

# Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork



## Improvising Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork Theory

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Scholars have long recognized that ethnographic method is bound up with the construction of theory in ways that are difficult to teach. The reason, Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa H. Malkki argue, is that ethnographic theorization is essentially improvisatory in nature, conducted in real time and in necessarily unpredictable social situations. In a unique account of, and critical reflection on, the process of theoretical improvisation in ethnographic research, they demonstrate how both objects of analysis, and our ways of knowing and explaining them, are created and discovered in the give and take of real life, in all its unpredictability and immediacy. *Improvising Theory* centers on the year-long correspondence between Cerwonka, then a graduate student in political science conducting research in Australia, and her anthropologist mentor, Malkki. Through regular e-mail exchanges, Malkki attempted to teach Cerwonka, then new to the discipline, the basic tools and subtle intuition needed for anthropological fieldwork.

The result is a strikingly original dissection of the processual ethics and politics of method in ethnography.