**CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY: METHODOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES**

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**Keywords:** power, epistemology, decolonizing knowledge, ethical framework, the field, context, fieldwork, ethnography, “culture,” place and space, voice, representation, the past, engagement, transformation, agency, collaboration, cultural translation, cultural critique, advocacy, activism.

*Anthropology is unquestionably a discipline with well-known intellectual traditions, or histories...*  
*It is* not a social science tout court, but something else. *What that something else is has been notoriously difficult to name, precisely because it involves less a subject matter ... than a sensibility* (Cerwonka and Malkki 2008).

*My claim is that thinking through hope as a method allows us to begin to confront the most fundamental problem – what knowledge is for* (Miyazaki 2006).

*For whom do we write?” The preposition “for” does not refer here so much to the public dissemination of the work as to its moral obligation: towards whom should we feel obliged?* (Fassin 2013)

**Contents**

1. Introduction: Power-Knowledge  
2. Ethics  
3. “The Field”  
4. Fieldwork  
5. Interviewing  
6. The Past: Traces  
7. Transformation  
Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

**Summary**

Building on foundational questions about knowledge and power, this chapter discusses methodology as a body of ideas and practices grounded in on-going relationships between (academically-positioned) researchers and the communities, institutions, or individuals to whom they are accountable. Ways of doing cultural anthropology are constantly changing in response to shifting conceptual, political and ethical terrains. I focus on methodological building blocks in cultural anthropology organized around shifting ethical practices; epistemological questions; ideas about “the field” and changing dialogues about fieldwork. Central approaches include participant observation, oral history, ideas about voice and the verbal arts; conceptual approaches to memory studies and ethnographic history; research exploring relationships between the individual and “culture;” politics surrounding representation; and finally, ever-emerging
dialogues about collaboration, engagement and transformative research practices. As an imaginative endeavour that requires improvisation, research with and alongside others presents myriad possibilities.

1. Introduction: Power-Knowledge

More than any other formal aspect of anthropological thought, methodology generates possibility because it is about improvising to some degree —with others. This calls for imagination and creativity, for building bridges between knowledge and action. Although the discipline has generated a deep record of models and concepts, it is not committed to a singular methodological practice. We make use of a suite of methods, usually also multiple theories drawn from diverse traditions of thought. Characteristically, we develop paradigms and methods best suited to each research context. Anthropology is a superb portal through which to consider the particular (the micro) within what is too often taken to be universal in human behaviour. Research involves parallel processes grounded in ethical awareness, in constant considerations about power. Doing research in cultural anthropology means leaning into the different epistemological worlds carved out by knowledge practices within the academy and among the peoples who are subjects, participants, collaborators and colleagues, in research. For any researcher considering her or his practice, research often begins with the question asked by Marc-Adélard Tremblay (1983), “What knowledge and knowledge for what?”

Methodology includes the researcher’s approach in its entirety: it is ontological, epistemological, ideological, theoretical, social and, biographical. Recognizing the enormity of a task to represent methodology in cultural anthropology, the chapter addresses what I regard as primary building blocks of anthropological practice that generate debate or tension —and so, usually, activate change within the discipline. The citation of scholars here is partial and should not be taken as exhaustive, as representing the best or primary sources on any topic. I includes social anthropologists (generally associated more with European anthropology), when their work exemplifies current scholarship taken up in (a more Americas-centered), cultural anthropology. Like all scholars, I write from a particular place (Canada) at a particular moment wherein public and academic dialogues about decolonization are reinvigorating research practices. My presentation on methodology inevitably reflects this moment.

“There is no such thing as an innocent anthropology” Gerald Sider (2009:43).

I begin with primary critiques of the power-knowledge nexus (initially developed by Michel Foucault) and elaborated through generations of interdisciplinary scholarship. As a discipline, practitioners of cultural anthropology have (at least) one foot in the social worlds in which they participate outside of academia. We establish relationships based in understandings about how to proceed that must reflect the political and social boundaries of those with whom we work. With this in mind, I briefly trace thresholds of practice through three important critiques of cultural anthropology from non-dominant perspectives. These may be understood as decolonizing moments that sent jolts through a primarily North American-centred discipline concerned with “culture.” The critiques
reveal taken-for-granted assumptions that both inform knowledge production and have effects on the “real world.”

1.1. Imperialism / Colonialism

Based as it is in a predominantly Anglo American and western European canon, cultural anthropology must be regarded within historical and contemporary contexts of colonialism and imperialism (Sillitoe 2007). Much productive labour goes into the consideration of power relations in the research context. Given that a major goal of anthropology is to work across significant cultural, social and political codes, we must take into account the ways that knowledge practices reflect researcher’s historical and geo-political positions.

In the Americas, formative relationships in cultural anthropology were established through studies about indigenous, First Nations (in Canada) and Native Americans (in the USA) societies. The discipline grew around responses to simultaneously witnessing and administering indigenous populations then expected to disappear in the wake of colonialism and settlement. In the aftermath of epidemics, relocations and imperial military campaigns; the dispossession of lands, starvation and brutal assimilationist processes in the Americas, scholars embarked on projects of salvage. The systematic documentation of languages and customs and the appropriation of material cultures from this era continue to inform ethical approaches to knowledge production in cultural anthropology. Archives built during this time are current sites for repatriation and revitalization and also for revisionist scholarship that contributes to a vital record of the history of anthropology. The vast resonances of trans-Atlantic slavery constitute another important reality affecting power relationships in cultural anthropology. As settler nations, research in the Americas has also attended closely to the shifting politics that surround immigration and the (legal and illegal) movement of peoples. Legacies of colonial and imperial moments are easily reignited through scholarship and are a focus of work that has especially acknowledged “race.” At the heart of critiques about 19th and early 20th century scholarship are understandings about the complicity of anthropologists in imperialist processes that facilitate (d) their mobility, their access to peoples and places and their appropriations of all manner of cultural property.

Like all arenas of academic inquiry, anthropology is grounded in political contexts that inform primary methodological dynamics. Given the centrality of relationships among those who produce knowledge (historically, educated Europeans and Euro-Americans) and those whom are the subjects of knowledge production (often “colonized” or subordinated populations), anthropology’s geo-political location has always mattered. As Bruce Knauff (1996:2) notes, “the holistic openness to world conditions and emerging paradigms has been one of anthropology’s enduring strengths.” At no time was this made more explicit than in the 1960’s and 1970’s with the “emergence of political and academic thought ... inspired by anti-war, free speech, civil rights, feminist and gay liberation movements” (Maskovsky and Susser 2016).

Within this context Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. wrote the first authored critique of cultural anthropology from a Native American perspective. His book *Custer Died for your Sins – an Indian Manifesto* (1969), rocked the discipline, launching a critical
conversation about anthropology with indigenous communities (especially in North America). In the chapter ‘Anthropologists and other Friends,” Deloria addressed anthropologists and missionaries alongside American Congress, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In part, his anger followed from the failure of anthropologists to support Indian rights, yet clearly, careers were being made on the research that resulted from their relationships in Native American communities. Deloria pointed out that tribal communities actually competed with anthropologists for funding from private foundations and federal agencies. He criticised notions of “pure research ... a body of knowledge absolutely devoid of useful application and incapable of meaningful digestion” (ibid: 80). In his words, “abstract theories create abstract action.” Deloria’s identification of the violence of abstraction and his remarks about the objectification of research subjects, pointed to common representations constructed through academic research that haunt indigenous peoples — likenesses of the exotic, authentic, essentialized “Indian,” that render people invisible or make them into caricatures. Deloria noted that theoretical and conceptual ideas were often informed only by preceding scholarship and were completely divorced from realities on the ground. His critique opened awareness that anthropological conversations within the academy may actually – and often did — occur at the expense of people who are the subjects of research. In cultural anthropology, on-going dialogues about authenticity, representation and exploitation are key.

Research [is] a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other ... Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:2, 5).

A second methodological revolution in cultural anthropology may be tied to the indigenous scholarship movement known as Kaupapa Māori initiated in the late 1990’s by Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith. In her work De-colonizing Methodologies (1999), she argued that western scholarship is conducted through “imperial eyes.” Her critique began a movement towards the recognition of “indigenous methodologies” ushering in a new epoch of scholarship that acknowledged multiple traditions of knowledge or ways of knowing. Important here is that what we count as knowledge is culturally and ideologically specific; that knowledge systems adhere to identifiable canons, procedures, representational and classificatory norms; that the ways we frame questions reflect ideas about time and space, race and gender, and history and bodies; relationships among individuals and, among individuals and their society. Awareness of the ways particular kinds of knowledge adheres to particular systems of classification lead to conversations about ways that anthropology (and other disciplines) translates knowledge. What happens as knowledge is translated across linguistic boundaries and also from oral forms into textual forms? How do powerful western concepts distort local meanings? In what ways do scientific approaches erase experiential approaches to being in the world? Tuhiwai-Smith’s attention to the importance of particular vocabularies contributes to cultural anthropology’s continuous awareness of the difficulties of cross-cultural translation. Her examples here include repertoires concerning spatial and temporal phenomena as well as critical forms of sociality. Her work resonates with the continual attention paid by cultural anthropologists to translation, to discontinuities among knowledge systems and to recognition of incommensurable ways of knowing.
A third essay by Palestinian scholar Leleh Khalili represents another generation of critique of the knowledge-power nexus within the discipline. In ‘The Ethics of Social Science Research’ (2011), Khalili summarizes evaluations of dominant western social science research, with special attention to forms of representation and global ethical positioning. Her critique draws from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) that dismantled dominant modes of representing “the East.” Khalili addresses ways that western scholarship reproduces transnational hierarchies through wielding powerful categories and classifications of knowledge linked to imperial histories and contemporary global inequalities. Her essay strikes to the heart of epistemological questions about what we know that are tied to where we are located and how we are privileged. Khalili reminds researchers to be constantly aware of “where power lies” (2011:71). She writes that researchers should commit to “keeping in view all the time” the “overt and occulted power calculations sedimented in all documents — whether written or oral” (ibid: 74). Importantly, Khalili (2011:69) calls attention to “transnational epistemic communities,” networks of power that usually include the state and associated organizations – NGO’s and universities – connected through funding. This is the institutional nexus of knowledge, research and power. To her, epistemologies (ways of knowing) are repositories for relations of power and these may be masked by the use of different scholarly vocabularies (like narrativity, performativity, and objectivity.) She asks that researchers be constantly attentive to positioning their knowledge and especially aware of different combinations of asymmetry in power; among researchers and the subjects of “our ethnographies and histories,” among the subjects of research and their state; among the subjects of research and their relationships with global power structures; and the subjects of research and their relationships with their peers (ibid: 77). Leleh Khalili calls for ethical responsibility throughout the whole research process from our choice of methods to the politics of our interpretations, the content and forms of representation. Her attention to geo-political location and the ways knowledge travels through particular networks of power are increasingly relevant in contemporary cultural anthropology.

1.2. Epistemologies

Methodology begins and continues with choices entangled in the kinds of questions mentioned above. How do researchers think about the world and imagine their place in it? What are their beliefs about how things work? What theoretical explanations (i.e. generalizations about the world and things in it), do researchers hold to? All of this is epistemology, a theory of knowledge about what things can be known, about what constitutes knowledge and how it may be generated (see Guba and Lincoln 2004:22-37). Epistemology is related to ontology, to one’s understandings about reality, its form and nature and possibility. Ontological questions are those that ask what is true or real. To some extent, all research questions are framed by understandings about truth and this raises important distinctions between more positivist and more constructivist approaches.

Positivism is an approach to knowledge that asserts one knowable truth that is accessible through the application of structured approaches controlled by the researcher (usually, the scientific method, experimentation, hypothesis-testing and, various forms of quantitative measurement). Positivism and neo-positivist approaches state that
inquiry is value free and, that the results may then usually be applied in a general manner to wider populations or phenomena than those under original investigation (Hesse-Biber 2011). At the other end of a knowledge spectrum is Constructivism, a paradigm that acknowledges the existence of multiple, coexisting knowledges “depending on social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors that differentiate the interpreters. These constructions are subject to continuous revision...” (Guba and Lincoln 2004:31). Most researchers are thoughtful about their positions along this spectrum as their predilections lead to different ethical choices, ideas about authority, voice and what they consider to be acceptable modes of theory-building (ibid:29). In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), Clifford and Marcus proposed the term “partial truths” that recognizes findings (especially in ethnographic research), are particular to the research context and not generalizable to a larger world or intended to close down meaning by being a final word. Following Donna Haraway (1988), many in cultural anthropology acknowledge “situated knowledges” — understanding that truth and knowledge are partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational.

“Who is *we*?” (Rich 1984:231). A researcher’s epistemological stance is inevitably connected to their biography. Experiential knowledge informs the researcher’s positionality in a world that is gendered, aged, raced, classed, sexed, housed etc. Our realities are to some considerable degree, shaped by politics of difference, by our “place” (in all senses) within regions and nations and within ideological regimes and structures that affect how researchers perceive themselves and how others in the world perceive them. In cultural anthropology, a good deal of scholarship has been dedicated to understanding ways that positionality affects methodologies. Especially important is the practice of reflexivity developed by feminist scholars in the 1980’s.

*Reflexivity generates heightened awareness and vertigo, the creative intensity of a possibility that loosens us from habit and custom and turns us back to contemplate ourselves just as we may be beginning to realize that we have no clear idea of what we are doing. The experience may be exhilarating or frightening or both...* (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982:1).

Reflexivity is a kind of folding back onto ourselves; a constant state of awareness of the eyes we look through as researchers (Behar and Gordon 1995). This involves thinking about ourselves as individuals suspended in webs of power; as observers using approaches derived from particular constellations of knowledge; as individuals whose own life circumstances influence how we do research, what we believe and, how we interpret and represent phenomena. “Reflexive anthropology turns the fieldworker’s ongoing negotiation of his or her professional role into an object of study” (Sluka and Robben 2007:9). Within a practice often dependent upon insights and approaches developed by a single researcher, reflexive writing makes the researcher’s choices evident and outlines their research path thus, offering readers one way to assess the validity of the research. Sandra Harding calls this self-reflexive loop a form of “strong objectivity” (Harding 1995:18). As researchers work with people (or with the works and acts of people), they also have to be aware of the ontological positions and epistemological groundings of others. Conscious and unconscious assumptions about how things work in the world always affect research design. Some aspects of the world will be visible to some that are entirely invisible to others.
2. Ethics

Anthropologists [are] drawn into complicated terrains where our own ethical imagination intersects and rubs up against the ethical imagination of others (Muehlebach 2013: 305).

Anthropology developed within contexts of colonial expansion and exploitation (Asad 1973). Its approaches have been used in covert research projects commissioned by states and brought into military service in counterinsurgency efforts since the discipline’s inception (see Price 2013). In part because of this history and the subversive potential of its methods, the discipline has generated a robust internal dialogue about ethical practice (Lambek 2012). Anthropological approaches create “obligations that compel those who seek knowledge to put themselves on the line by making truth claims that they know will intervene within the settings and among the people they describe” (Rutherford 2012:465). Research has repercussions for people and we as researchers have professional and ethical responsibilities to ensure to the best of our abilities, that people with whom we work are not harmed. Perhaps the most important edict is to conduct no covert or deceptive research (see American Anthropological Association).

To the people with whom we work we owe disclosure of our research goals, our methods, and our sponsorship. What theoretical choices have we made? What ideological frameworks guide our work? What is the relationship among these and the worlds of those with whom we work? In what ways is our work political? Where do we stand as a researcher? These questions address the impact of structures of meaning imposed on material we collect. Our answers to them affect how “data” is interpreted and used – or not used. Research is a privileged activity. Customarily, the researcher selects the topic, the sites and the people with whom they wish to work. They choose theoretical perspectives imbued with images of peoples’ abilities to act in the world, or their capacities for change that may or may not be commensurate with self-definitions. Researchers have historically had control over the products of research and the intended audiences. Ethically, researchers and participants benefit by imagining their work together as political. Research generates knowledge that may be interpreted as “facts” capable of undermining local political projects or unwittingly bolstering agendas researchers are unaware of. Participants deserve to know where funding comes from and what obligations (of ownership, dissemination, publication, reporting, etc.) are attached to that funding. The agendas of sponsoring agencies and their interests in the lives of individuals and communities where research is conducted — matters. This is the realm of “epistemic communities” identified by Khalili (2011:69).

2.1. Responsibilities to Individuals

Throughout this chapter, I use the term participant to identify people with whom researchers engage. Changes in the way anthropology names the subjects in / of research are interesting to note as they reflect shifting power relationships. Early participants in research were called “informants” or “subjects,” depending on location “the Native.” Later, with the influence of critical theory, participants became “the Other” and “interlocutors;” within present contexts of engagement – they are “cultural experts,” “collaborators,” “colleagues” and sometimes, “co-authors.”
Cultural anthropologists enter into a number of relationships, juggling responsibilities to variously defined collectivities and to individuals. Given their potential vulnerability, researchers’ primary ethical responsibility is to individuals who must be well informed about potential risks of research. Voluntary and informed consent is a process that is dynamic and continuous. It involves constant dialogue with individuals to discuss expectations, activities and the (real and imagined) risks of research as it unfolds. Participants are informed of realistic consequences that may include social, political, and/or economic threats to their well being. Informed consent does not necessarily imply or require a written or signed form when this may be counter to local knowledge protocols or the politics of information flow. It is the quality of consent, not the format that is most important. In sites where consent forms are not appropriate, verbal consent is often acknowledged on audio/video recordings or in supporting statements by those who witness the initial act of consent. Regardless of the form, all research participants are entitled to ask questions and express concerns. They should be left with a way for them to contact the researcher and/or organizations or institutions with whom the researcher is affiliated, long after the project has ended.

As they enter into personal relationships with individuals, researchers must take seriously the importance of confidentiality. They are largely in control over what is made visible at the end of research; participants may or may not be included in the production and editing of final products. Interviewing in particular carries with it the risk of wider circulation of personal information—about stigmatizing conditions, political activities, health status, or gossip about others that may be harmful. Cultural anthropologists enter into ethical agreements to keep confidential all information deemed private—to not share this in their own social circles, with others in the community, with agencies or institutional bodies or authorities. As researchers we cannot guarantee anonymity (no way to be identified); research participants must be fully aware of what this might mean for them. The use of pseudonyms (made up names to conceal the identity of speakers) is one way to work with anonymity. But unbeknownst to researchers, small details may still identify participants to others, especially within small communities, social or professional networks. Rather than recording names, researchers often code and are directed by Research Ethic Boards (REBs) to digitally encrypt or number their research materials—audio and video recordings, fieldnotes, etc. Many participants are well aware of the dangers posed by revealing sensitive knowledge; they will refuse to speak about certain topics or tell only what they wish to safely share. Regardless of this awareness, it is the responsibility of the researcher to inform participants of these risks.
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ETHNOLOGY, ETHNOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY - Cultural Anthropology: Methodological Possibilities
- Leslie Robertson


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Schepers-Hughes, Nancy (1995). The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology. Current Anthropologist 36(3):409-440. [The author makes an argument for the problem of cultural relativism in anthropology, arguing that it amounts to weak stances of moral relativism at a time when anthropologists should be taking firm ethical ground as part of morally and politically engaged research.]


Sillitoe, Paul (ed.). (2007). Local Science vs. Global Science: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge in International Development, 288 pp. New York: Berghahn Books. [Drawing from a range of ethnographic examples and contexts and supported by discussions in science studies and environmental anthropology, this collection makes a case for the incorporation of local science and ways of knowing in power laden global international development projects.]


Sider, Gerald M. (2009). Can Anthropology Ever be Innocent? Anthropology Now 1(1): 43-50. [Commentary on the benevolent intentions of anthropological researchers and the disciplinary and methodological impetus that typically drives research on human subjects—In anthropology, these are often less powerful groups experiencing inequality or conditions of struggle.]


Stoler, Ann Laura. (2002). Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance. Archival Science 2:87-109. [Using the example of Dutch East Indies document production, this article prompts interrogation of the power of the archive. The author argues researchers’ engagement with archives should move beyond mere data mining or knowledge gathering to the study of the form of the archive itself as knowledge producer.]

knowledge producing, ordering and governance, through the production of the archive and its conventions.]

Stoler, Ann Laura (ed.). (2013). Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination, 378 pp. Durham / London: Duke University Press. [Through a focus on materials that make up lived landscapes with violent histories of conflict, the editor of this collection moves beyond the study of ruins to develop a concept of ruination: a material/affective process by which imperial power is continually exercised in the present.]


Sverker, Finnström. (2015). War Stories and Troubled Peace: Revisiting Some Secrets of Northern Uganda. Current Anthropology 56(12):222-230. [The author discusses participant observation in his field site of northern Uganda, where so often the realities of war remained unspoken, to demonstrate the challenges such situations present to an ethnographer’s efforts to gather, interpret, and represent the story of a people and place.]


Trinh, Minh-ha T. (1989). Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, 173 pp. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. [A literary-focused exploration of how women, and especially women of non-western societies, are studied and represented in scholarly research.]

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. (1995). Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 191 pp. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press. [A critical analysis of historical narrative. Demonstrates ways that power is enacted in the making of history as some perspectives are elevated while others are ‘silenced’ or go unreported. The author provides examples of major global events.]

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. (1990). Good Day Columbus: Silences, Power and Public History (1492–1892). Public Culture 3(1):1-24. [Using the example of the invention of the historical narrative of Columbus in the Americas, this article points to the workings of power that produce and naturalize particular versions of history.]


Varese, Stefano. (1997). Memories of Solidarity: Anthropology and the Indigenous Movement in Latin America. Cultural Survival Quarterly 21:3. [Historically traces the colonial relationship between European and American humanitarian scholars and indigenous peoples of Latin America, noting asymmetries and cultural misunderstandings that have been so difficult to surmount for scholars and activists, indigenous and non-indigenous alike].


Weidman, Amanda (2014). Anthropology and Voice. Annual Review of Anthropology 43:37-51. [A review of the concept of voice in scholarship of the last several decades. The author explores how attention to voice has related to anthropological approaches to identity and subjectivity, and argues this emphasis affords particular access to intimate, sensory and affective revelations about social life.]


Zeitlyn, David. (2012). Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41:461-480. [References major philosophical thinkers Derrida and Foucault to engage critiques of the archive as a knowledge creating tool. The author demonstrates power is exercised toward both hegemonic and subversive ends in productions and readings of the archive.]

Biographical Sketch

**Leslie Robertson** is an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Broadly, Robertson’s research examines the circulation of forms of social knowledge (public histories, academic theories and representations, colonial legends, medical discourses), in sensitive political and cultural contexts (settler colonialism, medical crises, resource extraction, tourism development). Recent research focuses on the afterlife of historical colonialism, how people from diverse cultural and social locations inhabit their histories, the imaginative resources they draw upon to speak about them, and the role of anthropology in translating and interpreting them. This includes attention to social projects linked to First Nations’ goals of self-determination: the re-inhabitance of histories and territories, naming practices, traditional food activism, and cultural impact research. Dr. Robertson has developed a critical interest in community-generated and collaborative methodologies.