

FIELDNOTES

The Makings of Anthropology

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“I Am a Fieldnote”: Fieldnotes as a Symbol of Professional Identity

This essay began as an exploration of my own relationship to my fieldnotes in preparation for a symposium on the topic.¹ When I began to chat with anthropologist friends about their experiences with fieldnotes, however, I found what they had to say so interesting that I decided to talk to people in a more systematic fashion. My rather nonrandom sample of seventy is composed of all the anthropologists I contacted; no one declined to be interviewed. Interviewees are thus mostly from the east coast, the Boston area being especially overrepresented. With the exceptions of one archaeologist, one psychologist, two sociologists, two political scientists, and one linguist (each of whom does research “in the field”), all are card-carrying anthropologists by training and employment. The only representativeness I have attempted to maintain is a reasonably balanced sex ratio and a range of ages. To protect confidentiality, I have changed any potentially identifying details in the quotations that follow.

Given the sample's lack of systematic representativeness, this essay should be seen in qualitative terms. The reasonably large sample size

¹An earlier version of this essay was read at the 84th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., December 4–8, 1985, in the symposium on fieldnotes.

guards against bias in only the crudest fashion, since so many complex variables are present. While I cannot claim to represent the entire field, I do think the sample represents practicing anthropologists living in the United States. Some are famous, others obscure; some have reflected on fieldwork and fieldnotes a great deal (a few have written about these topics), while others describe themselves as having been fairly unconscious or even suspicious of such matters. My sample is thus more representative of the profession than if I had written a paper based on what anthropologists have published about fieldnotes—the last thing many of my interviewees contemplate undertaking is writing on this topic. I believe that the fact that some common themes have emerged from such a variety of individuals is significant.²

Although readers might justifiably want to see connections made between an interviewee's opinions about fieldnotes and his or her work, I provide none because I very much doubt that many anthropologists would have spoken with me if I had indicated that I was endeavoring to write up the interviews in journalistic format, or write biographical sketches, or compare different anthropological schools represented by named or easily recognizable individual scholars. Thus my "data" prove nothing, divorced as the quotations are from the context of the interviewee's personal background, personality, fieldwork project, and published ethnographies or essays on theory and method. The quotations given are illustrative anecdotes and nothing more. Rather than write a polemic about what is wrong with our methods, I hope to gently provoke readers, to stimulate them to ask questions about their own fieldnote-taking. Hence, this essay is to be

²Although this essay is inspired by the current interest in "ethnographies as text" (see Marcus and Cushman 1982; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Clifford 1988), my methodology necessarily produces findings that differ from these and similar work in two crucial respects. First, most of the anthropologists I interviewed are not enamored of the "anthropology as cultural critique" (Marcus and Fischer 1986) trend, even though all of them had very interesting comments to make about fieldnotes. Second, given the frankness and the strong feelings—especially the ambivalence and negativity—that emerged in the interviews, I doubt that some of what my interviewees said to me would ever be said in print, even by those who might be inclined to write about fieldnotes one day. For all I know, some might later have regretted being so frank with me, although this does not necessarily make what they said any less true. Thus, while I certainly do not think I got the *entire* truth from anyone, given that the confidential interaction of an interview setting can pull out of people ideas and feelings they might not come up with by themselves, I believe that the material I did get is different from what I would get from a literature search about fieldnotes, even given that authors make extremely negative comments about fieldnote-taking from time to time.

seen as neither a philosophical nor a historical treatise on anthropological epistemology but rather as a somewhat lighthearted exploration of the emotional dimension of one stage of the anthropological enterprise, one that heretofore has not received much attention.

With a few exceptions, my procedure has been, first, to ask interviewees to tell me whatever they might want to say about the subject of fieldnotes. Almost all have been willing to comment. Then I ask about (1) their definition of fieldnotes; (2) training—preparation and mentoring, formal and informal; (3) sharing fieldnotes; (4) confidentiality; (5) disposition of fieldnotes at death; (6) their feelings about fieldnotes, particularly the actual, physical notes; (7) whether "unlike historians, anthropologists create their own documents."³ I also try to query those who have had more than one field experience about any changes in their approach to fieldnotes over the years and to ask older anthropologists about changes over the span of their careers.

Interviews last at least an hour. Lacking funds for transcription, I do not tape them, but I do try to record verbatim as much as possible. Along the way, of course, I have discovered other issues that I wish I had been covering systematically: for instance, the interdependence of what Simon Ottenberg terms "headnotes" (remembered observations) and written notes. In more recent interviews I have added questions about a possible mystique surrounding fieldnotes, and whether fieldnotes are connected to anthropologists', or anthropology's, identity.

Whatever their initial attitude, by the end of the interview all interviewees seem to have become interested in one or two of the deeper issues that the topic introduces. Most comment that my questions and their answers have made them realize that fieldnotes are not by any means limited to nuts-and-bolts matters. The subject is clearly complex, touchy, and disturbing for most of us. My interviewees have indicated their unease by using familiar words from the anthropological lexicon such as *sacred*, *taboo*, *fetish*, *exorcise*, and *ritual*, and by commenting on our tendency to *avoid* talking about fieldnotes or only to *joke* about them (comments reminiscent of the literature on avoidance and joking relationships).

Anthropologists have many insights to offer, even in discussing the nuts-and-bolts issues connected to the actual recording of notes. Field-

³This phrase was part of Roger Sanjek's abstract for the 1985 symposium; see Preface.

notes seem to make a remarkably good entry point for obtaining opinions and feelings about bigger issues (such as this paper's topic, the relationship between fieldnotes and professional identity), probably better than point-blank questions about these larger issues. The monologues I encourage at the beginning of the interviews seem to put informants at ease, reassuring them that I am genuinely interested in whatever they have to say and piquing their interest in the topic. All the interviews have gone smoothly—although one interviewee said he was “leaving with a dark cloud” over his head: “How am I going to get ready for class in the next ten minutes?”

Why has this project turned out to be so interesting, both to me and seemingly to all those I interview? For one thing, because at least one of my questions (although *which* one varies) arouses each interviewee, the dialogue becomes an engaged one. Also, while some responses are well-formulated answers, at other times the reply is anything but prepackaged, neat, and tidy, allowing me to see thinking in action.

Overview of Answers to the Specific Questions

Let me try to summarize the perplexing and challenging variety of responses to the specific questions. This section does not address professional identity per se, but it provides necessary background.

Definition

What respondents consider to be fieldnotes varies greatly. Some will include notes taken on readings or photocopied archival material; one person even showed me a fieldnote in the form of a ceramic dish for roasting sausages. Some give local assistants blank notebooks and ask them to keep fieldnotes. Others' far more narrow definitions exclude even the transcripts of taped interviews or field diaries. It is evident that how people feel about fieldnotes is crucially linked to how they define them, and one must always determine just what this definition is in order to understand what a person is saying. Clearly, what a “fieldnote” is precisely is not part of our profession's culture, although many respondents seem to believe it is.

Most interviewees include in their definition the notion of a running log written at the end of each day. Some speak of fieldnotes as representing the process of the transformation of observed interaction to

written, public communication: “raw” data, ideas that are marinating, and fairly done-to-a-turn diagrams and genealogical charts to be used in appendixes to a thesis or book. Some see their notes as scientific and rigorous because they are a record, one that helps prevent bias and provides data other researchers can use for other ends. Others *contrast* fieldnotes with data, speaking of fieldnotes as a record of one's reactions, a cryptic list of items to concentrate on, a preliminary stab at analysis, and so forth.

Some definitions include the function of fieldnotes. Many people stress the mnemonic function of notes, saying that their purpose is to help the anthropologist reconstruct an event. Context is often mentioned.

You try to contextualize. I never did it and I regret it bitterly. I don't have people's words on it.

I don't have a daily diary. There are a lot of things that became a part of my daily life I was sure I'd remember and I didn't. Things you take for granted but you don't know why any more. Pidgin words, stuff about mothers-in-law. You can recall the emotional mood, but not the exact words.

One interviewee commented that at the beginning of her fieldwork she generated fieldnotes in part because doing so reassured her that she was doing her job. An insight that she could use materials her informants were generating (memos, graffiti, schedules) as fieldnotes greatly aided her fieldwork. Here a shift in definition seems to have been crucial.

Most anthropologists describe different kinds of fieldnotes, and some will rank these according to the amount of some positive quality they possess. But what this quality is, varies. For some, those notes containing the hardest data rank highest; others have found their diaries to be the best resource:

That journal, of course, is also a kind of data, because it indicates how to learn about, yes, myself, but also how to be a person in this environment. Subsequently I see it as part of the fieldnotes.

The category “hunch” is something anthropologists don't bring to the field. This is why you should take a journal.

A moral evaluation often colors the definition itself and how respondents feel about fieldnotes in general. Clearly, those who see

fieldnotes as interfering with “doing” anthropology, as a crutch or escape, or as the reason we are not keeping up with the competition (e.g., sociology) in rigor, differ from those who characterize fieldnotes as the distinguishing feature separating superior anthropologists from journalists, amateurs, and superficial, number-crunching sociologists.

Training and Mentors

The question of training often elicits strong reactions.⁴ Virtually all respondents complain in some manner, most saying they received no formal instruction in fieldnote-taking, several pointing out that their graduate departments are proud to “do theory” only. Some approve of this state of affairs, and some do not. Many speculate about how to improve the situation; a few interviewees spoke approvingly of the training received by students in other social science and clinical fields. But the complaints from those who *did* receive fieldwork training reveal this to be an extremely thorny issue. Designing a course on fieldwork and fieldnotes that will be useful for all anthropologists, with their different styles, research focuses, and fieldwork situations, appears to be a challenge few instructors meet successfully. One interviewee said that much of what is published on fieldwork today is not “how-to” material so much as reflections on why it is so difficult to tell people how to do it. The best tack would appear to be to provide a smorgasbord of techniques for students to learn about, without insisting on a particular approach. Many of those most adamant about the worthlessness of whatever formal advice they received nonetheless report that little bits and pieces picked up along the way have been extremely useful.

Sharing Fieldnotes

Interviewees are very touchy on the topic of sharing notes. Questions of privacy, both one’s own and one’s informants’, enter in.

⁴Several readers of earlier drafts of this paper have commented on how a number of the responses quoted seem quite “studenty.” As noted above, I have obtained a roughly representative range of ages for interviewees, and I have avoided overrepresenting recently returned graduate students in the quotations I have chosen to present. Yet regardless of interviewees’ age, stature within the field, and number of separate fieldwork projects, most of them chose to answer my questions by referring to their early fieldwork experiences. My conclusions suggest some reasons why these initial research periods were most salient in interviewees’ minds.

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Also, because we don’t demand access to fieldnotes, people don’t demand, “Look, you say such-and-such, I want to see the notes.” . . . It’s like saying to a student, “We don’t trust you.”

I haven’t, and I’d be of two minds . . . who they are and what they’d want it for. Fieldnotes are . . . it’s strange how intimate they become and how possessive we are.

Yet many recognize the myriad potential values of sharing:

It would be such an advantage . . . to enter a place with some of that background.

I think for someone else who’s gone there, your notes can be an aid to his memory, too. They are still helpful, sort of like another layer of lacquer to your own notes.

An eminent anthropologist’s fieldnotes can be a valuable source of information about both the person as a scholar and a culture greatly changed in the interim. One interviewee commented on Franz Boas’s diary:

The notes reveal a lot and for that reason they are valuable documents. Does the anthropologist see the culture, or see himself in the culture . . . see the social context from which he comes as somehow replicated in the culture?

Interestingly, this respondent thinks she will eventually destroy her own fieldnotes.

Many speak of the privacy of fieldnotes with a touch of wistfulness, saying they have never seen anyone else’s:

There are strong rules in anthropology about the intensely private nature of fieldnotes. I’d like to have this protection. . . . “It’s in my notes,” or “It’s not in my notes,” and hide behind this.

I’d show mine to people and they’d say, “Oh, wow, I’ve never seen notes like that. Fieldnotes are really holy.”

Confidentiality

Comments about the confidentiality of notes depend in large part on the field situation and type of research conducted. Worries about promises made to informants emerge, as do ethical considerations

about revealing illegal activities or giving ammunition to groups who do not have one's field site community's best interests at heart. Waiting until one's informants die may not be a solution:

I'm working with people who have a lot of interest in history as a determinant force, and therefore for someone to read about a scandal his family was in a hundred years ago is still going to be very embarrassing.

On the other hand, some anthropologists' informants wanted to be mentioned by name. And members of some communities disagreed among themselves about how much should be made public.

Death

Several anthropologists, particularly the ones who took few fieldnotes and relied a lot on their memories, commented on what would be lost when they died:

It's not a random sample, it's much better designed. But because the design and values are in my head, it's dead data without me.

Very few interviewees, even the older ones, have made any provisions for the disposition of their fieldnotes. Many worry about compromising their informants, and a large number say their notes are worthless or undecipherable. Some speculate about possible ways to preserve the valuable information in them, but apart from systematically organizing and editing for the express purpose of archiving the notes themselves, no other practical solutions have been described.

Feelings about Fieldnotes

The subject of fieldnotes turns out to be one fraught with emotion for virtually all anthropologists, both in the field and later on. I found a remarkable amount of negative feeling: my interview transcripts contain an extraordinary number of images of exhaustion, anxiety, inadequacy, disappointment, guilt, confusion, and resentment.⁵ Many in-

⁵It has occurred to me that since anthropology provides no forums for discussing some of these issues, except anecdotally during "corridor talk" or at parties, one reason so much emotion comes out during an interview is that it provides a rather rare opportunity to express such feelings confidentially and reflectively. (Even in field methods courses that systematically explore fieldnotes, one's defenses are likely to be in

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interviewees feel that writing and processing fieldnotes are lonely and isolating activities, chores if not ordeals.

Many mention feeling discomfort taking notes in front of the natives:

I think part of that process is forgetting your relationship, letting them become objects to some extent. . . . The way I rationalize all that is to hope that what I publish is somehow in their interest.

Others mention discomfort when at times they did *not* take notes and an informant responded: "Write this down! Isn't what I'm telling you important enough?"

Working with fieldnotes upon return can also evoke strong memories and feelings, and a number of interviewees discuss this in fetishistic terms:

The notebooks are covered with paper that looks like batik. I like them. They're pretty. On the outside. I *never* look on the inside.

Several people have remarked that since fieldnotes are a jog to memory about such an important time in their lives, strong feelings are to be expected.

Some interviewees comment on how writing fieldnotes can make you feel good, or proud to be accumulating lots of valuable data. Others remark on the reassurance function of taking notes, particularly at the beginning of fieldwork:

You go there, a stranger. It gives you something to do, helps you organize your thoughts.

Still others mention the value of fieldnotes in getting an idea off one's mind or using the notebooks to let off steam—what we might call the Malinowskian garbage-can function.

Fieldnotes allow you to keep a grip on your sanity.

Of course I couldn't show that I was unhappy. My diary helped me talk about myself—my angst, my inadequacy. I wasn't experiencing the exhilaration I was supposed to.

place.) A number of respondents commented at the end of the interview that they felt relieved and appreciated having been able to talk at length about the topic.

Fieldnotes can reveal what kind of person you are—messy, procrastinating, exploitative, tidy, responsible, generous. Some interviewees find this valuable; others find it upsetting:

Rereading them, some of them look pretty lame. How could you be so stupid? Or puerile?

You could do an archaeology of my understanding . . . but that's so hard to face.

And a number of respondents discuss how fieldnotes, in tandem with their emotions, produce good anthropology:

I try to relate the analysis to the fieldnotes and my gut sense of what's going on . . . do you *feel* male dominance?

Quite a number of respondents mention feeling oppressed by their fieldnotes:

I experience this still when I listen to them. A horror, shock, and disorientation. Paranoia, uncertainty. I think I resisted looking back at the journal for that reason.

If I look in them, all this emotion comes out, so it's like hiding something away so it won't remind you.

Sometimes I've wished they just weren't there.

So they aren't just physically unwieldy, but mentally as well.

And others' fieldnotes invite invidious comparisons:

I had a sense of insufficiency. I hadn't done it as well. I wouldn't be able to access mine as easily as she had hers. She, on the other hand, felt the same way.

For one respondent who "wondered how it felt to be responsible for so much [written] material," the contrast between having something written down rather than stored in memory is troubling. The written notes become more separated from one's control, and their presence increases one's obligations to the profession, to posterity, to the natives.

It sort of makes me nervous seeing those file drawers full of notes. It reifies certain things, to get it into boxes. For me . . . a lot gets lost when they're translated onto these cards.

Several interviewees mention the problem of having too much material, of feeling dominated or overwhelmed.

They can be a kind of albatross around your neck.

They seem like they take up a lot of room . . . they take up too much room.

Several find this to be particularly true of audio tapes.

Issues of worth, control, and protection often figure prominently. An entire study could be devoted to whether fieldnotes are thought of as valuable, potentially valuable, or worthless. Anxiety about loss emerges in many interviews. The notion of burning fieldnotes (as opposed to merely throwing them away) has arisen quite often. I have also been struck by how many interviewees mention, sometimes with great relish, legends (apocryphal or not) about lost fieldnotes. Though fieldnotes in general have received little attention until recently, this is not true for the theme of lost fieldnotes in the profession's folklore.

So maybe the people who lost their notes are better off.

[Without notes there's] more chance to schematize, to order conceptually . . . free of niggling exceptions, grayish half-truths you find in your own data.

Several interviewees spoke of the physical location of their notes and meanings attached; one admitted

a strong awareness of the physical notes, in a symbolically important place next to my desk at home . . . a mana quality.

And quite a number of respondents report feeling great pleasure, in some cases visceral pleasure, at thinking about their notes, looking at them, reading them (sometimes aloud):

I do get pleasure in working with them again, particularly my notes from my first work. A feeling of sort of, that is where I came in, and I can sometimes recapture some of the intellectual and physical excitement of being there.

So a feeling of confidence that if one could manage this, one could manage almost anything.

For example, you write about a sacrifice, how it's done. When reading my notes I remember how it smelled . . . everyone's really pleased when it comes time to eat it.

Black ink, very nice; blue carbon, not so nice.

Some respondents seem to see their fieldnotes as splendid in themselves and invaluable for helping with recall; others say their fieldnotes are rubbish compared to their much more real memories of the events. These memories may be described in terms of visual or aural qualities that fieldnotes cannot provide. One interviewee said his fieldnotes were not real for him until he combined them with his memories, the theory he was working on, and his wife's critiques to make a published work.

For some reflective types, fieldnotes possess a liminal quality, and strong feelings may result from this alone. Fieldnotes are liminal—betwixt and between—because they are between reality and thesis, between memory and publication, between training and professional life (see Jackson 1990).

It seems that fieldnotes may be a mediator as well. They are a “translation” but are still en route from an internal and other-cultural state to a final destination. And because some anthropologists feel that fieldnotes change with each rereading, for them that final destination is never reached.

Fieldnotes as Documents “Created” by the Anthropologist

Despite being the premise of the 1985 AAA symposium on fieldnotes, the statement that anthropologists create their own documents elicits quite varied and usually strongly opinionated responses. Some say this is absolutely true:

Yes, you do create data in a self-conscious way that is quite special.

Each anthropologist knows it's a dialectic. The informant creates it; you create it together. There must be a tremendous sense of responsibility in it, that is, a sense of political history, one version.

It seems plausible . . . one is creating some special kind of fabricated evidence. Especially after time has passed, and you go back and it's as if they're written by someone else.

So we do more than historians . . . we create a world, not just documents.

Fieldnotes are my creation in the sense that my energies saw to it in some sense that they be recorded.

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It's creating something, not creating it in the imagination sense, creating it in terms of bringing it out as a fact.

In some senses we do. We see ourselves. Malinowski . . . says as he's coming into Kiriwina, “It's me who's going to create them for the world.”

But some consider “create” as a pejorative term:

This [statement] says that anthropologists fudge and historians don't. I don't agree.

I tend to believe my notes reflect reality as closely as possible.

A large number of interviewees object to the implication that anthropologists use only those documents they have created. To others, the statement seems to disparage the natives:

The reason why I'm having a hard time responding is I never think of my fieldnotes as a document. I feel the people are sort of a document. I did not create these people, and they are the documents.

Maybe I just view my task not so much as creating but transmitting, being a broker, an intermediary, a partner. . . . It's their words.

Still others disagree with the contrast made between anthropologists and historians:

Of course anthropologists create their own documents. The argument would be to what extent historians do that.

Fieldnotes, the Anthropologist, and Anthropology

Having sketched in some necessary background, we can now explore the extent to which the interviewees see fieldnotes as symbolizing the anthropological endeavor. Some make very direct statements:

It's a symbol of your occupation. A material symbol.

Anthropologists are those who write things down at the end of the day.

It's our data, it comes in chronological order. Not neatly classified the moment you receive or generate it.

Clearly, one reason for the strong feelings my questions frequently elicit is that "fieldnotes" is a synecdoche for "fieldwork." One woman described the differences between anthropology and other social sciences in terms of how we do fieldwork, saying that ours was feminine and osmotic, "like a Scott towel soaking up culture."⁶ Another female respondent said that she found fieldwork and traditional fieldnote-taking *too* feminine, and this was why ethnoscience was so appealing: it promised to introduce rigor into fieldnotes, eliminating the touchy-feely aspects (see Kirschner 1987).

Yet several others saw no special link between being an anthropologist and taking fieldnotes:

No. I've read the fieldnotes of sociologists and psychologists. They're very similar.

I don't feel they're unique. In order to collect data, you have to take notes of some kind.

No. Our fieldnote tradition comes out of naturalist explorer-geographer background. Lewis and Clark . . . [were] not that different.

This is a way anthropologists have of alienating themselves from other disciplines because we are alienated from number-crunching sociologists.

We just feel superior to social psychologists because we say this isn't social. They don't do fieldwork, we say.

Still, the majority of interviewees do say that fieldnotes are unique to anthropology, even if they disagree as to why. It is in their own varied definitions of fieldnotes that we find clues about how fieldnotes are seen as unique to anthropology and therefore emblematic of it. For almost all, fieldnotes are limited to the field (it is perhaps significant that the few nonanthropologists I interviewed did not make this distinction):

Notes taken in the field. Hard-core fieldnotes are written records of observations and interviews.

Anything I wrote down in the field. And didn't throw out.

Before going I read about the place and take notes. I keep the notes but I don't consider them as fieldnotes.

⁶Lévi-Strauss comments: "Without any pejorative intent—quite the contrary—I would say that fieldwork is a little bit 'women's work,' which is probably why women succeed so well at it. For my part, I was lacking in care and patience" (Eribon 1988: 3); see also Caplan (1988).

Another ingredient found in many definitions is the notion that fieldnotes come from primary sources:

Notes taken on a book in the field are not fieldnotes. But if a Kwakiutl brought down Boas's book, then yes.

I suppose, strictly speaking, fieldnotes are the records of verbal conversational and observational kinds of work you did, rather than archives.

However, as always seems to happen with this topic, ambiguity soon enters the picture:

The question is: is it only notes on the interviews, or everything else? Or what I'm note-taking in Bahia versus New York City? I'm not sure there's a neat distinction . . . in Brazil I'm in the field. But what if I'm doing research in New York City? It's sort of an infinite regress.

For example, in Nicaragua, it's such an ongoing event, and I can't say, "Something's happening but it's not of relevance."

Several interviewees commented on the problem of defining the field, particularly those working in nontraditional settings:

Sometimes I don't take notes on purpose. Around here I use it as a protective device. My way of turning off.

For many respondents this "field" component of the definition, while historically and sociologically important, is not the only reason fieldnotes are unique to anthropology. But "the field" for the majority is seen as exclusive to anthropology, for it is characterized by various criteria that are not seen as applying to the research sites of other disciplines. While fieldwork is carried out in other behavioral sciences, anthropology is seen by many as having imparted a special quality to "the field" tied up with the intensive, all-encompassing character of participant-observation, which is not found in notions about fieldwork in related disciplines.

Your try hard to be socialized. Your measure of success is how comfortable you feel. We try like mad.

I feel now that I am prepared to not finally become "one of the locals." I did have that expectation.

This attitude toward the field has consequences for fieldnote-taking:

I think [fieldnotes are] unique . . . because of the kind of data being collected and because of the kind of relationships. The fieldnotes are the record of these. . . .

I don't think the fact of notes is unique, but the type of notes is. Maybe not unique, but special. We try so hard to get close to the people we're working on. Most anthropologists are not really satisfied until they've seen them, seen the country, smelt them. So there's a somewhat immediate quality to our notes.

The sense of intimacy we pretend to develop with people we work with. I think if it's done correctly, then you get good information, not the trivial stuff that frequently comes from surveys. For example, the theory of the culture of poverty is worthless, but *Children of Sanchez* [Lewis 1961] will survive.

Dialogic considerations enter the picture for some:

In many ways I see anthropology as the art of listening to the other.

Doing fieldwork happens when you expose yourself to the judgment of others.

Several interviews indicate that the anthropological fieldworker frequently worries about intellectual exploitation. Having material in one's head is somehow less guilt-inducing than having it on paper. Some of this may be the "two-hat" problem: one is in some ways a friend of the natives, yet one is also a student of them, and one cannot wear both hats simultaneously. Writing fieldnotes can make repressing the contradictions in this balancing act more difficult:

I found [troubling] the very peculiar experience [of] getting to know people, becoming their friend, their confidant, and to be at the same time standing on the side and observing. . . . So when I came back from the field, it was, yes, years before I was able to write up that experience.

In traditional types of "deep bush" fieldwork, the category "fieldnotes" can be conceptually opposed to "the natives" (usually seen as illiterate).⁷ Many interviewees revealed complicated opinions and feelings about colonialism and cultural imperialism, literacy and power, and their own image of themselves both as hardworking observers and sensitive, moral persons.

⁷Not all field situations fit this stereotype. Some interviewees plan to leave their fieldnotes on file in a local museum run by the people they study.

A general pattern for most interviewees is to couch their answers in terms of how their fieldwork—and hence fieldnote-taking—differs from the stereotype. I think in part this signals a defensiveness about one's fieldwork not living up to an imagined standard. It may also reflect what we might call the Indiana Jones syndrome: a romantic individualism, an "I did it my way" attitude. A substantial number of interviewees expressed pride in the uniqueness of their field sites, in their own iconoclasm, and in being autodidacts at fieldnote-taking.

The stereotypical research project involves isolation, a lengthy stay, and layers of difficulty in obtaining information. One needs to arrive, to get settled, to learn a language, to get to know individuals, and so forth. Overcoming such difficulties is seen as demanding a near-total marshaling of one's talents and resources. These and other characteristics of fieldwork turn any written notes into something valuable, because to replace them is difficult if not impossible.

[Given] the whole aspect of remoteness, remote areas, not much written, your fieldnotes become especially precious.

One factor is the conditions of traditional fieldwork, the role of isolation and loneliness in producing copious fieldnotes that the researcher will be attached to. In modern urban settings this factor may not apply, yet it appears that at least for some "marginal" anthropologists—people carrying out research in nontraditional settings—fieldnotes are an important symbol of belonging to the tribe.

Another often mentioned characteristic of traditional fieldwork is the attempt to supply context, to get the whole picture. This is spoken of in many ways, often with ambivalence.

I suppose I had a desire to record the complete picture. The ideal is like a video in my mind.

I have trouble with my students. I say, "Write down what they're wearing, what the room looks like."

I guess what strikes me is that for all the chaos I associate with fieldnotes, there's also a richness, and that somehow that is distinctive to anthropology.

Another important idea is that the investigator is a crucial part of the fieldwork/fieldnotes project:

Fieldnotes embody the individual fieldworker's reactions. It's O.K. for

me to be part of [anthropological] fieldnotes, but not O.K. if I'm part of [notes from] a child observation [in a psychology research project].

Often, notions of personal process, of the investigator's own evolution and investment, enter in:

In that case, the interview transcripts wouldn't count [as fieldnotes; they are] data but not fieldnotes. They're more inseparable from you, I guess.

An aura, an intensely personal experience, an exposure to the other, a reluctance to reduce to or translate, so unwilling to do this [to write down fieldnotes].

The individual is further tied to the fieldnotes because he or she "sweats blood" for them in the field. This is often remarked on in connection with reluctance to share notes. Frequently mentioned too is fieldnotes' mnemonic function; they become "a document of what happened and device for triggering new analysis."

All these personal aspects of fieldnotes bring us far from formal, spatial, and temporal definitional criteria. A frequently mentioned theme does seem to be that of the anthropologist-as-participant-observer in the very process of reading and writing from fieldnotes, revealing the close ties between fieldworker and fieldnotes:

That might be closer to a definition of a fieldnote: something that can't be readily comprehended by another person. A newspaper clipping can be interpreted. The clipping has more validity of its own, but it can be a fieldnote if it needs to be read by me. . . . It's what I remember: the notes mediate the memory and the interaction.

This tie is illustrated by one anthropologist's reactions when her notes were subpoenaed:

"They're dog's breakfast!" they [opposition lawyers] would say. "How can you expect anything from this?" . . . [They] had been written on the back of a Toyota [i.e., scribbled on paper held against the trunk of a car in the field] and were totally incomprehensible to anyone but me. But it was an attack on my credibility . . . I said, "This is a genealogy." "This is a genealogy?" Our lawyer would jump in, "Yes, of course."

Securing the document's acceptability as a genealogy demonstrated her credibility as a professional anthropologist.

"I Am a Fieldnote"

Some people see the centrality of the personal component in fieldwork and fieldnotes as a strength:

Something about the identity of anthropology, first of all, concerns the subjectivity of the observer. Being a social science doesn't exclude this . . . the definition of fieldnotes is a personally bounded [in the field] and personally referential thing.

[Fieldnotes are] personally referential in terms of this dialectical relationship with memory. Otherwise you're dealing with "data"—sociological, demographic, computer card, disks.

A political scientist notes:

Anthropologists are self-conscious about this process called the creation and use of personal fieldnotes. I think it's dangerous that political scientists aren't.

Yet many interviewees are reluctant to see fieldnotes in overly subjective terms:

They're unique to anthropology because anthropology has consciously made it a methodology and tried to introduce some scientific methods. . . . in anthropology we don't see it only as an extension of someone's self but also a methodology of the discipline.

If I felt that ethnography just reflected internal states, I wouldn't be in this game.

The personal issue emerged strongly when interviewees considered the interdependence of fieldnotes and memory:

An event years later causes you to rethink. . . . What is the status of that material? Is this secondary elaboration? . . . the memories one has, we have to give some credence to, and the notes themselves are subject to distortion, too.

Are memories fieldnotes? I use them that way, even though they aren't the same kind of evidence. It took a while for me to be able to rely on my memory. But I *had* to, since the idea of what I was doing had changed, and I had memories but no notes. I had to say, "Well, I saw that happen." I am a fieldnote.

This interviewee's willingness to state "I am a fieldnote" reflects the shifting, ambiguous status of fieldnotes. At times they are seen as

“data”—a record—and at times they are seen as “me.” I create them but they also create me, insofar as writing them creates and maintains my identity as a journeyman anthropologist.

A number of anthropologists link the uniqueness of their fieldnotes directly to issues of privacy:

I've never systematically studied anyone else's, which says something about anthropologists.

It comes from the British teaching of keeping one's personal experiences private. You can read all through *Argonauts* without finding out how many natives Malinowski talked to about painting canoes.

I do think about what to do with them. I would hate for it to come to light if something happens to me. The people being observed forget you're there. There is something unethical about that: they go on about their business, and you're still observing. So to have fieldnotes that reflect your direct observations become public property is to me a betrayal of trust.

It's secret. Part of it is a feeling that the data is unreliable. We want to be trusted when we say “the X do Y”; we don't want them to be challenged.

Many respondents point out that the highly personal nature of fieldnotes influences the extent of one's willingness to share them:

Fieldnotes can reveal how worthless your work was, the lacunae, your linguistic incompetence, your not being made a blood brother, your childish temper.

But several note that such secrecy is unacceptable in other fields:

Think of how it would be for a graduate chemistry student saying “You'll have to take my word for this.”

We've built up a sort of gentlemanly code dealing with one another's ethnography. You criticize it, but there are limits, social conventions . . . you never overstep them or you become the heavy.

A number of anthropologists mentioned that field notebooks serve as reminders that one is an anthropologist and not a native:

I'm not just sitting on a mountain in Pakistan drinking tea.

[I had] to write something down every day. To not accept everything as normal.

They can also be a reminder to informants that the information will be used:

I feel better taking notes and tape recording, because it's clear that we're interviewing.

But others saw the notebooks as hindering the researcher from obtaining information and creating distance between the observer and the observed:

The record is in my head, not on paper. The record on paper, it, because it's static, it interferes with fieldwork . . . keeping fieldnotes interferes with what's really important.

First, it took up far too much time, like the addiction to reading the *New York Times*.

Fieldnotes get in the way. They interfere with what fieldwork is all about—the doing.

This is what I would call fieldwork. It is not taking notes in the field but is the interaction between the researcher and the so-called research subjects.

One interviewee criticized at length the profession's mythology about fieldwork, saying that most anthropologists throw away their original research proposals. They begin without a clue as to how to do it, or if they have a clue, it turns out not to work. Most of the time in the field is wasted, and many unsavory emotions emerge. Not only are you not “living like one of the natives” much of the time, he said, but the anthropological enterprise requires that you do not; your wife and kids will probably go more “native” than you. This man concluded that many people know their fieldnotes are worthless, but, as with the emperor's new clothes, mutual deceit is necessary to underpin the fate of the empire. Another man noted:

One always doubts. Anthropologists mask their doubting with a certain amount of masculine bravado.

The ways a number of interviewees discuss the mystique of fieldnotes reveals the problematic association between fieldworkers and their notes. Many speak, usually ironically, about the fieldnotes as sacred, “like a saint's bone.” Some even volunteer that their fieldnotes are fetishes to them. The legends about lost notes and the frequent theme of burning suggest the presence of a mystique.

The high degree of affect expressed by many interviewees is probably also evidence of a fieldnotes mystique. That some do not feel this way, or at least say they do not, does not necessarily argue against the existence of a mystique, for these anthropologists note that their feelings are not shared by others; they “don’t have the same kind of mystical attachment” that some people do.

Linked to the issue of mystique is the frequent observation that graduate school is an apprenticeship period and fieldwork an initiation rite. Student-advisor interaction can provoke long-standing problems of authority, sometimes for both student and advisor. Mentors were identified as the generous givers or mean withholders of fieldnotes advice. Strong feelings about advisors also emerged when several informants discussed how they “liberated” themselves from their fieldnotes—or at least from the variety they had initially attempted to produce—using such phrases as “the illusion of control,” “positivism,” “empirical trap.” One called fieldnote-taking “a self-absorption, a way of retreating from data.”

Many interviewees comment that their training reflected the mystique of fieldwork and fieldnotes. The following explication of this connection summarizes and “translates” their remarks.

1. The only way you learn is through the sink-or-swim approach. “You go to the field with Hegel and you do it or you don’t.” (I went through hazing week; you should too.)
2. The only way that you become attached, cathected, truly initiated is through the sink-or-swim approach. (An important feature of becoming a professional anthropologist is to discover that the standard operating procedure is wrong, and then modify it.)
3. Each research site is different, each research project is different, each anthropologist is different. (So *any* fieldnotes training will resemble the “take a big stick for the dogs and lots of marmalade” jokes. Any advice will eventually have to be thrown away.)
4. Anthropology is not at a stage where it knows the Best Way.
5. Tailor-made solutions are the way to go, to be worked out between graduate student and advisor.
6. There is always competition between the Old Guard and the Young Turks regarding theory and method, and so any beginnings of a continuous tradition of training about fieldnotes will be sabotaged.

We can argue that first-fieldwork fieldnotes are a diploma from anthropology’s bush school, even if it is almost never displayed. Further, insofar as being a member in good standing of the anthropologi-

cal club requires continued research, continued production of fieldnotes is evidence that one is not letting one’s membership lapse. But we have seen that a few interviewees speak of fieldnotes (and here again, definition is crucial) less as tools of the trade than as tools of the apprentice. For these anthropologists—a small minority—fieldnotes are a beginner’s crutch, to be cast aside when one has learned to walk properly. While most anthropologists, by far, do not hold this view, it is a remarkably clear, albeit extreme, illustration of the ambivalent emotions revealed in many interviews.

Some interviewees suggested that one reason fieldnote-taking is rarely taught may be that part of the hidden curriculum of graduate training in anthropology is to promote a mystique about writing and ethnographic documentation. Perhaps in some ways it is necessary to *unlearn* assumptions about the connections between observing and recording to become a good fieldworker. One respondent spoke of receiving an insight into Australian Aboriginal symbolism about the ground while *on* the ground:

You notice in any kind of prolonged conversation, people are squatting, or lie on the ground. I came to be quite intrigued by that, partly because *I’d* have to, too . . . endless dust.

This is participant-observation, ethnography-by-the-seat-of-your-pants par excellence. The lesson this anecdote imparts about how to do fieldwork would be difficult to teach explicitly. The important insight that followed his paying attention to the ground is quite divorced from formal academic models of observing and analysis.

In part, what interviewees are talking about is that the writing versus the doing of ethnography creates a tension sometimes difficult to bear. Thoreau wrote that he could not both live his life and write about it. Some anthropologists grapple with the problem by becoming heavily involved with recording and even analyzing their field data in the field. For them, “fieldwork” includes data-sort cards, audio tapes, even computers:

I sometimes felt like a character in a Mack Sennett comedy trying to manipulate the camera, tape recorder, pens. A mental image of myself trying to write with the microphone and point the pen at someone.

I always managed to justify it to myself that it was more important to analyze while you’re still in the field so you can check on things. . . . But it’s also a preference.

But others become convinced, at least at times, that the road to success is to minimize these trappings of academe and the West.

Clearly, many anthropologists suffer during fieldwork because of this tension, which is exacerbated by not knowing what the methodological canons are:

We ought to have the kinds of exchanges of methods and technologies that scientists do rather than the highly individuated kinds people do in the humanities. It would make life interpersonally more comfortable if you knew others were having to make this kind of decision.

The lack of standard methodology is also revealed in the huge variety of definitions of fieldnotes offered by interviewees. While in our "corridor talk" we anthropologists celebrate and harvest anecdotes about the adventure and art of fieldwork, playing down and poking fun at our attempts to be objective and scientific in the deep bush, the tension remains—because at other times we use our fieldnotes as evidence of objectivity and rigor. Fieldnotes, as symbol of fieldwork, can capture this tension but not resolve it.

They are a mystery to me . . . I never know what is material.

How do you know when you know enough? How do you know when you're on the right track?

If there was something happening, I'd write it down. Not very helpful information, and I was looking to the lists of words to get a clue as to what to do.

You have no criteria for determining what's relevant and what isn't.

And collecting notes: what do you write down?

Some anthropologists connected this lack of explicitness and agreement regarding methods to the anthropological enterprise as a whole, and to its position vis-à-vis other social sciences.

What is lost in that, I feel, is that there is a sense that disciplines are cumulative in their knowledge. We're not just collecting mosaic tile and laying them next to each other. [Yet] anthropology has performed a real service in being [politically and intellectually] slippery. So I feel a certain ambivalence.

Such feelings—of loss of control, inadequacy, or confusion about what one is supposed to do—influence the stance one takes regarding fieldnotes.

Fieldnotes and the Individual Anthropologist's Identity

The topic of fieldnotes sooner or later brings up strong feelings of guilt and inadequacy in most of my interviewees. I wish I had recorded how many of them made negative statements (using words like "anxious," "embarrassing," "defensive," "depressing") when I first asked to interview them. Some even accused me of hidden agendas, "of trying to make me feel guilty my fieldnotes aren't in the public domain." Most often, people worried about the inadequacy of their fieldnotes, the disorder they were in, their indecipherability:

Oh, Christ, another thing I don't do very well, and twenty years later I still feel this quite strongly.

Fieldnotes can bring up all sorts of feelings about one's professional and personal worth. Several interviewees have commented on how disappointed they are when rereading their notes: they are skimpy; they lack magic:

I went back last year and they were crappy. I didn't have in them what I remembered, in my head, of his behavior, what he looked like.

And yet

What the field is is interesting. In Africa I [initially] wrote down everything I saw or thought, whether I understood it, thought it significant, or not—300 photographs of trees full of bats. How people drove on the left side of the road. . . . Having sent [my advisor] back all that crap, he didn't say anything.

In one case the fieldnotes are inadequate because they are skimpy; in another they are inadequate because of an "everything including the kitchen sink" quality.

With interviewees opinions on training and preparation, and sometimes with the fieldnotes-as-fetish issue, come expressions of attachment to one's first fieldnotes:

They're like your first child; you love them all but your first is your first, and special.

I do like my fieldnotes from the very beginning. There's more freshness, excitement. The sense of discovery of things which by now seem very old hat.

My fieldnotes of the '50s, that's where I have my emotional investment, even though my work in the '70s was superior.

I still have my 1935 Zuni notes. I couldn't bear to throw them away.

A number of interviewees commented to the effect that "an important part of myself is there"; they find it natural to be anxious about the notes because they represent a period of anxiety, difficulty, and great significance to which their career, self-esteem, and prestige may appear to be hostage. Several made direct links between fieldnotes and their own professional identity:

When I think of activities I do, that's a lot closer to the core of my identity than most things. I'm sure the attitude toward the notes themselves has a sort of fetishistic quality—I don't go stroke them, but I spent so much time getting, guarding, and protecting them . . . if the house were burning down, I'd go to the notes first.

I have a lot of affection for my notes in a funny way . . . their role here—in the U.S.A., my study, in terms of my professional self. Something about my academic identity. I'm not proud of everything about them, but I am proud of some things about them . . . that they represent. Probably in a less conscious way some motive for my not wanting to make them too public.

My primary identity is someone who writes things down and writes about them. Not just hanging out.

That particular box is my own first real claim to being a scholar and gives me the identity of a person doing that kind of work.

Looking at them, when I see this dirt, blood, and spit, it's an external, tangible sign of my legitimacy as an anthropologist.

A number of anthropologists saw their field notebooks as establishing their identity in the field: "a small notebook that would fit into my pocket" became "a kind of badge."

Frustrations in the field regarding which intellectual economies to make add to the complexity: fieldnotes can be a validation of one's worth or a revelation of how much one is a fraud. But how to decide whether one is or is not a fraud is far from clear. As we have seen, fieldnotes are not done by filling in the blanks. Advisors can tell you only what they did and what you should do, but one person's method does not work for most others, and many advisors and graduate schools refuse to cover these topics. Doing fieldwork properly appar-

ently involves strategies other than following well-specified rules. It appears that one must create some of the rules, predissertation research proposals with impressive methodology sections notwithstanding. To some extent, perhaps, one is expected to define or design the problem in the field and is subsequently judged according to how well one has lived up to those expectations.

These interviews make it almost seem that fieldwork involves the discovery of one's own True Way. The advisor-shaman can only provide some obscure warnings, like the aids in a game of Dungeons and Dragons. If the initial period of fieldwork is part of a coming-of-age process, then the fieldnotes aspect of it seems a well-designed and effective ordeal that tests the anthropologist's mettle. Clearly, insofar as first fieldnotes symbolize first fieldwork, they represent a liminal period in our preparation as professionals. As in other initiation rites, items associated with such activities take on a heavy emotional valence and sacredness.

We need some answers as to why many interviews do offer evidence of a fieldnotes mystique, for although a minority of interviewees assert that their fieldnotes are just a tool, most respondents relate to fieldnotes—their own and as a concept—in an ambivalent and emotionally charged manner. Despite some anthropologists' apparent nonconfusion about what fieldnotes are and how to teach about them, one could make an overall argument that ambiguity and ambivalence about fieldnotes are promoted in the occupational subculture.

Perhaps the idea that fieldwork requires one to invent one's own methods explains why such advice as is given is so often joked about, even when it was originally offered in utter seriousness.

You know, "Take plenty of marmalade and cheap tennis shoes."

[Alfred] Kroeber said to take a big stick for the dogs. [That was the extent of his advice to me.]

The numerous complaints about useless advice concerning stenographer's pads, data-sort cards, or multicolored pen sets—all of which were spoken of favorably by other interviewees—need a deeper analysis than merely that only some advice works for only some people only some of the time.

During fieldwork one must work out one's relationship to the field, to the natives, and to one's mind and emotions (as data-gathering instruments and as bias-producing impediments). Working out a rela-

tionship to one's field notebooks is a part of this process, and since fieldnotes are material items that continue to be used upon one's return, they apparently often come to symbolize these other important processes. Furthermore, since the writing of fieldnotes validates one's membership in the anthropological subculture, fieldnotes symbolize relations with one's fellow professionals: "You have to do something to justify your existence as an anthropologist." Those interviewees who exasperatedly disagree with this view do for the most part acknowledge its hold on their fellow anthropologists. Even the most adamantly anti-fieldnote respondent indicated that he did not consider himself a true anthropologist in a number of respects. Another said:

I remember reading a novel by Barbara Pym where one character burned his fieldnotes in a ritualistic bonfire in the back yard. It was inconceivable . . . someone doing that and remaining an anthropologist. I found this passage to be fascinating and very provocative.

My material on competitive feelings, in the form of smugness or anxiety, shows that people are curious and judgmental about each other's fieldnotes:

I've been astonished at the amount, both more or less, of fieldnotes people have come back with.

This accounts for some of the expressed reluctance to share, even though interviewees see value in sharing:

The irony in anthropology is that [because fieldnotes are private,] we're really exercising acts of faith a lot of the time.

Perhaps some anthropologists see their fieldnotes as a sort of holy text which, like the tablets Moroni gave to Joseph Smith, need to be deciphered with golden spectacles or a similar aid; otherwise, the possibility arises of one's fieldnotes leading to misunderstanding—by colleagues and by natives. In part, fears about notes being used without their author's supervision are fears about potential abuse, but they may also go deeper: how could something so much a part of you be (potentially) so alienated from you? In this, Bronislaw Malinowski's diary (which many interviewees referred to one way or another) stands not only as evidence that all gods have feet of clay but as a dire warning. His diary was deciphered without his permission or par-

ticipation, and most of us want to feel comfortable and secure about a text so linked to our identities.

We are also pulled in the opposite direction, urged to archive our notes, to be responsible scientists about them:

It's taken me four years to turn this over to an archive . . . I'm about to do it.

The interviews provided many examples of how the boundaries between the anthropologist and his or her fieldnotes are fuzzy. One interviewee, who commented on how useful Boas's diary is because of its revelations about his motives, concluded:

On the other hand . . . by taking fieldnotes we're reporting on the public and private lives of the natives. To what extent are the documents our own? And for either side, the observer and the observed. I don't think there's an easy answer.

As we have seen, some respondents consider themselves to be a kind of fieldnote, speaking of both written notes and memory in similar fashion.

As noted above, for some interviewees fieldnotes from the beginning of a fieldwork period are "all garbage," yet for others these are "the most valuable" because one has not yet become too socialized; one has not yet come to take things too much for granted:

Right at the beginning [taking copious notes] is important because later on you'll see your mistakes.

Watching people's fieldnotes over the years, the first impressions are very important, very revealing. Because you become socialized to the culture . . . although some scorn this and think it's dangerous, most pride themselves on this.

One respondent regarded fieldwork as a social process whereby we learn to formulate questions that the members of the cultures being studied find interesting and appropriate, yet even "boring" questions can have interesting answers that fieldnotes provide a record of. Many interviewees commented on how changing research topics, methodology, or theoretical orientation can make rereading fieldnotes an eye-opening experience: "You get this eureka experience: there it was and I didn't notice at the time." In a number of respects, then, field-

notes are a synecdoche for the anthropologist. Probably those who are both pro- and anti-fieldnotes are so in part because of how they want to think of themselves as anthropologists.

Some of those I interviewed also contrasted fieldnotes with the questionnaires and standardized instruments of sociologists and political scientists, portraying fieldnotes as individualistic, authentic, impossible to replicate—the art and poetry of anthropology. When these anthropologists link fieldnote-taking with their professional identity, romantic and adventurous themes appear. Perhaps some of those who feel negative about fieldnotes reject what they see as the Western tendency to valorize the record over “reality.” They are unhappy with the fact that in a modern bureaucratic state a document can have a major role in creating the reality: whether you’re married or not finally depends on the validity of the marriage license, rather than on your intentions and assumptions at the time. Expressions such as “I needed to carry things to keep alive; the last thing I needed was a bunch of notebooks” perhaps contains a wish to be free of the power of the written word; free from the way writing, bureaucracy, and academe can control one’s life; free, like the noble natives, to experience life directly with no interfering intermediaries, external (notebooks) or internal (the symbols that the enemy—inauthentic literacy—uses to maintain outposts in one’s mind). Of course, those anthropologists who believe that fieldnotes fairly unproblematically reflect reality do not feel this way at all.

Conclusions

My interviews have illustrated that the topic of fieldnotes is often one of deep significance for the anthropologist who writes and subsequently works with them, as well as the anthropologist who speculates about someone else’s notes. The answers to the questions I asked reveal strongly held and varied opinions and feelings about many of the issues linked to fieldnotes. Many interviewees believe that more consensus on fieldnotes (e.g., definition) exists in the profession than is actually the case. Our profession perhaps has an unusually large proportion of people who view themselves as rugged individuals; I have argued that fieldnotes and fieldwork do represent an individualistic, pioneering approach to acquiring knowledge, at times even a maverick and rebellious one. I have argued that the hints of a deliberate know-nothing spirit in graduate training, which emerge in discussions of lack of

preparation for ethnographic fieldwork and fieldnote-taking, may even be part of a hidden curriculum designed to force the student to become an active creator, or re-creator, of anthropological technique. As one interviewee put it: “There was the image that each anthropologist was going into terra incognita and had to reconstruct, or reinvent, anthropology.”

I have argued that anthropologists’ opinions and feelings about fieldnotes can tell us much about the anthropological enterprise: how it straddles the fence between science and the humanities; how it distinguishes itself from its sister social science disciplines; and how it creates its own pecking orders, prods, rewards, and justifications for doing “good” fieldwork. Planning field research, carrying it out, and reporting on the results necessitates planning, writing, and using fieldnotes. If “the field” is anthropology’s version of both the promised land and an ordeal by fire, then fieldnotes symbolize what journeying to and returning from the field mean to us: the attachment, the identification, the uncertainty, the mystique, and, perhaps above all, the ambivalence.

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