A Song for My Supper: More Tales of the Field

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This essay is shaped by a ceremonial talk. In the talk, I invited my audience to pay more attention to the spirit of my remarks than to my words since a pulpit performance allows and encourages one to take certain liberties they might not take in cold print. Here, however, I must reverse the prescription. Text is all I can offer. Whatever spirit remains -- or what a reader might take away from a text beyond the words it lays down -- is something of an open question. It is however a question not much considered by organizational researchers for reasons well worth exploring.

On the Importance of Writing …

To get quickly to the heart of the matter, the shameful truth of any research trade is that we traffic in communications and communications implies that we intend to alter the views of our readers. From this perspective, our task is then rhetorical. We attempt to convince others that we’ve discovered something of note, made unusual sense of something, or, in weak form, simply represented something well. This is simply to say that a good part of our writing is both explicitly and implicitly designed to persuade others that we know what we’re talking about and they ought therefore to pay attention to what we are saying.
Things get interesting here because, when it comes to writing, the literature in organizational studies and elsewhere in the social sciences is relatively silent. While our findings, theories and methods are well inscribed in an ever-increasing number of journals and books, there has been little attention given to just how these various writings persuade. For example, how ethnographers get from fieldnotes to monographs or survey researchers get from informant responses and statistical tests to research reports is rarely discussed in print. Since some writings generate a good deal more reader response (altered views) than others, it seems reasonable to ask why this might be so and inquire as to what authorial styles (and stances) lie behind such success.

To some, this may appear as a curious question because it is not clear what examining our texts might mean. For many of us, textual study is something of a blind spot since we are trained typically to read through our texts to what they say about the world they present and not to examine them for the compositional features they display. After all, most of us have little training or aptitude for analyzing metaphors, deciphering tropes, recognizing voice or examining rhetorical ploys. Literary practices are terra incognita. For many of us perhaps syntax is not about grammar but is something a smoker might pay and lexicons are not special vocabularies but right-wing political pundits. Were it otherwise, we’d be going about our work in literature departments.

Yet, even if we knew something and cared about such matters, the close analysis of text might still seem strange for it would contradict what we think we ought to be doing. We should be off doing studies and examining various research literatures for what they have to say that might inform and direct our scholarly interests and projects. The student who wants to sit back and worry about the plots and subplots in an
ethnographic report or detect the presence of irony (if any) in population ecology studies would seem a bit odd. Researchers should be out doing research not in the library doing some amateur or silly ‘lit crit’ on the words and works of our trade.

Even if we were to overcome these reservations, such work might still seem -- at first blush -- a bit embarrassing and hardly worth the effort. It is one thing to attempt to decode the narrative structure, characterization techniques, plot lines and authorial voices in the work of Jane Austin, Saul Bellow, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel García Márquez, Joan Didion (or any other acknowledged star of the literary scene) but it is another matter entirely to worry about the same things in the prosaic and seemingly rule-governed work of organizational researchers who, informed by current theory, presumably get their effects by constructing texts stuffed with facts drawn from the use of well-established methods and put forth in clear, unadorned language exhibiting something close to a style-of-no-style.

It may also be that our silence rests on the vague but unexamined feeling that if we did start looking closely at the ways our major and minor work are put together, we might not like what we find; a fear that if we looked closely at our use of imagery, phrasing, allusion, analogy and claims of authority, we might discover some literary chicanery or authorial trickery that would undercut our ability to make claims about the worth (and truth) of our findings and theories. If style were shown to play an important persuasive role in research reports, a corrosive relativism might overcome us and authors of organization studies would become players in a mere game of words, trapped in the same “prisonhouse of language” thought to be occupied by poets, novelists and not-so-cunning memoirists. From this perspective, it is best to imitate the ostrich and not look.
Of course if I took any of these claims seriously, I would not be writing this piece. Surely it is not too difficult to accomplish at least a modest literary reading of our organizational texts. If we can handle matrix algebra, model complex path-dependencies and produce defensible content readings of interview transcripts, we can certainly learn some rudimentary literary skills. We might perhaps become better readers in the process. Reading is, after all, a good deal of what we do as reputed scholars. And, closer to the matters at hand, most of us would readily admit that we often spend as much if not more time writing and endlessly rewriting our research reports than we do gathering the empirical materials on which our writings are presumably based. Since writing (and reading) are such a large part of our research endeavors, to not look closely at such everyday work seems rather myopic.

As to the claim that we have no “real writers” in our midst and thus need not worry about how organizational researchers generate their texts, experience and evidence suggest otherwise. Indeed we have a number of quite convincing and stylish writers in our field who have put forth some highly persuasive prose. A short list of influential writers might include Erving Goffman, Karl Weick, Jim March and a long list of others who are more or less specific to readers in particular subfields of organization studies. These are powerful writers and some of them are no doubt responsible for drawing us into the field in the first place. Blame them perhaps but their writings have altered the way we see the world.

Misguided too is the worry that if we examine the rhetoric displayed in our texts, we will sink the ship and deep-six its cargo. We need not be so cautious. To seriously take this position is akin to arguing that literary criticism will destroy the novel. Literary
criticism has been around for ages and the texts addressed and at least partially opened-up by such work remain works of value even if we now read them more skeptically and attach a wider range of meanings to the inscribed. Certainly good and bad criticism can be found but it is at least arguable that such criticism has in a variety of ways improved (or at least changed) the novel. So too it’s potential for organization studies.

There are then good reasons for looking closely at the writing practices at work in organization studies. Such reasons stand behind and ground all that I have to say below. While I focus on textual change and stability in a field of study I know best, I do think a similar sort of approach to other fields in organizational research would prove instructive and valuable. The conceit I hold should now be apparent: If a literary perspective helps us better understand what is going on in one domain, it will help in others too.

Fieldwork and Textwork

My remarks that follow 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. If one cannot do lengthy and sustained fieldwork among others who are often initially recalcitrant and suspicious of those who come uninvited into their lives, one has no business doing ethnography (and best be advised to take up a nice academic career in economic sociology or experimental social psychology).

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, these styles 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 is less a primer on what kind of writing we should be taking up than a look at what kind of choices we have today at our fingertips.

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. As noted a few paragraphs back, there remains in ethnography as well as other organizational research fields 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 an airport bookstore. This is not to say
we don’t know how to talk about textwork. Indeed we can easily hold forth when asked how we write. To wit, when asked how I write, I might well respond by saying:

*I usually get up around seven or so and get a cup of coffee and bagel, read the morning paper and then go before eight to that sleek 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 in splendid isolation – 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) with the doors closed and locked. As such, this monastic image 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 co-authors, 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.ii 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 2008. 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.

**Ethnography Past and Present**

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 accounts 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 report. Impressionist tales have fragmented into several emerging styles partly as a result of the swift moving expansion of cultural studies within the university (the “cult studs” of our day) and the continuing experimentation with ethnographic formats. Notable also is a resurgence of theory-driven writings in ethnography and the rise of ethnographic work that advances a strong normative point of view running through an entire text rather than locating moral concerns as rather circumspect expressions appearing in an author’s stylized preface or bracketing such concerns in a concluding, reform-minded section or chapter. Before examining what I take to be several distinctive “new” forms of ethnographic writing however I want to note a few broad shifts in the trade.

In line with modified and evolving new genres for putting forth ethnographic studies comes greater topical variety across all ethnographic forms. 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 natives, 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.iii 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 various communities and workplaces across the United States.

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 (1996) 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 – has become 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 ethnographic 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 (and defending them), 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 and representation 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 joyful celebration and 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, rather detached 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 often quite traditional and 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, journalism, 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.

Within this world of modest change there are at least three rather distinguishable ethnographic forms or templates (and temptations) now apparent that I more or less bypassed when writing *Tales of the Field*. Each draws to differing degrees on realist, confessional and impressionist conventions and each has something of a traceable history within ethnographic traditions. But the “new” textual categories marked breathlessly below strike me as more than passing fancies, hopelessly blurred genres, or isolated, one-off experiments. They appear to me to have lasting value and may well be with us for some time.

**Structural Tales:**

This is a template favored by critical scholars, Marxist or not, who argue – usually with just cause -- that many ethnographies suffer from a myopia that sharply delineates behavior at close range while obscuring the proximate and less visible structures and processes that both engender and sustain lines of behavior. It is theoretically
sophisticated, determined and ambitious. In a way, it is also something of a back-to-the-future form of ethnography for the roots of critical tales run deep. In anthropology, for example, the Manchester School of Max Gluckman set off a long run of critical ethnographies aimed at uncovering the workings and inner logic of political and legal systems. In sociology, Alvin Gouldner’s *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954) is a vintage but paradigmatic structural tale.

Those pushing for a renewed interest in building, borrowing and elaborating on theory argue that the narrow definition (if not fetishizing) of fieldwork denies the legitimacy of social observation beyond the tête-à-tête of interpersonal interaction. Other sources of information are equally important thus ethnographers must broaden their reach and refuse to reduce ethnography to representation of perspectives or mentalities that are not contextualized by, for example, class, race, gender and political-economic conditions. Representative and recent work in this tradition include, prominently, Michael Burawoy’s (1979; 1999) studies of labor processes at home and abroad; James Baker’s (1999) theory building efforts in the domain of what he calls “concertive control”; and Mats Alveson’s (2004) use of narrative theory and political symbolism to unpack “hidden assumptions” governing the management of so-called knowledge workers. I am particular fond of a work by Adreas Glaeser (2000) – what he refers to as an example of “analytic ethnography” – that looks at West and East Berlin police agencies who were merged after the fall of the wall wherein the critique of the West by the East (and vice versa) is a major theme but highly contextualized by the systemic social, political and economic differences marking each agency.
To be clear, I am not saying that authors of structural tales do not attend to what they witness or bring theory, grand and small, to task when evidence is scanty. Fieldwork in this domain is as hard slogging as in any ethnographic domain but the tales that result are noticeably distinct and keyed to certain disciplinary matters that extend into but also beyond the studied scene. For example, two recent ethnographic works in organizational studies do a thorough job of standing some well-received organizational theories on their head while bringing in other ones, suitably tailored, to bear on the problems at hand. One is by Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda (2006) and takes a close look at contract workers – of both blue and gold collars – in Silicon Valley. Here Barley and Kunda challenge conventional economic (and functional) understandings of contract work. The other is Michel Anteby’s (2008) superb account of a dying occupational community formed among craftsmen working for a French manufacturing firm in the aeronautics industry. In this study, Anteby takes on various general understandings of workplace deviance and shows via his field materials the weaknesses of such accounts and offers a more robust one in their place.

Structural tales are clearly on the rise but bridging the macro-micro chasm has never been easy. What is perhaps gained in theoretical acuity is sometimes lost in the coverage of life worlds supposedly governed by larger forces. This is an old critique of course and the debate continues with no resolution on the horizon. But what surfaces quite clearly in structural tales is the tight focus and selective character of the cultural representations that appear in the text. The intent is to show how a particular authorial understanding of a local practice or specific social situation travels and illuminates larger matters and thus helps resolve theoretical puzzles posed outside ethnographic circles.
Much of the theory therefore comes with the ethnographer into the field and pushes the inquiry in particular directions. What makes for a structural tale however is not simply a concern for theory -- for all ethnographies draw on at least some social theory -- but the overall weight such theory carries in the text in terms of the framing, focusing and generalizing the ethnographic account.

**Post-Structural Tales:**

There is a kind of rough justice at play in contemporary ethnography: Structural tales are currently doing well and so too are post-structural ones. Writers of the latter mode read structural tales as conjuring up a dreaded form of holism based on out-of-date, discredited and canned theoretical systems. If structural tales that embrace the big-picture perspective of an orbiting satellite are not trusted in the post-structural camp, neither are the on-the-ground realist or confessional tales for they are read as slanted (contaminated) by the obscured personal characteristics and interests of the ethnographer, the political and institutional context in which social research is embedded, the topical and narrative conventions of the day, and the relative lack of a deep reflexivity displayed in the work. To the post-structuralist, reality may be a nice place to visit but no one really lives there. It is better treated as a fragile social construction subject to numerous lines of sight and interpretation.

Justification for post-structural tales derives largely from various strains of postmodern (or late-modern) literary criticism and foregrounds language over other social phenomena. Textual acts are often seen as persuasive fictions and the more persuasive they appear to be, the more ideological they become. This form of ethnography has carried a slightly poisonous tag for some time and hostile reactions are still common in
certain ethnographic circles. Few ethnographers it seems own up to the label. The gist of such ambivalence is caught well by Graham Watson’s (1991) wonderful line: “Make me reflexive – but not yet.”

Yet despite the villainous and tainted image, post-structural tales are multiplying (received of course with mixed reviews). Consider, for example, Carolyn Ellis’s (1995) auto-ethnography of feeling; Bruno Latour’s (1995) claims that we have never been modern; Stephen Fjellman (1999) detailed, obsessed romp through Disney World; Margery Wolf’s (1993) thoughtful analysis of a 30-year old incident in a Taiwanese village told in succession as a short story, as fieldnotes, and as a scholarly, anthropological report; and, in organization studies, Boje et al.’s (1996) sampler of post-structural accounts, some of which are informed by ethnographic study.

In all of these works, textual innovation, disorder, the wavering of meaning, and open-endedness are obvious. But three thematic features also stand out. First, there is typically an emphasis on those times and places where stable identities break down and the boundaries that structure identity collapse. Second, there is a focus on what Eco (1986) calls “hyperreality,” times and settings where life is exaggerated and signifiers lack clear referents. Third, there is something of an apocalyptic flair in post-structural tales representing newness, novelty and an end-to-the-world-as-we-know-it sensibility.

The literary features of post-structural work come forth strikingly in its textual self-consciousness and purposeful incompleteness and uncertainty. Unlike other forms of ethnography, post-structural ones frequently emphasize what the authors don’t (quite) know rather than what they do. The goal remains recognizably ethnographic – to represent affectively and credibly, the interaction between individuals and the social
worlds they inhabit— but neither the individuals nor their social worlds are treated as if they were fixed, dependable entities, possessed of natural, inherent qualities. All is in flux.

It follows then that post-structural tales are inevitably inconclusive. Indeed, from a post-structural author’s perspective, all works are unfinished without considering the critical and differentially positioned responses to a text by specific readers. Texts are therefore always partial. This is perhaps one reason why we might call post-structural work a form of ethnography from another planet. But, however we regard such work, it does represent the outward looking, experimental rim of ethnographic practice— in terms of both topical choice and textual style. In a sense, those working in this mode are doing what we might call ethnographic research and development.

**Advocacy Tales:**

A confession is called for here since I am at a bit of a loss as to what to label work that falls in this domain. Advocacy Tales could just as well be called Moral Tales, Normative Tales, Value-based Tales or even Judgmental Tales. Whatever it is called however the marker 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 ethnography of the sort I have in mind have produced some quite good work. Consider, for example, Hugh Gusterson’s (2004) critique of the American weapon design community; Jennifer Howard-Grenville’s (2007) nuanced treatment of would-be environmental activists employed as engineers by a large and successful computer chip manufacturer; Malcolm Young’s (1991) informed and
devastating critique of the British police; and Vicki Smith’s (2002) harsh treatment of

corporate restructuring and downsizing in the “new economy.”

These works are sometimes superficially similar to structural tales in that they
generally articulate a broad grievance: That others suffer unjustly, often unknowingly,
and are hard pressed to do something about it. But they differ greatly from structural tales
in the sense that righting wrongs is what motivates and animates the text. The seeming
formality and precision of a structural work gives way to vigor and potency in the well-
told advocacy tale. The most prominent difference lies in the emphasis advocacy tales
place in the text on the necessity of change and a studied consideration for just how it
might be accomplished. Theory is carried much lighter in advocacy than structural tales
and is likely to be inserted more for its usefulness than for whatever explanatory or
authoritative power it might provide. A main theme advanced by this work follows the
sociological maxim put forth by C. Wright Mills (1959:27) suggesting that the goal of a
study and its corresponding text should be “to trouble the comfortable and comfort the
troubled.”

Advocacy tales put forth a strong, clear point of view in which no doubt is left in
the reader as to what side the ethnographer is on. Such a moral stance is carried
throughout the writing and not restricted to occasionally asides regarding reform-minded
policy implications or bland change recommendations in the concluding pages of a
monograph (or concluding paragraphs in a research article). The entire point of the
ethnography—from beginning to end -- is to take on certain evils in the world, show what
they have done (and are doing) and tell us what might be done about them. The prose is
both moral and normative, taking up many causes including anti-racist, pro-feminist, anti-colonial and environmental ones.

The point here is less to enumerate the ethnographies in this domain than to merely to note their noticeable presence at the moment. Ethnographic work – like virtually all other social sciences -- has always had an applied wing and can easily be seen as something of a tool to help identify and perhaps help solve human problems. Certainly the legendary, tireless and loquacious Margaret Mead is prototypical in this regard as her *Letters from the Field* (2001) makes clear. While some may decry such an open advocacy stance on the grounds that it puts ethnographers squarely into an activist role and thus reserves the famous charity, sensitivity and empathy they are said to cultivate and express for only those whose cause they wish to support, others would surely point out – and rightly so -- that ethnography has always served some groups better than others and making this explicit in the text is well-established – if infrequently promoted or practiced -- within the trade.

**Plus ça change, plus c’est pareil**

To close off this all-too-speedy glance at shifts in ethnographic writing, I want now to examine a few areas 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. 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 structural ethnography has 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 and rigid reporting templates. In this respect, ethnography remains open to a
relatively artistic, improvised and situated model of social research where the lasting
tenets of research design and technical writing have yet to leave their mark. In the end,
this is the way I think it should be for convincing ethnography will always be something
of a mess, a mystery and a miracle.
NOTES

i This paper is based on a talk given at the Telling Tales: Qualitative Research in Management and Organization Conference held at the University of New Mexico on March 12, 2008. I must thank the organizers of and participants in this Albuquerque affair, in particular, Ann Cunliffe, Bud Goodall, John Johnson and Mike Agar for the invitation as well as the gentle critique they provided me after the talk. Such conversation made my speech giving far more than a mere excuse to wine, dine and schmooze among old friends.

ii 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 classis as Gusfield, (1976), Edmondson, (1984), Becker (1986), 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.

iii The master of multi-site ethnography is not a new name but an old one, Erving Goffman, who shines 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.

iv See, for example, some of the work briefly touched on in Van Maanen (1995, 2001).

v In partial defense, I did not ignore these forms entirely in Tales of the Field. But, at the time of the writing, I either classified them as a modest variation of realist tales (structural tales) or subparts of the more general impressionist category (post-structural and advocacy tales). They were, however, buried in my footnotes. The three now seem sufficiently distinct, numerous and prominent enough to warrant a stand-alone position within the range of ethnographic tales, a range that probably still remains, alas, too restricted.

vi Kuper (1999) provides an useful review of a number of classic anthropological themes including political and legal system study.

vii A possible exception here may be those ethnographic accounts I’ve labeled post-structural whose authors do seem to occasionally mask and obscure their work by importing specialized vocabularies -- with high syllable counts -- thus constructing a “difficult” or unreadable text for many readers. Yet, I would argue, the grounded character of ethnographic work – fieldwork – usually acts as something of a tether, keeping the writers tied as it were to their respective setting(s). Remember too that post-structural tales concern “post-structural subjects” – those highly mobile and multiply
situated social actors who operate within a swirling, expanding universe of ambiguous signs and symbols. Numerous perspectives appear in post-structural tales and cultural coherence is more or less absent. Texts are thus less tidy than California theme parks (and other forms of ethnographic reporting) since more discordant voices, never coming to rest, are heard within them. Readers must work harder then they are accustomed to figure out what is going on because the narrative is a fractured one. True, too, those textual practices alleged to be “reader unfriendly” may also be due to reader unfamiliarity with the tools of textual analysis put into play by post-structural authors fascinated by language and language use. There are, of course, bad -- indeed horrid -- post-structural accounts crammed with baffling meta-analysis and pounding waves of self-indulgent reflexivity (“enough about them, lets me tell you about me”) while being annoyingly spare with ethnographic details. The good ones I think are spare on conceptual flights, modestly confessional and thick with detail. See, for example, some splendid, reader-friendly post-structural tales addressed to students of organizations by Brannen (1992), Davis (1997) and Watson (1994).
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