
Research Design: The Craft of Ethnographic Writing

ANTH 611

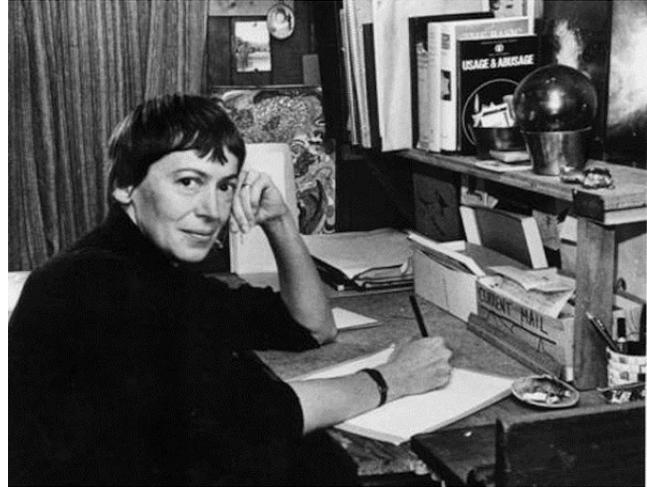
2:35 pm – 5:25 pm

Lisa Stevenson

Fall 2020



Zora Neale Hurston at her typewriter.



Ursula K. Le Guin at her desk.

Zora-Neale Hurston on curiosity:

"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein."

Ursula K. Le Guin on rhythm:

"Writing, whatever its medium, is made of words, and words are bodily, made with the body and the breath, received by the body, felt with the body, and the rhythms of words are bodily rhythms."

Marilyn Strathern on the "gap" that opens up when she is writing:

"It is a moment of dissolution, when past certainties melt away, and everything one thought was at one's fingertips (materials, notes, analyses) slips out of grasp. For myself, at least, it is climbing out of the crevasse, emotionally speaking, that is the writing."

Tim Ingold on the uses of breakfast cereal:

"Sheets of card cut from used cereal packets are perfect for catching thoughts on the fly. They are sufficiently stiff that you do not need anything to press on, and large enough to allow ample, unruled space. Sometimes I wake up in the early morning with a problem paragraph that I had been struggling with for all of the previous day perfectly formed in my head. Propped up in bed, I quickly write it down on a cereal packet card."

This is a seminar on the craft of ethnographic writing. Class activities will include reading and commenting on the work of classmates, discussing ethnographic and literary, as well as engaging in a variety of writing exercises.

Participants should have completed fieldwork and be actively working on an MA or PhD thesis in anthropology. If interested, please contact Lisa Stevenson at lisa.e.stevenson@mcgill.ca. In your email, please outline your current project and what you would like to get from the class. What are your strengths and challenges as a writer?

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Course Outline – ANTH 611: Research Design

General Information

Course #	611
Term	Fall
Year	2020
Course schedule	Thursdays, 2:35-5:25pm
Number of credits	3 credits

Instructor Information

Name and Title	Professor Lisa Stevenson
E-mail	lisa.e.stevenson@mcgill.ca
Virtual office hours	(replace this text)

Course Overview

Anthropology: Research design in anthropology.

Terms: Fall 2020

Instructors: Stevenson, Margaret (Fall)

Regarding Remote Delivery

The remote learning context presents new challenges for all involved, and student engagement is of particular concern. My hope for this class is that we can experiment together and find ways to build intellectual community despite our physical distance. Let's just remember that this is a complicated time for everyone that takes us out of our so-called zones of comfort. Let's use that as a possibility for shaking things up and finding new ways of being together.

Learning Outcomes

This is a class on the craft of ethnographic writing. I hope that collectively, through sharing our work and our techniques, we will each be able to hone our craft.

Instructional Method

This is a seminar. Attendance and participation is paramount. It's about being there virtually.

Recordings of Sessions

These sessions will not be recorded, to allow for freer conversation.

Required Course Materials

All course materials will be available on MyCourses.

Course Requirements

Students should be in the process of writing a MA or PhD thesis.

Assignments

The following are some of the topics we will cover in the course.

The readings are for inspiration and not to be considered onerous. We will discuss them lightly. If it is not helpful, move on to something else.

The object of the class is rather to write and read each other's writing. Each week we will discuss a longer, chapter length piece of writing of 1-2 students in the class. Each week there will be a 1-2 page exercises for each student to complete. These exercises are just that. They should exercise your writing muscles and are moments to 1) experiment with an unfamiliar form/style/aspect of writing, or 2) take a piece of already written material and polish it.

Each week you will peer review on Peergrade the chapter submission plus 2 of your classmates short pieces of writing.

Peergrade Submissions

To submit an assignment to peergrade, follow the guidelines listed in this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQT3KilEuKQ>



Course Content

Week 0--Introduction to the Class.

Week 1 – Rituals

Reading (Choose one or two, or all of them)

Emina: “Review of Daily Rituals by Mason Currey” *The Guardian* (2013)

Strathern collection (this is a website, I will send you later)

Didion: “On Keeping a Notebook” (1979)

Murakami: “The Running Novelist” *The New Yorker* (2008)

Popova: “The Third Self” (2016)

Week 3 – Structure

Reading

McPhee: “Structure: Beyond the Picnic-Table Crisis” *The New Yorker* (2013)

Reverse Outline handout

Exercise: Provide a one page outline of your dissertation. Chapter summaries should be in non-technical non jargony language. Provide a one page outline (generated from a reverse outline) of one of your chapters. Show how the ideas flow.

Week 4 – Ends

Reading

Hurston: “Research” [1942]

Taussig: “The Corn-Wolf: Writing Apotropaic Texts” (2010)

Popova: “Zadie Smith on Optimism and Despair” (2018)

Narayan: “Writing to Be Alive” (2012)

Exercise:

Write one to two pages on what the ends of your thesis are. Avoid classic formulations. Why are *you* writing? Why does it matter to *you*?

Week 5 – Writing with Care

Reading

Paper Boat Collective: “Introduction: Archipelagos, A Voyage in Writing” (2017)

Jackson: "After the Fact: The Question of Fidelity in Ethnographic Writing" (2017)

Elliott: "Writing" (2017)

Exercise

Michael Jackson asks, "How can our writing refuse this complicity in the death of the subject, and become a form of natality, recovering life in the face of death?" Describe a situation in your fieldwork where the question of fidelity and even the life and death of the subject became important to you.

Week 7 – Ethnography and Literature

Reading

Fassin: "True life, Real Lives: Revisiting the Boundaries Between Ethnography and Fiction" (2014)

Byler and Iverson: "Literature, Writing & Anthropology" *Cultural Anthropology* (2012)

This source is the introduction to a collection of 5 articles

Exercise

Write a short piece (1-2 pages) of ethnographic fiction.

Week 8 – Ethnography and Poetry

Reading

Corson: "An Introduction to Documentary Poetry" (2018)

Metres: "From Reznikoff to Public Enemy" (2007)

Rosaldo: *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief* (2013) The whole book or an excerpt?

Rukeyser: "The Book of the Dead" (1938)

Rankine: "Don't Let Me Be Lonely [There was a time]" (2004)

Exercise

Write an ethnographic/documentary poem.

Week 9 – Portraiture

Reading

Stevenson: "Looking Away" *Cultural Anthropology* (2020)

Exercise

Write a portrait from fieldwork.

Week 10 – Description

Reading

Berger: Excerpt from *Bento's Sketchbook* (2011)

YouTube video: "John Berger's Suggestions to a Young Writer" (2014)

Describe something from fieldwork in great detail.

Week 11 – Place

Reading

Narayan: "Place" (2012)

Exercise, *Set the Stage* taken from "Place"

Set the stage for an event you want to describe. Include, in any order, at least passing mentions of the season, place- names, the landscape, the built environment, and (if applicable) an interior. **W o r k w i t h a l l o f y o u r s e n s e s . 2 p a g e s**

Week 6 – Moves

Reading

Harvard Writing Guide (I put it in the drop box)

Look over a chapter or an article you have written and outline its "moves"

Look over a chapter/article of ethnographic writing you admire and outline its "moves."

Week 12 – The Unknown

Reading

Pandian: "A Method of Experience: Reading, Writing, Teaching, Fieldwork" (2019)

Describe a situation where the "unknown" mattered to you in fieldwork.

Week 2 – Sound of Writing

Reading

Le Guin: “The Sound of Your Writing” (2015)

Le Guin: “Ursula K. Le Guin, The Art of Fiction No. 221” (2013)

Oliver: “Sound” (1994)

Exercise

Being Gorgeous, from “The Sound of Your Writing” with the additional challenge that the page be ethnography.

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EXERCISE ONE: Being Gorgeous

**Part One:** Write a paragraph to a page of narrative that’s meant to be read aloud. Use onomatopoeia, alliteration,\* repetition, rhythmic effects, made-up words or names, dialect—any kind of sound effect you like—but *NOT rhyme or meter.*\*

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Evaluation

Evaluation will be based on the quality of your participation and the seriousness with which you take the assignments. It is NOT about producing immaculate work but about exercising your ethnographic writing muscles. All weekly assignments and chapter length manuscript assignments must be submitted to receive an A grade for the course.

McGill Policy Statements

Language of Submission

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.” (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009 - see also the section in this document on Assignments and Evaluation.)

Note: In courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives, the assessments shall be in the language of the course.

Academic Integrity

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures” (see [McGill’s guide to academic honesty](#) for more information). (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

Additional Statements (Please Read Carefully!)

- “The [University Student Assessment Policy](#) exists to ensure fair and equitable academic assessment for all students and to protect students from excessive workloads. All students and instructors are encouraged to review this Policy, which addresses multiple aspects and methods of student assessment, e.g. the timing of evaluation due dates and weighting of final examinations.”
- “Note that to support academic integrity, your assignments may be submitted to text-matching or other appropriate software (e.g., formula-, equation-, and graph-matching).”
- “© Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, podcasts) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.”
- “As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the [Office for Students with Disabilities](#), 514-398-6009.”
- Content warning: Please be aware that some of the course content may be disturbing for some students. It has been included in the course because it directly relates to the learning outcomes. Please contact the instructor if you have specific concerns about this.”
- In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.”
- Additional policies governing academic issues which affect students can be found in the McGill Charter of Students’ Rights (see [document](#)).
- McGill has policies on sustainability, paper use and other initiatives to promote a culture of sustainability at McGill. (See the [Office of Sustainability](#).)

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- “McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.”