

## **RELG 3XX: Ethnography of Religion**

\*Prerequisites: RELG 222, RELG 220, RELG 122, RELG 123, RELG 205, RELG 235, or by permission of the instructor

### **Course Description**

How do we ethically study communities and tell nuanced stories about the practices and lifeworlds of others?

This seminar explores the craft, ethics, and politics of ethnography, a qualitative methodology essential to the study of lived religion. Ethnographers conduct participant observation and cultivate long-term collaborative and intimate relationships with contemporary communities. By centering the genre of ethnography, we examine how research is about *relationships*. Research relationships are messy, rife with power dynamics, intimacies, and tensions, and contingent on bonds of trust and access. We consider how ethnographers of religion navigate spaces and histories crowded with the presences of gods, spirits, and ancestors and the work of writing about those presences.

We will explore the relationship between research and embodied knowledge and the tensions between balancing story-telling, history, and theory. This course will help students develop analytical and methodological skills as they explore the ethical dimensions of humanities and social science research with human (and nonhuman) subjects.

### **Course Goals**

Students will...

- build familiarity with concepts such as fieldwork, positionality, reflexivity and productively question the “objectivity” of research
- explore a range of contemporary religious communities from the perspective of practice, creativity, ritual, and embodiment
- examine how ethnographers represent and build relationships with research subjects and engage in nuanced discussions about the ethics of trust and access
- practice and build skills in close-reading and analyzing narrative style, story-telling, and ethnographic voice
- gain a deeper understanding of the value of human-subject research, its methods and its challenges

**Assignments:**

40% Fieldnotes & Analytical Memo

[10% First Set of Fieldnotes]

[15% Second Set of Fieldnotes]

[15% Analytical Memo]

30% Final Project: Book review

[10% [Annotated bibliography (what texts is the scholar in conversation with, what fields are they building with and upon?)]

[20% Final Review]

15% Discussion Leading [students must submit their notes and questions]

15% Engagement & Participation

**Grade Scale:**

A: 95-100

A-: 90-94

B+: 87-89

B: 84-86

B-: 80-83

C+: 77-79

C: 74-76

C-: 70-73

D: 60-69

**Fieldnotes & Analytical Memo**

Students in this class will prepare to do future ethnographic work by completing the human-subject research training with the IRB. In addition, students will practice the descriptive and observational work of ethnographic observation and writing fieldnotes. They will choose a single site—a public space, consumer space, or event(s)—to practice participant observation. This site must be one that is populated with people, action, and dialogue—students will complete a brief site proposal explaining why those chose their site and why it is particularly rich for observation. Students will return to this site twice over the course of the week and write fieldnotes—modeling the realities of ethnographic fieldnotes they will complete “scratch” notes and jottings and then fully flesh those out as formal fieldnotes. We will share these fieldnotes with each other in class to workshop how we approached character building, “lush” and thick description, sensory details, spatial description, and dialogue. The scratch notes must be turned in along with the full fieldnotes. \*Scratch notes should not be taken on laptops (as

ethnographers typically are not working from computers in the field because of the contingencies of action and interaction).

Students will then write an analytical memo about their fieldnotes—exploring themes, making preliminary arguments about their site, and reflecting on this initial fieldwork experience.

### **Discussion Leading**

Students will sign up to lead a hour of discussion between weeks 5-10. As discussion leaders they should primarily lead us in exploring the author's claims and arguments, exploring the narrative style, methods, and positionality of the author. Discussion leaders should introduce the author and their broader work and disciplinary background to contextualize *who* we are reading. They should clearly identify keywords, arguments, passages, and quotes they would like to discuss with the class in addition to generating a robust set of discussion questions that reflect close, careful reading of the text. If and when relevant, discussion leaders might also choose to use handouts and multimedia to shape discussion. (Keep in mind that our discussions should stay close to the text and author at hand). Discussion leaders will submit in their notes, critical summary, and questions in class on the day of their discussion.

\*Interviews and podcasts with the author might be a helpful source to consult to prepare for leading discussions.

### **Book Review**

For the final project, students will choose an ethnography that we did not read in class on a topic of interest and write a critical review of that text, demonstrating their understanding of ethnographic methods, style, and issues of reflexivity and positionality. To prepare for this, students should read and consult book reviews (in academic journals and similar outlets) of the texts we read in class to gain a command of the book review genre, its tone, and its balance of summary, contextualization, and critique. Writing a book review is much more complicated than reading the text and writing one's thoughts—it also involves exploring the connections between that text and others in the field, and therefore takes further research and reading. A successful book review will help readers understand what broader scholarly conversations the author is responding to and building upon in addition to providing nuanced insight into the structure, argument, and limitations of the text.

**Engagement = Preparation + Participation**

Participation is a crucial part of this seminar. I expect you to show up to every class having read the material, ready to discuss it thoughtfully. As this is an upper-level seminar centered on close reading, students should come prepared to make direct connections to the text. It would be useful to take notes and come prepared with flagged passages you want to discuss, sections you want to challenge, and questions you had about the text.

The liberal arts classroom is about discussion and critical engagement. In the world, it is crucial that we interact with those who have different viewpoints, worldviews, and identities. The classroom is a place where tense discussions may happen, where productive disagreement may occur. In this classroom I expect you to be respectful of one another, but also critical of each other's ideas. This class requires you to engage in difficult conversations about race, gender, religion, sexuality, and class and I expect you to be willing to interact with, listen to, and critique each others ideas, as well as the texts and authors.

#### **'A' ENGAGEMENT:**

- Comes to class prepared and demonstrates they carefully engaged with the reading by consistently **contributing** to discussion
- Is able to back up their arguments and claims with examples from and connections to the text/materials
- Makes thoughtful, relevant comments and participates actively in small group discussions and activities
- Listens and responds attentively to others
- Has consistent attendance and brings books and readings to class with them

\*Students who participate in class rarely or sporadically, make only tangentially relevant comments, do not bring their materials, arrive late, or do not actively participate in small group activities will fail to receive full class engagement points.

\*Students must bring their books and readings to class

\*Adapted from: Stephanie Almagno, "Participation Points: Making Student Engagement Visible"

#### **Attendance**

Please contact me if you have to miss class and please stay home and rest if you are not feeling well. More than **two unexcused absences** (for sickness, emergencies etc.) will result in the lowering of your grade by a half a letter grade. Additional absences will result in an additional

lowering of the grade by a full letter grade. Especially as we meet only twice a week, **any** excessive absences will jeopardize your standing in the course.

### **Late Work**

Late work will be docked a full letter grade. Assignments need to be handed in printed out/hard copy unless otherwise indicated. Assignments that are over a week late may not receive credit. If you ever want to talk about where your grade stands in the class, I'm happy to chat in office hours or meet on Teams--but I don't share grade estimates over chat or email.

### **Academic Honesty**

In this course you will engage in original and creative thinking and writing. When you borrow ideas or discuss other authors or media make sure to CITE YOUR SOURCES. Writing should spotlight your own analysis, not just reproduce lengthy verbatim quotes—even from cited sources. If you have any questions about how to use sources appropriately, please reach out to me.

This course operates under the College Honor System. That means: we treat each other with respect, we nurture independent thought, we take responsibility for personal behavior, and we accept environmental responsibility. Academic honesty is a critical part of our value system at K. When you borrow an idea, express the idea in your own words, thus thinking it through and making it your own, and acknowledge the source of the idea in a note, or, in certain situations, use the exact words of the source in quotation marks and acknowledge with a note. Ideas raised in class are part of the public domain and, therefore, sources of the ideas need not be acknowledged. If you are ever in doubt about this, you must ask. **Plagiarism will result in failing the assignment and possibly the class.**

K's Academic Dishonesty Policy: <https://studev.kzoo.edu/policies/#129>

See the Purdue Guides on Citations <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

See the Library Guide on using Chicago Style Citations: [https://reason.kzoo.edu/library/research\\_help/guides/citations/chicago/](https://reason.kzoo.edu/library/research_help/guides/citations/chicago/)

### **Email and Teams**

I will communicate with the class via email and Teams, often providing additional instructions, links to media, and electronic sources. Super important: Check your email and Teams daily.

### **Assignments and Submission Guidelines**

All work must be completed to pass the class. Assignments will be fully described and discussed at least one week before they are due. All assignments are printed out in class on the indicated in the course schedule or on the assignment sheet.

### **Personal Circumstances**

If you are a student with a disability who seeks accommodation or other assistance in this course, please let me know as soon as possible. Kalamazoo College is committed to making every effort to providing reasonable accommodations. If you want to discuss your overall needs for accommodation at the College, please direct questions to the Associate Dean of Students Office, (269) 337-7209. For more information, please see <https://disabilities.kzoo.edu/>

### **Learning Commons**

I encourage students to use the resources of the Learning Commons and Writing Center--they have specialists to help with research projects, developing study skills, note-taking strategies, supporting neurodiversity, and writing at any stage of your process. <https://learningcommons.kzoo.edu/>

### **Religious Accommodations**

If a religious holiday conflicts with classroom obligations, please contact me ahead of time so we can work out a plan for any missed material. The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life is deeply committed to helping students pursue religious observance in their tradition and fashion. Students may always contact Chaplain Liz Candido to find local resources including other religious students, rides to major holiday services, and local congregations and groups. For more information on religious accommodation, or about religious life, Chaplain Liz Candido may be reached at [ecandido@kzoo.edu](mailto:ecandido@kzoo.edu) or at 269.337.7362.

## SCHEDULE

### Week 1: Religious Studies and the Ethnographic Voice

Tuesday:

- Orsi, Robert A. "Roundtable on Ethnography and Religion: Doing Religious Studies with Your Whole Body." *Practical Matters* 2 (2013): 1-6.
- Bender, Courtney. "Roundtable on Ethnography and Religion: Hallucinations." *Practical Matters Journal* 6 (2013): 1-6.
- Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter. "Writing with Fragments and Silences: An Ethnographer's Anxiety and Responsibility," *Practical Matters* 2 (2013): 1-7.

Thursday:

- Harding, Susan Friend. *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Orsi, Robert A. "Have You Ever Prayed To Saint Jude?" Reflections On Fieldwork In Catholic Chicago." In *Between Heaven and Earth*, pp. 146-176. Princeton University Press, 2013.

### Week 2: The *Doing* of Ethnography

Tuesday:

- Nabhan-Warren, Kristy. "Embodied Research and Writing: A Case for Phenomenologically Oriented Religious Studies Ethnographies." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 378–407.
- Nabhan-Warren, Kristy. *Meatpacking America: How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland*. UNC Press Books, 2021.  
Chp 4 "The Work of God and Hogs"

Thursday

- Eichler-Levine, Jodi. *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community*. UNC Press, 2020.  
(pg 10-21, Chp 3 “Threads Between People: The Art of the Gift” pg 76-100)

### **Week 3: Gods, Spirits, and Abundant Others in Ethnography**

**\*Students will complete IRB training and submit certificate of completion by Sunday night**

Tuesday:

- Orsi, Robert A. "The problem of the holy." In *The Cambridge companion to religious studies*, pp. 84-106. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Wirtz, Kristina. "Hazardous Waste: The Semiotics of Ritual Hygiene in Cuban Popular Religion." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 476–501.

Thursday:

- “The Sorcerer’s Body” in Stoller, Paul. *Sensuous Scholarship*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. (4-23)
- Nwokocha, Eziaku. “The ‘Queerness’ of Ceremony: Possession and Sacred Space in Haitian Religion.” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 71–91.

### **Week 4: Writing Ethnographically—Writing Fieldnotes, Creating Scenes**

**\* Students will bring their fieldnotes for peer review in class on Thursday**

Tuesday: (\*Students from Urban Religion will have read the Emerson chapters already, skim to refresh and focus on the Clifford & Geertz)

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
  - Chp 1 “Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research” & Chp 2 “In the Field: Participating Observing, and Jotting Notes”
- Clifford, James. "Notes on (field) notes." *Fieldnotes: The makings of anthropology* (1990): 47-70.



- Geertz, Clifford. "Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture." In *The cultural geography reader*, pp. 41-51.

Thursday:

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
  - Chp 3 "Writing Fieldnotes I: At the Desk, Creating Scenes on a Page"; & pg 109-124 on narrative segments

Further Reading on Scenes & Dialogue:

- Duneier, Mitchell, and Ovie Carter. *Sidewalk*. Macmillan, 1999. (Introduction, "Informal Life of the Sidewalk: The Book Vendor" excerpt [3-43])

### **Week 5: Sensory Ethnography**

[note to self: this text will likely be replaced after the release of this new book in summer 2025: Nwokocha, Eziaku Atuama. *Vodou En Vogue: Fashioning Black Divinities in Haiti and the United States*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2025.]

Tuesday:

- Pérez, Elizabeth. *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*. NYU Press, 2016.
  - Introduction, Chp 2

Thursday:

- Pérez, Elizabeth. *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*. NYU Press, 2016.
  - Chps 3 & 5

### **Week 6: Ethnography of Family & Ancestral History**

Tuesday:

- Ochoa, Todd Ramón. *A Party for Lazarus: Six Generations of Ancestral Devotion in a Cuban Town*. Univ of California Press, 2020.
  - Part 1

Thursday:

- Ochoa, Todd Ramón. *A Party for Lazarus: Six Generations of Ancestral Devotion in a Cuban Town*. Univ of California Press, 2020.

## Part 2

### **Week 7: Ethnography & Eccentric Environments**

Tuesday:

- Crockford, Susannah. *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.  
Introduction, Chp 1 (& get a head start on Chp 2)

Thursday:

- Crockford, Susannah. *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.  
(finish Chp 2) 4-5, Conclusion

### **Week 8: Festival Ethnography [Alternative idea: Ethnography & Extraterrestrials]**

Tuesday:

- Lucia, Amanda J. *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals*. Univ of California Press, 2020. [first half]
- Lepselter, Susan. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. University of Michigan Press, 2016.

Thursday:

- Lucia, Amanda J. *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals*. Univ of California Press, 2020. [second half]
- Lepselter, Susan. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. University of Michigan Press, 2016.

### **Week 9: Institutional Ethnography: Studying the Creative Process**

Tuesday:

- Bielo, James S. *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*. NYU Press, 2018.  
Introduction, Chps 3-4

Thursday:

- Bielo, James S. *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*. NYU Press, 2018.  
Chps 5-6

## **Week 10 : Ethnography of Pain: Balancing Theory & Narrative**

Tuesday:

- Bautista, Julius. *The Way of the Cross: Suffering Selfhoods in the Roman Catholic Philippines*. University of Hawaii Press, 2019.  
Introduction (1-8), Chp 1, Chp 3

Thursday:

- Bautista, Julius. *The Way of the Cross: Suffering Selfhoods in the Roman Catholic Philippines*. University of Hawaii Press, 2019. Chp 4, Chp 5