

Fragments and Fragmentography

Instructor: Dr. Santiago Orrego

Level: MA Seminar + Field Practicum (advanced; suitable for doctoral participation)

Credits: 6 ECTS (180 hours total workload)

Language of Instruction: English

Format: Seminar (2 hrs/week) + Field Practicum (2 hrs/week)

Cluster: Experimental Ethnography and the Epistemologies of the Incomplete

Course Description

This course investigates fragmentation as a methodological, ethical, and aesthetic condition of ethnographic knowledge. Drawing on European Ethnology's traditions of collecting, archival practice, and reflexive writing, it explores how broken, partial, or drifting materials can become sites of analysis and care.

Students engage the fragment not as a deficit but as a generative form—one that invites montage, juxtaposition, and speculation. Through readings that connect Walter Benjamin's literary archaeology with feminist STS, material culture, and curatorial anthropology, participants will experiment with fragmentography: a multimodal practice of gathering, annotating, and composing from what remains.

The seminar alternates between theoretical discussions and field-based experimentation. Each student will develop a Fragment Atlas—a multimodal archive of situated fragments—culminating in the collective exhibition *The Cabinet of Fragments*, accompanied by a reflexive essay on method and incompleteness.

Learning Objectives

By completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Analyze the role of fragmentation and incompleteness in ethnographic and historical knowledge.
2. Apply curatorial and multimodal methods to document and interpret field fragments.
3. Experiment with writing, labeling, and montage as analytical forms.
4. Reflect critically on ethics, care, and partiality in research and representation.
5. Design a fragmentographic project that integrates empirical, aesthetic, and philosophical dimensions.

Guiding Questions

- How do fragments become evidence, stories, or companions in ethnographic practice?
- What ethics arise from working with partial, damaged, or uncertain materials?
- How can montage, annotation, and display function as modes of reasoning?

Course Structure

Component	Hours	Description
Seminar Sessions	28	Conceptual discussions and close readings on fragments, archives, and speculative ethnography.
Field Practicum	28	Experimental exercises in collecting, annotating, juxtaposing, and curating field fragments.
Independent Reading & Fieldwork	100	Reading, documentation, writing, and composition of the Fragment Atlas.
Presentation & Reflection	24	Preparation of the collective exhibition and reflexive essay.
Total	180 hours	6 ECTS credits

Assessment

All assignments grow from the weekly interplay between theory and field experimentation.

At the MA level, evaluation emphasizes theoretical integration, methodological invention, and curatorial articulation.

Component	Description	Connection to Weekly Practice	Weight
Fragmentary Field Notebook (6–8 entries)	Analytical fieldnotes (300–500 words each) that document and interpret found fragments—objects, materials, or textual traces—through course concepts. Each entry must engage one reading.	Developed from Field Practicum Weeks 1–6. Forms the core of the <i>Fragment Atlas</i> .	25%
Fragment Atlas / Montage Experiment	A multimodal composition that assembles selected fragments (texts, images, sounds, objects) into a relational or visual taxonomy. Accompanied by a 600-word commentary on process and ethics.	Builds on Weeks 3–6 (<i>Assemblage Logics</i> , <i>Material Metaphors</i> , <i>Montage as Method</i>). Intermediate project.	25%
Final Portfolio and Reflexive Essay	Curated selection of 3–4 fragments from the Atlas + a 1000-word essay titled <i>On Incomplete Knowledge: Notes for a Fragmentography</i> .	Synthesizes course outputs and contributes to <i>The Cabinet of Fragments</i> exhibition.	30%
Participation	Active engagement in seminar discussion, peer review, and collective curation.	Continuous across all weeks.	20%

How to Work with the Assessments

- **Field Notebook:** A working diary for conceptual and sensory fragments. Each practicum yields material that can become an entry; peer discussion will occur in Weeks 4 and 6.

- **Fragment Atlas:** Developed iteratively—Week 3 introduces collection logics; Week 4 adds material analysis; Weeks 5–6 translate them into montage or taxonomy.
- **Final Portfolio:** In Week 8, curate and re-label selected fragments, articulating their analytical or affective relations in a short public-facing text.

Weekly Schedule

Each week alternates between conceptual work (Seminar 2 hrs) and experimental practice (Field Practicum 2 hrs).

Week 1 – Thinking with Fragments

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:

Fragmentation · Assemblage · Incomplete archives · Empirical philosophy

Guiding Questions:

1. What does it mean to begin from the broken?
2. How can fragments think for us?

Readings:

- Benjamin, Walter. 1999 [1930s]. *The Arcades Project*. (C & D Convolutes.)

- Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. (Selections.)
- Lury, Celia. 2021. *Problem Spaces*. Cambridge: Polity Press. (Ch. 2 “Fragment Thinking”).

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discussion on fragmentation as an epistemic condition. Close reading of Benjamin and Stewart.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Field Collection 1 – The Broken and the Partial

- **Objective:** Collect three urban or domestic fragments (objects, texts, images).
- **Procedure:** Document each through photo/sketch and 150-word description—Annotate circumstances of encounter.
- **Output:** Three catalog entries + one short reflection (200 words) on fragment as method.
- **Connection:** Opens the *Fragmentary Notebook*.

Week 2 – Ethics and Affects of the Incomplete

Key Ideas:

Care · Loss · Temporalities of decay · Ethnographic responsibility

Guiding Questions:

1. How do we represent what we cannot restore?
2. What forms of care does the fragment demand?

Readings:

- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2017. *Matters of Care*. (Ch. 1.)
- Mol, Annemarie. 2002. *The Body Multiple*. (Duke UP.) (Selections on multiplicity and care.)

- Stewart, Kathleen. 2011. “Atmospheric Attunements.” *Environment and Planning D* 29 (3): 445–453.

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discussion on care as an analytic and method.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Fragment Care Protocol

- **Objective:** Experiment with repair, preservation, or reinterpretation of a found fragment.
- **Procedure:** Choose one item from Week 1; devise a non-restorative gesture (cleaning, wrapping, labeling).
- **Output:** Documentation (images/text) + 300-word note on the ethics of intervention.
- **Connection:** Extends Field Notebook; introduces curatorial ethics.

Week 3 – Assemblage Logics

Key Ideas:

Assemblage · Relation · Partial connection · Situated ordering

Guiding Questions:

1. How do we connect heterogeneous elements without forcing unity?

Readings:

- Strathern, Marilyn. 1991. *Partial Connections*. (Selections.)
- Deleuze & Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.) (Ch. 1–2.)
- Law, John. 2004. *After Method*. (London: Routledge.) (Ch. 1 “Mess”).

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discussion of assemblage as method.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Relational Cataloging

- **Objective:** Create connections between fragments based on relation rather than type.
- **Procedure:** Select five previous items and rearrange them using relational labels (e.g., “touch,” “temperature,” “risk”).
- **Output:** Relational diagram + 300-word explanatory text.
- **Connection:** First module of the *Fragment Atlas*.

Week 4 – Material Metaphors

Key Ideas:

Material semiotics · Metaphor as method · Epistemic objects

Guiding Questions:

1. How do materials and metaphors shape ethnographic thinking?

Readings:

- Haraway, Donna J. 1997. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*. (New York: Routledge.) (Selections.)
- Ingold, Tim. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. (London: Routledge.) (Ch. 2.)
- Lather, Patti. 2016. “Topologies of Difference.” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 16 (2): 125–131.

Seminar (2 hrs):

Examine metaphor as an analytical bridge between concept and material.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Metaphoric Translation

- **Objective:** Transform a fragment into a conceptual metaphor.
- **Procedure:** Choose one object or text and render it as a visual or verbal metaphor (e.g., diagram, poem, specimen label).
- **Output:** Metaphor artifact + 250-word analytic commentary.

- **Connection:** Adds a conceptual layer to the *Fragment Atlas*.

Week 5 – Montage as Method

Key Ideas:

Juxtaposition · Interruption · Poetic logic · Curatorial composition

Guiding Questions:

1. What does it mean to think through arrangement and contrast?

Readings:

- Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. (K Convolute.)
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2017. *The Eye of History*. (London: MIT Press.)
(Selections.)
- Stewart, Kathleen. 2017. “Worlding Refrains.” *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (2): 209–217.

Seminar (2 hrs):

Explore montage and juxtaposition as thinking techniques.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Fragment Montage

- **Objective:** Assemble a visual or textual composition using contrasts and echoes.
- **Procedure:** Select six field fragments; arrange them in a grid or timeline with minimal connective text.
- **Output:** 1-page montage + 250-word reflection on composition.
- **Connection:** Central to the *Fragment Atlas / Montage Experiment*.

Week 6 – Speculative Classifications

Key Ideas:

Taxonomy · Error · Fiction · Play

Guiding Questions:

1. How can we classify without closing possibility?
2. What is a fictional taxonomy?

Readings:

- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1964. "Analytical Language of John Wilkins." In *Other Inquisitions*.
- Myers, Natasha. 2020. "Unclassifiable Life." *Environmental Humanities* 12 (2): 321–339.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2004. "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation." *Tipiti* 2 (1): 3–22.

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discuss classification as an ethical and creative practice.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Counter-Taxonomy Lab

- **Objective:** Invent a taxonomy for your fragments based on affect, error, or fiction.
- **Procedure:** Re-classify previous materials using non-hierarchical criteria (color, touch, chance).
- **Output:** Taxonomic table + 400-word explanation of principles.
- **Connection:** Completes the *Fragment Atlas / Montage Experiment*.

Week 7 – Curatorial Ethnography

Key Ideas:

Display · Ethics of representation · Public methods

Guiding Questions:

1. How does display reconfigure knowledge and relation?

Readings:

- Bennett, Tony et al. 2017. *Collecting, Ordering, Governing*. (Durham: Duke UP.) (Selections.)
- Harrison, Rodney, and Esther Breithoff. 2021. *Afterlives of the Museum*. (London: Routledge.) (Ch. 3.)
- Myers, Natasha. 2015. *Rendering Life Molecular*. (Duke UP.) (Selections on display.)

Seminar (2 hrs):

Analyze curatorial forms as an ethnographic argument.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Exhibition Sketches

- **Objective:** Design a micro-exhibit for your fragments.
- **Procedure:** Select three pieces; create mock-ups or digital layouts, including labels and contextual texts.
- **Output:** Exhibition plan + 200-word rationale.
- **Connection:** Preparation for Week 8 exhibition.

Week 8 – The Cabinet of Fragments

Key Ideas:

Open archive · Poetics of incompleteness · Collective curation · Ethnographic afterlives

Guiding Questions:

1. How can we exhibit incompleteness without resolving it?
2. What forms of care and relation emerge through curating what remains?
3. How do fragments become speculative propositions in ethnographic knowledge?

Readings:

- Demos, T. J. 2023. *Radical Museology and the Decolonial Turn*. London: Sternberg Press. (Selections.)

- Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Ch. 10, “On Collecting Art and Culture.”)
- Myers, Natasha. 2020. “Curating the Planthropocene.” *Environmental Humanities* 12 (1): 1–22.

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discussion of curation as both a method and an ethics. We examine how ethnographic fragments can be displayed to evoke relation, ambiguity, and care rather than closure. The session includes peer critique and a roundtable on exhibition strategies and public presentation.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Cabinet Assembly and Reflection

- **Objective:** Curate a selection of fragments into a coherent but open-ended ensemble for public presentation.
- **Procedure:**
 - Select 3–4 fragments and one diagram or montage from your *Fragment Atlas*.
 - Revise them for exhibition (editing, re-labeling, or recontextualizing).
 - Write short labels (≤ 75 words each) articulating their relational or affective meaning.
 - Compose a 1,000-word reflexive essay titled *On Incomplete Knowledge: Notes for a Fragmentography*, connecting your work to course readings.
- **Output:**
 - Contribution to the collective exhibition *The Cabinet of Fragments*.
 - Submission of the final *Portfolio and Essay*.
- **Connection:**
 - This week synthesizes all previous exercises—collection, annotation, montage, and counter-classification—into a shared curatorial experiment that treats incompleteness itself as a form of theory.

Final Output: The Manual of Fragments

Description

The course culminates in *The Manual of Fragments*, a collaborative assemblage of ethnographic traces—texts, sketches, notes, and sonic excerpts.

Each student contributes 3–4 fragments with concise labels and a 1,000-word essay *On Fragmentography*.

Purpose

The Manual functions as both method and reflection: a guide to working with incompleteness. It treats fragmentation as an ethical and epistemic stance—an invitation to think through what remains partial and unfinished.

Public Presentation

Presented as a printed or digital manual, the collection reads like an evolving field guide to the ethnographic imagination of the incomplete.