Ethnography Then & Now

John Van Maanen

To be invited to contribute to the inaugural issue of an international journal in the expanding if not exploding field of qualitative organizational studies is both a pleasure and a challenge. Pleasurable in the sense that the mere presence of a new journal in the area seems to confirm what many -- including myself -- have been wanting of late but challenging in the sense that so many have been speaking in this field that there may be little to say beyond getting on with the work. But, nonetheless, as an invited contributor, my mandate is to work up a few admonitions and prophecies that might carry off a smidgen of the festive guilt that is usually attached to the initiation of new ventures -- from bringing into a life new social science journal to the opening of a new car dealership.

My remarks concern ethnography, a practice I take to be concerned with the study and representation of culture (with a distinctly small c). It is a field many claim to be the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences. It exists therefore somewhere in academic limbo-land (or purgatory) as a storytelling institution possessing a good deal of scholarly legitimacy whose works are commissioned and approved by the leading educational institutions of the day. It claims a sort of
documentary status by the fact that somebody actually goes out beyond the ivory towers of employment and comfort to live with and live like those who are studied.

These are matters that are more or less given. They are not up for grabs. One becomes an ethnographer by going out and doing it (and writing it up). Fieldwork of the immersive sort is by and large definitional of the trade. Yet fieldwork practices are also biographically and situationally varied – spectacularly so. Studies differ in terms of working style, place, pace, time and evidentiary approaches. They also vary by textual styles and, like fieldwork approaches, they change over time as new ways of doing old things and old ways to do new things emerge and establish a hold on at least some ethnographers. What I wish to consider here are textual practices of the kind I explored in *Tales of the Field* some 20 or so years ago. My interest is directed to a few compositional and orientation shifts in ethnography. The stance is both appreciative and critical of the textwork associated with ethnography and thus this essay is something of a reflection on ethnography that follows the tune of ‘anything you can do I can do meta.’

**The Lonely Scribner**

Textwork is a suturing together of two words meant to convey that writing is a labor-intensive craft and represents a good deal of what we do as intrepid ethnographers. Oddly, there remains a curious silence concerning textwork – at least compared to the fairly recent upsurge of method texts on fieldwork and qualitative research generally, a collection of work that might well fill a small airport bookstore. This is not to say we don’t know how to talk about textwork. Indeed we can wax prosaic or poetic when asked
how we write. I am, for example, frequently asked how I write and know how to respond perfectly well to such requests. To wit:

*I usually get up around seven or so and get a quick breakfast then go before eight to that Cadillac of a computer that sits on my desk for an uninterrupted three solid hours of work, usually the most productive part of my day. I take a break around eleven or so to fetch the snail mail and read my email, then it’s back to work – resisting by sheer strength of character the seductions of this mail. I quit around one or so, get lunch and read the morning paper. Then back to the desk for another couple of hours until my concentration inevitably fades and I sag away from the desk around five, go for a run, take a shower and begin, drink in hand, to read over whatever it is I was writing during the day.*

Piece of cake. Right? The problem of course is that I get a day like this once every two or three months. I do have a family, classes to teach, a dog to walk, administrative duties to attend to, students to meet, social attractions that call and so on. But I do think my fictional day is rather typical of the help and advice we give when someone asks how to write. More importantly, however, I think my altogether mundane but representative response suggests part of the problem surrounding how textwork is treated since it presents the image of a writer who writes alone – a kind of ideological trope we ethnographers so often take-for-granted. It features the model of the hard-working scholar
in quiet quarters (or alienated artist in the garret) and is something of a freeze-frame image drawn from modernism. As such, it suppresses the social and contextual aspects of writing that includes reading other writers, discussing our ideas of content and style with colleagues, the various shaping roles that are played by critics, reviewers, readers, friends, relatives, (dreaded) thesis advisors both present and past, and the writing to and for others in a language whose grammar, tone, voice, genre and figures of speech literally encode collectivity.

Such collectivity is still not much talked about among ethnographers. Pandora’s box is open of course (and has been for some time) but not rummaged through or inspected closely for we continue to give the lion’s share of our attention to the much mythologized fieldwork that stands behind our writing rather than the textwork that carries it to our readers. This of course is not what I’d hoped for in my imagined post- 

*Tales of the Field* world but this does seem to be the state of the union circa 2006. Given our condition, let me then sketch out something of a quick literary perspective on ethnography as it has shifted over the past twenty years and then consider a few apparently stable features of the ethnographic literature on which we still hang our hats – be they of the safari or homebody sort.

**Ethnography in Motion**

At the outset, I must say that the three categories I stuffed ethnographic writings in two decades ago (and the accounts I used to accompany such category conceits) seem to have held up reasonably well over the years. Realism is still with us (albeit in slightly
different forms). Confessional tales are fewer in number perhaps but confessional practices are now rather routinely attached to the ethnography itself rather than reduced to appendices, turgid and one-off method chapters, or separate, follow-up monographs apparently intended to humanize the initial ethnographic account. Impressionism has fragmented into a number of distinct styles largely as a result of the swift moving expansion of cultural studies within the university (the “cult studs” of our day) and the growth of what might be considered “advocacy ethnographies” that advance a strong, normative point of view running through an entire text rather than locating normative thrusts in rather circumspect expressions of the author’s stylized preface or bracketing such concerns in a concluding, reform-minded section or chapter.

In line with modified and evolving new genres for putting forth ethnographic studies comes greater topical variety. This is no doubt partly a result of the spread of the distinctly modern idea of culture as something constructed (and construed) – thick or thin – by all self-identifying groups. Everyone these days, except for those who bowl alone, has a culture and more likely has several cultures from which to draw meaning. Hence we have lively accounts of exotics at home as well as exotics abroad, culture as constructed by motorcycle gangs, culture as constructed by art scene aficionados in lower Manhattan, and culture as constructed by those abducted by aliens and mercifully returned to us.

Relatedly, ethnography is no longer confined to single-site studies of supposedly isolated or conveniently distinct and isolated peoples (the Cultural Island approach). With the rise and expansion of vast human migrations, vanishing native groups, market globalization, enhanced information, communication and transportation technologies, the anthropologizing of the West, ethnography has become rather de-territorialized. With
such broad change, comes an inevitable and yet rather unprecedented shuffling and interpenetration of modes of thought and action the world over. Thus the emergence of what Marcus (1998) calls “multi-site ethnography” where the same people or groups of people are tracked across the different settings that make up their life worlds. Consider here Christina Nippert-Eng’s (1995) wonderful study of integration and separation of home and work or Louise Lamphire (and colleagues, 1992) detailed treatment of how the new immigrants from Southeast Asia are faring in the communities and workplaces across the United States. iv

There are also inventive ways of doing realism that include a greater role for the ethnographic subject. This is a kind of Bakhtin-oriented experimental style such as Ruth Behar’s (2003) emotionally riveting tale of Esperanza, a Mexican street peddler crossing back and forth across the U.S. border told in her own voice. Notable too is Paul Rabinow’s (1997) voice-giving strategy in Making PCR where celebrity biotech researchers and entrepreneurs seem almost to take over the text. Such ways of presenting ethnography suggest that the career paths of those we study is currently on a roll – from savage to primitive to subject to native to informant to interlocutor to, ultimately, co-author.

In the midst of these innovations in tale telling, the burden of ethnography – to represent culture – becomes heavier, messier and less easily located in time or space. The faith in an ethnographic holism -- always something of an ethnographic fiction akin to Newton’s frictionless space – has continued to retreat along with all those quaint claims of writers to have captured the “spirit” of a people, the “ethos” of a university or the “culture” of a nation or organization. Still, the trope of holism remains strong and
dangerously seductive as a kind of literary suction pump, a rhetorical imperative believed to be necessary to achieve closure to a study. This said, it nevertheless seems to me there is less tidiness and general portraiture in ethnography these days than in times past. This lack of closure is particularly apparent in postmodernist work concerned with representations of both personal and social identity. Attempting to depict in writing what it is like to be somebody else – arguably, ethnography’s main claim to fame -- has never been a simple matter but today it appears almost Herculean given the problematic nature of identity in the contemporary world. A certain instability, rupture, uncertainty and fluidity of meaning attends then to some of the best of contemporary ethnography.

Another shift in ethnography stems from the “epistemological hypochondria” that Geertz famously suggested in 1988 had attached itself to ethnography. This seems to have spread widely and deeply throughout most ethnographic research communities and most of us would probably now agree that all ethnographies owe a good deal of their persuasive power and wonder to contingent social, historical and institutional conditions. And no meta-argument, reflexive turn or navel-gazing can effectively question these contingencies. Yet, the hypochondriacs like me who soldier on rather than taking to bed have mostly come to recognize that this sublime contingency matters little when it comes to putting ink to paper because any particular ethnography must still make its points by the same means that were available before the contingency was recognized and absorbed. These means are of course the old ones that include the hard work of putting forth evidence, providing interpretations, inventing and elaborating analogies, invoking authorities, working through examples, marshalling one’s tropes, and so on (and on).
The nature of ethnographic evidence, interpretation, authority, style may indeed have changed – more modestly I think than radically – but the appeal of any single work remains tied to the specific arguments made within a given text and referenced to particular, not general, substantive, methodological and narrative matters. The point here is that we now can assert the textuality of ethnographic facts and the factuality of ethnographic texts at the same time. The two lay in quite different domains and hence the work of ethnography goes on in much the same way as it did before textuality came into vogue because evidence (including I-witnessing) must still be offered up to support a claim in such a way that at least some readers are convinced that an author has something worth saying.

Changes in attitude and reader response are of course possible and what is persuasive to one generation of ethnographers may look ludicrous to the next since every generation on coming of age has some stake in showing their ancestors – dead or alive -- to be airheads. But the simultaneous yet paradoxical characterization of the textuality and the factuality of ethnography vanishes with the realization that the practice of ethnography – as continually carried on by successive generations – does not remain the same because the facts, methods, theories, genres of ethnography remain the same but because in the midst of change some audience still looks to it for the performance of a given task. And in this case, an audience continues to look to ethnography for the close study of culture as lived by a particular people, in particular places, doing particular things at particular times.

I doubt this mandate is likely to fade away anytime soon. It is one however that accommodates – if not encourages --- a good deal more topical variety, methodological
imagination and stylistic diversity than was the case when *Tales of the Field* was published. Moreover, as younger researchers routinely and rightly question older (and authoritarian) definitions and portraits of culture, more subject matter is created and more opportunities can be taken to breach traditional disciplinary and substantive boundaries. It seems safe to say that there are now fewer rules for ethnographers to follow but more work to be done. This, to me at least, seems far preferable to a situation of less work and more rules.

This is not however a state of affairs that warrants ecstatic dancing in the streets. A predicament surfaces because students today (novices or veterans) must negotiate with their teachers (and editors) over the nature of the so-called standard model of ethnography – the single-site, year in the field, one-tribe-one-scribe, objectivist or God-trick model. We must now self-consciously select, defend, blend, stretch, combine various ethnographic templates or genres when constructing a career-making (or breaking) dissertation project or when submitting one’s work for publication to editors whose appreciation and knowledge of ethnographic means and products are traditional and perhaps unbending. On top of this, more and more work is produced by those coming from beyond the usual ethnographic parade grounds of anthropology and sociology. Ethnography these days comes from students almost anywhere – cultural studies, engineering, business and medical schools, media and communication departments, observers and historians of technology, urban affairs, women’s studies, criminal justice and many other fields too numerous to list. Such is the nature of the game today and to be a serious (and strong) player in this game requires a good deal more textual sophistication than in times past. This is not however some insurmountable barrier or game-ending
problem for I submit – and have argued elsewhere -- that textual sophistication can be (and has been) learned by many and will, in the end, help produce sharp, exciting, convincing and ultimately useful ethnographic work.vi

And … On the Other Hand

To close off this brief glance at contemporary ethnography, I want now to examine a few areas in ethnography that in the face of the changes put forth above have more or less stayed the course. I have four in mind.

First, ethnography remains relatively free from technical jargon and high-wire abstraction. While polysyllabic postmodernism is not altogether absent from ethnographic circles, it is infrequent.vii In what might be called mainstream realism, concepts are borrowed largely from broad public discourse and, for better or worse, an anti-theory bias is still apparent in ethnography. Representation by “merchants of astonishment” rather than generalization by “human nature experts” remains the primary authorial pose in the trade and surprise, frame breaking, exceptions to the norm shape the analytic domain of ethnography. A logic of pluck-and-luck discovery is favored over a logic of verification or abstraction.

Second, because of this relative freedom from a thoroughly specialized vocabulary and a privileged conceptual apparatus, ethnography continues to carry a slight literary air compared to other forms of social science writing. It remains I think a less congealed, passive-verb, congested form of discourse thus suggesting that a textual self-consciousness has been with us for quite some time. This I think keeps the non-specialist
interested in what we do and occasionally pushes certain forms of ethnography into the trade or general reader domains and brings the seemingly distant and alien or proximate but puzzling worlds we study to more readers beyond the warrens of our own research guilds.

Third, ethnography maintains an almost obsessive focus on the “empirical.” The witnessing ideal with its intense reliance on personalized seeing, hearing, experiencing in specific social settings continues to generate something of a hostility to generalizations and abstractions not connected to immersion in situated detail. Other forms of data are acceptable of course and responsible scholarship requires a sort of interdisciplinary contextualization of the settings in which we work. But these other forms of evidence and argument are acceptable only (sigh) as a concession to practicality. This signals the struggle various forms of critical, historical and structural ethnography have had over the years, a struggle that continues today despite a recognizable broadening of ethnographic genres.

Finally, there still is not much of a technique attached to ethnography despite the last twenty plus years of trying to develop a standard methodology (or at least much of a methodology that gets behind and beyond the simple cautionary stories of seasoned veterans). Ethnography it seems cannot and will not be made safe for science leaving it trapped as it were between the humanities and sciences. This I don’t decry or find terribly worrisome for a standard methodology would effectively neuter or perhaps destroy the still present Columbian spirit that marks the trade as broadly inquisitive and adventurous – “bringing back the news” of what and how certain identifiable people are doing these days whether they are located at the far ends of the world or across the street. There
remains among many, perhaps most ethnographers, a general indifference if not distain for the seemingly endless efforts of social scientists to develop methodological rigor. In this respect, ethnography remains open to a relatively artistic, improvised and situated model of social research where the lasting tenets of research design have yet to leave their mark.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

In the end, this is the way I think it should be. But keep in mind that there are at best two guaranteed truths behind the sort of pontificating I’ve been up to in this short essay. One is that in the long run we will all be dead. The other is that in the long run we will all be wrong. From this perspective, a wonderful scholarly career can be had only when the former precedes the latter. We should all keep this in mind as we go about our work, ethnographic or otherwise. Such reckoning might help sustain some sort of humility amongst us as we continue to issue into the wind the words of the worlds we study.
NOTES

1 This paper is a much-abridged version of an invited talk given at the Center for Arts and Humanities on the “Power of Wonder” at the University of Colorado at Boulder on February 6, 2006. I must thank the organizers of and participants in this affair, in particular, Jeffrey Cox, Chris Braider, Dennis McGilvray and Patti Adler for the invitation and attention as well as the gentle critique they provided me after the talk. Such conversations made my speech giving far more than a mere excuse to wine, dine and schmooze among old friends.

2 This is of course not altogether true. There are a small number of important works that do in fact begin to unpack this Pandora’s box. Among those I’ve found particularly helpful include such textwork classics as Gusfield, (1976) Edmondson, (1984) Becker (1986) Nelson, McGill and McClosky (eds) (1987), Geertz, (1995) and the indispensable Clifford and Marcus, eds. (1986). In organization studies, the pickings are spare but there are a few useful works including Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), Czarniawska-Joerrges (1997) and Martin Kilduff’s (1993) witty and careful look at March and Simon (1958) Organizations, the foundational text of our field.

3 I am at a bit of a loss as to what to label these works. Advocacy Ethnography could just as well be called Moral ethnography, Normative Ethnography, Value-based Ethnography
or even Judgmental Ethnography. Whatever we call it however should capture those
ethnographies that attempt to address some of the major wrongs in the world. While
sometimes criticized for a “save-the-world” missionary zeal, Advocacy ethnographers of
the sort I have in mind have produced some quite good work. Consider, for example,
Hugh Gusterson’s (1996) critique of the weapon design community, Douglas Foley’s
(1991) stinging portrait of capitalism and schooling Texas style and Malcolm Young’s

4 The master of multi-site ethnography is not a new name but an old one, Erving
goffman, who provides a weird but brilliant light on the interaction order wherever it
arises. Almost magically, Goffman’s early work (eg, 1959, 1961, 1963) mixes and
analytically orders revealing ethnographic snippets from such diverse settings and
sources as Las Vegas casinos, Shetland Island villages, city sidewalk maneuvers in urban
centers, check out lines in supermarkets, daily life in the backwards of psychiatric
hospitals and Jane Austin novels. This is multi-site ethnography with a vengeance.

5 Some examples here include Andreas Glaeser’s (2000) Divided in Unity, a deep
ethnography of the police in East and West Berlin after the fall of the wall; Margery
Wolfe’s (1992) crisp A Thrice Told Tale of a thirty-year-old incident that occurred in
Taiwan told first as a short story, second as fieldnotes and third as a scholarly journal
article; and Donna Haraway’s (1989) ringing feminist manifesto, Primate Visions, on the
role of women in science.

5 See, for example, Van Maanen (1995, 2001).
Postmodernism is often regarded as humanism from another planet wherein the postmodern subject is highly mobile and multiply situated, exists in a swirling hyper-reality of signs and symbols where signifiers lack clear referents and an almost apocalyptic frame underpins the text. Such work leans heavily on contemporary reader-response theory that suggests all works are incomplete without taking into account the critical and differentially positioned reactions to a text by varied readers. For some engaging ethnography of the postmodern sort, see, Fjellman’s (1992) guided but frenzied tour of DisneyWorld and Latour’s (1993) back to the future take on contemporary life in *We Have Never Been Modern*. In organization studies, Boje et al. (1996) provide a sampler of postmodernist theorizing, some of which is informed by ethnographic study.

This *bon mot* is lifted from the magisterial Marshall Sahlins (2002: 12). Sahlins is also one of the few historical ethnographers whose work on stone-age economics (1992) as well as his reconstruction of Captain Cook’s fatal encounter in the Hawai’ian Islands (1995) are must reads for both wannabe and veteran ethnographers.
References

Becker, H.  

Behar, R.  
2003  *Translated Woman: Crossing the border with Esperanza.* Boston: Beacon.

Boje, D.M., R. Gephart and T.J. Thatchenkery (eds)  

Carniawska-Joerges, B.  

Clifford, J. and G.E. Marcus (eds)  
1986  *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography.* Berkeley: University of California press.

Edmondson, R.  

Fjellman, S.M.  

Foley, D.E.  

Geertz, C.  


Glaeser, A.  

Goffman, E.  


Goldern-Biddle, K. and K. Locke  

Gusfield, J.  

Gusterson, H.  

Haraway, D.  

Kilduff, M.  

Lamphire, L.  

Latour, B.  

James G. March and H. Simon  

Marcus, G. E.  

Nippert-Eng, C.E.  

Sahlins, M.  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>responsibility.*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Tales of the Field.</em></td>
<td>University of Chicago Press.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>An end to innocence: The ethnography of ethnography.</td>
<td>In J. Van Maanen (ed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Young, M.