

elizabeth campbell and luke eric lassiter

# doing ethnography today

theories  
methods  
exercises

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# Doing Ethnography Today

*Theories, Methods, Exercises*

Elizabeth Campbell and  
Luke Eric Lassiter

**WILEY** Blackwell



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For Rosalie

## Preface

This book is the outgrowth of a conversation on ethnography we began 20 years ago at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We were graduate students back then - Beth in folklore and Eric in anthropology - and we were taking a seminar entitled, "The Art of Ethnography," which emphasized the craft's humanistic and artful possibilities. Although we have both worked in a variety of settings and conducted numerous ethnographic and other projects since then, we keep coming back to that conversation, and we continue to view the craft of ethnography as an artful, humanistic form in search of meaning, connection, and, above all, change.

When we were coming of age as ethnographers, feminist, postmodernist, and other critical scholars were furiously interrogating, theorizing, and reconstituting ethnography along these lines. It was an exciting time. It was also an incredibly challenging time because it required us to both think about and do research in new and very different ways. The theories and methods of feminist, postmodernist, and other critical theorists - particularly those that concerned dialogic and collaborative theories and methods - changed not just how ethnography is conducted or written, but how its goals and purposes are constituted. Those theories and methods heavily influenced our work as students, and continued theoretical developments in these areas influenced our work as professionals as we started our careers in Folklore and Anthropology, respectively. We document many of the ethnographic projects we conducted within this framework in the pages that follow, but one project, in particular, radically transformed how we viewed the possibilities of collaboratively researched and written

ethnographies to change people, their relationships with one another, and even communities.

That was the Other Side of Middletown project, and it is, in many ways, responsible for much of what we have written since, including this book. We will have a lot more to say about the Other Side of Middletown (as well as other projects) in the pages that follow, but we should elaborate on this a bit here. When we lived in Muncie, Indiana (1996 to 2004) - Beth working for a range of local arts and history organizations and Eric for Ball State University - we had the unique opportunity and privilege to develop, along with others, a community-university collaborative ethnographic project that eventually came to involve over 75 people, including faculty, students, and African American and other Muncie community members. Much of the work we did in that project mirrored other ethnographic work we had done before in other settings, such as when ethnographers and community members design research questions together, conduct research collectively, or co-interpret and co-create written ethnographies. But this particular project worked on us in ways that we had never experienced before, at least at this level. The very intense processes of faculty, students, and community members researching and, especially, writing together changed all of us to varying degrees, some in profound ways. The intense collaborative processes that worked across differences in race, class, community, university - among a host of other things - foregrounded not just the project, but many other collaborative actions that grew out of the project. (For more on this, see [chapter 2](#), especially the notes, which include several references to articles that document these developments.)

Many ethnographers, of course, have described similar processes, and how ethnographic fieldwork can involve us in different kinds of collaborative relationships and actions,

and thus produce change. So in that regard there was nothing particularly unique about the experience. But for us, it was the quintessential collaborative ethnographic project, one that brought research, pedagogy, university, and community into the same stream, and in ways that powerfully articulated the promises of the dialogic and collaborative ethnography we had learned about as graduate students and sought to practice in our professional work. Importantly, however, it also inspired in us a new appreciation for how the intersubjective and dialogic processes of co-researching and co-writing ethnography itself could be mobilized as a form of public dialogue and exchange to inspire changes in human relationships.

We have written in several places about how the project changed the trajectory of our thinking about ethnography along these lines (again, see the notes in [chapter 2](#) for references). As we have detailed in many of those reflections, the project raised several new problems and issues for us, too. While we were completing the project, for instance, Eric began to wonder (and read) about similar kinds of projects, their histories, and what kind of possibilities lay ahead for doing these kinds of collaborative ethnography (e.g., how they might transform anthropological pedagogies), work that eventually prompted his *Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Beth began to think more and more about the creative and constitutive possibilities of writing together, and soon after we moved to West Virginia in 2005, she decided to pursue another degree in English composition, rooting her dissertation research in the possibilities for collaborative writing that she had so powerfully witnessed while serving as the editor for the Other Side of Middletown project. (In fact, her dissertation, “Being and Writing with Others,” begins with the Other Side of Middletown project.)

Twenty years after Chapel Hill, and 10 years after publication of *The Other Side of Middletown*, we are now working primarily with graduate students in education and in the humanities and navigating a broad array of interdisciplinary and collaborative research projects including but not limited to ethnography. We are still talking about the transformative possibilities for ethnography we first explored as graduate students and experienced so powerfully in the Muncie project, and about the still unfolding possibilities for ethnography as collaborative, creative, and constitutive; as an agent of change; and as artful, humanistic, and hermeneutic. This book, then, is an extension of that conversation. But it also joins up with another conversation, which now involves us in discussions with our current students who come to ethnography, on the one hand, from quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods backgrounds (in the case of our education students) or, on the other hand, from the arts, cultural, historical, or literary studies (in the case of our humanities students). So we also wrote this book with these students in mind, as an open letter of sorts, so that they might have a better understanding of where we are coming from and what we are up to (and what we hope they might try to do).

We have thus written this book primarily for advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate students (and similar audiences) working in a variety of fields – from those who might like to think about and do ethnography outside of familiar quantitative–qualitative dichotomies to those who might want to expand their readings of society and culture into realms of ethnographic research. But we have also written this book for students and others who want to engage ethnography at a time when many of the promises of ethnography, theorized when we were graduate students, are simultaneously being more fully realized in

practice “in the field,” even as they are being overshadowed by the increasing dominance of STEM-infused views of science in our universities.

We should point out that we do not view this book as exhaustive, and that we have not written it to be a traditional stand-alone or step-by-step manual or guide. Our purpose here has been different. What we want to offer is more food for thought than any model, or standardized set of methods. Although we strongly believe that doing and writing ethnography can never be a one-size-fits-all affair, we also believe that one can learn a set of contemporary concepts and ideas around which ethnography is built, and upon which to found one's own application and interpretation of ethnography. This book, then, is meant to cultivate experience in ethnographic fieldwork, reading, and writing that emphasizes both theoretical and methodological direction for doing ethnography today.

We begin [chapter 1](#), the book's introduction, by outlining some of the key assumptions behind our approach to ethnography as well as our approach to this text. These include several of the themes already mentioned: that ethnography is personal as well as collaborative; hermeneutic, creative, constitutive, and artful; and oriented toward dynamic and complex ideas of culture and society. In [chapters 2](#) and [3](#), “Fields of Collaboration” and “Emergent Design,” respectively, we explore how contemporary collaborative contexts for doing ethnographic fieldwork today – which include but are not limited to the moral and ethical commitments between and among those engaged in collaborative research – provide the contours through which ethnography is built and sustained, and touch on how research design can emanate from this collaborative process.

In [chapter 4](#), “Engagement: Participant Observation and Observant Participation,” we highlight ethnographic processes of participation, observation, and documentation and take up the art of “observant participation”; we also explore the processes of crafting fieldnotes within this context. In [chapter 5](#), “Interviews and Conversations,” we take up the ethnographic interview and consider how field conversations materialize within the context of dialogic and collaborative ethnographic work. And finally, in [chapter 6](#), “Inscriptions: On Writing Ethnography,” we explore the process of ethnographic writing itself (broadly defined), including its organization and continuing interpretation as well as the actual process of composing ethnographic texts. This section of the book also includes a discussion on various modes of dissemination past and present, including the process of creating different kinds of collaborative ethnography through dialogue, co-interpretation, and co-inscription. Each chapter, we should mention, is followed by a list of “Suggested Readings” and “Suggested Websites,” which offer additional resources on subjects covered.

In addition to brief theoretical discussions about particular issues, we have included Exercises throughout. These Exercises, we should note, are meant to engage readers in practice as they read. Although most begin with an explicative or theoretical discussion followed by a set of recommended activities, readers will quickly observe that the Exercises do not all follow a single, set form. The lengths of the introductory discussions vary, and the activities' substances and processes are often quite different; again, this is not a conventional step-by-step guide to doing ethnography. We have drawn heavily on our own training and experience to design these Exercises and organized them in a way that follows the (more or less) customary evolution (in our experience) of an ethnographic

project. Because writing and dialogue are critical to contemporary ethnographic processes, nearly all of the Exercises rely, at least to some degree, on the production of private or shared texts, and on partnered, small-group, or large-group discussions.

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Many people have contributed to our ongoing conversation about ethnography, collaboration, and possibility that serves as the impetus for this book. Former professors, colleagues, friends, and the various ethnographic collaborators with whom we have worked have helped to shape many of the ideas we explore here. They include Rachel Bruenlin, Theresa Carter, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, Sam Cook, Graham Crow, Clyde Ellis, Les Field, Carolyn Fluehr-Loban, Hurley Goodall, Glenn Hinson, Billy Evans Horse, Susan Hyatt, Michelle Johnson, Seth Kahn, Ralph Kotay, Charles Menzies, Danieala Nieto, Gian Pagnucci, Lee Papa, Joanne Rappaport, Celeste Ray, Helen Regis, Linda Spatig, Bonnie Sunstein, Joe Trimmer, and Bob White. Any failures to articulate their eloquent ideas are entirely our own, of course. Speaking of which, a very thorough and insightful set of reviews written by a very thoughtful group of reviewers improved this book markedly. And finally, we need to single out an old friend.

Yet another outgrowth of the Other Side of Middletown project has been our continued relationship with Rosalie Robertson, who was the Senior Editor at AltaMira Press when we set about finding a publisher for the book. Rosalie (who had worked with Eric on a previous book project) immediately became intrigued with the idea and engaged AltaMira Press as a collaborative partner throughout the entire process from beginning to end. Soon after the completion of *The Other Side of Middletown*, and after Rosalie had moved to Wiley Blackwell, we began discussing



writing this book. We were supposed to have it to her by 2010. It did not happen. But Rosalie stuck with us (and commented on more than a few drafts) and we are deeply grateful for her faith in us. Although she is no longer with Wiley Blackwell, we dedicate this work to her.

Elizabeth Campbell and Luke Eric Lassiter  
March, 2014

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Conceptualizing Ethnography

Ethnography is traditionally described as both a fieldwork method and an approach to writing. As fieldworkers, ethnographers participate in the lives of others, observing and documenting people and events, taking detailed fieldnotes, conducting interviews, and the like. As writers, ethnographers organize, interpret, and inscribe this collected and, as many argue, constructed information as text. Over the last century or so, ethnography's fieldwork and writing have come to signal very particular sets of assumptions, epistemologies, and expectations, and to yield recognizable – some might say, predictable – textual forms.

Though its histories and methodologies mix elements of both the sciences and the arts and their histories, ethnography also inhabits very particular ways of being, by which we mean ways of encountering, thinking about, interpreting, and acting in the world around us. Ethnographers often identify as and talk about “being ethnographers,” and although they may argue about whether what they do is science or art or both, most would agree that being ethnographers changes how we think, how we interact with others, and even how we move through the world. It does so because it brings us directly into contact with diverse people leading varying ways of life. Ethnomusicologist Nicole Beaudry points out that doing ethnographic fieldwork “remains a challenging experience because it teaches us that there are many different ways for human beings to be themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

What Beaudry says of ethnographic fieldwork has certainly been the case for us. Between us, we have done various kinds and differing levels of ethnographic work, all of which have brought us into contact with many different kinds of people. We have worked with K-12 math and science teachers, activists and community organizers, and descendants of a pre-Civil War plantation in West Virginia; African American pioneer descendants, black Civil War reenactors, “Middletown” residents, and state and county fair participants in Indiana; Waldensians, tobacco farmers, and Lumbee Indians in North Carolina; recovering addicts, historic preservationists, and bikers in the urban South; students and faculty in a university-based digital technologies center; tradition bearers in rural Kentucky; and Kiowa Indians in southwestern Oklahoma. We have written fieldnotes and conducted interviews; recorded songs and taken photographs; traced maps (physical as well as social); dug into national, state, and local archives; documented folk culture and traditions; organized focus groups; collected life histories; participated in a whole host of activities; and, of course, produced ethnographic reports that have ranged from academic ethnographies to performance pieces to museum exhibits to briefs for state agencies. Though our fieldwork methods have generated a wide range of recognizably ethnographic products, they have also consistently led to other outcomes, often unexpected, for us and for the diverse people with whom we have worked, from educational programs, to National Register nominations, to political action, to other applied, and often activist, work.

The processes of doing fieldwork, producing texts, and connecting to unexpected – and not always directly related – outcomes have both challenged and changed us, sometimes in profound ways. Ethnography, when done with the experiential and intellectual depth it deserves, brings

us face-to-face with our own assumptions and ethnocentrism. As we study with and learn from others – who often seem very unlike ourselves – we are pushed to move beyond understanding and toward transformation. Our own ethnographic work has fundamentally shifted our understandings of what it means to be, for instance, a biker, an addict, or a Kiowa singer, and in bringing about those shifts, has also affected how we relate to others and, for that matter, to ourselves. Some projects forced us to examine how we may have stereotyped or over-generalized the experiences of some people. Other projects have forced us to think about class or race or gender in new ways. And still others have led us to navigate relationships differently. For example, an ethnographic project on bikers that Beth did as a folklore graduate student unexpectedly healed a rift that had long existed between her and one of her sisters. Although family therapy had not been a goal at the outset of that project, being with bikers – and talking with them, and writing about them, and sharing emerging understandings with them – brought the very different worlds she and her sister then lived in closer together. That proximity led both to imagine, and then to create, different ways of being together.

Such experience is not at all unusual when it comes to doing ethnography. In an ethnographic study of a small Iowa community where he grew up, anthropologist Douglas Foley describes in *The Heartland Chronicles* how a complex matrix of relationships between and among whites and Mesquaki Indians yield multi-layered ethnic and racial negotiations through time. But he also describes how the processes of ethnographic fieldwork helped him understand his own experiences and memories growing up in the town, and of how the process of “one person trying to understand him- or herself enough to understand other people” can lead us to understand others and our relations

with them better. In Foley's case, he was led to learn more about his father (whom he never met) and make connections with his mother (who helped shape his views of Indians from an early age) that he had not made before, which, in turn, helped him understand on a deeper level the subject of his study. He writes, for example, that “knowing Mom better was absolutely crucial for understanding abandoned Mesquaki mothers and grieving Mesquaki men.” Importantly, though, Foley points out that the process of ethnographic fieldwork and cross-cultural understanding “takes much more than simple empathy. It takes endless hours of listening to people and observing, constant recording and reflecting, a grab-bag of theories to ply. But knowing yourself always seems like the biggest part of understanding others.”<sup>2</sup>

As Foley suggests, knowing yourself as you come to know others is a big part of “being an ethnographer.” But as Foley also suggests, so is learning to be with – and listen to and take seriously – others. It should not come as a surprise, then, that many ethnographers doing ethnography today emphasize more than a purely methodological approach, calling attention instead to ethnography's histories, philosophies, epistemologies, and ontologies. Although learning the “how to's” of ethnographic fieldwork and writing are necessary for doing ethnographic work, actually “being an ethnographer” requires us to reach beyond method. Consider, for example, this quotation from the late communication studies scholar and ethnographer, H. L. “Bud” Goodall:

[T]he choice of “being an ethnographer” is a profound philosophical commitment that very much transcends ordinary concerns about the utility of fieldwork methods or even prose styles. Not everyone is suited for this line of work. Unlike traditional methods of social science, ethnography is not theory-driven, method-bound, or formulaic in its research report. Ethnography requires a person who is comfortable living with contingencies, who is good at associating with others from widely diverse backgrounds and interests, and who likes to write. As such, ethnography is more of a calling than a career, and the decision to do it – as well as the ability to do it well – seems to require more of a particular, identifiable, but oddly ineffable attitude toward living and working than belief in method.<sup>3</sup>

Not everyone may see ethnography as a kind of “calling.” But everyone should, at the very least, understand that ethnographic practice requires commitments that are different from other research approaches. One of the most important of these is committing to a particular *way of being with people*, which brings up an important consideration for any student of ethnography, regardless of whether or not you are invested in “being an ethnographer” as such: in spite of its many different approaches (and there are many), at the end of the day, *doing and writing ethnography is about engaging in, wrestling with, and being committed to the human relationships around which ethnography ultimately revolves*. Folklorist Carl Lindahl, whose home discipline is rooted in the processes and relationships of ethnographic fieldwork, has this to say: “I regularly tell students on the verge of their first foray into fieldwork that folklore, done as it should be, is as personal as it gets: fieldwork can easily double the number of birthday cards you send and funerals you attend.”<sup>4</sup> To Lindahl's statement – with which

we absolutely concur - we add this: the relationships that emerge “in the field” are as rewarding and challenging and “real” as any others, especially because they encourage us to know others as well as ourselves. Understanding that ethnography will necessarily expand and complicate your own personal web of relationships is, we think, a very important place to start in conceptualizing ethnography.

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This book is grounded in the idea that ethnography begins and ends with people. Ethnography, as we understand and practice it, articulates a very particular way of being that foregrounds the personal and relational; assumes an underlying collaborative perspective; necessarily implicates an interpretive and hermeneutic approach; works within the realm of the cultural; and depends on the very human arts of understanding. To elaborate exactly what we mean by all of this, in the sections below we briefly outline some of the basic assumptions we bring to the practice of ethnography and thus to this book. We think you should know what we are up to right up front.

## **Ethnography is as Personal as it Gets**

As Lindahl says so poetically, engaging the complexities of fieldwork also means engaging the complexities of human relationships. Those relationships, of course, are framed by the dynamics of experience, through which we participate in people's lives and engage them in dialogue. To be open to this process is to be open to experience itself, to its often unanticipated twists and turns, and to the unexpected places it may take us. We see experience as an apt metaphor for the ever-emergent qualities of both ethnographic fieldwork and ethnographic writing. But more than this, we also see experience and the human

relationships it generates as the crucial and vital space within which the contours of ethnographic practice – from its design to its composition – are negotiated. As such, we see the processes of doing ethnography as deeply personal and “positioned” activities. This implicates a complex intersection of worldviews, sensibilities, agendas, hopes, and aspirations that are an inevitable part of each individual endeavor, and of every relationship into which an individual may insert her- or himself, including the relationships that constitute ethnography.

If, as we believe, doing ethnography is deeply personal and positioned, then it is also deeply subjective. In this sense, we adhere to a long tradition of philosophical and critical thought that scrutinizes (and is skeptical of) the very idea of objectivity, and that considers the pursuit of a purely objective point of view a misdirected foray. In our view, ethnography proceeds not from an objective, or even reasonably objective, research position – an idea which we believe masks rather than erases one's worldviews, sensibilities, agendas, hopes, and aspirations. Rather, ethnography develops out of an unambiguous consideration of one's own experiences, positions, and subjectivities as they meet the experiences, positions, and subjectivities of others. In this way, ethnographic practice is a relationship-based intersubjective practice that demands honest and rigorous appraisals of our own assumptions and ethnocentrism as we learn about those of our ethnographic collaborators through co-experience and shared dialogue.

## **Ethnography is Collaborative**

Ethnography has always depended, at least to some extent, on collaboration. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine any ethnographic project without at least some level of shared



work. But collaboration in ethnography has most often been limited to fieldwork processes. In the field, for example, ethnographers work closely and talk deeply with key “informants” or “consultants,” collaboratively constructing and interpreting cultural concepts, practices, and so on. Writing up the “results” of these dialogic collaborations, however, has traditionally been left to the ethnographer, and control over the final work (and often its dissemination) usually remains in her or his hands. This kind of collaboration tends to begin and end in the field; it is more a collection method or strategy than an underlying perspective or philosophy for doing and writing ethnography.

We do want to say that there can be good reasons for carrying out ethnography like this. We have written ethnographic reports for local community groups, for instance, who have requested this kind of arrangement. But we also want to say that, in our view, ethnography is at its best when collaboration carries through from beginning to end. Taking seriously the human relationships that give rise to collaborative processes means that we also take seriously the ethical and moral commitments we make to ourselves and others as our ethnographic projects unfold. This can and often does extend well beyond the mechanics of fieldwork: the obligations and responsibilities of collaboration can animate the entire process of an ethnographic project, from its conceptualization, to its design, to its inscription. If we are open to it, that is.

In the context of this manuscript, then, we assume a stance of collaborative ethnography, which strives for – even if it does not always fully attain – ongoing collaboration at every point in the development of an ethnographic project. The ethnography we have in mind is responsive to the commitments established between and among ethnographers and the people with whom we work, and it

shares authority and control whenever and wherever possible. Ethnographic practice undertaken in this way can be controversial, even today; students (and, to some extent, junior scholars) should be aware that not all who identify as ethnographers are willing to enact or support this particular kind of ethnography.

## **Ethnography is Hermeneutic**

We view ethnography as hermeneutic, in that we believe it is an entirely and inescapably interpretive affair. Of course, it has long been assumed that fieldwork involves the reading, interpretation, and production of cultural “texts” (human actions, expressions, and traditions, for example), and that writing ethnography is intimately tied to this dynamic and dialogic process. Doing and writing ethnography involves us in more than just the analysis of texts, however. It is also intimately tied to the personal: as we participate in others' lives and engage them in dialogue, we cannot help but be influenced by the unfolding and ongoing co-experience that develops among us. This co-experience, moreover, changes our subjectivities, and as those subjectivities change, our positions – our ways of being in and interpreting the world around us – move into states of flux. This is a basic fact of ethnography: as we learn about others, we learn about ourselves; as we learn about ourselves, we learn anew about others; and when we are open to what we learn about others and ourselves, we change.

This is not, we want to emphasize, a one-way street; the processes of learning and transformation are by no means limited to the ethnographer. In collaborative ethnography, in particular, where both ethnographers and their “interlocutors” or “consultants” struggle together to co-interpret and even co-theorize experience via the