

# Handbook of Qualitative Research

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editors



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## The Art and Politics of Interpretation

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*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, *Culture and Truth*, 1989

*I have been working to change the way I speak and write.*

bell hooks, *Yearning*, 1990

IN the social sciences there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself. Confronted with a mountain of impressions, documents, and field notes, the qualitative researcher faces the difficult and challenging task of making sense of what has been learned. I call making sense of what has been learned *the art of interpretation*. This may also be described as moving from the field to the text to the reader. The practice of this art allows the field-worker-as-*bricoleur* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 17) to translate what has been learned into a body of

textual work that communicates these understandings to the reader.

These texts, borrowing from John Van Maanen (1988), constitute tales of the field. They are the stories we tell one another. This is so because interpretation requires the telling of a story, or a narrative that states "things happen this way because" or "this happened, after this happened, because this happened first." Interpreters as storytellers tell narrative tales with beginnings, middles, and ends. These tales always embody implicit and explicit theories

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