

# Cities and Everyday Life: An Introduction to Urban Ethnography

**Instructor:** Dr. Santiago Orrego

**Level:** Undergraduate (BA)

**Credits:** 5 ECTS (150 hours total workload)

**Language of Instruction:** English

**Format:** Seminar (2 hrs/week) + Field Lab (1 hr/week)

**Cluster:** Urban Ethnography and the Infrastructures of Everyday Life

## Course Description

This introductory course invites students to explore the city as an ethnographic field and a living laboratory of everyday life. Through observation, mapping, and creative documentation, participants learn how infrastructures, gestures, and atmospheres assemble urban experience. The seminar bridges classical urban theory with contemporary approaches from feminist and multispecies ethnography, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and material culture.

Combining conceptual discussions with guided field exercises, the course emphasizes *learning to notice*: how to observe the ordinary as extraordinary, to trace the social and material entanglements of people, things, and environments. Students move between theory and practice, developing the ethnographic imagination as both an analytic and curatorial mode. The semester culminates in a collective exhibition—The Cabinet of Urban Fragments—and a short personal reflection on method.

## Learning Objectives

By completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify and discuss key concepts and debates in urban ethnography.

2. Apply observational, sensory, and visual techniques in everyday environments.
3. Analyze how infrastructures, materials, and relations shape urban life.
4. Experiment with multimodal forms of ethnographic documentation.
5. Reflect critically on ethics, positionality, and care in fieldwork.

## Guiding Questions

- How can ethnography reveal the infrastructures and atmospheres of everyday life?
- What forms of attention, care, and description make cities legible as fields of relation?
- How can writing, mapping, and curation become tools for thinking with the urban?

## Course Structure

| Component                                  | Hours            | Description                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Seminar Sessions</b>                    | 28               | Conceptual discussions and close readings on everyday life, infrastructure, and method. |
| <b>Field Labs</b>                          | 28               | Guided exercises in urban observation, mapping, and multimodal documentation.           |
| <b>Independent Reading &amp; Fieldwork</b> | 74               | Reading, writing, and collecting field materials for assignments.                       |
| <b>Presentation &amp; Reflection</b>       | 20               | Preparation of collective exhibition and short individual reflection.                   |
| <b>Total</b>                               | <b>150 hours</b> | <b>5 ECTS credits</b>                                                                   |

## Assesment

All course assignments grow directly from the weekly seminar discussions and Field Lab activities. Each deliverable is part of a continuous ethnographic and creative process that culminates in the collective exhibition *The Cabinet of Urban Fragments*.

| Component | Description | Weight |
|-----------|-------------|--------|
|-----------|-------------|--------|

|                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |     |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Field Diary (4 entries)</b> | Four short ethnographic texts (300–400 words each) based on Field Lab outputs. Each entry should expand or rework a weekly exercise (e.g., <i>Learning to Notice</i> , <i>Two Ways of Being There</i> , <i>Mood Mapping</i> , <i>Species Biography</i> ). Entries must integrate observation, reflection, and a reference to at least one course reading. | 25% |
| <b>Mini-Cartography</b>        | A visual and textual project (individual or pair work) that re-assembles fragments collected throughout the course into one interpretive map. The map may combine diagrams, traces, or sensory symbols; it must be accompanied by a 500-word commentary situating it within course debates on critical cartography and more-than-human relations.         | 25% |
| <b>Final Project</b>           | Contribution to the collective exhibition <i>Cabinet of Urban Fragments</i> —one curated selection (text, image, or sound) plus a 400-word reflection titled <i>What the city taught me about method</i> .                                                                                                                                                | 30% |
| <b>Participation</b>           | Active involvement in seminar discussions, field labs, and peer feedback.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 20% |

## How to Work with the Assessments

- **Field Diary:** Think of it as your ethnographic sketchbook. Each Field Lab yields a fragment that can be refined into one diary entry. Bring printed drafts to seminar sessions for short peer reviews (Weeks 4 and 6).
- **Mini-Cartography:** Developed iteratively—Week 3 introduces the tracking of objects, Week 4 adds sensory layers, Week 5 translates them into spatial form. A draft version will be shared for feedback in Week 7.
- **Cabinet Contribution:** In Week 8, you'll curate your best fragments (texts, images, or maps), edit them for coherence, and prepare them for public display with short explanatory labels.

# Weekly Schedule

Each week combines conceptual readings with applied exercises that cumulatively feed into the Cabinet of Urban Fragments.

## Week 1 – The City as Ethnographic Field

### Opening note

Before beginning our first discussion and field exercise, we will dedicate part of the session to reviewing the course program together. We will go through its structure, aims, and expectations in detail—clarifying how the seminar, field labs, and assignments connect as well as the process for the final collective exhibition.

Students are expected to have already read the entire syllabus before class and to bring any questions, suggestions, or uncertainties for discussion. The goal is to treat the syllabus as a shared ethnographic artifact—a document we will revisit, modify if needed, and collectively inhabit throughout the semester.

### Key Ideas:

Everyday life · Urban modernity · Estrangement · Situated observation

### Guiding Questions:

1. How can the city be approached ethnographically?
2. What does it mean to “learn to notice”?

### Readings:

- Simmel, Georg. 1950 [1903]. “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, edited by Kurt H. Wolff, 409–424. New York: Free Press.
- Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Introduction & Ch. 7 “Walking in the City”)

### Seminar (2 hrs):

- Review and discussion of syllabus, course aims, and final project.
- Introduction to ethnography as an art of noticing.
- Collective discussion of Simmel's and Certeau's readings: modern perception and walking as method.

### **Field Lab (1 hr): Learning to Notice**

- **Objective:** Develop observational sensitivity to the overlooked.
- **Procedure:** Choose a familiar urban corner, spend one uninterrupted hour observing without note-taking for the first 15 minutes. Then record five distinct observations: gestures, objects, rhythms, sounds, or interactions that usually go unnoticed.
- **Output:** Write five vignettes (50–100 words each) titled *Learning to Notice*. Include time and place for each.

## **Week 2 – Fieldwork and Positionality**

### **Key Ideas:**

Participant observation · Reflexivity · Proximity · Care

### **Guiding Questions:**

1. How does our position shape what we see?
2. What does it mean to care for the field?

### **Readings:**

- Haraway, Donna J. 1988. "Situated Knowledges." *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–599.
- Low, Setha M., and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, eds. 2003. *The Anthropology of Space and Place*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. (Introduction, 1–47.)

### **Seminar (2 hrs):**

- Lecture on participant observation and reflexivity.
- Group discussion: comparing ethnographic presence in classical and feminist traditions.

- Writing exercise: “My position in the field I inhabit.”

### **Field Lab (1 hr): Two Ways of Being There**

- **Objective:** Explore how proximity alters perception.
- **Procedure:** Visit the same site twice. The first time, act as a participant (sit, talk, buy, move as others do). The second time, act as a detached observer. Take brief notes after each visit, focusing on how your presence changes what you perceive.
- **Output:** A two-page reflection comparing both perspectives. Use first-person voice.

## **Week 3 – Infrastructures of Everyday Life**

### **Key Ideas:**

Maintenance · Repair · Circulation · Material relations

### **Guiding Questions:**

1. What holds cities together?
2. How do small acts of maintenance reveal broader structures?

### **Readings:**

- Simone, AbdouMalik. 2010. *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*. New York: Routledge.  
(Intro & Ch. 1.)
- Star, Susan Leigh, and Geoffrey C. Bowker. 1999. *Sorting Things Out*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Introduction.)

### **Seminar (2 hrs):**

- Discussion of infrastructures as relational fields (Simone, Star).
- Collective analysis of maintenance, repair, and invisible labor.
- Case examples: street cleaning, waste collection, or public lighting.

### **Field Lab (1 hr): Following an Object**

- **Objective:** Learn to trace infrastructures ethnographically.

- **Procedure:** Select a small, mundane object ( a traffic light, a bench, a bin, a piece of sidewalk). Over several days, follow its trajectory —how it behaves, who touches it, and how it circulates —and record notes, sketches, and photos.
- **Output:** A short illustrated diagram/infographic (A4 page) visualizing the object’s encounters and behaviors + a 200-word explanation.
- **Connection:** Forms the basis for your *Mini-Cartography* project.

## Week 4 – Atmospheres and Sensory Ethnography

**Key Ideas:** Affect · Mood · Perception · Infraordinary

**Guiding Questions:** How can we sense and describe the atmospheres of the city?

### Readings:

- Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.  
(Introduction, 1–15.)
- Vaughan, Laura. 2018. *Mapping Society*. London: UCL Press. (Ch. 1, “The Social Life of Maps.”)

### Seminar (2 hrs):

- Discussion: how affect and mood can be documented ethnographically.
- Comparative analysis of sensory ethnography methods.
- Exercise: Describe a city scene using only sensory verbs.

### Field Lab (1 hr): Mood Mapping

- **Objective:** Develop skills for multisensory documentation.
- **Procedure:** Spend 45 minutes at your chosen site, focusing on one sense at a time (10 minutes each for sound, smell, temperature, light, and movement). Jot down impressions using color, shape, and metaphor rather than description.
- **Output:** A *Mood Map* combining text and visuals (sketches, lines, or sound spectrum).  
Add a short note (150 words) on how it felt to translate atmosphere into form.

## Week 5 – Mapping Otherwise

**Key Ideas:** Critical cartography · Decolonial mapping · Visual ethics

**Guiding Questions:** How do maps produce social and political knowledge?

**Readings:**

- Oslender, Ulrich. 2021. “Decolonizing Cartography and Ontological Conflict.” *Political Geography* 89: 102444.
- Lury, Celia, and Nina Wakeford, eds. 2012. *Inventive Methods*. London: Routledge. (Introduction, 1–24.)

**Seminar (2 hrs):**

- Lecture on cartography as a knowledge-making device.
- Discussion: counter-mapping, feminist GIS, and visual ethics.
- Analysis of selected “radical maps” and participatory cartographies.

**Field Lab (1 hr): Counter-Mapping the Ordinary**

- **Objective:** Reimagine mapping as an ethnographic gesture.
- **Procedure:** Choose one street or block you know. Create a *counter-map* that documents smells, sounds, non-human presences, and social interactions instead of landmarks. Use paper, collage, or digital tools.
- **Output:** A visual counter-map + 300-word reflection on what your map reveals that conventional maps erase.

## Week 6 – Multispecies and More-than-Human Cities

**Key Ideas:** Urban ecologies · Coexistence · Relational ethics · Care

**Guiding Questions:** How do nonhuman beings participate in urban worlds?

**Readings:**

- Haraway, Donna J. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Introduction, 3–42.)

- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2017. *Matters of Care*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Introduction, 1–24.)

#### **Seminar (2 hrs):**

- Lecture and discussion: more-than-human urbanism.
- Case studies: pigeons, street trees, and microbial publics.
- Reflective writing: what does care look like across species?

#### **Field Lab (1 hr): Species Biography**

- **Objective:** Practice multispecies ethnographic description.
- **Procedure:** Choose a nonhuman urban inhabitant (tree, dog, pigeon, fungus). Observe it at least twice, noting its movements, relationships, and vulnerabilities. Research briefly its ecological or social context.
- **Output:** A 300-word *species biography* with one image or drawing; give it a title (e.g., “The Dog Who Waits by the Bakery”).

## **Week 7 – Writing and Drawing the City**

**Key Ideas:** Form as method · Multimodality · Fragmentary ethnography

**Guiding Questions:** How do different media shape ethnographic meaning?

#### **Readings:**

- Fortun, Kim. 2012. “Ethnography in Late Industrialism.” *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (3): 446–464.
- Stewart, Kathleen, and Lauren Berlant. 2019. *The Hundreds*. Durham: Duke University Press. (Selections, 1–45.)

#### **Seminar (2 hrs):**

- Discussion: ethnographic writing as aesthetic and analytic form.
- Workshop: collective discussion of multimodal ethnographic texts.
- Mini-lab: translating a paragraph into a sketch.

### Field Lab (1 hr): Translating a Fragment

- **Objective:** Explore how form transforms knowledge.
- **Procedure:** Select one fieldnote or vignette from previous weeks. Translate it into two new forms: (1) a visual version (sketch, collage, diagram) and (2) a 150-word poetic rewrite.
- **Output:** Submit the three versions (original note + two translations) in one A4 layout.

## Week 8 – Exhibiting the Field

**Key Ideas:** Curation · Care · Public ethnography · Fragment as form

**Guiding Questions:** How can we present our findings without closing them?

### Readings:

- Yusoff, Kathryn. 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Preface & Ch. 1.)
- Holston, James. 2008. *Insurgent Citizenship*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Conclusion, 289–309.)

### Seminar (2 hrs):

- Discussion: ethics of display and fragmentary curation.
- Peer critique of fragments prepared for the exhibition.
- Planning session for public presentation.

### Exercise – Cabinet Assembly

- **Objective:** Transform field materials into a public ethnographic artifact.
- **Procedure:** Select two fragments (vignette, map, image, or sound) from your previous exercises. Edit them for clarity and aesthetic coherence. Prepare a short written label (max. 50 words) for each, contextualizing it.

- **Field Lab (1 hr):** Exhibit your two fragments as part of the collective *Cabinet of Urban Fragments* and submit a 400-word reflection on “What the city taught me about method.”
- **Reflection:** Write a short text on “What the city taught me about method.”

## Final Output: The Urban Archive of Fragments

### Description

The course culminates in *The Urban Archive of Fragments*, a collective portfolio of short ethnographic pieces—texts, sketches, soundscapes, and maps—that trace how infrastructures and gestures assemble everyday life.

Each student contributes 2–3 fragments with 75-word interpretive labels and a 500-word reflection titled *Learning to Notice: On Method and the Infraordinary*.

### Purpose

The Archive invites students to treat the ordinary as analytical material. It foregrounds care and attention as an ethnographic method, showing how minor gestures and relations hold the city together.

### Public Presentation

Presented as a public or digital exhibition, the Archive forms a sensory portrait of urban life—an invitation to see the city through the eyes of ethnographic curiosity.