

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SCHOOL
ANTH480|SOCI480
IN-CLASS WRITING EXERCISE
PLACE-WRITING 1

Places are never only what they appear to be at any given moment. They carry histories of labor, displacement, aspiration, and collective life that are not always visible on the surface but that actively shape what is possible in them, who is welcome in them, who is excluded for the place to exist in its current form, and what they mean to those who inhabit them.

The sociologist Avery Gordon calls this haunting: the way something not fully present keeps making itself felt in the texture of present experience. Places haunt! The site of a demolished neighborhood haunts the street grid that replaced it. An abandoned factory haunts the community that organized its life around it. The corner where something happened haunts those who know what happened there. Attending to haunting is a method for writing places honestly, in a way that includes the absences and unresolved histories that continue to shape the present.

KEY CONCEPT | THE PALIMPSEST

A palimpsest is a manuscript that has been scraped clean and written over, but where traces of the earlier writing remain visible beneath. Place works like a palimpsest: each layer of use, memory, and meaning is written over the last, but the previous layers are never entirely erased. Effective place-writing makes some of that layering legible without reducing it to a history lesson.

The challenge in writing historical depth is one of *integration*: the history should not arrive as background explanation or contextual introduction. It should surface as part of the texture of the present scene, embedded in an object, carried by a person's gesture or memory, inscribed in a building's surface, or alive in a practice that continues to carry something forward from the past. The reader should feel time accumulating in the place, not pausing for a detour into history.

VECTORS OF HISTORICAL DEPTH

History surfaces in present scenes through recognizable channels. As you plan and draft your scene, consider which of the following might carry the past into your present moment:

- **Objects:** worn, repaired, obsolete, or out-of-place things that carry traces of previous use or an earlier life
- **Physical traces:** marks on walls, thresholds, or infrastructure that bear the imprint of what came before
- **Memory fragments:** something a person says, recalls, or visibly knows without explaining
- **Practices:** actions, routes, or habits that persist even when their original context has disappeared
- **Absences:** empty lots, boarded buildings, missing people, or cleared land whose absence is itself a kind of presence

THE TASK

Take a place you know well and think about the many layers of historical depth that have contributed to making it what it is today. Write a short scene in which a fragment of its history surfaces in the present. Ground the scene in the present moment something is happening, someone is there,

something can be seen, heard, or touched. Then let the history arrive: through an object, a physical trace, or a practice that carries something from the past into the current moment.

The history should not be explained as background. Do not open with “This neighborhood used to be...” or “Before the renovation, this place was....” Instead, let the historical layer emerge from within the scene itself, as part of its texture, not its preamble.

Target: ~200 words | Stay at ground level; no overview shots

REFLECTION

After you finish your scene, take five minutes to respond in writing to the questions below. You do not need to write full paragraphs; notes are fine.

01

How does the historical depth change what the place means in the present? What does the place become once you can feel its past in it?

02

What would be lost if you rewrote the scene without the historical layer? Try to be specific: which sentence or detail carries the most weight?

03

Which of the five vectors (object, trace, memory, practice, absence) did you use? Was it a conscious choice, or did it arrive naturally as you wrote?

04

Is there any moment where the history felt like an interruption or a detour from the present rather than part of it? If so, what would it take to integrate it more fully?

Looking for a topic? Here is one.

Walk down almost any residential block in East Vancouver and you will find older houses (many of them Vancouver Specials, the wide two-storey houses with brick facing and a side entrance for the downstairs suite) sitting next to newly built or still under-construction houses marketed in styles like “Scandinavian modern” or “modern farmhouse”. The new buildings tend to have dark board siding, black-frame windows, and minimal landscaping. The older ones tend to have gardens that have been producing something for decades: grape vines, vegetable beds.

The contrast is visible at the level of a single block. You do not need to explain gentrification for it to be present in the scene. The history is in the material: the thickness of a vine, a contractor’s sticker still on a window, a suite entrance that was built for a family that needed the income. Work with these and help the reader to see the change (“showing” vs “telling”).