Field Notes on an Ethnographic Writing Experiment

Ayşe Çavdar
American University of Central Asia

> I told stories I didn't think were in me to tell.
>
> – Ruth Behar, *Ethnography and the Book that Was Lost*

1 INTRODUCTION

I have been making a living by writing since I was about sixteen years old. After many years in journalism, I was introduced to ethnography while writing my PhD thesis in Cultural Anthropology (2010–2014). The first change I noticed about myself was that writing was no longer as easy as it used to be. Although journalism and ethnographic field research seem to have significant similarities – chiefly regarding their physical engagement with the field – my experience led me to believe that, for many reasons, they offer two almost opposite knowledge production regimes in research and writing processes. While trying to learn how to write ethnographically, I noticed that not only my approach to research but also my relationship with writing itself changed dramatically. This essay is not the place to discuss the relationship between ethnography and journalism in detail. However, I should mention that the main issue being addressed here emerged from my attempt to answer why I had lost my ability – or rather, my courage – to write multiple news stories and even an interpretative piece in a single day as a journalist, which had worked for several daily, weekly and monthly outlets for a long time. I should add that I view this "loss" as a completely positive change.

The most distinctive – yet also the most challenging and enjoyable – aspect that differentiates ethnography from many research and writing methods is that it revolves around the ethnographer's personal experience. Alongside the theoretical framework they engage and discuss, as well as their life experiences, the ethnog-

rapher must create a narrative that not only resonates within themselves but also aligns with the scientific or academic discourse based on the "intuitions" and information they have gathered through their senses over a certain period of time.

Thus, field research consists of numerous layers of silent, voiced, and sometimes even loud and intense conversation, assuming that the fieldwork phase is not merely reduced to simple interviews – which could mean outsourcing a significant part of the work to the interlocutor. Consequently, the entire ethnographic writing process can be seen as a negotiation involving multiple parties: actors from the field, their representations in the literature, the competing theoretical frameworks within the academic discourse, and, of course, the researcher with their own personal and political engagements.

First of all, every researcher knows that it is impossible to include everything learned in the field in the final narrative. Choosing what to represent in the written text is often akin to making a sacrifice, which is why every step in constructing an ethnographic narrative requires careful ethical concern.

In such situations, an ethnographer may easily find themselves caught between the voices of multiple actors, each holding authority in their respective areas. As a result, the ethnographer's own voice can become obscured, even to themselves. For young ethnographers, in particular, navigating these complex dynamics can be especially difficult. Although the excitement of fieldwork can help to ease this tension temporarily, it often strikes back during the writing stage and becomes one of the main elements of writer's block.

2 BARD COLLEGE IWT TECHNIQUES AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING PROCESS

From the moment that I began to learn about Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) techniques, I wanted to have a more grounded experience of it by attending the two-year training offered by the IWT Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (IWT CLASP). I felt that many of these techniques could be useful tools, particularly for young ethnographers, for overcoming the writer's block that might occur during the ethnographic writing process.

IWT techniques refer to the pedagogical strategies developed and studied by The Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking. I had the opportunity to learn about these techniques while working at Bard College Berlin between 2021 and 2023.

The Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (IWT CLASP) is a project of IWT.

I tested these techniques in my ethnography classes and got positive results. For instance, Focused Freewriting, a freewriting technique initiated with a question that does not impose strict boundaries on the answer, served as a threshold at the beginning of the class, engaging students physically and mentally. Immediately after, I would ask a Freewriting question that helped gather the participants around a common agenda, preventing the discussion from deviating too much and making

the questions and responses more to the point. Another technique I used was "silent debate." It is based on the Dialectical Notebooks practice of IWT and allows students to discuss each other's arguments on a common topic on paper in groups of three. Despite, or thanks to, the silence, this little game offers the sense of having fun together. Most of the time, that is the missing link in the ethnographic endeavor.

Nonetheless, the real treasure was the Loop Writing Process, technique that involves asking several questions at different time intervals to help the writer discover what they truly want to write or what might be blocking them. Since I was first introduced to it, I could not stop imagining using this technique with anthropology students struggling to write their bachelor's or master's thesis. Apparently, loop writing could ease the labor of ethnographic writing, providing a space for both writing and collaboration, more like struggling to survive within a shared destiny in the classroom or in a Zoom room. In one of my classes, I tried loop writing with my students to help them figure out which perspective to take for their chosen term paper topics right after conducting their preliminary fieldwork. I asked questions at various intervals independent of their topics. I observed that the two-hour practice helped them to find a way to translate their modes of engagement within the field to a textual strategy and find a suitable or working voice, tone, and starting point for writing.

After the above experiment, I decided to test Loop Writing with a couple of students struggling to write their thesis after conducting their field research. My presumption was that by limiting time and potential directions, we could focus on using the material at hand in the best possible way. I compare this to procrastination addiction – experiencing the surge of creativity and energy often reserved for the last minute, but doing so before that final moment arrives. Another way to describe this tension, I confess, could be by simulating the urgency of writing in a newsroom, where there's limited time to answer specific questions related to the material at hand.

Although this technique may not eliminate all of the challenges of ethnographic writing, it could help alleviate them or at least allow researchers to recognize what stops them from writing. Among the challenges that the practice of Loop Writing could help to eliminate, or at least to acknowledge and search for a remedy for, were the following.

1 The difficulty of integrating various types of data: Ethnographic research requires dealing with various types of information, such as personal observation, interviews in the field, archival data, statistics, gossip, newspaper articles, etc. These are entirely different categories of information that need to be consid-

ered and narrated along with each other to give a holistic perspective on the field. A good Loop Writing strategy and script would first guide the researcher in building a central axis to work on.

2 Structuring self-reflexivity: In methodology courses, it is said that one of the essentials of the ethnographic method is self-reflexivity. However, it is rarely explained how to practice it or how to incorporate self-reflexivity into writing. For young researchers, this can turn into a never-ending process, or, due to time pressure, it has to be set aside for a while. In the first case, it leads to writer's block, and in the second, it may result in the researcher no longer being able to hear their own voice. I assumed the Loop Writing technique could help the researcher to incorporate their self-reflexivity into the writing process.

3 Loneliness and emotional load: Although the founding fathers of ethnography claimed that ethnography is a research method conducted alone, it is evident that the loneliness experienced in the field and at the writing desk has significant consequences for both researchers and the discipline itself. In addition to loneliness, the heavy emotional load accumulated within and after fieldwork is one of the most essential elements of writer's block. An external voice asking questions might change the flow around the blockage by introducing the feeling of urgency of a new question coming up a few minutes later. The environment created by the loop writing technique could introduce clarity and direction to what may initially feel like a deep and opaque waterhole filled with the endless negotiations that the researcher brings back from the field.

3 PRACTICE

To conduct this experiment, I asked an anthropologist friend of mine in Istanbul to refer me to a few students who were in the thesis writing stage. My aim was not to provide thesis supervision but to develop a writing practice together.* This exercise needed to become independent from the content of the thesis, as I imagined it as a tool that could be used for not only individuals but also groups dealing with different matters in their thesis writing process. I also thought it would be easier to do this work in my native language for different reasons. First, it would be more comfortable for me to use humor and tell stories that ease the intensity of the loop writing sessions. Second, the affective exchange during the loop writing process could be more manageable and analyzable for me.

I met with two students separately, and after explaining what I proposed to do, I left the decision for the date and time to them. One of them, Menekşe (I changed her name to protect her from any possible issues this article might bring), said she

* I thought a lot about my role in this experiment and discussed it with my colleagues during our last CLASP gathering. I thank my friends for reminding me that what I do is a kind of thesis supervision and that denying it would be a denial of responsibility. After having this discussion, I looked at both mine and Menekşe's notes by asking the same question. Menekşe and I discussed the fieldwork and possible theoretical frameworks to help her narrate her findings. However, the relationship between us was not due to an academic institution. I do not have any authority to speak on behalf of the academic institution about the fate of Menekşe's thesis. The lack of such an institutional link was one of the elements that eased our relationship and made the Loop Writing experience possible. Most importantly, I am not in the place of assessing what she would write after this process. Our relationship in the beginning looked like a kind of author coaching. However, after a short conversation with her before writing this essay, I realized that was not the true nature of our relationship either. As I will explain in the rest of the essay, my job was to support her in finding what she genuinely wanted to write, what her experience and knowledge gathered in the field meant for her, rather than how to write it. This experiment established a kind of friendship between us. I was sharing my experience, but this sharing did not have any normative or institutional consequences. This friendship was very similar to the relationship we call "yarenlik" in Turkish.

wanted to participate, and we set up a meeting. As expected, she had just finished her fieldwork and felt overwhelmed and confused. Naturally, she wanted to discuss her fieldwork, so we discussed it briefly during each session. However, I repeated several times that my goal was not to replace her thesis advisor but to experiment with a technique that could be helpful for ethnographic writing. I informed her that while she was writing, I would also write an article about a completely different topic she writes about following the same script.

3.1 WORKING WITH METAPHORS AND FINDING A VOICE

I designed the first Loop Writing script for our session with Menekşe, starting with the metaphor exercises Peter Elbow suggested and the fiction writing classes I took from Beliz Güçbilmez. The script would also include a couple of questions to explore the voice and tone she fits while writing. The remaining script would focus on finding a strategy for narration.

Elbow suggests that metaphors are not answers but questions.[1] For him, metaphors will first distract attention, and then gather it again. They can act as kick-ups in the form of questions, helping in initial exercises by creating connection networks between objects and states that seem unrelated, thereby removing possible blocks. My fiction writing teacher, Beliz Güçbilmez, also sees metaphors as building blocks, or better yet, as bridges or gateways that are not immediately visible among the materials, substories, themes, and dilemmas we have or remember, but can only emerge through intuition and working on them – not spontaneously.[2] Here, I chose an approach where I somehow combined both views but, in practice, applied Güçbilmez's suggestion. In this way, the ethnographic researcher can make their subject matter visible to themselves through metaphors.

In other words, what I expected from metaphors was for the researcher to both abstract and concretize the issue she observed in the field and intended to write about to the point where she could express it with a single image. This way, the field would turn into a concrete image, but at the same time, that image would also help generate abstract patterns visible in the field itself.

After five minutes of freewriting, I asked two questions. The first question was, "What do you expect from writing this thesis? What do you want it to change in your life?" The purpose of this question, which I gave her three minutes to answer, was to make her confront the feeling of "meaninglessness" that every student "can get while writing a thesis and, if she did not have such a feeling, to remind herself of the reason for this hard work. The second Focused Freewriting question was, "What should be the impact of your thesis in the research field in which you worked?" This question aimed to encourage her to describe the thesis as a ground

where she continues to communicate with the field even after she finishes writing.

After this stage, I moved on to Loop Writing exercises. The first Loop Writing task I wanted her to do for seven minutes was to find metaphors that capture the core of her thesis – the things that make this thesis meaningful for her. I asked her to write this exercise by hand. She wouldn't turn these metaphors into stories but only name them, creating as long a list as possible. It would be like a kind of taboo game. Objects, proverbs, phenomena, archetypes – anything with the potential to express or represent what she found in her field research – she would list them all.

When Menekşe wanted to read or show me what she had written, I reminded her that it wasn't necessary; we were doing this exercise for her to see, not for me.

The purpose of the next question was to help her find her voice. I asked her to think of three people. One of them had to be someone who believes her thesis is trivial and meaningless. The second one should be someone who supports her and her thesis. The third person should be completely neutral, someone who knows nothing about her thesis or topic. These people had to be real individuals, meaning she should choose people whose voices she could imagine.

Then, I asked her to distribute the metaphors she had listed among the people she had chosen to address. There were no specific criteria. She just needed to trust her instincts. She could think about which metaphor would fit which person she imagined addressing. She wasn't supposed to develop new metaphors; even if a new one popped into her head, she wouldn't add it to the list.

Similarly, if another person came to mind, they wouldn't be included in this exercise. She only had five minutes for the task. I set these short time intervals to prevent her from overthinking and getting lost in her thoughts again. My goal was to create a sense of urgency in the air and activate her instincts and reflexes.

After this exercise, I gave her ten minutes to review her audience/metaphor list and decide which one she liked the most. She would also consider why she preferred that particular one and write down her reasons.

By this point, she had a voice imaginatively talking to the person she chose to address and a list of metaphors that translated the core of her thesis. I asked her to write a short paragraph summarizing the main argument of her thesis using the metaphors she had listed for the chosen person. She would write this paragraph in the form of a letter in just five minutes.

The purpose of the next question was to get her to start establishing connections between her field stories and the main argument of her thesis. She would write three stories, observations, or conversations that support her central argument. While writing, she wouldn't try to link them to each other but only focus on how each related to the main argument. I told her that she could now switch to writing on the computer. However, she couldn't copy and paste these stories from

another document; she had to write them out. There was no need to go into the details of the stories either. In a sense, she would summarize or name them to remember later. I gave Menekşe fifteen minutes for this exercise.

After this question, I asked her to add one story, observation, or conversation from her field experience that she thought could refute the argument she wrote in this exercise. For this, she only had five minutes.

I gave her 20 minutes to read through what she had written. While doing so, she needed to focus on whether she found a flow in her text. Then, I asked her to rewrite her argument and the stories, considering both the connections between the argument and the stories as well as the relationships among the stories themselves. She had a total of forty-five minutes to do this. For now, she would only focus on the stories that supported her argument. In the end, I directed her to focus on the story that refuted her argumentation and to write about how it related to all the other stories.

The purpose of this exercise wasn't to write the thesis itself but rather to practice crafting a thesis using what remained from her fieldwork. She mentioned that she wanted to show me what she had written, but I reminded her that my aim wasn't to evaluate her thesis but to provide her with a space to see what was in her mind. Of course, I could take the time to read her thesis, but in that case, I wouldn't be able to resist discussing its content, and our work might drift toward another direction I did not intend. Nevertheless, she sent me some pages from her field journal on another occasion. My discovery about Menekşe through this exercise was that she tended to write only when she was sure it would be read. As someone who kept a regular diary as a child but struggled to write anything unless it would be read or published since I began making a living by writing, I, of course, understood her.

In our conversation before I started writing this essay, Menekşe described the impact of the metaphor exercise on her:

> We matched the metaphors with people. This was something I returned to the least afterward. I didn't look at it much. It clarified some things for me, though. For instance, it helped me to think of my conceptual framework. ... If I hadn't written down all these possibilities, I wouldn't have been able to get there. However, after I wrote it, it felt a bit too absolute. I didn't think about it again.

These possibilities are the ones contained by the metaphors she had found, she later clarified.

Even though this initial attempt opened some doors, the flow hadn't started yet. I asked her to navigate through the possible theoretical frameworks indicated by her work during our loop writing session for inspiration, continue reading and an-

notating her field journal, and let me know when she felt ready for a second Loop Writing exercise. We planned to meet again in July 2024, giving us almost a month to prepare for the second session.

3.2 ANXIETIES, PREJUDICES, AND LIES

I structured the second script around anxieties, prejudices, and lies, drawing from Peter Elbow's suggestion to confront them on paper.[3] This approach stemmed from her mentioning that annotating her journal did not help alleviate her anxiety about possibly misunderstanding everything in the field. I added lies alongside anxiety because I remembered how, at one point during my own thesis writing, I was paralyzed by the fear that what I wrote might not be based on actual observations but rather influenced by my emotions about the field. At some point, however, I instinctively began drafting fictitious short stories that reimagined what I experienced in the field. These stories helped me recognize how my prejudices and emotions shifted during the fieldwork and how the field itself altered my perspective on my subject. This realization allowed me to better clarify the relationship between my emotions and my observations in the field.

One of Peter Elbow's Loop Writing strategies, which I believe is the most useful for anyone conducting ethnographic field research, is the one that suggests starting the work by revisiting one's biases.[4] This is especially relevant for those ethnographers who conduct their research within groups they sympathize with or feel a sense of solidarity with.* Sometimes, the opposite strategy is also possible. Some choose to study groups they feel most distant from, even in opposition to, aiming to expose the politics and strategies of those groups through their work – and I fall into this second category.

At first glance, political and personal engagements might make the field more understandable, but in reality, they could create significant barriers between the researcher and the field. Changing one's positive or negative biases about the field requires both courage and effort. Additionally, during the writing phase, this "activist" engagement often brings a deep sense of guilt, which can become one of the blocks in the writing process.

In such a situation, simply putting biases down on paper and observing them as written statements for a while makes the researcher's own voice more audible to themselves. This self-reflexive experience helps the researcher recognize the fault lines in the ongoing negotiation within their mind. As the researcher reflects on which biases they let go of, and why and how they did so, their political or ethical engagement with the field stops being a burden. Instead, it becomes a motif to explain what was transformative in the field.

* Activist research, especially following a background in journalism, initially appeared to be an appealing ethnographic approach. However, after a few field experiences, it became clear that researching marginalized groups or those resisting mainstream power politics can have two significant negative consequences. First, conducting research in a politically engaged field can lead to closely examining one of the beliefs that provide hope, which can ultimately result in disappointment. This emotional state can make practicing ethnographic writing quite difficult. Second, and more importantly, when studying groups that challenge mainstream political and economic power structures, such as human rights or environmental groups, it becomes necessary to expose their organizing and resistance strategies, along with their vulnerabilities. While academic research is not intended for a wide public audience and is not a form of public relations, such research can still be used by those seeking to weaken these groups as part of their own strategies. For a discussion on activist research, see Urla & Helepololei, 2014 and Hale 2006.

However, as I will soon explain, the genuinely transformative stage for Menekşe in this exercise occurred when I asked her to tell a lie about the field. Elbow explains the potential benefit of this method by saying, "Writing down as many lies as you can as quickly as you can gives you glimpses of your unconscious mind. You will discover some important preoccupations and assumptions related to the topic."[5] Considering both Menekşe's field experience and my own, I thought biases and lies could work together to clarify the field experience. However, I asked Menekşe to write only one lie as if she were writing a fictitious story.

The second session also began with a seven-minute Freewriting exercise. After that, I gave her ten minutes and asked who she most wanted to read her thesis, what kind of people she wanted as readers, and who she was worried about reading it.

The first Loop Writing question was about her prejudices concerning her research field. I asked her to write down three thoughts she believed would be confirmed in the field before starting her fieldwork and how these thoughts had changed. Which of these changes surprised her the most?

Then, as if we were switching to an entirely unrelated topic, I asked her to list which theoretical concepts she had read so far that she thought might be useful while writing her thesis. I gave her only five minutes for this. The reason for this question was the possibility that, besides our life experiences, the theoretical concepts we've read and sometimes admired could create a distance between us and the field.

Then, we arrived at the main objective of the previous questions. I asked her to tell me a story that didn't actually happen in the field but could be said as if it did. In other words, she was going to lie to me. The story or conversation she would narrate had to be completely made up. She only had five minutes to come up with this lie.

Without talking about the lie at all, we took a step back again. I asked her to look at her concept list and discard the one she thought was the most useless – to cross it out. She only had one minute for this as well.

Finally, we were approaching the truth behind the lies. I asked her to identify the concept from her theoretical list that she wished she could continue working with, but felt she couldn't, whether because it was beyond her reach for some reason, too grand, or no longer fashionable.

It was time to rank the remaining theoretical concepts according to their potential usefulness. She would list the most useful one at the top.

I continued with an unexpected question that would surprise her. I asked her to theorize the lie she had just told about her fieldwork. Which theoretical concept relevant to her field could connect her lie to what she experienced in the field?

Then, I asked her to forget about the lie she wrote and hold onto the theoretical concept she used to connect it to the field. She would use this theory to explain or link the stories she had experienced in the field. She had fifteen minutes to do this.

Next, I asked her to place the theoretical concept she used to theorize the lie – then used again to connect the real stories – into an appropriate position within the list of concepts she previously thought might be relevant to her field.

After this stage, there were actually three more questions, but Menekşe was so surprised that we had to stop. We didn't continue because we had touched on a problem between her thesis topic and fieldwork, as well as between herself and the possible theoretical frames. From the first days of her fieldwork, she had instinctively – experientially – put aside the conceptual framework she thought would be most helpful, partly because she didn't find it "politically correct." As a result, while the stories connected at a general level, she couldn't place herself within them. When she tried to tell a lie, she suddenly made that connection and discovered exactly where the flow was getting stuck.

She had conducted her research in a field she had idealized and romanticized before. However, what she saw and experienced showed that her hopeful feelings about the community forming the basis of her thesis were not as valid as she had thought. Writing about this change would not only break her own heart but might also be unfair to the people she had shared experiences within the field. Yet, not writing about this change would mean lying. Therefore, the story she told when I asked her to lie metaphorically, described her actual experience in the field. The fact that the theoretical concept she wanted to work with emerged within the context of that story and was not a coincidence for this very reason.

In our last conversation, she described this experience as follows: "There was that moment when I couldn't tell a lie while writing. It was such a jarring moment for me. It took me a while to emotionally recover afterward. I sat down and thought, 'What did we just go through?' If a person truly enters that space of honesty, it's actually a bit uncomfortable. Because it made me realize that maybe I don't want to be that honest with myself either."

4 CONCLUSION FOR AN INCOMPLETE EXPERIENCE

Of course, after this stage, Menekşe didn't immediately transition to thesis writing. Had she done so, I believe it would have been a significant mistake because the ethnographic experience requires digesting fieldwork in various phases. She also needed to distance herself from this unsettling experience she had during our exercise. Additionally, she had several concerns about finding a job and maintaining

her financial sustainability. That's how we got a silent period. From early July 2024 until our brief conversation at the end of September 2024, we rarely called each other except to exchange some books and articles. However, during our last meeting, she felt more ready to start writing her thesis, at least confident in her theoretical framework. She also informed me that she had begun a dialogue with her thesis advisor at the university.

To be honest, I haven't yet finished the article I said I would write while working with Menekşe either. So, I can easily say that using your own Loop Writing script to motivate yourself to write or to guide your writing process doesn't seem very realistic. On the other hand, while preparing these scripts, I had the chance to review many aspects of my own writing process, which turned out to be quite surprising and educational.

During my conversation with Menekşe before writing this essay, we decided to continue working. By then, she had already named the sections and identified the arguments she would work within each one. So, in the next phase of our work, we will be writing about more specific topics. I now have more information about the fieldwork she did, and even though I will probably try to hold myself back, I will likely start including content in the scripts as well.

I would like to leave the final word to Menekşe on whether the loop writing strategy was useful for a master's student writing an ethnography thesis. I am endlessly grateful to her for accompanying me in this experiment – or, better yet, this little game.

> I used to think that I'd have to create a very traditional outline first, insert a thesis statement into the paragraphs, and only then would what I wrote make sense. When I tried to answer one of your prompts this way, you stopped me. That was really eye-opening for me because I realized, 'Wait a minute, there's another way to do this.'
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> ... I think it [the practice we shared in this experiment] gave me a sense of accountability. You're putting in the effort as well, so I thought, 'I can't slack off right now; I don't have that right. I have to do this.' It felt really good for me. I'd like to do more of this with others. I wish I had a writing group where we could meet and write together.
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> ... Writing is actually a way of thinking. Using it in this way feels logical and ethical to me. It feels honest. Then, I can compare what I'm doing to the work of poets. Then, I can take a different kind of pride in it.

... I used to doubt a lot, thinking that if what I wrote didn't stick to the formal expressions and structure required by the thesis, then it wouldn't have any scientific value. But now, writing reflexively, letting my instinctive findings flow into it – that's an epistemological statement. What we're actually doing here is experiencing a knowledge production method.

... When I start, I'm very stressed, but after a while, it starts to write itself, like my hands are writing, and I'm just sitting in the back seat. This also happens when I'm dancing. I often recalled tango during these writing exercises because when I first started dancing, I used to count my steps a lot. Am I taking the right step? I'd watch my feet. But once I got into the flow, the dance started to dance itself. Your body just starts doing something.

NOTES

1 Elbow, 1998. pp 78–93
2 Beliz Güçbilmez, 2023. pp 41–73
3 Elbow, 1998. p 64
4 Elbow, 1998. pp 62–64
5 Elbow, 1998. p 73

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