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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Elliott, Denielle, and Matthew Wolf-Meyer, eds. 2024, *Naked Fieldnotes: A Rough Guide to Ethnographic Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 320 pp., ISBN 978-1-5179-16145

In *Naked Fieldnotes: A Rough Guide to Ethnographic Writing*, editors Denielle Elliott and Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer seek to fill a gap in ethnographic instruction and literature on how to record and capture fieldnotes divorced from rigid pedagogy and how-to guides that provide little insights into the actual mechanisms and techniques. Elliott, a sociocultural anthropology professor at York University, and Wolf-Meyer, a professor of anthropology and historical science and medicine at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, pull together 38 accounts and examples of writing ethnographic fieldnotes across the world to provide novice researchers with intimate insights into an opaque process.

In the preface of the seminal *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*, Robert Sanjek (1990) describes how his edited volume emanated from a dinner conversation among colleagues attending the American Ethnological Society in 1984. According to Sanjek, James Clifford remarked that “no one had addressed what anthropologists write *before* they write ethnographies—fieldnotes” (xi). While Sanjek’s volume approached topics such as relationships between ethnographers and fieldnotes, the types of fieldnotes, uses of fieldnotes, and other related matters, it provides relatively few examples for new researchers. Similarly, *Naked Fieldnotes* originated from conversations between the editors about their experiences taking fieldnotes. Elliott and Wolf-Meyer describe how fieldnotes are “charismatic” (ix, xi), part of an intimate and dynamic process to memorialize observations captured as data in the field. Such an intimate process is typically private to the ethnographer, who may discuss their process, reflections, and findings over a convivial meal with colleagues. Thus, Elliott and Wolf-Meyer have tried to replicate that dinner table, in a sense, in this edited volume (xxiv).

Elliott and Wolf-Meyer intended for *Naked Fieldnotes* to elucidate the process of learning how to take fieldnotes by “demystifying” a practice that is often private and intimate (xxiii). They found that the way scholars teach or write about this process is typically more sterile and guarded than the experiences shared over dinner with colleagues. Thus, they wanted to invite the reader to this metaphorical dinner table and conversation (xxiv). The “Fieldnote Confessions” section addresses the impetus for the book, which was both editors wishing for a more public way to teach writing fieldnotes (pp. xxv, xxvi). The title of the book derives from a remark given by a contributor, who teaches fieldnote methods by allowing his students to see his raw fieldnotes, which leaves him feeling “naked from the waist down” (xii).

To review the book, I followed two of the editor's suggested reading strategies, first starting with a methodological approach using sense modalities including visual methods, sounds and hearing, multimodal approaches, events, interviews, and interpersonal interactions. Next, I moved on to topics covered by the volume, which included land and landscapes; access and infrastructure; healthcare; technoscience; more-than-human interactions; tradition; kinship; institutions and organizations; material culture; documents and bureaucracy; and colonialism and racism. I avoided approaching the book by continent or geographic location; while convenient to present those chapters to the reader who might be searching for a particular locale, I felt that fieldwork experiences based on geography would be too diverse and broad to be helpful. Finally, the chapters that fell under the category of experience were covered elsewhere during my reading.

The title of each chapter consistently and succinctly presents the location, topic, theme or discipline, and date. The chapter then provides the research context and examples of the so-called "naked" fieldnotes. The opening of the chapter, which typically describes what is being studied and the reason, the field and conditions, how the fieldnotes were collected, and reflections on fieldnotes, is approached differently depending on the contributor. Some of the chapters open laconically while others read more like a narrative or story; some are pithy and direct while others are more reflective and introspective. As for the sample fieldnotes, they are transcribed into text, formatted accordingly for publication, and often they are accompanied by photos and illustrations that include images from the field, notebooks, sketchbooks, and screenshots.

Of the book's many strengths are that it indeed provides an inside look into the reflections, notebooks, sketches, and photos ethnographers incorporate as part of their fieldnotes. Some of the approaches, while unique to the study, described a relatively universal process, tailored by the researcher. Other approaches were uncommon, creative, and inventive. For instance, in Stacy Leigh Pigg's and Shyam Kunwar's account of taking fieldnotes in Nepal ("30: Nepal, Roads, Mobility, Graphic Ethnography, 2018"), the researchers intended to write a graphic novel about road politics and infrastructure sociality (231). Their fieldnotes consisted of a blend of photographs, video, handwritten jottings, record keeping, and resting the pen tip on the notebook page as a means of recording the car ride. While the example note itself looks like an indecipherable scribble, it memorializes a rugged journey and the moment when Pigg found she could no longer write legible impressions (235). The note, as it were, visually depicts this movement the ethnographer felt during the ride, and thus, could be used to inform the final research product. John Dale's chapter, "10: Myanmar, Pro-Democracy Movement, Collective Violence, 1998," starts plainly enough with a cold opening on how he took his fieldnotes in an All-Weather Shirt Pocket Spiral Memo notebook (71), but it is not until the reader is presented with a photograph of the notebook and a caption (73) where we learn that Dale prefers this spiral-bound, small pad because, in the increasing local violence, the pages could be deftly removed and swallowed to destroy evidence of the notes. Dale also wrote coded fieldnotes to protect the identity of his subjects as political discussions were prohibited by law (74). Additionally, Dale encrypts the notes in the form of cooking recipes; he shares how this looks in typed notes (74-77) and how to decode it in a coding schema sent to a dissertation advisor (74, 77-84)

Naked Fieldnotes, however, does not supplant other authoritative texts on taking fieldnotes—it was never intended to do so. Rather, it supplements pivotal texts such as *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (1995, 2011) and *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* by Roger Sanjek (1990). While *Naked Fieldnotes* seeks to fill a gap that exists with these works, it does not provide an instructive framework for novice ethnographers. Furthermore, *Naked Fieldnotes* does not provide much breadth or depth into taking fieldnotes on any particular topic, using any particular mode, or in any particular location. At the same time, there is something useful for every reader within the volume.

I eagerly awaited the publication of *Naked Fieldnotes*. Fieldnotes transcend anthropology and ethnography; there are many other disciplines that rely on researchers taking fieldnotes. These researchers may have received rigorous methodological training and yet received little instruction or guidance on how to take fieldnotes. For instance, a book like *Naked Fieldnotes* would have been a perfect resource to consult while I was on the ground conducting my fieldwork in Japan as it is cleanly organized, compendiously described, and inspirationally illustrative. Another feature I appreciated was how the contributors described the “tools of trade,” including types of notebooks, writing utensils, cameras, recorders, and other equipment. These details were particularly personal, drawing the reader closer to the respective author. Some of these details were rather standard, simply preferred notebooks or pens, while others were more comprehensive, such as Patricia Alvarez Astacio’s chapter (“2: Peru, Textile Practices, Multimedia, 2011”), which describes multiple tools (video, markers, audio recorders, hard drives) for multiple recording modes: “visual, audio, written” (7). All in all, I believe *Naked Fieldnotes* is a vital, pleasurable read for budding ethnographers and a fabulous addition to academic libraries.

Works Cited

Elliott, Denielle, and Matthew Wolf-Meyer, eds. 2024. *Naked Fieldnotes: A Rough Guide to Ethnographic Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Emerson, Robert, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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