

Urban Ethnography and the City as Field

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: *Urban Ethnography and the Infrastructures of Everyday Life*

Course Description

This course examines the city as an ethnographic field—an evolving infrastructure of relations, atmospheres, and cohabitations. Situated within European Ethnology, it draws on traditions of *Alltagskultur* (everyday-life research), *Raumforschung* (spatial studies), and material culture, integrating them with contemporary approaches from feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS), multispecies ethnography, and urban anthropology.

Participants engage the city not as an object of study but as a collaborator in the production of knowledge. They will experiment with writing, mapping, and multimodal documentation to explore how infrastructures, gestures, and atmospheres compose urban worlds.

Alternating between conceptual seminars and field practicums, the course emphasizes methodological invention and curatorial reflection. Students develop small-scale ethnographic projects that trace urban relations across human and more-than-human domains, culminating in a collective exhibition—The Cabinet of Urban Specimens—and a reflexive analytical portfolio.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Situate urban ethnography within European Ethnology's historical and theoretical frameworks.
2. Apply and critically evaluate advanced ethnographic methods to study infrastructures and atmospheres.
3. Integrate sensory, material, and more-than-human dimensions into analytical and curatorial practice.
4. Design multimodal experiments as forms of ethnographic reasoning.
5. Reflect on ethics, positionality, and epistemic care in the making of urban knowledge.

Guiding Questions

- How can we treat the city itself as a method rather than merely a site?
- What infrastructures of knowledge sustain ethnographic observation and its politics?
- How can multimodal forms—maps, diagrams, fragments—serve as ethnographic reasoning devices?

Course Structure

Component	Hours	Description
Seminar Sessions	28	Conceptual discussions and close readings of key texts in urban ethnography, feminist STS, and curatorial theory.
Field Practicum	28	Guided field and analytical exercises involving multimodal and reflexive experimentation.
Independent Reading & Fieldwork	100	Extended reading, writing, and project development.

Presentation & Reflection	24	Preparation and curation of collective exhibition and peer critique.
Total	180 Hours	6 ECTS credits

Assessment

All assignments emerge from the weekly interplay between theory and field experimentation. Each component contributes to a cumulative ethnographic and curatorial process culminating in the collective exhibition *The Cabinet of Urban Specimens*. At the MA level, assessments emphasize theoretical synthesis, methodological reflexivity, and curatorial experimentation—students are expected to link fieldwork closely to the course’s analytical and philosophical debates.

Component	Description	Connection to weekly practice	Weight
Fragmentary Field Diary (6–8 entries)	Series of ethnographic fragments (300–500 words each) capturing sensory, relational, or material dimensions of a chosen urban site. Each entry should integrate analytical reflection and one course reading.	Derived from Field Practicum Weeks 1–6. These fragments form the analytical corpus of the <i>Cabinet of Urban Specimens</i> .	25%
Counter-Map or Diagram	A speculative cartographic or diagrammatic work combining empirical data and theoretical reflection; includes a 600-word commentary articulating analytical choices.	Builds on Weeks 3–5 (<i>Infrastructures of Relation, Atmospheric Diagramming, Cartographic Intervention</i>).	25%
Final Portfolio and Reflection	A multimodal portfolio combining 3–4 curated field fragments, one map/diagram, and a 1,000-word	Synthesizes all course outputs and contributes to the collective exhibition.	30%

	reflexive essay titled <i>What the City Taught Me About Method</i> .		
Participation	Active and informed engagement in seminar discussions, peer critique, and collaborative curation.	Continuous across all weeks; evaluated qualitatively.	20%

How to Work with the Assessments

- **Field Diary:** Functions as an analytical lab notebook. Each Field Practicum yields material that may evolve into one diary entry. Bring drafts to seminars for peer commentary (Weeks 4 and 6).
- **Counter-Map or Diagram:** Progressively developed across three weeks: infrastructural tracing (Week 3), affective layering (Week 4), and speculative mapping (Week 5).
- **Final Portfolio:** In Week 8, select your strongest materials (texts, visuals, diagrams) and prepare them for public exhibition. Pair each fragment with a short label (≤ 75 words) and accompanying theoretical reflection.

Weekly Schedule

Each week consists of a Seminar (2 hrs) and a Field Practicum (2 hrs).

Week 1 – The City as Epistemic 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:

Urban modernity · Situated knowledge · The city as method · Reflexive empiricism

Guiding Questions:

1. What happens when we treat the city as a producer of theory?
2. How does situated observation translate into epistemic practice?

Readings:

- Simmel, Georg. 1950 [1903]. “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 409–424. New York: Free Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991 [1974]. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
(Selections)
- Haraway, Donna J. 1988. “Situated Knowledges.” *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–599.

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Discussion on the genealogy of urban thought in European Ethnology and urban anthropology.
- Introduce “the city as method” and reflexive empiricism.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Theorizing the Ordinary

- **Objective:** Examine how theoretical concepts reframe everyday perception.
- **Procedure:** Choose a site (street, square, infrastructure). Observe for 60 minutes: first descriptively, then through the lens of a theoretical concept from one of the readings (e.g., “estrangement,” “situatedness”).

- **Output:** Two 250-word comparative vignettes + 150-word reflection on how theory altered perception.

Week 2 – Relational Ethnography and Reflexivity

Key Ideas:

Field relations · Ethics of presence · Positionality · Reflexivity as method

Guiding Questions:

1. How does ethnographic relation shape knowledge production?
2. How can we practice reflexivity beyond self-reference?

Readings:

- Strathern, Marilyn. 1991. *Partial Connections*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
(Ch. 1–2)
- Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other*. New York: Columbia University Press.
(Ch. 3)
- Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Seminar (2 hrs):

Debate on relational epistemology and the temporality of fieldwork. Exercise: diagramming ethnographic relations.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Ethnography as Relation

- **Objective:** Analyze how positionality transforms the field encounter.
- **Procedure:** Visit a site twice—once as an active participant, once as a silent observer.
Compare how each stance structures relations and ethics.
- **Output:** 2-page reflection linking observation to at least one theoretical text.

Week 3 – Infrastructures of Relation

Key Ideas: Maintenance · Repair · Relational materialities · Classification and control

Guiding Questions:

1. How do infrastructures shape relational life?
2. How can ethnography trace its moral and political work?

Readings:

- Amin, Ash, and Nigel Thrift. 2017. *Seeing Like a City*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Star, Susan Leigh, and Geoffrey C. Bowker. 1999. *Sorting Things Out*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Selections)
- Larkin, Brian. 2013. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42: 327–343.

Seminar (2 hrs):

Lecture and discussion on infrastructures as social and epistemic assemblages.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Tracing Infrastructures of Relation

- **Objective:** Conduct a situated analysis of infrastructural assemblages.
- **Procedure:** Choose one system (public lighting, waste, transport). Trace its relational nodes—human, material, ecological.
- **Output:** An annotated diagram + 400-word analytical commentary.

Week 4 – Atmospheric Diagramming**Key Ideas:**

Affect · Environmental aesthetics · Sensory epistemology · Infraordinary perception

Guiding Questions:

1. How can we render affect and atmosphere analytically?
2. What does a diagram of feeling look like?

Readings:

- Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Neimanis, Astrida. 2017. *Bodies of Water*. London: Bloomsbury. (Ch. 1–2)

- McCormack, Derek. 2018. *Atmospheric Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
(Selections)

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discussion on atmospheres as empirical yet indeterminate phenomena.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Diagramming Affect

- **Objective:** Visualize relational atmospheres as analytic configurations.
- **Procedure:** Observe one site focusing on sensory transitions (sound, temperature, light). Create a conceptual-visual diagram that links these affects to forms of relation.
- **Output:** Analytical diagram + 250-word commentary.

Week 5 – Cartographic Intervention

Key Ideas:

Critical mapping · Visual ethics · Spatial politics

Guiding Questions:

1. How do maps produce knowledge, authority, and exclusion?
2. How can mapping become a speculative ethnographic act?

Readings:

- Oslender, Ulrich. 2021. “Decolonizing Cartography and Ontological Conflict.” *Political Geography* 89.
- Dalton, Craig, and Mason-Deese, Liz. 2012. “Counter-mapping and Spatial Politics.” *ACME* 11 (1): 440–460.
- Lury, Celia, and Nina Wakeford, eds. 2012. *Inventive Methods*. London: Routledge.
(Intro)

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discussion: mapping as an epistemic and ethical intervention.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Cartographic Intervention

- **Objective:** Critically intervene in representational regimes.
- **Procedure:** Choose an existing institutional or online map of your field site. Identify what it erases, then design a counter-cartography that visualizes these absences or relations.
- **Output:** Counter-map + 400-word theoretical justification.

Week 6 – Infrastructural Ecologies

Key Ideas: More-than-human urbanisms · Coexistence · Care · Entanglement

Guiding Questions:

1. How do more-than-human assemblages sustain urban life?
2. How does care operate across species and matter?

Readings:

- Haraway, Donna J. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2017. *Matters of Care*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Blok, Anders, and Ignacio Farias, eds. 2016. *Urban Cosmopolitics*. London: Routledge. (Selections)

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discuss multispecies urban ethnographies and ecological infrastructures.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Infrastructural Ecology Study

- **Objective:** Analyze a multispecies or material relation as an infrastructure of care.
- **Procedure:** Select a more-than-human system (pigeon habitats, water drains, compost). Trace flows of maintenance, neglect, and coexistence.
- **Output:** 400-word analytical vignette + one annotated photograph or sketch.
- **Connection:** Expands the *Field Diary* and feeds into *Portfolio*.

Week 7 – Specimenization and Analytic Form

Key Ideas: Multimodal ethnography · Aesthetics of knowledge · Specimen as concept

Guiding Questions:

1. How can ethnographic fragments become analytical forms?
2. What does it mean to “specimenize” the city?

Readings:

- Fortun, Kim. 2012. “Ethnography in Late Industrialism.” *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (3): 446–464.
- Lury, Celia. 2021. *Problem Spaces: How and Why STS Thinks with Fragments*. Cambridge: Polity Press. (Selections)
- Stewart, Kathleen, and Lauren Berlant. 2019. *The Hundreds*. Durham: Duke University Press. (Selections)

Seminar (2 hrs):

Workshop on analytic writing and multimodal form.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Specimenization Workshop

- **Objective:** Transform one fragment into a specimen—a stabilized analytical form.
- **Procedure:** Choose one fieldnote or vignette. Design a “specimen entry”: text, image, label, and theoretical annotation (100 words).
- **Output:** One specimen + 300-word reflection on form and method.

Week 8 – Curating the Field

Key Ideas: Curation · Public ethnography · Fragment as form · Knowledge aesthetics

Guiding Questions:

1. How can ethnographic materials be curated without closure?
2. What are the politics of exhibiting as a method?

Readings:

- Yusoff, Kathryn. 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Myers, Natasha. 2020. “Curating the Planthropocene.” *Environmental Humanities* 12 (1): 1–22.
- Jasanoff, Sheila, ed. 2004. *States of Knowledge*. London: Routledge. (Selections)

Seminar (2 hrs):

Discussion on care, curatorial ethics, and speculative exhibition in ethnology.

Field Practicum (2 hrs): Cabinet Assembly and Reflection

- **Objective:** Curate analytical specimens for collective presentation.
- **Procedure:** Select 3–4 specimens and one diagram from your project. Write brief labels and a 1,000-word reflexive essay *What the City Taught Me About Method*.
- **Output:** Contribution to *The Cabinet of Urban Specimens* exhibition + final portfolio submission.

Final Output: The Atlas of Urban Specimens

Description

This course concludes with *The Atlas of Urban Specimens*, a multimodal analytical portfolio combining texts, diagrams, and field images.

Each student curates 3–4 specimens accompanied by short interpretive labels and a 1,000-word essay *What the City Taught Me About Method*.

Purpose

The Atlas acts as a conceptual map of urban relations. It transforms fragments into analytical devices, connecting infrastructures, atmospheres, and more-than-human encounters across scales.

Public Presentation

Displayed as a collective installation or digital atlas, the project turns the classroom into an experimental archive of the city as a method.