

Stanford University
Graduate School of Education
EDUC 389B/ANTHRO 398B/CSRE 389B/LINGUIST 254
Race, Ethnicity, and Language:
Writing Race, Ethnicity, and Language in Ethnography
Spring 2026

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Course Meetings

Fridays, 1:30pm-4:20pm
Building 60-108

Course Description

If categories of race, ethnicity, and language are sociohistorical constructs, how can we represent them ethnographically without reifying them? Taking this question as its starting point, this methods seminar analyzes strategies for writing race, ethnicity, and language in ethnography. In that they are simultaneously ubiquitous features of everyday life yet often difficult to articulate with precision, race, ethnicity, and language are highly elusive phenomena. We will read a range of ethnographies that seek to overcome this dilemma by neither taking race, ethnicity, and language for granted as naturally occurring phenomena nor avoiding the complex ways in which they shape interactions, institutions, and identities. The goal is for students to conceptualize ethnographic strategies for representing and analyzing the (re)production and (trans)formation of racial, ethnic, and linguistic phenomena, while also recognizing potential pitfalls and limitations associated with ethnographic research.

Course Structure

This course meets once weekly for two hours and fifty minutes. We will be reading 7 ethnographic monographs: four dissertations, two dissertation-based books, and one book by a senior scholar. During the first half of each meeting, I will provide framing comments that situate the text within broader scholarly literatures and dialogues, as well as invite questions and conversations about these topics. During the second half of each class, a small group of students will sign up to collaboratively facilitate discussion, taking a prompt that I provide as a starting point for their facilitation.

Guidelines and Requirements

1. Weekly Responses

Each week you will compose a 250-300-word response to the assigned ethnography based on the designated prompt for that week. Your response should refer to some specific moment in or aspect of the reading, including citations. It is impossible to capture the breadth of the reading in this kind of small-scale assignment, so please just focus on a few key examples and/or dimensions of each reading. You should approach these exercises as opportunities to think aloud. We welcome less polished and/or drafty reflections. Weekly responses are due by Thursday afternoons at 5pm on Canvas before our Friday meetings.

2. Discussion Facilitations

Each week a group of students will be designated as the discussion facilitators; each student will facilitate discussion once throughout the quarter. For the week in which you sign up to facilitate discussion, you are expected to collaboratively develop a creative plan for guiding the discussion, taking the prompt provided for that week as a starting point. Your group can prepare a brief handout (i.e., 1-2 pages) with your reflections on the reading(s) and your discussion questions, create a few slides to help guide the dialogue, and/or pursue alternative approaches that you think might generate constructive conversation and insight. There is no possible way that you could get to all the issues covered in the reading, so focus on whatever ideas interest you most.

3. Book Review

The final assignment for the course is to select an ethnography from a week in which you did not facilitate discussion and compose a book review adhering to the guidelines in the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology. Your review should cover the entire book, not just the chapters that we read for class. This is an opportunity to enter into deeper dialogue with an ethnography from our course and practice a distinctive genre of scholarly writing. You can find the specific guidelines for this assignment at the end of the syllabus. Book reviews are due by 5pm on Monday, June 8.

Land Acknowledgment

Stanford sits on the ancestral and unceded land of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. Land acknowledgments can disrupt the notion that colonialism was a distant historical event and draw attention to ongoing practices of Indigenous dispossession. Importantly, land acknowledgments are not ends in themselves, but rather strategies for recognizing, honoring, and sustaining Indigenous peoples, ecologies, and lifeways.

Students with Disabilities:

Students who need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, 723-1067 TTY). **I am also committed to working with students to address accessibility concerns that do not fit into the category of “documented disabilities”; please contact me as soon as possible to address any such concerns should they arise.**

Course Schedule

All readings for this course are available on Canvas or electronically through the campus library. Students are expected to come to seminar having engaged meaningfully with the readings each week. During our first meeting I will address critical reading strategies for navigating the book per week structure.

Week 1 (April 3): The Promises and Pitfalls of Ethnography

Required:

1. González, Melinda. 2026. Institutional Displacements: Academia and Ethnography's Exclusions. *Transforming Anthropology* 34(1):1-14.
2. Baker, Lee D. 2023. The Gamble and the Game: Reflections on Writing *From Savage to Negro*. *Transforming Anthropology* 31(2):96-99.
3. Briggs, Charles L. 2024. Introduction to *Incommunicable: Toward Communicative Justice in Health and Medicine*. Duke University Press. (pp. 1-26)

Suggested:

1. Da Col, Giovanni and Graeber, David. 2011. Foreword: The return of ethnographic theory. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1(1):vi-xxxv.
2. Nader, Laura. 2011. Ethnography as theory. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1(1):211-219.
3. Sefanelli, Alice. 2024. Reading ethnography in the classroom: Complementary strategies to develop students' ethnographic imagination. *Learning and Teaching* 17(2):71-93.

Week 2 (April 10): NO CLASS (American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting)

Week 3 (April 17): Voicing & Locality

Mejía, Alexander Feliciano. 2023. *Voicing Places: Maya-Mam Youth Navigating Race, Language, and Labor in East Oakland*. Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University.

Prompt

Structure of text: How is the text organized? Are ethnographic vignettes separate from theory or are they interwoven? Are there transcripts? How are they represented? How are sections broken up? Is the structure of the text connected to or reflective of the argument?

Week 4 (April 24): Institutionalization & Recognition

Trivedi, Sunny. 2022. Making and Measuring Race, Ethnicity and Language: South Asian Racialization Across Community Contexts. Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University.

Prompt

Keywords: What are the key concepts? How are they engaged ethnographically and conceptually—as objects of observation and analysis? How are ethnographic data and theory put into dialogue?

Week 5 (May 1): Contextualization & Temporality

Massengale, CoCo. 2025. Literacies for Liberation: An Archival and Ethnographic Study of Black Literate Lives Across Time. Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University.

Prompt

Scenes & Sites: Where does/n't action take place? Why? Is this part of the argument? Where else might the author have devoted attention? How might this have shaped the data and argument?

Week 6 (May 8): Embodiment & Performance

Mendoza, Dozandri D. 2025. Dando Cunt and Walking with the Trancestrxs: The Semiotics of Puerto Rican Ballroom Performance. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Barbara. (Introduction, Chapters II, III, & IV)

Prompt

Participation & Collaboration: Who are the key social actors in this work? Are they individuals, collectives, and/or organizations? Why these figures? What other possible collaborators might the author have consulted and with what consequences for the analysis?

Week 7 (May 15): Diaspora & Relationality

Smalls, Krystal A. 2024. Telling Blackness: Young Liberians and the Raciosemiotics of Contemporary Black Diaspora. Oxford University Press. (Introduction, Chapters 2 & 5)

Prompt

Data: What are the author's key ethnographic data sources? Interview quotations? Embodied practices? Language or other semiotic forms? Is there apparent priority given to particular forms of data? Why? What other possible data might the author have considered engaging?

Week 8 (May 22): Survivance & Mediation

Arnold, Lynnette. 2024. Living Together Across Borders: Communicative Care in Transnational Salvadoran Families. Oxford University Press. (Introduction, Chapters 3 & 4)

Prompt

Positionality, Voice, and Access: How is the author positioned in relation to the context and topic? Are they a longstanding community member, a newcomer, an advocate, and/or a dispassionate social scientific observer? How are these positionings reflected in their ethnographic approach to representing self and other? How did positionality shape the way in which they were perceived, the relationships in which they participated, and the data they collected?

Week 9 (May 29): Commodification & Commensuration

Urciuoli, Bonnie. 2022. *Neoliberalizing Diversity in Liberal Arts College Life*. Berghahn Books. (Introduction, Chapters 4 & 5)

Prompt

Power and Representation: Are race, ethnicity, and language straightforward empirical phenomena or problems to be interrogated? How does the author approach these issues ethnographically? Are they attempting to disrupt stereotypes, essentializations, and overdetermination, or do they pursue alternative approaches? Why?

Week 10 (June 5): NO CLASS (No Friday meetings during Week 10 of Spring Quarter)

Book Review Assignment Guidelines

Select an ethnography from the syllabus and compose a review adhering to the guidelines in Journal of Linguistic Anthropology. Your review is due

Reviews should be 1200-1500 words and follow the Chicago Manual of Style, with references to other works included in the text of the review, not as a separate reference list. A guide to Chicago style may be found on the AAA website, at http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style_guide.htm. Please find the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology guidelines called "Book Review Style" copied below. These guidelines show the generally formatting for book reviews including instructions on how to make in-text references. Please make note of the format for the book title, your name and affiliation at the beginning, and then the address at the end. I am also including an example of a book review from a recent edition of the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology.

Book Review Style:

Title of Book in Bold. *Author Name* and *Second Author*[, ed. or eds.] Location: Publisher, year. pp. [e.g., iv + 300pp.]

AUTHOR NAME

Name of University

First paragraph not indented.....

Second paragraph indented

Citations from the book under review are in text with "p/pp.", e.g., (p. 25).

Citations from other sources: in text, omitting city of publication. Where title or author is mentioned in text, you can omit this information in the citation.

[Examples: (*Title in Italics and First Letter in Caps*, Author, Publisher, Year), ("Title of Article in Journal First Letter in Caps," Author, *Name of Journal*, Year: #-#), ("Title of Chapter in Book First Letter in Caps," Author, in *Title of Book First Letter in Caps*, Names of Editors, eds., Publisher, year: #-#)]

Department in University

University

Address [full address, including street, city, state, etc in one line, not separated into parts]

Email

Ethnographic Reading Strategies

Some questions to consider while reading ethnographies, language-focused and otherwise (adapted from Susan Gal's 2004 seminar "Ethnographies of Language" at the University of Chicago):

1. Argument and contribution

How well is the theoretical argument laid out? Does it encompass the introduction and the more descriptive chapters? Is the argument lean? Does it become repetitive? Likewise, how well is the empirical argument laid out? What does the author see as the relative importance of these kinds of arguments? What does the author see as their primary contribution?

2. Analysis and supporting evidence

What is the relationship between the theoretical apparatus introduced early in the monograph and the analysis in the rest of it? Is there a disjunction between them, or an appropriate fit? Does the evidence that the author supplies fit the theoretical framework within which it is laid out? Is it adequate to support the author's claims? Are there obvious indications of evidence that has been left out? Does the author pursue the argument with appropriate ruthlessness? Are there places where the author becomes evasive?

3. Authority

How does the author establish the authority to speak to the issues discussed in the monograph? How does the author represent their field experience within the text they are writing? Do you find the author a credible witness to the events and patterns being described and analyzed? What presence does the author establish as ethnographer within the interactions that are being analyzed? Does the author establish a distance between a self-as-ethnographer and a self-as-analyst (and/or some other kind of self, such as member of a particular kind of community of origin), and if so, how? What kinds of literary tropes and conceits are employed in making the analysis believable?

4. Field methods

Did linguistic questions or sociological questions, or both, provide the starting point for the research? What was the principal social unit of study (e.g., individual, social network, community, "society" or "culture," region)? What relationship does the author seek to draw between insider and outsider perspectives, and how are these approached in the conduct of the fieldwork? In the author's research, what relationship is there between such methods as linguistic elicitation, other types of interviewing, text collection and analysis, participant observation, recording of observable behavior (at what level of detail?), collection of demographic statistics, etc.?

5. Technical handling of evidence

How, and to what extent, does the author use technical linguistic arguments to advance claims about society? Do they show appropriate command of the methodologies being used? Are these methods mere "tools" in the service of the ethnographic analysis, or does the author move the analytic methods forward in and of themselves, by subjecting them to critical discussion or showing a novel

interpenetration between phenomena that are most often called “linguistic” and phenomena that are most often called “social”? (Note that these questions could be reversed: To what extent are an author’s uses of social categories and concepts mere “tools” in the service of a linguistic analysis? How well does the author command the relevant sociological concepts and social theories?) Are more technical aspects of linguistic analysis avoided in the analysis? If they are not avoided, do the more technical arguments help lay out the contours of the argument or do they tend to obfuscate it?

6. Intertextuality

How is the monograph situated in relation to other currents in the discipline(s)? What is the literature on which the author draws, and why? What apparatus does the author use or point the reader to other relevant writing? Is there conspicuously relevant writing that is being omitted? Does the author’s scholarly apparatus tend to help supply supporting arguments, or supply foils for attack, or does it serve as scholarly window dressing? To what extent is the monograph conceived of as a self-contained whole? To what extent is it contextualized by other writing by the author and by the author’s immediate co-workers/collaborators/colleagues? To what extent do the analytical priorities and strategies reflect emphases developed in the area literature?

7. Ethnographic constraints

To what extent do the analytical priorities and strategies reflect ethnographic constraints, including conditions of field research? Does the author use “native” accounts in the analysis, and if so, how? Are they part of the evidence? Are they part of the analysis? To what extent does the author draw on native interpretive traditions? In which sectors of the community are such interpretive traditions vested? What kinds of social selection are evident in the ethnography? How do gender, race, class, social status, and age play into the selection of “informants”?

8. Textual evidence

Does the author provide specific textual evidence for the analysis? If so, how is it handled? Are texts presented in different languages/varieties? What kinds of transcription practices are followed? Do the texts reflect particular kinds of social settings? Do they reflect particular kinds of linguistic registers? Is the author aware of such possible reflections, or is all linguistic evidence treated as equivalent?

9. Community (social unit)

How does the author conceive of the community or social system under study? Are linguistic practices seen as distributed evenly through a community? Who is treated as “experts” or “masters” of language or of particular kinds of linguistic practices? Who is seen as having authoritative opinion about social relations and situations?

10. Audience

Who is the audience for the work? What kind of reader is inscribed in the text, and how? Do the methodologies used in the work invite larger readerships or limit them? How readable is the work, and by whom? What standing does it have as a literary work?

11. Language, culture, social relations

For the author, what are the boundaries of “language” and “the linguistic”? How does the writer conceive the relationship between language and nonlinguistic aspects of culture and social relations? How is language conceived, and how is speaking linked to or distinguished from other aspects of social action? Is silence part of the object of study?

12. Consequences

What are the “real world” consequences of the work? If it is implicated in particular applied practices, what are they? What impact might the author’s view of the people being studied, and their language, culture, and society, have on them? What are the implications of the author’s views of language and social relations for the way we conceive of our own society?

13. Fruitfulness

To what extent does the monograph advance a line of questioning such that either the evidence or the method can be used in other ethnographic settings? Does the work provide sufficient ethnographic richness that it could supply grist for a quite different analytical mill? Does the work inspire new and interesting questions about language and social life? Do you see it as intellectually consequential?