

RACHAEL D. STEPHENS

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Rachael Stephens is a joint Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology and Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research traces how racial capitalism is semiotically and institutionally produced through arenas of the American political economy such as real estate, schooling, and public finance — processes that shape contested formations of civic belonging, politicization, and ethno-racial difference. Her dissertation is an ethnography of public-school finance inequality that examines how everyday practices of valuation and discursive avoidance reproduce social inequality in U.S. (sub)urban contexts.

Drawing on training in anthropology, education, urban studies, and political science, Rachael's scholarship and teaching are driven by a commitment to building more democratic and equitable futures. She has conducted ethnographic and community-based research, as well as participatory filmmaking projects, in the Greater Hartford region for over thirteen years, and has taught and advised research projects at institutions including the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, and Columbia University.

EDUCATION

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA <i>Joint Ph.D. in Education and Anthropology</i> <i>Graduate Certificate in Urban Studies</i>	Expected: Spring 2026
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY <i>Masters in Education and Anthropology</i>	2016
College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA <i>Bachelor of Arts, Cum Laude, Anthropology Major, Peace & Conflicts Studies</i>	2010

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

Visiting Lecturer <i>Trinity College, Liberal Arts Action Lab</i>	Fall 2025
Urban Studies Graduate Fellow <i>University of Pennsylvania, Urban Studies Program</i>	2024–2025
Visiting Lecturer <i>Stanford University, Graduate School of Education</i>	Summer 2017

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Courses Taught

- *Community Research: Inclusive Cinema* — Trinity College (Visiting Lecturer, Fall 2025)
- *Urban Fieldwork* — University of Pennsylvania (Graduate Fellow, Spring 2025)
- *Equity and Education* — Stanford GSE (Guest Lecturer, 2017)

Courses Assisted (Teaching Assistantships & Co-Teaching)

- *Qualitative Methods* — UPenn GSE (Fall 2020, Prof. Nicole Mittenfelner Carl)
- *ECS Master's Paper Seminar* — UPenn GSE (2016–2018, Prof. Alex Posecznick)
- *Culture & Communication* — Teachers College, Columbia (Spring 2015, Prof. Ray McDermott)
- *Education & Cultural Production* — Teachers College, Columbia (Spring 2015, Prof. Ray McDermott)

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Racial capitalism and race-making; U.S. urban and suburban political economy; real estate markets, property regimes, and school finance; space, place, and governance; social reproduction and social change; cultural politics of schooling; politicization and civic formation; neoliberal education policy; decolonial, multimodal, and community-based research methodologies.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

PH.D. RESEARCH

Graduate School of Ed. and Anthropology Department, University of Pennsylvania
Principal Investigator — June 2016- Present

Committee: Deborah Thomas, Kathy Hall, Asif Agha

- Multi-sited, multimodal ethnography of school-finance inequality in Greater Hartford, CT, analyzing how property value distribution and state educational-aid allocation are produced through everyday practices.
- Identifies the decentralized institutional network of actors and practices that comprise the “school finance assemblage,” spanning real-estate markets, property taxation, and civic debates over public finance and responsibility.
- Draws on historical materialism and material semiotics to theorize race-making as a dynamic process of property and civic valuation embedded in U.S. political economy
- Multimodal components — including community filmmaking and digital mapping — are disseminated through a public-facing website: GreaterHartfordAnthropology.com.

M.A. RESEARCH

Anthropology Department, Teachers College, Columbia University
Principal Investigator — Summer 2015

Advisors: Hervé Varenne and Raymond McDermott

- Ethnographic study of neighborhood segregation and urban fear in Hartford, CT, examining how social and spatial categories are constructed, reinforced, and resisted, particularly among racially and economically privileged groups.
- Analyzed how everyday practices and narratives sustain patterns of exclusion and inequality, laying the groundwork for later doctoral research on race-making and property.

COLLABORATIVE AND COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

Principal Investigator, Inclusive Community Cinema Project — 2025–Present
Liberal Arts Action Lab, Trinity College & Cinestudio, Hartford, CT

- Lead a collaborative, mixed-methods study examining barriers to cultural participation and strategies for fostering inclusivity in Hartford’s arts ecosystem
- Oversee mixed-methods research—including surveys, interviews, and participant observation—to understand how residents and students engage with Cinestudio and how university–community relationships can be reimagined. Findings will inform future institutional practices and contribute to scholarship on cultural access, public humanities, and university–community partnerships.

Lead Researcher & Steering Committee Member, Greater Hartford Coalition for Safe Technology Greater Hartford, CT (2023-Present)

- Designed and led a mixed-methods community study documenting the socio-spatial distribution of wireless radiation and local policy responses; authored white paper sponsored by GHC4SafeTech, “Wireless Radiation Across Greater Hartford” (2024)
- Produced educational print and audiovisual materials to make findings publicly accessible: <https://ghc4safetech.com/educational-resources>

Co-Director, “Be Brave” Collaborative Film Project. Penn GSE Films Philadelphia, PA
(Fall 2016-2017)

- Directed and co-taught a yearlong youth filmmaking course culminating in a student-produced documentary on Philadelphia’s educational system. The film is hosted on the Philadelphia School District’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsaYS5PaatE>

Preventative Public Safety Initiative — 2015- Fall 2016

West End Civic Association, Hartford, CT

- Convened residents to reimagine public safety through a preventative rather than punitive framework.

Youth Participatory Filmmaking Project — 2011-2014

“bout That Life” Video Narrative Project, Hartford CT

- Designed and led a participatory media project amplifying youth narratives of race, class, gender, and place, integrating those narratives into educator training on deficit ideology and systemic inequity.

Re-Thinking Community Service Curriculum Development— 2008-2010

Student Programs for Urban Development (SPUD), College of The Holy Cross

- Developed a new curriculum integrating systemic analysis of inequality into community service trainings for 20 student leaders and 700 volunteers.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Communications & Media Dept., Teachers College, Columbia U., NYC, NY

Research Assistant,—Sept. 2014- Spring 2016

- Assisted Prof. Lalitha Vasudevan on an ethnography of educational well-being at the Educational Video Center, a youth media organization producing documentaries on social inequality.

Anthropology Department, College of The Holy Cross, Worcester, MA

Independent Ethnographic Project: “Men & Women for Others or Others for Men & Women?: an applied ethnography of community service”—Spring 2009-Spring 2010

- Conducted applied ethnography on community service and politicization at an elite college, producing curricular interventions to incorporate systemic analysis into volunteer programs.

PUBLICATIONS

ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS

Hall, K & **Stephens, R.** (2021). Neoliberalism. *Oxford Bibliographies of Anthropology*. DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199766567-0275. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0275.xml?rskey=GS5G2Z&result=185>

Stephens, Rachael, & Michelle Zhang (2020). "The Moynihan in Us: The culture of 'poverty knowledge' production." *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*. Vol. 14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2020.1738111>

Literat, Ioana, Anna Conover, Elizabeth Herbert-Watson, Karen Kirsch Page, Joe Riina-Ferrie, **Rachael Stephens**, Sawaros Thanapornsangsuth and Lalitha Vasudevan. (2017). "Towards Multimodal Inquiry: Opportunities, Challenges and Implication of Multimodality for Research and Scholarship." *Higher Education Research & Development*. Article ID: CHER 1389857.

Stephens, Rachael and Barbara Hartigan. (2015). "Equality, Justice, & Social Change: Teacher-Researcher Use of the Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis." *British Journal of Education, Society & Behavioral Science*, 8(4), 266-277.

PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

Stephens, Rachael. "Wireless Radiation Across Greater Hartford." Greater Hartford Coalition for Safe Technology. 2024. <https://ghc4safetech.com/local-radiation-levels>

Stephens, Rachael, David McDonald, Mary Sanders, and Gladys Moreno. January 30, 2024. "Wireless Radiation In Our Communities." Interview with Stan McCauley and Cleo-Wright. Morning Talk Live with Stan McCauley. Discussion starts at 12:20. www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlEBwN4BDbg

Stephens, Rachael. "The Social and Spatial Distribution of Wireless Radiation in Greater Hartford, Connecticut." Greater Hartford Coalition for Safe Technology Presentation for Hartford Public Health Director Arroyo. April 2023.

Stephens, Rachael. "'Tax Talk': Why it might be misleading our votes." *CT Mirror*, 11/5/2018. <https://ctmirror.org/2018/11/05/tax-talk-and-why-it-might-be-misleading-our-votes/>

Stephens, Rachael. "Don't want higher taxes? Don't be misled by 'tax talk.'" *The Daily Campus*, 11/6/2018. <http://dailycampus.com/stories/2018/11/6/letter-to-the-editor-dont-want-higher-taxes-dont-be-mislead-by-tax-talk?rq=Rachael%20Stephens>

AWARDS, FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS

Inaugural Presidential Ph.D. Fellowship, University of Pennsylvania (2021–2024)
Selected as one of 33 doctoral students across the university whose research demonstrates exceptional scholarly promise and leadership potential, advances equity and interdisciplinary understandings of inequity, and pursues an innovative agenda with local, national, or global impact.

Halperin Memorial Fund Award, Society for Economic Anthropology (2020)
Selected as one of two graduate students recognized annually for economic research on social exclusion that integrates anthropological theory and social activism.

Urban Studies Graduate Fellowship, University of Pennsylvania (2024–2025)
Selected for competitive fellowship supporting interdisciplinary research on urban inequality, governance, and spatial justice.

Grants and Scholarships

- Center for Experimental Ethnography Grant, University of Penn. (Fall 2020)
- Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (CSERI) Research Grant, University of Penn. (Fall 2019)
- Brady Family Endowed Scholarship, University of Penn. (2016–2019)
- Penn Anthropology, Penn Museum, and GSE Fieldwork Funds, University of Penn. (Summers 2017–2019)

PRESENTATIONS

2025 "I'm looking for a nice, quiet neighborhood": Denaturalizing property valuation--and race--in residential real estate." American Anthropological Association. Annual Meeting. New Orleans, Louisiana. November 2025. Critical Urban Anthropology Association Flash Session (Presenter).

2025 "Speculation and Its Specters." American Anthropological Association. Annual Meeting. New Orleans, Louisiana. November 2025. Roundtable (Organizer and Presenter).

2025 "Pizza, politics, and property: The semiotics of property valuation" Semiotics Conference. Penn Semiotics Lab. May 2025.

2025 "Reclaiming the tin foil hats: The politics of wireless radiation exposure." Annual Meeting for the Society of Applied Anthropology. Revitalizing Applied Anthropology, March 2025.

2023 "Challenging Our Analytical Assumptions: How Research Can Reproduce Inequality." Harvard Graduate School of Education, "Perspectives in Global Education." Invited Lecture. February 2023. *Presenter*.

2022 "Race-making in residential real estate: On studying categories of social differentiation." Screening Scholarship Media Festival (SSMF). "CAMRA Fellows Showcase." Remote conference. March 2022. [Vimeo.com/750744469](https://vimeo.com/750744469). *Co-Presenter*.

2021 "CAMRA Fellows Showcase" Screening Scholarship Media Festival (SSMF). Remote conference. March 2022. *Producer, Coordinator, and Co-Presenter*.

2021 "Mapping the Sensory Topographies of Property Value: a Multimodal, Multi-Scalar Ethnography of School Finance." Screening Scholarship Media Festival. March 2021.

2020 "Sensory Topographies of Property Value." Annual Conference of the Society of Economic Anthropology. Remote conference. March 2021. *Presenter*.

2017 "Achieving Segregation: an interaction analysis of urban segregation." Penn Ethnography Forum. "The Successful Failure of Educational Research" Invited Session. Philadelphia, Pa. February 2017. *Coordinator & Presenter*.

2016 "Successful Danger: an interaction analysis of urban segregation." American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting. "Successful Failure: Methodological Possibilities and Paradigmatic Alterities" Session. Minneapolis, Minnesota. November 2016. *Coordinator and individual presenter*.

2015 "Moving from 'them' to 'us': Using interaction analysis to escape the perils of deficit ideology." American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting. "Revisiting Research Methodologies" Session. Denver, Colorado. With Michelle Zhang. November 2015.

2015 “Shifting the analytical lens: Using interaction analysis to escape the perils of deficit ideology.” Teachers College Black Student Network’s Annual Conference, NY, NY. With Michelle Zhang and Rodrigo Mayorga. May 2015.

2015 “Media as Scholarship: Broadening the nature of academic practice and research.” Organizer, Roundtable Discussion. Teachers College Black Student Network’s Annual Conference, NY, NY, May 2015.

2015 “Educational Ethnography of Media Production & Consumption: Multimodality & Media Ethnography.” American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., Dec. 2014. With L. Vasudevan & J. Riina-Friere.

2015 “Multimodal Play and Educational Wellbeing: An Ethnographic Study of Youth Documentary at the Educational Video Center.” American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, New Scholar Poster Session, Washington, D.C., December 2014. With Dr. Lalitha Vasudevan and Joe Riina-Friere.

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES & SERVICE

Association of Political and Legal Anthropology, American Association of Anthropology, *Graduate Representative to the Board*; August 2020-2022

- Served on Board and develop and coordinate Graduate Student Workshops and Senior-Junior Mentorship Initiative

CAMRA (Collective for Advancing Multimodal Research Arts), UPenn

Undergraduate Fellow Mentor Philadelphia, Pa., December 2019-2024

- Mentored undergraduate students from traditionally underrepresented groups who were interested in pursuing multimodal, non-traditional scholarship at the graduate level.

CAMRA (Collective for Advancing Multimodal Research Arts), UPenn Screening Scholarship and Media Festival Committee & Reviewer Phila., Pa., November 2019-2020

- Coordinated annual festival focused on multimodal scholarship; review submissions

Center for Experimental Ethnography, UPenn Member, Fall 2017—Present

The Penn Semiotics Lab, UPenn Member, Fall 2017—Present

CAMRA/Ethnography Forum Collaborative Initiative, UPenn Philadelphia, Pa.

Member of Planning Board— Fall 2017

- Developed and lead initiatives to support multimodal research and scholarship

Media & Social Change Lab, Teachers College, Columbia University NYC, NY

Graduate Assistant— January 2015- Spring 2016

- Developed and co-lead Teachers College’s “Media and Social Change Lab,” a hub for multimodal scholarship and pedagogy

Urban Studies Department, University of Penn., Philadelphia, PA

Graduate Fellow— August 2024-June 2025

- Developed and facilitated URBS Graduate Colloquium Series

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ADDITIONAL EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Connecticut River Academy Magnet High School, East Hartford CT

Instructor, Advisory Teacher, Director of Extracurricular Activities, October 2011-June 2014

Coastal Community Action Program, Aberdeen, WA

Housing and Community Services Specialist— Fall 2010-Winter 2010

MA Dept. of Transitional Aid, Worcester, MA

Legal Services Coordinator—Fall 2006-Spring 2009

REFERENCES

Deborah Thomas (215) 746-0435; deborah.Thomas@sas.upenn.edu

R. Jean Brownlee Term Professor of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

Kathleen Hall (215) 573-9612; kdhall@upenn.edu

Associate Professor of Education and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

Asif Agha (215) 898-4110; asifagha@sas.upenn.edu

Francis E. Johnston Term Professor of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

Raymond McDermott (650) 723-1723; rpmcd@stanford.edu

Professor of Education & Anthropology, Graduate School of Ed., Stanford University