Simply History: A Review of Recent Thought on Ethnography, Reflexivity and Auto/Ethnography

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Since its inception as a discipline, anthropology utilized fieldwork with methodologies of participant-observation, surveys/interviews, and archival research, to record information on cultures. Traditionally the researcher disseminated this information in the form of a monograph, theoretically framed and laden with data, aimed almost exclusively at interested parties within academe. Informants spoke to researchers, who in turn "translated" what they heard into information on the varied and various traits of that culture, conflating methodology with presentation into the concept of ethnography.

Yet ethnography is not merely a methodology of research, but a genre of reporting data, a scholarship producing contextual thickly detailed literature (Geertz 1973) that provides intricate insight into the human condition, enabling the confrontation of issues that can inform our adaptation to social life and exposing us to the wisdom of others. (Stoller 2007) Each body of ethnographic material is unique to the culture and period reflected in it. For a large part of anthropology's history, the monograph remained the sole example of analysis and presentation: while many classic ethnographies remain a part of required and desired reading among academics and the public, the greater part of those written sit untouched. (Stoller 2007)

The debate about how best to represent ethnographic realism as a totality of cultural experience began in the discipline several decades ago. (Stoller 2007) Nicholas Holt reviews several moments in the recent history of qualitative research, of which ethnography is the largest part. The current moment in time covers "crises of legitimation and representation" (2003:3) followed by experimental writing and participatory research, all of which provide impetus for the expansion of representational genres that now include autoethnography, biography, autobiography, life story, memoir, and poetics.

Ruth Behar labels the writing of ethnographies as an art in this time of blurred expression, referring to Geertz's assessment of ethnography as "a genre which partakes of both memoir and fiction and yet is neither." (2007:145-146) She credits the "poetic sensibility" Ruth Benedict wove throughout her works with influencing the manner in which new ethnographers construct their writing. The turn towards poetics and ethnopoetics as an expression of ethnography weds indigenous voices with dialogic anthropology, adding context and academic "legitimacy" to indigenous oral traditions, strengthening collaborations between folklore, linguistics, and anthropology in works such as Dell Hymes' *In Vain I tried to Tell You* and Dennis Tedlock's *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Combining poetics with current ethnography results in writing like Mark Nowak's *Zwyczaj*, which alternates theory with native voice with analysis in a poetic dance of words that evoke the smells and emotions of a Polonian kitchen. (1998)
Memoirs "open up your being to an invisible audience of readers"; (Stoller 2007:182) they are personal, deeply detailed recounts. Where autobiography is an historical account of events of an author's entire life, and biographies the history written by an outside voice, memoirs differ in that they relate a section or sections of an author's life, contextualized. Illness narratives are part of the memoir genre; Stoller mentions as memorable Joni Rodgers' *Bald in the Land of Big Hair*, Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, and Stewart Alsop's *Stay of Execution* as memoirs that create a "personal bridge that connects outer realities to inner impressions, others to selves, and readers to writers." (2007:183-184)

In the 1970s, the focus of anthropological investigation shifted from participant-observation to what Barbara Tedlock terms the observation of participation (1991:78), following a decade of alternating experimental writing that included and involved the impressions and expressions of the researcher with traditional academic ethnographies. Tedlock cites D.M. Hayano’s 1979 *Poker Faces* as one of the first uses of the term auto-ethnography to describe the recounting of an insider on a culture or cultural expression, but credits Martin Yang’s self-reflexive 1972 essay on the writing of his ethnography *In a Chinese Village* as unique in looking at and writing about the experience of his fieldwork. (1991) The shift towards a torrent of auto-ethnographic and reflexive writing reflects "today's general intellectual climate of epistemological doubt" and a society receptive to anthropological ideas, exposed and experienced in a world where the "Other" is as close as the click of a mouse or the nightly news.

Deborah Reed-Danahay's text *Auto/Ethnography* (1997a) is a collection of chapters by both native anthropologists writing from insider viewpoints and by professional anthropologists writing about their own experiences in investigating others. Her introduction defines the term autoethnography as double sensed, referring either to an ethnographer working within their own culture or autobiographical writing that has as it's focus anthropological concerns. She breaks down the dichotomy of native/anthropologist into three realms: writings by members of societies, formerly the objects of ethnographic studies themselves, who became authors of studies of their own group; autobiographical writings by members of ethnic minorities; and ethnographies by anthropologists replete with reflexively interjected autobiographical information. Reed-Danahay mentions the increasing awareness in ethnography of the power relations between researcher and subject, the apparent harkening back to colonial hegemonic attitudes when chronicling the culture of a people, as impetus for this recent focus on voices other than anthropological to write culture.

Many of the writers concur with Caroline Brettell in her chapter appropriately entitled, in part, *Blurred Genres and Blended Voices* (1997) that a more complete accounting can only come from blurring the "lines" artificially drawn between "us" and "them," between "narrative" and "academic." This practice is the descendent of dialogic anthropology, which reinforced the knowledge that intertextuality, conversational recounting and understanding are critical components of correctly recording/reporting exchanges and "interviews." Indeed, "traditional criteria used to judge qualitative research in general may not be appropriate for autoethnography."(Holt 2003:3)
In this frame of dialogical research, many anthropologists also routinely seek input from the communities in which they worked on the material they prepare. Karen Johnson-Weiner studies in and with the Old Order Amish; she distributed chapters of the book she planned to write among her key consultants in the community. When the responses included "I guess this is probably the best we should expect from someone who isn't one of us," (Omohundro 2007:398) Johnson-Weiner refined her representations to reflect more accurately the meaning and mode of Amish life.

In her essay *Leaving Home* (1997), Reed-Danahay remarks that she is suspect of the authenticity of the voices of the writers of the two works she critiques, noting that they are not truly rural peasant French, but have left to become educated and then return to their villages. This leaving and coming back has given them a different outlook, a different perspective on life in the villages that those who never left cannot have: they "often construct dominant, master narratives of schooling and schooling experiences – not counternarratives of resistance." (emphasis in the original) (1997:141) The assumption that any authentic "native" voice must be one that echoes resistance may be anthropologists, slipping into post-colonial apologetic mode, expecting that every voice not our own is angry, protesting, resisting, or as per George Marcus, we are "running behind the poor and defenseless to explain how they 'resist'?” (Marcus 2008:12) Will we feel vindicated if they are, some sort of cultural penance we must do to atone for what we perceive as decades of implicit mastery over other cultures? Perhaps this is our own anthropology of remorse, yet it does not denigrate the validity of native voice, it serves to elevate it.

Pnina Motzafi-Haller, in her essay *Writing Birthright* (1997:195-222), describes her scholarly work both within her own *Mizrahim* (Jews from the Middle Eastern world) community and as a field worker with "others" in Africa. Her dilemma in wondering if she can really be a representative voice for the minority non-Ashkenazi Jewish community partners with her description of a "traditional" field work experience in a community in Botswana and illustrates the disparities between "new" native voice versus "old" outsider ethnography. She wonders whether she can really be a voice for the minority, and anguishs over her treatment and privilege in a field community where she picks "her people" and "her translator." (1997:205) "By collapsing the categories of native and non-native, subject and object, researcher and subject of study, I hope to go beyond the strict laws of the genre identified with traditional social sciences practices. This is making me a better, not less able, anthropologist and analyst." (1997:219) For reasons that have little to do with the dichotomies mentioned, or maybe because of them, this analysis of the current stage of ethnography is valuable.

George Marcus suggests that reflexive writing was born of the critiques of the current conditions of collaboration, which has always been a part of fieldwork, representing an act of atonement and reconsideration of methodological oversight. (Marcus 2008) As to the inclusion of autobiographical information in the ethnography, Robert Krizek states:

> I recognize that part of going 'there' might include, in many research undertakings, staying 'here,' and part of understanding 'them' might include a reflexive examination of 'me.' Under no circumstances, however, at least for me,
does ethnography, including the excavation of personal narratives, involve simply staying 'here' and understanding or studying 'me.' (2003:145)

Reflexivity in ethnography came to the fore with Renato Rosaldo's 1989 *Grief and a Headhunter's Rage*, as he discovered that how much a researcher can understand of a culture depends on his position therein. (Salzman 2002) Examining the limiting positionality of the researcher abets an analysis of constraints, yet does not free the researcher from them, allowing that there is no priority of objectivity or truth, just differing perspectives. (Salzman 2002) However, reflexivity depends on critical personal integrity in the reporting, and presentation of the self without subterfuge; Barth states, "there is reason to distrust our own description of ourselves." (1994:354), and adding a multitude of voices to anthropological investigation can serve to counterweigh the shortcomings of solitary reflexivity.

**Conclusion**

The acceptance of new modes of expression in ethnography does not dictate the abandonment of "traditional" genres. There are anthropological academics who seek an amalgamation of new ethnographic genres, including autoethnography, and traditional ethnographic monographs. Matti Bunzl calls for a Foucauldian reinterpretation of Boasian ethnography, effectively deconstructing the native/anthropologist into terms that stop reifying one or the other. "Producing genealogies that account for the historical conditions of the present while not focusing on the present condition itself," (Bunzl 2004:440) while adopting the Boasian tradition of secondary explanations to account for the advent of traits within a society, will create "scholars whose work produces neither native nor non-native history but simply history." (2004:441) Paul Stoller states that ethnographers, irrespective of the "direction of one's anthropological path," must tell stories that "speak to the most human of things: fear, pain, love, fate, and humor." (2007:178) In the end, writes Stoller, "it is the contour of our stories that etch our traces in the world." (2007:190) Expanding our ethnographic offerings greatly strengthens this contour, advancing the field by etching these traces with many and varied voices, contexts, and views.

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