

Board of Directors of the American Ethnological Society

President

Ellen Rasmus/University of Arizona

President-Elect

Renato Rosaldo/Stanford University

Councilors

Susan Bean/Peabody Museum of Salem

A. Lynn Bolles/University of Maryland, College Park

Jose E. Linde/University of Texas, Austin

Karen Brodtkin Sack/University of California, Los Angeles

Secretary

Nancy McDowell/Tranklin and Marshall College

Treasurer

George Collier/Stanford University

General Editor

Donald Donham/Emory University

Journal Editor

Don Brenneis/Pitzer College

The *American Ethnologist* is a quarterly journal concerned with "ethnology" in the broadest sense of the term. The Editor welcomes topical papers in areas such as ecology, economy, social organization, ethnicity, politics, ideology, personality, cognition, ritual, symbolism or cosmology focused on any human group or society. Papers that cut across specific topical areas, and that deal with culture theoretically as well as synchronically, are especially welcome. The views expressed in these pages are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the American Anthropological Association, the American Ethnological Society, or their officers.

Information for contributors All manuscripts are reviewed anonymously. Type authorship, institutional affiliation and acknowledgments on a separate sheet; only the title should appear on the manuscript and abstract. Submit five copies of articles and comments and reflections. For more information consult the *Style Guide and Information for Authors* published in *American Ethnologist* 7:1. Unsolicited manuscripts submitted by persons who are not members of the American Ethnological Society must be accompanied by a nonrefundable processing fee of \$25.

There are two addresses for the *American Ethnologist*: Manuscripts, books for review, and all communications relative to editorial matters are to be sent to: Don Brenneis, Editor, *American Ethnologist*, Anthropology, Pitzer College, 1050 N. Mills Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711-6110.

All other communications, including subscription information, are to be sent to: *American Ethnologist*, 4350 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 640, Arlington, VA 22203.

Subscription Information *American Ethnologist* (ISSN 0094-0496) is published quarterly (February, May, August, and November) by the American Ethnological Society, a Division of the American Anthropological Association, 4350 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 640, Arlington, VA 22203. Annual subscriptions are available through membership in the American Anthropological Association and the American Ethnological Society. Annual dues for professional members are \$95.00, including \$20.00 designated for the *American Ethnologist* and \$14.00 for the *Anthropology Newsletter*. For information on other membership categories, write the Virginia office. The AE subscription rate for nonmembers is \$70 per volume. Back issues are available for \$10.00 per copy for members and \$15.00 for all others. Allow at least 3 weeks for changes of address to take effect. Overseas delivery is not guaranteed. Issues returned by the Postal Service as undeliverable at the address on record will be replaced at a service charge of \$5.00 each, upon request. Domestic claims for nonreceipt should be made within 90 days of the month of publication, overseas claims within 180 days. Thereafter, the regular back issue rate will be charged for replacement. Second-class postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *American Ethnologist*, 4350 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 640, Arlington, VA 22203.

a guide to the perplexed ethnographer in an age of sound bites

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ—University of Chicago

Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology. ROGER SANJEK, ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990. xviii + 429 pp., figures, photographs, notes, references, index.

fieldtexts

Of more significance than we might think in the continuity of cultural traditions in the during of anthropology are the books—that small shelf—that we take with us to the field. These serve variously as exemplars of the kind of ethnography we hope to achieve, as *aides-memories* to the kinds of questions we should be asking, as detailed accounts of the historical or ecological contexts in which we are working, or as simply entertainment or diversion—surcease from the tensions of everyday life in the field. In my generation *War and Peace* was recommended as night-table reading under the pressure lamp. It or any other of the Russian classics offered transcendent perspectives on the smaller-scale comedies and tragedies that were our daily fare. Perhaps a subsequent companion volume in a minor key to the major compendium we have before us here would be titled *Fieldtexts*.

These fieldtext influences occur to me because I have just had the occasion to visit a student working in the field in a village in the former Deutsche Demokratische Republik. Sanjek's *Fieldnotes*, only a year out, already figured prominently among the 15 to 20 books she had upon her shelf. Conspicuously absent, at least for an anthropologist of my field generation (mid-fifties to mid-sixties), was *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (Royal Anthropological Institute 1951), that British compendium of complete inquiry useful to several generations of anthropologists in reminding us of everything we had not inquired about—before it was too late to ask.

Notes and Queries was full of practical advice about the conduct of fieldwork too, although it had mainly colonial contexts in mind. One advisory I wish I had not ignored concerned hiring native assistants from the coastal fleshpots and bringing them into the more innocent interior. Impressed by his *savoir faire*—he presented himself as cook, clerk, confidant, and general factotum—I hired such a man with, as predicted, much subsequent tribulation. Patricia certainly taught me a thing or two. But some of the lessons were there in *Notes and Queries*. And, of course, there were all those questions on the various aspects of culture and society that we could review—despairingly at times—to see how adequate our own inquiry had been. I found *Notes and Queries* a useful (if stern and rather hectoring) field companion, and my frequent consultation of it is evidenced by its many dog-eared pages.

No doubt, quite beside its colonialist air, the unreflective "fact-finding and fact-gathering" nature of the inquiry proposed in *Notes and Queries* contrasts strikingly with what is afoot in *Fieldnotes*.¹ There is little of a prescriptive, cookbook relationship between the matters discussed here and field research, and certainly no assumption that questions and answers have a transparent reference. As is typical of the age, this is largely a collection—a very good one by and large—of reflection and metacommentary on taking and using fieldnotes. As its subtitle suggests, this is a compendium that deconstructs the "making of anthropology" and is not primarily a handbook to doing it. With some exceptions,² it is by indications that the meditative fieldworker will, in reading this collection as a fieldtext, find directions out.

This must be particularly the case if, as is frequently argued in this book, fieldnote work is an art rather than a science—such that there can be few directions that will suit every fieldworker and every field situation. *Notes and Queries* presumed that fieldnotes were or could be, in the end, very public documents produced out of commonly understood questions answerable in, ultimately, a common idiom. *Fieldnotes* takes a more relativistic position and argues for the most part that, in fact, they have been private documents susceptible to diverse creative uses. *Notes and Queries* pointed toward ethnographies with very similar formats. *Fieldnotes* espouses greater "textual relativism" and points the way to that creative diversification of ethnographic writing that is presently taking place.

fieldwords

If this collection is sparse in the questions it offers to the fieldworker for the direct acquisition of field materials—the forte of *Notes and Queries*—it is, in contrast, rich in the words it offers for the reconceptualization (at least more adequate conceptualization) of the whole process of fieldnote-anchored fieldwork and the writing up of fieldwork.³ This semantic enrichment may inevitably be a consequence of the reflective mode and of the kind of mediative metacommentary that is present here. In fact, we have long needed a more fine-grained and nuanced vocabulary for discussing the entire process.

Thus, for example, we are given the distinctions between "scratchnotes," "fieldnotes proper," "headnotes," and "filednotes." The first are those hurried or surreptitious jottings in slippocket notebooks that will be later expanded and composed in quieter and more removed moments. Many a slip is possible between the full cup of daily human interaction, which we can but scratchily register, and our later articulation of it in the more measured pronouncements of fieldnotes proper. An even greater and possibly more hazardous distance lies between these fieldnotes and the filednotes we later prepare upon return to the academy, where (using David Plath's phrase) we "confer note" upon the events and create actors out of the persons of the field. Anthropologists, by and large and in the end, spend much more time with filednotes than with fieldnotes proper. And it is a virtue of this collection, David Plath's chapter particularly, to have brought to our attention that deconstructive and reconstructive activity, for filing always involves the breaking down and recombining of notes. It is a virtue to have distinguished between the "context of discovery," in which fieldnotes are central, and the contexts of "organization" and of "presentation," in which they are not.

Most interesting is the idea of "headnotes" offered to us by Simon Ottenberg in his perceptive "Thirty Years of Fieldnotes." This idea helps clarify for us why it is so difficult to make use of another's fieldnotes. A great deal of what we know about the field, matters of register, emotional tone, point of view, weighting, and many field facts as well, never gets written down. These things remain in the head in silent dialogue with what is actually written or to be more directly consulted later at the time of writing up. These headnotes come to have an authoritative dominance—a transforming power—over the fieldnotes proper of which we must try to be aware and to which we are accountable. There are two important chapters here, both treating the

reworking of mid-1930s material, that point up the problem of interpolating all that is not present (or is present only as headnotes) in others' fieldnotes: Nancy Lutkenhaus working with Camilla Wedgewood's New Guinea notes; and Robert Smith seeking to attune himself to all the hidden voices in Ella Lury Wiswell's Japan notes used in the writing of *The Women of Soye Mura* (Smith and Wiswell 1982).

An important part of realizing the shadow presence of headnotes in fieldnotes is recognizing that unlike fieldnotes, which have a cryographic nature—a "frozen in time" quality—headnotes are susceptible to the warm winds of ever-changing theoretical debate. Fieldnotes, as Ottenberg, George Bond, and Rena Lederman (among others) point out, are very much the product of their times and of now-moribund theoretical and ethical debates. That seems to be why many people feel slightly discomfited when returning to them. Headnotes, however, are ever-changing and capable of giving new interpretations of past notes. For as headnotes are finally brought fully to bear upon fieldnotes in the act of writing up, the original notes undergo not only a diminution of importance but also a sea change. This book makes rewarding commentary on these subtle transformative reworkings.

We carry away from this volume, then, a much better grasp of the complex interactive dynamic of scratchnotes, fieldnotes, headnotes, and filednotes. And, ironically for a book ostensibly about fieldnotes alone, in this wider understanding fieldnote taking and preserving is (as James Clifford points out) decentered from its pride of place in anthropology. We come to see fieldnotes as just a part of a much longer and more complex and subtle, multilayered process of ethnography, in which "inscription," "transcription," and "description" deliver us up to the much larger contexts involved in engaging, knowing, and interpreting the other. At moments in such an argument fieldnotes shrink, virtually, to the status of "mnemonic artefacts," or "Proustian cups of tea," evocative of complex associations and secondary elaborations found, however, not mainly in themselves but in the head.

fieldpaths

The publication of this reflective collection certainly brings to an end the long prevailing situation in anthropology where, in George Stocking's phrase, fieldwork was more "enacted than analyzed." For here we are given (most perceptively of all in the chapter by Lederman) considerable insight into the constant, frequently contingent, negotiations that go on in this enactment. There is the negotiation, for example, between local colloquial speech and collegial discourse, between local voices and the once and future professional voices to whom we must inevitably relate. Most of these negotiations come down in the end to questions about the adequacy of categories: those brought to the field and those, tested by the field or learned in it, to be brought back from it.

But while this collection is usefully forthcoming on these field problems and the anxieties and uncertainties attendant on them it also provides us with useful knowledge about the field procedures and field commitments that comprise that forthcomingness. Sanjek in an important final chapter treats such field procedures and the resultant ethnographic commitments as possible solutions to the perennial problem of ethnographic validity. It might be more plausible to treat them as responses to the problems of reliability and credibility in ethnography. For while this collection does not, in my reading, solve the problem of ethnographic validity (indeed, it complicates it)—a problem, after all, bound up in a different discourse, that of experimental science—it does force us to consider the nature of reliable fieldwork and credible ethnography.

Take, for example, the path metaphor as applied here to fieldwork. This collection first suggests the variety of paths taken by various anthropologists in successful fieldwork—the range of reliability and credibility—and, second, encourages credibility by calling for the explicit discussion of the paths taken in compiling fieldnotes. For fieldwork, after all, is pathfinding, and

fieldnotes are the product of that pathfinding. They are a product of the precincts and persons to whose doors we have beaten a path and hence have relied upon. By being forthcoming and explicit about this pathfinding, about this system of reliance, the "who" and "what" and "where" we have relied upon, we contribute to ethnographic credibility. Fieldnotes are reliable and ethnography is credible to the degree that the ethnographer is aware of his or her fieldpaths, which is to say system of reliance, and makes the reader aware of these fieldpaths as well.

It is not necessarily the case that tightly circumscribed fieldpaths and narrow consultations which result in more narrowly focused work are to be disvalued. As much is to be said for the method of intensity as for that of extensity. It is, rather, that the credible ethnographer, the one entitled to our confidence, is forthcoming about the fieldpaths taken, the kind of situated listings, observations, and questionings that resulted, and the relation of those paths and situations to the ethnography itself. This collection suggests other, accessory field techniques that will fructify this pathfinding—the genealogical method, significant "event," and "linked event attentiveness," for example—but by highlighting the notion of the "paths" of fieldwork, it is a valuable aid to achieving reliability and eventual credibility.

fieldframes

When focusing on fieldnotes themselves, or even upon fieldwork itself, we tend to give to them and to it an autochthony they do not possess. I have spoken of reshaping and refining fieldnotes into fieldframes. The reduction can be drastic. "Sometimes you feel," in Plath's telling image, "like the Curies, boiling down tons of pitchblende, bucketful by bucketful, just to obtain a splash of luminosity" (p. 374). This collection of articles is particularly strong in pointing up the subsequent transformations that fieldwork and fieldnotes undergo. But on the other end of this whole process, at its inception, is how fieldwork and fieldnote taking are framed ("pre-figured" or "pre-encoded" in Clifford's terms).

Much more is involved here than the hypotheses or propositions we take to the field to be tested, for the hypotheses themselves are pre-encoded. They are first of all a matter of the prevailing narrations, the framing stories about the vectors in cultural dynamics and intercultural relations that have captured the imaginations of a particular generation of fieldworkers. Edward Bruner argued that in Native American studies there had been a sea change from the prevailing narrative of assimilation to that of resistance.³ The narratives prevalent in the academics from which the fieldwork is planned are bound to influence the research planned and to frame what is considered fieldnote-worthy in the research process itself.

This collection says much less about this "other end" of fieldnotes, although, to be sure, it is treated under the rubric of fieldwork framed from what Sanjek calls a "WMMWM (or WMMWF)" (Western, middle-class, white male or female) perspective:

How different the history of anthropology would be if it were written not about the awakening of anthropological interest in cultural awareness by Western/middle-class/white/males for females . . . but also about the awakening of cultural awareness and ethnographic self-reflection by people of color with the stimulus and assistance of (but also appropriation by) WMMWM anthropology. (p. 407)

Such an argument, besides calling, at the least, for a "radical widening" of anthropology's membership, also asks us to consider (despite the interpretive variety made evident here) something typical in the way that WMMWF fieldworkers frame their fieldwork and fieldnotes. The chapter by Christine Obbo may be taken as an illustration of this difference in framing. The majority of the chapters here work (perceptively, to be sure) to figure out illuminating comparisons for fieldnote taking—what such a process of inscription and description can be understood as similar to—or to figure out how fieldnotes relate to the whole ethnographic enterprise—what part of the whole they are. These efforts are conducted often enough in a certain ironic register that is partially produced by the detachment of "the West from the Rest," and

partially from comparing the former blind acceptance in anthropology of fieldnotes as transparent registers of fact with current ideas of their constructed and partial nature.

Obbo's chapter, "Adventures with Fieldnotes," is a very different essay. It is literal argument very serious in tone and hardly suspect of irony. Obbo is concerned with the politics of ethnographic knowledge and with the appropriation, not to say exploitation, of the fieldnotes of native ethnographers by WMMWF ethnographers—the exploitation of the rest by the West. For Obbo this is apparently a subject too serious to be treated through double entendres or other ironic "figurings out." The point is that she has framed both her essay and fieldnotes themselves in a much different way than the WMMWM/WMMWF contributors to this volume.

So fieldnotes are framed according to that part of the universe one comes from and the tropes, in this case of enlightenment or exploitation, that are central to one's worldview. A full exploration of the tropes that prefigure and pre-encode fieldnotes may well be the next order of business that follows upon this informing and satisfying banquet of essays. But while this may be an appropriate endnote to this review of *Fieldnotes*, it is still, perhaps, too open-ended and relativizing. For in the end, in the best essays here, there is a commitment to some enduring verities of ethnography that go beyond the transitory figuring out of its nature and the attendant ironies of such reflection. Before pushing away from the table we should recognize a commitment here to a set of field values very like what Gillian Feeley-Harnik has called the "complicity, scrupulousness and concurrences" (1991:xx) that lie behind fair-minded and revolutionary ethnography.⁴

The culinary metaphor for fieldwork and fieldnote taking is thematic in this collection: the final ethnography as the glaze or "nappe" uniting the mealy diversity of the fieldnotes (p. 59); the fieldnotes as the uncooked, the ethnography as the cooked (p. 343); the fieldnotes as the making and the fieldnotes as the baking of anthropology (p. 375). As familiar as these figurings out of the ethnographic process may be, in this media age what we should want to avoid is that superficial and tendentious compilation and use of fieldnotes—used not as lead-ins to an ever more profound understanding of the human condition in local terms but as "ethnobotanics" called to feed other purposes. This collection is dedicated to the next generation of ethnographers. May they read it carefully whether in the field or out. For the "complicity, scrupulousness and concurrences" that we sense at work here in the best of these chapters, whatever the attendant ironies of the age, should go a long way in forewarning and forearming them against the sound-bite cannibalism—to frame fieldnote "taking" in another idiom—of the modern world.

notes

¹ I don't want to imply that the generation of fieldworkers with whom I identify was simply naive and mechanistic about "fact finding." Indeed, Charles Frake's article "Notes on Queerics in Ethnography" (1964) became one of the core texts of that generation.

² In such a large compendium there are, to be sure, chapters, sections, and passages interested in greater standardization and more direct usefulness. The chapter, for example, by Allen and Chiu Robinson on randomizing procedures in fieldnote gathering works toward a more representative and realistic ethnography. But in fact the Johnsons compile a checklist for inquiry very like that provided by *Notes and Queries* (Royal Anthropological Institute 1951), which they, otherwise, recommend as a still valuable fieldtext.

³ I mean to suggest the predominant cryogenic or cryocentric mode of preserving the multisensory field experiences by "freezing" them into written form. In this multimedia day and age other, more directly analogic forms of anchoring and preserving these experiences, such as extensive videotaping, are surely possible. Indeed, as Plath implies, reflecting on fieldnotes in a media age brings into question and greatly widens our notions of what it is to "document" reality.

⁴ It might be said that Sanjek is much more than an entrepreneurial editor of the kind who limits his role mainly to that of stimulating and introducing the work of his colleagues. The preface and five important chapters, which bring each of the five parts to an enriching conclusion, make him a major and central contributor. This is very much his book.

⁴Edward Bruner's "Ethnography as Narrative" (1986) is among the most perceptive and pithy analyses (among many) that appeared in the 1980s on the centrality of narrativity in anthropology and cognitive social and human sciences.

⁵Feeley-Harnik's *A Green Estate: Restoring Independence in Madagascar* (1991) is a recent instance of that reliability and credibility in ethnography.

references cited

- Bruner, Edward
1986. Ethnography as Narrative. In *The Anthropology of Experience*. V. Turner and E. Bruner, eds. pp. 139-155. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Feeley-Harnik, Gillian
1991. *A Green Estate: Restoring Independence in Madagascar*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Frake, Charles
1964. Notes on Queries in Ethnography. *American Anthropologist* (special publication) 66(3), pt. 2: 132-145.
Royal Anthropological Institute
1951. *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*. 6th edition. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Smith, Robert J., and Ella Lury Wiswell
1982. *The Women of Suye Mura*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

submitted 19 December 1991

accepted 19 December 1991