

elizabeth campbell and luke eric lassiter

doing ethnography today

theories
methods
exercises

WILEY Blackwell

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Theories, Methods, Exercises

Elizabeth Campbell and
Luke Eric Lassiter

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For Rosalie

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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.

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