

# **FIELDWORK IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE**

Learning Anthropology's Method  
in a Time of Transition

**Edited by  
James D. Faubion  
and George E. Marcus**

**Foreword by  
Michael M. J. Fischer**

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## FIGURING OUT ETHNOGRAPHY

*Kim Fortun*

When my daughters were very young, there was a game we often played. Each player put his or her hands into a cloth bag filled with wooden figures shaped like animals and also with flat wooden rectangles with cutouts that the various animal figures could fit within. The challenge was to match the figure of an elephant with the cutout space of an elephant, or the figure of a lion with the cutout space of a lion. The challenge, in other words, was to feel and figure out how figure and ground could be brought together. I loved this game from the outset, but only with time did I realize why its effect seemed so familiar. As I felt my own way around the bag of figures and cutouts, or talked my daughters through their wanderings (encouraging patience and creativity, attention to detail and extrapolation), I recognized how similar this is to the process of figuring out ethnographic projects. A process that also requires patience and detail, creativity and extrapolation. A process that is very much about the play of figure and ground. I've learned to enjoy this figuring out in my own work and in the work of graduate students with whom I've worked over the last decade or so in an interdisciplinary department of Science and Technology Studies (STS). In STS, it is not a given that dissertation research and writing will be ethnographic. Ethnography has to be defined, without much curricular support in my context, and often defended. I've had to be able to argue how, in the terminology of STS, ethnography is the "right tool for the job" (Clarke and Fujimura 1992). I've also felt the need to be quite overt and even programmatic in the teaching of what some would call "methods." I have thought about it as the need for purposeful research design.

Provocations to purposefully design ethnographic research have come from many directions. Through my own work on the Bhopal disaster (in which a U.S.-owned and -designed chemical plant blew up, in India) and through work in STS and the history of technology generally, I have learned of the fateful consequences of technical design (Fortun 2001; and, e.g., Perrow 1984). Different technical designs do different things and interact with their contexts in different ways. Some designs are inherently unsafe or (intentionally or not) exclude use by particular social groups. Some designs are more “appropriate” and sustainable than others.<sup>1</sup> Different ethnographic research designs also do different things, drawing out functional stability, for example, privileging what makes a particular system hold together and work, often discounting what destabilizes or queers the system. In some way, ethnographic research projects always build in time, sometimes by default and negation. Without purposeful temporalization, ethnographic subjects tend to be read as Other without reason, as unlikely to change and as indices of a particular context rather than as interpreters and makers of context themselves.<sup>2</sup>

I’ve come to appreciate, too, the dramatic import of literary form, which I also think of in terms of design. The structure of a discourse or text matters. Different things can be accomplished in a legal affidavit than in a press release. Comedy always ends differently than Tragedy. Form, in many ways, dictates content. I learned about this working as a political activist and ethnographer in Bhopal, where I did my Ph.D. fieldwork. The dictates of literary form were also drawn out by many theoretical currents of the mid-1980s, when I was in graduate school.<sup>3</sup> Arguments about the import of literary form synergized with what I learned about the significance of technical form, in turn attuning me to the significance of the forms through which we think about and carry out ethnographic research.

Most provocative, however, has been the unruly world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century—a world that has not been easy to study within a traditional ethnographic frame. High awareness of dramatic change has

1. The concept of appropriate (or “intermediate”) technology became popular in the 1970s through the work of E. F. Schumacher and others building on Gandhian critiques of mass production articulated during the Indian independence movement. Advocates argued that in order to be “appropriate,” technology should be designed to fit into its local setting, synchronizing with available material resources, expertise, and labor-time. For a recent analysis that highlights the need for technology to match both users and needs in both complexity and scale, see Hazeltine and Bull’s *Appropriate Technology: Tools, Choices, and Implications* (1999).

2. In *Advocacy After Bhopal*, I conceived of my informant groups as “enunciatory communities” rather than as “stakeholder communities” in an effort to avoid this problem.

3. *Writing Culture* (1986) and Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973) made important impressions, for example, as did Michael Taussig’s analysis of the different forms of discourse used by colonizers and colonized in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987).

characterized many sectors, offsetting informants’ own sense of having durable cultural forms. People, ideas, artifacts, and information have circulated with unprecedented scope and speed. For many cultural analysts, focusing their studies on one particular locale or people just didn’t make sense.

This has certainly been the case with my students in Science and Technology Studies. As topics, scientific and technological phenomena have always been difficult to pin down to one locale. Even in “lab studies,” involving extended ethnographic engagement at one site of scientific production, the best work crosses scale, tracing out funding streams and what they enable and constrain, or tracing the way scientific interest colludes and collides with national interests (see, e.g., Traweek 1988, 1995, 1996, 2000). Studies of scientific practice can also center on research design—as an “object” of study—teasing out why and how scientists configure their studies as they do, how methodologies evolve, and how particular phenomena and problems fade in and out of view. Such studies reveal the temporal, organizational, and disciplinary specificities of science, highlighting the process of scientific work and the way scientists themselves read and strategize the contexts they work within (see, e.g., Fujimura 1987, 1992, 1997). Such studies also reinforce general understanding of the import of research design, whatever the field, and of the conundrums that predictably complicate all knowledge-making schemes.

The challenge of figuring out and fitting figure to ground, for example, is neither new nor unique to cultural anthropology. This challenge does, however, have particular intensity today. The capacity to see and move across scale—using a range of technical prosthetics and information resources—has turned oscillation between figure and ground into a routine even if always demanding move in many fields. Cultural anthropology can be said to be at the “vortex” of the challenge, in Marcus and Fischer’s terms, because of its traditional mandate to provide both thick, particularistic description, and comparative perspective, and its contemporary compulsion to explicate both the global and the local, in motion (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

One result is increasing interest among cultural analysts in what can be thought of as open systems—systems that are continually being reconstituted through the interaction of many scales, variables, and forces.<sup>4</sup> Whether the system of concern is the global economy, an organization, or an individual subject, the task is in mapping an array of constitutive dynamics—including but not limited to dynamics at the local level. These kinds of project differ in important ways

4. I began working through the idea of ethnography of/as open systems in a review of the second edition of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Fortun 2003). An essay in the *India Review* elaborates on the idea (Fortun 2006).

from traditional anthropological projects while preserving in-depth engagements with real-world situations as a defining methodology. They are often based on complex research designs, often involving ethnography at multiple sites, engagement with multiple scholarly literatures and disciplines, and fluency in many languages, technical as well as natural. At their best, these projects result in dense and complicated accounts of how the contemporary world works, which have relevance both to scholarly debates and to practical efforts to respond to social problems. An open system analysis conjures and temporalizes its “object,” both synchronically and diachronically, recognizing diverse forces of change and diverse ways change happens. Identifying pressure points where a given system is subject to change is critical to both description and transformation of an open system.

Talk of open systems and complexity is of course high fashion today. Environmental and computer scientists—informants in my own research—rely on it, as do other kinds of scientists, military strategists, and financial analysts.<sup>5</sup> Nature, the stock market, and organizations of all kinds—among other things—are all captured by the complexity heuristic. I’m game to think in terms of open systems well aware of this discursive context, imagining it as an opportunity to play into and with this context, experimenting with what is becoming hegemonic, creating a shared language for collaboration with different kinds of people. Such an approach makes ethnography itself an open system.

In what follows, I trace the development of my understanding of and my pedagogy to support open systems analysis. I briefly discuss my own research, but primarily focus on how and why I have come to teach ethnographic research design in the way I do, in a course titled “Advanced Qualitative Methods” in particular. In this course, students do a series of short, highly structured “memos” in which they articulate different ways of thinking about their dissertation projects, mapping out possible informants, different data resources, and different ways of configuring figure and ground, among other things. The promise and problems of structure are in play on many levels.

As I will explain, the research memos that I assign are intended to give students a structured place to play with what can be overwhelming ideas. This approach builds on Winnicott’s ideas about how play becomes possible, and becomes a “potential space” that opens up without determining what goes on in the “real world” (i.e., outside of play or the therapeutic session [1971a, 1971b]).

5. See, for example, a Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute STS dissertation recently completed by Sean Lawson, which examines uptake of concepts from nonlinear science in the U.S. military (Lawson 2007).

In other words, research design is conceived as preparatory without being deterministic. This is particularly important in ethnography since openness to what one encounters “in the field” (however “the field” is defined) is part of what makes ethnography a distinctive approach. Structure, at the level of method, is used to facilitate play.

Structure is also at the center empirically. A critical intent of my teaching is to help students draw out the many structures—social, discursive, technical, etc.—that enable and constrain what their informants say and do. “People” thus remain at the center of ethnography, as in traditional ethnographic projects, but conceived of as nodes and indices of larger systems.

Ethnography of open systems positions people within larger systems, accounting for systematicity at every scale and across scales. It involves accounts of systems within systems. Accounting for how relevant systems function is one goal, but another is to account for how systems dysfunction and disseminate. Structure, in other words, is accounted for as both over- and underdetermining.

Poststructural theories of structure are thus also at the center of things, directing attention to the funny ways structure functions and fails (Derrida 1976, 1978). Figuring out how to extrapolate insight from poststructuralism into empirical projects is part of the game. The implications are complex, and—in my view—politically charged. Play can be a serious matter.

## From Bhopal to “Advanced Qualitative Methods”

Think 1989. The Soviets leaving Afghanistan. Joyous Germans dancing on top of a fallen Berlin Wall. Ayatollah Khomeini sentencing Salman Rushdie to death for writing *The Satanic Verses*. Trade agreements promising “harmonization” are making the rounds, though “globalization” is not yet in the vernacular. Time Inc. and Warner Communications Inc. announce a deal to merge into the world’s largest media and entertainment conglomerate. Union Carbide agrees to pay \$470 million to the government of India in a court-ordered settlement of the 1984 Bhopal gas leak disaster. The government of India claims that the Bhopal decision demonstrates India’s openness to foreign investors.

Foucault is already dead and Salvador Dali dies. Poststructural and experimental sensibilities intensify and are institutionalized in the U.S. academy, nonetheless. Theory is hot throughout the humanities, but speaking of methods is in poor taste. “Methods” are the tools of positivism and Science. They are understood as inevitably reductive, and passé. I left the United States for

fieldwork in India, with *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976) and Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Worlds* (1987) in my backpack.<sup>6</sup> With time, "Bhopal"—a place, an event, and a politically charged symbol—became my field site. My goal in writing about Bhopal was not to account for a stable, bounded culture that had been disrupted by disaster. Instead, I focused on how people's identities, positions, and claims emerged in the aftermath of the gas leak, shaped by myriad forces and interactions. The ways human rights and environmental justice discourses touched down in Bhopal were part of the story, as were ways survivor testimonies circulated outside Bhopal, among activists in India, in plant communities in the United States, at meetings of Union Carbide shareholders. Action and inaction by the government of India were part of the story, as were action and inaction by U.S. courts. What people said about Bhopal was of critical interest, as were the forms—literary and technical—of delivery. I also was interested in what could not be said, particularly in available legal venues and discourses. Pieces of communication became "evidence" of how and why different "stakeholders" understood Union Carbide's gas leak and its aftermath so differently. An anarchist tract from Ireland, for example, helped me understand and describe middle-class Indian activists in Bhopal. Boxes and boxes of Union Carbide documents, stored in the already cramped home of former plant worker T. R. Chouhan, helped me position him, drawing out his sense of betrayal by the company, and by the government of India. A pamphlet celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Union Carbide India Limited helped me understand and show the way foreign companies played into nationalist goals. Glossy brochures advertising the chemical industry's post-Bhopal commitment to "Responsible Care" helped me show how "Bhopal" has brought about a new era of environmentalism, synchronized with neo-liberal ideals. Figuring out what could be "data" was a key challenge, as was figuring out what my study was really about. Figure and ground continually oscillated.

It took me years to turn my research on the Bhopal disaster into a book, in part because it seemed imperative to include material collected in the United States in my account—as a critical response to industry claims that "it [a Bhopal-like

6. In *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus and Fischer describe the 1980s as a time when conventional ways of thinking about the world needed to be—and indeed were—intensely questioned and challenged. Across academic disciplines, there was a sense that many of the concepts that had oriented empirical work and social theory since the nineteenth century—the social actor, class, the state, even culture—were out of date, if not obsolete. Technological advance, economic globalization, and the reordering of social relations at all scales had created a reality that was difficult to encompass within these categories, and all but impossible to encapsulate within general and historically comprehensive theories. This provoked what Marcus and Fischer refer to as a "crisis of representation," which marked a generalized lack of confidence in the adequacy of established ways of describing social reality. I left for the field, as a student of Marcus's and Fischer's, acutely attuned to this crisis of representation. Bhopal was an intensely charged site for working through its implications.

disaster] can't happen here [in the United States]." I also struggled hard with text design, painfully aware that even well intentioned ways of representing disaster easily played into the workings of disaster.

Meanwhile, I had begun a job as an assistant professor in a department of Science and Technology Studies. The first graduate course that I taught (in 1996) was called "Cultural Analysis" and fulfilled a methods requirement. Through a few previous years of work with graduate students, I already sensed the need to support research design pedagogically. Eventually, "Cultural Analysis" iterated into a required methods course called "Advanced Qualitative Methods."

In its initial form, the course included a fair amount of reading (about methods, but also theoretical and ethnographic texts). It quickly became clear that there was more than enough to do in the course of a semester just working out students' projects. We do this through a series of about thirty "memos," with a couple due each week. The first memo is simply a "laundry list" of topics, questions, people, and data resources that a student is interested in pursuing. I encourage students to make the list long and inclusive, so that they have lots of options to consider in putting their project together. In the process, I also try to make clear that having ideas, or even a field site, is not the same thing as having a project. I also encourage them to keep this memo (and most others) going throughout their research, as a way to keep track of what gets pushed in and out of a project as it develops. A project, I insist, always has a provisional starting point, a constructed and ever moving center, and margins. Projects, like other meaning-making processes, work in part because they exclude. Signal becomes signal, through often painful designations of what will, for the moment, count as noise.

As students are working on their research "laundry list," we are reading a few ethnographies—using a template that I titled "Questioning a Text" to direct our attention. The goal is to help students read as practicing ethnographers.

**QUESTIONING A TEXT:** What is the text "about"—empirically and conceptually? What modes of inquiry were used to produce it? How is the text structured and performed? How can it circulate?

*What is the text about—empirically?*

- What phenomenon is drawn out in the text? A social process; a cultural and political-economic shift; a cultural "infrastructure"; an emergent assemblage of science-culture-technology-economics?
- Where is this phenomenon located—in a neighborhood, in a country, in "Western Culture," in a globalizing economy?

(Continued)

- What historical trajectory is the phenomenon situated within? What, in the chronology provided or implied, is emphasized—the role of political or economic forces, the role of certain individuals or social groups? What does the chronology leave out or discount?
- What scale(s) are focused on—nano (i.e., the level of language), micro, meso, macro? What empirical material is developed at each scale?
- Who are the players in the text and what are their relations? Does the text trace how these relations have changed across time—because of new technologies, for example?
- What is the temporal frame in which players play? In the wake of a particular policy, disaster or other significant “event?” In the general climate of the Reagan era, or of “after-the-Wall” globalization?
- What cultures and social structures are in play in the text?
- What kinds of practices are described in the text? Are players shown to be embedded in structural contradictions or double binds?
- How are science and technology implicated in the phenomenon described?
- What structural conditions—technological, legal and legislative, political, cultural—are highlighted, and how are they shown to have shaped the phenomenon described in this text?
- How—at different scales, in different ways—is power shown to operate? Is there evidence of power operating through language, “discipline,” social hierarchies, bureaucratic function, economics, etc.?
- Does the text provide comparative or systems level perspectives? In other words, is the particular phenomenon described in this text situated in relation to similar phenomena in other settings? Is this particular phenomenon situated within global structures and processes?

*What is the text about—conceptually?*

- Is the goal to verify, challenge, or extend prior theoretical claims?
- What is the main conceptual argument or theoretical claim of the text? Is it performed, rendered explicit, or both?
- What ancillary concepts are developed to articulate the conceptual argument?
- How is empirical material used to support or build the conceptual argument?
- How robust is the main conceptual argument of the text? On what grounds could it be challenged?

(Continued)

- How could the empirical material provided support conceptual arguments *other than those* built in the text?

*Modes of inquiry?*

- What theoretical edifice provides the (perhaps haunting—i.e., non-explicit) backdrop to the text?
- What assumptions appear to have shaped the inquiry? Does the author assume that individuals are rational actors, for example, or assume that the unconscious is a force to be dealt with? Does the author assume that the “goal” of society is (functional) stability? Does the author assume that what is most interesting occurs with regularity, or is she interested in the incidental and deviant?
- What kinds of data (ethnographic, experimental, statistical, etc.) are used in the text, and how were they obtained?
- If interviews were conducted, what kinds of questions were asked? What does the author seem to have learned from the interviews?
- How were the data analyzed? If this is not explicit, what can be inferred?
- How are people, objects, or ideas aggregated into groups or categories?
- What additional data would strengthen the text?

*Structure and performance?*

- What is in the introduction? Does the introduction turn around unanswered questions—in other words, are we told how this text embodies a *research* project?
- Where is theory in the text? Is the theoretical backdrop to the text explained, or assumed to be understood?
- What is the structure of the discourse in the text? What binaries recur in the text, or are conspicuously avoided?
- How is the historical trajectory delineated? Is there explicit chronological development?
- How is the temporal context provided or evoked in the text?
- How does the text specify the cultures and social structures in play in the text?
- How are informant perspectives dealt with and integrated?
- How does the text draw out the implications of science and technology? At what level of detail are scientific and technological practices described?

(Continued)

- How does the text provide in-depth detail—hopefully without losing readers?
- What is the layout of the text? How does it move, from first page to last? Does it ask for other ways of reading? Does the layout perform an argument?
- What kinds of visuals are used, and to what effect?
- What kind of material and analysis are in the footnotes?
- How is the criticism of the text performed? If through overt argumentation, who is the “opposition”?
- How does the text situate itself? In other words, how is reflexivity addressed, or not?

#### *Circulation?*

- Who is the text written for? How are arguments and evidence in the text shaped to address particular audiences?
- What audiences can you imagine for the text, given its empirical and conceptual scope?
- What new knowledge does this text put into circulation? What does this text have to say that otherwise is *not obvious*?
- How generalizable is the main argument? How does this text lay the groundwork for further research?
- What kind of “action” is suggested by the main argument of the text?

I ask them to read for what a text is “about” empirically, for example. A social process? A cultural and political-economic shift? An emerging cultural assemblage? I also ask them to draw out the historical trajectory that the text mobilizes, and to consider the different scales of analysis and whether a particular scale operates something like a center of gravity. Next, I ask what the text is “about” conceptually and how empirical material is used to build a conceptual argument. Modes of inquiry are then queried, helping students imagine the kinds of real-time engagements and questions that produced the “data” presented. Critical as well is getting students to think through implicit and explicit categorization schemes, attentive to the political implications of the ways social groups are grouped, for example. Then there is a section called “structure and performance” through which I try to get students to consider how the text is organized and operates and how it is situated in ecologies of other texts. Consideration of how images and footnotes are put to work is important, for example, as is consideration of how the text moves, from first page to last, possibly performing as well as

overtly articulating an argument. Last is a section that considers circulation: whom the text appears to be written for; what other audiences are imaginable. Reception of ethnographic work, I argue, is hardly straightforward. A good text to bring in here, because of the many levels on which it works, is Paul Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994). The key argument of the book is that the play of improvisation requires extraordinary discipline and structured preparation.

Early on in the class, I also ask students to begin peopling their projects, by filling in three templates that I sometimes think of as the Foucault 101 templates. The first template asks students to run a list of types of people in their “site,” or search space. Most often, the list is easily long and differentiated—peopled with cryptographers (today, a particular type of computer scientist), lawyers, notaries, and immigrants in France, for example, in a project about the development in the late 1990s of electronic forms of authentication in governance (Blanchette 2002). Most students that I work with simply don’t think about their projects as centered on a particular social group, at least at the outset. With time, a particular social group may come to center their accounts, but this center emerges as the project develops rather than serving as a starting point. Even in those cases when a particular social group is a starting point, differentiation within, early on, is critical. If a project is about physicists amid new information infrastructure, for example, it is important to tease out how topical, national, generational, and gender differences among physicists matter. Beginning to tease out the differences that make a difference early on can orient without determining where a project goes, preparing a researcher to look out for the differences already identified as likely to be significant while having an analytic frame in place that makes it easy to add to the list. This memo, too, can be maintained throughout a project.

In addition to the list of types of relevant people, this memo also asks for a snapshot of the force fields that these people work within. The list of social groups runs down the center of the page. A column to the left lists forces—economic, political, discursive, technical, etc.—that enable people in that group to say what they say, and do what they do. A column on the right lists forces that constrain or corrode what each group is able to say and do. In a page, one is able to see the swirl of people and forces that are the “site” of ethnographic study.

The next, related memo zooms into a particular group and maps many different forces that compel them to say and do what they do and don’t do. I encourage students to be as historically specific as possible, recognizing that groups don’t cohere naturally or automatically, but in specific ways in specific times and places. I often talk through work in critical race theory that teases out the political import of the ways groups are conceived. Anthropological studies of the making of ethnicity, sometimes quite intentionally, are also illustrative. The challenge, as





observation, interviews, and context mapping were analyzed to understand continuities and changes in the way people conceive of X." The third sentence begins with the phrase, "Primary findings of this study are..." The fourth and final sentence is about the implications—theoretical and practical/political—of these findings. The point is to force a figuring out of figure and of ground.

A student who undertook this exercise recently started referring to it as the "disciplined abstract." He rewrote his about ten times, sending me iterations by e-mail with a recurrent message: "this is closer." The exercise worked very well for him, even though it did not come easily. It helped that he knew a lot about gaming and was invested in gaming as a practice. His dissertation was titled "The Work/Play of the Interactive New Economy: Video Game Development in the United States and India" (O'Donnell 2007).

In one particularly memorable semester, there were twenty-two students in this class. I felt as if I were part of an enormous circus, with each project having at least three rings, with different kinds of things going on in each. It was a bit overwhelming, but also exciting and fun. The play of it was, and always is, crucial.

Research design always, inevitably, is an anxious endeavor. Joking along the way, about the process, about oneself, about the world in which research happens and, one hopes, makes a difference, is important. Joking, as Freud has taught us, is a way to approach what we would otherwise avoid. The condensations that happen in jokes, and in dreams, are not unlike the condensations that research memos are after. Brevity, Freud promises, can have punch.<sup>8</sup>

For research design to work, without becoming formulaic, students must engage with it as play (or perhaps calisthenics). One moves through a research design process to be ready, quick on one's feet, attuned to what many would discount as noise. The task in teaching research design is to stage it as what Winnicott has described as "potential space"—a place where play can happen, opening up without determining future possibilities. The therapist in Winnicott's account provides the enabling frame.

It takes play on the part of the teacher, too. Ethnographic eyes and ears, in my experience, have been as vital in the classroom as in "the field." An important way that I can help my students is by listening to them very closely, attentive to what drives and concerns them, to slips and to what they cannot yet find words for. At the outset, some find my quite incessant questioning stressful. I try to pull them into the game.

Winnicott explains that "psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do

8. Playing off Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in "Jokes and Their Relation to the Subconscious," Freud reminds us that "brevity is the soul of wit" (1963).

with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play" (1968). I think of my work as a teacher of ethnographic research design in similar terms.

## Constituting Ethnographic Subjects

**The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay that is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay. With this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game.**

—Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," *Writing and Difference*

At the end of some session or another, I send students away with yet another game. Figure out, I tell them, if you are obsessive-compulsive or paranoid, and—thinking in terms of Roman Jakobson—whether you have a combination disorder, or a selection disorder.

If you are an obsessive-compulsive, you will tend to focus so intently on the object of your concern that context falls away. Your desire is to name, specify, and control your object. You want figure. Its ground is an annoyance. If you are paranoid, context is your focus, and obsession. All is signal. Only begrudgingly will you admit that something is noise, outside the scope of your project. Figure is hard to come by. Its ground has captured your attention.<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Fox Keller

9. STS students are exposed to this distinction in a seminal (*sic*) essay by Evelyn Fox Keller, "Dynamic Objectivity: Love, Power, and Knowledge." Keller, drawing on Shapiro's *Autonomy and Rigid Character* (1981) and *Neurotic Styles* (1965) explains: "The central concern of the obsessive-compulsive is control, not so much of others as of oneself.... Under this harsh regime, attention is subject to the same kind of control as is the rest of behavior, leading to a focus so intensely sharp and restricted that it precludes peripheral vision, the fleeting impression, the hunch, the over-all feeling of an object.... And what does not fit is not acknowledged: The rigid or dogmatic compulsive person simply ignores the unusual; he narrowly follows his own line of thought and goes right by anything out of the way. The cognitive style of the paranoid, although similar in some ways, is ultimately quite different. Grounded in the fear of being controlled by others rather than in apprehension about the loss of self-control, in the fear of giving in to others rather than to one's own unwelcome impulses, the attention of the paranoid is rigid, but it is not narrowly focused. Rather than ignore what does not fit, he or she must be alert to every possible clue. Nothing—no detail, however minor—eluded scrutiny. Everything *must* fit. The paranoid delusion suffers not from lack of logic but from unreal-ity. Indeed, its distortion derives, at least in part, from the very effort to make all the clues fit into

describes how natural scientists inhabit these tendencies. Ethnographers, I insist, do as well.

In Roman Jakobson's terms, writing of "two aspects of language and two types of aphasic disturbances," there is selection disorder, and combination disorder. The person with a selection disorder has trouble articulating the frame in which something occurs. Metanarrative escapes her, though she easily finds focus. The object of her research is taken to represent the quality and reality of the whole. She is likely to be something of a realist and materialist.

The person with a combination and contexture disorder has trouble identifying a focus. Things don't add up. She knows where her object of concern is, in a very expansive sense, but not what it is. I imagine her circulating round and round her object of concern, gaining increasing understanding of the system in which it operates, but forever hesitant to name the object itself.<sup>10</sup> Her thinking is far-reaching, but sometimes difficult to pin down.

All of us, I insist, are beset by these disorders, in one way or another. We must learn to play within these limits.

This kind of recognition of one's own tendencies and dispositions is, in my view, critical to ethnography and needs to be cultivated pedagogically. Critical ethnography—particularly conceived as in/of open systems—requires intense attunement to what is being considered in the frame and what is not, to subtle slides between figure and ground, and to the many forces that shape what a particular study comes to be about. Access to visas and fieldsites, nondisclosure agreements, and gender dynamics are all constitutive, of course, as are the genre conventions of the anthropological dissertation and monograph. Thought and writing "disorders" like those described by Keller and Jakobson are also critical. What is often termed "reflexivity" requires attention to all these things. I prefer to think in term of recursivity rather than reflexivity, highlighting how ethnographic subjects—both researchers and their objects of concerns—are constituted through repetition and relationality. Indeed, as I mentioned before,

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a single interpretation. Once accomplished, the logic is such as to leave no room for an alternative interpretation; the pieces are locked into place by the closeness of their fit. So convincing is the result that 'nothing but' that interpretation can be imagined" (1985: 121–22).

10. Jakobson contrasts a "logic of recognition," which is a logic of semblance and metaphor, and a "logic of touch," which is a logic of contiguity and metonym. The development of a discourse may take place in two ways: one topic may lead to another through similarity (metaphor), or one topic may lead to another through contiguity (metonym). Jakobson further discusses how either metaphor or metonymy dominates in various kinds of expression, both verbal and pictorial. Crudely, poetry moves through metaphor while prose moves through metonym. Metaphor is associated with romanticism and symbolism, metonym with realism and rationalism. The Cubists were metonymically oriented. The surrealists were metaphorical. Jakobson complicates these extrapolations, noting that over-attachment with a simple binary scheme would demonstrate a "continuity disorder" (Jakobson 1956).

I have a memo for this, too, in which students map the many determinants of their own interests and research trajectory.

Ethnography—even of open systems—is not about everything. There are always margins and disavowals. Research design is a key space for working this through and for learning to be caught by and implicated in the ethnographic game. Certitude about what one is doing should not be the goal. Anxiety should be played rather than mastered. Practices and pedagogy of ethnography have to cultivate playfulness—and understanding that what at times feels like free play is a structured effect. A patience for and sensibility for what many would term "method" is thus critical.

Structure must be understood as both ethnographic object and context, as itself the ground on which the figure and ground of ethnographic studies are figured out. Thinking in terms of structure, sign, and play needs to become second nature, so to speak.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play" describes how the organizing principle of any structure allows free play within the structure, while closing off other kinds of play. The center of the structure thus enables and constrains, creating both sense and non-sense, designating what is signal and noise (1978). Derrida describes how noise becomes noise, and the historical condition of its production. He also suggests the promise of noise—the way it can intercede in signal, displacing what makes most sense, allowing something new to emerge. The promise of ethnology, according to Derrida, lies in its potential to intercede in this way. At the same time, however, ethnology itself is delimited. The organizing principles that ethnology has the potential to upend give structure to ethnology itself.