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INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL TERMS FOR THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF RELIGION


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ABSTRACT

Religious studies is an interdisciplinary field encompassing a range of research methods and theoretical areas of analysis. Interest in ethnographic methodology has grown of late as scholars of religion with varying specialties and backgrounds have turned towards anthropology for inspiration on how best to analyze and interpret people’s variegated religious lives in the contemporary world. The special issue “Critical Terms for the Ethnography of Religion” considers eight key terms that are central to the conceptual grammar of the ethnographic method in order to highlight the opportunities and challenges this form of research offers the study of “lived religion”. By bringing together established scholars of religion who take ethnographic methodology seriously in their
work, this special issue offers readers an opportunity to think with colleagues from across the discipline about what is at stake in their approach to studying, analyzing and writing about religion from an ethnographic perspective.

**Keywords:** fieldwork; participant observation; data; interlocutors; subjectivity; ethics; writing; positionality; religious studies; ethnographic methods.

**Introduction**

It is not unusual for anthropologists in religious studies spaces to hear their work described as a kind of “magic” by historians of religion. While that description is often meant as a compliment, suggesting that something extraordinary has been produced by the ethnographer, it also mystifies the process of actually doing ethnography. Any seasoned ethnographer will tell you that however enchanted the final product might seem, doing ethnography is anything but magic—it is really hard work.

To be fair, explaining ethnography in simple terms is a fool’s errand. There are many ways of doing ethnography and any attempt at a specific definition runs the risk of foreclosing the vast area of theory and method anthropologists have come to consider “ethnographic”. In its broadest sense, ethnography refers both to a method of data collection (based primarily, though not exclusively, on participant observation) and a genre of analytical writing also called “ethnography” (typically a research report in narrative form). In addition to participant observation, the primary calling card of ethnographic research methods, ethnographers employ a range of qualitative and sometimes quantitative methods at their disposal from structured and unstructured interviews to demographic surveys, statistical sampling, genealogies, life histories, and more.

Ethnography can be distinguished from other qualitative methodologies through its diverse toolbox of procedures, its characteristically critical, self-reflexive mode of analysis, the collaborative often intimate relationships ethnographers cultivate with interlocutors, and the typically immersive, long-term commitment that ethnographers make to studying and working with a particular community. Although ethnographic fieldwork may include informal interviews or demographic surveys, it is not reducible to any one method alone which makes ethnography, on the one hand, extremely adaptable and comprehensive but, on the other, difficult to pin down. Furthermore, ethnography’s traditional focus on contextual knowledge and grasping the “native point of view” is remarkably unique. Taken together, these qualities differentiate ethnography in kind and capability from journalism, travel writing, memoir, historiography, or any other research or writing activity.
Though difficult to define precisely, ethnography is not an enigma. Ethnographic methodology is a discipline with formal techniques and procedures that require skills that can be learned and mastered over time. It also has a long history of revision and critical reflection. However varied and challenging ethnographic methods might be, there are, nevertheless, good and bad ways of doing ethnography. When ethnography is confused with magic, or misrepresented by those uninformed about the method, it underrates the time, resources and expertise required of ethnographers and undermines the value of the research they conduct. Promoting a more nuanced and detailed portrait of ethnographic methods in religious studies will hopefully illuminate for others what exactly ethnographers do and why they do it.

**Scope and Aim of this Collection**

Our aim in this special collection is to help scholars better understand ethnography as a research methodology in religious studies. There has undoubtedly been an explosion of interest in “doing ethnography” among scholars of religion in the past several decades, but what exactly is done as part of ethnographic research is not always adequately discussed, theorized or understood. Novices aspiring to do ethnographic research often think that what one does is simply talk to people, but anyone who has done the work in any serious or sustained way will readily attest that things are never quite that simple. Conversations are complex things, after all, and there is much work that must be done before they can become the basis of scholarly understanding (not to mention the various forms of labor that one must engage in to open purposeful dialogue in the first place). Our hope is that readers, whether they are students just starting out or established scholars seeking to add ethnographic methods to their research, will find in these articles a set of guideposts for how to do and think about that work.

That being said, this collection is not intended to be a programmatic manual or even a set of “best practices” for the ethnography of religion. We have framed the articles as critical reflections on various key aspects of ethnographic research as a means to promote further theorization of how ethnography contributes to the interdisciplinary study of religion. They are therefore open-ended, provocative and geared toward stimulating thoughtful reflection on the critical practice of ethnography in ways that we hope readers will find generative. Although the articles may be read individually, having their own distinct voice and contribution, they are arranged to be read together in an ordered sequence. Perusing the varying perspectives and experiences of diverse ethnographers alongside one another highlights the strength of ethnography as a rich and expansive, albeit subjective, research discipline.
**Structure of the Collection**

The articles in this special issue grew out of a roundtable session held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion convened in San Antonio, Texas on November 21, 2021. Co-sponsored by the *Anthropology of Religion* and *Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion* units, we conceived of the session as an opportunity for seasoned ethnographers of religion to offer critical reflections on the craft of ethnographic research. We invited a handful of scholars whose work we greatly admire and settled on the format of assigning each participant a “key term” for critical reflection so that each would have the opportunity to make their own unique but structured contribution to the larger discussion. This had the advantage of providing a starting point for examining the constitutive elements of ethnography that we wished to expand into the publication you see here. Although we recognize that our list of critical terms is far from exhaustive, and that other scholars might well have engaged with the terms we included in significantly different ways, by structuring the collection in this way, we aim to capture something of the scope of what ethnographic research on religion encompasses, beginning with the commitments an ethnographer makes to beginning a project, through the process of finding one’s footing in the field, through refinements of a project in progress, up to the process of writing up one’s ethnographic findings and beyond.

In “Fieldwork”, Brendan Thornton problematizes the temporality of ethnographic research. He notes that while expectations about how much time ethnography takes varies due to disciplinary expectations, personal circumstances, and myriad other factors, what ultimately credible and responsible ethnographic work entails is a serious investment of time and energy. He warns that abbreviated fieldwork may run afoul of ethical obligations that ethnographers have to research participants while potentially jeopardizing the reliability of the empirical data they collect. Nonetheless, temporal constraints on research are inevitable, which creates a dilemma for ethnographers that might only be mitigable through long-term fieldwork and a vested commitment to interlocutors over time.

Kristy Nabhan-Warren’s reflections on ethnography’s key method of “Participant Observation” show that doing ethnography is rarely as romantic as reading about it can make it seem. Ethnography is an embodied process, which means that ethnographers do not just sit and listen, they also have to experience all manner of things, including, for example, crawling through dirt or being splattered by animal viscera. Nonetheless, it is precisely one’s willingness to be open to novel experiences, even those that are uncomfortable, humiliating, or even dangerous, that the ethnographer can put themself in a position to learn about others.

Finding ways to turn one’s experience as a participant observer into something that can be analyzed as “Data” is the subject of Eric Hoenes del Pinal’s
Data, he argues, is not something that exists inherently, nor is it always entirely obvious what the important information one finds during fieldwork will be. Rather, data is something that coalesces when an ethnographer begins to sort through, categorize and examine their observational experiences through various interpretive lenses. Finding one’s data is something that requires not just legwork, but conceptual work as well, and it can sometimes even emerge long after one has ceased formal fieldwork.

Lauren Leve tackles the term “Interlocutors” by drilling down into the various categories that ethnographers use to refer to the people they interview, consult, befriend, observe and study. Reminding us that concepts themselves are never passive or inconsequential but always evocative and political, she complicates ethnographers’ reliance on terms like “interlocutor” which privilege oral communication over other relational and metacommunicative practices that may be more embodied or material. Interviews alone, she warns, cannot be the final word on ethnographic practice, suggesting that participatory experience is essential to ethnography precisely because norms of communication are culturally variable and frequently metalinguistic.

Christopher Taylor’s article addresses the issue of “Ethics” head on, both as a question of method and as an object of inquiry. The two come together in his encounter with the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and his attempt to study inconspicuous or “secret” almsgiving in Muslim north India. He highlights the fact that not only does studying secrets pose a challenging ethical question for ethnographers, both personally and professionally, but secrets are also themselves representative of everyday ethics and therefore may usefully be analyzed as data along with other cultural phenomena. Taylor reminds us that the question of ethics is central to ethnography and as indispensable to field researchers as their notebooks, cameras or recording devices.

In her essay on “Subjectivity”, Fadeke Castor plays with her own subject position as she thinks with and about other subjects in the field and their multiple subjectivities. She does so to question traditional assumptions about the boundedness and indivisibility of the observer/observed relationship in ethnography. Drawing insight from an unexpected encounter from her fieldwork, Castor highlights how several genres of scholarship may offer possibilities for rethinking the limits of subjectivity and the stakes it could have on field research in religion.

The ethical and intellectual entanglements of turning ethnography, in the sense of research, into ethnography, in the sense of text, are at the heart of Jessica Johnson’s contribution. She argues that, at its best, ethnographic “Writing” is an extension of the dialogical processes at the heart of ethnography. Ethnographic texts invite their reader to be part of the larger encounter between the researcher

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and their subjects, and, seen in this light, ethnographic writing is much more than narration or reportage, it is itself a practice of critique.

In the collection’s final essay, Stephen Selka addresses the ethnographer’s duty to think reflexively about their own “Positionality”. Although it has by now become normal practice for ethnographers to write about their positionality, the point of doing so is not to offer the writer a venue for self-expression, but rather to ensure that our ethnographic encounters are situated within the larger social realities we inhabit. By examining his shifting positionality over the course of decades of research, Selka invites readers to consider how one’s ethnographic encounters may take on a different character over time due to factors ranging from the simple fact of aging to complex changes in global politics.

Although each of us do our ethnographic work in different cultural and religious settings and come to our projects with varying questions and theoretical commitments, we all situate our work at the intersection of anthropology and religious studies, and as such, our perspectives overlap in significant ways. Reading across the articles one will find intertextual linkages and common concerns, and one may also identify certain aspects of the ethnography of religion that perhaps deserve their own reflections. As a means of concluding this introduction we offer a few remarks in that direction.

### Process

Ethnographies as texts often occlude the processual nature of ethnography as a research method. At least since Malinowski’s time, ethnographers have included in their written work short narratives about how they arrived in the field, and occasionally, too, how some key discovery was made (usually via an “ethnographic vignette”), but they rarely disclose much about the journey of getting to the field, how perspectives and goals changed once there, or how retrospectively they have come to re-evaluate their work. Yet, as the articles here show, doing ethnography is very much a process. Thornton and Nabhan-Warren’s essays urge ethnographers to be clear-eyed about the investments of time and energy (physical, intellectual and emotional) that responsible ethnographic work demands. Hoenes del Pinal, Castor and Taylor build their articles around moments during their research when they found they had to reevaluate some of the unstated assumptions and categories they brought with them to the field. In a slightly different vein, Leve and Selka show the value of periodically revisiting the terms and categories that ethnographers use to think about their encounters with research subjects. Finally, Johnson reminds us that even the finished products of ethnographic research have afterlives, and that just because something is written down as text
does not mean that it ceases to be generative. Taken together, the articles prompt us to remember that if the ethnographic method is to live up to its promise of challenging our assumptions about the universality of our own perspectives, then ethnographers must also habitually challenge themselves to critically reassess what it is that they do and how they go about doing it.

**Responsibility**

It is hard to understate the extent to which ethnographers come to be indebted to their interlocutors while doing fieldwork. Debts big and small, material and emotional, accrue as part of the intersubjective process of researching someone else's lifeworld(s), and ethnographers come to feel a great sense of responsibility to do justice to the people we meet in the field. These articles address the various responsibilities of ethnography in a number of ways. Taylor's article offers the most sustained discussion of the ethnographer's ethical obligations, but that theme is also present in Thornton's discussion about the need to strive for fidelity in fieldwork, Nabhan-Warren’s assertion that what differentiates ethnographers from other kinds of researchers is that “we’re in it for the long haul”, and in Leve’s discussion of the terms that ethnographers use to refer to their interlocutors. The challenges of acting as a kind of “mediator” (Selka) that facilitates “the project of sharing worlds” (Castor) are many and to get it right one must periodically revaluate one’s subjectivity/-ies and positionality. The responsibilities involved in collecting, analyzing and explicating the entanglements of religion—which can often be highly sensitive and especially complex—are thematized by Hoenes del Pinal and Johnson. All the articles within this special issue remind us that doing ethnographic research requires certain commitments to the communities we study, and that we should not enter into them lightly.

**The Future of Ethnography**

Our roundtable discussion was originally scheduled to take place in November 2020, but the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that it was postponed for a year and that when we finally did gather, we did so largely thanks to modern video-conferencing technology. As we have all no doubt learned over the past two years, participating in this kind of discussion over video conferencing poses at least as many challenges as it offers opportunities. During this time, too, many ethnographers have struggled with what it might mean to do ethnographic research under the pandemic or in a hoped for, but seemingly constantly delayed, post-pandemic world. If the ideal of conducting long-term, face-to-face fieldwork is no longer viable, then what new methods or approaches should scholars adopt
in its place? As Nabhan-Warren sees it, there are distinct advantages to letting go
of older models, not the least of which is that it allows us to recalibrate the power
dynamics of ethnographic research to be more equitable. Relying less on being in
close bodily proximity with our interlocutors for extended periods of time may
actually facilitate some of the conversations and exchanges of knowledge that
are at the heart of ethnography. How exactly we do so is left open for debate, but
these articles provide certain clues about the fundamental issues we need to have
in mind as we re-imagine ethnography for the future. If fieldwork as a single long-
term stay is not possible or desirable, how then should we go about building bind-
ing relationships with our interlocutors? In what ways might new technologies
afford new venues for participant observation or help generate new forms of data
less predicated on bodily entanglements? How might those technologies and the
contexts in which we use them also help us to further interrogate or problematize
our own subjectivities or positionalities qua researchers? Might the problems and
possibilities that all of this raises actually help us create a more ethical and equi-
table kind of ethnography, both as a kind of praxis and as a kind of text?

One thing is certain, the answers to these questions will not appear with the
wave of a wand; it is our hope, however, that with sustained study and reflection,
there is a chance that the keywords explored here will help unlock the means to
answering these questions and many more.