**Ethnography Lab**

**ethnographic observation & writing**

Spring 2020

Anthropologists participate firsthand in social worlds that are often unfamiliar to them and they produce written accounts and analyses of these worlds, which we call “ethnographies.” There is, however, much writing that precedes this writing of social worlds. Foremost, for the anthropologist, is the “fieldnote.” This sort of writing is essential to the process of analysis, and is a mixture of personal reflections, observations, and provisional analytic thoughts about these reflections and observations**.**

Although a vital component of ethnographic research, it can be challenging to keep written notes while observing and participating in a given space. It can be difficult to decide in which moments to write notes, and in which moments to be fully immersed. Anthropologists typically rely on quick jottings in the midst of ethnographic research. In your case, if you are not able to take detailed notes while you are there, you might find it useful to rely on mental notes, or jot down key words—fragments of text that can later be expanded. Write anything you would forget, and write whenever you can. Think about taking photos, if it’s appropriate to your site. Try to get different observation points, and a variety of data. The fragments and images will be subsequently – usually later that evening—fleshed out into detailed descriptions.

Strive for both depth and variety. Spend time in one place, doing what anthropologists refer to as “deep hanging out,” but also move to different places over the course of your fieldwork, to approximate different perspectives. This will necessarily look different depending on the type of space you are working in. While conducting your research over the course of the semester, consider the following (but don’t try to cover them all in one trip):

* Start by taking note of your initial impressions.
* Take notes on what things look, smell, and sound like.
* Pay attention to non-verbal gestures, movement, color, shapes. Describe, rather than interpret (e.g. instead of “he looked impatient” you can describe: “he paced back and forth, his cheeks flushed red, hands in his pockets, occasionally turning his head towards the road”).
* Avoid generalizing statements, evaluations, opinions, interpretations. While you might note someone’s emotional state, do not assume you know what caused it.
* Then, pay attention to how space is organized and marked. How do people use the space? What forms of social difference are recognizable (or seemingly invisible)?
* Then think about what might be important, or unexpected. Take note of your emotional response. Observe the response of the people around you. How do they differ?
* Attend to what the people you are observing experience as “important.” Can you tell what this is? If you don’t talk to people, what can you infer about this from your observations?
* Now focus on routine actions. Things that happen regularly, how are they organized? How do they take place? What categories, priorities, meanings, values seem to be at play?
* Then think about differences and variations. What would be seen as exceptional? What are the circumstances that account for variations?