The Teaching Writing series publishes user-friendly writing guides penned by authors with publishing records in their subject matter. While ethnographers inevitably write up their findings from the field, many ethnography textbooks focus more on the ‘ethno’ portion of our craft, and less on developing our ‘graph’ skills. Gullion fills that gap, helping ethnographers write compelling, authentic stories about their fieldwork. From putting the first few words on the page, to developing a plot line, to publishing, Writing Ethnography offers guidance for all stages of the writing process. Writing prompts throughout the book encourage the development of manuscripts from start to finish. Appropriate for both new and emerging scholars, Writing Ethnography is a useful text for qualitative methods, research methods courses across disciplines.

“This is a must read for anyone who is learning about ethnography and is unsure about how to start writing.” – Kakali Bhattacharya, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Kansas State University

“I love this writer because she does her homework, cares about her readers, and writes a damn good story. Buy this book immediately.” – Anne Harris, PhD, Senior Lecturer of Education, Monash University and author of Critical Plays: Embodied Research for Social Change and The Creative Turn: Toward a New Aesthetic Imaginary

“In this foundational text, Gullion accomplishes the herculean task of talking about the overlooked process of ethnographic writing with an intimate tone. It is like we are seated at her desk writing along with her. This text will be required reading in my research methods courses and for my graduate students because of the meticulous breakdown of writing practice that creates a text that is both useful and engaging.” – Sandra Faulkner, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication, Bowling Green State University and author of Family Stories, Poetry, and Women’s Work and Poetry as Method: Reporting Research Through Verse

Jessica Smartt Gullion, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Affiliate Faculty of Women’s Studies at Texas Woman’s University. She has published more than thirty peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, in journals such as Qualitative Inquiry, the International Review of Qualitative Research, and the Journal of Applied Social Science. She has also written two additional books, Fracking the Neighborhood: Reluctant Activists and Natural Gas Drilling with the MIT Press and October Birds: A Novel about Pandemic Influenza, Infection Control, and First Responders, which is part of the award-winning Social Fictions Series with Sense Publishers.
Writing Ethnography
TEACHING WRITING

Volume 2

Series Editor

Patricia Leavy
USA

International Editorial Board

Liza Ann Acosta, North Park University, USA
Sandra L. Faulkner, Bowling Green State University, USA
Lee Gutkind, Arizona State University, USA
Anne Harris, Monash University, Australia
Yvonna S. Lincoln, Texas A&M University, USA
David Manderson, University of West Scotland, UK
Ronald Pelias, Southern Illinois University, USA
Rita Rud, Washington State University, USA
Candace Stout, The Ohio State University, USA
Jonathan Wyatt, The University of Edinburgh, UK

Scope

The Teaching Writing series publishes concise instructional writing guides. Series
books each focus on a different subject area, discipline or type of writing. The books
are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate courses across the disciplines
and can also be read by individual researchers or students engaged in thesis work.

Series authors must have a demonstrated publishing record and must hold a PhD,
MFA or the equivalent. Please email queries to the series editor at pleavy7@aol.com
Writing Ethnography

Jessica Smartt Gullion
Texas Woman’s University, USA
PRAISE FOR
WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY

“In this foundational text, Gullion accomplishes the herculean task of talking about the overlooked process of ethnographic writing with an intimate tone. It is like we are seated at her desk writing along with her. Gullion uses interesting exemplars and personal examples to show the important process of writing ethnography. This text will be required reading in my research methods courses and for my graduate students because of the meticulous breakdown of writing practice that creates a text that is both useful and engaging.”
– Sandra Faulkner, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication, Bowling Green State University and author of *Family Stories, Poetry, and Women’s Work* and *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research Through Verse*

“When we were in the playwriting program together at New York University, John Bellusso (the brilliant queer playwright who pioneered ‘crip theatre’ in the United States, and who died far too young) and I used to go see every new show together. I’d push him home up 2nd Avenue on the East Side and we’d debrief the show we’d just seen. John’s only criterion was ever: “Did she have something to say?” Jessica Smartt Gullion has something to say, and she says it, as always, in a smart (smart by name, smart by nature), readable, and useful way. I love this writer because she does her homework, cares about her readers, and writes a damn good story. Buy this book immediately.”
– Anne Harris, PhD, Senior Lecturer of Education, Monash University and author of *Critical Plays: Embodied Research for Social Change* and *The Creative Turn: Toward a New Aesthetic Imaginary*

“The art of constructing writing from research in meaningful ways that engages readers to ‘linger in the scene’ awaits you in *Writing Ethnography*. As Jessica Smartt Gullion empowers you to provoke and incite social change, she does so in ways that diminish the complexities of producing public scholarship. I invite you to engage in this collaborative process aimed to healthfully enhance our craft, working to ensure that people who need our compelling stories receive them most optimally, so our efforts may favorably linger beyond words and pages.”
– Miroslav Pavle Manovski, PhD, independent scholar and author of *Arts-Based Research, Autoethnography, and Music Education: Singing Through a Culture of Marginalization*
“Jessica Smartt Gullion’s book is “directed to graduate students and new researchers,” yet I would urge experienced ethnographers to read and to use this book in your classrooms. Gullion quotes Norman Denzin’s charge to qualitative researchers to write social science that matters, and Gullion has done that in spades.”

– Stacy Holman Jones, Professor, Centre for Theatre and Performance, Monash University and author of the Handbook of Autoethnography, with Tony E. Adams and Autoethnography, with Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis

“Gullion acts as a gentle guide as she opens up ways in which people could conceptualize and execute writing ethnographies. She writes in accessible language and argues for the importance of such intelligibility. She offers tangible examples, creates possibilities, and shares her process of writing, publishing, and even working with rejection. This is a must read for anyone who is learning about ethnography and is unsure about how to start writing.”

– Kakali Bhattacharya, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Kansas State University

“Jessica Smartt Guillon’s new important book on ethnography is accessible and comprehensive. She carefully takes the reader through the nuts and bolts of ethnographic writing with clear examples of different narrative structures. The text is encouraging and filled with practical advice. Highly recommended for social science graduate students and qualitative research courses.”

– Kris Clark, Associate Professor of Social Work, Fresno State University

“Gullion provides a comprehensive history of ethnography, describes essential aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, identifies rarely discussed issues such as writing, editing, and publishing ethnographic research and shows how (and why) contemporary ethnographers can (need to) create vulnerable, creative, evocative, and socially-just tales. This succinctly and accessible text will make a fine resource for both new and skilled ethnographers.”

– Tony E. Adams, Associate Professor of Communication, Northeastern Illinois University and author of Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction and co-editor of On (Writing) Families
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix  
Introduction xi  

### Section I: Writing Ethnographically

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: A Brief History of Ethnography</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Why Ethnography?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Creative Nonfiction in Ethnography</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: What Makes a Story Great?</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Evocative Storytelling</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Vulnerability in Writing</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Ethical Issues in Ethnographic Writing</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Types of Tales</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Reflexivity</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: Audience</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Section II: Narrative Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: Story Arcs</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12: Voice</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13: Academic Fan Fiction</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14: Writing the Voices of Our Participants</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15: First, Second, or Third Person</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16: Active/Passive</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 17: Adverbs</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 18: Show, Don’t Tell</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 19: Conversations</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 20: Characters</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 21: Metaphorically Speaking</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 22: Vignettes</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 23: On Sounding Smart</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 24: Editing</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 25: Arts-Based Research</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section III: Linger in the Scene</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 26: Putting Words on the Page</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 27: Writing as Process</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 28: Writing as Inquiry</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 29: Doing the Unstuck</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 30: Integrating the Literature</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 31: What to Call this Thing?</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 32: The Panic Attack</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 33: Framing and Publishing</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 34: Revise and Resubmit</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing to Connect, Writing for Social Change</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I: Ethnographic Inspiration</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix II: Additional Writing Guides</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before I published my first book, I’d read acknowledgements sections and wonder who all those people were and how they could have contributed to the final text. I discovered through my own publishing journey that while the act of writing is generally a solitary endeavor, we draw on our communities to move our work from idea to printed book.

This book never would have come to fruition had it not been for Patricia Leavy. Thank you for your big loans from the girl zone. I have been so blessed by your friendship and your support for my work. Thanks also to Peter de Liefe and the staff at Sense Publishers. Always a pleasure to work with you.

Dian Jordan Werhane, my cheerleader and friend. This book is dedicated to you. I’m looking forward to reading all of yours.

Thanks also to Anne Harris and Miroslav Manovski for your support and words of publishing wisdom. Anne, I’m delighted that you let me include your writing as an example of writing for social change. And much thanks and love to the rest of my ABR and ICQI friends. I’d also like to thank Amy Minton, whom I’ve only met online in a wonderful writing group called (appropriately) The Year I Finished the Book, for your suggestion to linger in the scenes. I use it often.

I am truly blessed to work at a university that supports and encourages my work. Thanks to my departmental and other colleagues at Texas Woman’s University for your positive words. I would like to acknowledge the graduate students in my Fall 2014 Qualitative and Spring 2015 Advance Qualitative Methods courses, for listening to my ideas and helping to flesh them out. Particular thanks to Jessica Williams. Another thanks to Abigail Tilton, Gretchen Busl, Stacy Greathouse, and Sally Stabb for the Just Write sessions. I wrote a lot of this book during those.

Over my academic career, a number of people have taken the time to mentor me as a writer. Brenda Philips first gave me a copy of Howard Becker’s book on writing in graduate school, and refused to let me get away with lazy writing. Lisa Henry made me recognize that my researcher soul is ethnographic. Lisa Zottarelly—your advice helped me gain my footing as a new academic, and for that I will always be grateful. Michelle Garcia and the rest of the amazing women at The OpEd Project gave me a different perspective on writing for a general audience and for making effective
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

arguments (to be sure). Both the Creative Writing and Journalism programs at Texas Tech University started me on the path of professional writer.

Thanks also to Rosemary Condelario, Kris Clarke, Claire Sahlin, Dave Neal, Jessica Ringrose, Lisa Mazzei, Sandra Faulkner, Susan Harper, and Marni Binder for your suggestions of ethnographic inspiration.

Greg, Renn, and Rory—nothing happens without you. Thanks for understanding (and leaving me alone) when mama needed to work on her book. You are my love, my light, and my happiness.
INTRODUCTION

Your field notes are compiled. Your interviews transcribed. You’ve written some memos and have hoarded all sorts of ephemera as data—maps, and drawings, and videos, and blogs, and technical reports, and websites, and photographs, and, and, and… You know your subject, you understand it, you’ve lived it. You’re an ethnographer for goodness sakes! The only thing left for you to do is write it up.

You create a blank document on your computer. The cursor flashes on the screen.

Shit.

You freeze. Your mind as empty as the page.

The transition from field work to writing up our research can be rocky. Writing uses a different process, a different mindset, than what we’ve been doing in the field. Which is why I wrote this book. Writing Ethnography is intended for scholars in any discipline working with ethnographic methods, to help them to move from a sometimes seemingly insurmountable mound of data to a coherent written report, to help shift through the messiness and produce a written account of their work.

Anne Lamott’s (1994) book, Bird by Bird, is one of my favorite writing memoirs. In introducing her own text, Lamott writes, “But you can’t teach writing, people tell me. And I say, ‘Who the hell are you, God’s dean of admissions?’” Writing is a learned skill like any other. Perhaps writing comes easier for some people than for others, but we can all learn to write better.

Most ethnographers get a significant amount of training on the nuts and bolts of doing research in graduate school—if not in their classes, then in the process of doing their dissertations. Typically, ethnography students take courses on theory, methodology, data collection, and analysis. They learn about the underpinning philosophical stances that frame ethnographic practice and the ethical considerations associated with conducting qualitative research. They become well-versed on the practical aspects of how to conduct fieldwork, and how to collect data and keep field notes and memos. Many graduate programs, however, make an assumption that students already know how to write (surely you learned that in English 1013, if not in high school). Graduate programs are more likely to train students to be researchers, not to be writers.
INTRODUCTION

This is not only a problem for graduate students. I’ve met many new faculty who have minimal experience writing for publication without the close assistance of a mentor, faculty who spend the first year or two on their tenure track floundering. Faculty who receive a letter from their tenure track committees during their third year that lament the fact that they haven’t published enough and suggest they start looking for a new job.

You’ve worked too hard to let that happen.

Unless you land a job at a strictly teaching school, most universities expect their faculty to be published writers. Different schools have different expectations as to the volume of that writing, of course, or as to the prestige of the outlets you publish in, but nearly all universities expect that you will publish something. Newly minted PhDs on the job market should have evidence on their vitas that they will be successful on the tenure track (let’s face it, a university’s investment in you is huge, and they want you to make it). That evidence comes in the form of peer-reviewed publications. Likewise, faculty on the tenure track are expected to establish a solid research agenda and record of publications in their area of expertise.

Despite all this, however, ethnographers have a tendency to emphasize the ‘ethno’ of ethnography, and pay less attention to the ‘graph’—to the writing of the ethnography.

And this is unfortunate.

Ultimately, to succeed in an academic career, a scholar must ‘write up’ their findings. As Westbrook (2008: 110–111) notes, “Writing is a professionally constitutive act, and one had better write something respectable. One’s career, and so one’s sense of self, are on the line, always.” As academics, along with all the other roles we occupy, we are also expected to be professional writers. But that transition—from researching to writing—can be difficult, especially if we’ve had little training on how to make that transition.

The good news is that Writing Ethnography is here to help you.

“Nothing is stranger,” Behar (1996: 5) writes, “than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them.” I wrote this book to help you through that process, the process of writing up ethnography. This guide is for those of you who have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork, and are ready to begin publishing off your data. While directed to graduate students and new researchers, ethnographers in general might enjoy the ideas inside for honing their craft. Professional writer is part of the academic job description, perhaps one of the most important parts. I hope this book will help you in that role.
As a sociologist, many of my examples draw from the social sciences, and as an ethnographer myself, many of my examples come from my own experiences. However, as ethnographic practice has spread across the academy well outside of its anthropological and sociological roots, this book can be used across academic disciplines. Writing Ethnography can serve as either primary or secondary text in a variety of courses, including general and qualitative research methods, courses on ethnography and field work, and courses on academic writing and publishing across a diverse range of disciplines.

Many wonderful books have been written about the craft of ethnography and ethnographic practice. While I touch briefly on these topics, the focus of this book is on the final stages of that process, on the writing up of research. I’ve divided the subject matter in this book into brief chapters within four broad themes: Writing Ethnographically; Narrative Structures; Linger in the Scene; and Writing to Connect and Writing for Social Change. While it can be read cover-to-cover, the chapters can also stand alone.

The first section, Writing Ethnographically, begins with brief history of ethnography (kept brief because I assume that readers of this book are already familiar with the practice of ethnography), followed by an overview of why researchers engage in this sort of work, and why it is important that we continue to do so. I follow that discussion with a transition into the idea of writing ethnography as creative nonfiction, a genre of its own but one that can inform and enhance our written products. Using creative nonfiction as our mode of operation, I explore the theories and foundations of what makes for a good story and how we can tap not only into the rational concrete aspects of our work, but also into the nonrational and emotive aspects of our ethnographies. Evocative, vulnerable writing draws our readers into our work, and makes our work resonate with readers long after they’ve finished reading, so I spend time discussing how to evoke vulnerability in your own writing.

As we write about real people who volunteered to participate in our research, I feel it is important for a text on writing ethnographies to include a discussion about the potential ethical issues specific to this type of writing itself. While most books on the practice of ethnography discuss ethical issues in the field, I briefly explore the ethics of representation. I follow this with a look at some of the major types of tales within the ethnographic tradition, and how they might inform your own writing. This leads into discussion of how to include researcher reflexivity in your
written work as well as how consideration of audience shapes your final piece.

The second section of the book delves into issues of narrative structure. I review some techniques and particulars for writing good narratives. We start with an overview of narrative arcs and how those arcs play out in ethnographic writing. I talk about both the importance of and how to build tension in your work as a mean of pulling your reader through to the end of you story; about how to make your ethnography a page-turner your reader won’t want to put down (and yes, such a unicorn of academic literature can exist). This is followed with a discussion of voice, and of how to find and develops yours. This section also begins to address issues of grammar and how the language we use shapes our presentation, whether it is in our use of action verbs or adverbs, in our ability to show the reader scenes from our field verses telling our stories, generous use of thick description, attention to pacing and scene, or well-developed conversations, characters, and metaphors. The stylistic choices we make determine the quality of our writing, yet often I find students don’t give these literary devices much, if any, thought. Because of this we will explore a number of literary and rhetorical tools that good writers use to craft an evocative tale. This section concludes with a discussion about the importance of editing and about the art of the sentence.

A fellow writer once told me that I could develop my own stories by what she called ‘lingering in the scene.’ This is one of my favorite techniques for developing my own writing, and I use this as the title of the third section, in which I discuss the process of writing. How do you get started? How do you linger in a scene—and more important, how do you get your reader to linger in that scene with you? What should you do when you have the dreaded writer’s block? How do you translate interview data into conversations, or integrate the scholarly literature into your own ideas? How do you come up with a good title, and how do you get something published? I address all of these topics in this section. This section is designed to help ethnographers represent the artifacts of their research on paper.

An ethic of social justice underlies all of my own academic work. Because I believe that good ethnography should both provoke and incite social change, I end this book with a comment on writing as a means to connect with others, to transcend the boundaries of our daily lives. I believe in the importance of public scholarship and of not only making our work accessible to wide audiences, but ensuring that the people who need our messages get them, and I address some suggestions for how to do this in this section.
I also include two bibliographies in appendices. The first is a list of great ethnographic writing that you can look to for inspiration for your own work. The second is a collection of helpful guides and memoirs about writing. While I hope that you find *Writing Ethnography* is a good start for developing your own writing, the references in the appendices are great resources for pushing your writing further.

Throughout the text, I’ve included Write It Up prompts to encourage you to apply the techniques in the chapters to your own writing. These prompts invite you to develop specific parts of your narrative and should be helpful when you are feeling stuck. Taking advantage of the prompts as you progress through the text should also give you a strong foundation for your own manuscript. Instructors may wish to use the prompts either as take-home or in-class writing assignments.

One of my own academic interests is the process of conducting intellectual work. I enjoy reading about other writers’ processes—what works, what doesn’t, where to find inspiration, and what to do to keep the creativity flowing. I discuss many of these ideas throughout this book. But none of this is prescriptive. While writers use a lot of the same techniques, our approaches to the creative process may differ. That’s kind of a definition of creativity, right? Making it your own. What works for me may not work for you, and the opposite might be true. I encourage you to try out a variety of these ideas to help figure out what works well for you and to incorporate them into your own writing. Doing so will enhance not only your own creative process but also to enhance your final products.

We have our goal: Write compelling stories.

Let’s get started.
SECTION I

WRITING ETHNOGRAPHICALLY
CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Once largely the purview of anthropologists and sociologists, researchers in other disciplines have taken up ethnographic methods to delve into a variety of social groups and situations. Nurse ethnographers research topics such as the work of nurse practitioners in acute-care settings (Williamson et al., 2012), or nursing education (Malinsky et al., 2010), or nurses as agents of healing and social change in the midst of political revolution (Pine, 2013). Ethnographers in education write about research ethics (Dennis, 2010), or teacher education (Frank, 2004), or health education among traditional healers (Simmons, 2011). Dance ethnographers explore specific dance cultures (Paulson, 2011) or even lap dancing (Colosi, 2010). And so on across the academy.

Keeping an overview of ethnography brief is difficult due to the wonderful diversity in approaches to ethnographic practice. Any generalized statements about the field are understandably contestable, so I invite you to read further if you would like to gain a greater understanding of the richness of this line of inquiry. I encourage broad reading of both completed ethnographies and writings on ethnographic methods. Read general books on writing as well. Get a feel for writing styles, identify both what writers do well in their written accounts and what is problematic. To help you get started, I’ve included bibliographies in Appendix I and II.

Ethnography is a tool, a method for researchers in just about any academic discipline who want to understand a particular slice of social life. Ethnographers are culture detectives. We immerse ourselves in a field—a setting in which social interactions occur—living for a certain time and to the extent possible, in a specific social reality under study. We then share the experience of that social reality with others through our writing. Our fieldwork can occur anywhere, in all sorts of settings, such as hospitals or in jails, or among gangs or cult members, or with dance troupes or artist colonies, or even online in chat groups or massive multiplayer online video games. Ethnographers identify a group of people or an activity of interest to them, try to understand what happens in that setting through our fieldwork, and then explain it to outsiders with our written accounts. Today’s
ethnographies are often multi-sited and multi-media, taking place in both physical and virtual spaces.

Traditionally, ethnographers focused their efforts on understanding a particular culture. Historically this was nearly always a culture different from that of the researcher. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that early ethnographic accounts were particularly interested in researching in ‘exotic’ locales. These projects were often associated with imperialist tendencies and the othering of humans (oftentimes to the level of dehumanization). That history has been difficult to transcend—even today, there are ethnographers operating in war conditions with the explicit goal of military advantage (Kusiak, 2008). We need to both problematize and be cognizant of the moral and ethical implications of our work, and ensure that we don’t replicate that othering today. Much has been written on this topic, and I encourage you to read up on it.

We can find the roots of ethnographic practice in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, early in the establishment of these fields as academic disciplines. While there is significant overlap between the anthropological and sociological traditions (Van Maanen, 2011), I will briefly outline the history of ethnography below. This is a general overview and not meant to be a comprehensive account of this history; indeed there has been more than a century of work on this topic, and students interested in this history should research it further.

We’ll begin with anthropology. The earliest anthropological research was marked with excursions to exotic locales as a rite of passage (Van Maanen, 2011). Budding anthropologists would load up their gear and travel to some remote location, to hopefully find an as yet undiscovered tribe of indigenous peoples hidden away in the jungle and attempt to understand their ‘primitive’ ways. Perhaps rightly criticized for their imperialistic orientations, anthropologists of the 1800s sought primarily to understand very ‘othered’ cultures. Through the ‘savage’ case, they believed they could better understand the process of ‘civilization’ (Van Maanen, 2011). To bolster the legitimacy of this work, and to differentiate the discipline from travel writing, they drew heavily on positivistic modes of inquiry, and techniques of categorization and classification of humans.

Enter Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski is generally credited with the development of in-depth, scientific field research. His 1922 work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, gained acclaim as one of the foundational texts of ethnography, and “by the late 1920s fieldwork and the image of the scientifically trained fieldworker stalking the wily native in his natural
A BRIEF HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHY

habitat had become the cornerstone of anthropology” (Van Maanen, 2011: 17). For decades after Malinowski, early career anthropologists were expected to travel to a different, often remote, location and prove their worth through field work (and in some departments that is still the norm).

Sociologists were not immune to the othering of peoples, although their field was different. Rather than travel to a different location to decipher radically different cultures, sociologists looked to deviant subcultures in their own neighborhoods. Sociological ethnography was based largely on social reform movements of the early 1900s. In the United States, the major impetus for sociological ethnography came from the Chicago School in the area of urban ethnography. Park, Thomas, Burgess, and their students “explored the city as if it were a remote and exotic setting” (Van Maanen, 2011). Their writings often had a documentary, journalistic style (Park having been trained as a journalist). Sociologists sought to uncover ‘social facts’ in the Durkheimian tradition, and present them in written form with little commentary and analysis. These researchers explored the margins of society on either side of the social class structure (although more often the lower economic end), considering both the impoverished and the power elite, once again othering a group of people. As Westbook (2008: 88) notes, “with the dearth of truly exotic subjects, there has been a notable tendency to exoticize the unfortunate.”

As both disciplines evolved, ethnography as method gained supremacy among anthropologists. Sociologists in turn embraced quantitative positivism as their method of choice, and while some still practiced ethnography, its status in sociology did not fare as well.

The disciplinary divisions between anthropology and sociology have blurred and eroded in recent decades. Historically, anthropologists were primarily inclined to study non-Western cultures while their counterparts in sociology studied Western cultures. This distinction delineated the disciplinary boundaries. Today those boundaries are much less rigid, and anthropologists can be found conducting fieldwork in Western urban areas, while sociologists may be found traipsing through lesser economically developed areas of the globe.

In addition, after troubling their imperialistic roots, both disciplines have amassed significant bodies of writing on the ethics of ethnography and have sought to minimize any violence on their research participants (even reframing the involvement of the people in their studies, from thinking of people as research subjects to working with them as full participants in their projects). They’ve also embraced indigenous scholarship and sought to devise
methods to work in collaboration with the peoples they are researching. Today’s ethnographers attempt to dismantle hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched, and to be on constant alert for issues of participant exploitation and violence. This often involves co-constructed narratives, member checking, action research, and other built-in assurances that the relationship is beneficial to both researcher and participant.

Meanwhile, ethnographic practice has expanded throughout the social sciences and much of the humanities. Researchers from across the academy interested in understanding a group of people or type of social interaction in depth have become ethnographers.

There has also been a turn inwards where ethnographers look to their own cultures. Researching ‘at home’ has become common practice, with researchers delving into their local communities and groups they are part of (Gullion, 2015). Autoethnographers turn a critical lens on themselves, using their own experiences as data (after all, what other data would you know better?).

Write It Up

1. How does your specific discipline shape your research? In what ways do you transcend disciplinary boundaries?
2. Describe your field setting. Why was this the appropriate setting for your subject?
3. What safeguards do you take in your own research to ensure that the people you work with are participants rather than subjects? How do you ensure that they are not only treated ethically, but in a socially just manner?
CHAPTER 2

WHY ETHNOGRAPHY?

Van Maanen (2011: 2) writes that “fieldwork is one answer—some say the best—to the question of how the understanding of others, close or distant, is achieved.” Ethnographers immerse themselves in a culture (typically) not of their own, to achieve an in-depth understanding of that culture. As ethnographies are usually conducted over a long period of time (often years), ethnographers participate in the unfolding of a scene, and share in the community experience. Projects range from studies of the mundane—such as an ethnographic study on table arrangements and background noise at a café (Whyte & Buckner, 2001)—to the specialized—like one of women’s artistic gymnastics (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010)—to the virtual—such as an ethnography of the massive multiplayer online video game, World of Warcraft (Nardi, 2010). Ethnographies ultimately have in common the attempt of a researcher to understand what it is like to be part of this group and to then express and often translate that experience for people who are not part of that group. This type of research is both a highly engaged and interpretive process.

The field is the physical (or virtual) space in which our research takes place. Fieldwork allows us to gain a depth of understanding of our research topic that cannot be captured in snapshot research methods (such as surveys or one-time interviews). Today, a particular respondent might score low on an anxiety scale. Next week, she might score high on the same scale. What has changed? Snapshot research methods cannot answer that question, but ethnography can. Lived experience is dynamic, and one of the best ways to capture that movement is through engaged ethnographic practice. The ethnographer witnesses, uncovers, and documents the motion and fluidity of life.

Thus, it is important for us as writers to portray that fluidity in our written accounts of our fieldwork. In writing ethnography we (re)present those dynamics for our readers. We tell our readers the story of what happened. Ethnographic writing (and reading for that matter) is different from that of quantitative approaches to research. Richardson (2009) writes: “Unlike
quantitative work which can carry its meaning in its tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meanings in its entire text. Just as a piece of literature is not equivalent to its ‘plot summary,’ qualitative research is not contained in its abstract. Qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading.” Our job as writers of ethnography is to express that meaning to our readers through our texts. To illuminate the drama of events, to embrace and express the emotion, rather than distance ourselves from the researched through percentages, tables, and graphs.

Ethnographers are the witnesses. We listen to and retell stories—like oral historians before us, we are the keepers of the stories. We keep them alive. We honor the people and places and things in our ethnographies. And herein lies our need to write well. “The act of writing,” Madden (2010: 153) writes, “is more than simply reporting on the interpretations that spring from the primary and secondary ethnographic data. The act of ethnographic writing is a form of collating, reporting, and interpreting at the same time; it is both systematic and artful.”

Writing—(re)presenting culture on the page—is just as important as data collection techniques. And ethnography is not only embodied storytelling—we also theorize through our narrative forms. Like writers of creative nonfiction, we tell compelling stories with our ethnographic data. Indeed, “the more theoretically relevant a piece of ethnographic work is, the more
WHY ETHNOGRAPHY?

it is able to travel from local community concerns and substantive area to capture wider academic interest and make a more lasting contribution to scholarship,” Puddephatt and colleagues (2009: 2) remind us. As we are academics and not journalists, we also embed our work in larger academic conversations. We interpret and analyze events through our disciplinary lens.

Ethnography occupies an interesting interrogative space at the intersection of the sciences, humanities, and the arts. Because of the lived reality of the groups and activities we research, and their dynamic nature, good ethnographers utilize all three domains in their research. We can (and good ethnographers do) also use tools from all three domains. Sometimes the answers we seek aren’t where we look. Embracing interdisciplinarity and even transcending disciplinary boundaries leads to both a richer ethnography and also to a richer understanding of our research subject.

Flyvbjerg (2001:18) writes, “Where science does not reach, art, literature, and narrative often help us comprehend the reality in which we live.” He continues, “Nietzsche suggests that the central task for human beings is not the Socratic one of making knowledge cerebral and rational but instead one of making it bodily and intuitive.” Luckily for us, as academic nomads, we have the tools at our disposal to strive for both.

Write It Up

1. Explain to your reader why you chose an ethnographic approach to your study and why this approach is the best one for answering your particular research questions.

2. Discuss your method and data collection. How did you enter/exit the field? How did you build relationships with the people in your project? What data did you collect? How did you manage and analyze your data? Explain your process to your reader.