Ethnographic Portraits of Social Suffering in the New Millennium:  
The Intimate Dimensions of Neoliberalism

Organized by:

Philip Lewin, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology  
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This workshop series will feature presentations by several leading social scientists who employ ethnographic methods to examine the social suffering associated with new forms of neoliberal governance. Their papers, which consider a diverse array of social groups and geographic areas, explore how people who have been relegated to places of advanced marginality--i.e. social worlds marked by structural unemployment, low levels of social service delivery, authoritarian methods of policing and social control, high rates of interpersonal violence and crime, and cultural stereotyping and stigmatization--navigate and experience the precarious realities that they face in their daily lives. By offering an in-depth examination of these social worlds, the series aims to improve scholarly understanding of the collective pain and trauma that unequal political and economic arrangements have wrought on society's most vulnerable populations since the advent of the new millennium.

Workshops/Presentations

- Friday, January 29th, Randol Contreras, University of Toronto.  Time and place TBA.
- Friday, March 18th, Waverly Duck, University of Pittsburgh.  Time and place TBA.
- Friday, April 22nd, Timothy Black, Case Western Reserve University.  Time and place TBA.

About the Workshop Participants:

Randol Contreras:  Contreras is Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto.  He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He was born in the South Bronx to Dominican immigrant parents, coming of age during the Crack Era when the South Bronx was riddled with arson and abandonment. In his recent book, The Stickup Kids: Race, Drugs, and the American Dream (University of California Press, 2012), he returned to the South Bronx with a sociological eye to provide an unprecedented insider’s look at the workings of a group of Dominican drug robbers. Known on the streets as “Stickup Kids,” these men raided and brutally tortured drug dealers storing large amounts of heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and cash. Using participant observation, Contreras offers both a personal and theoretical account of the rise of the Stickup Kids and their violence that focuses on the lives of neighborhood friends who went from being crack dealers to drug robbers once their lucrative crack market opportunities disappeared. The result is a stunning, vivid, on-the-ground ethnographic description of a drug robbery’s violence, the drug market high life, the criminal life course, and the eventual pain and suffering experienced by the casualties of the Crack Era.  Contreras is currently doing field research on the Maravilla gangs of East Los Angeles. His larger goal is to use ethnography to reveal and explain the human pain and suffering prevalent in marginal urban areas.
**Waverly Duck:** Duck is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology from Wayne State University and has held post-doctoral positions at the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University. Widely regarded as an expert on poverty, race, and gender relations, community order, and the drug trade, his research uses ethnographic methods to study the orderliness of recognizable situated practices concerning gender, race, age and class in situations of inequality. His new book, *Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), challenges the common misconception of urban ghettos as chaotic places where drug dealing, street crime, and random violence make daily life dangerous for their residents. He presents powerful case studies of individuals whose difficulties flow not from their values, or a lack thereof, but rather from the multiple obstacles they encounter on a daily basis. *No Way Out* thus explores how ordinary people make sense of their lives within severe constraints and how they choose among unrewarding prospects, rather than freely acting upon their own values. What emerges is an important and revelatory new perspective on the culture of the urban poor.

**Timothy Black:** Black is an Associate Professor of Sociology and a Faculty Associate of the Social Justice Institute at Case Western Reserve University. He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. His scholarly work examines the intersections between larger social structures and personal lives, attempting to identify the mechanisms through which social and economic marginalization is (re)produced and show how life in marginalized spaces is negotiated. He is the author of *When a Heart Turns Rock Solid: The Lives of Three Puerto Rican Brothers On and Off the Streets* (Pantheon Books, 2009; Vintage Books, 2010). Based on an unprecedented 18-year ethnographic study of a network of Puerto Rican men from Springfield, Massachusetts, the book examines the intersections of structural and individual changes in the men’s lives as neoliberal reforms unfolded in their communities. Following the men into a variety of social spaces—city schools, the drug trade, formal and informal low-wage jobs, the trucking industry, prisons, and drug treatment programs—Black draws on the work of C. Wright Mills to demonstrate how social structures are lived and how personal struggles are linked to public issues. He is also co-author of *On Becoming a Teen Mom: Life before Pregnancy* (University of California Press, 2015). Based on life history interviews with 108 brown, white, and black teen mothers, the book exposes problems in their lives that are often overlooked in pregnancy prevention campaigns. It offers a fresh perspective on the links between teen births and social inequalities, demonstrating how the intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and class shape the biographies of young mothers.