

ANTH/SOCI 480: Urban Ethnographic Field School

Assignment: Calls from the Field

Overview

You are already in the field. This assignment asks you to send word back.

Field researchers have long communicated from their field sites through emails and letters—forms of writing that were more open than a published monograph, more honest about uncertainty, more willing to sit with what had not yet been understood. Margaret Mead's *Letters from the Field 1925–1975* is not a polished argument; it is a running account of what it was like to be somewhere unfamiliar and trying to make sense of it. Allaine Cerwonka wrote to Liisa Malkki from Melbourne in real time, working through the anxieties and improvisations of fieldwork as they happened. These correspondences are not marginal to the anthropological record. They are where the method was being made.

This assignment asks you to work in that tradition, but through the medium of the telephone call. You will draw on your own field experience in this course to identify one specific moment, encounter, or observation, and record a short first-person narrative about it: 2 to 4 minutes, in your own voice, as if calling from wherever you were when it happened. Not a summary of your research. Not a methods update. A moment: grounded, particular, and maybe even still working out what it means.

With your permission, the recordings will be used as audio content for the Calls from the Field listening station: a vintage rotary telephone through which listeners can pick up the handset, dial a number, and hear a researcher's voice from the field, and may also appear on the field school website and other course-related public-facing materials. This is not an assignment that stays in the course Canvas site. It goes somewhere.

The Tradition You Are Working In

In this course, you are a researcher. You are not solely observing fieldwork from a distance, reading about it, or practicing it in simulation. You are doing it. And that means you are now in the position that every ethnographer who ever wrote a letter from the field was in: you have been somewhere, you have seen and heard and felt things that people outside that place have not, and you have the problem of how to communicate any of that to someone who was not there.

The dominant solution to that problem, in our disciplines (anthropology and sociology), is the written monograph or journal article: formal, argued, extensively cited, and addressed to a specialist audience. That form is important and you will practice it. But it is not the only form, and in some cases, it is not the best-suited to conveying what fieldwork actually feels like from the inside (the uncertainty, the relationships, the moments of recognition that arrive before you know what to do with them).

Storytelling offers something different. Not storytelling instead of analysis, but storytelling as a mode of analysis. A well-chosen field story does not merely describe a moment; it surfaces a pattern, raises a question,

or makes an argument through the particular rather than the general. When Clifford Geertz opened ‘Deep Play’ (that we read in class the other day) with the story of the police raid on the cockfight (the moment he and his wife ran with the Balinese) he was not illustrating a point he had already made. He was making the point through the story itself. The story was the analysis.

The telephone call adds a further dimension. Where a letter arrives composed and considered, a call arrives with breath and hesitation, with the texture of someone still thinking. What you are producing here is a recording that will be heard by strangers, one at a time, in private, through a handset held to the ear. That intimacy is not incidental. It is the format’s argument: that what happened in the field is worth a listener’s full, private attention.

Learning Objectives

This assignment is designed around the core methodological and representational concerns of the field school. By completing it, you will:

- **Practice multimodal research dissemination.** Academic writing is one way of sharing what fieldwork produces. Audio narrative is another, one that reaches different audiences, demands different skills, and communicates different things. This assignment asks you to move deliberately between modes: from field observation, to analytical reflection, to spoken narrative, to written transcript. Each transition requires you to make choices about what to keep, what to compress, and what the medium itself contributes to meaning.
- **Develop storytelling as an analytical practice.** A field story is not is an interpretation of what happened, expressed through the careful selection and arrangement of specific detail, so as a description, it also has analytical value. You will practice identifying which moment from your fieldwork carries the most analytical weight, and shaping it into a narrative that does the work of interpretation without spelling it out; that trusts the listener to think alongside you.
- **Deepen your reflexive practice.** Choosing what to share from your field experience, and how to share it, is itself a reflexive act. The process of scripting and recording a field call will ask you to examine your own positionality: what you noticed and why, whose perspective is centred in your account, what you have chosen not to say, and what that omission means. The reflection you submit should engage seriously with these questions.
- **Engage with the ethics of representation.** When you narrate a field story, you are representing not only your own experience but the people, places, and situations you encountered. You will consider what obligations that creates: what to name, what to anonymize, and how to represent others’ words, actions, or circumstances with care and accuracy.
- **Produce research in a public and accessible format.** If you choose to opt in, the finished recording will be used in a public installation and possibly on a public-facing website. This means your audience is not your instructors or your classmates; it is anyone who picks up the handset. You will practice communicating research findings in a register that is clear, engaging, and free of unexplained jargon, and you will produce a written accessible version for listeners who are deaf or hard of hearing.

What the Assignment Is Asking

You are looking for a moment from your fieldwork that is specific enough to stand in for something larger. Not a general observation ('people in this neighbourhood tend to...') but a scene: a conversation, an encounter, a detail that stopped you, something you wrote down immediately or almost didn't write down at all. The kind of thing you might have texted a friend about that evening, or described at length in your field journal.

That specificity is not the opposite of analysis. It is the vehicle for it. The moment you choose should be one that, in the telling, reveals something about your field site, your research questions, or the practice of urban ethnography itself. It might be a moment of surprise (e.g., when something you expected turned out to be wrong). It might be a moment of connection, or discomfort, or confusion that later resolved into clarity or not. It might be a moment so small that you almost dismissed it, which turned out to contain everything.

The call should be narrated in the first person, present-tense where it serves the story, as if you are still somewhere close to where it happened. 2 to 4 minutes. One moment, told with enough detail and analytical intention that a listener who has never been to your field site will understand not only what occurred but why it matters.

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A useful test for whether your story is working: does it end somewhere different from where it started? A field call that simply recounts what happened is a description. A field call that arrives at a question, a realization, or a complication it did not begin with is analysis. Aim for the latter.

Process and Deliverables

1. Identify your moment.

Go back through your field notes, journal entries, and any other records from your time in the field. Look for the moments that have stayed with you: the ones you returned to, described at length, or found yourself thinking about outside of your formal note-taking. You are looking for one moment that is both vivid and analytically significant: something that happened that also reveals something.

2. Identify the analytical layer.

Before scripting, articulate in writing (for yourself, not for submission) what you think this moment means. What does it reveal about your field site, your interlocutors, your research questions, or the experience of doing urban ethnography? What concept or theme does it connect to? This analytical layer does not need to be stated explicitly in the recording itself. But it needs to be present in the way you tell the story: in what you choose to include, where you slow down, and where you end.

3. Consider representation and ethics.

If your story involves other people, consider carefully how you represent them. Do they need to be anonymized? Do you need not to reveal the neighborhood or organization's name to protect the identity of

people in your story? Have you represented their words and actions accurately and fairly? Is there anything in your account that could cause harm if it were heard by people outside the course? Reflect on these questions in relation to our class discussion of ethics and the considerations we addressed when discussing course ethics approval. Your reflection should show that you have engaged these issues thoughtfully and made deliberate choices in response.

4. Write a script.

Draft a script for your recording. It should run 2 to 4 minutes when read aloud at a natural pace (roughly 300 to 600 words). Write it to be heard, not read: short sentences, active voice, concrete sensory detail. Read it aloud several times before recording. If it sounds like a field note being read, rewrite it until it sounds like a person talking. The analytical dimension should be carried by the story itself: by the detail you choose, the question you end on, the thing you say you still do not understand.

TIP	<i>A structure that sometimes works (you are not limited to this structure; it is just one approach): open in the middle of the scene, not before it; give the listener enough context to be there with you without front-loading explanation; let the meaning arrive near the end, through what you noticed rather than what you concluded.</i>
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5. Record your call.

Record your script using your phone, laptop, or any available recording device. Find a quiet space, speak clearly and at a natural pace, and do as many takes as you need. The recording should be in your voice only.

Technical specification	Required value
File format	WAV
Channels	Mono
Sample rate	8,000 Hz (8kHz)
Bit depth	16-bit
Length	2–4 minutes
Naming convention	Your surname _ field site or theme (e.g., Shiva_LearningExchange)

6. Edit and produce the audio.

Clean up the recording as needed: remove long pauses, false starts, or significant background noise. The final file should be clear and audible. You do not need professional editing software; Audacity is free and sufficient. Do not over-edit: some hesitation and breath are appropriate to the register of a phone call.

7. Produce an accessible written version.

The telephone installation is audio-only and is not accessible to listeners who are deaf or hard of hearing. You will produce a transcription of your field call to address this.

8. Submit your audio file, written version, and reflection.

Submit three things together: your audio recording in the format specified above, your accessible written version, and a written reflection of approximately one to two pages. The reflection should address the following: Which moment did you choose and why? What do you think it reveals analytically and how did you try to carry that through the story without stating it directly? What choices did you make about

representation and ethics? What did the process of translating a field experience into a spoken narrative teach you about your research, your fieldwork, or your own positionality? If there were things you decided not to include, write about those too.

Why This Matters

Ethnographic knowledge does not have to stay in monographs. One of the ongoing challenges of the discipline is the gap between what researchers learn in the field and what reaches the people, communities, and publics that fieldwork is ultimately about. Audio narrative is one of the most direct ways to close that gap: it requires no disciplinary training to receive, it travels easily, and it carries something that academic prose rarely does: the sound of a person still thinking.

If you give your permission for your story to be included, during our final event at the end of the field school, the recordings you produce will be heard by people who may have never taken an anthropology course, through the handset of a vintage rotary telephone. They will encounter your fieldwork not as a paper submitted to an instructor, but as a voice arriving from somewhere real. That is a different kind of accountability than a grade, and it is worth taking seriously.

The act of producing this recording is also, in itself, a methodological exercise. Moving from field observation to analytical reflection to spoken narrative to written transcript is not a simplification of your research. It is another pass through it, one that will show you things about what you observed and how you understood it that the field notes alone may not have.