



## What is Ethnography? Teaching Ethnographic Sensibilities without Fieldwork

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### Abstract

How do we teach undergraduate students to think ethnographically, to recognize something as ethnographic and not just as qualitative? Importantly, how do we do so not in the field, where students might learn by doing their own research, but in the static classroom? One approach is to have students cultivate a concept, awareness, and practice of an ethnographic sensibility, that is, of a sense of the ethnographic as the lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, possibilities, and ground of any given cultural group. Such a view opens up an understanding of ethnography and ethnographic research as more than available qualitative methods. Instead, it takes an ethnographic approach to be an epistemological one. Yet, how might we do this? In this article, I discuss my pedagogical strategies for teaching students an ethnographic sensibility without having them conduct fieldwork. I argue that it is both possible and valuable to generate an ethnographic sensibility in the classroom.

### Introduction

How do we teach undergraduate students to think ethnographically, to recognize something as ethnographic and not just as qualitative? Importantly, how do we do so not in the field, where students might learn by doing their own research, but in the static classroom? One approach is to have students cultivate a concept, awareness, and practice of an ethnographic sensibility, that is, of a sense of the ethnographic as the lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, possibilities, and ground of any given cultural group. Yet, how might we do this? Edmund Leach is said to have famously claimed that anthropology is too sophisticated to teach to undergraduates. Anthropology may be sophisticated and yet that does not make it impossible to teach.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it offers us a challenge: how do we convey the sophistication of anthropology to undergraduate students without having them conduct fieldwork?

Cultivating an ethnographic sensibility starts on the very first day in my “Introduction to Cultural Anthropology” undergraduate lecture course. With more than 100 students before me, I announce we are relocating the class to Kathmandu and ask for eight volunteers to come down to the front of the lecture hall. I huddle the volunteers around me and give them instructions; the rest of the students wait in their seats, while an anticipatory buzz of “what are they doing?” hums through the room. We break up the huddle, and the students then perform an impromptu skit about riding the bus in Nepal. The rest of the class watches and then shares what they noticed, observations such as “the women sat with the women, and the men with the men” or “they talked about their family members,” and the like. I then ask the students what it is like to ride a bus here in Colorado—who would they choose to sit next to (ideally no one, they tell me) and what they might talk about with a stranger seated next to them (ideally nothing, most say, but if necessary, topics such as where they are from and/or what they do)? We compare riding a bus here and there, and I ask the students why there are such differences. Why might Nepali bus riders ask each other about their brothers and sisters rather than their hometowns? What do these differences tell us, and what sort of cultural work do they accomplish?

This first-day-of-class exercise is designed to get my students thinking both anthropologically and ethnographically. Anthropologically we are launching our investigation of the myriad ways that human beings collectively organize, understand, and live in the world. Ethnographically we are listening, participating, witnessing, and reflecting, in ways both actual and approximate. While the classroom is not “the field” or an extended experience of immersion or encounter, in this article I contend it is possible to bring some of the experiential, embodied, and empathetic aspects of ethnographic research into the classroom. Pedagogically, getting students to think and feel ethnographically requires a clear understanding of ethnography and ethnographic research.

What is ethnography? What makes something ethnographic? The word ethnography comes from the Greek—*ethnos* means “folk/the people” and *grapho* is “to write.” Ethnography is the writing of the people, the writing of society, the writing of culture. Ethnographies have long been what anthropologists write and read, but recently we have also been using the term as a shorthand for fieldwork, saying we are “doing ethnography” when we mean ethnographic research. By ethnographic research, anthropologists mean the ever-evolving Malinowskian program of an ethnographer in the field conducting participant-observation paired with a range of other methods, living within a community, and getting deeply into the rhythms, logics, and complications of life as lived by a people in a place, or perhaps by peoples in places.<sup>ii</sup> Ethnographic research, then, is more than a method. It is not simply to watch people or interview someone or assemble a focus group or “shadow” someone, but a much more all-encompassing and demanding way of knowing.<sup>iii</sup> To reduce “ethnography” to just another qualitative method is to miss its potential, to miss what Didier Fassin calls that space “where true life and real lives meet” (Fassin in Joshi 2014). In such a reduction, we risk missing the ethnographic altogether.

The classic description of ethnographic research belongs to anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. In his 1922 book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* he explains the goal to be “to grasp the native’s point of view, his [sic] relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” and that following from that, “to study the institutions, customs, and codes or to study the behavior and mentality without [also considering] the subjective desire of feeling by which these people live, of realizing the substance of their happiness, in my opinion, [is] to miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man.” The gem of ethnographic research is this subtlety, the goal and possibility of getting to the feel and not just the structure or organization of life. As Clifford Geertz would later famously explain in 1973’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*:

From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques, and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, “thick description.”

To get to the point of thick description is to arrive at “a discourse of and about humanity, ... [of] a species living in terms of meaning in a world subject to law” (Hoey and Fricke 2007: 596).

Anthropologists do this via a methodology that prioritizes meanings and frameworks outside the discipline, generated not solely by scholars, but also by the community in which the ethnographer is conducting research. Ethnographic research is not static or fixed; instead, it is personal, transformational, contingent, and responsive to actually existing and often shifting conditions. It is an open-minded, open-ended collection and celebration of the excess and messiness of human life.<sup>iv</sup> As Marilyn Strathern (2004: 5-6) contends, it is a “deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection.”

The longstanding lore about graduate-level ethnographic research is that it cannot be taught, that you have to learn by doing. I am one of those anthropologists who still believes that to be true. But, I do not think we need to mystify the process. One consequence of this mystification is a lack of transparency about what ethnographic research is, how it works, and what it requires in terms of preparation. In some ways, it appears as just another qualitative method seemingly available to

anyone—you just go and talk to people or watch them instead of, say, counting them. Yet, we train graduate students to do ethnographic research by teaching them anthropological history, debates, and theory, by having them read well-researched, well-argued, well-written ethnographies, and then sending them to the field, not (only, or even) by teaching them methods prior to their first fieldwork. Ethnographic research is actually very rigorous and structured, and yet we do not talk about it that way. We downplay the great amount of preparation and discipline ethnographic research requires. *It is more than a method, it is a way of knowing in which the means and the goals are the same but different.* What we experience and learn and reflect upon in the field is what we then try to convey and argue in writing, and also in teaching.

Teaching students an ethnographic sensibility is to provide them disciplinary knowledge, methodological strategies, theoretical frameworks, and an affective understanding of ethnography and the ethnographic. In this article, I discuss each of these components, starting first with an introduction to the type of university teaching I do, then moving to a concrete example of an in-class pedagogy I use to spark embodied, experiential thinking and learning for my students. Next, I review the qualities of an ethnography together with my undergraduate students, considering and then revising George Marcus and Dick Cushman's 1982 list of the characteristics of contemporary ethnographies. Building on this conversation, I then turn to a review of recent discussions of fieldwork and theory in anthropology—what, for example, constitutes an acceptable ethnographic subject or source? How do we see the ethnographic across disparate sources, including non-traditional ones? And, how do we teach our students to access an ethnographic register without the requisite fieldwork? I conclude with a conceptual and hands-on discussion of “experience as pedagogy,” reflecting on the relationship between my own research experience in the field, and exercises I use in the classroom to generate an empathetic, but also empirical ethnographic sensibility.

### Teaching Context: The U.S. University System (and Beyond)

I presented an earlier version of this article as a keynote lecture at the “Learning by Example: Building Arguments Ethnographically” conference at Oxford University in April 2012. While I was familiar with some of the differences between the English and American education system, the Oxford tutorial format was new to me, and thus I want to be clear about the specific context of my teaching in the US higher education system. The context of one's teaching matters. It is a very different situation to engage a single student in a one-on-one conversation in a tutorial, or to teach four or five students in an intellectually intimate setting than it is to have forty students in a medium-sized classroom or two hundred in a large lecture hall. While there are some pedagogical goals and strategies that can travel successfully up and down large and small classes, there are also meaningful differences that must be considered.

Since 2001, I have taught at the University of Colorado, what we in the United States consider a “large, public research university.” Our academic year is divided into two semesters, each sixteen weeks long. At Colorado we have approximately 450 students studying for a Bachelor's degree in anthropology. Our introduction to cultural anthropology course for beginning students has roughly 100-150 students in it each semester. I also regularly teach a large, lecture course on the anthropology of Tibet with 200-250 students enrolled in it. Our courses for more advanced undergraduate students are smaller, but still large, usually between 30-40 students. Attendance in twice-weekly lectures is required, not optional. I realize that while some universities in the UK and elsewhere do teach on a model similar to this, not all do. I think ideas of how to teach ethnographic sensibilities can cut across differences in educational systems, but nonetheless the type and size of undergraduate classroom settings in which I teach matters to this discussion.<sup>v</sup>

In order to teach students how to think ethnographically, we need to approach ethnographic knowledge as both epistemology and ontology. This is a way of thinking about and being in the world.

Many of the students who take my undergraduate courses may be majoring in another discipline and thus might never again take another anthropology class or may stop with a BA rather than continue on for an MA or a PhD. These are not graduate students who are preparing to go to the field to do anthropological research, but young men and women finding different paths through life. I believe that anthropology can provide them with an important and unique framework for thinking anew about the world and their place in it.

## **Squatting as Ethnographic Stance**

Thinking like an anthropologist is not just an intellectual endeavor. It is also an experiential and embodied way of knowing. In cultural and social anthropology, ethnographic research relies on the body, or as Sherry Ortner puts it, a minimal definition of ethnography would be that “it has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing” (2006: 42) As an anthropologist, your body, your self, *is* your instrument of knowing. In an important way, you *are* your method. With this in mind, one exercise I use in several of my classes to get students thinking with their bodies is to have them squat. Following in Marcel Mauss’ footsteps from 1934, we explore the social side of a practice often presumed to be simply physical.<sup>vi</sup>

What I do is this: first I ask everyone to stand up. This alone is unusual, getting the students out of their seats, an unexpected request which is pedagogically valuable in terms of altering students’ attention and intentions. Then I tell them I want them to do a flat-foot squat, with their heels flat on the floor, not up on their toes. This is an unfamiliar body position for the great majority of my students, so immediately intrigues some and intimidates others. I demonstrate such a squat for them, and remain down while they all attempt to squat. We stay down in the squatting position for as long as we can. While we are squatting, I tell the students that all parents know that young children squat, but in many societies around the world, children are not the only ones who squat; people of all ages do. In the United States, however, we do not squat, so children stop doing it. They do not see adults squatting, and thus quickly learn they are expected to sit in certain ways: on their bottoms either on the floor or in a chair. As a result, our bodies forget how to squat. Our thighs lose this memory. In contrast, there are people in Nepal who can and do squat for hours. In one village where I conducted research, old men who were retired from physical labor in the fields would squat for hours talking or resting in social silence, letting the day pass. Women would squat while washing or cooking or talking. Kids would squat. Everyone would. After a short while of our in-class squatting practice, most students had returned to a standing or sitting position, complaining about the burn in their thighs or claiming that they just could not do it.

I use this squatting exercise in several courses. In my “History and Memory” class for advanced anthropology students, I use it to get the students thinking about things their bodies have forgotten. We take memory out of the cognitive domain and bring it into an embodied realm that is deeply cultural. I use this exercise in my “Theory in Contemporary Anthropology: Nepal and the Himalayas” course to provoke discussion about perspective. This often enables excellent class discussions on status, hierarchy, social place, and the literal comportment and placement of the body in the social and physical world. What does the world look like from a squatting position rather than a sitting or standing position? In both classes, the actual physical squatting is destabilizing for the undergraduate students in some of the same ways that fieldwork can be for graduate students (as well as for seasoned anthropologists). Their senses are activated, discomfort and discovery co-exist in the exercise, prompting observations and further conversation on any number of topics ranging from the arbitrariness of culture, the concept of habitus and ideas of hegemony and cultural practices, to the social and historical values assigned to sitting versus squatting, as well as those practices that are explained as “the way things are” or “how we've always done it” or so on.

In each course, and usually while at least some of us are still squatting, I share with the students that squatting is making a comeback in the contemporary United States. Birthing bars are now available in hospitals and birthing centers, enabling laboring women to deliver their babies in a squatting position (rather than prone or reclined on their backs) by holding on to the bar to steady themselves. There are even multiple companies making adaptors to convert sit-down toilets to squat toilets.<sup>vii</sup> Ironically, as the squat comes back into style in the USA, it might be moving on in Nepal. In 2012, long-time anthropologist of Nepal Sondra Hausner conducted research in an area where squatting had prior been a common practice, and said that in a three-week period she saw no one squat.<sup>viii</sup> This reminder of the historicity of any bodily practice leads to all sorts of other conversations about meaning, value, and ideas of the self and society.

The body is involved in squatting and in ethnographic research, but it is not the entirety of what we do. An ethnographic sensibility is not only an embodied one. It is “as much as intellectual (and moral) positionality—a constructive and interpretive mode—as it is a bodily process in space and time” (Ortner 2006: 42). Ortner’s ethnographic stance is a commitment to a Geertzian “thickness” of research, “to producing understanding through richness, texture, and detail, rather than through parsimony, refinement, and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance” (2006: 43). What counts as thickness in ethnographic research has changed over the decades: once it was considered to be exhaustiveness in detail and description, later holism in the sense of revealing and documenting highly integrated and systemic aspects of a culture, and now it exists (for the most part) as contextualism, as a “density of situatedness” (Ortner 2006: 43). Regardless of what we call it or how we fill in the category, getting to such a thickness of ethnographic research rests on participant-observation, on what we both fondly and critically refer to as “being there.” At the heart of fieldwork lies the sort of disruptions and unsettling moments encountered via squatting in the classroom. As Lisa Stevenson (2009: 56) argues, such bodily as well as epistemological uncertainty is a critical part of ethnographic research, specifically “listening for hesitation—listening for that which persistently disrupts the security of what is known for sure.”

### Getting to the Ethnographic

How do you know when you have gotten to the ethnographic? How do you recognize that moment when you have hit on something that matters? This is a question I pose to myself in the field and to my graduate students as they prepare for their dissertation research. Renato Rosaldo was once asked what anthropologists had discovered, what universal truism we had learned through our decades of investigation (Visweswaran 1994: 17). The answer he gave was that we know a good description when we see one. While I concur that anthropologists appreciate a good description, I think we can extend the culmination of our collective scholarship one step further. I think we know a good ethnography when we read one. We can spot the ethnographic, smell it, hear it, sense it. It does not matter if the research took place in a rural village, an urban neighborhood, or a corporate headquarters, among the Nuer or in Newark, among soldiers, dancers, ritual specialists, or scientists. The ethnographic traverses the human experience; it *is* and can be found everywhere.

One undergraduate course I teach is titled “Reading Ethnography” in which our goal is to track the ethnographic. We do this by reading and comparing different contemporary ethnographies (written in the last fifteen years). Prior to reading ethnographies, we read a series of articles including George Marcus and Dick Cushman’s “Ethnographies as Texts” from the 1982 *Annual Review of Anthropology*. In this article, Marcus and Cushman review the state of ethnographic writing between the publication of Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* in 1973, and Marcus and James Clifford’s *Writing Culture* in 1984. They list nine characteristics of ethnographic realist writing from texts in that period:

1. A narrative structure organized by topic, chronology, or a problem;
2. The unintrusive presence of the ethnographer in the text;
3. Common denominator people, not as characters but just “the people;”

4. Based on ethnographic data produced through fieldwork;
5. A focus on everyday life situations, via a “case study” merger of interpretive and realist goals;
6. An emphasis on the native point of view;
7. Establishing specificity and sufficient context for any generalizations made;
8. The use of disciplinary jargon to signal anthropological scholarship and competencies; and,
9. Contextual exegesis of native concepts and discourses.

This list is now thirty years old. Some parts of it have stood the test of time, but what might such a list look like if generated now, three decades later? With each ethnography students read in my Spring 2012 course, we worked through this list of Marcus and Cushman’s, assessing both the list and the ethnography.<sup>ix</sup> At the end of the course, we collectively generated our own list of what makes something ethnographic. Our list also had nine items:

1. Anthropological purpose clearly stated in author’s research question and argument;
2. Clear marking of the production of ethnographic knowledge, i.e., how the anthropologist knows what he or she knows;
3. People appear in the text as named individuals or characters (e.g., “Gloria” in Donna Goldstein’s book *Laughter Out of Place*), rather than categories of people (e.g., sister-in-law, farmer, mother, etc.) or common denominator people;
4. Research topic in dialogue with issues of local concern (rather than solely important within the discipline);
5. Focus on ethnographic realities, on life as lived, on everyday life and ordinary time rather than solely on extra-ordinary time;
6. Attempt to articulate a native point of view;
7. Sufficient context for the ethnographic data in terms of the necessary anthropological literature, history, theory, etc.;
8. Clear scholarly credibility of the author, such that the reader trusts their credentials; and,
9. A sense of the ethnographer’s relationship with the community s/he writes about, how was trust gained, or relationships of care forged?

These are both descriptive and ideal categories; few of the ethnographies possessed all these characteristics in equal measure or force. We discussed at length the quality of the writing as well as the argument and evidence marshaled by each author. These discussions gave the students a new appreciation for ethnographic writing as craft. In relation to Marcus and Cushman’s points, our criteria for contemporary ethnographies was similar to four points, different to three, and considered two obvious and thus not necessary to list.

Narrative structure of the text and research based on ethnographic fieldwork were both givens to my students, such expected and regular part of contemporary ethnographies that they felt redundant to list. The four criteria that appear on both lists—in similar but not necessarily the exact same fashion—were attention to everyday life, emphasis on the native point of the view, the need for sufficient context, and signaling of scholarly credibility and competency. Finally, we decided that three points on Marcus and Cushman’s list were no longer key components of contemporary ethnography: the unintrusive presence of the ethnographer in the text, common denominator people, and contextual exegesis of native concepts and discourses (which the students felt was implicit in their revised list, albeit without the textual “exegesis” focus).

Three new criteria were deemed key by my students. These were, first, a transparency of the ethnographer as researcher. By this they meant not gratuitous reflexivity, but a clear and communicated sense of how knowledge was accumulated, and of what the scholar’s relationships with the community were; a twist on the need to show you were there. Second, the students noted the presence of people in the text as characters whom you get to know, people who appear as themselves, as real people. Third, they identified a contemporary need for the author to demonstrate that the topic being studied matters;

by this they meant mattered not only in an anthropological sense, but mattered and was relevant to the people in the community. To my students, these were the hallmarks of the current ethnographic realism. These were the things needed to make the ethnographic seem thick and thus real and trustworthy.

### Fieldwork, Theory and Disciplinary Debates

From a different angle, what I think of as “getting to the ethnographic” is what Giovanni da Col and David Graeber (2011) discuss in their Foreword to the inaugural issue of *HAAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. In assessing the possibilities of ethnographic theory, they focus on the excess of culture, that small percentage of concepts within a society that do not easily or perhaps ever fully translate across societies. These untranslatable remainders, arrived at through ethnographic research and a commitment to a pre- and post-Geertzian “thick description,” are the stuff of transformative anthropology. They contend such destabilizing moments, where two things are ostensibly not coming together, reveal the ethnographic, those ideas and practices and ways of being that are most singularly cultural. The ethnographic here is the productive space of disjuncture, a place where concepts dwell and theories arise. The ethnographic theory da Col and Graeber posit in *HAAU* requires ethnographic research as well as the sort of ethnographic sensibilities I am trying to cultivate in my students. Inasmuch as they call their project a “return” to something that anthropologists have long done, albeit never in formulaic style, it is a “new old-fashioned” form of ethnographic practice.

Why the need to return? And why this need now? Da Col and Graeber (2011) are arguing against a type of scholarship which puts theory, especially the wrong sort of theory, before ethnographic practice. In their view of anthropology, ethnographic insights arise out of translating the untranslatable from the inside out rather than outside in, thereby challenging us to think anew about what we collectively know about the world and how people live in it. Theory is generated in fieldwork rather than (solely) imported from the outside. Start instead, they implore, with the concepts that ground people’s lives, worldviews, actions, and words in ways particular to that community.

Of current theoretical woes in contemporary anthropology, they critique scholars who would begin, for example, with the Deleuzian nomadic rather than with actual nomads. Scholars who cite French theorists from the period of 1968 to 1983 are depicted as committing theoretical violations grimly presented as the equivalent of listening to Led Zeppelin or Fleetwood Mac; that is, of being embarrassingly anachronistic or out of fashion. As someone who has been known to use thinkers from that country and era, I confess to being charmed rather than offended by this criticism. Yet, I wonder what the alternative is. What might the soundtrack be to an ethnographic theory that arises out of specific context but speaks to issues elsewhere? World Music comes to mind, Putumayo compilations, a pan-African contemporary music CD I once purchased at a Starbucks while on a road trip. This is lovely music but in compilation form or categorized as “global” or “world” music, it can be anthropologically problematic for reasons ranging from the economic to the historic to the cultural.<sup>x</sup> Instead of compilations, a single-origin approach is called for, a sinking into the details in a way that prompts engagement with broader anthropological problems. Perhaps a return to ethnographic theory will enable a new way of articulating anthropology without getting stuck in the relentlessly local and contextual, in what George Marcus (2007) has called the “messy baroque.”

From the 1982 “Ethnographies as Text” article to his 2006 creation of a Center for Ethnography at the University of California at Irvine, George Marcus is the anthropologist who has written most prolifically and productively about ethnography as method and practice. Although Marcus’ work on ethnography and method deals primarily with training graduate students rather than teaching in the undergraduate classroom as is my focus here, his conceptual interventions into ethnography are important and thought-provoking, worthy of both consideration and controversy. Over the last two decades, his prescriptions for ethnography are to think it beyond fieldwork, specifically toward a non-genealogical anthropology of contemporary problems distinct from the “classic” fieldwork and area-

studies model of ethnographic research. But, what does ethnography look and feel like without fieldwork?

Thinking ethnography outside of the fieldwork model might include ideas such as three detailed on the UC-Irvine Center for Ethnography's website: (1) *para-sites* or collaborative seminar-room conversations between scholars and members of "the community or network defined by fieldwork projects," (2) *ethnocharettes* in which participants draw from design studio principles and practices to reconsider the textual form of ethnographies, and (3) the imagining of *experimental spaces* such as the "City as Laboratory" project which both recognizes the always-present experimentation in ethnographic research and also uses experimentation as a pedagogical strategy for collective reflection on ethnographic practice. One question that remains, however, is can you get to an ethnographic understanding of a community, a network, or a people without some sort of fieldwork in the Malinowskian or Geertzian sense? As many anthropologists would ask, what is the point of ethnography without the ethnographic? Isn't that just some other type of qualitative research?

In the US in 2009, two edited collections appeared on fieldwork and anthropology. One was George Marcus and James Faubion's volume *Fieldwork Is Not What it Used to Be: Learning Anthropology's Method in a Time of Transition* which works through some of the ideas presented above. The other was John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi's *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*, a book that argued a stance similar to that of da Col and Graeber in the journal *HAU*. In *Being There*, Borneman and Hammoudi argue for the importance of the fieldwork encounter, an argument with which I concur, and complain about two current forms of anthropology they call "ethnography surrogates": (1) fieldwork that privileges "surface over depth," which they associate with a *Writing Culture*-inspired approach, a reference to the landmark 1986 anthropological text edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, and (2) textual ethnography of the sort they associate with scholars such as Talal Asad and Nicholas Dirks.<sup>xi</sup> Their critique of the Clifford and Marcus school is encapsulated in the idea of surface analyses over deep ones, and of a rejection of traditional fieldwork in favor of a cultural critique style of "putting things together." Their critique of textualist scholarship is that the study of texts cannot access that which they contend is most uniquely anthropological: "diverse forms of social action and interaction, interlocution in experience" (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009: 16). Both approaches are critiqued for being surrogates, for not being the real thing. Borneman and Hammoudi explain this as follows:

Writing not based on much experience in the field, much acquaintance with people or with the questions that concern them, cannot fail to show a certain vagueness no matter how theoretically competent the writer. Rhetorical and performative virtuosity can rarely compensate for the lack of fieldwork experience, which provides an opening to dilemmas in the contemporary world. ... [As such] fieldwork as a series of human encounters in communicative events has become subsidiary—the Derridean supplement, necessary but also a substitute—and therefore mimicked or replaced by surrogate rhetorical techniques" (2009: 18).

What is the problem they find with these approaches? A thinness in being there. I agree that thinness in research is problematic. Fieldwork can be thin; it is not inherently thick. Good ethnographic fieldwork requires skill as much as time. Yet, I am not sure that some approaches are necessarily ethnographically deficient; I disagree, for example, that ethnography in the archives is by definition less ethnographic than village-based fieldwork. Ethnographic research has an elastic capacity to cover a wide breadth of topics. I think the problem instead is in the execution of the research and in the understanding of the ethnographic, both of which are linked to anthropological training.

My intellectual biography is relatively classical for an American. As an undergraduate, my main professors were Ann Gold, a Chicago-trained anthropologist of India, Michael Peletz, an anthropologist of Malaysia and a student of Sherry Ortner, and Mary Moran, an anthropologist of Liberia and Brown-trained student of Louise Lamphere who taught me feminist and political anthropology, and with whom I read more Ortner as well as Geertz and all the classics of British structural functionalism and symbolic anthropology. As a budding young anthropologist of the

Himalayas and already trained in the Ortner/Geertz lineage, I went to Michigan for graduate school to work with Sherry Ortner herself. Unfortunately she left Michigan after my first year of graduate school. After a summer of preliminary fieldwork in Nepal as a Master's student, I found my anticipated project was historical as well as ethnographic, and I officially transferred to Michigan's Doctoral Program in Anthropology and History. I am thus a historian as well as an anthropologist; my PhD is in both disciplines. My dissertation advisors were Nicholas Dirks and Ann Stoler; Nick was a student of Bernard Cohn at Chicago, trained in a history department by an anthropologist, and Ann is a Columbia-trained political economist turned historical anthropologist.

Being trained at the PhD level in history as well as anthropology, and by two scholars who pioneered the ethnography in the colonial archives approach taught me how to see the ethnographic in unexpected places, such as in archives and the documents they hold.<sup>xiii</sup> They taught me how to bring ethnographic sensibilities to the archival research I did, yet it was in my fieldwork before and during graduate school that I cultivated these sensibilities and thus had an embodied understanding of how ethnographic practice might be taken to the textual realm. In my case, my experience bringing ethnographic knowledge generated from fieldwork to life in other domains provided me with the pedagogical grounding needed to bring an experiential sense of ethnography to life among my students.

### **Experience as Pedagogy**

What does it mean to use experience as pedagogy? For me, this means providing students with the conceptual tools to think ethnographically. I am thus less interested in having students at the undergraduate level parse elegant analyses of thorny anthropological questions, than having them understand the overarching anthropological program of what it means to be human and how to know others. I do this through a five-point approach:

- (1) I teach ethnographic material alongside;
- (2) Theoretical texts or lectures, and work throughout the course to have students apprehend course material through constantly taking them out of the role of passive student taking notes and instead asking them to inhabit one of three subject positions:
- (3) That of a member of the society we are studying in any given course or week of a course;
- (4) That of an anthropologist, not student of anthropology, but an anthropologist in the field, conducting research; and,
- (5) themselves.

I find it effective to have students reflect on new and ostensibly "foreign" topics from within their own ways of knowing and being. I use these strategies in all of the classes I teach, for example, in both my small "History and Memory" course, and my large lecture course on the "Anthropology of Tibet."

I start the "History and Memory" class with an article by Akhil Gupta (1994) on reincarnation in India, followed by an article by Veena Das (2001) that is a theoretically and emotionally charged reflection on and analysis of fieldwork in Delhi in the immediate aftermath of the riots and violence surrounding Indira Gandhi's assassination. Reading about and discussing reincarnation sets the stage for opening up my students' ideas of time and for thinking of new ways of conceptualizing the self, both crucial steps in establishing a sense of the ethnographic. Reading about ethnographic research in a chaotic, confusing time—that of the Emergency in Delhi—helps the students see what the anthropologist is trying to get at, what knowledge she is producing about how and why people are acting and thinking the way they are in this time. Or, more specifically, they begin to see past the chaos into the realm of commitments and beliefs and culture, the reservoir of embodied truths about the world that guide people in ordinary and non-ordinary time. Only then do we begin to read in the history and memory literature. In this sense, teaching is like writing: you need to lay the groundwork for students to receive ethnographic knowledge. In the same way that authors need to provide certain material in, for example,

Chapter Two so that Chapter Three and Four make sense, so too do professors need to set certain readings up with prior ones.

What do students need to know before they get to a certain book or concept or argument? Only after reading the Gupta and Das pieces, do I then ask the students to read Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory* (1992), which introduces ideas the students often find difficult, specifically that their memories are not individual, that memories do not belong to them independent of society. It is in tandem with Halbwachs' thoughts on forgetting that we do the squatting exercise I discussed earlier. Halbwachs contends that something is forgotten when there is no available social framework of meaning for it. Hence the socially-encouraged bodily forgetting of how to squat. It is one thing for me to talk about squatting in the class in conjunction with a discussion of social forgetting, but it is pedagogically and thus intellectually more effective to pair this conversation with the actual practice of squatting in class.

In my "Anthropology of Tibet" class, my approach is slightly different. This is not a topical course moving around the world, looking at issues in different societies, but instead looking at a range of concerns and concepts in one society. In this course, I frequently use different subject positions to cultivate a sense of the ethnographic for the students. The experience of fieldwork, and of coming to an ethnographic understanding of another group is an affective as well as intellectual project. As Dimitrina Spencer (2011) has written, there is emotional transformation involved in ethnographic knowledge, and we should more formally acknowledge this as part of our method. A strategy I use to help students access this affective register is the use of their own personal subject positions in developing an ethnographic sensibility.

I ask the students what they would do if Canada invaded. Where would they go? How would they communicate with their families? What if phone lines were down? Would they have time to go home? Get money? Would their bank cards work? I ask if any of them have ever contemplated such a situation, if any student has ever thought about the possibility of losing their home or country or becoming a refugee. From time to time, I do have students in my class who are or were refugees, whose families fled from their countries, somehow unexpectedly landing in the United States. But most students have never thought about this at all.

When I do this exercise, the students first laugh but then turn serious and even somber. We talk about local militias and survivalist groups, and the students' initial excitement of having to 'flee' to Mexico is soon tempered by thoughts of having no money or not being able to contact one's family and so on. This gets their intellectual wheels turning in a personally engaged way, and for the purposes of our class helps to reinforce the point that Tibetans neither anticipated nor wanted to become refugees.

Generating exercises or even just moments in the classroom where students respond as anthropologists is a second subjective pedagogy I use. This can be an on-the-spot in-class exercise. One exercise might be: turn to your neighbor and come up with two questions an anthropologist would ask a certain character in an ethnography we are reading, or questions about a ritual or historical moment we've read about. Other times I have students work in groups to rewrite section from course texts, rewriting a first-person passage into the third person, to think about what is lost and gained in various writing choices anthropologists make. Another pedagogy I use here is to offer examples from my own research for the students' considering of research and writing choices I have made.

The final subject position I place the students in is an emic subjectivity, thinking like a Tibetan individual might, asking how would a Tibetan potentially explain any given cultural concept or practice to themselves.

I tell the students about my research on the Tibetan citizens' volunteer army that fought against the Chinese for almost two decades from 1956-1974 (McGranahan 2010a, 2005). This was research that involved me working with many old Tibetan men, who had been young during the war, but by the time

I met them were old men mostly in the 70s and 80s. At the time I was a young woman in my mid-late 20s. One thing many of the men told me about were the protective amulets they wore on the battlefield which made the men bullet-proof. These protective amulets were decorative metal boxes with consecrated religious items inside that the men wore on their bodies; they would test their powers by shooting at sheep. Sometimes the sheep were shot, they granted, but never did one die. They were truly bullet-proof as was emphasized to me again and again. I heard stories about sheep and bullets and the invincibility of these amulets over and over until one day, one man told me about menstrual blood. What he said was that if a bullet was dipped in menstrual blood, then its protective powers were cancelled.<sup>xiii</sup>

Here I pause and bring students back to anthropology and ethnographic research, to the power of fieldwork, of being there in person, and of the importantly unpredictable way that research unfolds. I invite the students into the research process. I ask them: Why does this possibility make sense to a Tibetan? What do you need to feel and know to believe you are bulletproof? Or to believe that menstrual blood would strip you of those powers?

We talk also about the awkwardness of certain topics, of how it was that a dozen or so elderly men skipped right over the menstrual blood exclusion with me, but one did not. One man told me about it. We talk about the difficulty and the beauty of trying to explain why, to reach a point of understanding, of getting to the place where cultural understandings of pollution, gender, and contradiction all come together. We ask how such understandings are felt and lived. Moving back and forth between subjectivities enables us to get deeper into the question of why no one mentioned menstrual blood. We try to get to the culturally obvious through various routes, strategies, and perspectives.

Pedagogically this is not a linear process, but these are techniques I use repeatedly throughout my courses, cycling in and out of them as needed, in response to the material and what seems the most efficacious way to pull the students into the ethnography in any given moment. This is my pedagogical toolkit that travels with me to undergraduate classes—large and small, topical or areal, for majors and non-majors all. Working to generate an ethnographic awareness for my students throughout the semester enables us to go deeper into the course readings, into ethnography, and thus into anthropology. This attention to ethnographic sensibility cuts across my teaching of anthropology.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I want to share the words of anthropologist Kirin Narayan who when I asked her “Why ethnography?,” answered the following:

For the discipline of paying attention; for becoming more responsibly aware of inequalities; for better understanding of the social forces causing suffering and how people might somehow find hope; and most generally, for being perpetually pulled beyond the limits of one’s own taken-for-granted world” (Narayan in McGranahan 2014).

Yes. These are the things about ethnography I most appreciate, and the things I want to bring into the classroom for my students to inform and infuse their understanding of anthropology as a way of knowing valuable well beyond disciplinary limits.

Pedagogically, I want to make a plea for a new old-fashioned anthropology. I want to argue for long-term ethnographic research, for deep empirical knowledge that includes the historical, for ethnographic intimacy as embodied and experiential knowledge, and for meaningful, productive fieldwork encounters that are possible in many different settings and on many different topics. I want to argue for being there and knowing people. And I want to argue for teaching students to think ethnographically. It is possible and it is important. Ethnographic knowledge is charged in that it is produced out of real-life encounters between people, most often in the context of meaningful differences between these people. Ethnographic research can be troubled and it requires care and commitment, humility and cooperation,

vulnerability and trust, but it is one of the most poignant ways of knowing another and thus, knowing the self. In terms of the teaching I do, I believe in its transformative possibilities.

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## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> For a fascinating discussion of a history of teaching anthropology, see Mills 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> The American Anthropological Association defines ethnography as an interdisciplinary composition of multiple methods: “the description of cultural systems or an aspect of culture based on fieldwork in which the investigator is immersed in the ongoing everyday activities of the designated community for the purpose of describing the social context, relationships, and processes relevant to the topic under consideration.” From the American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethnography and Institutional Review Boards.

<sup>iii</sup> As Marilyn Strathern (1999: 1) explains, ethnographic research “is a moment of immersement that is simultaneously total and partial, a totalizing activity which is not the only activity in which the person is engaged.”

<sup>iv</sup> On the open-mindedness of ethnographic research, Margaret Mead explains that it is an “open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder, that which one would not have been able to guess” (Mead 1950: xxvi as cited in Boellstorff 2008: 71).

<sup>v</sup> For comparison, the graduate seminars I teach for both Masters and PhD students tend to have between six to fifteen students in them. In this article, my focus is solely on undergraduate pedagogy. For more on teaching ethnographic research at the graduate level, see Cerwonka and Malkki 2007.

<sup>vi</sup> For a short critique of the social habits and authority invested in hierarchically dividing the world into “squatting mankind” and “sitting mankind,” see Mauss’ 1934 essay “Techniques of the Body.”

<sup>vii</sup> Some companies specializing in squat toilet converters are Evaco (Singapore), Lillipad (New Zealand), Nature’s Platform (USA), Squatty Potty (USA), and Taringa (Australia).

<sup>viii</sup> Personal communication, April 2002.

<sup>ix</sup> The ethnographies we read in 2012 were Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*; Kristen Ghodsee, *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Communism*; Donna Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*; Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*; Mandana Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town*; and, Carole McGranahan, *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War*, in addition to articles by Lila Abu-Lughod, Ruth Behar, James Clifford, Kirin Narayan, and Paul Stoller. The course also included a unit on ethnographic genre where we considered ethnographic poetry, fiction, and film in relation to the ethnographies we read.

<sup>x</sup> On “World Music,” see Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

<sup>xi</sup> See especially the discussion in Borneman and Hammoudi 2009b: 4-8. Given that Borneman and Hammoudi single out George Marcus and Nicholas Dirks as examples of where anthropology went wrong in the last two decades, it was telling that the two anthropologists invited from the USA to talk about ethnography at the 2012 Oxford conference were Kim Fortun and myself. Kim was a cultural anthropology PhD student of George Marcus, who currently teaches in a Science and Technology Studies program, and my PhD co-advisor was Nick Dirks.

<sup>xii</sup> See, for example, Dirks 2001 and Stoler 1995.

<sup>xiii</sup> For a detailed ethnographic and historic analysis of this story, see McGranahan 2010b.