

## The Ethnographic Imagination

Walsh Building 498. -- 2pm-4:30pm

"Haunt. You've heard me say this word a lot. It is never enough for the reader of your words to be convinced. The goal is to haunt -- to have them thinking about your words before bed, see them manifest in their dreams, tell their partner about them the next morning, to have them grab random people on the street, shake them and say, 'Have you read this yet?'"

-Ta-Nahinsi Coates, 2024, pg 5 *The Messenger*

Associate Professor Jamon Halvaksz

Pronouns: He/Him

Office: 🚗 📧 308G

Personal Website: [www.jamonhalvaksz.com](http://www.jamonhalvaksz.com)

Office hours: Mon., 11-1 and by appointment

Email: [jamon.halvaksz@georgetown.edu](mailto:jamon.halvaksz@georgetown.edu)

In this course, which is one of your requirements towards the major/minor, we explore two things. First, how has ethnography been thought of during the period of modern anthropology and how it has been approached in a variety of anthropological traditions around the world?

Second, how should we think of imagination? What part does imagination play in anthropological approaches to writing, visualizing, recording, describing, and analyzing culture, society, and difference? Doesn't the very notion of imagination clash with the idea of objectivity and distance in academic scholarship?

And yet, without imagination, we have no vehicle to think about the past, the future, how to conceive of problems, ask questions, or craft alternatives to current ideas, practices, or how we engage with the world and each other. Even the driest report on statistical anomalies comes from and addresses a problem - wherein, there is, the work of imagining.

### Texts

In addition to select articles and chapters, we will use the following texts (available as e-books through the Georgetown library):

- Petryna, A. (2022). *Horizon Work: At the Edges of Knowledge in an Age of Runaway Climate Change*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1vbd0t0>
- Tengan, T. P. K. (2008). *Native Men Remade: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Hawai'i*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11312sh>
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). Part 1, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bcc>
- West, Paige. 2016. *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/west17878>.

## Assignments and Grading

### **Attendance and Participation** 20 points

Attendance is required. Small discussion courses rely on the variety of insights that you as a student bring to the reading, as well as the diversity of perspectives on how a set of ideas fits into the real world. As such, attendance will be recorded. If you have a university approved and documented reason for absence, you will be excused. Students are allowed 1 unexcused absence before impacting their grades. 2% will be deducted from your final grade for each absence

### **Fieldnotes to Descriptive Text** 15 points, due 9/24

Before class on 9/10, students will spend an hour observing and taking fieldnotes on an event or at a place of interest to them. These will be typed and at 4 copies should be brought to class to share in groups. We will work with these initial notes to writing descriptive texts 'setting the scene' of ethnographic enquiry and imagination.

### **Discussion Questions** 20 points

Each week 2 students will be assigned to create discussion questions related to the readings. These can be questions that the student had about the materials, things that they found confusing, or interesting comparisons that they want to explore among the readings for the week, and with past texts. Each student will share 5 questions at the start of the class and lead the discussion of these. Students should work together to divide up responsibility for readings. A printed copy should be provided to the professor and shared electronically with students via Canvas before class. Each student will share responsibility for 2 weeks of class. In general, discussion will be divided between small group and class discussion. Questions should be written with this approach in mind.

### **Film Essay** 15 points, Due 10/29

In 3-4 pages compare the nuances of narrative and ethnographic detail in the films about Joe Leahy with the narratives of Paige West. How do they differ in audience and goals? How do each accomplish their goals? What do we learn from film that we can't learn from the text, and what can we learn for the text that we don't see in the film?

### **Final Reflection** 30 pts, Due 12/17 by 6pm

What kind of ethnographic writer are you? Where do you draw your inspiration? In a 5-7 page essay, drawing on course materials, fictions, films, readings in other disciplines, etc., reflect on how you would approach writing. Your essay should include an organizing thesis or statement, a discussion of examples of the sort of writing that draws you in and haunts you, and how that style might inform your own approach.

### Grade Distribution and Letter Grade Range by %

100-94: A	82-80: B-	69-65: D+
93-90: A-	79-76: C+	64-60: D
89-86: B+	75-73: C	59-00: F
85-83: B	72-70: C-	

### **Course Policies:**

Please be mindful and aware of Georgetown's academic policies for undergraduates:

<https://honorcouncil.georgetown.edu>

<https://academicsupport.georgetown.edu>

### Deadlines

Students should make every effort to submit their assignments and materials on time in order to ensure prompt feedback and grading. However, we are all human and things happen. In the event that a deadline is missed or going to be missed, please reach out so we can discuss make-up assignments and set new timelines. If you feel at any point that you are overwhelmed with deadlines or are falling behind, please reach out as soon as possible. I will try to be accommodating for circumstances beyond your control.

### Copyright and Fair Use

It is important to understand the issue of intellectual property rights. You may not use the images or thoughts of others for profit or gain without their written permission. This includes plagiarism and use of texts without proper citation.

### Changes

The syllabus is subject to change at the instructor's discretion. Any changes/corrections to the course materials, assignment dates, or other updates will be communicated to the students ahead of time. You are responsible for checking Canvas for corrections or updates to the syllabus.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

### **Week 1**

Wednesday 8/27

Introduction to the course.

### *What is the Ethnographic Imagination?*

### **Week 2**

Wednesday 9/3

Read:

- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1936. Introduction in *The Imagination* (3 pages)
- Le Guin, Ursula. 2019. The Importance of the Imagination  
<https://thedewdrop.org/2019/09/27/ursula-le-guin-and-the-importance-of-imagination/>
- Faye V. Harrison (2012). Writing the Anthropological Imagination for Public Engagement. *Journal for the Anthropology of North America* 15(2): 50-59
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Pardon my French: in incomprehension and slow understanding, imagination can return." *The Atlantic*, June 2013, 44+. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed August 10, 2025).

Video: Anthropology, Our Imagination, and how to Understand Difference

### *What does it mean to write ethnographically? How is writing part imagination? Part literary? Part Experience?*

### **Week 3** Fieldnotes due for peer discussion

Wednesday 9/10

Geertz, C. Being 1988. Being There: Anthropology and the Scene of Writing in *Works and Lives*

McGranahan, C. 2020. Introduction. On Writing and Writing Well: Ethics, Practice, Story. Chapter 1 in *Writing Anthropology*

**Week 4** Descriptive text due for peer discussion

Wednesday 9/17

Pandian, A. 2020. The Ecology of What We Write. Chapter 4 in *Writing Anthropology*  
Hollan, D 2024. Hands in Memory and Imagination. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 35(2).  
Behar, R. 1986. The Vulnerable Observer, Chpt 1 in *The Vulnerable Observer*

Class peer discussion can continue, but I do have to leave at 3:55 for a meeting with the college.

*Ethnographic examples*

**Week 5** Final descriptive text due in class

Wednesday 9/24

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1976 [1937]. Chapter 1 in *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*

See also: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E. E. Evans-Pritchard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._E._Evans-Pritchard)

Zora Neale Hurston, selected readings from *Barracoon*

See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zora\\_Neale\\_Hurston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zora_Neale_Hurston)

Deloria, E. C., & Deloria, P. J. (2022). Introduction. In R. J. DeMallie & T. Veyrié (Eds.), *The Dakota Way of Life* (pp. 1–16). University of Nebraska Press.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3006xrc.9>

See also: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella\\_Cara\\_Deloria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella_Cara_Deloria)

Film: Zora Neal Hurston/EE Evans Pritchard clips

**Week 6**

Wednesday 10/1

Tengan, T. P. K. (2008). *Native Men Remade: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Hawai'i*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11312sh> pages 1-92

Ebook through Library

**Week 7**

Wednesday 10/8

Tengan, T. P. K. (2008). *Native Men Remade: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Hawai'i*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11312sh> pages 125-218

Ebook through Library

**Week 8**

Wednesday 10/15, No class, students will work towards completing a film essay due 10/29

Watch *Joe Leahy's Neighbors*

<https://wrlc->

[gu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01WRLC\\_GUNIV/15eloc1/alma991037640771504111](https://wrlc-gu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01WRLC_GUNIV/15eloc1/alma991037640771504111)

West, Paige. 2016. *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/west17878>. pages 1-62

**Week 9**

Wednesday 10/22

Film: Black Harvest

West, Paige. 2016. *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/west17878>. Pages 63-110

Ebook through Library

**Week 10** Film essay due

Wednesday 10/29

West, Paige. 2016. *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/west17878>. Pages 111-152

Ebook through Library

**Week 11**

Wednesday 11/5

Tsing, A. L. (2015). Part 1, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bcc>

**Week 12**

Wednesday 11/12, Digital ethnography and non-linear texts

Feral Atlas <https://feralatlant.org>

Film: *Tambuna Stori*

**Week 13**

Wednesday 11/20

Petryna, A. (2022). *Horizon Work: At the Edges of Knowledge in an Age of Runaway Climate Change*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1vbd0t0> pages 1-78

Ebook through Library

**Week 14** Wednesday No Class

**Week 15**

Wednesday 12/3

Petryna, A. (2022). *Horizon Work: At the Edges of Knowledge in an Age of Runaway Climate Change*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1vbd0t0> pages 79-158

Ebook through Library