CHAPTER 2

Fieldwork and Methodology

Bodies and Knowledge

JCars is a large Japanese multinational manufacturer (with around 30,000 staff). The head office is based in the bustling northern quarter of central Osaka City with the site limited to clerical work. During fieldwork, living alone in my parents’ home in Nara City (Nara Prefecture), which lies in a valley to the Southeast of Osaka City, for 12 months, from February 1998 to February 1999 (with a month’s break in May), following a precise daily routine, I commuted into Osaka City every weekday as a full-time office worker (9AM to 6PM). I invite you, dear reader, to accompany me on this journey. The routine enforced on our bodies is important insofar as it gets us to work on time, and that it puts us in a certain productive and motivated frame of mind, but contained in such commonplace are thoughts, feelings, and activities that escape its grip; we are never simply at the mercy of spatiotemporal coercion endemic to corporate life. My experience and skills of the commute (learned semiconsciously, with an awareness of cultural differences that structure this learning) can be read to mirror that of other members of JCars as well as the commuter body as a whole. I do not claim to know other commuters’ thoughts or that my thoughts would resemble theirs accurately; nonetheless there is a certain commonality of bodily experience. Thus, by this description, I bring together the particular and the general, the micro and the macro, or the individual and common experience: the dual perspective that tends to orient studies of everyday phenomena (Highmore 2002: 5). Then upon our arrival at the office, I embark on a discussion of my fieldsite, my relation to my subjects, in order to draw out some methodological points. As a general note on preparing a methodology, it might be said that all ethnographies leave emotional and cognitive imprints and these precious nuggets of inspiration become tools from which we devise our own methodology in situ.

In this chapter, further to the discussion of discursive forms of knowledge described previously, I am interested to bring in the employees as
well as myself, here not so much to take account of the complexity of
the workers’ subjectivities and experiences (Cohen 1992) as the rest of
the ethnography is devoted to that aim, nor to give an existential exposé
of myself, but to rather attend to the issue of embodiment and produc-
tion of anthropological and socio-cultural knowledge. Our bodies as the
means of communication with the world are present in all experience and
thoughts (Merleau-Ponty 2005). As our body, personality, and social posi-
tioning are conduits for a project that aspires to understand the experience
of others (Goffman 1989), one way of understanding another person’s (cul-
tural) experience is to understand them through our own personal experi-
ence in the field.

Intensely connected to our experience is, of course, our writing; our
personal experience as anthropologists undertaking research in the field
directly produces theory and analysis (Okely 1992). Such issues were taken
up in the Writing Culture debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986) that paved
the way for a new writing style—no longer are accounts written by the
disembodied authoritative anthropologist; rather ethnography became situ-
atuted, multivoiced, and reflexive. This narrative voice of the ethnographic
text differentiates the anthropological project from other social sciences:

... Today, anthropologists strive to explain the stages through which they
have arrived at what they think. They try to make explicit their shuttling
back and forth between theory and “field.” The work is no longer a matter of
overflying the experience of the actors at high altitude, but of restoring the
located and interactive character of ethnography. Their texts give more space
to other voices than to the researcher’s own: voices from the archives, those
of interlocutors in the field, of philosophers, literary theorists, writers. Closer
attention is given to social interactions, to the anthropology of speech and
other modes of communication. It is accepted, in effect, that every statement
relates to a context, is contingent on the personalities of the researcher and
the informants, is subject to variations caused by a wide range of factors.
And these days, the authors of anthropological texts are more likely than
ever before to have to explain themselves; their divine right to exercise total
control over their own narrative is being contested. ... Reflexivity—the
researcher’s scrutiny brought to bear on himself, the attempt to objectivize
his own subjectivity—has become the main requirement of research. (Augé
and Colleyn 2006: 105–6)

Our concern with writing has again moved forward, beyond the prob-
lems of textual production, to grapple with the changing conditions under
which ethnographies are conducted and produced (Marcus 1999): In con-
temporary society multiple layers of representations—in images and writ-
ing—pre-exist regarding the ethnographic subject. These simultaneously
undermine and side with the project, altering the anthropologist’s position