ANT 473HF Ethnographic Practicum: The University

2018 Theme: Politics, Instructor Prof. Tania Li, Thursdays 10-1 pm

Participants in this class conduct an independent ethnographic inquiry, analyse data, write it up, present it, and publish it on the Ethnography Lab website as an original contribution to knowledge. The premise of the class is that the most effective way to learn how to do ethnographic research is by actually doing it, with guidance and plenty of opportunity for feedback. The format of the class is collaborative. Each year the class has a common theme. All students identify a research site related to the theme, usually a site within the University of Toronto, conduct primary ethnographic research at their chosen site, and bring issues of research design, ethics, theory and analysis to the weekly group session for collective brainstorming.

The teaching method is loosely based on that developed by Michael Burawoy at Berkeley. It requires students' creativity, cooperation, initiative, organizational skills, flexibility, active participation, integrity, ethical conduct, some reading and lots of DOING: doing field research for at least four hours per week, writing field notes, and preparing for class presentations and discussions.   Assignments and tasks are designed to maximize collaboration, insight, and learning.

Requirements

Ten weekly blog posts, written in a format to share with class peers. Each post is 3-500 words, on a topic of your choice. Examples: summarize a reading and draw out what it contributes to our collective project; summarize field observations and discuss their implications; discuss ethical dilemmas and how you will resolve them; reflect on the strengths and limitations of our methods and how to improve them; others tba. The instructor will give private individual feedback on blogposts, so you can keep track of how you are doing. The blogs are also part of the learning process: you read, you write; you observe, you analyse; you discuss with your peers, you commit your reflections to paper... repeat. Some of
the blog posts maybe integrated into the website or your final report.   40%
Participation in class, by posting 5 of your blogs and commenting on others, and final conference   20%
Individual and collective material for posting on public website   20%
Final report, due after presentation at ethnography lab conference (3-4000 words)   20%

Schedule

Reading for the class is front-loaded, as we need to start off with a strong and imaginative conceptualization of the common topic, and how we can investigate it. After that, most of your time each week will spent doing research, and writing about it. Active field work will start as soon as we have human subjects/ethics permission. I will apply for permission for the class as whole.

1   Introduction to research theme, initial brainstorming, selection of common readings as a starting point for collective discussion (some from the attached list - others to be chosen according to emergent themes)

2   Theory, concepts, and research design

3   Report on initial scoping exercise; refining research strategy.

4   Into the field

Burowoy: "Participant observers confront two hurdles: getting in and getting out. Entering the field site can be the most aggravating, unnerving, humiliating part of the field research. It often raises all sorts of ethical dilemmas. Yet to the

extent it is emotionally draining and thwart with resistance (internal and external) so it is all the more significant. Your attempts to "enter" can provoke a crisis situation not only for yourself but for those you want to study and thereby reveal much of what is normally hidden or taken for granted. Barriers to entry display the "values," assumptions," and above all "interests" of those you are about to study -- the theories they hold about the external world from where you come. ... The more "blunders" you make, the more embarrassed (humiliated) you will be but the more you will learn. In short, "getting in" provides the most important materials you will collect, although their meaning will become apparent only later in the field research. *It is imperative you record all your experiences around entry -- all the resistance and all the anxiety. this is not the pre-play before the real act.*"

5   Documents, observations, field notes.

Burowoy: "*There is no point in spending time in the field without writing up your field notes, and immediately after leaving the field. Loss of detail, mistakes, distorted reconstructions increase exponentially as time elapses from the original experience. ..*In the beginning field notes should offer as much detail as possible. One should write down everything one can remember. (Making notes during the field to jolt the memory afterwards is very useful. If it's awkward to be seen writing then the lavatory is a good secret (re)treat.) The first set of field notes should describe the setting, the characters you interact with or observe and what they are up to. It is important you do this in the beginning when everything is novel since soon you will take so much for granted that it will be difficult to offer a vivid description. At all times specific, concrete, detailed descriptions are crucial. What appears irrelevant in the beginning may turn out to be central in the end. The meaning of each field sortie is only unravelled in subsequent sorties. As the study progresses so questions emerge that will push you toward collecting certain types of data or perhaps suggest a change of field site. Field research is a process of discovery and reconstruction."

6   Fieldwork practices and dilemmas

7   Moving towards analysis.

From Burowoy: "In the seminar you move from participant to academic. It is here that participant observers are forced to respond to the interests and concerns of other sociologists, that is, forced to develop the "scientific" dimension of their analysis. A second advantage of working intensively in a seminar lies in the diversity of problems that are encountered. In effect we will be learning about the technique of participant observation not just through our own personal experiences but through the experiences of others too."

Useful sources on fieldwork dilemmas and how to position yourself in relation to your research field:
Bourdieu, Pierre. 2003. Participant Objectivation. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9:281-294.
Mosse, David. 2006. Anti-social Anthropology? Objectivity, Objection and the Ethnography of Public Policy and
        Professional Communities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (4):935-56.

8, 9   From now on, we will have a routine of research, writing, discussion, and planning. Any new reading will relate directly to analytical puzzles we need to solve.

10, 11 **Synthesis of findings, common themes across projects; preparing and uploading material for the website.**

12   Research conference presentations at time TBA; write up of presentations/final report is due on the same day. You may feel that you have only just begun their research, and are not ready to present it or write it up. *This is normal!* You can only do what you can do in 12 weeks, but definitely, you will learn a lot about how to conduct ethnographic research, and be ready for future explorations…

Academic Integrity:

Academic integrity is fundamental to learning and scholarship at the University of Toronto. Participating honestly, respectfully, responsibly, and fairly in this academic community ensures that the U of T degree that you earn will be valued as a true indication of your individual academic achievement, and will continue to receive the respect and recognition it deserves.

Familiarize yourself with the University of Toronto's *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm). It is the rule book for academic behaviour at the U of T, and you are expected to know the rules. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

In papers and assignments:

- Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement.
- Copying material word-for-word from a source (including lecture and study group notes) and not placing the words within quotation marks.
- Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor.
- Making up sources or facts.
- Including references to sources that you did not use.
- Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment including:
  - working in groups on assignments that are supposed to be individual work;
  - having someone rewrite or add material to your work while "editing".
- Lending your work to a classmate who submits it as his/her own without your permission.

On tests and exams:

- Using or possessing any unauthorized aid, including a cell phone.
- Looking at someone else's answers
- Letting someone else look at your answers.
- Misrepresenting your identity.
- Submitting an altered test for re-grading.

Misrepresentation:

- Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including doctor's notes.
- Falsifying institutional documents or grades.

The University of Toronto treats cases of academic misconduct very seriously. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following the procedures outlined in the *Code*. The consequences for academic misconduct can be severe, including a failure in the course and a notation on your transcript. If you have any questions about what is or is not permitted in this course, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you have questions about appropriate research and citation methods, seek out additional information from me, or from other available campus resources like the U of T Writing Website. If you are experiencing personal challenges that are having an impact on your academic work, please speak to me or seek the advice of your college registrar.

Citation format:

We use the Chicago format style. The full explanation is here: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/chicago_manual_of_style_17th_edition.html The course biblio uses this style - follow the formats **exactly** (ie re capitals, italics, punctuation etc.).   Use in-text citations rather than footnotes, following this format (Li 2015:32). Quoted and paraphrased material must have page numbers.   Reserve footnotes for clarifications that would interrupt the flow of the text.

2018 Ethnographic Practicum Theme: Politics

The theme for 2018 is politics. Is our university a hot bed of political activism, or is it a place of conformity, where structures of power are unchallenged? If we make the starting assumption that everyone has a *capacity* for critical thought and action, what are the conditions under which, and the practices through which, a critical sensibility – a gut feeling that something is not right with the world – does, or does not, morph into collective action to bring about change? To investigate this, participants interested in the kinds of critical politics that challenge formations of capital (or gender, or race, or nature …) could select sites in which such a challenge is well advanced (eg student activist groups). Or, they might be more interested in sites in which a critical politics might be expected to emerge (eg among students worried about debt, or casual workers with low pay), but it seems that critique is absent or interrupted, begging the question – why? Sites may include classrooms, locker rooms, dorms, clubs, unions, cafeterias – anywhere that groups of people (students, faculty, staff, casual workers…) might potentially identify grievances and act on them.

Don't worry if you don't have a topic or site in mind at the outset. Bring your half-baked ideas to the first class, and we'll brainstorm collectively to turn them into something interesting, researchable, and well worth 12 weeks of your time.

Background

In a world characterized by inequality and injustice, we might expect to encounter widespread political mobilization, as different groups identify oppressive conditions and attempt to change them. Yet it is relatively rare for a critical impulse to become the basis of mass movements engaged in "collective attempts to grasp the reigns of history and change its course"(Smith 1999, 53). More often, critique remains embedded in the practices of everyday life, in quiet stubbornness, and small acts of refusal. Participants in this class will conduct ethnographic projects that explore the conditions under which - and the practices through which - an articulate, critical politics emerges and becomes historically effective, and the conditions under which such a politics is blocked, or interrupted.

We are told that we live in a "post-political" age, in which politics has been displaced by expertise (Swyngedouw 2010); or, alternatively, that "politics is everywhere," a claim so broad that the term politics loses its specific meaning. In place of these bold pronouncements, which promise too much and deliver too little, ethnographers are well positioned to explore politics as a diverse but identifiable set of practices, which operate at different scales.

Ethnographers are especially well positioned to explore situations in which critique is muted and hard to discern, or voluble but disorganized and incoherent; connections are not forged; and individuals do not organize with others who share their fate, or find effective points of leverage. Studying something that isn't there – articulate, effective practice – is a difficult task. But posing the trajectory towards historically effective practice as a counter-factual (something we might expect to find), and attending to how a potential trajectory is interrupted, offers a useful point of entry for ethnographic research.

What is Politics?
Politics is a slippery term. It is often used broadly as part of a phrase (a politics of food, fashion, football ...), but it is not always clear what a "politics of" actually means. Limiting politics to the terrain of state, parties, and elections seems too restrictive, even when this terrain is approached with an astute ethnographic eye (Spencer 1997, Candea 2011). Prominent framings use the term in a binary mode, to contrast practices of critique and contestation on one side, and formations of power on the other:

Critique, contestation	Formations of power	
resistance	power, structure, order	(Abu-Lughod 1990, Scott 1986, Ortner 1995, Ortner 2016)
the political, antagonism, agonism, deliberation, democracy, dispute	politics, hegemony, pacification, containment	(Laclau and Mouffe 1982)
Communication, alliances, collective action	domination, hegemony	(Arendt 1986, Hall 1996, Gramsci 1971)
politics, dissensus	police, policy, consensus, law	(Rancière and Panagia 2000, Rancière 2001)
heterodoxy	doxa, orthodoxy, rules	(Bourdieu 1977)
practices of everyday life, creativity, arts of doing, expression, obstinacy, stubbornness	structures, institutions, repression, regulation	(de Certeau 1984, Bayat 2010, Müller in press)
critique, history of the present, strategies of struggle, counter conduct	relationship of power, governmentality, conduct of conduct, classification	(Foucault 1991a, 1982, 1991b, 1980)
practice of politics, politicization, contestation, mobilization, opening, questioning, critique, challenge, disassemblage	anti-politics, post-politics, depoliticization, rule of experts, rendering technical, closure, discipline, pedagogy, (re)assemblage	(Swyngedouw 2010, Ferguson 1994, Mitchell 2002, Rose 1999, Li 2007b, a)
endurance, refusal, disturbance, unmaking, unsettling, fracture incoherence, recalcitrance, incommensurability	settlement, suture, agreement, incorporation appropriation, pacification, attachment	(Povinelli 2011, Simpson 2014, de la Cadena 2010, Berlant 2011, McGranahan 2016)

Whatever the preferred terms (note that the theoretical positions from which these binaries derive are not identical), the table can serve as an initial guide for posing diagnostic questions about how practices relate to power. What kind of practices are actors engaged in (cross-dressing, writing reports, drawing cartoons, holding meetings, self-immolation, hunger strikes, sending thugs, occupying space, consulting with others)? When examined in context, is a practice critical, rendering a form of power visible and contestable, or does it work within, reproduce and consolidate existing formations of power? If it is critical, what is the target of critique? More specifically, what is the formation of power from which the critic separates herself, however tentatively, or upon which she passes judgement?

Critique means discovering in a configuration of power its inherent possibility for being other than it is, opening a space to configure it differently. But it will also be configured – hence there is no end to politics, no final emancipation, no space without power. The two columns of the table do not describe two solitudes, or two different types of person or institutional location. They are not ethical judgements (critique=good, settlement=bad). Settlements enable people to live together, to form communities and organize commons; they are the stuff of social relations and institutions, though they are never fully coherent or complete. Everyone has a capacity for engaging in critique, and we all work within and reproduce relations of power. As parents, we govern children; as teachers and writers, we attempt to settle arguments by convincing others of our point of view; as officials in state bureaucracies we may attempt to consolidate a technical arena governed by expertise, while also engaging in critical reflection on our own practices; as members of social

movements and political parties, we must be engaged in practices of pedagogy and discipline if we are to consolidate a new hegemony to counter the hegemony we oppose.

Note also that the columns are empty of content: they do not specify what kind of power configuration is to be promoted or opposed. Struggles could be over distribution or recognition, challenging the distribution of status, symbolic capital, and institutionalized power (Fraser 2000). For Jacques Rancière (1999), even Fraser's distinction between a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution is too limiting, and the emptiness of categories is a crucial advance. It means that what comes after (post) the social positions and structures with which we are familiar is radically under-determined, enabling us to be receptive to the possibility that a "part with no part" in current social arrangements could erupt onto the scene and provoke a settlement quite different from any we have been able to imagine thus far. The emergence of the term cisgender to mark a previously unmarked social position, and the challenge to cisgendered bathrooms, is one example: a social force mobilized to unsettle discourses and practices, and a new settlement had to be forged. But *how* does such a social force emerge, find collective expression, and make new worlds?

Posing the *how* question highlights a critical limitation of the binary framing of the table above, which tends to render invisible the practices that produce an apparently divided world in which resistance stands outside power, and formations of power seem to be simply given, or self-reproducing (Mitchell 1990). Both sides appear to be unitary and abstract, rather than emplaced, embodied, multiple and overlapping (Moore 1998, Allen 2003). Although several scholars note that the left and right sides of the table are intrinsically linked, and point out the importance of exploring the dynamic between them, the nature of this dynamic is seldom specified. Nikolas Rose, for example, uses the mechanical metaphor of a "switch point" where critical scrutiny of governmental programs is absorbed back into the realm of expertise, and "an opening turns into a closure" (1999, 192); Foucault notes that between "a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal" (1982, 225-6). But neither author examines the nature of this "reciprocal appeal," or the practices that bring reversals about. Ethnographic analysis of practices that politicize what appears to be fixed, or that support existing settlements and forge new ones, can help fill this void.

Identifying the precise point at which a group acting collectively can be said to have engaged in historically effective practice by consolidating, challenging or changing a given configuration of power presents a thorny problem of scale. On the butterfly principle, every human (and non human) action has effects, in which case politics collapses into agency, and disappears as a distinctive object of study. Scalar terms to evaluate effectiveness are often smuggled in without explanation (eg fundamental versus superficial). If quantity is problematic, so too are scales of space and time: over what period of time, and what spatial scale, should effectiveness be assessed? Narrow specifications of what counts as properly political run into the same problem: who is qualified to make such an assessment? Rancière (2001), for example, argues that "true politics" is rare, but he offers no guidance on where to look for this esoteric object, or how to recognize it when we find it (see also(McCarthy 2013, Dean 2009, Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014, Apter 2018).

In place of attempts to specify once and for all the "true" subject or relevant scale for politics, the approach we adopt in this class is based on transparency: participants will clarify the kinds of subject, scale and direction of politics they are interested in, and indicate how this interest is reflected in their selection of research site. So, for example, a participant interested in the kinds of critical politics that challenge formations of capital (or gender, or race, or nature ...) could select sites in which such a challenge is well advanced; or s/he might be more interested in sites in which such a critique is mute, and potential articulations are interrupted: "unheroic decades," as William Roseberry called them (Roseberry 1989, 46). Alternatively, any researcher - and especially an ethnographer - can take advantage of being close the ground and alert to the different formations of power and critical practices that emerge in the site where they are working, and see where they lead. What kinds of politics emerge in a dorm? Among students in the business school? Among janitorial staff? If you hang out in these spaces, ear to the ground, what will you find?

Critique often takes the form Raymond Williams identified as a "structure of feeling" that is felt more than enunciated, although it is shared by a social group, hence it is collective rather than idiosyncratic (Williams 1977, 129-30). Such a feeling may take the form Sara Ahmed (2014) identifies as being "not in the mood." In Indonesia this is expressed as "feeling lazy" but actually means feeling out of step with a required affective state (eg happy celebration on national day), and is communicated by staying at home. In a similar vein, social historian Alf Lütke (1982) foregrounds a kind of embodied stubbornness (Eigen-sinn) as the starting point of political practice. Building on Lüdtke's ideas, Birgit Müller (in press, 2010) suggests that politics starts when actors stubbornly give their own sense to the world (ie mark a distinction) and act in terms of that sense; but to be historically effective or "act *on* their time" they must take further steps. The initial, critical impulse and ensuing action may be small in scale, but for both Lüdtke and Müller, it is communication through word, deed, or a passing glance that marks stubbornness as politics, and distinguishes it from solipsistic forms of endurance or mere eccentricity (Povinelli 2011). Something as basic as a sense of unease, or "a gut feeling of being treated unfairly" has the *potentia*l to be communicated and morph into a campaign - but only occasionally does that morphing take place (see Smith, 1999, pp114-16 and 255-265). Exploring the practices through which a 'gut feeling' does, or does not, morph into a campaign is the terrain of inquiry we will pursue in this class. Participants will select their preferred research sites, and organize analysis around a common set of questions that will provide the class with plenty of opportunity for collaboration, feedback, and collective synthesis.

1) what is the formation of power that creates a sense of unease, or separation?

2) through what practices is critique shared or enunciated?

3) what is the social group that connects to this critique?

4) in what ways does a group thus assembled act to change the configuration of power it has identified as problematic? Following the logic of the counterfactual,

5) what are the silences, or embryonic critiques that are not articulated and shared? or

6) do not form the basis for connection and mobilization? or

7) do not make new worlds? Finally,

8) what are the formations, practices, and affective states that sustain and stabilize the status quo?

Example 1: students at the U of T started an "anti-racism initiative" in 1991. It started with discomfort, and became an articulate protest movement that led to the creation of an institutional space that eventually morphed into ARCDO (the anti-racism and cultural diversity office) http://www.antiracism.utoronto.ca/about.html. Arguably, the initial political impetus was dissipated or tamed by formations of power that worked in two ways: a) the addition of "cultural diversity" as a goal (more palatable to many than "anti-racism"); b) a huge bureaucratic effort to demonstrate that U of T conforms to high standards of equity and/or is making steady progress along these lines - check out the reports http://reports.hrandequity.utoronto.ca/#officers How did all this come about - both the politics, and the formation of a regime of power to (attempt to) contain it? And how does the struggle - and the containment - morph and continue in new forms, eg around decolonization?

Example 2: a student ethnographer who spent time in the business school found the students there much less critical than his classmates in the social sciences. He investigated whether this had to do with recruitment – different kinds of students chose different courses of study – or whether it had to do with how the business school structures student activities and aspirations, convincing them that they have a bright future if only they follow the rules. He did not go on to ask – so what form DOES student politics take in the business school – what critiques do students have about the world they live in, and what do they do about them? Maybe the answers would be a surprise…

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