This is a graduate seminar on qualitative research methods in the social sciences. The course is designed to be a ‘studio’ course, in the sense that students will experiment with elements of research design over the semester, spurred by creative insights from reading, conversation, and critical reflection. We will cover cutting-edge topics, such as multispecies ethnography, as well as research design and staples of fieldwork: participant observation, interviews, visual methods, and archival work. I encourage you to try on new ideas, imagine possibilities for your projects, think with the readings, and approach your research project creatively from the multiple angles our conversations afford. To do this successfully, you might have to let go of some of the ideas you bring to the seminar about your project, at least temporarily.

The studio metaphor is also apt in that building a research proposal consists of working on the pieces without losing sight of the whole, just as in the studio arts. Moving or changing one part of a proposal generally requires you to re-think, in big or small ways, your entire project. Decisions you make about method cannot be divorced from broader theoretical or conceptual issues, and neither can our discussions. In this seminar we will think about theory and method together, since that’s how they operate in practice. This orientation will be more explicit in some of our sessions than in others, but it holds throughout.

Assignments:

Participation: I expect students to be active participants in the seminar. This means that everyone reads the assigned readings before class, writes a critical reflection on the readings each week, and participates in discussions. I encourage you to make a habit of reading beyond the assigned readings, even if it means reading only one or two extra pieces each week. The readings that have made it onto the syllabus are by no means exhaustive treatments of the weekly topics, so please follow a lead that piques your interest.

To keep the cost of books down, I have placed these books on reserve at Mann Library, but, if your budget permits, please buy the following:


Each student will take responsibility for leading our discussion of the readings for one class. A sign-up sheet will be distributed at our first meeting.

**Critical reflections**: The critical reflections are an opportunity to think your project through the prism of the readings and our discussions. Prompts are provided in the syllabus for writing your reflections, but don’t be constrained by them. Think of your reflections as trial balloons. You will not use all of the possibilities you consider in your critical reflections in your final research proposal, but I hope your final proposals will be improved by this process of trying on new ideas every week.

**Research proposal**: The seminar will be most useful for students working on research proposals, since the construction of a research proposal is the main activity in the course. By the end of the semester you should have a proposal for a research project. Write it in blocks, and revise those blocks as you move along so that theory, method, and design are integrated and your final proposal is seamless. Formats will vary. If you are writing for a particular purpose (a research grant competition, an oral defense), the format may be pre-determined. Students who don’t yet have a funder in mind might look up grant writing instructions provided by major sponsors of qualitative or ethnographic research, including the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the J. William Fulbright Foundation, and the Fulbright-Hays program through the US Department of Education. Others might adopt formats required by their departments or institutional funders, including those inside Cornell. The last two or three sessions of the seminar (depending on enrollment) will be used to workshop student proposals.

**Sessions**:

Please note that depending on student interests and projects, some of these sessions may be modified. Please check Blackboard for the latest copy of the syllabus.

**January 26: Introductions**

**February 2: Framing studies, locating field sites**

Read this piece first:

Then read these pieces (in no particular order):


**Critical reflection:** All of these readings address questions of the fit between research questions and study design and especially the field/place/site where research is conducted. Write a statement about the project you plan to develop for this course. How do these readings help you think about ‘the field’ for your project and the kinds of questions you can ask and answer in specific places? How do they help you frame or design your project? How do your questions, ideas about design, and field sites work together? Will you work in one or more than one location? Why? How will you connect your situated project to broader (regional, national, or global) processes? How are these connections reflected in your questions, theories of change, and study design? How, following Zussman, does your project work on more than one level?

**February 9: Multi-sited ethnography and mobile methods**

Read:


Then read:


**Critical reflection:** Think conceptually in this reflection. How might you conceptualize and construct your project as multi-sited in the way that term is used by Marcus? Can you construct questions that reflect its multi-sitedness? (Forget, for the moment, the logistics of data collection). What would you follow? What could you follow? How would such an approach reflect conceptually what you are trying to capture? If there are alternative study designs that are more appropriate for the work you propose to do, what are those and why do you favor them?

**February 16:** We will not meet in class this week (stay tuned about a make-up date/time).

**February 23: Multispecies encounters**

Read:


Then read:


See also the Multispecies Salon [here](#) and articles in a recent special issue of *Conservation and Society on multispecies encounters* [here](#).
**Critical reflection:** What kinds of multispecies entanglements does your project involve? How would taking non-human actants (plants, animals, waste, etc.) seriously shift the focus of your project or shape it? How will you engage non-human actants in your project? What roles will they play? What would it mean for your research design and methods to recognize the non-human actants that people your project as independent agents?

**March 2: Doing fieldwork: Participant observation**

For an (dry-ish, sorry…) overview, read:


Then read:


Recommended and on reserve at Mann Library:


Critical reflection: What opportunities do you have for spending time in your field sites? How will you insert yourself into this space/spaces? Who are you in relation to the places, people, or things you will be studying and why and how is this likely to matter? Will you be more participant or observer? What types of ethical concerns are likely to arise, given your topic of study, your field site(s), your participants and their histories, your audiences? How will you think about the validity of data gathered through participant observation and how will you manage threats to validity? Think and write concretely about how you will capture your fieldwork experiences.

March 9: Interviews

Read:


Recommended and on reserve at Mann Library:


Critical reflection: Who do you want to talk to? Why? Turn in a draft interview guide. (You may need to prepare interview questions for multiple different types of informants, but focus on only one type for this reflection). Annotate your interview guide or add some text to discuss it from both technical and substantive points of view. Comment on access, on institutional discourses, on how you will analyze the data you collect and how you will take into account some of the forces that are likely to shape its production. From a more technical perspective, comment on the number of themes you want to cover, the organization of the guide, the flow and pace of the interview, the
opening and closing, the structure or type of your questions (Spradley is particularly thorough on this), the mechanics of staging the interview and recording it.

**March 16: Visual methods**

Read:


Recommended and on reserve at Mann Library:


Vergara, C. Images as a tool of discovery. Also, look around his website at his use of images and maps: [http://invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html](http://invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html)

**Critical reflection:** What possibilities do you see for incorporating visual elements into your project? How would charting, drawing, mapping, filming, or photographing enhance or alter your project? How will you interpret any visual information you are planning to collect? What kinds of interpretive challenges would the visual methods you propose pose? Tack back and forth between your developing ‘methods’ section of your proposal and your research questions and any background or literature review section you are preparing to be sure that modifications are not required to bring these elements into alignment.

**March 23: Using documents and archives**
Read:


**Critical reflection:** What kinds of documentary evidence might be relevant for your project? What might it mean for your project to approach the archive as a site of knowledge production? How can you think about the structure of the archive in relation to your project and any silences in it? What kinds of questions might you ask of the archive? Think concretely about archival sources, and then think critically about those sources.

**March 30: Ethnographic writing**


Write a brief review of the book and come to class prepared to discuss it. In writing your review, write a 1-2 paragraph summary for someone who has not read it. Then, comment on study design, methods, use of data, and writing style, thinking your review through the readings encountered to date in this course.

**April 6:** Spring break – no class

**April 13: Ethnographic writing**


The reflection this week should follow the format above.
April 20: Student proposals

In the last three sessions of the seminar we will turn our attention to reviewing student proposals. The amount of time we have for each proposal will depend on the number of students in the seminar. One week before the session in which we discuss your proposal you will pre-circulate it along with information about the (ultimate) audience for the proposal. In class you'll be asked to make brief remarks about your proposal (5-10 minutes) to kick off the discussion. You can talk about particular challenges, questions you have for the group, etc. during this time. We will make a practice of first stating what works and what we particularly like about the proposal (everyone should be prepared to contribute their thoughts on this), followed by suggestions for improvement. All suggestions should be constructive and delivered in the spirit of mutual support and encouragement. I will take responsibility for making sure everyone respects those rules and receives useful feedback.

April 27: Student proposals

May 4: Student proposals