

ETHNOGRAPHY BEYOND METHOD:
THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SENSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

There is no ethnography without a corresponding ethnographic sensibility. That is, the understanding and practice of ethnography as method, theory, and writing practice rests on the cultivation of a sense of the ethnographic as the lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, possibilities, and grounds of any given cultural group. Within anthropology, the articulation of an ethnographic sensibility has long been at the heart of our disciplinary project of documenting how people collectively organize, understand, and live in the world. As such, we consider ethnography both something to know and a unique way of knowing.

Keywords: Ethnography; anthropology; ethnographic methods; ethnographic sensibility

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is not just a method. In anthropology, ethnography is both something to know and a way of knowing. We use it as a method, a theory, and a style of writing. Informing each of these is an ethnographic sensibility, or a sense of the ethnographic as the lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, possibilities, and grounds of any given cultural group. The ethnographic is what animates anthropology. That is, if anthropology is the study of how people collectively organize, understand, and live in the world, then ethnography is the means through which social and cultural anthropologists accomplish this study. Ethnography itself has not been controversial in anthropology until recently. In 2014, anthropologist Tim Ingold's polemic 'That's enough about ethnography!' set off scholars everywhere with his critique of ethnography (Ingold 2014; see also Ingold 2008, 2017, Da Col 2017).² His argument was against the conflation of ethnography with anthropology, and as I read it, with the evacuation of anthropological concerns from ethnographic practice. My stance is that within the

discipline of anthropology this claim is not true, in that ethnography remains a key component for anthropological inquiry. However, outside anthropology, and indeed outside academia, where ethnography has grown increasingly trendy in the last decade, it is practiced as a method sometimes devoid not only of anthropology, but also of the ethnographic.³ Thus, in this collection of essays devoted to the ‘frontiers’ of ethnography, I find Ingold’s provocations useful to think with. However, I believe what is needed is not less ethnography, but more ethnographic sensibility.

What is the ethnographic and why does it matter? This question is key to understanding ethnography as more than only a method. In terms of theory or method or writing, doing (or experimenting with) ethnography requires taking the ‘ethnographic’ seriously. For an anthropologist, ethnography that is not ethnographic feels off, thin, undeveloped, and thus, not incredibly useful or insightful. It can be easy to see and to name what is not ethnographic, for example, that which is merely description or observation or some other form of qualitative data. In contrast, although we know good ethnography when we read it, it is harder to articulate what makes something ethnographic (Marcus and Cushman 1982, McGranahan 2014a). What therefore qualifies scholarship as ethnographic?

The ethnographic is a culturally-grounded way of both being in and seeing the world. It is both ontological and epistemological. It is all that goes without saying in terms of what is considered normative or natural, and yet is also the very rules and proclaimed truths – about the way things are, and the way they should be – that underlie both everyday and ritual beliefs and practices. The ethnographic consists of the rhythms and logics through which we, in socio-cultural groups, collectively make, and make sense of, the world. In terms of theory, the ethnographic drives theory through its attention to disjuncture, to things that cannot be translated, to conceptual excess that is both taken for granted and expected in local contexts (Da Col and Graeber 2011). As such, it precedes and responds to theory, and is not merely fodder for it. In terms of method, getting to the ethnographic is the goal, and participant-observation is key to attaining this goal. In terms of writing, an ethnographic sensibility conveys anthropological expectations of field-based knowledge of realities of a given community, on life as lived in both ordinary and extraordinary time and place. In anthropology, this sense of the ethnographic has been in formation for almost two centuries. We are constantly turning over what the ethnographic, and thus what ethnography, is and can be.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPT AND PRACTICE

Ethnography has been part of anthropology since the origins of the discipline, but over time we have expanded and refined our understanding of it. In the nineteenth century, ethnography was the science of knowing human society, of documenting traditions and beliefs and institutions for peoples around the world. Anthropologists documented ‘the ethnography’ of the such-and-such people, accumulating knowledge about different cultural groups in the world with a goal of recording as many as possible. Once this knowledge was obtained, it was then written down. Hence, the etymology of the term ethnography as from the Greek: *ethnos*/ folk, the people and *grapho*/to write’. However, if ethnography was originally information to collect and then to write about, anthropologists now think of ethnography as not just something to know, but as a way of knowing. As such, ethnography is truly unique.

In 1922, Bronislaw Malinowski explained the goal of anthropology as a field science to be ‘to grasp the native’s point of view, his [sic] relation to life, to realize his vision of his world’ (p. 25). As he saw it, this meant the need to record and consider both the objective and subjective aspects of human life, for

to study the institutions, customs, and codes or to study the behavior and mentality without [also considering] the subjective desire of feeling by which these people live, of realizing the substance of their happiness, in my opinion, [is] to miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man [sic]. (1922, 25)

Ethnographic research thus became a field-based programme designed to identify and record the entirety of any given society’s material and affective life. This reorienting of anthropology is still influential today. For example, on their website the American Anthropological Association defines ethnography as

the description of cultural systems or an aspect of culture based on fieldwork in which the investigator is immersed in the ongoing everyday activities of the designated community for the purpose of describing the social context, relationships, and processes relevant to the topic under consideration. (2004)

As the European Association of Social Anthropologists explains, ethnographic research is also time-intensive in addition to being immersive, with particular attention to detail and nuance not found in other research methods (2015).

Currently, anthropological ethnography is an embodied, empirical, experiential field-based knowledge practice grounded in participant-observation. We often use the term ‘fieldwork’ interchangeably with ‘ethnography’. Both refer to our research, specifically to the longstanding anthropological practice of immersion into a community. Anthropologists live with, in, or near the communities of their research for long periods at a time, measured over months or years or even decades. An initial period of fieldwork that unfolds over several years provides an ethnographic base for shorter periods of research in the future, as is so often the case, as a scholar moves through different stages of their career. Anthropological fieldwork involves living one’s life in the field; research and personal life are thus interwoven in that they take place in the same domain, whether it is a shared neighborhood or city or region, or in new 21st-century shared online communities which approximate the ethnographic space of in-person fieldwork. We participate in, rather than only observe daily life in a community, and do so over an extended period of time. Key to anthropological ethnography is ‘being there’ (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) as a cultivated practice, one that requires discipline and commitment not easily visible to someone not trained in ethnographic methods.

Ethnographic research is usually a very low-tech endeavor. Little is required other than a means of recording data – pen and paper, a laptop, a mobile phone, a camera – and the ethnographer themselves. Learning and knowing is not outsourced to technology, but instead is incumbent upon the ethnographer, and is both all-encompassing and demanding. One definition of ethnography that captures this is

the attempt to understand another life world using the self – as much as it of possible – as the instrument of knowing ... [that is] as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality – a constructive and interpretive mode – as it is a bodily process in space and time. (Ortner 2006, 42)

As an individual, the ethnographer is as crucial to the research process as are the people with whom the study is being conducted. Ethnographic research is a commitment to interpersonal relations as the base of knowledge. Given that much of this research takes place across cultural or other sorts of structural or hierarchical divides, ethnography rests on trying to know the life world of another, be it a different social or cultural group, or others within a group to which the ethnographer belongs. Anthropologist Alpa Shah captures this with her definition of participant-observation as centering ‘a *long-term* intimate engagement with *a group of people* that were once *strangers to us* in order to know

and experience the world through their perspectives and actions in as *holistic* a way as possible' (2017, 51, italics in original). As such, ethnographic research is attentive to the actual conditions of life, rather than to laboratory-produced or predicted conditions. It traffics in stories rather than numbers, and in the contingencies and rules of socio-cultural life. As the oeuvre of anthropologist Anna Tsing shows so beautifully (1993, 2005, 2015), ethnographic detail also scales up, enabling us to ask and address questions about universals through a grounding in the sometimes messy specificity of actual life rather than through 'self-fulfilling abstract truths' (2005, 2).

One of the key concepts non-anthropologists often use from our ethnographic toolbox is 'thick description'. Infamously introduced in his 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz explains that the key to ethnography is the conceptual force that informs it:

From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques, and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, 'thick description' or to articulate a discourse of and about humanity, ... [of] a species living in terms of meaning in a world subject to law. (p.6)

To ask how people give their world meaning is thus to ask an ethnographic question. To push to the limits of that question can thus never be only a methodological enterprise. In that ethnographic research is grounded in participant-observation, and supplemented by other particular methods as needed – e.g., in addition to those listed by Geertz above, others might be interviews, video, focus groups, para-sites, oral history, joint writing projects, participatory photography, and so on – the power of this methodology lies in the intellectual energy animating one's understanding of ethnography. Without a conceptual understanding of the ethnographic, the method is empty of the very meaning it ironically is uniquely designed to appreciate. It becomes just another qualitative method.

LIFE WITHOUT DANCE: A CONCLUSION

Sonam didn't like to talk in detail about her life as a girl in Tibet. When she did share them, her narrations were often staccato and unexpected, told at times when we were discussing something else. Her narrations were often

fragmentary and disjointed. They did not unfold over time; her stories did not grow. Not everyone knows how to narrate their life as a story (McGranahan 2010b). Instead, over the twenty-odd years we have known each other, dating back to my first summer of anthropological research with the Tibetan refugee community in Kathmandu in 1994, Sonam seemed to live mostly in the present. Dismissing the past as behind her in a wistful sense, and framing her future tense almost entirely in the form of prayer, her present revolved around practical, day-to-day needs. On rare days, however, something would come to mind that she wanted to share. One such a day, we were sitting in the altar room in her home close to the Boudha stupa, where each morning and evening we would go for *kora*, circumambulating the stupa as a form of walking prayer. As the rays of the late afternoon sun filtered in through gauzy curtains, and we got ready to head to Boudha, Sonam began to tell me about monks and dancing.

‘There were no monks in Tibet’, she said. ‘When I was a girl, my parents and other old people would talk about the fantastic dances the monks used to do. They would talk about how wonderful they were. But there were no monks and there were no monasteries. I didn’t know what they were talking about. I saw the dances for the first time when I came to Nepal. As a girl, I didn’t know what they were like. I didn’t know what a monk looked like.’ She shook her head, and clucked her tongue. ‘I didn’t see the dances until I came to Nepal.’

Sonam told me this apropos of nothing, or so it seemed. We hadn’t been talking about monks or dancing nor was my research about these topics nor had we discussed them before. However, my research was about refugee memory, mostly in the context of the citizen’s army formed to defend the Dalai Lama against invading Chinese communist troops (McGranahan 2010a). In this context, Sonam’s memories were a part of what I am referring to as the ethnographic. They were part of the fabric of life, of connections individuals made across experiences and encounters on any given day, of feelings they had toward loss and hope, and of the moments as well as the structures that make up our days and our worlds and how we live them. In order to understand what Sonam meant, you would need to know that she grew up in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution, a time when monasteries were closed and monks were all killed, imprisoned, or sent home. In contrast, in the exile community, and in historic Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation, monks were a ubiquitous part of everyday life. Her sense of missing something, of not being able to understand or imagine what she was being told, and of her own much later viewing of monks dancing in Kathmandu is an example of a cultural barometer in geographic, historic, and political flux. As her circumstances changed with her escape from Chinese-ruled Tibet to life as a refugee in Nepal, so too did

her grounding in the world. Monks appeared, and her memory shifted to a new sort of possible knowledge.

An ethnographic sensibility is what makes ethnography matter. It is attention to the conditions and experiences of life as actually lived. It is an attunement to worlds shared via participant-observation that extend beyond the parameters of a narrowly defined research question. It is an understanding that the narrow view can only be understood via the wide angled one, and vice versa. An ethnographic sensibility requires depth and time; it is a theoretical commitment as well as a methodological practice. In that people's lives are a combination of the predictable and the uncertain, so too does ethnography, as a way of knowing about people's lives, tell us things that are also both predictable and not; it exceeds questions and answers, and its unique contribution is in that space of excess, of telling us more than we knew to ask.

As Kirin Narayan explains, ethnography brings about transformative knowledge of the self, both individually and collectively, as much as of another; she offers that we should turn to ethnography

for the discipline of paying attention; for becoming more responsibly aware of inequalities; for better understanding of the social forces causing suffering and how people might somehow find hope; and most generally, for being perpetually pulled beyond the limits of one's own taken-for-granted world. (Narayan in McGranahan 2014b)

These limits are the frontiers of ethnography. Getting beyond them is to get to the ethnographic, to push on our ability to listen and know and act. Sometimes we have no way of understanding what we learn. And yet, these stories and knowledge stay with us, and inform who we are. As our situation and our subjectivities transform, so too will our ability to receive such stories and knowledge, just as happened for Sonam. There were no monks in her village during the Cultural Revolution. It was not a time for dancing. And it was not until much later that this memory became knowledge, became something to ponder, something to tell, something to be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Sita Venkateswar for the invitation to contribute to this special issue of Sites. Two anonymous reviewers provided sharp but generous critiques that I greatly appreciated and did my best to address. My continuing gratitude

to Sonam for her friendship over the decades, and for all she has taught me about ethnography, life, and loss.

NOTES

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Email: carole.mcgranahan@colorado.edu
- 2 Two examples are: (1) a special Correspondences section on the *Cultural Anthropology* website in April–May 2016 devoted to the 2014 article, with contributions by Joanna Cook, Susan MacDougal, George Marcus, and Andrew Shryock; and, (2) the May 2017 issue of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* included a Debate Collection of essays responding to Ingold's 2014 article. Contributors included Rita Astuti, Maurice Bloch, Giovanni Da Col, Signe Howell, Tim Ingold, Thorgeir Kolshus, Daniel Miller, and Alpa Shah.
- 3 On epistemological problems with ethnography outside of anthropology, see Howell 2017.

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