

Sarah Lopez - Associate Professor
Graduate Course
Fall 2025
Wed. 1:45-4:45pm
Location: DRLB 2N36
David Rittenhouse Lab on the corner of Walnut and 33rd

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office: Weitzman Hall; office hours by appointment.

Material Histories and Ethnographic Methods

What does it mean for students in the spatial disciplines (outside of anthropology, sociology, and history) to engage human subjects as primary sources of evidence? How can students in design, planning, landscape, and preservation both learn from the social sciences and transform classic ethnographic and historical methods to address the unique contexts of buildings, landscapes, and cities? This class focuses on how to conduct built environment research that situates human subjects as repositories of knowledge and critical sources of primary evidence of space and place. We will move between research on the *history* of the built environment (dependent on maps, plats, archives, and documentation of sites) and *human centered spatial research* as we design—collectively—best practices and spatially oriented interview and observation techniques. We will address multiple scales (national and urban grids, post office infrastructure, sidewalks, commercial store fronts, schools, prisons) as we problematize human experience, perception, and knowledge of the built world.

Course Goals:

- * reading buildings in their spatial context
- * historic context as a living palimpsest
- * critical engagement with the city through observation, mapping, interviews
- * the art of interviewing
- * differences of oral history, ethnography, interviewing, narrative, and autoethnography
- * comparative and cross-disciplinary methods for studying places

Course Requirements:

1. ¡Presente! Students are expected to be present. What does that mean? You show up. You engage. You read, think and talk. Please **email me in advance** if you miss a class, as otherwise I will expect to see you there. **More than two unexcused absences will automatically lower your grade by one whole letter.**
2. Sept. 10: Take a walk and draw a map – can also be a collage (see week 3)
3. Sept. 17: Watch Oral History recording or read transcript and review (see week 4)
4. Sept. 24: Interview a family member or close friend (see week 5)

5. Oct. 8: Interview #2, and transcribe (see week 7)
6. Nov. 5: Conduct *dérive*
7. Nov. 12 OR after Thanksgiving: Interview #3, transcribe and “code”
8. Optional Dec. 3: Present final project (see week 14)

*recommended text: Ritchie, Donald, *Doing Oral History*, third edition, 2015.

*readings in this syllabus have **short citations**, if anybody has questions about other chapters or full citations, please ask.

***AI**, friend or foe? We will collectively determine our AI policy for class.

*no computers in class allowed unless we are doing group work on them or you are pulling up a pdf of your reading

Grading Structure

Attendance and participation in class (questions, discussion, in-class notations): 50%

Short Assignments: 25%

Final assignment: 25%

**I reserve the right to change the syllabus according to group discussion/needs. Please look out for e-mails I send or canvas updates regarding any changes to the syllabus.

WEEK 1

August 27

Subjects (Self, Other, Built / Environment)

Part 1: My disciplinary position / my subject position / my environmental position /
Part 2: Course overview

Reading:

- bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Intro, Ch. 1: 1-22

WEEK 2

Sept. 3

Positioning Ourselves in the Land

Part 1: The idea of Nature, Land, and First Effective Settlement
Part 2: You

Reading:

- Liboiron, Max, "Land, Nature, Resource, Property," *Pollution is Colonialism*, 39-80, 2021.
- Kimmerer, Robin, "Learning the language of animacy," *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, 48-59.

WEEK 3

Sept. 10

Positioning Ourselves in the National Ordinance and Urban Grid

Part 1: What does it mean to live in a grid? To what extent does the spatial determine the social?

Part 2: US Land Ordinance of 1785

Part 3: Discuss historic maps and contemporary experience of walking. How might one know where one is?

Reading for next week:

- Dell Upton, "The Grid and the Republican Spatial Imagination," *Another City* (pg. 113-144).
- Rosalyn LaPier, "Land as Text: Reading the Land."

For Reference:

- Paul Groth, “Street grids as Frameworks for Urban Variety,” *Harvard Architecture Review* 2 (1981): 68-75.
- Grady Clay, “Crossing the American Grain with Vesalius, Geddes, and Jackson: the cross-section as a learning tool,” *Everyday America*, Ch. 7: 109-129.

Milestone: How do you think about land? How might learning about the history of Philly’s grid inform your experience of its streets? What and where is beyond the grid? Study Holmes map, Bromley Atlas and Google Street Maps (and any other interesting cartographic projects about Philly’s space that you already know or find). Find a swath you want to walk that takes a cut into the urban history of the city and consider Upton’s idea of land as “interchangeable” in the 17-19th centuries and LaPier’s ideas of ‘landscape as text.’ Draw an *alternative cartography* of your movement or walk/cut through the city. If not represented by a grid, how do you tell the story of the ordering of space? Patterns? Bring a paper copy to class (and send me a photograph of your sketch or collage) and be prepared to discuss. This can be messy and experimental. It is not meant to take hours, nor be rendered in a computer program. Time should be spent walking and thinking, not drawing...

WEEK 4

Sept. 17

Post Office and Postal Roads

For class discussion: What would an ethnographic project of the postal system look like? Can you find an example of one?

Part 1: Federal Institutions and the building of national infrastructure

Part 2: Postal Research

Part 3: Oral History interviewing – promises and pitfalls

Reading for next week:

- David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth Century America*, Intro: 1-12.
- SKIM / USPS, *Postal Service Contributions to National Infrastructure*, 2012
- Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018), 1-24.
- Optional: Star, Susan Leigh, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” *American Behavior Scientist*, 1999, 377-389.

What are this?

- <https://www.godblesstheusps.org>
- <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/research-article/the-railway-mail-service/oral-histories>
- <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/the-revolutionary-post/>

For Reference:

- SKIM: <https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/>
- SKIM: <https://oralhistory.org/best-practices/>

Milestone: Find a recording of an interview that is a part of an oral history project and review one interview (can be audio or video). This is a list of repositories:

<https://oralhistory.org/centers-and-collections/>

How would you describe the audio –affect, person’s comfort level, tenor? What did you think about the questions asked? What question would you ask next if given the chance? Critiques or comments about this oral history project? You do not need to submit anything, simply take notes for class.

WEEK 5

Sept. 24

Black towns & Black Farms: Corn, Capital, Kinship

Part 1: Farms as a built landscape and investigative journalism on farm space

Part 2: 1980s vernacular architecture and 2020 urban geography approach to Black space

Part 3: Line between an oral history interview and investigative journalism interview?

Reading for next week:

- 1619 Podcast, episode 5, The Land of Our Fathers Part 1 and 11:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>
- Brown, Mary Ann, “Vanished Black Rural Communities in Western Ohio,”
Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture (1982): 97-113.
- Purifoy and Seamster, “Creative Extraction: Black towns in white space,” *Society and Space*, 2021.

For Reference:

- Richie, Donald, “Conducting Interviews,” *Doing Oral History*, chapter 3: 73-102.
- LISTEN: Audie Cornish, “The Burning Question,” <https://transom.org/2012/the-burning-question/>

Milestone: Interview somebody in your family or closest circle of friends about a landscape that is memorable to them and why. Before you interview, think carefully about if you will use handwritten notes, typed notes as they speak (which can be distancing), or record the interview with your phone or on zoom/Facetime/etc. Write 1 to 2 paragraph reflection. What was easy, or difficult? Is there a quote that stands out? If so, which quote? Can you paraphrase their words? What is difference in affect between their quote and your paraphrasing? Finally what would you do differently next time? Submit in paper-form at the beginning of class.

WEEK 6

Oct. 1

Street Vending and Ethnography

Part 1: Ethnography and the built environment

Part 2: Stories as scholarship and the “sociological imagination” vs. “spatial imagination”

Part 3: Sanborn maps & Google Street View for studying streets and street life (if time permits)

Part 4: interviews take #2

Reading for next week:

- Duneier, Mitchell, Hakim Hasan, and Ovie Carter, “Introduction,” “Part 1,” and “Afterward,” 1-16, 17-114, 318-330 in *Sidewalk* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

For Reference:

- Mills, C., “The Sociological Imagination,” 1959 [1977]

In class workshop: Interview somebody in class about an interstitial urban space (parking lot, alley, etc) or street from another time in their life.

WEEK 7

Oct. 8

Squatting, Tenements, SROS

Part 1: A built environment perspective on SROs

Part 2: Focusing on peoples’ stories of squatting

Part 3: Discuss your interviews (listening, transcription and analysis)

Reading:

- Paul Groth, “San Francisco--Third and Howard: Skid Row and the Limits of Architecture,” chap. 1 in *Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space*, ed. Zeynep Celik, Diane Favro, and Richard Ingersoll (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- Starechesnki, “Squatting History: The Power of Oral history as a History Making Practice,” *Oral History Review*, 2014, 182-216.

WEEK 8 (SARAH WILL REMOTE IN; class may meet for 1.5 hours)

Oct. 15

Transnational Mexican/American Placemaking

Part 1: *The Remittance Landscape* – overview of methods

Part 2: Techniques of observation

Part 3: workshop- interviews

Reading:

- Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape*, Introduction and Ch. 1, 1-70, 2015.
- Cheng, “‘Flesh and Blood Archives’: Embodying the Oral History Transcript” in *Oral History Review* 45:1 (2018): 127-42.

Milestone: Conduct your second formal interview. It can be the same person as your first interview, a person related to another project you have going on, or related to a question you have about place, history, politics, social life (but in relation to some aspect of the material world/built environment). At this point it is more important to practice an interview than to have a clear research agenda or interview subject. This time you will *record and transcribe* the interview into a written word document. **Pull out salient moments in bold typeface.** If this were a part of a larger project, how might you code the interview (put keywords or themes as a “comment” thread in your word or pdf document)? Once finished, what would you do differently? Bring a paper copy at the beginning of class.

WEEK 9

Oct. 22

“Indian” Residential Schools and Trauma

When considering these different means for telling stories about a difficult place and time, how do they compare? Comparing one against the other: can you design new research questions? How could the arguments and examples *be strengthened* by applying a built environment lens? What questions are left unanswered? What is omitted due to the focus on either buildings/landscapes **or** people?

Part 1: “Indian” Residential Schools—their architectural history

Part 2: Trauma, investigative journalism, and autoethnography

Part 3: “Best Practices?”

Reading:

- Rina Swentzell, “Conflicting Landscape Values: The Santa Clara Pueblo and Day School,” *Places*, 19-27, 1990.
- **Listen:** Connie Walker, *Stolen: Surviving St. Michael*, 9 episodes, <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/stolen/episodes#show-tab-picker>
- Rosalyn LaPier, “[My family lived the horrors of Native American boarding schools—why Biden’s apology doesn’t go far enough](#),” *The Conversation* blog, Oct. 28, 2024.
- Crystal Mun-hye Baik, “From “Best” to Situated and Relational: Notes Towards a Decolonizing Praxis,” *The Oral History Review*

For Reference:

- Alexander Freund, “Toward an Ethics of Silence? Negotiating Off-the-Record Events and Identity in Oral History.” In *Oral History Off the Record*.

- Martha Norkuna, “The Vulnerable Listener,” in *Oral History Off the Record*, 81-95, 2013.

WEEK 10

Oct. 29

Prisons / Carceral

Part 1: Immigrant detention in Texas—overview of Lopez/student project for HAL
 Part 2: The idea of shared authority and legal and ethical issues in oral history, ethnography, and people-centered research.

Reading:

- Listen: <https://www.futuromediagroup.org/suave/> (Maria Hinojosa’s 6 episodes of “Suave”; listen to at least the first 2)
- Lopez, Sarah, “A Personal Reflection on People as “Subjects” for Built Environment Research,” *Buildings & Landscapes* (2022).
- Lopez, Sarah, [Sidewalk Apprehensions](#): UnMasking the migrant detention histories,” PLATFORM, July 7, 2025.

For Reference:

- Shopes, Linda, “Legal and Ethical Issues in Oral History” in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, 125-159, 2007.

WEEK 11

Nov. 5

Description and Walking and Built Environment Data

Part 1: How can walking be a method for people-centered spatial and historical research?
 Part 2: Workshop to design walking session next week.

Reading:

- Guy Debord, *Theory of the Dérive*, 1958
- Garnette Cadogan, “Walking While Black,” *Literary Hub*, July 8, 2016
- J. B. Jackson, “Stranger’s Path” in *Landscape in Sight*, 1997.
- Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What happens after they are built* (Penguin Books, 1994). Ch. 1 & Ch. 2, pgs. 1-23. (skim)

For Reference:

- William Littman, “Viewpoint: Walk This Way: Reconsidering Walking for the Study of Cultural Landscapes,” *Buildings & Landscapes*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 3-16.
- Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2001)
- Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), 91-110.

- Podcast: 99% Invisible: 68 Built for Speed
- Guy Debord, *Two Accounts of the Dérive*, 1956

Milestone: Go on *dérive* that is no less than 1 hour and no more than 2. After reading Cadogan and Jackson, do a very short experimental writing exercise where you “describe” your path (fine to focus on the material aspects, or the subjective ones, or both). I do not want images. I want text. Write a two substantial paragraphs reflecting on walking. Submit at the beginning of class and be prepared to share.

WEEK 12

Nov. 12

WALKING TOUR OF CUT OF CITY THAT HITS AS MANY THEMES FROM ABOVE SESSIONS – WE COLLECTIVELY DESIGN

How can we see the walk as historical and material research – how can we leverage 15 different lenses shaped by the 15 of you all?

Census data

Zoning history or zoning present

Sanborn maps

Atlases

Historic Photographs

Geohistory Philly maps or data

<https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/>

<https://www.philageohistory.org/geohistory/>

<http://www.philageohistory.org/tiles/viewer/>

Oral History

Interview

Observation

Milestone: Conduct your third interview, transcribe, and analyze take-aways. Submit before or after Thanksgiving.

WEEK 13

Nov. 19

Autoethnography & (potentially) late 20th century “peep shows”

Part 1: What are the boundaries between personal narrative and built environment stories? What is the difference between memoir and autoethnography?

Part 2: In pairs, begin to sketch a memoir or autoethnography style narrative of some aspect of your life. One of the main narrative threads should be place, landscape, and/or buildings.

Part 3: Group discussion about next class

Reading:

- Samuel Delaney, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (maybe...TBD)
- Trude, “The Colour of Water: an autoethnographically inspired journey of my becoming a researcher”

For Reference:

- Cooper and Lilyea, “I am interested in Autoethnography, but how do I do it?,” *Qualitative Report*, 2022.
- James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to his White Mother* (1995)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015).
- Ochs, Elinor and Lisa Capps, “Narrating the Self,” 1996, 19-43.

WEEK 14

Nov. 26 NO CLASS

WEEK 15

Dec. 3

Final Project / Initiating a Project...

How can you leverage your own embodied knowledge and situated experience to create a material history of some aspect of your life (where you were born, a spatial genealogy of your parents or care-takers place-based knowledge, your grandparents spatial world view as related to their history contextualized in larger histories)? If you are not interested in doing a final project on your own family history, what research questions drive you and how can you center the interviews and final project for this class around them?

The final project should not be thought about as a final product. Rather, this class aims to identify methods that open new lines of inquiry for you within academia, in relation to place and history, and in how you understand and situate your history in place. The final project is experimental. It can take the form of narrative prose, of academic text, of photographic prose, audio text, or video text. Note: *it must include words*, but they can be written, spoken, or recorded. The medium is your choice. It will either be a piece you design in relation to a research question that drives your curiosity, or a piece you design based on an autoethnographic approach.

USEFUL LINKS:

ORAL HISTORY

On technique:

- <https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/>
- <https://oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>
- <https://training.npr.org/2017/01/31/the-ear-training-guide-for-audio-producers/>
- <https://transom.org/2012/the-burning-question/>

On collections:

- <https://oralhistory.org/centers-and-collections/>
- <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/visit/bancroft/oral-history-center>

On Penn's IRB requirements:

- <https://irb.upenn.edu/homepage/social-behavioral-homepage/guidance/types-of-social-behavioral-research/survey-interview-research/>

On Consent:

- <https://columbia.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=d3fc0d48-5152-4c36-a2a9-ac3900fd3a6a>

EXAMPLES OF DIGITAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS:

- <https://www.nybg.org/learn/humanities-institute/bronx-foodways-oral-histories-project/bronx-foodways-oral-histories-project-2021-participants/>
- <https://medium.com/community-archives>

Oral history meets journalism:

- <https://www.futuromediagroup.org/suave/>
- <https://www.podchaser.com/podcasts/latino-usa-95725/episodes/the-quevedos-43990281>
- Wilkerson, Isabel, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (2010)

EXAMPLE OF ETHNOGRAPHY:

- Tang, Eric, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto* (2015)

Experimental Ethnography:

- De Leon, Jason, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (2015)

EXAMPLES OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY:

- Whitworth, Colin, "Finding My Front Porch: An Autoethnography of Queer Southern Intersections" *Journal of Autoethnography* (2023)
- Han, Clara, *Seeing Like a Child: Inheriting the Korean War* (2020)

Experimental Autoethnographic Podcast:

- Espera: <https://www.sayrequevedo.com/espera>

MAPPING

- Sanborn Maps, digital, on Pennsylvania
https://franklin.library.upenn.edu/catalog/FRANKLIN_9940043353503681
- USGS Maps

Landscape Methods:

- Denis Cosgrove, “New Directions in Cultural Geography”
- Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place and Topophilia*
- Paul Groth, “New Connections in Vernacular Architecture”
- Paul Groth and Chris Wilson, “The Polyphony of Cultural Landscape Studies,” Ch 1, *Everyday America* (pg. 1-22).

Mapping

- King, Tiffany L., “The map (settlement) and the territory (the incompleteness of conquest),” *The Black Shoals*, 74-110.

Gridding:

- Hildegard Binder Johnson, “Gridding a national landscape,” *Making the American Landscape* (pg. 142-161).
- 99% invisible, episode 240, Plat of Zion,
<https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/plat-of-zion/>
- J. B. Jackson, “Sense of Place, Sense of Time,” in *Sense of Place, Sense of Time* (Yale University Press, 1994): 151-163.
- J. B. Jackson, “Almost Perfect Town,” 1-7.
- Pierre Bourdieu, “Structures, *Habitus*, Practices,” and “Belief and the Body,” chap. 3, 4 in *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (1980; Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990).

- <https://oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-overview/>
- <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/fifty-years-of-service-1971-2021.pdf>

Farming:

- Thomas Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England*, 1984.
- J. B. Jackson, “Westward Moving House” in *Landscape in Sight* (pg. 81-105).

Stories:

- Gelman, Andrew and Thomas Basbøll, “When Do Stories Work: Evidence and Illustration in the Social Sciences,” *Sociological Methods & Research*, vol. 43, 4, 2014, 547-570.
- Trouillot, Michel-Ralph, “The Power in the Story.” In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 1-30. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Migration places:

- Sen, Arijit, *Transcultural Placemaking: Intertwined Spaces of Sacred and Secular on Devon Avenue, Chicago*, 31-62, 2013.
- Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History*, Chapter 1, “Claiming Urban Landscape as Public History,” 1-13.

- Becky Nicholaides and James Zasadias, “Design Assimilation in Suburbia: Asian Americans, Built Landscapes, and Suburban Advantage” (pgs. 332-371).

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Oral Histories

- Mazé, Elinor, “The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History” in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodologies*, 2007.
- Anderson, Kathryn and Dana C. Jack, “Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis” in *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd Edition, New York: Routledge, 2016, 179-192.
- Mahuika, Nepia, “The Indigenous Truth of Oral History,” *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: an indigenous perspective*, 166-178.
- Rouverol, Alicia, “Collaborative Oral History in a Correctional Setting: Promise and Pitfall,” *Oral History Review*, 61-85, 2003.