

Critical Ethnography: The Politics and Poetics of Representation

Rhetoric 010:332:001; Communication Studies 036:378:001; POROI 160:332:001

Th 1:30-4:20

E 226 AJB

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Course Description

This course addresses the politics of representation within ethnographic inquiry. Students consider the interdependent relationship between knowledge production and (neo)colonization, and between transformative knowledge and decolonization. Ethnography is framed as a rhetorical form, emphasizing how ethnographic inscription renders “self,” “other,” “culture,” and the “world” intelligible in ways that reinscribe and/or challenge dominant (neo)colonial social relations. Students are encouraged to approach reading and writing as a rhetorical process to attend to the practice of writing itself at multiple levels: writing as a craft, an intellectual endeavor, and a political expression. Thus, the course works at both the level of textual form, with attention to the practice of writing itself, as well as at the socio-political level, in which we examine ethnography as inevitably a function power. Attention will be paid to axes of power such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation within postcolonial, feminist, and antiracist approaches to ethnographic/autoethnographic theory and praxis; negotiating researcher privilege and epistemic violence; blurring the boundary between fiction and ethnography; the crisis of representation. Writing exercises encourage students to write ethnographic texts which strive to work against the grain of power in self-reflexive, provocative, multivocal, empathic, and/or vulnerable ways. The course emphasizes theory, not methodologies, surrounding ethnographic practice and the politics of representation.

The structure of the course works from representation as “crisis” to alternative modes of representation that work within and through the problematics inherent in the power dynamics that constitute processes of signification. We begin by outlining some of the “problems” inherent in the politics of representation (what has been called the “crisis of representation”). Here we consider the relationship between the ethnographic project of the West/North and its epistemic and material production of the, and thus control over, subordinated East/South. From crisis, we then move through various ways of navigating through these problematics in reflexive and resistive ways. The work of the latter part of the semester is to locate creative strategies to work within and through the critiques of power relations that are otherwise ignored or become debilitating to those who recognize the dangers involved. We will pay explicit attention to literary form and actively work to develop skills of literary creative writing.

Course Goals

Students should gain a critical awareness of how power is always at work in the process of representing one’s “self,” “others,” and the “world.” Students will grapple with the risks of reifying those power relations that critical ethnographers and cultural workers seek to disrupt, coming to terms with the impossibility of neutrality, innocence, or benevolence as adequate strategies of resistive political intellectual work. Indeed, such strategies must be viewed as functions of the larger (neo)colonial project through which

they function. The goal is to come to a palpable understanding of this “crisis” of representation and the inevitability of our imbrication in relations of power. And yet, from this position of critical awareness our work will be to find creative and resistive ways to name, give voice to, and interpret those moments that constitute the marginality and/or privilege of “self” and “others” as complex and conflicted locations within social matrices of power. This work is simultaneously deeply personal and political. The goal is for each student, and the group as a whole, to face the crises of power that dominant culture seeks to sublimate and allow their meanings to deeply penetrate our beings. And from a space of humility and honesty, our goal is to find voices from which we can create productive texts in which we grapple with our own complicity. By closely examining the work of others engaging with the intersections between the political, intellectual, spiritual, and embodied, our goal is to gain insights and inspiration to “do our work.”

Expectations

Students should be willing to take risks in this class, both in terms of the self-explorations they undertake and in terms of their willingness to question major assumptions that they have held. Defensiveness blocks our work. Students are encouraged to come to crisis as a necessary component of doing this work. Students should also be willing to undertake significant reading and writing assignments with diligence and honesty. Students are expected to treat each other with respect, both in written and oral forms of communication. Students will be expected to read each other’s work and to allow other students to read their work as well. We will work from an “empathic listening” paradigm in class discussions, which means you must hear and acknowledge what others have said prior to your insertion into the conversation. Participation is strongly encouraged, but I am also aware that cultural and power differences may empower some students to speak more than others. In other words, more participation is not necessarily better participation. It is the students’ responsibility to balance out classroom air time use, drawing out other students, checking yourself if you’re talking too much, and challenging yourselves if you are afraid to speak.

Assignments

Students must be present in class to turn in assignments. Late assignments will not be accepted and make-ups will not be allowed, unless severe circumstances challenge the student.

- Weekly response papers to guide discussion: identify author’s thesis, a key concept, and your reflections. Handout provided.
- Lead class discussion on a day of your choice.
- Final paper—20 page research paper of your choice. Paper should be aimed toward publication and/or presentation within your discipline or beyond.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Michael Awkward, *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*. Durham: Duke. (1999).

Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota (1994).

Tobias Hecht, *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel*, Durham: Duke (2006)

Marjory Wolf. *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic*

Responsibility. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, (1992)
Carla Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean*. Durham: Duke (2000)
Piya Chatterjee, *Time for Tea*, Duke. 2001.

Books will be available at *Prairie Lights*. Reader will be available at *Zephyr's* on Washington Street in Iowa City and will be available on ICON.

Course Schedule (tentative)

WEEK 1

1/18 Introduction to the course
Screening: Stuart Hall, (1997). *Representation and the Media*. Video (55 minutes), Northampton, MA: Media Educational Foundation.

WEEK 2

1/25 ***The Crisis of Representation***

George Marcus and Michael Fischer, "A Crisis of Representation in the Human Sciences"

Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors"

Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees"

James Clifford, "Identity in Mashpee," from *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard, 1988

Cherríe Moraga, "Sour Grapes: The Art of Anger in America"

Response #1 Due

Recommended: *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Thomas Kuhn

Blow up and Other Stories, Julio Cortazar

Power/Knowledge, (lecture 2) Michel Foucault

WEEK 3

2/1 ***Multiplicity, Narrative, and Representation***

Marjorie Wolf, *Thrice Told Tale*

Response #2 Due

Recommended: "And of Clay We are Created," Isabel Allende

WEEK 4

2/8 ***The Politics of Representation***

Linda Alcoff, "The Politics of Speaking for Others"

Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception"

Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory"

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the savage slot: The poetics and politics of otherness." In *Recapturing Anthropology*. R. Fox (ed.) Pp. 17-44. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research

Mary John. 1989. "Postcolonial Feminists in the Western Intellectual Field:

Anthropologists and Native Informants.” In James Clifford and Vivek Dhareshwar, (eds.), *Traveling Theorists, Traveling Theories: Inscriptions 5*. Santa Cruz: Center for Cultural Studies at the University of California Santa Cruz

Screening: Trinh Minh Ha

Response #3 Due

Recommended: *I Rigoberta Menchu* Rigoberta Menchu

Orientalism, Edward Said

Bannerji, Himani. 1992. “But Who Speaks for Us? Experience and Agency in Conventional Feminist Paradigms”. In Bannerji, Himani, Kari Delhi, and Linda Carty, eds., *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles*. Boston, MA: South End Press: 67-108.

WEEK 5

2/15 ***Performance, Place, and the Organic Intellectual***

Michael Awkward, *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*

Response #4 Due

Recommended: *Zula*, Toni Morrison

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

WEEK 6

2/22 ***The Politics of Location: Spatializing Location and Belonging***

Ruth Frankenberg, “When We are Capable of Stopping, We Begin to See,” in *Names We Call Home*, ed. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi. University of Minnesota.

Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location”

Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place” from *Space, Place, and Gender*

Raka Shome, “Space Matters,” *Communication Theory*

Frankenberg, Ruth and Lata Mani. 1993. Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, ‘Postcoloniality,’ and the Politics of Location. *Cultural Studies*, 7(2): 292-310.

Phillip Lopate (2001). “Writing The Personal Essay: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character,” in Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard (eds.), *Writing Creating Nonfiction: Instruction and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*. Cincinnati: OH: Story Press.

Response #5 Due: the Politics of your Location

Recommended: Alarcón, Norma. 1991. “The Theoretical Subjects of *This Bridge Called My Back*.” In Gloria Anzaldúa (ed.), *Haciendo Caras*. San Francisco: Kitchen Table Press.

Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Joanna Kadi, “Speaking (about) Silence,” From *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray!*

WEEK 7

3/1 ***Globalizing Gendered Labor***

Carla Freeman, *High Heels and High Tech in the Global Economy*

Response #6 Due

Recommended: Marx, Karl. 1967. *Capital*, vol. 1. New York: International Publishers.

Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

WEEK 8

3/8 ***Self-Reflexivity and Solidarity in Ethnographic Representation***

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles”

Jayati Lal, “Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity, and ‘Other’ in Living and Writing the Text,” in Diane Wolf (ed.) 1996, *Dilemmas in Feminist Fieldwork*

George Marcus, “The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork”

Aimee Carrillo Rowe, “Bridge Inscriptions”

Virginia Dominguez, “For the Politics of Love and Rescue”

Judith Stacey, “Can there Be a Feminist Ethnography?”

Davis, Dawn Rae. 2002. (Love Is) the Ability of Not Knowing: Feminist Experience of the Impossible in Ethical Singularity. *Hypatia*, 17:2:145-161.

Judith Ortiz Cofer. 2001. “The Woman Who Slept with One Eye Open,” in Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard (eds.), *Writing Creating Nonfiction: Instruction and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*. Cincinnati: OH: Story Press

Response #7 Due

Recommended: Albrecht, Lisa B. and Rose M. Brewer. 1990. *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances*. Philadelphia: New Society.

Alexander, Jacqui. 2002. “Remembering Bridge.” In *This Bridge We Call Home*. Edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating. New York: Routledge.

Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”

SPRING BREAK (March 12-16)

WEEK 9

3/22 ***Third World Feminist Ethnography***

Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Minnesota

Response #8 Due

Recommended: Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands: La frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Freedom: The Crossing Press.

Moraga, Cherríe. 2000. *Loving in the War Years : Lo que Nunca Pasó por sus Labios*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

WEEK 10

3/29 ***The Problem of Experience***

Joan Scott, “The Problem of Experience”

Giorgio Agamben, selected readings from *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*

Paula Moya, “Postmodernism, ‘Realism,’ and the Politics of Identity”

Alice Walker, "Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain"

Response #9 Due: Write an Experience from multiple vantages

Recommended Readings: Harding, Sandra. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hartsock, Nancy. 1987. "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." In *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Edited by Sandra Harding. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Moya, Paula. 2002. *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Moya, Paula and Michael R. Hames-García, eds. 2000. *Reclaiming identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Berkeley: university of California Press.

Laura Wexler. 2001. "Saying Good-Bye to 'Once Upon a Time,' or Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction," in Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard (eds.), *Writing Creating Nonfiction: Instruction and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*. Cincinnati: OH: Story Press.

WEEK 11

4/5 ***Experimental Postcolonial Feminist Ethnography***

Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*

Response #10 Due

Recommended: Spivak, Gayatri. 1992. *Thinking Academic Freedom in Gendered Post-Coloniality*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

Stoler, Ann. 1995. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

WEEK 12

4/12 ***On the Politics and Poetics of Ethnographic Writing***

James Clifford, Introduction, from James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*

Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, "The Basics of Good Writing in any Form," *Tell it Slant*. NY: McGraw Hill, 2004

Anne Lamott, "Looking Around," from *Bird by Bird*

James Clifford, "White Ethnicity"

Brenda Miller. (2001). "A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay," in Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard (eds.), *Writing Creating Nonfiction: Instruction and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*. Cincinnati: OH: Story Press.

Response #11 due: Experimental/creative text—a Braided Essay

Recommended: Behar, Ruth. 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*, Boston : Beacon Press.

WEEK 13

4/19 ***Ethnographic Fiction***

Tobias Hecht, *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel*

Judith Ortiz Cofer. 2001. "But Tell it Slant: From Poetry to Prose and Back Again," in

Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard (eds.), *Writing Creating Nonfiction: Instruction and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*. Cincinnati: OH: Story Press.

Response #12 Due

Recommended Reading: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

WEEK 14

4/26 Integration

WEEK 15

5/3 **Final Papers Due**