

ANTH480/SOCI480:

Urban Ethnographic Field School

# Writing Place

A vignette-based workshop



# Why write place (a quick recap)?

## Space vs. Place

**Space** is abstract: coordinates on a map, undifferentiated expanse.

**Place** is space made meaningful through lived experience, social relation, and accumulated history.

*Describing a place in purely spatial terms (its layout, its location) is not full ethnographic work.*

## Writing as Inquiry

Places are not containers where social life happens. **They are active participants in its making.**

Place is always in formation, constituted through interrelations, contested, never settled.

*This means ethnographic writing about place is not backdrop work. **It is the analytical work itself.***

# Why vignettes (a quick recap)?

*“A vignette dramatizes a person, act, event, or activity so as to catch the attention of the reader; it condenses complex social realities into discrete moments that require attentive interpretation.”*

— LeCompte & Schensul, *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data* (2013)

## Microcosm

A vignette condenses the broader ethnographic narrative into a single vivid moment: small enough to hold, rich enough to analyze.

## Epistemological Device

Vignettes reveal how ethnographic knowledge is constructed: through what is selected, framed, emphasized, and left out.

# Today's Workshop

1

**Print**

Draw your vignette

2

**Read & Reflect**

Work with your  
printout

3

**Analyze**

Identify writing  
techniques

4

**Pair Up**

Share and compare

5

**Board**

Collective discovery

*Total: approx. 50 minutes*

# 1 Print Your Vignette

~5 min

Come up to the printer and choose a vignette length:

**Short** *under 200 words*

**Medium** *200–300 words*

**Long** *over 300 words*

*The printer selects a vignette at random from published ethnographies, all linked to place-writing.*

## Your printout includes:

- Content warning (where applicable)
- The vignette text
- Full citation
- Reflection question
- QR code: A lesson on place-writing

## 2

# Read & Reflect

~10 min

### First: Read without a task

Read your vignette once without trying to analyze it.

Let the place arrive. Notice what strikes you: what feels vivid, strange, or unsettling.

### Then: Work on your reflection question

Your printout includes a reflection question.

We won't collect your answer. But start thinking on the page.

Annotate your vignette: underline, circle, question mark, **highlight**. Write on the back of the receipt. Make it a working document.

# 3

## Analyze the Writing

~8 min

*How does the writer make this place come alive? Use this vocabulary as a starting point.*

### Sensory Detail

Smell, sound, texture, temperature (integrated into the scene's argument, not merely decorative atmosphere.)

### Temporal Layering

The present holds traces of the past (through memory, objects, material decay, or embedded history.)

### Pacing & Movement

Sentence rhythm and sequencing enact the experience of moving through a place (not just describing it.)

### Juxtaposition

Two descriptions of the same place placed in proximity reveal it as contested, changed, or internally divided.

### Object Ethnography

A specific object anchors the social meaning of a place.

**After class today and as you finalize your first assignment, read the short lesson on place-writing. It is QR-linked on the receipt.**

## 4

# Pair Up

*~8 min*

Find a partner. Share your vignettes and discuss a couple of these:

1

Read aloud a sentence from your vignette that struck you. What drew you to it?

2

Name one or two writing techniques you identified. Point to the exact moment in the text.

3

Is there anything happening in your vignette that the technique list doesn't capture? Try to describe what it's doing.

# 5

## To the Board

*~10 min*

Refer to the “pattern cards”.

Read the cards & decide which of the 7 patterns is most relevant to your vignette:

The Perception Shift

Objects as Social Stories

Infrastructure as Argument

Place as Multiple

Layered Temporality

Movement as Narrative Structure

Place as Multiple

Use a corresponding sticker (1 or 2) and tape your vignette to the board

After taping your vignette to the board, hang around and read a couple of the vignettes your class-colleagues have taped to the board.

# Take an infographic...

- Ethnographic writing is not only representation; it is analysis too.
- The infographic shows what kind of arguments each of the patterns you recognized in your vignettes can make.

After this workshop:

- Take an infographic, review it.
- Review the QR-linked lesson:  
<https://ethnography.ca/vignetteprinter/lessons/lesson9>
- Is there anything you can apply to your first assignment as you are finalizing it?

*Also: print another receipt if you'd like to, or reclaim your annotated note (if you can take it off the board!!)*

