

ANTH 448: Anthropology Horizons

Assignment: Calls from the Field

Overview

Anthropologists have always sent word back from the field. Margaret Mead's *Letters from the Field 1925–1975* is not a monograph; it is a running correspondence, uncertain and sensory and alive to the strangeness of being somewhere unfamiliar. Allaine Cerwonka wrote to Liisa Malkki from Melbourne about her anxieties and methodological decisions in real time. Malinowski asked his student, Camila Wedgwood, to write to him. These letters are not marginal to the anthropological record. They are, as Mead herself observed, where the method was being made.

This assignment asks you to work in that tradition, but through a different medium. Instead of a letter, you will produce a phone call.

You will interview a faculty member or graduate student who has conducted field research, draw out a short, vivid, first-person account of a specific moment or encounter from their fieldwork, and record it as if they were calling from wherever they were. The result (2 to 4 minutes, ideally, and in the researcher's own voice) is a call from the field. Not a summary of findings. Not a lecture excerpt. A moment: grounded, particular, still thinking.

The recordings you produce will become real departmental resources. They will be used as audio content for a physical installation in which visitors pick up a vintage rotary telephone handset, dial a number, and hear an anthropologist's voice from the field, as if the call is still coming in. They may also be used for the department's website, recruitment materials, and public outreach. This is not an assignment that lives and dies in the course Canvas site. It goes somewhere.

The Tradition You Are Working In

Letters and correspondence from the field have long served as a distinctive mode of anthropological writing: more open than fieldnotes, more intimate than published ethnography, more honest about uncertainty than either. The act of writing a letter from the field—of making what you are doing intelligible to someone who is not there—is itself a form of methodological reflection. You have to distill, translate, and take a position. The letter compels a kind of clarity that the notebook does not.

The telephone call shares these qualities but adds something else: a voice, with all its hesitation and texture and breath. Where a letter arrives folded, a call arrives in real time. Where a letter is composed, a call is delivered. The format of the handset creates an intimacy: you hold it to your ear, and for a moment the distance collapses.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote about the paradox of the postcard: simultaneously personal and public, addressed to one person but open to anyone who handles it. The telephone call has a similar paradox.

What you are producing here is a recording that will be heard by strangers, one at a time, in private. Each listener will hold the handset to their ear and receive something that was meant for no one in particular... and will feel, momentarily, like it was meant for them.

Your job is to make that moment worth having.

Learning Objectives

By completing this project, you will develop skills directly transferable to professional environments in research, communications, nonprofits, academia, and journalism:

- Professional communication and relationship-building: You will initiate contact with a faculty member or graduate student, introduce yourself and the project clearly and professionally, and navigate the back-and-forth of scheduling, follow-up, and collaboration. These are foundational workplace skills that require confidence, clarity, and persistence.
- Consent and ethics: Before any recording begins, you will explain the purpose of the project (including its use in a public installation or website) and obtain the narrator's explicit consent. This mirrors the ethical protocols anthropologists use in their own fieldwork.
- Interviewing and active listening: Eliciting a good story is a skill. You will learn to ask open questions, follow unexpected threads, and listen for the moment when someone is circling around something worth pursuing.
- Narrative shaping and editorial judgment: A great story doesn't tell itself — it is shaped. You will work with your narrator to identify the right moment, the right level of detail, and the arc that makes a listener want to stay. This develops your ability to communicate complex ideas for non-specialist audiences.
- Audio production basics: You will record, review, and deliver a clean audio file. Familiarity with audio capture and editing is increasingly valuable in both professional and academic contexts.
- Project ownership and follow-through: You are responsible for the entire arc — from first contact to final delivery. This end-to-end accountability mirrors what professional project work actually looks like.

What You Are Looking For

A call from the field is not a lecture. It is not a research summary. It is the kind of thing someone might actually say if they called you from the field in the middle of the third week of fieldwork and said: "I have to tell you what happened yesterday."

The best calls share a few qualities. They are grounded in a specific moment: a place, a person, an object, a conversation, an unexpected turn. They may reveal something the narrator did not fully understand until later. They give the listener a felt sense of what it means to do fieldwork: the uncertainty, the relationships, the serendipitous encounters, the slow accumulation of meaning.

You are asking your narrator to take you somewhere. Not to describe somewhere in the abstract, but to stand you in a specific place at a specific time and let you feel what it was like to be there.

REGISTER

A useful orientation for the narrator: imagine you are calling a colleague from the field. You have 3 minutes and something happened yesterday that you can't stop thinking about. What do you say? That quality of urgency and specificity is what you are looking for.

Process and Deliverables

1. **Step 1.** Identify and contact your narrator.

Reach out professionally to a faculty member or graduate student in the department. Introduce yourself, briefly describe the project—including its use in the telephone installation and other departmental materials—and ask if they would be willing to participate.

2. **Step 2.** Share the purpose and obtain consent.

Before scheduling, make sure your narrator understands how the recording may be used (telephone installation, departmental website, promotional materials for the department) and has given their consent in writing. Provide them with a brief written description of the project to review.

3. **Step 3.** Prepare your questions.

Come to the interview with guiding questions, but hold them lightly. Your goal is to find the story, not to conduct a survey. Useful prompts include: “Is there a specific moment in the field that you still think about?” Or: “Was there something that happened that you almost didn’t write down?” Follow the conversation where it goes.

4. **Step 4.** Conduct the recorded interview.

Record the interview. Aim for a final clip of 2–4 minutes. If the raw interview runs longer, you will work with the narrator to identify and isolate the right section. The final recording should be in the narrator’s voice only, not yours. Your role is to draw the story out, not to appear in it.

5. **Step 5.** Edit and produce the audio.

Clean up the recording as needed: remove long pauses, background noise, or false starts with the narrator’s approval. The final file must be clear, audible, and delivered in the format specified below. Think of yourself as a producer, not a narrator.

Technical specification	Required value
File format	WAV
Channels	Mono
Sample rate	8,000 Hz (8kHz)
Bit depth	16-bit

Length	2–4 minutes
Naming convention	Narrator surname _ location or theme

6. **Step 6.** Share with your narrator for approval.

Give your narrator the opportunity to review and approve the final recording before you submit it. They may ask for minor edits. This is part of the ethical process and mirrors how consent works in actual research publication.

7. **Step 7.** Produce an accessible alternative format.

The telephone installation is an audio-only medium, which means it is not accessible to listeners who are deaf or hard of hearing. As a final step, you will produce a written transcript of your recording and consider how it might be presented alongside the handset (e.g., as a printed card, a QR code linking to a text version, or a captioned digital display). The transcript should read as a text in its own right, not simply as a verbatim transcription: you may lightly edit for readability, add a one-sentence introduction identifying the narrator and context, and note any significant pauses, sounds, or atmosphere that a reader would otherwise miss. This step asks you to think of accessibility not as a compliance exercise but as a design problem: how do you preserve what makes this recording worth hearing for someone who cannot hear it?

8. **Step 8.** Submit your audio file and reflection.

Submit the final WAV file together with a short written reflection (approximately one page) describing your process: how you found your narrator, what you learned in the interview, what choices you made in shaping the story, and what this project taught you about professional communication in an academic context. If you encountered moments where the story was hard to draw out, or where you made an editorial decision you are uncertain about, write about those too.

Why This Matters

The stories you collect are part of the answer to a problem the discipline has always faced: how to communicate the value of anthropological research to people who have never done fieldwork and may not know what it involves.

A two-minute recording of a researcher describing the moment fieldwork changed how they saw something can do more to recruit a curious undergraduate than any program brochure. It can do more than that. It can make the discipline feel alive and worth entering — which is what good letters from the field have always done.

Among the specific uses for these recordings is the telephone installation: a vintage rotary phone through which visitors — students, prospective students, members of the public — can dial a number and hear an anthropologist’s voice from the field. No slideshow. No caption. No summary. Just a person, a moment, and a story that is still unfolding. Your recordings could be part of that.

You are contributing something real and lasting to the department. That is worth taking seriously.