Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa H. Malkki, *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 197 pages.

Reviewer: Mark S. Dolson
University of Western Ontario

Improvising Theory is based on a series of email correspondences between Liisa H. Malkki (an associate professor of Anthropology) and Allaine Cerwonka (who was a Political Science doctoral student at the time, with no experience in anthropology or ethnography). Its aim is to provide a chronicle-style account of communications between mentor and student regarding the inherent complexities, frustrations and joys of conducting ethnographic fieldwork as it unfolds in "real time." During the time of the correspondence (which took place in 1994 and 1995), Cerwonka was embarking on a multi-sited, urban ethnographic field research project for the first time in order to understand and contribute to social, cultural and political theories regarding the spatial and ideological processes of national identity construction in Melbourne, Australia. That Cerwonka's emails reflect her inexperience with the ethnographic approach forced Malkki to articulate and clarify those latent ideas that "often go without saying" in anthropology, thus adding to the particularly descriptive and informative tone of the book.

With Cerwonka's lack of experience in ethnographic methods in mind, then, readers are afforded tremendous insight into the firsthand subjective experiences of a novice field researcher. Such experiences include the uncertainties of choosing appropriate fieldsites, searching out informants, and better understanding one's positionality—including the role of the senses (both *inter*-subjectively and corporeally) in ethnographic fieldwork and knowledge production. I found this discussion of the senses and the body to be quite innovative and informative as most methodologically oriented texts tend to efface the heuristic "work of the body" (its epistemological importance, or rather *necessity* in as much as we are *embodied beings-in-the-world*, where emotion and affect can have a tremendous effect on the tone and register of our interpretations) as a vehicle in ethnographic knowledge production.

One of the central themes of Cerwonka and Malkki's book is, I believe, an attempt to address the epistemological debates which continue in the social sciences regarding the status of ethnographic practice as a mode of knowledge production: from the perspective of Cerwonka's mentors in political science, should ethnography be conceived of as a "soft" social science, purportedly based on mere anecdotal evidence, and thus ever-fraught with problems of applicability and generalizability? Or, taken from a more philosophically grounded and humanistic perspective, should ethnography be conceived of as an approach to knowledge production which overflows the rigid and pre-constructed categories and strict methodologies of mainstream, positivist-oriented social science?

Arguing strongly for the latter, the authors state that ethnographic practice is a *social and processual* practice concerned with understanding not fact: it is *an empirical and interpretive process* of acquiring deeply situated knowledges; and it is based on the oftentimes unstable dynamic between the positionality of the researcher and the inter-subjective, emotional and physical terrain that they must navigate and negotiate throughout the course of ethnographic fieldwork. Following suit, the authors deny the all-to-often-assumed distance between subject (researcher) and object (researched)—a stance usually underwritten, in spirit at least, by more positivist oriented researchers—arguing that both are always, already in a state of ontological complicity (locked permanently in a "dialectical dance" as it were).

As such, the ethnographic approach (for I hesitate to call it a strict "method") is more akin to a *sensibility*—as the authors argue cogently—gleaned from the improvisatory tactics one must employ in the sometimes unpredictable nature of fieldwork, rather than an inflexible methodological algorithm to be learned through the inculcation of "rules" gleaned through lectures and the reading of "authoritative" texts. That the ethnographic approach is more a sensibility to be experienced, felt and engaged, than a codex of methods to be "learned" or merely "followed" is, I believe, the central contribution of the email correspondence and thus the ultimate core of the book.

One of the inherent strengths of the book is that both authors *realistically* limn the process of ethnographic fieldwork as: (1) a critical theoretical practice—we are "always, already" theoretical; we bring theory with us to the field, only to revise it *ex post facto* in the face of the "surprises" we encounter in our "data"; (2) a local-level, everyday ethical practice—regardless of bureaucratic ethical protocol, fieldwork is an intensely human and local negotiation between personalities, and thus has to be dealt with from situation to situation, person to person; and (3) above all else ethnography is an improvisational practice, and thus has no "correct" format or series of steps to follow—it is an "autodidactic" (Malkki's word) process where one learns *through doing*. As such, ethnographic knowledge is sometimes spur-of-the-moment, learned in a specific context at a specific time, forcing the ethnographer to adjust their tack accordingly.

Cerwonka's long and sometimes neurotic emails may come as a turn off to some impatient readers, however, I feel that the extremely detailed, repetitive and idiosyncratic nature of the correspondence lends a certain quality of authenticity to the text. While reading it I felt as if I was alongside Cerwonka at her computer as she expressed the many frustrating and joyful undulations of her research process. This, perhaps, may be the best pedagogical feature of the book as Cerwonka's concerns may resonate with or echo the potential concerns first year graduate students may have regarding the dynamics of field research.

As such, I would highly recommend this text to first year social science graduate students who are either interested in

engaging in ethnographic fieldwork for the first time or who have designed their project and are about to leave for the field. *Improvising Theory* succeeds tremendously, then, in comparison to standard "field guides" or methods books insofar as it provides a highly detailed, step-by-step account of what actually happens in the "thick of things"—when things go wrong and when things go incredibly well.

Shirley Fedorak, *Anthropology Matters!*, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2007, 234 pages.

Reviewer: *Karl Schmid*
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Shirley Fedorak offers teachers a relatively new and unique tool for introducing and interesting students in anthropology with *Anthropology Matters!* The book is designed to supplement introductory textbooks and it has similar attributes such as a glossary, bolded key terms, questions for consideration and suggested readings. That Fedorak has been the lead author of the Haviland *Cultural Anthropology* text is demonstrated in its organization and overall accessibility. *Anthropology Matters!* is clearly useful for students of anthropology and allows the instructor to go beyond the limited examples in textbooks without having students read (or not read) longer academic articles and it provides more depth when ethnographies are not practical.

The first part of the book, "How Does Anthropology Work?," has three chapters addressing ethnographic fieldwork, culture shock, and the use of anthropology. The first chapter on fieldwork competently introduces the subject. Chapter 2, which examines culture shock, should interest students because of the frank perspective on the everyday trials of fieldwork. It is the third chapter, "Of What Use is Anthropology to the Business World? The Anthropology of Shopping," that demonstrates both the attractiveness and limitation of the book. I liked the attempt to draw students into economic anthropology through a study of shopping mall culture—a subject that should be familiar to them. The problem, however, is that this is the book's central example of the practical (real world) application of anthropology. Although Fedorak clearly points out that we should consider the ethics of applied work while acknowledging the contributions made, the chapter leaves open the question of how corporations utilize the expertise of anthropologists. A few examples of these relationships would have been useful here. Although there is some critical discussion of power, consumption and space, instructors might want to ensure that students are not left with the impression that anthropology matters only when its applications "uncover new and meaningful ways to entice consumers to purchase more merchandise" (p. 35). Although this is not Fedorak's intention, there is a risk that the reliance on this example communicates to students that the discipline's relevance should be judged on market contributions.

Why does anthropology matter according to the book? Despite other occasional references to public and applied contributions, Fedorak emphasizes that the real public value of anthropology is to answer questions about cultural practices and relationships by providing context, complexity and cross-cultural examples. Part Two, in nine chapters, tackles a number of questions that I found relevant and interesting. Each chapter poses and answers a question such as "What are the Underlying Reasons Behind Ethnic Conflict, and the Consequences of these Conflicts?" (ch. 4). Other topics include immigration (ch. 5), women's bodily self-image (ch. 6), female circumcision (ch. 7), aging (ch. 8), missionism and indigenous cultures (ch. 9), the practice of Purdah (ch. 10), same-sex marriage (ch. 11) and the impact of television (ch. 12). There is also a thematic guide to the book that indexes these chapters under twenty-one headings; these are the usual headings of many introductory texts (gender, kinship, ethnicity, sexuality, globalization and cultural imperialism).

Most thematic chapters stress the cross-cultural aspects of the topics, while integrating the language of anthropology into the discussion. Only rarely is the effect overly simplified or too overloaded with concepts. Mostly, the questions are well examined, the examples useful and illuminating, and the overall thrust is to introduce context and complexity to the subject without drowning the reader. Chapter 7 is probably the strongest chapter in the book, highly recommended for its ability to broaden debate on the question "Is Female Circumcision a Violation of Human Rights or a Cherished Cultural Tradition?" Fedorak integrates debates on ethics and cultural relativism, critically examines Western viewpoints and deftly works through connections with Islam, medicalization, criminialization and much more. Another current topic is the discussion of purdah and the question of oppression or liberation (ch. 10). Here is a highly accessible account of a cultural practice examined in numerous contexts that incorporates power and resistance.

A few chapters would benefit from additions or might require more unpacking by the instructor. The chapter on the impact of television (ch. 12) does cover social and personal meanings of the activity and analyses the *Star Trek* television series phenomenon, however students are likely to find this somewhat dated. It may be a reflection of a lack of available anthropological research, but it would add to the allure to have any of the following included: scrutiny of reality shows, discussion of the rise of news-taking through comedy and talk shows or explanation of the ubiquity of the dumb and even dumber male figure. The chapter on women's self-image and health is likely to be popular, and many of the main issues are addressed, but it could be more ethnographic and comprehensive. On the other hand, the chapter on same-sex marriages seems to be a little over-stuffed with issues and ideas. It could also benefit from more of the Canadian perspective that Fedorak deftly weaves in without overdependence or underutilization of non-Canadian material. For example, "What Challenges do Immigrants in Canada Face?" is an effective