-observation. What ethnography is supposed to produce, and why its use has diminished in social science while growing in journalism. Comparison of some classic ethnographies with more recent works of journalism.

Entering "The Field."
An introduction to researching long-form journalism, and to the idea of "reporting for story." How do you take notes? What's worth writing down? What is this raw material for? Relationships with one's subject(s), and explicitness about point of view. Identifying a person or group of people to write about. Participant-observation and empathy. Ethics.

Research Into Story.
Conceptualizing a long-form piece of writing. Identifying themes. Elements of narrative: chronology, structure, character, scene, conflict, quotation. Writing practice. One goal: to not be boring! (See Tom Wolfe's The Right Stuff.) The use of drafts to identify research shortfalls. First-person narration; subjectivity as strength and weakness. Authorial voice and sensibility v. the sensibility of one's subject(s).
Course requirements

Coursework will consist of reading, discussion, presentations, a few short essays, taking field notes and presenting them in a fieldwork blog, and writing two short articles of 750-1000 words, and a culminating narrative of 1500-2000 words. And revisions!

A small seminar offers the advantage of attention from the instructor but comes with the obligation to participate. You must attend. If you are unable to or will be late, please let me know in advance. Missing more than two classes or arriving late repeatedly will lower your grade.

One third of your grade will depend on your attendance, on in-class participation including workshopping, and how much your contributions reflect an engagement with the assigned reading and with your classmates' work. Two-thirds will depend on the quality of your assignments.

Journalism is all about making deadlines: assignments turned in late will be marked down a half grade initially (i.e., an A will become an A-) and a full grade after 24 hours (i.e., an A will become a B).

Facebook group

The class has a private Facebook group. Please friend me so I can add you to it.

Books to buy

Storycraft, by Jack Hart
The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, by Anne Fadiman
War, by Sebastian Junger

Books we’ll read from

Sidewalk, by Mitchell Duneier
The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, by Erving Goffman
Writing Ethnographic Field Notes, by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw
The Right Stuff, by Tom Wolfe
Participant Observation, by James Spradley

Sample articles

"The American Man, Age Ten," by Susan Orlean (Esquire, December 1992)
"Ticket to the Fair," by David Foster Wallace (Harper's, July 1994)