

## PUBLISHED VERSION

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Anthropology Today, 2022; 38(3):5-8

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Published version <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12725>

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22 June 2022

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/135556>

# The 'drive and talk' as ethnographic method

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**Fig. 1.** A historical sluice gate used to partition and move floodwaters. Langhorne Creek, 2021.

On a sunny winter day in the wine-growing region of Langhorne Creek, South Australia, we arrive at a refurbished settler homestead to meet a man of Anglo-European descent whose family has been tending the land for generations. Handshakes are exchanged as supple, keyboard-typing fingers take their turns wrapping around a rock-like grip fashioned by daily farm labour. Within minutes of the initial greeting, we are invited to load ourselves into the farmer's pickup truck so he can show us around his property.

His fields are located on the Bremer River, one of two rivers that were key to the choice of colonial settlement on land belonging to the Indigenous Ngarrindjeri landowners (circa 1850). The invitation to ride along suits us perfectly as we have two primary purposes for our visit. The first is to learn how the farmer we are meeting has continued the flood-based viticulture irrigation that has been practised in the region since European settlement. The second and related purpose is to see the redgum swamps alongside the river, which are now full following winter rains. These temporary swamps absorb the overflow of seasonal rains and floods while providing a water savings bank for the trees that offer much-needed shade for humans, cattle and wildlife in the parched summer.

While driving through the farmer's land on our way to the swamps, bouncing exuberantly inside the truck as we move over uneven ground, we find time to ask him a series of questions about the landscape features we pass. From the grapevine varieties to the animal diversity we see, each observation allows us to tap into the farmer's knowledge while understanding how he moves through his land. Unanticipated insights also emerge. After passing grazing cows, we learn of his cattle-rearing side business and how it has been an exceptionally profitable year due to a significant price hike for grass-fed beef and veal. We also learn of his knowledge of the regional flora and fauna and the particularities of tree plantations that his forebears were responsible for seeding over generations.

The redgum swamps, once we arrive, are glorious. Thick grey trunks with low branch cover emerge from a shallow rainfed lake as ducks and black swans meander across the water's surface. The array of birds in front of us is not happenstance as the seasonal swamps are part of known migration patterns, the farmer informs us. Behind the swamps runs a river from which he draws irrigation water, as evidenced – upon inspection – by a giant grey pipe rising from the riverbed and disappearing into a pumphouse.

And what of the floodwaters, we ask? How does he harness the seasonal floods for irrigation? For that, we are told, we need to travel further upstream. We once again pack ourselves into the truck to arrive miles later at the century-old infrastructure – comprised of a check dam, sluice gates and raised earth banks – rebuilt to harness and redirect water to the fields when the river surges. The simplicity and ingenuity of the system are impressive, and we exclaim as much. The farmer agrees that we need to see it to appreciate it. 'I can't explain it to you,' he states with a large grin, 'I have to show it to you.'

## The 'drive and talk' as method

The farmer featured in the opening vignette was not alone in wanting to respond to our water and landscape management questions by driving us around his fields. In a nine-month ethnographic project conducted in 2021, which included 30 mixed-method interviews, we were routinely invited to hop into pickup trucks to survey farmland after



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we introduced ourselves and the purpose of our study, which was to understand the 'hydrosocial adaptations' that have allowed farmers to adapt to water stress over the past century. A hydrosocial perspective aims to understand how changes to the water cycle impact society and, conversely, how society impacts the water cycle (Linton & Budds 2014). Although we anticipated that 'walk and talk' methods of ethnographic questioning would be necessary to the project to understand people's attitudes to water management on their farms, the farmer-initiated 'drive and talk' method surprisingly emerged as a key research tool. The following discussion highlights why this method is significant for ethnographers and ethnographic research. We also offer a preview of the insights derived from the technique to illustrate its utility.

For social scientists, the value of the 'walk and talk' method is that it provides an interactive means of generating research insights *in situ* – on site – while eliciting information that is prompted by features in the landscape that might have otherwise been forgotten or overlooked if the interview context was set in a fixed location. Many anthropological discussions of this method emphasize the phenomenological data that walking-and-talking generates as people understand the significance, and even the 'wisdom', of the places in which they live (Basso 1996). Phenomenological anthropologists have successfully utilized the approach, even when not using the 'walk and talk' terminology. This includes exploring landscape knowledge and 'dwelling' practices (Ingold 2011), the human-animal relationships of shearers (Gray 2011), and the heightened extra-sensorial and even spiritual insights that can be gleaned from the ethnographer's involvement in walking rituals and pilgrimages (Apfell-Marglin 2012; Armbricht 2009).

One does not have to be driven by phenomenological theory to value the method. Visual anthropologists have found the approach useful for capturing the 'sensorial elements of human experience' that they can document on photo or film while ambulating with their interlocutors (Pink 2007: 240). They have also spoken of how walking with film subjects (and knowing how they walk, including while barefoot) can deepen filmmakers' understanding of how people move through places while also creating a sense of empathetic knowing with the filmmaker and the audience (Laine 2020). Cultural geographers similarly find value in walking-and-talking, particularly in agricultural or environmental research. The 'walk and talk' method can even be used by geographers as a sort of 'rapid rural appraisal survey device' that engages people within their local context while simultaneously integrating a conventional interview process that helps identify landscape management and environmental values (Bardsley et al. 2018; Evans & Jones, 2011; Häggström 2019; Nelson 2015).

Scholars who apply 'walk and talk' methods have discovered revelatory power in the act and the experience of

ambulation. Insights into the significance of human movement through space and place owe a debt to Michel de Certeau's work on the social significance of 'walking in the city' as a 'practice of everyday life' (1986: 97). Jo Lee and Tim Ingold (2006) add to insights on the exploratory significance of ambulation by asserting that walking is a multisensorial activity that can be shared and empathetically comprehended with human and non-human others. But while scholars have argued that we are more in touch with our surroundings through our feet and in contact with the ground, it is no longer just our legs that take us places. Machines – and cars in particular – move hundreds of millions of human bodies each day.

The mobility enabled by cars is so pervasive that it forms the daily routines 'often taken for granted' (Lavolette & Argounova-Low 2021: 1008). This is surprising, as scholars have argued the need for scholarly appreciation of vehicular mobilities for decades. Nigel Thrift (2004) is particularly adamant that car travel should not be overlooked as a significant means through which humans come to know the world because, as he contends, much walking, both historically and contemporarily, is derived from it. He asserts that car travel is not, therefore, 'a separate and, by implication, more authentic sphere', since the notion of walking associated with a 'peripatetic aesthetic of being somehow closer to nature' has been carefully culturally constructed (ibid.: 44). Thrift argues that the car's significance is that it reconfigures civil society's 'distinct ways of dwelling, travelling and socializing in and through automobilized time-space' (ibid.: 46). The roads and routes that people travel in cars can reveal 'a lot about us as thinkers, doers, goers and movers' (Lavolette & Argounova-Low 2021: 1011).

Vehicular forms of non-ambulatory movement can be highly sensorial, even if it is not as 'multisensorial' as the experience of walking on the ground. As Andrew Dawson points out, one of the chief sensory benefits of driving is that it can make people 'feel good' (2015: 6). Thus, although you may lose some tactile or olfactory values, not to mention the joy of conversation while walking in the open air, talking in the car provides the methodological benefit of tapping into people's feelings, emotions and knowledge. While people's bodies and minds reside within the 'inner space' of the car, vehicular movement can also unlock their recollections of the places and things they pass in the 'outer space' that extends beyond its boundaries (Huijbens & Benediktsson 2007: 145)

With these insights in mind, we argue that automobility has the advantage over ambulation when it comes to accessing connections to the landscape at the scale of the farm, which is where environmental management decisions are on heightened display. Human senses and emotions continue to play an essential part in the vehicular movements through landscapes managed by farmers because cars help to connect people to the spatial histories of the environments through which they pass – even if, we note, these recollections can invoke 'fantasies of home', and of the past (Dawson 2015: 7). Over time, in fact, cars enable people to build a 'historical ontology' that becomes 'the condition of possibility for present spatial practices' (Huijbens & Benediktsson 2007: 145). In our fieldwork, we experienced these spatial histories and historical ontologies in automobilized time-space as we moved about the fields that have been managed by the inter-generational farmers who cultivate produce, vineyards and cattle on lands that have been transformed since the start of colonization.

### Landscape management and ride-along insights

The combined temporal, spatial and sensorial encompassing that driving enables at an accelerated rate, relative

to walking, emerged as significant to the phenomenology of the 'drive and talk' method. With the first farmer we mentioned earlier – let us call him Farmer A – we were able to jump hydrosocial time-space in a matter of minutes via car travel: at one moment, we were in the heart of the redgum swamps looking at their water overflow and recharge capacities; at another, we were observing the river-drawn pumping irrigation arrangements; and just a few moments later, we were journeying upstream to see a point on the river where the multi-generational practice of floodwater irrigation continues via the reconstruction of a new weir that is built alongside the dilapidated infrastructures marking the inception of settler colonization in the region. Importantly, this movement of 'time/space' enabled a 'shifting of worlds' (Latimer & Munro 2006: 48) as we moved with farmers at the slow-rolling speeds often mandated by topographic demands. And as we encountered the 'spatial history' (Huijbens & Benediktsson 2007: 145) of these water and landscape management features, we conversed with the farmer while driving to the locations of interest and hopping out and walking the land with him.

This socialized landscape interaction facilitated understandings we would not have arrived at otherwise – such as the careful plot divisions for cattle rearing that allow for off-season farm income before the vintage arrives, a practice which can financially insure the farmer in years of low grape yield. We also gained a better sense of how the farmer moves through and thinks about his land on a day-to-day basis – all with an eye towards how these movements and perceptions change seasonally and over time. Through driving-and-talking with Farmer A, in other words, we experienced liberation from the limitations of 'ordinary conversation' (Latimer & Munro 2006: 49); we let the driver's landscape knowledge elicit relevant insights as we passed vital features that might have gone unreached within the confines of a 'walk and talk' interview.

Other farmers intuitively and unknowingly followed suit to Farmer A, encouraging us to join them in automotive movement and bipedal ambulation as we traversed large tracts of land to understand how they and their forebears undertook water and landscape management. For Farmer B, we needed to understand how much of the family's land was put towards wildlife conservation on their 6,000-acre farm. Within moments of arriving at his homestead, we piled into his pickup truck to journey to the open-air bird sanctuary that his late father initiated, and where he and his wife picnic to take in the beauty and diversity of the animals that gather there. In fact, it was only by walking around his special place at a more intimate scale that the landscape management concepts discussed during the drive could be translated into observable outcomes for the specific vegetation, birds and venomous snakes(!) that Farmer B cherishes, and for which he has worked to preserve a vital habitat.

Since the bird sanctuary juts up against a large freshwater lake with salinity problems that during times of extreme drought is used as a backup water supply, our journey continued to the private desalination plant that Farmer B built during the 2006-2010 Millennium Drought (which almost brought the region's farming activity to a crippling halt). Moving on from the desalination plant, we were taken to survey the sizeable scope of his property portfolio, the length of which took 20 minutes of driving to see from end to end. During this automotive tour, we learned of the native brush that he lets thrive on fallow land and the 'Irrigators' Revegetation Planting Site' that he allowed to be built on a road next to his farm to encourage groundwater recharge from irrigation runoff. Such efforts, we learned, are essential to repairing the water over-extraction practices of decades past. We discussed Farmer

This project was supported by the Australian Research Council (DP210101849). The authors express their gratitude to the funders, the farmers who shared their time and insights, and the reviewers' for their helpful suggestions. Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Adelaide, as part of the Wiley - The University of Adelaide agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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WILLIAM SKINNER



DOUGLAS K. BARDSLEY



WILLIAM SKINNER



GEORGINA DREW



GEORGINA DREW



GEORGINA DREW

(From left to right, above to below)

**Fig. 2.** A black swan in redgum swamps and grapevines beyond. Langhorne Creek, 2021.

**Fig. 3.** An irrigation pipe on the Bremer River. Langhorne Creek, 2021.

**Fig. 4.** Off-roading with a farmer's car in Langhorne Creek, 2021.

**Fig. 5.** Second author walking around a century-old weir. Langhorne Creek, 2021.

**Fig. 6.** First author appreciates the bird (and snake) wildlife sanctuary from the safe distance of the car. Langhorne Creek, 2021.

**Fig. 7.** Second author walking and talking with an interlocutor on a dam's edge. Langhorne Creek, 2021.

**Fig. 8.** The Angas River flowing over a dirt road. Langhorne Creek, 2021.

**Fig. 9.** An interlocutor mapping out the flood management system on a dirt road. Langhorne Creek, 2021.



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GEORGINA DREW

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- B's grape-growing techniques, too, but via the 'drive and talk' experience, we also came to understand how grape growing is surrounded and scaffolded by a range of other agricultural and water management activities that are not specific to the wine industry.
- When we conducted follow-up visits with Farmers C and D, having earlier undertaken sit-down interviews with them, they had us tailgate through a range of farms settled on either side of the Angas River, the second seasonal river in Langhorne Creek used for flood-based irrigation. The region's settler-colonial history was on display in this off-road adventure as we followed the flow along the edge of agricultural fields to look at various efforts to harness the river. We witnessed the hubris of the earliest colonists, whose efforts to control the Angas via a costly check dam had been thwarted within a matter of years as the river learned to flow around the dam and gouge out the riverbed far below its original level. We also saw how other dam and diversion features had eroded or required modifications over time, proving that the river still laughs at the best engineering efforts it has been presented with to date.
- And as we hopped in and out of our cars to start and stop the conversation – and the recording device – we learned of the family farms that are being bought up by large corporations as the demographics of the region change and as many young sons and daughters look elsewhere for their career opportunities. Since the older generation are cashing in on their financial 'pound of flesh', often after reaching exhaustion from keeping the farm going well into their late 60s and early 70s, we discussed what long-term landscape management histories might be lost or forgotten as the corporatization of Langhorne's wine industry expands. We also learned that some offspring are returning, attracted back from cities by the landscape's freedoms, histories, beauties and opportunities.
- An hour and a half after the start of the tailgate journey along the river, we ended the trip at a dip in the road over which a deceptively placid Angas flowed. At this point, Farmers C and D took turns mapping out the landscape we had covered with a stick they picked off the ground. As they etched the landscape into the dirt road beneath us, they explained how and where the river overflows when it swells and how the region's farmers have learned to sequentially flood their fields with the precious water that offers relief from reliance on piped water supplies. When the tutorial ended, the talk of the social relationships forged by the need to jointly manage the floodwaters led to commentary about the town's support for, and close involvement with, their 'footy' (Australian football) sports team. It was on this topic of social bonding and solidarity that the tour was completed.
- It would be difficult to imagine how we might derive some of the insights we gained if it were not for the 'drive and talk' method. In the semi-structured indoor interviews we conducted, the discussions were invariably focused upon the recollection of events past as people recounted the sequence of changes in water and landscape management practices since the beginning of the region's settler colonization. When the interactions were taken outdoors – and significantly accelerated in their temporal and spatial scope via driving tours – novel and unanticipated points of commentary arose that enriched our understanding of the region's social, ecological and economic change. Since the 'drive and talk' method lent itself to a multidirectional conversation rather than feeling like a formal interview based on predetermined questions, the researcher/subject barrier broke down, and the discussion emerged organically on a range of topics. As new ideas or key points were raised, the method redirected our driving journeys to physical locations where the hydrosocial concept or process was displayed in places the farmers deemed important.

## Conclusion

Building on Thrift's (2004) observation that drivers experience cars as extensions of their bodies, our ethnographic work in an Australian wine-growing region demonstrates how farmers traverse, know and encounter their farms as extensions of themselves while engaging with them on the ground and in the car. This matters, we argue, for efforts to understand how farmers interact with their lands and how they manage the spatial and temporal challenges of cultivation through variable conditions. To understand the experience of working large tracts of agricultural land, anthropologists and other social scientists would do well to drive, and not just walk, those lands with farmers. For our research project on the hydrosocial adaptations that farmers undertake in a warming world, driving and talking with our interlocutors has allowed us to better understand how they know their farms, which for our purposes has included insights into how their water and landscape management practices have changed over time at a regional scale. As demonstrated in this discussion, we also came to appreciate on a more visceral level how the farm is nowadays experienced through vehicular and ambulatory engagement. This mixed form of embodied engagement between farmers and the land has its own sensorial peculiarities, qualities and affordances that are not as separated or 'cocooned' from the world as some people imagine car travel (Dawson 2017a).

For ethnographers working elsewhere in the world, the driving and talking experience has the added benefit of affording unanticipated and surprising moments of observation and encounter that can prompt points of discussion that would have otherwise been omitted from the more common sitting interview approach. The potential for the unanticipated to emerge in 'drive and talk' interviews is due, in part, to the dynamism of the ever-changing environments through which cars move and the intimate social processes of sitting and engaging with the landscape together. Adding to the sense of external dynamism, ethnographers' ride-along efforts can even help identify drivers' 'improvisatory ways of moving forward in the world', as Sarah Pink and her co-authors contend (2019: 103). As natural and built features flash by outside car windows, people value the 'feeling of moving through the environment' in ways that entail 'embodied, sensory and affective knowing' (ibid.).

To be clear, we do not mean to say that anthropologists and other social scientists have overlooked the significance of the car. Acts of automobility feature in many, if not most, ethnographic monographs. Some scholars have even taken human ways of knowing with, and through, the car as a point of scholarly and/or ethnographic focus (Argounova-Low 2021; Dawson 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Huijbens & Benediktsson 2007; Latimer & Munro 2006; Thrift 2004; Urry 2004). This is essential work because cars reflect and embody complex 'socio-cultural phenomena', even as they create 'conducive spaces and environments for expressive social events and actions' (Laviolette & Argounova-Low 2021: 1010). For our work, the emphasis is less on the car as a sensorial extension of the self (Latimer & Munro 2006; Urry 2006), and more upon what the car enables researchers to access in terms of drivers' practices and knowledges of the places and landscapes through which they pass. Our hope in underscoring the significance of the car as a tool is to recentre the act of riding along and conversing with our interlocutors as a viable research method that can yield significant empirical results. We contend that the 'drive and talk' affords meaningful ethnographic opportunities that merit a more concerted anthropological embrace. ●