

# Introduction to Urban Ethnographies

URBS UN3308  
Fall 2018  
Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:10-2:25pm

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Office hours: MCL 715, Wed. 2:45-4:00 pm and by appointment

Image: Helen Levitt (<https://mymodernmet.com/helen-levitt-subway-photography/>)

## Course Description

What is an ethnography and what makes an ethnography “urban”? This course explores how social scientists use ethnography to analyze questions and dilemmas often associated with urban settings. We will combine close readings of ethnographies with field-based inquiry, including our own studies of urban public space. Through both our readings and our field exercises, we will focus on the methods at the heart of ethnography: observation and participant-observation.

As we read other scholars’ work, we will ask how the author uses ethnographic tools to explore issues that are suitable to intensive fieldwork. We will assess which kinds of research problems and theoretical perspectives are a good fit with ethnography and the roles that ethnography can play in transdisciplinary research projects. You will apply what you have learned about research design to your own pilot fieldwork. The ethnographies that we read together will examine intersections of housing, race, and class in urban communities. You are welcome to extend this focus to your own fieldwork, but it’s not required to do so. This is a writing-intensive course, and we will devote a considerable portion of class time to workshopping your individual projects.

### Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Explain differing ways that ethnographic methods have been used to understand urban policies, spaces, and communities.

- Identify multiple analytical perspectives on how individuals and groups shape and are shaped by social structures and processes.
- Critically read ethnographic work with regard to the appropriateness of the methods, theories, and data used to answer research questions.
- Use a toolkit of skills and strategies for field work, including developing research questions; designing research projects; managing ethics in the field; writing jottings, fieldnotes and analytic memos; conducting interviews; and analyzing qualitative data.

As an elective course for the Urban Studies Program, this course provides instruction and/or learning experiences to help students develop knowledge and skills to prepare them for their senior thesis research and to achieve several of the Program’s student learning objectives, namely:

- Apply concepts or methods from more than one social science or adjacent discipline to analyze an urban issue or problem.
- Describe the distinctive social, cultural, and spatial features of cities and illustrate their impacts on the urban experience.
- Apply basic skills of empirical reasoning to an urban problem.
- Explain how the idea of the city varies in different historical and comparative contexts.
- Demonstrate familiarity with a particular disciplinary approach to the city as an object of study.
- Communicate ideas effectively in written or oral form.

## Course Requirements

### Class Attendance and Participation (20% of your grade)

This is a discussion and workshop-based course. Our success and shared learning – both your own and your peers’ – depend on you. Please arrive on time and ready to think through the week’s assignments, with notes and questions that you want to discuss in class. There are many ways to participate in class. Listening actively, asking questions, commenting on the thoughts of others, or discussing tentative, speculative ideas are just as important to our shared learning as stating original, completely-formed thoughts. Please also prepare to share your own writing and to respond to your peers’ work with generous, productive feedback.



You may miss one (and only one!) class meeting with no penalty for the semester. You don’t need to explain yourself to me if you decide to miss class, but please be sure to reach out to your peers and to me to make sure you catch up on what you missed. If you are not in class, you are still responsible for the readings and assigned work, including any announcements I might make about updates to assignments, deadlines, etc. If you have an unavoidable conflict that requires you to miss additional classes, please reach out to me immediately.

### Reading Memos (20% of your grade)

Some days, I will ask you to formalize your preparation for class discussions by writing memos about course readings. These assignments will ask you to reflect critically on assignments and will provide the basis for our class discussions. Prompts for reading memos can be found on the class website.



### Fieldwork Assignments (15% of your grade)

Ethnography is a hands-on science and is best learned through trial and error. In order to develop your ethnographic toolkit, you will be asked to regularly observe of public spaces and interactions. These observations will serve as the basis for your fieldwork assignments, analytic memos, and final course paper. You will choose a public place to serve as a research site and conduct focused observations in that research site for at least 2 hours/week over the course of 6 weeks. You will then analyze the data you collect through a series of memos. You will use these fieldnotes and memos to write a paper that answers a research question.



Your research *must* take place in a public space, such as a park, a library, a café, a sports game, a public meeting, or a subway. Your research site should be a place in which participants do not expect privacy (e.g., don’t follow people into bathrooms, even if they’re technically “public”). If you have any questions at all about whether a space is public, ask me.

You will not collect any identifying information and you are not permitted to make audio or video recordings. As you observe, you will write jottings. Later, you will transform them into fieldnotes that document your observation, based on specific prompts (see course website for details).

Your fieldwork and analytic memos will be challenging and time-consuming. Why don't they count for more of your grade? Because you are going to make many mistakes in this part of the process, and that's okay. With practice and feedback, you will learn to do this work better. What matters in this class is whether you learn from your experience and demonstrate that learning in your final project. I will grade two sets of field notes during the course of the semester.

### **Analytic Memos (15% of your grade)**

Periodically, you will write memos that analyze the data you have collected for this class. These memos will allow you to reflect on observations, to think through dilemmas associated with fieldwork, and to begin developing ideas for your final project. You will share these memos in small groups in order to maximize opportunities for peer feedback and collaborative problem-solving. We will write several of these memos in class, but you will write others on your own and upload them on the course website, according to instructions posted on the website. I will grade 2-3 of your memos during the course of the semester.



### **Final Paper: Research Proposal (30% of your grade)**

The course paper assignment asks you to propose a research study inspired by the data you have collected. You could propose a project that builds on or differs significantly from the fieldwork you have done for this course. Specifically, your paper will include an introduction, a review of prior research related to your project, a description of your methods to date (including their strengths and limitations), an analysis of your preliminary findings, and a proposal for a follow-up study. We will discuss details about what should be included in your paper throughout the semester, as we plan and reflect on your fieldwork. Your final paper will be 15-20 double-spaced pages.



### **Course Expectations**

- **I may adjust assignments based on how the group discussion progresses.** Please check your Barnard or Columbia email regularly for updates.
- **Our success will depend on every member of the class being actively engaged as both learners and teachers.** Each of us has valuable experiences and perspectives that will inform our collective knowledge. It is very important that you let me know if you have questions about the concepts being discussed during the course. Please email or schedule a meeting with me if asking questions in class is difficult.
- **Avoid using cell phones in class.** We will work together to develop guidelines for computer use that minimizes distractions during class.
- **All assignments are required to pass this course. An "A" grade will be awarded to students who have exceeded, not simply met, the course requirements.** All written work is graded on thoroughness, quality of analysis, level of support from data and/or research literature, organization and clarity.
- The assignments in this class are designed to help you move step-by-step through the process of creating your final paper, so it is important that you complete each assignment on time. **Unless noted otherwise, all assignments are due before class begins on the due date noted. Late work will be penalized one grade each day it is late. Each semester, you will have the opportunity to use one (and only one) "late pass" which will allow you to submit an assignment up to 48 hours after the deadline.** Please be sure to back up all of your work; problems with technology will not excuse late assignments. Written assignments should be submitted as a Microsoft Word document in Times New Roman, size 12, and double spaced, with 1-inch margins.
- **Your success in this class is important to me. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know as soon as possible.** We will work together develop strategies that meet both your needs and the course requirements. If you need official accommodations, you have a right to have these met. Please make sure you are registered in advance with your Office of Disability Services (ODS).
- **One of the requirements of this course is that you work with a Barnard Writing Fellow for two papers.** One of the requirements of this course is working with a Barnard Writing Fellow. The Barnard Writing Fellows Program

(founded in 1991) is designed to help students strengthen their writing in all disciplines. We believe that writing is a process; it happens in stages, in different drafts. Often the most fruitful dialogues about your writing occur with your peers, and the Writing Fellows are just that. They are not tutors or TAs; they are Barnard undergraduates who participate in a semester-long workshop in the teaching of writing and, having finished their training, staff the Barnard Writing Center and work in courses across the disciplines. It is not their role to comment on the accuracy of the content of your papers, nor to grade your work. They are not enrolled in your course. You will probably know more about the course's specific material than they do, and your papers must therefore be written clearly enough so that the non-expert can understand them. Two dates are listed for each piece of writing assigned. You will hand in your first draft to your instructor on the first date, who will pass it on to your Writing Fellow. The Writing Fellow will read it, write comments, and conference with you on it, after which you will have a week to revise the paper and hand in a final version on the second date. Sign up for your Writing Fellow in class when you first hand in your paper. Conference locations will be indicated on the sign-up sheet. Please make a note of when and where you have scheduled your conference. Also, please make sure to record your Writing Fellow's email and phone number when you sign up for your conference in case you need to contact her. If you have any questions about the Writing Program, please contact DaMonique Ballou, the Program Coordinator ([dballou@barnard.edu](mailto:dballou@barnard.edu); 212-854-8941). For more detailed information about the program, please see: [www.barnard.edu/writing](http://www.barnard.edu/writing)

- **Academic Integrity:** I take academic integrity extremely seriously. All work that you submit for this class must be your own. Building on the ideas of others is a critical part of academic work, but **you must clearly credit the people whose ideas and/or words you are using every time you use them**. Do not present the work of another as your own by copying or paraphrasing their words or ideas without properly citing them. Include the author and date of publication you are referencing in your text and have complete bibliographic information at the end of the paper. Use quotation marks every time you borrow another author's language, even if you also cite them. If you do not follow these conventions, you are plagiarizing. **If you plagiarize you will receive no credit for the assignment and you will face the disciplinary rules of your college.** We will discuss how to cite sources properly in class. Please ask me if you have any questions. The [Barnard Library's Citation Guide](#) and the [Online Writing Lab](#) at Purdue are useful resources if you have questions about citation mechanics. All students are responsible for understanding and complying with the [Barnard Honor Code](#).
- **Some college students have difficulty affording sufficient food to eat every day, lack a safe and stable place to live, or experience challenges balancing school work with paid work or family responsibilities.** Those challenges can create considerable anxiety and may affect students' abilities to perform in a course. If you are experiencing these or other challenges, I encourage you to reach out to [your class dean](#) for support. Please also notify me if you feel comfortable doing so, so that I can assist you in accessing support.

### Required Texts

All assigned articles (or select book chapters, when indicated) are available on CourseWorks in the "Files and Resources" section. The assigned books (below) are on reserve at Barnard library and available for purchase at Book Culture:

- Desmond, Matthew. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Pattillo, Mary. 2007. *Black on the Block: The politics of race and class in the city*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (available as an ebook via CLIO)
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. University of Chicago Press, 2011.



Helen Levitt (<https://mymodernmet.com/helen-levitt-subway-photography/>)

## Assignment Schedule

Guiding Question(s)	Dates	What to read?	What's due when?
What is this course about?	9/5	Syllabus	
What is ethnography? What makes an ethnography "urban"?	9/10	<b>No Class (Rosh Hashanah)</b>	Analytic memo: Your ethnographic self, due 9pm on 9/10
	9/12	Duneier, Mitchell, Philip Kasinitz, and Alexandra K. Murphy. <i>The Urban Ethnography Reader</i> . Oxford University Press, 2014. "An Invitation to Urban Ethnography."  Leonardo, Zeus, and Margaret Hunter. 2007. "Imagining the Urban: The Politics of Race, Class, and Schooling." In <i>International Handbook of Urban Education</i> , edited by W. Pink and G. Noblit, 779–802. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.  Low, Setha M. 1996. "The Anthropology of Cities: Imagining and Theorizing the City." <i>Annual Review of Anthropology</i> 25 (1): 383–409.	
	9/17	<i>Evicted</i> , Prologue and Part One	
	9/19	<b>No Class (Yom Kippur)</b> <i>Evicted</i> , Part Two	
	9/24	<i>Evicted</i> , Part Three and Epilogue	
	9/26	<i>Evicted</i> , "About This Project"  Desmond, Matthew. 2012. "Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty." <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> 118 (1): 88–133. doi:10.1086/666082.  -- OR --  Desmond, Matthew. 2012. "Disposable Ties and the Urban Poor." <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> 117 (5): 1295–1335. doi:10.1086/663574.	
	10/1	<i>Black on the Block</i> , Introduction, Ch. 1 and Ch. 2	
	10/3	<i>Black on the Block</i> , Ch. 3-4	
	10/8	<i>Black on the Block</i> , Chapter 5-6 and Conclusion	Reading memo: Comparing two approaches – draft due by 10/9, revision due by 9pm on 10/21

<p><b>What will my fieldwork look like?</b>  <b>What decisions will it involve?</b>  <b>How will I make sense of what I observe?</b></p>	10/10	<p>Venkatesh, Sudhir. (2002). "'Doin' the hustle': Constructing the ethnographer in the American ghetto." <i>Ethnography</i>, 3(1): 91–111.</p> <p>Fine, Gary Alan. 1994. "Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas in Field Research." <i>Journal of Contemporary Ethnography</i> 22 (3): 267–94.</p>	CITI/RASCAL certification (email me confirmation)
	10/15	<p><i>Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes</i>, Ch. 1.</p> <p>Brown, T. (2011). <i>Raising Brooklyn: Nannies, Childcare, and Caribbeans Creating Community</i>. New York: NYU Press. Introduction &amp; Chapter 2.</p>	
	10/17	<i>Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes</i> , Ch. 2 & 3	Reading memo revision due by 9pm on 10/21
	10/22		Fieldnotes: Initial impressions
	10/24	<i>Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes</i> , Ch. 4	
	10/29		Fieldnotes: Space and Perspective
	10/31	<p>Jerolmack, Colin. 2009. "Primary Groups and Cosmopolitan Ties: The Rooftop Pigeon Flyers of New York City." <i>Ethnography</i> 10 (4): 435–57.</p>	
	11/5	<b>No class – Academic Holiday</b>	
	11/7	<p>Geertz, Clifford. 2001 (1973). "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture."</p>	Fieldnotes: Thick descriptions
<p><b>How can I use ethnography in future research?</b></p>	11/12	<p><i>Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes</i>, Ch. 5</p> <p>Khan, Shamus, &amp; Jerolmack, Colin. (2013). Saying Meritocracy and Doing Privilege. <i>Sociological Quarterly</i>, 54(1): 9–19.</p>	Fieldnotes: Insider and outsider perspectives
	11/14	<b>No class – final day of fieldwork and/or literature review</b>	Fieldnotes: Conversations due 11/17
	11/19		Analytic memo: Annotated bibliography
	11/21	<b>No Class – Thanksgiving Holiday</b>	
	11/26	<p><i>Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes</i>, Ch. 6</p> <p>Timmermans, Stefan, and Iddo Tavory. 2012. "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis." <i>Sociological Theory</i> 30 (3): 167–86.</p>	Analytic memo: Surprises and questions about your data
	11/28	<p>Freidus, Alexandra. Selected field notes.</p> <p>Freidus, Alexandra. Dissertation Proposal.</p> <p>Freidus, Alexandra. 2018. "Race, Class, and Belonging: Diversifying Schools in Gentrifying New York." New York University. Chapter 2.</p>	
	12/3	Proposal workshops	Project proposal outline

	12/5	Readings TBD, depending on group questions	Project proposal draft due
	12/10	Readings TBD, depending on group questions	Revised project proposal due 12/17