Critical Ethnography, Ethics, and Work: 
Rearticulating Labor

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In this essay, I argue that a cultural materialist perspective on the work of critical ethnography in composition studies can provide a useful framework that accounts for and can help to resolve some of the significant ethical dilemmas to which recent critiques of critical ethnography in composition have pointed (see Cintron; Cushman, “Public”; Kirsch; Kirsch and Ritchie; Lu and Horner; Mortensen and Kirsch). My argument is aligned with and is intended to further the materialist emphasis of those critiques. Responding to the limitations of traditional ethnographic practices, those critiques resituate the work of ethnography in the material social circumstances of its enactment in order to take into account the power relations among those involved in such work and the material consequences for those living at the research “site.” But this has led to calls for a seemingly endless series of ethical strictures on the direction, conduct, outcome, and writing of critical ethnographies that, in their overwhelming number and sometimes conflicting recommendations, can appear to place an impossible set of responsibilities on the shoulders of the critical ethnographer. These countless strictures result, I argue, not from the materialist emphasis of these critiques but from their failure to be materialist enough in their conception of the work of ethnography. I argue that challenging how such critiques define the work, workers, and the production of value through such work, and by locating that work more insistently in the material realm, a cultural materialist perspective, while not eliminating the ethical demands on critical ethnography, can redefine by redistributing more broadly the meanings and means of addressing such demands as indeed demands, not dilemmas.
I begin by describing recent critiques of ethnography in composition studies, highlighting the model of academic work to which such critiques respond but which, I argue, remain in the recommendations emerging from these critiques. I go on to describe how a cultural materialist view of academic work redefines the dilemmas addressed in such critiques from being understood as strictly ethical dilemmas to being understood as challenges arising out of material social conditions and that therefore must be addressed in terms of such conditions. To demonstrate the aptness of such an understanding of critical ethnography in composition, I revisit some of the critiques of ethnographic work to consider alternative strategies for responding to the dilemmas these critiques identify.

Recent critiques of ethnography have complicated not only researchers' understanding of ethnography but also their research practices, for researchers now must ask themselves a host of new questions as they design, conduct, and report on their research. These questions respond to feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist perspectives on experience and knowledge that highlight the partiality and historicity of knowledge and experience—importantly, not only the "informant's" but the researcher's—and consequently call for reimagining research projects as "praxis," responsive to the local research site and those residing there in its origination, implementation, and representation (see Kirsch and Ritchie 25 and passim; Lu and Horner 261–63). Knowledge and experience are approached as "partial" in all senses: neither complete, fixed, disinterested, universal, nor neutral; but, instead, situated, local, interested, material, and historical.

To ensure a socially just response to the partiality of knowledge and experience in the practice of ethnography, researchers pay greater attention to asymmetrical power relations between researcher and informant, researcher and researcher, researcher and community, institutional site and researcher, and funding agency and researcher as these affect the definition, conduct, outcomes, and reporting of the ethnographic project. Put crudely, given inevitably asymmetrical relations of power between these different parties, and given the partiality of knowledge and experience, researchers are now expected to ask themselves what would constitute ethically responsible ways of defining, initiating, carrying out, and reporting on their research. Those asking themselves such questions have produced myriad recommendations, but I'll focus on the three that have garnered the most attention and that are most germane to questions of materiality: an emphasis on collaboration, on multivocality, and on
self-reflexivity. While all three challenge the traditional model of academic work, my argument will be that they are not materialist enough in the framework by which they understand that model, and so the recommendations they present remain insufficient.

The Myth of the Lone Ethnographer

Once upon a time, the Lone Ethnographer rode off into the sunset in search of “his native.” After undergoing a series of trials, he encountered the object of his quest in a distant land. There, he underwent his rite of passage by enduring the ultimate ordeal of “fieldwork.” After collecting “the data,” the Lone Ethnographer returned home and wrote a “true” account of “the culture.”

—Renato Rosaldo

Renato Rosaldo’s satiric depiction of the ideal of traditional ethnography is telling, especially for what that ideal omits from consideration. The traditional model of academic work is closely tied to the ideal of academic professionalism. In that model, the researcher serves “his” (in the ideal) discipline, rightly oblivious to the material social realm, which always threatens to corrupt his work. In Rosaldo’s satiric depiction, the Lone Ethnographer produces his ethnography as a result of a quest that seems to be self-defined, “his,” not the result of any set of social or historical circumstances. In producing his “true” account, the ethnographer uses “professional” standards for conducting, reporting, and evaluating research so as to guard against corruption from such circumstances and to ensure the “quality,” objectivity, and neutrality of the researcher. In ethnography, for example, triangulation is intended as a means of verifying that data are evaluated accurately. More generally, such practices as peer review of manuscripts are intended to guarantee both the quality and legitimacy of academic scholarship.

The divorce of the researcher’s research agenda from the material social realm is mirrored in the imagined divorce of the location of the work of research from that same realm. First, the work produced is imagined as the researcher’s own, arising out of and testimony to his own genius. Rosaldo’s “Lone Ethnographer” is “lone,” makes “his” quest to find “his” native, makes his trip alone and apparently by his own means, and writes his “true account” all by himself and for himself and others like him. Or, as Rosaldo puts it, these accounts were produced “by and for specialists,” treated as “storehouses of purportedly incontrovertible
information to be mined by armchair theorists engaged in comparative studies" (32). Secondly, while the work of ethnography, like all other work, is made possible by particular social and material conditions—for example, an elaborated educational system (the "academy"), funding agencies, informants, libraries, clerical support, academic departments, journals, research assistants, university presses and the editors and others that work for them—the contributions of these forces to the work produced is largely dismissed, relegated at best to notes of acknowledgment by the work's "author." The materiality of ethnographic work—its demands of time, bodily health, equipment, money to pay for equipment and salaries and travel, and so on—is ignored as necessary but having nothing to do with the actual production of the ethnographic work; the work is imagined as strictly "the product of the Lone Ethnographer's labors" (31). Third, it is understood that while "fieldwork" is crucial, the "field" is imagined as untouched by the researcher's work there; the researcher instead is imagined to observe the field from a privileged location of "detached impartiality" above the field, his observations having no impact on, while accurately identifying truths of, the field (Rosaldo 30). Finally, the value of the work, located in the textual product, is attributed not to the labor of all these participants but to features of the text itself as a commodity. The Lone Ethnographer's account is admired as an "artifact worthy of being housed in the collection of a major museum" (31).

In its insistence on collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexiveness about the impact of power relations on the ethnographic project, critical ethnography begins to contest this traditional ideal vision of ethnographic work. It recognizes the contributions of others to the work produced; it calls for their voices and interests to be included in the definition of the project; and it insists that the Lone Ethnographer remove what Rosaldo terms his "mask of innocence" and to confront the asymmetrical power relations with which the work is complicit (30). As I will suggest, however, a residual idealism limits the challenges that critical ethnography poses to this model. By framing the problems with traditional ethnography in terms of ethics, critical ethnography continues to identify the work and the responsibility for it as the lone ethnographer's, even in those arguments that would appear to call for recognizing the sociality of ethnographic work. Thus, new burdens of ethical responsibility are simply added to the traditional ideal of the lone ethnographer, leading to seemingly tortuous dilemmas.
The Emphasis on Collaboration
Critical ethnographers, along with many others, frequently recommend some form of collaboration, whether between researcher and informant, fellow researchers, researchers and communities, researchers and institutions, or some or all of these. First, collaboration with informants is understood as a means of contesting the hierarchical relationships between “researcher” and “informant,” indeed rendering such distinctions somewhat arbitrary as both take on the role of researching and informing. In collaborative arrangements, at least in theory, both parties have a say in the design, implementation, and writing of the ethnography so that both parties, and not just the researcher or research community, can benefit from the project. As Cheri Williams observes,

When research is truly collaborative, the researcher and the informants participate as a team; they become co-researchers who explore an issue of common interest and concern. They co-author the research questions, co-collect, co-analyze, and co-interpret the data, and they co-construct the final products (e.g., written reports, public presentations). The researchers develop an interactive, dialogic, reciprocal relationship that mitigates the strictures of traditional, imperialistic hegemony. They learn to respect one another’s perspective and honor one another’s trust. (51)

Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie advocate collaboration as a means of reducing the distance between researcher and informant and the consequent marginalization of the latter—a distance that marks the difference between the Lone Ethnographer and “native” in traditional ethnography (22). From the standpoint of an “ethic of care,” for which they argue, unequal power relations between researcher and informants require that research be used as “‘praxis’ to help those who participate with [researchers] in research to understand and change their situation, to help those who have been marginalized to speak for themselves” (25).

Second, as Kirsch and Ritchie observe, through collaboration between researchers and participants, “Researchers can gather additional insights by getting to know participants in the context of their daily lives, and participants can gain new knowledge about themselves and their lives through the research project” (14; see also Blakeslee et al. 142; Cushman, “Public” 332; Sullivan 109). In counterdistinction to the Lone Ethnographer, knowledge from the research is imagined to accrue not simply to the Lone Ethnographer and “his” fellow specialists and armchair theorists, but also to the “natives.” Further, the ethnographer, no longer “lone,” is imagined to gain even more knowledge through working more
collaboratively with "his native" than he might otherwise gain; in Kirsch and Ritchie's words, researchers "can gather additional insights" through collaboration. But the motivation for collaboration is not simply to increase knowledge and benefit or to make these reciprocal. Collaboration is also seen as methodologically more consistent with critical ethnographers' belief in the social construction of knowledge. As Jennie Dautermann argues, "If we are serious about social construction of knowledge, it is important to authorize and practice collaborative methods for analyzing and reporting our research as well as for collecting it" (257; see also Durst and Stanforth 60; Sullivan 109).

It is thus that, as Russel Durst and Sherry Stanforth remark, the literature on collaboration in research portrays collaborative research as both "politically progressive" and "beneficial to learning" (60). However, as Durst and Stanforth themselves, as well as others, report, this collaborative ideal seems frequently to become problematic in practice, the ideal creating friction in its encounters with the material social realm. First, the ideal assumes that others—that is, the "natives"—share the academics' interest in research. But as several researchers warn, many "participants" may in fact have little or no interest in ethnographic research (see Blakeslee et al. 146; Brueggemann 33; Kirsch and Ritchie 15–16). The ideal of participants as "co-researchers" that Williams (as well as others) heralds may simply be unappealing to many. Second, differences in the social positioning of "participants" complicate the ideal. In a report on their research experience, Durst and Stanforth note that published discussions of collaborative research do not often articulate the complexity they themselves experienced as collaborators, instead presenting "exceedingly sanguine" accounts of its benefits, emphasizing its "positive, feel-good aspects" (60). While both Durst and Stanforth were academics in composition studies and so could be expected to share an interest in composition research, their very different positioning in the academic hierarchy—Durst was a male tenured professor and writing program director, Stanforth a graduate student in composition studies for whom Durst was teacher, academic advisor, and job supervisor—significantly complicated the agenda, conduct, and interpretation of their research, transforming it from a study of composition instruction to "an examination of the politics of studying scenes of instruction" (60–61).

Where those involved include nonacademics, interests may collide more significantly. Dautermann reports that in her study of hospital writing practices, a hospital administrator did not want the hospital’s
investment in Dautermann as a writing consultant to fund her dissertation (245). Ruth Ray warns that in research collaborations between university and primary or secondary school teachers, each party may be pursuing conflicting goals masked under the “research” rubric: “Teachers conduct research because of its transformative potential for themselves and their classrooms; [academic] researchers conduct research because of its transformative potential for their fields” (292; see also Dale 82). More pointedly, researchers have reported conflicts between the researcher’s desire to present a full account and participants’ desire not to disclose personal information, as well as conflicts between researchers’ and informants’ religious and political beliefs. How, for example, does a researcher committed to fighting homophobia “honor” a fundamentalist Christian informant’s desire not to disclose her lesbian past (see Kirsch and Ritchie 17)? How does a feminist researcher report on the experiences of a woman who explicitly rejects feminist accounts of her experience (19)? Or how does the ethnographer “fairly” represent a teacher’s literacy pedagogy when it collides with the researcher’s own beliefs about such pedagogy (see Williams 48–49)?

Finally, even in instances where the researcher and the participant-informant share research and political commitments, material barriers can intrude. Helen Dale describes the difficulties she encountered collaborating with Carol, a ninth-grade English teacher, in researching student coauthoring. Carol shared Dale’s interest in the research and invited her to co-teach for a quarter, and the two developed a plan for Dale to co-teach the class and for the two to collaborate on conducting the research. However, Dale found that while she’d hoped to work with Carol “on all ongoing aspects of teaching and research,” that was not possible because Carol “did not have time to collaborate” with her fully (79). Carol was very excited at the prospect of “talking about teaching English, getting ideas,” especially “because in a typical public school teacher’s day, you know, there’s so little time to talk about teaching.” As the project developed, however, Carol ended up having no time to devote to it (80, 81). In hindsight, while “frustrating” for both, this was perhaps inevitable, given the very different situations of the two: Dale was a researcher working on her doctoral dissertation; Carol was a ninth-grade schoolteacher responsible for teaching five classes and serving as faculty adviser for the student newspaper (Dale 83–84). Carol, Dale observes, was “understandably more concerned with her daily class schedule, the yearly curriculum, and the various demands on her time and attention” than with the progress of the research, despite her initial enthusiasm.
for the ideal of such research and the promise it held for her own teaching (79).

These conflicts point to a residual attachment to the ideal—that is, non-materialist—model of ethnographic work in conscious critiques of and attempts to engage in practices counter to it. From the idealist perspective of the Lone Ethnographer, research to add to the universal fund of knowledge is in itself valuable, and something which all, if possessed of sufficient genius, would want to participate in conducting. No disputes would arise about whose interests would be served, or hurt, by the knowledge gained by such research; its impartiality would guarantee universal acceptance of the project of its production and dissemination. Who, after all, could object to the discovery and spread of Truth? Further, in pursuit of such a goal, all would presumably be cooperating freely as independent agents, contributing their small part to the "discovery" of Truth (without, of course, demanding recognition for such contributions from the Lone Ethnographer). Finally, given the worthiness of the goal, no possible barriers of time or competing demands would interfere with its pursuit.

In contrast, the difficulties recounted by the researchers described above demonstrate the crucial role of social material positioning in determining individuals' perspectives on, and interests in and abilities to participate in, ethnographic research; and they also demonstrate the significance of the material facticity of the work itself (for example, its location in and demands on time) in shaping that work. In a curious way, the perpetual praise that researchers give to the generosity of their informants and anonymous or pseudonymous participants, and the qualms they express about the ethical status of their decisions, points to the residual idealism that frames their accounts of these difficulties. That is, rather than understanding these difficulties in terms of material barriers to be addressed as such—in the case of Dale's research, for example, through giving Carol release time to devote herself more thoroughly to the project to which she appeared to be so committed—they come to be understood in terms of ethical dilemmas whose resolution depends on the good character (ethos) of the researcher and participants—questions of fidelity, empathy, generosity, betrayal, honesty, guilt, willingness, or cooperativeness (see Dale, Newkirk, Kirsch and Ritchie, Williams, Dautermann). Obviously, honesty, generosity, fidelity, empathy, and team spirit can be good things. And, less obviously, as writers like those cited above argue persuasively, determining what constitutes behavior that demonstrates such qualities in given situations can be quite compli-
cated. At the same time, some of these dilemmas arise specifically from understanding the demands of the research from the start in terms of idealist ethics rather than in terms of material conditions, in terms of good character rather than relations of labor.

We might, in this regard, consider an alternative perspective on calls for collaboration emerging in the field of industrial relations. Philip Kraft, in a critique of new management theories like Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Process Reengineering (BPR), argues that such theories "are about systematically appropriating ideas and knowledge from all workers" (25). Unlike Taylorism, which attempted to rationalize work to take agency from workers, "TQM and BPR encourage employees to 'surface' tacit knowledge in order to systematically incorporate it into 'rational' processes," through what managers call "empowerment" (28). In this system, "[p]ower and control are usually given labels like flexibility and cooperation," and workers, "newly empowered on self-directed multifunctional work teams, are informed they are engaged in a 'win-win' quest with their employers," if only they will agree to cooperate. As Kraft warns, such calls for cooperation and flexibility easily lend themselves to arguments against unions as uncooperative and adversarial. Equally ominously, the invocation of "teamwork" can "get team members to reveal their attitudes and opinions, to confess their individual sins and seek forgiveness from the group" (29).

Joan Greenbaum, in an analysis of recent changes in the design and organization of white-collar work, notes that the move to integrate rather than separate tasks and to broaden rather than specialize job responsibilities has required greater flexibility from workers (80–81). However, "the new, so-called flexibility of workers to do more tasks and use more skills does not imply increased wages or improved working conditions." Instead, "integrating tasks and broadening jobs" have increased "the pace and intensity of work" (81). These intensified work practices are internalized under the rubric of professionalism, which is used "to cloak the fact that work intensification is not being linked with increased wages" (88, 90).

In a critique of the discourse of "fast capitalist texts" advocating TQM and the like, James Paul Gee and his coauthors warn that such texts "grab us" because they use "words that name things which nearly all of us like but which, on reflection are seen to mean slightly (and sometimes very) different things in fast capitalist texts than they might mean to many of us: words like 'liberation,' 'empowerment,' 'trust,' 'vision,' 'collaboration,' 'teams,' 'self-directed learning,' 'quality,' and many more" (29).
The authors' warning works two ways: on the one hand, it cautions against being seduced by the attraction that words such as "collaboration" have into giving up things such as job security and decent wages and working conditions. (Think of the deeply conflicting meanings associated historically with the term "collaborators.") On the other, it can also be read as a warning against the unintended consequences of our own use of such words to name and think about what we do in our work and the work we conduct with others. Gee and his coauthors direct their warnings both ways: at the discourse of fast capitalist texts and at the disturbing alignments of educators in their theorizing and pedagogies with that discourse (see especially chapter 3). Without denying the potential value to be gained by educators in promoting some forms of empowerment, collaboration, self-directed learning, and even teams, they caution against the co-optation of these practices by new capitalism for its own aims and in service of its own values and politics (67, 71).

Such a threat may seem remote from the situation facing the critical ethnographer, who is neither alone nor impartial but part of a team deeply committed to working collaboratively with his or her participant-informants for the empowerment of all. But such a view again assumes a removal of the work of ethnography from the material social realm. As the difficulties reported by the researchers cited above suggest, unexpected questions of labor, value, and capital (symbolic and otherwise) surface persistently in issues of who will do what work, determined by whom, to produce what use value and exchange value, realized by and for whom, paid for how, on whose time, by what means. These questions arise in part because the work is imagined not as "work"—in the sense of labor—but in terms of professional duty: a matter of professional commitment to the field (which motivates the research in the first place) and of professional standards of ethical conduct toward those living at the research site. If, alternatively, we imagined critical ethnographic work in terms of labor, in the sense of material practices aimed at altering the physical and social environment, then questions of time and commitment and pay and results would be at the forefront in how research is planned and conducted.

In the introduction of ethnographic work into the composition classroom, the same issues would operate. If we think of the work composition students do as work—that is, again, the expense of energy to produce, reproduce, and alter both students' material social environment and, simultaneously, themselves—then ethnographic projects in the composition classroom involve students, wittingly or not, as participants in the production of such projects. This runs counter to many discussions about
collaborative classroom research in which the asymmetrical relations of power complicating the collaboration are understood exclusively as those between researcher and teacher (as co-researcher) rather than between researcher, teachers, and students (as all three in some ways are researchers and teachers of each other; see Lu and Horner). This is not to call for issuing blanket invitations to composition students to join us in collaborating on ethnographic research. To do so would be to ignore asymmetrical power relations between students and teachers and differences between the material and social positions and, consequently, interests of students as students (and teachers as teachers). But it is to insist on recognizing the classroom, the students populating it, and the institutional pressures on the students and teachers as agents operating in, and on, the composition classroom ethnographer's research site. Thus, while, as some have suggested, in some ways ethnographers of composition classrooms would seem to be ideally situated (as are composition teachers) to conduct the collaborative type of inquiry for which postmodern ethnography calls (see Kirsch and Ritchie 14; Sullivan 109), in planning and taking up such inquiry we need to recognize and confront the material differences at the research site among the researchers and researched rather than assume an ideal of shared interest among equal partners. We need to recognize the labor that all contribute and to factor in the values to be accrued through such labor and how such values are realized.

The Emphasis on Multivocality
To bridge the hierarchical divide between researcher and informants, highlight the partiality of the researcher's perspective, and give voice to those often silenced or marginalized (the researched), critiques of ethnography have called for multivocality in research texts. Patricia Sullivan poses the issue this way:

How can we get at and represent an other, and not the self, in the act of writing? How do we allow the other to speak itself, to speak on and in its own terms, rather than reconstitute the other in our own likeness? How can we create textual conditions that will allow others to speak in and through our texts with their own powers of recognition, representation, and persuasion intact? And lastly, how can we write not only about the other but for the other? How can we write ethnographies that not only exist for the sake of knowledge but that can be put to good use? (106)

Multivocality is understood as one strategy by which to answer these questions. The "other" can now speak in the text rather than being
"spoken about" by the ethnographer. Thus, perspectives other than the ethnographers', and the contributions of these others—in short, the collaborative role of participants in ethnographic work—can be made manifest. As Ann Blakeslee and her coauthors suggest, to address the concern with "unsilencing" subjects, feminists have proposed a variety of approaches "to include subjects' voices" in ethnographic texts so as to be "consistent with a participatory approach to situated inquiry." These include writing collaboratively with subjects, having subjects "read the research to see whether they hear and recognize their voices in the work," and negotiating and modifying "those parts of the texts that subjects find questionable or inaccurate" (147).

Strikingly, in these arguments, the dilemma is often framed in terms of written conventions, of creating "textual conditions." That is, both the provisionality of the researcher's knowledge and the marginalization of groups being studied are to be addressed through breaking from the univocality of the research text. Marginalization is understood as "silencing," and the provisionality of knowledge is linked to particular discursive conventions. It is thus that critics have focused their energies on producing multivocal texts that accentuate a plurality of voices and perspectives, a plurality that itself is intended to highlight the provisionality of any one of those perspectives. Doing so is expected to enable researchers to conform in their work to the ethical and epistemological principles of emancipatory critical ethnography. As Kirsch and Ritchie observe,

An ethical stance... suggests that we encode in our research narratives the provisional nature of knowledge that our work generates and the moral dilemmas inherent in research. We need to reconsider our privileging of certain, coherent, and univocal writing and include multiple voices and diverse interpretations in our research narratives, highlighting the ideologies that govern our thinking as well as those that may contradict our own. (24)

Multivocal, innovative forms of writing "highlight rather than suppress the problems of representation in our writing, and expose the multiple, shifting, and contradictory subject positions of researchers and participants" (Kirsch and Ritchie 25).

In identifying the work of ethnography with the written text, this emphasis on multivocal, innovative forms of writing closely aligns critical ethnography with the traditional definition of academic professional work as synonymous with academic texts (rather than, say, teaching). More specifically, attention to the particular discursive forms
the text takes as a means of manifesting particular research stances and practices is an instance of commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism occludes the labor involved in the production of value—here the labor of researching, writing, and distributing the text (and the labor of all those involved in these activities) as well as the labor of reading it.

In short, just as calls for collaboration gloss over the labor involved in such work and the different material social positionings of those called to take it up, calls for multivocal writing can gloss over the facticity of writing and reading as material social practices. So, for example, while it may seem ethically mandatory for researchers to ask subjects to write collaboratively with them, those subjects may have no interest in the research, lack the necessary time or other means to write, or have notions of writing that collide with those of the researcher. As several researchers have reported, many participants, for a variety of reasons, decline the invitation to “participate” in the production of research texts, despite the researchers’ strong desire for their participation as a means of conforming to the ethical strictures of critical ethnography (see, for example, Williams 50–51; Dale). However, as Brenda Brueggemann observes, researchers cannot “make” participants “participate if they only want to observe”; they “cannot require them to speak if they only want to remain anonymous or silent” (33). In other words, when viewed strictly in terms of ethics, the ethnographer is caught in a dilemma—restricted by ethical strictures of respecting participants’ wishes from following the ethical stricture to require collaborative writing. Alternatively, were the issue understood in terms of material social conditions, ethical issues, while not eliminated, would be addressed differently. Instead of calling on, hoping for, or regretting a failure in the generosity of participants, for example, such participation would be understood in terms of labor and compensation for it, perhaps issues to be addressed in the funding for the research and the negotiation of participant “consent.”

But calls for multivocality gloss over not only the labor that participants are expected to contribute to writing the research but also the labor of reading the texts that result. Instead, appeals are made for greater tolerance for innovative writing from editors and readers. Kirsch and Ritchie, for example, while calling for such texts, note that such a call “challenges scholars to find new ways of presenting research, challenges journal editors to develop a greater tolerance for ambiguity and unconventional forms of discourse, and challenges readers to learn new ways of reading and interpreting texts” (25). Dautermann warns that we need to become “better writers and readers of qualitative research” (257). The
assumption behind the issuing of such challenges would seem to be that the value of such texts resides in their innovative forms and that therefore editors, and ultimately readers, perforce must learn to appreciate such values by changing their reading practices.

However, as Kirsch warns in a subsequent essay, the emancipatory aims behind such texts can be stymied by the very textual forms produced to achieve them:

These new textual practices have a number of serious limitations in terms of readability, accessibility, and interpretation. They can disguise writers' continuing authorial control, they can fail to provide the theoretical framework and cultural context necessary for understanding the multiple voices emerging in a single text, they make new and difficult demands on readers, they require tolerance for ambiguity and contradictory claims, and they easily become elitist and exclusionary. (193–94)

Thus, she argues that before embracing such writing, “we need to examine our motivations for creating (and celebrating) these new forms of discourse, we need to anticipate their effects on different communities of readers, and we need to make conscious, deliberate decisions about when to write (and when to avoid writing) multi-vocal texts” (194).

One clear problem is that the exclusionary effects of such texts contradict the politically emancipatory aims of the writers. This dilemma arises, again, from identifying the value of the work with the text as commodity, occluding the role that labor—here, the labor of readers—contributes to the production of particular values through interaction with the text. And it arises from, then elides, the material conditions necessary for particular kinds of labor to be performed on the text to produce the intended value. Ralph Cintron, in a review of such textual experimentation, notes that only those writers who “need not answer to institutions that are significantly controlled by ‘bottom-line’ economics,” who instead “have the luxury to experiment,” can legitimately engage in such experimentation (401). Similarly, we may say that only those readers who have the necessary conditions to luxuriate in the difficulties posed by multivocal texts are likely to develop and engage in the kinds of reading practices that would yield the values their authors hope for. As Cintron argues, “The discourses of postmodern ethnographers and critical ethnographers have a limited audience, namely, an academic one” (403). Conversely, “the audience for writing research imposes on researchers a normative discourse that lacks elasticity.” As he explains, “Teachers, principals, school boards, government agencies, the public, and even the
media want to know what the language situation is and how to deal with it. They need to know how well their programs are working or how well their money is being spent” (401; see also Kirsch 197). In short, the specific material social conditions of the audience for whom much writing research is intended places particular demands on its reading practices. For example, Dautermann observes that it is difficult “to imagine many readers willing to tolerate the 2,000-plus pages of some qualitative research reports” (255).

What such writing demonstrates above all is a privileging of the exchange value of the textual commodity over any potential use value. In her essay questioning the value of multivocal texts, Kirsch describes the reaction to them as a “rush to celebrate these new textual practices” and their authors and publishers as “brave” (191). That is, the texts are admired less for what readers might learn from them about their putative subjects than for their forms and for what those forms say about their authors and publishers. Status is garnered either for the authors’ daring or for display (and thereby confirmation) of the privileged position the authors occupy, a position that enables them to engage in such daring—that is, for what the texts represent about the authors and their writing as writing rather than about the subject they ostensibly address in their writing. But as Ray observes, we need to bear in mind “the crucial difference between representational issues that arise out of a desire to be politically and intellectually current”—that is, out of a concern for the ethical and/or professional status of the ethnographer author—and “representational issues that arise out of a desire to change the way people read, write, and act in the world” (299). In contrast to a call for the production of a single text that offers displays of multivocality, Ray calls on researchers to produce a multiplicity of types of texts, including “speeches to the school board, inservice presentations, and articles in newsletters and newspapers that reach students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community organizers” (298). This list would, presumably, not exclude multivocal texts but would recognize that the question for ethnographers to ask is, as Kirsch puts it, “when to write (and when to avoid writing) multi-vocal texts,” rather than assuming that such texts in themselves carry specific values for all (194).

The Emphasis on Self-Reflexivity
The feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist perspectives on experience and knowledge that insist on the partiality and historicity of knowledge and experience have fueled a heightened stress on researchers
to practice self-reflexivity. In place of the Lone Ethnographer pursuing his quest without question, the Critical Ethnographer is expected to constantly question his or her motives, practices, and interpretations to avoid the colonizing discourse of traditional ethnography (see Brueggemann 19). Indeed, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater claims that in ethnography “a major goal of the research process is self-reflexivity—what we learn about the self as a result of the study of the ‘other’” (119; emphasis added). Kirsch and Ritchie, for example, call for “rigorously reflexive examination of ourselves as researchers that is as careful as our observation of the object of our inquiry” (9), and they tell researchers that they need to “examine deeply held assumptions” (19), “interrogate their relations with the people they study and the power they hold over them” (20), “open themselves to change and learning, to reinterpreting their own lives, and to reinventing their own ‘otherness,’” “attempt to identify what may be repressed and unconscious in their own experiences, and to claim their own contradictory social and gendered identities” (22), and conduct “rigorous on-going scrutiny of [their] motivations and methods” (24).

The practice of such reflexivity is intended as a professional safeguard against taking one’s own perspective as universal rather than local and personal, and as a safeguard against rewriting the experiences of those researched in one’s own terms. Again, it is difficult to argue against these as ethical strictures: rigorous and continual self-examination is what professionals are expected to do to counter tendencies toward professional arrogance. At the same time, precisely because they point to an ideal of academic professionalism, such calls tend to obscure the material social conditions of ethnographic work. As a result, what is intended as a cautionary practice can become a textually commodified guarantor of professional purity. Like the call for multivocality in texts, a concern about research practice can be transformed into a demand for a particular kind of product as evidence of professional worthiness.

In a critique of the reception of postmodern notions of the inevitability of ideology, Patricia Bizzell notes that some have taken such notions as a reason to view the scholar who avows ethical commitments with “embarrassment”: “Enmeshed in ideologies, we see ethical commitments as just another ideological construct, ratified by no transcendent authority or by no match with transcendent truth” (55). However, as Bizzell argues,

Our embarrassment about ethical commitments indicates a real nostalgia for the transcendent ratification that we in theory reject. For if we were
utterly convinced of the inevitability of ideology, we would not feel uneasy about seeing the world through ideological interpretations ... any more than we feel embarrassed about needing to eat or drink. (55)

Ethnographers' admissions of the ideological character of their work can seem like attempts to ward off such embarrassment and achieve transcendence. In such instances, explicit self-reflexivity about one's ideology can be employed as a kind of paradoxical strategy for innoculating oneself from the effects of that ideology: by acknowledging (confessing?) one's own imprisonment in ideology, one can achieve a kind of absolution. Cintron appears to recommend such a strategy when he suggests that making anthropologists "more aware of their rhetoric and how ideological positions are embedded inside particular rhetorics may indeed further anthropology's ability to tell us something 'real' about how others live their lives" (376). Similarly, when Kirsch and Ritchie propose "that composition researchers theorize their locations by examining their experiences as reflections of ideology and culture, by reinterpreting their own experiences through the eyes of others, and by recognizing their own split selves, their multiple and often unknowable identities," the intention would appear to be that such theorizing will enable researchers to guard against being "blinded" by their own "culturally determined world views" (8). However, if we take Bizzell's point, such "blindness" is in a sense unavoidable. Removal from one set of ideological blinders does not preclude blindness; rather, one ideological set is simply replaced by another—in this case, an ideology holding that we are all enmeshed in ideologies. As Kirsch and Ritchie later remind us, we can "never fully step outside our culture in order to examine our assumptions, values, and goals"; indeed, "no attempt at analyzing our assumptions is neutral or value-free; it is always a culturally and politically charged activity" (10). The value placed on self-reflexivity, in other words, is itself evidence of a particular ideology, one I have been identifying with beliefs about academic professionalism.

When self-reflexivity comes to be accepted (ideologically, of course) with such professionalism, then we can expect to see its value shift from having particular use value for researchers (and others) to having exchange value as an identifier of the researcher's status as a professional and as someone savvy about a postmodern understanding of ideology. A concern with the exchange value of self-reflexivity then displaces the concern with the potential use value of textual conventions for exhibiting self-reflexivity, as several researchers suggest in questioning the value of
self-reflexivity in research texts. In other words, while we can embrace the call to self-reflexivity as valuable for researchers, that is not the same as requiring textual gestures of self-reflexivity.

Two confusions about the place of self-reflexivity in ethnographic work are in operation here. First, there is a conflation of ethnographic work with a text, leading to the fetishizing of textual gestures of self-reflexivity, like the “facile statements” with which Kirsch and Ritchie note many research articles begin (9). Self-reflexivity comes to be understood as an inherently valuable attribute of the textual commodity. Again, this removes the writing from the social material practices that might, indeed, involve self-reflexivity on the part of any number of actors—researchers, participants, editors, readers—that have the effect of realizing any number of specific use values. Instead, it locates self-reflexivity in the text as a commodity characteristic that adds to its inherent exchange value in the economy of high-status ethnographic texts (ostensibly authored by high-status ethnographers). Secondly, just as self-reflexivity is treated as a textual commodity, thereby occluding the labor of actors in realizing particular use values from it, so it is often treated as an ethical characteristic of individuals, a matter of ethos, not praxis—individuals are encouraged to be self-reflective rather than to reflect. In making self-reflexivity a character trait, the material conditions under which individuals might engage in self-reflection are elided, as are the purposes for such engagements, hence the tendency of demands for self-reflexivity to resemble demands for researchers, on their own, to be “good.”

These confusions risk the production of textual commodities that display authorial self-reflexivity, warranted or not, regardless of whether the writing emanates from, or encourages in readers, a reflexivity that serves particular purposes with which we might align ourselves. Attention is directed, instead, to the author as subject. As Brueggemann complains, self-reflexivity that turns on issues of representation as an antidote to the colonizing discourse of traditional ethnography “risks turning representation into a solipsistic, rhetorical position in which the researcher (the self)—ah, once again—usurps the position of the subject (the other). For in being self-reflexive, we turn the lens back on ourselves, put ourselves at the center of representation” (19). Sullivan argues similarly that in efforts to avoid the “transcendent epistemology” of traditional ethnography that purported to present a “view from nowhere” by bracketing the authorial self, we risk introducing what R.S. Khare describes as “a self-reflexivity that dwells more on ‘ours’ and ‘us’ than
on a genuinely power-sharing discourse with the Other” (qtd. in Sullivan 102).

Rather than imagining self-reflexivity as requisite display in ethnographic texts, we might ask, as Chiseri-Strater, does, “How much self-reflexivity is valuable to readers as a way of understanding the ethics and methodology of the research context?” (119). First, we can address this in part by distinguishing among readers. If indeed the reader for a particular text—say, an ethnographer’s diary—is the ethnographer him or herself attempting to better understand his or her material social location, then for that text and that reader it might indeed be the case, as Chiseri-Strater states, that “a major goal is self-reflexivity—what we [ethnographers] learn about the self as a result of the study of the ‘other’” (119; emphasis added). That is, if the “we” are the ethnographers, then it may be fully appropriate for “us” to use some kinds of writing to better understand “ourselves.”

But we can distinguish the purposes, audiences, and uses to be realized from such texts with the purposes, uses, and audiences for other texts produced, such as reports. Second, we can distinguish self-reflexivity as an activity from self-reflexivity as an attribute of textual production altogether. While it may well be the case that the practice of writing can be used to engage in self-reflection, it does not and need not always lead to self-reflection; conversely, self-reflection may be practiced without involving writing. It is the conflation of ethnographic work with the production of textual commodities that blinds us to such possibilities.

Third, critical ethnographers can avoid the potentially paralyzing effects of self-reflexivity by recognizing that they are, after all, not alone but part of the social. Insofar as critical ethnographers recognize that there are, after all, ideological limitations to their self-reflexivity, they can use those limitations as an acknowledgment that the limitations of the accounts they produce can and will likely be noted by others—not because they themselves have been “unprofessional” but because of the inevitability of ideological blinders. Readers may and will realize meanings and values from accounts that differ from those their putative “authors” intended. That is, ethnographers can recognize the contributions that readers as participants make through the labor of interpretation to the meanings realized from their encounters with texts. This is not a call for abandoning responsibility in writing but for acknowledging, and acting on, the fact of shared responsibility for meanings from the texts that result from their work, in their work as both researchers and writers.

Finally, if we redefine self-reflexivity as a material social practice
with specific potential use values, then we must perforce revise the imperative for ethnographers to "be self-reflective" to the imperative to secure the material conditions that would allow ethnographers and their participants to self-reflect. Ellen Cushman, describing the practice of "activist" research, argues that in such research "researchers and participants fluidly negotiate power relations together as they try to facilitate each other's goals." This statement, she acknowledges, "presumes that participants have the critical reflexivity necessary in order to openly and carefully negotiate the terms of the ethnographic relation" (Struggle 23).

While part of her argument is to insist on a relationship of reciprocity between researcher and participants (27–31), the part most relevant here is that ethnographers often underestimate the ability of subordinate groups to resist dominant ideology in their daily practices; instead, they assume, from attending only to accounts by the dominant, that subordinate groups share the dominant ideology (24–25).

Cushman's argument is a useful corrective to what Anthony Giddens identifies as social theorists' "derogation of the lay actor," in which subordinate groups "are regarded as cultural dopes or mere 'bearers of a mode of production,' with no worthwhile understanding of their surroundings or the circumstances of their action" (71). At the same time, we need to recognize as well that reflection is a material practice that as such requires particular conditions for its sustenance—most obviously, time. In other words, ensuring that research participants achieve Cushman's activist research ideal of being able to "openly and carefully negotiate the terms of the ethnographic relation" will require not only the presumption that participants have the necessary critical reflexivity, but that they are afforded the means to practice that reflexivity in ways that benefit them. As Cushman observes in describing her research, "I needed a methodology that provided room for reflexively communicating the give-and-take terms of the relations community members and I developed" (Struggle 26; emphasis added).

Articulating the Ethics of Labor
Recent critiques of traditional ethnography in composition studies have challenged the Lone Ethnographer's pretensions to innocence, neutrality, and objectivity, insisting that Critical Ethnographers acknowledge instead their partiality, the effect of their work on the lives of those at the research site, and the rights of participants to have a say, and a hand, in the nature and direction of that work. These critiques have led ethnographers to be sensitive to the impact of research on the lives of those
researched, to recognize the rights of "participants," and to create forums for giving voice to individuals and perspectives historically silenced. As a consequence, there has been a significant increase in the understanding and knowledge of all concerned—researchers, participants, and readers of ethnographic texts. To safeguard the continuation of such benefits, I have been arguing that we need to face more fully the material sociality of ethnographic work as work performed on, with, and in the social and material in our design, practice, and writing about such work. While recent calls for ethical strictures on ethnography have in some ways furthered such recognition, they often carry the residue of the model of the academic professional as, once again, "lone": isolated from the material social realm even in pursuit of multivocality and collaboration, the professional's work understood not as labor in and with material and the social but, in its extreme forms, as commodified, disembodied discourse.

Furthering the critique of the Lone Ethnographer thus requires moving from efforts to define professional ethics for ethnographers to articulating the ethics of labor in ethnography, understood as work on and with the social—as cultural material practice. As I have been suggesting, addressing questions of ethnographic practice from a cultural materialist frame does not eliminate many or even some of the significant difficulties facing critical ethnographers. The concerns that critiques like those discussed have usefully raised all remain in place. However, addressing these concerns from a cultural materialist framework can help to redefine these difficulties from being understood as "dilemmas" to challenges. What might otherwise appear to be impossible demands on ethnographers in their research and writing to be fully collaborative, multivocal, and thoroughly self-reflexive can be understood instead as challenges to consider who might best want to participate in defining and carrying out particular research projects, through what material means, with what "room" and forums for reflection, to be reported on through what different venues and genres, to achieve what various and different purposes, for which readers, on which occasions. Rather than aiming at the development of a uniform code of professional ethics, this framework would have us consider and develop a multiplicity of strategies, each appropriate for different circumstances, to be used by researchers and research participants to define, pursue, and achieve their common projects.  

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Notes

1. As I have argued elsewhere, this results not from any lack of commitment among faculty to teaching or other activities but from the commodification of their work and social relations under which they can acquire exchange value primarily through production ("authorship") of research texts, not through teaching (see Horner 4–7).

2. Similarly, composition teachers pursuing pedagogies informed by critical ethnographic perspectives have been asked to engage in significantly greater self-reflection on both their theoretical positions and classroom practices. For example, in "The Problematic of Experience," Lu and I call on theorists of critical pedagogy to "reflect on their practice as theorists" and for those enacting and interpreting critical projects in research and teaching researchers to "reflect, and reflect on, the tension [they] experience between the researcher's desire to produce knowledge about the student and the teacher's desire to bring about change in the student" (268, 271).

3. This essay is taken from Brown and Dobrin. I am grateful to the editors and to SUNY Press for permission to present material from that book here.

Works Cited


Greenbaum, Joan. "Spread over Time and Place: Redivided Labor and the Role of Technical Infrastructure." Wardell et al. 79–92.


