how to read ETHNOGRAPHY

Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle
How to Read Ethnography

*How to Read Ethnography* is an invaluable guide to approaching anthropological texts. Laying bare the central conventions of ethnographic writing, it helps students to develop a critical understanding of texts and explains how to identify and analyse the core ideas in order to apply these ideas to other areas of study. Above all it enables students to read ethnographies anthropologically and to develop an anthropological imagination of their own. Combining lucid explanations with selections from key texts, this excellent guide is ideal reading for those new to the subject or in need of intellectual refreshment.

- Includes excerpts from key ethnographies
- Offers balanced and progressive reader activities and exercises
- Provides reading exercises, a glossary and full chapter summaries
- Teaches an independent approach to the study of anthropology.

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How to Read Ethnography

Paloma Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle
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We are very grateful to Catherine Alexander for her useful and insightful comments on the last draft of this book. We also thank Keith Hart and Joanna Overing for their incisive comments on various chapters, and Jane Cowan for her suggestions regarding our treatment of her piece. Deema Kaneff came to our rescue at the very end when a small family crisis meant we were about, once again, to be late with our delivery. As always, we are in debt to her. We are very grateful to Juan Serrano and Iona Dobson who relieved us of some childcare duties and gave us much needed time to complete the project, also to Mhairi Aitkenhead and Orchid Liu who worked very hard preparing the excerpts. Finally, it was thanks to Lesley Riddle, Senior Editor at Routledge, and to her determination, that we got on with the job.

We are grateful for the permissions to reprint excerpts from the following texts:


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University of St Andrews
April 2006
A note on the use of words in bold

Throughout the book some words are highlighted in **bold type**. The meaning of these words, or our usage of them, is explained in the Glossary. Words are usually highlighted in bold only the first time they appear in the text or the first time they appear in a particular discussion.
This book is a guide to reading ethnography aimed at those new to the subject or in need of intellectual refreshment. In it we lay bare the central, often implicit, codes, conventions and concerns of ethnographic writing, and explore how anthropologists use them to create and transmit knowledge about diverse experiential worlds. We provide readers with the skills to analyse ethnographic texts, and guide them through an investigation into distinctive qualities of anthropological knowledge.

Anthropology textbooks have traditionally taken one of two approaches: either they introduce students to the core themes and concepts in anthropological writing to date or they summarise the theoretical standpoints of the various schools of anthropological thought. Our perspective is different: rather than presenting information, we focus on enabling our audience to read ethnography critically and to think anthropologically. We do this by submitting ethnographic texts to the anthropological gaze, and unpacking them as we would any other cultural product. By teaching our readers how to analyse ethnographies anthropologically, we help them to understand what kind of knowledge ethnography is, as well as to develop an anthropological imagination of their own.

Our starting point is the conviction that ethnographic writing constitutes a valuable and distinctive way of asking and answering a recurrent question – ‘what does it mean to be human?’ Writers of ethnography approach this issue in a unique manner, taking their field experiences as their starting point and framing them in terms of anthropological standards, concepts and debates. The ethnographic arguments that result draw from, and contribute to, wider flows and eddies of the human conversation. Of course, there is a striking multiplicity of modes of writing and even conceptualising ethnography. Some authors view anthropology as a science and ethnography as the tool that helps it deliver objective representations of society. For others, ethnographic writing is akin to literature and art, and introspection and self-reflection should predominate over the search for objectivity. Yet others attempt to find a middle ground, stressing the subjectivity of their accounts but nonetheless trying to produce
communicable knowledge of particular social and cultural worlds. But, in spite of these and other variations, we argue that there are more than superficial resemblances between what different anthropologists achieve in their writing. There are key concerns and techniques to written ethnography present across a continuum of aims and values and styles. It is these elements that form the basis for anthropological dialogues and expressions of difference, thereby providing an intellectual core to our discipline. And it is by uncovering these commonalities, and by investigating this tension between diversity and cohesion, that in this book we explore what makes ethnography a distinctive way of knowing and representing the world.

By the same token, it is by learning to identify how these concerns and techniques play out in specific texts that you will learn how to read ethnography. Reading ethnography involves more than being able to glean information about a particular group, an activity, or a theory: it entails taking an anthropological approach to ethnographic texts. And this implies being able to elucidate how a text embodies the aims and cultural assumptions that support anthropology as a discipline; how an ethnography adheres to, or attempts to challenge, the shared codes and conventions of the ethnographic genre; and how it evidences the social and cultural conditions under which it was produced. It is the breadth of response across these three domains that gives us very different ethnographic writings, but which also provides a unity that distinguishes ethnography from other ways of recounting human experience such as novels, travel accounts, or even texts produced in sister disciplines like sociology or human geography. By negotiating these three domains, writers of ethnography make their own distinctive contribution to the discipline and establish their originality.

The problem is that these aims and assumptions, these codes, conventions, and conditions are rarely made explicit in ethnographies themselves. They are often difficult to identify, not just for readers, but for writers too. In Tony Crook’s words, ethnographic writing, like other knowledge practices, is governed by a ‘powerful aesthetic that is taken for granted’ by its practitioners (2006: 358). Although the capacity to reproduce this aesthetic is demanded of all writers of ethnography – in other words, they must write ethnography that looks and feels right – Crook tells us that ‘the skill is never explicitly put into words’ (ibid.). Authors learn to write ethnography by trial and error, and also by repeated exposure to other ethnographic texts – that is, by reading ethnography. But what is true of the capacity to write ethnography is also true of the ability to read it: students of anthropology are not usually taught how to read ethnographies; they are expected to develop the know-how by themselves, and the cycle perpetuates itself. Most importantly, the ethnographic text tends to be treated as either a vehicle for the transmission of information or a mere literary production: it is rarely considered as an apparatus for the creation of knowledge.
In this book we consider the role of ethnographic writing in the production of anthropological knowledge, addressing a series of questions that are fundamental, not only to reading ethnography, but to anthropology at large. What are the shared concerns and understandings that make communication and debate among anthropologists of the most different persuasions possible? How can readers identify how these concerns mould ethnographic texts? And also, what are the technical and stylistic principles upon which our discipline is based? How do writers of ethnography reproduce these in their work? The structure of the book follows our unravelling of these questions. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 examine what we believe are the basic concerns addressed in all ethnographic texts. These are:

(i) the concern with understanding different cultural or social life worlds by reference to each other, that is to say, through comparison;
(ii) the need, which follows from the comparative outlook, to contextualise; to show how the differences thrown up through comparison have meaning within a relevant mutual framing of context and detail;
(iii) the objective of showing that the life world in question displays elements of pattern or logic that helps explain why people might act in this way, or speak in that. This is a deepening of the process of contextualisation.

Chapters 4 and 5 proceed to examine the distinctive stylistic devices, techniques of processing information and modes of argument that anthropologists use to address the concerns we have just described. We focus on (i) how anthropologists portray lived experience; and (ii) how they shape this portrayal through positioning the ethnography as an argument. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 open up the discussion by considering the social and cultural settings within which ethnographies are produced. We examine (i) the relationship between ethnographic texts and their audiences; as well as (ii) the creation of an authorial or authoritative ethnographic voice that this involves. This discussion in turn leads to a consideration of (iii) how ethnographic texts relate to each other and to disciplinary conversations, big and small. In the Conclusion we argue that ethnographic writing delivers a distinct kind of knowledge. We explore in detail what this knowledge involves and the continuing importance of ethnography for a conversation about what it means to be human.

**Ethnographic concerns**

Writers of ethnography attempt to make the ways of living and thinking of particular groups of people intelligible to their readers, no matter how foreign or incomprehensible, or how familiar and taken-for-granted, these practices may appear at first. Faced with a new field of language and
behaviour, anthropologists unavoidably start by setting it against what they are familiar with – that is, they compare. They compare what they see and live through in the field against their own lives, ideas and expectations. Because they write for an audience, they perforce set their object of study against parameters comprehensible to their readers. And, because they write within a tradition, using anthropological knowledge and debate as their point of reference, they also compare what they learn about the people they study against the knowledge of other groups that they have obtained through their familiarity with anthropology as a way of thinking, talking and writing. Thus, not only are ethnographic descriptions always comparative, but the very concepts and analytical tools that anthropologists use to mould these descriptions and construct their arguments are also premised on, and designed to enable, comparison. And so in Chapter 1 we examine this centrality of comparison to the anthropological worldview, outlining the various kinds of comparisons writers of ethnography make, and how to identify their role in a particular text.

If comparison is the first stage and strategy through which writers of ethnography attempt to make sense for their audiences of very different ways of knowing and behaving, contextualisation, the topic of Chapter 2, is the second. In order to explain actions and meanings that may initially appear inexplicable – either because their foreignness challenges explanation or because they are so familiar that explanation appears superfluous – all writers establish social and cultural contexts for them. They ask their readers to lay aside their immediate response and instead learn to appreciate the specific instance as it takes its place in, or embodies in itself, a particular context. As with the weave of a cloth, the smallest detail is only meaningful when considered as an aspect of a pattern, but the pattern itself is an elaboration of integral details. In Chapter 2, then, we consider the ways context is deployed in ethnographic writing, examining how writers of ethnography establish the distance between significant detail and contextual frame, and how they understand and interpret one by reference to the other.

The work of explaining lived experience with regard to context depends on the awareness that human life is inherently relational in character – that it is built out of relationships, for example between husbands and wives, among workmates, between leaders and followers, and so on. In Chapter 3 we explain how ethnographers examine the many different relationships we all engage in, investigating what they tell us about broader social and cultural dynamics. Writers of ethnography aim to abstract a pattern of relationships from one-off statements and ways of behaving, and go on to use this abstract delineation to make sense of specific instances and details. They also look for the relationships – both links and discontinuities – between different areas and levels of experience, for example between what people do and what they say they do, between
activities and rationalisations. And they often focus on their own relationships with others during fieldwork in order to gain further analytical perspective on a context.

**The distinctiveness of ethnography**

In order to initiate the study of others, then, writers of ethnography must compare. In order to unveil the purposes and significance of an activity or a belief, they must contextualise. And for this same reason, they must also consider meaning and action relationally, understanding how their interplay shapes the quality of life among a particular group of people. Comparison, contextualisation of a life world, and an exposition of the relationships involved – these are the central prisms through which writers of ethnography look at the world. And yet, none is unique to ethnography. Below, we include excerpts from two very different books, both novels, whose authors attempt to create for their readers particular social and cultural worlds by deploying these same three strategies.

In the first excerpt, from *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton (2006 [1920]) tells the reader about the New York upper class into which she was born. The novel is set in the 1870s, and in the passage below Wharton describes a dinner attended by Newland Archer, a young man from a respectable family, and Countess Ellen Olenska, the disgraced woman he has fallen in love with:

The dinner was somewhat a formidable business. Dining with the van der Luydens was at best no light matter, and dining there with a Duke who was their cousin was almost a religious solemnity. It pleased Archer to think that only an old New Yorker would perceive the shade of difference (to New York) between being merely a Duke and being the van der Luyden’s Duke. . . . It was just for such distinctions that the young man cherished his old New York even whilst he smiled at it. . . .

When the men joined the ladies after dinner the Duke went straight up to the Countess Olenska, and they sat down in a corner and plunged in animated talk. Neither seemed aware that the Duke should first have paid his respects to Mrs Lovell Mingott and Mrs Headly Chivers, and the Countess have conversed with that amiable hypochondriac, Mr Urban Dagonet of Washington Square who, in order to have the pleasure of meeting her, had broken through his fixed rule of not dining out between January and April.

(Wharton 2006: 43–4)

Wharton’s ironic narration provides a meticulous anatomy of New York upper-class society. She emphasises the peculiarity and arbitrariness of New
York moral conventions as witnessed by Archer, who is able to reflect on them but who nonetheless submits to their restraining effect. Wharton uses Archer’s relationship with Countess Olenska to highlight for the reader the distinctiveness of old New York; conversely, Archer’s life is given meaning by reference to this distinctiveness. Detail and context are carefully intertwined as interpretation. Wharton uncovers for us the organising principles behind the specific relationships that she describes, allowing us to understand the life of old New Yorkers in general and, more specifically, Archer’s motives and behaviour (the moral values that he has internalised and cannot ultimately escape; his inability to leave his wife). The end result is a compelling reconstruction of a world premised on the awareness that mores are culturally specific even as they appear absolute and necessary to those who live by them.

A similar emphasis on the cultural specificity of morality also runs through the next excerpt, from Richard Morgan’s (2002) *Altered Carbon*. Morgan imagines a future in which human consciousnesses are storable and transferable from one body (or ‘sleeve’*) to another. In the excerpt below the protagonist, a hitman called Takeshi Kovacs, has just witnessed the reunion of a young black man, newly downloaded into a white middle-aged body, with his wife and children. Kovacs remembers his own father:

The cleaning robot trundled off and I went back to the graffiti. . . . [H]igh on the bench’s backrest and chiselled upside down, like a tiny pool of inverted calm in all the rage and desperate pride, I found a curious haiku in Kanji:

Pull on the new flesh like borrowed gloves

*And burn your fingers once again.*

. . . I rolled my head to an empty quadrant of the hall. My own father had walked right past his waiting family and out of our lives when he was re-sleeved. We never even knew which one he was, although I sometimes wonder if my mother didn’t catch some splinter of recognition in an averted gaze, some echo of stance or gait as he passed. I don’t know if he was too ashamed to confront us, or more likely too set up with the luck of drawing a sleeve sounder than his own alcohol-wrecked body had been, and already plotting a new course for other cities and younger women.

(Morgan 2002: 234–5; original italics)

Like Wharton, Morgan plays with comparison, and *Altered Carbon* revolves around the notion that there might be infinite social and cultural possibilities. By recounting Kovacs’ life, Morgan highlights to us the idiosyncratic character of our own world, and it is our intuitive understanding of our own society that works as the final reference point for the imagined future of the novel. We are presented with a complex of actions
and expressions that are only meaningful against very specific social and cultural patterns familiar to ourselves. Once again, the protagonist’s moods and choices are used to explain the singularity of his society, but in turn can only be understood if this society itself is contextualised, its relational pattern exposed.

If cultural comparison, contextualisation and analysis of relationships are so important to other kinds of writing about human experience, such as fiction, why have we argued that they are what makes ethnographic writing distinctive? Because they take a particular shape in ethnography, and because they are deployed for a very specific, and distinctly ethnographic, end. Read through the excerpt below, from Henrietta Moore’s (1986) ethnography Space, Text and Gender, a study of a social group called the Endo who live in Kenya. In her book, Moore presents an argument about how the relationship between Endo men and women is mediated by their symbolic use of space. Here she focuses on a crucial element of Endo spatial thinking, the hearth and, more specifically, the ash that comes from it.

The following incident involved two girls from Sibou village, and was observed during the early morning cleaning of the house and compound:

Chepkore is removing ash from the fireplace. Using a flattened tin, she scoops the ashes into a wooden container and leaves the house to go to the ash placement. On the way she meets a friend, Jerop, and, in jest, she tilts the ash container towards her friend. Jerop starts back and laughs.

This simple sequence of events appears unsurprising to a Western observer. Gestures of mock aggression, particularly involving substances considered ‘messy’ or ‘dirty’, are recognisable indicators of a degree of friendship and intimacy. However, this particular sequence of events can only be understood with reference to a series of associations linked with the element of ash. The Endo say that only woman can remove ash from the hearth: a statement which confirms the identity of the woman with the home, hearth and cooking. It is, however, at the same time an implicit recognition of the destructive ‘power’ of ash – a power which derives from an association between ash and the socially and sexually destructive aspects of womanhood. Ash in its destructive capacity is harmful to men and to male interests. It would, therefore, be unthinkable for a man to remove ash from the hearth. When Chepkore ‘threatens’ her friend with the ash, the same destructive connotation is invoked. The destructive quality is compounded by the fact that ash is also associated with sterility. This link is made by the simple fact that if a girl wishes to refuse marriage, then she will cover herself in ash. The Endo say that this act signifies her desire for the ‘death’ and/or sterility of the proposed union.

(Moore 1986: 117)
Moore goes on to describe further, positive, connotations of ash, including its linkage with female sexuality and creativity, and its significance within a picturing of the fertility of the clan as a whole. She finishes by drawing some theoretical conclusions from the fact that, for the Endo, ash can mean many different things:

I have shown that, as a symbol, ash has distinct polysemic qualities and can be used to represent a number of different concepts and perceptions, in a variety of contexts. However, this multivocality is not the product of an inherent ambiguity of meaning which permits constant metaphorical expansion. The ‘meaning’ of ash cannot be reinterpreted in any particular context, just because it is so brimful of ambiguity that it at once means everything and nothing. The metaphorical extension of meaning is only possible on the basis of recognition of a more literal meaning. This literal or primary meaning gives access to a series of secondary meanings or significations.

(Moore 1986: 118)

Here Moore is using her Endo material to enter a long-standing anthropological conversation regarding symbols, how they work, and what roles they play in social and cultural life. She deploys concepts – multivocality, polysemic, metaphorical, context – whose meanings have been honed through debate, and she puts forward her analysis as a contribution to this discussion. The distinctiveness of her position is clear to readers who are familiar with the ideas and theories that Moore is discussing.

At this stage – and all these features will be explored in greater depth as this book unfolds – we can contrast Moore’s ethnography with the two novels above on a number of points. First, this particular ethnographic text is driven by explicit comparison: Moore tells the reader that, beyond typical Western assumptions, a further field of associations needs to be addressed and she lists them as items to be taken into account. Second, in the ethnography the process of contextualisation and interpretation is likewise opened up primarily for intellectual consideration rather than for intuitive-aesthetic appreciation as in the novels. We are, in effect, being asked to try out the feasibility of Moore’s analysis and not merely of her description. By the same token, Moore presents us with evidence in that her account is being put forward as partial substantiation of an overall argument. Last, in her writing Moore responds to the theoretical viewpoints and ethnographic descriptions of other anthropologists and takes an authorial stance with regard to these. The result is that, as readers, we are not asked to suspend our disbelief in order to engage with the alternative world on offer here, as we are in Altered Carbon and The Age of Innocence. On the contrary, we will hold the ethnographer answerable for the factuality of what she says, even while we use our aesthetic and
imaginative senses to enter her account. As we argue in the Conclusion, this basis in true knowledge is crucial but it is also only one aspect of ethnographic knowledge taken in the round. By providing a full account of an experiential life world, ethnography can also deliver a provocation to established ways of understanding what it means to be human. And beyond this, it can have a liberating role, freeing us to think outside our ingrained expectations concerning society, the self and human nature.

**Shaping ethnography**

Ethnography, then, is never just recollection: it is a reflection on, an examination of, and an argument about experience made from a particular standpoint, one that responds to questions which have their roots in the history of anthropological thinking. Because ethnographic writing involves a reshaping of experience in order to address anthropological conversations, all ethnographers need to consider the gap between the text and the lived reality that they try to explain. There is a tension between the chaos and diversity of experience and the transcription of that experience in a text, between life and analysis, that every author must deal with. Moreover, because ethnographers set out to make anthropological claims, because they draw on anthropological concepts and discussions, there is always a distance between the knowledge of experience put forward in ethnography and the local ways of knowing and making sense of the world that the ethnography is trying to explain. All ethnography, then, is moulded by the inevitability of dealing with the gaps between life and text, and between local and anthropological perspectives. And all ethnographers need to make decisions as to how to represent these gaps and how to bridge them.

In Chapter 4 we discuss how anthropologists transform experience into analysis by way of narrative, and how their narrations of the immediacy of everyday life are shaped by the need to deliver ethnographic knowledge and contribute to anthropological conversations. We discuss how contrasting narrative styles serve different ends in ethnographic texts, from highly uniform descriptions of collective life to fleeting notations of a personal response to particular situations. These varied kinds of account emerge from their authors’ particular engagement with anthropology and its history, and as such are mediated by anthropological debates and concerns. Narratives of the immediate, thereby, function as the building blocks of anthropological claims to knowledge.

We go on to examine in Chapter 5 the processes through which, in ethnographic texts, experience becomes evidence and evidence is conjoined as argument. We show that ethnographic arguments, and hence ethnographies themselves, are always positioned relationally *vis-à-vis* others. The argument of an ethnography, which sometimes becomes condensed in the
form of a key concept, is invariably presented with regard to the arguments of other anthropologists. The use of conceptual or jargon terminology in ethnographies has to be understood with this in mind: anthropologists use conceptual terminology in order to make their fieldwork experience relevant to a broader anthropological conversation.

It is, then, by drawing on anthropological debates, concepts, and analytical tools that writers of ethnography make sense of what they have seen and lived through in the field. No matter how close anthropological styles and aims may be to those of non-anthropologists, and in spite of the many undeniable continuities between ethnographic and other kinds of writing, it is this framing of ethnography within anthropological debate that sets it apart from other genres. The recognition that ethnographic texts always engage anthropology as a body of knowledge and discussion, that they take on their wider meaning as contributions to a broader anthropological conversation, is taken up in detail in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

In Chapter 6 we explore the relationship between the ethnography and the broader context within which it is written, taking as our starting point the idea that the two, the text and its context, are in fact inseparable. Because ethnographies are written by individuals who are socially and culturally situated and engaged, the context is always part of the text’s very fabric. We analyse the interweaving of text and context by examining the ways ethnographers present their writings for an assumed audience. We also examine how the intellectual climate at the time an ethnography is written shapes its production from fieldwork onwards, and finish by considering wider social, cultural and political milieus and their impact on the production of ethnographic texts.

Because ethnographers are social actors writing within particular socio-cultural contexts and for specific audiences, ethnographic authorship has to be seen as relational. And indeed, in Chapter 7 we argue that it is out of constellations of relationships in the field and in the academy that writers emerge as authors – that is, as agents with the capacity to know, represent and analyse. And yet, in ethnographic texts this authorial agency is not always openly displayed or asserted: it is often hidden and disclaimed. So we trace the ambiguation of agency in ethnographic texts and argue that it works to reaffirm the authority of the author. Ultimately, the ethnographer as author will be answerable for their text as knowledge.

Chapter 8 places these issues again within a wider framework. Ethnographies exist as contributions to larger anthropological conversations. Certainly, for the anthropologist, their ethnography will exist as only one kind of utterance amongst others – lectures and tutorials, graduate supervisions and informal chats. Here we explore features of this anthropological dialogue. While the history of anthropology is often taught as the supplanting of one kind of theoretical paradigm by another, and anthropologists typically write as if this were the case, the actual circulation of
anthropological knowledge is much less squarely cut. A richer understanding is gained by exploring the ethnography as the expression of relationships that an ethnographer has entered into at certain times and the pattern of intellectual commitment thereby formed. Rather than looking at the ethnography from the top down, as the product of a school of thought, we explore the continuing movement back and forth between personal intellectual commitment and the bigger and smaller conversations of anthropology.

How we wrote this book and how to use it

This book was written by two practising anthropologists/ethnographers: Paloma Gay y Blasco, whose primary research has been with and about Roma in Spain; and Huon Wardle, who has worked in and on urban Jamaica. One is of Spanish, the other of English background, both of us teach anthropology in Scotland. We mention this to emphasise the differing perspectives we inevitably bring to this book, and the degree to which these are blended in it. Just as ethnographic writing is always part of conversations, this book itself is the result of a dialogue between us in which we evaluate, not only the writings of others, but our own sense of ourselves as anthropologists and writers of ethnography. We have wanted to convey this feeling of an open-ended conversation through our organization of this book, particularly through the way key themes are introduced from one perspective and then re-explored within others as the text unfolds. It should be stated that we have not always agreed on what the priorities of ethnography or anthropology are, and this is still true even as we add the last words and corrections.

The core chapters in the book, 1 through to 8, are made up of excerpts from ethnographies published in English, in-depth commentary on these excerpts, and a cumulative argument derived from both. Here we are not primarily concerned with exposing the chronology of anthropological ideas, nor with putting forward another discussion of schools of thought in anthropology and their contrary perspectives on social life. Instead, and as we have already explained, we are looking for the common thematic and stylistic elements characteristic of ethnography. And so in each chapter we mix together texts of very varied theoretical orientations, written at different times by academics from diverse scholarly traditions.

Even though we have cast our net wide, we have inevitably and often fallen back on ethnographic selections that were familiar to us, written by anthropologists whose work we know well, sometimes made known to us by people who have taught us anthropology, or with whom we have collegial relationships. In other words, many of the ethnographies highlighted in this book were authored by figures we consider important or interesting given the pattern of our lives as professional anthropologists. Others we
simply have found illustrate a point or a trend particularly well. We can hardly claim, then, that the ethnographic extracts we base our discussion on here are representative in some general or absolute sense; the amount of ethnography written by anthropologists and its thematic and historical diversity precludes that. Instead we have created a *heuristic* picture based partly on our response as readers, partly on our expectations as anthropologists and partly on our practice as ethnographers. Likewise, given a central strand of our argument, we cannot pretend that the scope of this book stands somehow outside the delimited pattern of social relationships characterising our lives as academics. And there are bound to be people who will primarily react to what is written here in terms of what has not been included. Our claims for it are based in its combination of perspectives, which, all told, provide a revised way of understanding ethnography.

This has consequences for how what we have written may best be put to use. Included here are extracts from many different ethnographies. Readers can simply browse these alongside the relevant analysis, perhaps using them as starting points for further research. Each of the eight main chapters also deals with a specific theme and exists in a relatively self-contained form. So, readers interested specifically in, say, comparison or ethnographic argument may wish to focus on those chapters (Chapters 1 and 5 respectively) taking in viewpoints on the same issues from other books and articles. *How to Read Ethnography* has, however, been written as an accumulation of perspectives and scales of vision, moving from the concerns that can be uncovered within an ethnography, to an understanding of the place of ethnographic knowledge within broader anthropological discussions.

Following each of the main eight chapters are eight long excerpts from ethnographic texts, accompanied by activities. These longer excerpts can be taken (and are worth taking) by themselves and of course can be studied for purposes outside the objectives of this book. However, they are primarily intended here as illustrative of the themes discussed in specific chapters and are aimed at providing a thought tool for testing out some of the ideas raised there. Before each selection we have described the ethnography in brief, and provided some questions that we feel will help the reader to focus their reading.

We have tried here to cut through tightly intertwined understandings of, and expectations concerning, ethnography, laying these out to view. Our goal with this book is thereby to give ethnography its due and its place. Ethnography is not the only way of understanding the human condition, though in the last century it has become a very important one. It is, however, worth understanding the specific parameters of ethnography as a kind of knowledge. And it is worth respecting this specificity.
Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight.

(Malinowski 1978 [1922]: 4)

This is how Bronislaw Malinowski described the beginning of his fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, which he undertook during the First World War. In this short sentence Malinowski tells us that anthropological fieldwork is an adventure, an unusual event separated from the humdrum of everyday life, characterised by the sense of heightened awareness of our surroundings we feel when arriving at an unknown place. Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone, not sure where to go or what to do next, hesitantly looking around, struck by how different everything is from what you know well and yet already searching for clues that will tell you what life is like in this alien environment. At this point you cannot help but compare all you see, hear and feel against the accumulated total of your previous experiences. Like all humans, you make sense of what you learn through contrast and comparison. Moreover, as an anthropologist, you are trained to search for and interpret difference, that is, to compare (Gingrich and Fox 2002: 20).

This sense of separation from normal life that typifies anthropological fieldwork is essential too to ethnographic writing. Writing ethnography also revolves around carving times and spaces out of the continuity of experience, as in Malinowski’s statement above, and investing them with special significance, showing them to reveal something important about the quality of social life among a particular group. In the following excerpt from her account of life in Gerai in Western Borneo, Christine Helliwell reflects on the sense of unfamiliarity she first experienced when confronted with the sounds of daily life in the longhouse:

While living in the Gerai longhouse, I wrote many letters back to Australia in which I described myself as part of a ‘community of voices’.
Although this perception was not, at the time, finding its way into my notebooks it was, nevertheless, the most apt way I could find the central quality of longhouse residence. Voices flow in a longhouse in a most extraordinary fashion; moving up and down its length in seeming monologue, they are, in fact, in continual dialogue with others. . . . Within the longhouse, voices create a powerful sense of community.

During my first two months in Gerai, while living with a household in its longhouse apartment, I was unable to understand why my hostess was constantly engaged in talk with no one. She would give long descriptions of things that had happened to her during the day, of work she had to do, of the state of her feelings and so on, all the while standing or sitting alone in her apartment. To a Westerner . . . her behaviour seemed eccentric, to say the least. It was only much later, on my second field trip, that I came to realise that the woman’s apparent monologues had always had an audience, and that they were a way of affirming and recreating ties across apartments that made her a part of the longhouse community. In addition, I recognised with time that she had been responding to questions floating across apartment partitions that I, still bewildered and overwhelmed by the cacophony of sound that characterises longhouse life, had been unable to distinguish. . . . Even now the memory of such conversations fills me with emotion; it is they which most clearly define longhouse life for me, and which distinguish that life from the Australian one to which I have since returned.

(Helliwell 1996: 138–9)

Helliwell describes an almost physical feeling of disconcertedness when faced with the Dayak way of living in a house. Her description illustrates how comparing and contrasting what we find against what we already know or remember is an automatic or unavoidable process, an inescapable element of our encounter with others. More importantly, her account shows that it is by setting up her expectations as a Western woman against her actual experiences in the longhouse that Helliwell realises that there is something anthropologically significant about living in a Dayak house. If you reread the excerpt above, you will see that a series of factors help transform Helliwell’s immediate and unavoidable awareness of difference into knowledge that is distinctively anthropological (as opposed to touristic, journalistic or literary for example). First, she deliberately explores the distance between herself and her informants drawing on a series of reflexive, comparative categories that are essential to anthropology: ‘now’ and ‘then’, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘I’ and ‘them’, ‘fieldworker’ and ‘informant’, ‘ethnographer’ and ‘subject’. Second, she analyses her sense of difference between life in the West and in Gerai looking for patterns and regularities: it is the relationship between the idiosyncratic and the regular that Helliwell,