Of Clipboards and Pith Helmets:
Learning to Laugh at Anthropological Methodologies

Kate B. Harding

There is something a little off-putting about the word “anthropology” — The Study of Man. Most people within our field have come to accept the term as a necessary but flawed label for articulating our unusual curiosity for the human world, but plenty of both casual and serious critics outside the field have noted that the term “anthropology” is itchy, to say the least, and that it scratches at our most tender points. In other words, “The Study of Man” suggests that our Others are open for scientific investigation, an ontological leap not too far from the biological experiments of the Nazi era in which humanity simply became an untapped mine for science. This critique has, of course, been played out ad nauseum to the point where anthropologists practically have come to ignore its redundant cycles of guilt and scolding. After all, qualitative anthropology is not Nazism, far from it, and we can loathe ourselves all we want but by golly, let’s just get on with our work. I am not suggesting that we revisit this debate. But what I am suggesting is that we visit the very notion of fieldwork in the first place and question whether it is a little hilarious in its earnestness and in its need to be taken so seriously. I will not suggest that fieldwork is disgusting or ethnocentric, far from it, but I will suggest that it is, quite simply, a little bit funny. Let’s laugh.

Anthropology takes its methodology very seriously for a few reasons, and graduate students of course receive intensive training on how to prepare for and conduct fieldwork. In fact, fieldwork has become so central to the discipline that it is even sometimes viewed as the most important rite of passage on the road to becoming an anthropologist (Sluka & Robben 3). And like all rites of passage, it is meant to be difficult, emotionally painful, exhausting, and —especially— transformative.

Indeed, the anthropologist becomes the anthropologist through her engagement with the field. Anthropological writings may encompass everything from philosophy, history, politics, art history, and cultural criticism, but “fieldwork”—and the real-world experience it promises—has traditionally been seen as the defining characteristic that sets the discipline apart from other fields of study. And
since anthropology is one of the most threatened disciplines from an institutional point of view (departments around the world are closing due to funding shortages), then it makes good sense to make sure that the methods do not slip away into other departments that may take fieldwork less seriously, slowly annihilating the need for anthropology altogether.

A rigorous study of methodology also forces the student of anthropology to think critically and deeply about the many ethical questions raised through fieldwork. For example, what are the ethical problems inherent in recording interviews or mapping ethnicities in a war zone? What are the ethical problems inherent in weaving oneself into a community, only to abandon it a few months later? These are questions that are taken seriously by anthropologists, far more so than journalists or any other students of culture. And they should be.

Finally, the study of methodology also forces an anthropologist to explore deeply the dialogic relationship between self and other and to probe the very category of knowing. How can we know what is real, and what kinds of methods are most effective for dissolving the intersubjective clouds of projection that arise in human relationships? How can we avoid ethnographic seduction (Robben 1995)? Indeed it is an exploration into the very heart of knowing.

I believe deeply in a rigorous study of methodology and research ethics, and I have found the study of methodology to be quite useful in my own work. Indeed, in addition to taking the various required methodology classes in graduate school (the classes covered research ethics, interview techniques, and research design, among others), I also taught research methodology to American and Nepali students during a year working at the Cornell Nepal Study Program in Kathmandu. And nowhere was I reminded more of the importance of methodology than during that year when young, untrained students often devised outrageous project ideas that risked their own safety or that of Nepal's communities. Methodology matters a great deal.

However, it is important for anthropologists to admit to ourselves—or I should say, it has been important for me to admit to myself—that a concern with methodology can come with its own neurotic and comical tics. It often seems that the more seriously an anthropologist takes his methodology, the more at risk he becomes of losing his very ability to communicate with his subjects. After all, a rigorous study of methodology leaves us coming away with an image that any good anthropologist must form himself into a Gary-Larson-like ideal, earnestly heading into the field site with a nerdy and unflinching devotion to knowledge collection. Worse still, the anthropologist may take a few requisite companions with him too: a research assistant at the side, a stack of IRB release forms, and a list of pre-planned interview questions spilling off the tongue. The natives, true to the Gary Larson cartoon, find the behavior entirely bizarre and, in fact, antisocial.
This image, while laughable, forms an ideal in our heads that risks exerting an aspirational magnetism upon us. We may visit this image throughout our career and imagine that rigor is defined by clipboards rather than by something more escapist and undefined. But if we do not laugh at this image, if we do not find a way to destabilize its supremacy with a bit of jest, we will risk convincing ourselves that many of the pearls of our fieldwork are unusable or unprofessional. Much of what we may have experienced “off the grid,” so to speak, will be deemed unworthy of professional use. And yet I believe it is those undocumented, untranslated, inappropriate, unprofessional, and off-the-grid moments that, more than anything else, reveal to us the most noteworthy insights. We have been fooling ourselves a little too much with this dutiful thing called methodology.

Indeed this “clipboard anthropology,” as I suppose I will call it for the sake of exaggeration, is not my kind of anthropology, far from it, but it has exerted itself upon my imagination as a result of so much rigorous study that I have concluded so many times that I do not have “what it takes” to be an anthropologist because I never, ever, had any interest in conducting fieldwork in this way, and I never, ever, had this much faith in knowledge collection. My anthropology has always been the kind that took place when I was halfway in between talking and listening, halfway in between hearing what people were telling me and answering what people were asking me, halfway between having the time of my life and wondering what time it was. Sometimes I laughed at the wrong moments, asked the wrong questions, rolled my eyes at the wrong subjects, or got drunk at the wrong weddings. Sometimes I hurt people or embarrassed people or cursed people, and there was nothing that methodology could have done to make that any better. In fact, over and over again, through my many years of fieldwork around the world, I discovered that methodological consciousness, self-awareness, and social “carefulness” were my biggest enemies. Not only did they estrange me from the present and remove me from my social embeddedness within the communities for which I cared, but they crushed my understanding of people and places. They turned me into an automaton; they turned me into a nerd.

In other words, I believe that the alienation of “clipboard anthropology” – that is to say, our obsequious respect for methodology – is eating away at the very substance that anthropologists are trying to glean: the quiet subtleties of the human experience. These subtleties can only be heard when we stop hearing ourselves. Ethnographic research is – or at least at one time, was – supposed to be closer to real life than cold, investigative journalism and science; it was supposed to have shades of love and spontaneity in it too. We were supposed to get corrupted by our subjects, we were supposed to fall in love with them, to forget ourselves, to slip away in the night and marry the tribal chief. Our hearts were supposed to get lost and to be a little
irresponsible. But lately, with all the strict emphasis on methodology, and yes, the IRB, it has been feeling horribly passionless. Even the most quantitative of disciplines – physics – could warn us that truth has a lot more to do with the magical uncertainty of ambiguity than our supposedly “qualitative” discipline wants to allow.

Nonetheless, I am also not advocating that anthropologists sneak into communities and get away with stealing the town’s secrets. But since deception is a human problem as old as the hills, I am in absolutely no way convinced that “methodology” resolves the issue. Instead, we must think differently about deception and see if we cannot tackle it another way. After all, the truth is that even the most righteous among the anthropologists are flat-out liars. Most of us lie in one way or another through myriad evasions, for example when toothless peasants ask us if we can buy an airplane ticket for them to visit our country (most of us can but we say we cannot) or when shriveled rickshaw drivers ask us if we will send their children to school (we can but we say we cannot) or when fruit sellers ask us if we have better fruit in America (we do but we say that we do not), and we especially lie when we walk into a community and tell people we want to be accepted “just like one of their own” (we most certainly do not. A little scratch beneath the surface will reveal that we do not want to be circumcised, or betrothed, or purified, or whatever it might take to make us “just like one of their own.”)

Instead, we want to take what our subjects give us, beg for maybe a little more, and then go home and write. In other words, we lie to our field sites because we worry that if we do not, then they will not give us what we need: the characters and details for our forthcoming stories. At the end of the day, all of us, in some way or another, are promising to marry the local milkmaid only to flee the village as soon as she gives us her secrets.

Somewhere around the 1970s, anthropologists took a real beating for the little lies we tell in order to study living beings. The Writing Culture debates of the 80s and 90s responded (Clifford and Marcus 1986). We began thinking that we had to apologize for representation, and we thought that post-modern, self-reflexive confessionalists and multi-sited, deconstructed spaces could help redeem our tarnished reputations. With our tails between our legs, we spilled a lot of ink to explain why our “positionality among our subjects” was an “imperfect self-reflexive process” of “dialogic negotiation” and “ever-shifting” “interpretation.”

But the fact is that all writers, or at least the good ones, lie all of the time – not just anthropologists. If a writer’s job is to understand the human experience, then they better find a way to live on the fringes of other people’s lives without being too noticed. Hemingway did this in Spain, Fitzgerald did it in France. They understood, like we do, that we learn how to write when we go far, far away and throw ourselves into the coals of someone else’s fire. And like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, we all
know we will get tired of the strangeness after a while and we will want to go home, pen in hand, to write it all up. In fact, it is quite likely that we are only able to write and distill our experiences while being at home, in the same way a dream is only processed while being awake. And so, we are constantly striking a very tortured and contradictory balance between throwing ourselves all the way into a place and throwing ourselves all the way out of it. And for this thrashing to be believable to anyone, let alone to ourselves, and for the writing that results from it to have any grain of truth in it at all, we must lie. (And besides, as anyone who has ever lived abroad can tell you, a dose of deception is just one more emergency supply you pack in your suitcase to get you through the tough spots. The key is to be careful not to use it so much that it lands you in trouble or turns you into a thief. It is, I suppose the difference between a lie and a white lie, between kindness and cruelty).

With twin oddities like IRB forms on the one hand and intentional duplicities on the other, is it any wonder that people all over the world think there is something amiss about letting an anthropologist into their communities? Is our reputation as spies any surprise? (I find the vitriolic debates about the American military's use of anthropologists to be particularly misguided. These debates suggest that anthropology's brand is being soured by the US Army's use of anthropologists thus causing people all over the world to suspect that anthropologists are agents of Big Brother. And yet if we are a little more honest with ourselves, we'll see that most of us have already been utterly duplicitous about what we do. And that behavior, more than anything else, explains why people are so ready to suspect us of other intentions. For more on these debates, see Forte (2011); American Anthropological Association (2012).)

And yet there is another reason that people think we work as spies. After all, not many writers have gone into Third World communities and told people they want to study them. No, most writers just say they want to write stories. Hemingway probably passed his flask of whiskey to a comrade and said, “So, tell me something about yourself, young man,” while Fitzgerald probably swirled a gal in his arms and said, “Tell me honey, who was your best dance?” There is a softness to saying that you just want to hear somebody's stories; it has something to do with the difference between thinking and feeling, something to do with treating others more gently and treating yourself less seriously.
Fieldwork is, like life itself, a continual process of remembering, forgetting, and most of all, reconnecting. It is an experience that is only comprehended through the remembrance thereof, and as Michael Taussig reminds us, our very fieldnotes themselves are breathing and “alive” as we reinvigorate them over time with new meanings and interpretations (Taussig 2011). Thus, fieldwork is always, necessarily, a process of reconnecting the present circumstances of the writer with the past circumstances of the researcher. It is always a process of building bridges and mental links between the sprawling chaos of the field and the restrained order of the office. This is a dialogic process in many ways, a process through which we unhinge the known, reimagine the unknown, and re-curate our experience into new imaginings. In other words, the field is always continually splitting and reforming as it is pushed through the machinations of memory and, in turn, writing. Inside we are a factory, continually making, making, making, at one moment with our minds, and at the next with our hands. As such, it is difficult to say whether a fieldsite is ever finished, and also whether the term “methodology” ever can cohesively encapsulate that process.

In the 21st century, a record of nearly every day of our lives continues to stay alive online, and it is easier than ever to reconstruct the past with startling accuracy. These multitudinous records allow us to physically see the ways in which the field contains a diverse choir of voices, reminding us of the ever-expanding infinity of a field experience. This disrupts the very notion of coherence and reminds us that “culture” is never a contained and circumscribed object that can be obtained by “clipboard anthropology.” Rather, it is a contradictory and neurotic side effect of the human experience.

All this brings us to a discussion of what might be called “proper fieldwork today.” According to Sluka and Robben’s definitive and current volume, Ethnographic Fieldwork, fieldwork today is governed by a generally accepted “best practice.” They write:

Today, the ‘best practice’ of fieldwork is ethically grounded, with free and informed consent of research participants. It is participatory, shaped with the active collaboration of research ‘participants’ rather than ‘subjects,’ and conducted with their needs in mind. That is, reciprocity – giving something back to the community which they deem to be of use to them – is built into it by design. Increasingly, it also seeks to both address the most pressing human needs and issues, and to reach wider cross-disciplinary and public audiences, (Sluka and Robben 2012, 29).

This definition appears to recommend a kinder and gentler method of fieldwork, one that resists some of the more notorious and colonial methods that violate the basic rights of individuals. But I wonder if this definition suggests that we are perhaps more responsible than we really are and if it is over-stating the work of the anthropologist in...
somewhat grandiose terms. Is it really necessary to describe a field interview as “participatory” just because the interviewee is indeed “participating?” Does writing an article in an anthropology journal really count as “reciprocity”? Is the use of the word “participant” in lieu of the word “subject” a tad misleading? And finally, do we all really study “the most pressing human needs and issues?” I fear I sound snarky or unnecessarily critical here; I do not mean to. I merely wish to wonder if, again, we are taking ourselves too seriously and if it is possible that we are, simply and perfectly, writers who enjoy the world, who are fascinated by all its people – both the “powerful” and “the forgotten” – and whether we really need to justify this fascination in any other way. Maybe we simply like talking to people in the field and, in turn, writing about them. Let us now sit back and laugh.

ENDNOTES

1 Anthropology has long held a tremendous fascination with rites of passage and their processes of transformation. For the classic anthropological study, see Victor Turner’s work, eg., Turner (1967, 1969).

American universities are required to maintain an Institutional Review Board, or IRB. These boards review the ethical practices of all research projects to prevent unnecessary harm to subjects. For anthropologists, whose research often falls in the gray zone between qualitative and quantitative research, IRBs have become bemoaned, bureaucratic nightmares. Anthropologists often find that the fluid and ambiguous nature of their research does not fit neatly within the highly structured questionnaire forms, release requirements, and checklists of the IRB. Several anthropologists have called for an end to these processes, while others have successfully navigated loopholes in the system. For more on these debates, see for example: Bosk and de Vries (2004); Sundar (2006); Jacob and Riles (2007).

REFERENCES


