



Putting Ethnographic Writing in Context

by Seth Kahn

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Putting Ethnographic Writing in Context

Seth Kahn

If you're like most students, you may wonder why your writing instructor is asking you to do *ethnographic writing*.^{*} You may have a vague idea of what ethnography is—what anthropologists do when they live in faraway places for long stretches of time, trying to understand what makes a culture unique or interesting. You may wonder what studying cultures in detail, conducting fieldwork and interviews, has to do with writing papers for your college classes.

Anthropologists James Spradley and David McCurdy answer the question concisely when they say, “A good writer must be a good ethnographer” (4). Ethnographic writing challenges you to consider everything that's interesting and difficult about writing; it pushes you to *generate, collect, analyze, and synthesize* more material than you've probably had to work with in one paper before. Moreover, because ethnographies are about actual people, the assignment makes you think about *ethics* (how you're presenting information, how that information might affect people if made public, being as accurate as you can) and *knowledge* (what it is you really know at the end of the project and how you present that knowledge without sounding more confident than you should). And finally, because these projects generally take a long time and you write constantly while doing them, you'll have plenty of

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time to reflect on and understand how you're learning and changing as writers along the way.

Along with the benefits to your writing, ethnography really highlights and emphasizes human relationships: between participants and researchers; between writers and readers of ethnographic narratives/reports; between students and teachers in classrooms. If all goes well, you'll find that your writing helps you navigate those relationships. That is, ethnographic writing can, when it works well, do more than produce interesting papers: it can improve your understanding of people and their ways of thinking/talking; it can improve the lives of the people you write about; it can help you reflect on your own positions within cultures.

One big lesson you should learn is that ethnographic writing, when it works well, does not—in fact cannot—follow a conventional formula for essays. It requires you to experiment with style, voice, structure, and purpose in ways you probably haven't before. To help you see what I mean by that, I'll at times evoke my own experiences as an ethnographer and teacher of ethnographic writing; the mixture of narrative and analysis should give you an idea—not necessarily a model—of the ways that traditional and non-traditional academic writing conventions work for this kind of project.

SOME NUTS AND BOLTS: WHAT ETHNOGRAPHERS DO

The term most synonymous with *ethnography* is *participant-observation research*. Ethnographers study *cultures*, i.e., the relationships, rituals, values, and habits that make people understand themselves as members of a group (or society, or what have you). We do so by spending lots of time in the cultures we study, interacting with members, watching and learning from how they act and talk, participating in their activities, and talking with them about how they understand their groups and their lives. That is, we adopt a stance that's both distanced (observing) and interactive (participatory), and good ethnographic writing emerges from the juxtaposition of those stances. Good ethnographic writing also acknowledges the effects we have on the cultures we study—which, I'll contend below, is both inevitable and desirable—and the effects those cultures have on us.

Put simply then, ethnographers: observe, participate, interact, analyze, reflect, write, rethink, and describe cultures, their members, and

our own involvements with them. What pins together all these ways of thinking and seeing is that they all either happen in—or directly lead to—*writing*. I can't even pretend to generate an exhaustive list of all the writing you'll do for your project, but here's some of it:

1. Pre-writing: reflections on what you know about the culture you'll study, what you think you know, your biases and predispositions towards its members, the questions you're interested in trying to answer, and more.
2. Introductions/consent forms: letters/emails to group members explaining your project and asking for permission to do it; consent forms for participants to sign, indicating that they understand your project and agree to be involved in it.
3. Fieldnotes/interview notes/transcripts: notes on your visits to the group/research site; notes taken during interviews with participants; transcripts of interviews with participants; descriptions of physical locations, settings, physical artifacts, and so on.
4. Journal: a running internal monologue, so to speak, of your thinking throughout the project—what you're seeing, what you think is important, what you need to pursue further, what you're confused about, who you need to make sure you interview, and/or anything else that helps you keep track of your ideas; some instructors might require occasional "progress reports," which are slightly more elaborated, formal versions of journal entries.
5. Drafts and revisions of ethnographies: your write-up of the project will require multiple drafts and major overhauls in organization/structure, voice, and content, all of which should help you understand your own points as much as they help your readers. Your instructor might even require that you share drafts of your paper with participants in your study.

If you're still wondering what this assignment can teach you about writing, then understand also that this list is not only incomplete, but also not in any necessary order. You'll probably find that your process is *recursive*, e.g., that a journal entry near the end of the project might call on you to re-interview a participant, or that something you'd forgotten about in your fieldnotes makes you rethink your analysis in a

third draft of the paper. And, just as importantly, you may find that sharing your notes, transcripts, and drafts with participants in your project heightens your awareness of what some of us call the *ethics of representation*, i.e., the responsibility to our participants to ensure that what we say about them is fair, reasonable, and accurate.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

One of the driving forces behind assigning ethnographic writing is that people learn more from direct experience than from second-hand experience (e.g., reading, lectures). When we ask you to go out into the field to do your participant-observation research, we're expecting you to learn a lot more about the culture you study than you could by reading about it, or listening to somebody else talk about it. We're also expecting that all the writing you do about it will help you come to terms with what you know, both by making you make sense for yourselves about what you're experiencing, and by making you make sense of it for readers.

If you've written personal reflective essays (like many college admission essays, as well as assignments you might have done for courses), then you've done some of what I'm describing; you've written a narrative in order to help you reflect on an experience, to help you learn or understand something about yourself, and to make that as clear as you can to somebody else. Ethnography also requires you to do this kind of *inductive reasoning*, which means that you collect and consider evidence and experience without a hypothesis or conclusion in mind; your analysis and descriptions explain what you've learned, rather than confirming or disconfirming what somebody else already claimed or knew. But ethnography is different from personal reflective writing in at least these two ways. First, rather than writing about experiences you've *already had*, most of the writing you'll do is about experiences *you're having*. That is, your writing can actually change your situation in ways that reflecting on the past can't. Second, while you're certainly part of the story you're experiencing and writing, you're also writing about *other people*, which comes with a set of responsibilities that can become very complex very quickly.

LEARNING FROM SOMEBODY ELSE'S EXPERIENCE

You can, of course, learn from other people's experiences, too. I want to tell you the story of my first ethnographic project. The project, a study of a graduate-level literature course, should help you see in concrete terms what I've been describing: the kinds of writing involved, and some of the ethical issues that arise from talking about real people and real events, with real implications.

Fall 1996 semester: for a research methods course (most graduate students are required to take at least one methods course, in which we learn to do the professional scholarship we'll have to do as faculty), our major assignment, which would span about eight weeks, was to pick a course in our department, negotiate access to the course with the professor, and do participant-observation research for about five weeks, leaving the last three weeks to write an ethnographic description of fifteen to twenty pages.

The first half of the research methods course had gone smoothly. We studied ethnographic techniques: negotiating access (convincing participants to let us study their cultures), interview strategies, ways of taking fieldnotes, and types of data analysis. We read two full-length ethnographic studies—Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's *Academic Literacies* and Bonnie Sunstein's *Composing a Culture*—as well as two books that theorize the importance of *writing* to ethnographic research: anthropologist Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* and sociologist John Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. I'll return to the Geertz text later; for now, suffice it to say that our entire class believed we'd been well trained to do participant-observation research, and to write interesting and ethically responsible accounts of our experiences.

I decided to approach a professor I had taken a course from before; the course I wanted to study examined relationships between jazz music and literature in the 1950s. I had really enjoyed working with him, and he had some teaching habits I wanted to examine while I wasn't a student in his course. He was intrigued by the idea, and because we'd developed a solid working relationship, he quickly granted access. His only request, one you shouldn't be surprised to encounter, was that I share the final paper with him.

The fieldwork went fine. Over five weeks, I attended class three times each week for fifty minutes; took fieldnotes on the nine students and the professor (an average of five handwritten pages per day); inter-

viewed everybody, some more than once (a total of fifteen interviews, averaging about twenty minutes). The professor gave me copies of his syllabus and all the assignments, as well as examples of work students had done earlier in the semester so I could see the kinds of topics they were interested in researching. In all, I had hundreds of pages of notes, course documents, students' work, and my own journals.

By the time I was done with the fieldwork, I knew how I would focus my description and analysis—which, in retrospect, was part of the problem. What I found, in brief, from my research was what I thought I'd find—a professor who knew his material inside-out, who worked hard to involve students in conversations, who cared as much as anybody I've ever known about his students, but who at times responded to students' comments in ways that seemed dismissive or sarcastic. As a result, the students were sometimes confused about how to respond to the professor's questions and discussion prompts, which frustrated the professor into sometimes sounding even more sarcastic, hoping to lighten the mood but often doing just the opposite.

I had plenty of evidence to write a good paper demonstrating what I'd learned.

We spent two weeks drafting and revising the papers, and receiving extensive feedback from classmates and the professor of the research methods course. All the feedback emphasized readers' needs for more direct evidence: anecdotes from class meetings; sections of interview transcripts; relevant pieces of the syllabus and course materials. By the time I submitted the final draft, I believed I had represented the central issue of the class in a readable, interesting, and believable way. My professor, Wendy, (mostly) agreed. She gave me an A- on the paper, an A in the course, and I thought I'd had a positive learning experience.

I had, but not the one I anticipated. Here's what Wendy wrote about my study in a textbook that incorporates a lot of the work and experiences of graduate students in her courses:

I have had a classroom mini-ethnography cause consternation to a colleague who had allowed one of my students to study him. Consent forms were signed. Classroom reports were drafted and commented on and shared: novice work, much learning. The teacher who was portrayed in the classroom study was—with some reason—much dismayed to read his portrait. I was able to assure him that the student had no intention of publishing that work. (He didn't, particularly

after talking to the teacher, whose work he actually admired no matter how his report played out, and he had even less intention of doing so when he realized his informant was upset.) (Bishop 122)

Wendy's description is much more careful and rational than mine was; I wrote in my journal, after the professor reacted to what I'd written:

I can't believe this guy! I can't believe he called me, at home, after midnight last night to yell at me about my paper. We were on the phone for an hour while he disputed everything I said, except the actual facts! Was I wrong when I said [. . .], or when I described his way of [. . .], or [. . .]? [I'm leaving out specific details to protect his identity]. Everything I said was right! It's not my fault if he's offended by his own behaviors.

Once I calmed down (a few days later!), I began to understand the professor's reaction: not so much that I'd included specific unflattering details, but that I'd made him look unprofessional (while I thought he looked quirky and interesting). He was an award-winning faculty member, understandably concerned that a published version of my paper could harm his reputation—an example of what I meant before when I talked about some of the ethical problems that arise from ethnographic writing. In retrospect, I wish I had shown him a draft of the paper while I was working on it so that he'd had a chance to respond, and perhaps clarify, what he believed were misrepresentations and misunderstandings on my part. I also learned a hard lesson about seeing situations from the perspectives of *all* participants; while my paper represented the students' frustrations at length, it didn't account for the professor's nearly well enough.

RISKS AND BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Because you're writing about real people in real life in your ethnography, your words have potentially profound consequences for the people you write about. I was devastated by the professor's response to my paper. Somebody I respected was very upset about what I'd written, and beyond his hurt feelings, he was concerned that my piece might affect his professional life. And I would soon teach my first research-writing course, having just experienced first-hand what hap-

pens when an ethnographic writer upsets a participant. The professor whose course I'd studied made it quite clear that we were no longer friends, and only once since then have we had any contact at all. He felt *betrayed*, a term I borrow from composition researcher Thomas Newkirk's essay, "Seduction and Betrayal in Qualitative Research." Newkirk contends that because qualitative research is inductive (we don't know what we'll see until it happens), there's no sure way to ensure that participants won't be unhappy about what researchers find; moreover, informed consent not only can't stop this from happening, but also may lull participants into a false sense of security during the project.

Because I wrote the paper for a class with no intention of ever publishing it, the professional consequences for the professor were minimal; that's not to say, of course, that his feelings weren't hurt by the experience. However, even your fieldnotes can have consequences, and you need to be very careful to protect the identities of your participants, even if you don't expect anybody else to see what you write. One former student of mine left his notebook on a table at his site one afternoon, and when he returned five minutes later, two of his participants were reading it. One of them discovered that her boyfriend was cheating on her with another group member; within two days the group had disbanded, and one participant wound up in the hospital with injuries from the ensuing fight.

Situations this dramatic are rare; I've read about 700 ethnographies and count fewer than ten with the potential to endanger any of the participants. The point is that they can be, and you should take steps to minimize the danger: never use anybody's real name or anything that easily identifies them; ask participants to check your notes about them for accuracy, and respect requests not to reveal certain details; make sure participants have signed consent forms. None of these is fail-safe, but they should all be habitual.

Your ethnographic research and writing can, of course, be beneficial for you and your participants, too. Several of my students have discovered, during their projects, significant ways to help their groups. One student, who studied a dance troupe at the university where I did my doctorate, found that the biggest problem they faced was the absence of a regular practice space; she used the evidence she developed in her research—specifically the time members spent worrying about and looking for practice space instead of practicing, and the number

of prospective members they lost because they looked disorganized—to argue for a dedicated room, and the group still uses the room to this day. Another studied a university office that provided escorts to students crossing campus late at night. His thesis in the first draft of his paper was that the service was under-utilized, largely because it was understaffed and underfunded. When he showed the draft to the office's director, however, he learned the office had been well-funded and well-advertised for many years, but had slipped off the university's radar. His study, particularly evidence that the staff didn't take its public relations responsibilities very seriously because they didn't have enough people to serve more students, helped the office's director develop a convincing argument to resume funding and public relations work so that the service got the resources it needed.

These projects helped their writers to see the significance of their own writing in very direct terms. One reason their papers worked so well is the *authority* (a somewhat different kind of authority than conventional academic writing demonstrates, a distinction that will be clearer shortly) with which they represented the cultures and the issues. Earlier, I mentioned anthropologist Clifford Geertz and sociologist John Van Maanen, both of whom have been extremely influential among ethnographers in helping us understand what ethnographic writing is good for. Geertz especially, in a book called *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, develops two concepts that have become crucial to my understanding of ethnographic writing. First is *ethnographic authority*. In simple terms, the problem is that for decades, anthropologists and sociologists had treated ethnography as if it were a science, i.e., as if it could/should result in objective descriptions of cultures. By the 1960s, ethnographers had begun to realize that objectivity isn't possible in this kind of research; when I said in the second paragraph that ethnography makes you think about the kind of knowledge you make from doing it, this is what I was introducing. To be taken seriously as research, the writing has to demonstrate a level of rigor that many academic disciplines believe is best represented by scientific reportage (like chemistry lab reports—very thoroughly detailed, step-by-step descriptions of processes; careful analysis of results; style that excludes any mention of the researcher; etc.). But with the realization that ethnography doesn't work like a science, ethnographic writers had to think about other ways to establish authority for their work.

Geertz presents the second major concept from *Works and Lives* in the deceptively simple phrase, “being there”:

The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly ‘been there.’ (4–5)

As he unpacks this phrase throughout the book, it becomes possible to paraphrase it in another deceptively simple way, i.e., ethnographic authority results from being able to present details and insights that only the writer would know, because the writer was there and readers weren’t.

The logic here is circular (authority comes from sounding like an authority)—mostly. Geertz’s goal is a little more complicated than I’ve put it. We haven’t explored yet his assertion (or recognition) that issues of writers’ *voices* and *styles* are as relevant to ethnographic authority as the writers’ *content*. Let me be clear here: nobody would argue that strong voice and style can override bad content; the data/findings/results have to be strong (in the sense that they’re specific, concrete, and analyzed carefully) before presentation matters. But, whereas traditional scientific discourse assumes that personal voice and style are distractions from content, Geertz posits that content, by itself, doesn’t really accomplish anything; the knowledge that ethnography produces emerges from the relationships formed among writers and readers. The students in my classes whose projects directly benefited their cultures were all able to construct relationships of trust with their readers—exactly what I failed to do in my project I described earlier—helping the data make the case that something needed to change on behalf of their groups. It’s hard to imagine that happening if they hadn’t “been there.”

Another way that ethnographers can benefit participants in our research is by establishing a relationship of *reciprocity*. The principle, in the abstract, is simple—in return for inviting us into their worlds and letting us take information from them, we agree to return the favor by performing services of various kinds for community members. Literacy researcher Ellen Cushman, in her book *The Struggle and the Tools*, describes this exchange between members of a black Muslim mosque and herself as an example:

[A]rea residents invited me to attend the mosque with them (this group of Muslims happened to be particularly private and only allowed Whites to attend if invited by a member). With their invitation, I was granted entry into a religious arena that I would have been hard pressed to enter otherwise [. . .]. In like fashion, I invited residents [participants in her study] to use the computer facilities of the private university I attended. Because this institute was private, residents would have been hard pressed to use the computers without my invitation. (23)

Much of her work with the residents of an inner city neighborhood also involved helping them deal with government agencies, advising high school students on college prospects, and similar activities.

Further, the principle of reciprocity signifies a commitment ethnographers make to developing personal relationships with research participants. Not only does reciprocity establish a relationship that goes beyond *taking*; it also allows ethnographers and participants to collaborate in the process of learning about each other, and learning about themselves. As ethnographers, we aren't watching lab rats run through mazes or observing processes in laboratories. We are real people, involving ourselves in the lives of other real people, with real consequences for all of us.

The takeaway value of these concepts (consent, reciprocity) is that you need to respect your participants and make sure you're not exploiting them and their goodwill just for the sake of your grades. Along with heightened attention to writerly authority (the discussion of Geertz earlier), concern for participants as a primary feature of ethnography is the most important shift following from the realization that ethnography isn't a science.

PUTTING ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

If ethnography isn't science, then what is it? Why do we talk about it as *research*? If its primary goal—as least as I've been putting it—is to benefit the cultures and participants in studies, then why do ethnographers pay so much attention to procedures, kinds of data, style, voice, authority—all the academic-sounding concerns I'm raising in this essay? The answer, at least my answer, to that question is compli-

cated. To understand it well, it's helpful to know some history of where ethnography and ethnographic writing came from.

Most scholars in Anthropology (ethnography's "home" discipline) agree on two predecessors of ethnography: missionary work and travel writing, beginning as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Anthropologist Dell Hymes traces the tradition back to ancient Greece, marked by the beginnings of sea-faring international commerce (21), contending that trade couldn't happen successfully unless traders understood the cultures they were trading with. Other anthropologists (Clifford Geertz; James Clifford; George Marcus; many more) likewise describe the peak of European/Christian missionary work, claiming that missionaries had to study and document the cultures in which they worked, and that the texts they produced were often extremely detailed descriptions of cultures—structures, membership, hierarchies, value systems, rituals, customs. Missionaries' purposes weren't *academic*, i.e., their task wasn't primarily scholarly, but they established the habit of *writing up* their findings.

Their writing, however, didn't need to appeal to an especially wide audience, or an audience that needed to be convinced that the "findings" were rigorous. Their audience was themselves, their churches, and other missionaries who would follow them into similar regions. As people began traveling more in the nineteenth century, many of whom were traveling in lands that missionaries had explored and written about, a new kind of cultural document emerged: travel writing. Nineteenth-century travel writing borrowed from missionary writing the habit of presenting detailed accounts of places, people, customs, rituals, and so on, but more with an eye towards representing the exotic, exciting elements of those cultures. The purpose was to highlight the *otherness* of foreign cultures in order to encourage people to visit them, or to feel like they'd shared the experience of visiting them, without recognizing (or caring about) the risk of stereotyping or marginalizing those cultures.

These forms of pre-ethnographic writing were crucial to developing the discipline of Anthropology, establishing the habits of writing detailed and (ideally) interesting texts about cultures other than the writers.' But missionary and travel writing also laid the seeds for two major ethical problems plaguing ethnographers since: the *imperial* and *colonial* critiques. The *imperial* critique contends that ethnographers bring cultural assumptions and agendas with us when we enter

new cultures, and (almost) inevitably try to impose those agendas and values on those cultures—which is, by definition, what missionaries do. I'm not accusing missionaries of anything insidious; I'm making the point that their understandings of other cultures are instrumental (they serve specific purposes) rather than intellectual. As an ethnographer, you'll discover, if you haven't already, that it's very hard not to do this. You can't help but see cultures in terms you're comfortable with. For now, as long as you're not trying to convince members of the cultures you're studying to *think like you do*, to share your beliefs instead of your trying to understand theirs, you're on the right track.

The *colonial* critique emerges more directly from the habits of travel writing, positing that simply taking data from a culture without giving anything back exploits the members of those cultures for personal gain (for academics, that usually means publications and conference presentations; for you, it means course credit and a good grade), leaving the cultures in the same conditions we found them. For many decades, anthropologists studied cultures that were isolated, pre-industrial, and very often on the brink of disappearing or being controlled by powerful nations. My earlier discussions of risks and benefits, especially the notions of respect and reciprocity, developed in direct response to these critiques.

With the shift away from seeing ethnography as science, possibilities for its usefulness have expanded significantly. No longer is ethnography a direct descendent of missionary work, an effort to romanticize the voyeurism of wealthy travelers, or a scientific effort to document different cultures—although it still wrestles with all of those influences. Instead, ethnography is a means of engaging and understanding cultures and cultural differences with respect and care for the members of those cultures.

LEARNING FROM A BETTER EXPERIENCE

Most of what I've discussed in the last two sections (Risks and Benefits; Historical Context) I learned after I'd struggled with the research project I described earlier. Although I couldn't know then what I know now, at least you can know some of it. In the same spirit but on a happier note, I'll finish this essay by describing a—not to put too fine a point on it—better ethnographic project, one that embodies what I learned. The goal is for you to see what these concepts look like in

practice. Although this project was much bigger and more complex than what you're doing, you should be able to see what it looks like to design and conduct a study that incorporates the kinds of care and respect for participants I'm calling for, and to see how various forms of writing contribute to making that happen.

My PhD dissertation, called *Grassroots Democracy in Process: Ethnographic Writing as Democratic Action*, merged my interests in *doing* and *teaching* ethnographic writing. I had taught ethnographic writing in my courses for years, studied what other ethnographic writing teachers do, and studied ethnographic theory and practice in other disciplines. What would happen if I did ethnography in a course where I was teaching ethnography? How would what I'd learned about research ethics, collaborative knowledge-making, and authority play out as I tried both to enact and teach them? I was also interested, as a teacher whose scholarly work speaks primarily to other teachers, in exploring the difficulties of being both the instructor and the researcher in the same setting.

In order to do what I'd learned—and, because I'd already started publishing articles about research ethics, to practice what I preached—a key goal of the project was making sure that the students' needs never became subordinate to mine. I needed to collect data: field-notes from every class and conference, transcripts of interviews, the students' writing, course materials, and so on. I also needed not to push their projects in ways that fit my expectations. Most importantly, I needed to make sure that the students' learning was always the focus of our activities.

For the most part, we could say that I was trying to build the kind of *reciprocal* relationship that Ellen Cushman calls for. Anthropologist Robert Jay probably describes what I was after a little more precisely: a relationship of collaboration and trust. The goal, that is, wasn't simply to return favors to participants, but to establish a relationship in which we all worked together on a common project that benefitted all of us equally as a result. As early as 1969, anthropologists were beginning (and I can't overemphasize that word—even forty years later many anthropologists don't fully subscribe to this position) to privilege the well-being of their research participants above even their own research agendas. Jay declares:

In future field work I shall place first a mutual responsibility to my whole self and to those I go to learn from, in agreement

with my desire to relate to them as full equals, personal and intellectual. I shall try to use my relationships with them to find out what topics are relevant to each of us, to be investigated through what questions and what modes of questioning, and for what kinds of knowledge. I should wish to make the first report for them, in fact with them; indeed it may be that written reports would seem to us redundant. (379)

Jay might sound preachy (he does to me), but his point is important. Ethnographers always have to remember that our work can have serious implications for our participants. As such, we share the responsibility to make those implications: (1) as positive as possible; and (2) collaboratively determined with our participants. By engaging our participants as collaborators, we make sure their needs are just as important as ours; our studies serve their aims as much as ours; and they benefit from participating in them as much as we do.

In my project, students collaborated as fellow researchers primarily by reading, responding to, and discussing every word of my fieldnotes during the semester. Every two weeks, I'd distribute all my notes. They'd read them for homework, and then we'd discuss them. They corrected any mistakes or misattributions in the notes. The discussions would focus on issues they saw recurring or emerging, what they found interesting or anomalous, and questions they had either about the method or the data. Thinking through all this information with the students was stimulating; they had ideas and noticed patterns I wouldn't have, which I carefully credited them with in the dissertation. More important than the direct benefit to me was the sense of collaboration this practice generated among them. Because the group really understood the project as a collaboration rather than an imposition, they spoke candidly about contentious issues, and were willing to trust that when I asked them to do seemingly strange activities, I wasn't just experimenting on them.

I also designed the course so that everything students did for my study helped them with their ethnographies; everything we did served two purposes at once. When they read and commented on fieldnotes, for example, they were collaborating and helping me understand our class, but they were also learning valuable lessons about fieldnote-taking and data presentation. About halfway through the semester, I asked them to interview each other about our class; the transcripts provided me with insights into their thoughts about the semester, while

at the same time allowing them to practice interviewing techniques. An exercise late in the semester, in which they reflected on what they thought somebody would need to know in order to do well in the course, helped them learn to synthesize and make claims about vast amounts of data, while showing me what struck them as important, annoying, useful, and distracting about the way we conducted ourselves in class.

By the end of the semester, I had a pretty good idea what my ethnography would say. Its central claim, that involving my students in my project helped them do theirs better, seemed clear and supportable. However, I also knew from my last experience that the obvious claim certainly wasn't all there was to it, and I needed to write and think a lot more about what I'd learned. I was lucky I had lots of time—more than a year—to write slowly and revise extensively; also, I was lucky to have two readers who worked very hard to provide feedback. The upshot of that long process was a project that made a much better claim than the one I'd started with. Yes, the ethnographies from that semester were better than ones I'd read before, but there was more to it than simply that they'd participated in somebody else's study while doing their own. I realized, after months of writing and rewriting, that all the writing we'd done (fieldnotes, comments on fieldnotes, interviews, in-class exercises) had been the catalyst for the students' improved work. That is, the fact that we wrote with, for, and about each other all semester long had helped the students understand what they were engaged in much more richly than they would have otherwise.

You shouldn't be taking my project as a model for yours. But you will, I hope, see one way of working with and through the major concepts I've laid out in the essay (the lessons to be learned about writing; the significant ethical issues that arise from representing other people; and the possible benefits of ethnographic research and writing). Rather than seeing this part of the text as instructions, I'd rather you feel inspired, or provoked—either way, prepared—to think your way through your own projects. The best feature of ethnographic writing is that whatever happens, it's important and interesting as long as you make it so by writing well about it. That's the hardest thing about it, too; nobody can provide you with a precise formula for the writing. You have to work that out by drafting, working with feedback, and revising.

CONCLUSIONS AND (IN)CONCLUSIONS

I hope you've learned enough about ethnography's problems and possibilities to understand *why* we ask you to do it. It's connecting events with how you understand them; with how your understanding connects to your participants' understandings; how all of those understandings interrelate, conflict with, and affirm each other; how you expect your readers to make sense of all that in a way that's meaningful for them; and how all that contributes to the lives of your participants and yourself.

Those are lofty goals. You may have noticed that I said little about writing any of my own ethnographic texts; that's partially because this collection limits texts to a certain length, but more importantly because you can only sort through these problems of representation and authority, and of collaboration and mutual respect, by writing your own way through them. Your writing, the feedback you get, and your revision processes will all make you see these problems as connected and complicated; keep writing, and you'll find your way.

DISCUSSION

1. Perhaps the most complex problem facing ethnographic writers is the problem of representing your research participants ethically. How have the theoretical and anecdotal evidence in this chapter helped you think about how to do that?
2. As I was drafting and revising this essay, I asked several classes to read it. There was strong disagreement among my students over which sections they found most convincing: the more traditionally academic, or the more narrative/anecdotal. How would you answer that question, and why?
3. Based on any fieldwork you've already done (if you've begun), or you can imagine doing, what specific strategies can you suggest for avoiding imperial and/or colonial critiques of your own research?
4. What lessons that you're learning about ethnographic research can you imagine applying to other kinds of research and writing that you do as college students, or beyond?

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