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SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

Ethnography Two Decades After Writing Culture: From the Experimental to the Baroque

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, and the Writing Culture critique of ethnographic representation, the writing of ethnographic texts in anthropology has been distinguished by the perennial appearance of new works composed of tropes and stylistic strategies that reflect the diverse influences of the period of critique. These “messy” texts were, and are, valorized as experiments. This essay argues that as critique such ethnographies are not so much experimental as baroque, indicating perhaps a limit of the historic ethnographic form, and the need to push the spirit of experiment back toward the conditions of producing ethnography in fieldwork. This “refunctioning” of ethnography in its experimental spirit would recognize and address the present limit of the baroque to which the 1980s period of critique and after has led.

In the 1980s, I once termed the exemplary ethnographies that circulated influentially for their innovative or experimental qualities as messy texts (Marcus 1994). Calling them messy was an affectionate way to draw attention to their often-systematic strategies for writing against the key controlling conventions that established the social scientific authority of this genre. Such texts were self-conscious experiments in bringing out the experiential, interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic process at work in any ethnography. There was an aura of “opening up,” of excess about these works, a pleasure in taking advantage of the emerging license to write into ethnography the reflexive tales of fieldwork, which always had an important role to play in the professional oral culture of anthropology particularly by which method as aesthetic and professional identity had been inculcated from generation to generation.

Reading ethnographies as a way of learning what the signature method of anthropology is and what it should produce as a discursive result had long been of pedagogical importance. Ethnographies have served classically as the basis of thought experiments, providing materials to be “worked through,” augmenting conceptual debates over description and crucially showing what fieldwork was to be about, what was expected of it in a discipline that has been remarkably silent in a formal way about method. After all, who else would read ethnographies with any care—no matter how appealing their romantic origins in travel?

Before the 1980s, there were classics and models of ethnography that circulated in such an exemplary, pedagogical way. After the 1980s, it was no longer the classics that circulated for their pedagogical influence, except perhaps symbolically, so much as the messy texts of experimental ethnography, calling attention to their critical, innovative aspects. In student culture, for example, one read Michael Taussig rather than, or at least more carefully than, Malinowski. And contra the older more stable system of pedagogy based on classics, for a time these experimental ethnographies circulated in an inflationary manner, turning over every year or so, emphasizing the first or second works of younger scholars, and very much defining of the marketplace of reputation on which secure careers were established. Indeed, the considerable demand for innovation and revival of ethnography determined the primary readership for such ethnographies. Significantly, this pattern of circulation and influence has continued to the present, set by the messy texts of the 80s, creating the crucial pedagogic models, fashions, markets, and perhaps most

crucially the form of knowledge for ethnography. For example, in the past two years, Anna Tsing's *Friction* (2004), Saba Manhood's *Politics of Piety* (2004), Joseph Masco's *The Nuclear Borderlands* (2005), and Bill Maurer's *Mutual Life, Limited*, (2005) among others, seem to have circulated as exemplary ethnographies in this now established inflationary sphere of pedagogy and anticipatory reception for ethnography. Before and overlapping with them, for example, were Adriana Pertryna's *Life Exposed* (2002), Kim Fortune's *Advocacy After Bhopal* (2001), William Mazzarella's *Shoveling Smoke* (2003), and Joao Biehl's *Vida* (2004), among others.

But comparatively in genre terms, what actually moves in these circuits of exemplary ethnography today, twenty years after *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986)? Well, exemplary ethnographies—the ones that stylistically call attention to themselves for their originality—are certainly still messy. But, in my view, they are not experimental. To be sure, there is still something of the driving experimental ethos that remains in these contemporary exemplars. Yet, I want to argue that their current messiness constitutes rather a symptomology of the uncertain state of ethnography reflecting the textual artifacts or habits of the diverse tendencies in culture analysis that emerged alongside the so-called *Writing Culture* moment. These tendencies came to shape the form, concerns, and ambition of ethnography within the still surviving genre conventions that anthropology had established for it and that had themselves been reconditioned by the *Writing Culture* critique. Exemplary ethnographies today reflect the uncertain state of the genre, and I call their current messy character baroque, rather than experimental, perhaps most acutely in the sense of the word that is often associated with the Portuguese *barroco*—a pearl that is not round but of irregular and elaborate shape. This baroque residue and legacy that shapes exemplary ethnography can produce works of power, originality, and considerable interest, but its form is not one of experiment. Rather, this baroque legacy is an expression of a devotion to a highly symbolic aesthetic while pressing against its limit to incorporate within its identifying modes of “being there” a conger of styles of expression, tendencies in argument, and studied interests in theoretical labor that represent the energy and desires of the interdisciplinary moment of culture theory of the 1980s and 1990s deployed within an old form that it inspired. In such unruliness, it is difficult to name comprehensively these symptoms of the ethnographic baroque, but here are some.

Some skein of the following holds ethnographies together:

1. The tale of fieldwork as the anchor of the older conventions (quotes, anecdotes, case examples) that define the *mise-en-scene* of ethnographies.
2. A theory exercise or riff that defines a certain conceptual ecology for a topic.
3. A dimension of observer's participation in public culture—a condition of the contemporary, an event, something that is already known by media discourse and that is topical.
4. Leaning toward culture history as the offstage reservoir of surplus meaning and materials for the ethnographic subject in focus [in my view, depth in such work is achieved by ethnography pushing into cultural history research, archives, rather than further into fieldwork networks; in these works, the contemporary is powerfully evoked, but ephemeral].
5. Ethnography is interested in the realm of ordinary life, which portrays the experience of particular subjectivities and their identities within scales of organization and historic events.
6. And, argument that is avowedly moral or moralizing in nature as the sign of “the critical.”

These features are often brilliantly configured for exemplary performance but as the elements of a contemporary script for ethnography, they also limit its roving curiosities, and its ability to find itself in fieldwork.

What travels, then, in the baroque's influential circuits is a strong set of images establishing place and fieldwork and a theory-bite as evocative concept. Little such ethnography beckons the reader within their bounds of fieldwork to argue with them. They are effective in establishing dynamic tableaux, but are not particularly good to think with.

With students and the work of dissertations specifically in mind, the messy baroque, as I will call it, has become perhaps a deceptive and even awkward model for standard work, but is still expected as the usual knowledge product. It is fine as something to aspire to as art and fashion—a kind of work of “genius” that anyone can aspire to, so to speak,—but as often as not, such ethnographies are actually reactions to training models and the difficulties of implementing the still powerful aesthetics of fieldwork today. They are an enhancement, and in some sense, an alibi for the ethnography from the classic fieldwork process that they no longer

produce, rather than exemplary results of them. Rather, as the primary form, or only form, with which anthropology has become identified, exemplary ethnography in a fragmentary and fractured way reflects both the influences and styles of interdisciplinary culture movements and the different sorts of subjects in both once familiar places and now unfamiliar terrains that anthropologists face today. And ironically in this, the dissertation writer has lost a model to work through that she once had. So as a standard work, rather than a space of singular distinction or originality, I doubt if ethnography, as we have known it, can bear the weight of what anthropologists now want to express in its terms. Ethnography as a distinctive genre of publication can never simply go back to being data, analytic description, or even works of interpretation as Geertz left it, and in this post 1980s textual baroque, it also has met a limit.

Now I want to go in a different direction, but perhaps just as baroque—away from the textual problems of the controlled ethnographic genre bursting at the seams with injected ambitions and changing subjects, and rather fold this still messy baroque back into the stuff of the world, the stuff of fieldwork, making it more a matter of design than textual strategy so as to free up the form and its present uncertainties and symptomologies to address rather similar problems in the space of inquiry itself. The result would be to release the traditional writing tropes of “being there” and place ethnography as a discursive field into its networked and nested knowledge paths. This is in a sense back to first principles, a reformation of the empirical offstage by all that has been learned and transpired critically during the past 20 years. Ethnography would be performed as strategic mediations, which would generate appropriate writing forms for different constituencies. It would not be the uncertain bursting form that it is now. I want to reiterate my observation that the current messy baroque genre finds its depth offstage not in the space/time of fieldwork, which still gives it traditional authority, but in the archive, in historical material, or accounts that pre-exist it. What I am advocating is to return this source of entanglement with material to fieldwork itself more so than to historical sources, given the interest of anthropologists in working in the contemporary and the temporality of emergence into near and unknown futures.

I now want to locate this other sense of the baroque that pushes the present textual aesthetics of the ethnography toward the conditions of its production in the design of contemporary fieldwork in certain tendencies in my own work that dates from the mid 1990s onward, corresponding

both to the aftermath period of the enthusiasm for textual experiment in ethnography and the ebbing of the period of critical theoretical ferment about culture and of expanding topics and styles of analysis in literary studies and the humanities generally. These ideas are expressed through the essays in my collection *Ethnography Through Thick & Thin* (Marcus, 1998), but especially in my 1995 essay on the emergence of multi-sited ethnography, which I see as my contribution to the many discussions at that time of what the idea of globalization might do to our ongoing practices and ways of thinking. This was not so much a consideration of another textual reconfiguration of ethnography's classic scenes of production, represented in now obligatory tales of fieldwork, as a survey of the challenges posed by altering the spatio-temporal character of the research experience that produced the established (Malinowskian) representation on which ethnographic authority was still based.

First, in the 1990s, there seemed to be a widespread sense of an exhaustion, or at least pause, in the excitement of academic discussions of critical cultural theory with the notion that perhaps critique was "out there" in the scenes of everyday life, in complex organizational life, in the embedded processes of resistance and accommodation that had already been well tracked and documented by genres such as ethnography and social history. The hyperattention to this idea also presumed the recognition of a fully engaged reflexive subject, if not a common, then at least a highly desired subject or interlocutor for the ethnographer (that is, the classic "native" or key informant becomes something more—an epistemic partner in research at the level of its conceptual labor). This recognition, if it had been taken far enough, would have changed the genre of ethnography, shifting it from a still individualistic mode of reporting to a more fully defined collaborational form with an ethos and ethics that would be quite different still from the way the very traditional research relationships of ethnography had been conceived as collaboration in the *Writing Culture* critique.

Second, the multi-sited challenge of ethnography—that is, becoming delocalized disrupts conventions of "being there"—does not lead to a merely mobile ethnography following processes through sites, but evokes ethnography itself as composed of networked, rhizomic, viral knowledge processes. Yes, it is following out connections and relations, but of ideas and maps or topologies that are not given, but found.

And third, there is no strong, considered reception in anthropology today of its own knowledge products. Ethnographies are read within the

community of anthropologists essentially as aesthetic objects with many important functions, but they are tested, read, have effect elsewhere in the complex situations defined by fieldwork itself, which produces them. Substantively, anthropologists are at best second-hand consumers of their own research. And the challenge is to make a virtue of this second-orderedness. This is the tendency of the three that has the greatest potential for innovations in thinking of a function of ethnography equal to the ambitions that the messy baroque suggests—moving it beyond mere analytic description and supplement for which it was historically devised. So ethnography might become more than description for an archive, or reportage for an academic audience, to the performance of mediations of found perspectives in multi-sited space amid reflexive subjects capable of their own paraethnographic functions. This, in my view, is the most far-reaching post 1990s shift in the conditions for the production of baroque ethnography today—a baroque that plays out in the design of fieldwork and uses the legacies of the period of theory ferment to do so rather than to deploy them as the fragments of textual resources which define exemplary ethnography today. The need for ethnographic projects to incorporate reception among the sites of ethnography thus pushes on the limits of ethnographic genres, and while it does not question writing or representation itself, or the remaining textual tropes of ethnography, it suggests other forms of these tropes displaced into the scenes of fieldwork. Ethnography in its present textual tradition would thus present itself as mediational, as situated among its multiple sites and would develop coherent positions of cultural critique from these contexts. In my own current view this would be the work of the dissertation, and where perhaps an experiment with form is most needed.

So, the engaged reflexive subject, who cannot be a mere informant or subject of research, but in some sense, must become involved in its intellectual work and scope; the multi-sited arena of fieldwork as networked knowledge sites the ethnography of which is both thick and thin, and is patterned by very politicized relations of collaboration; and ultimately the inclusion of reception itself as an object or site of fieldwork—these together constitute an ethnographic baroque today that would move us beyond what the exemplary ethnographic textual form has come to in its past messiness.

I want now to present two exhibits of the baroque with an interlude in between. The first exhibit is the discussion and preview of a second (perhaps third) book project by William Mazzarella coming to fruition on cen-

sorship in India (following on his first ethnography of advertising in India, *Shoveling Smoke* [2003]). I consider this an example of working within and among the textual devices that I discussed that shape the messy baroque and is characteristic of many circulating exemplary ethnographies today. The second exhibit is a project, also a work in progress and nearing completion by Douglas Holmes on the practices of central banking (this follows his 2001 book *Integral Europe*). This is a project of ethnographic research on which I have consulted with Holmes. The sort of argument that I am putting forward in this essay has shaped the ethnographic form of this project. Holmes' writing (as well as our writing, Holmes and Marcus [2005, 2006, nd.]) reflects the displacements and moves that have defined ethnography since the 1980s toward a different account of the conditions of fieldwork and the basic functions of ethnography in line with the tendencies reflected in my work of the 1990s. And the interlude is a brief, telegraphic discussion of the shifting interests of ethnography and the conditions for its production over the past decade that might make the reasons to suggest its refunctioning more understandable. This refunctioning, I should say, is not a move away from the originary inclinations and impulses of ethnography, but a further engagement with them under very altered circumstances.

To guide the presentation of these exhibits, I want to keep in mind the most enduring trope of ethnography—the scene of encounter within the tale of fieldwork. The scene of encounter inaugurates the mythos and ideology of ethnography memorably in the introductory chapter to Malinowski's 1928 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, the oft-quoted, melodramatic—"Imagine yourself, suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away, out of sight..." The circumstances and methods of ethnography are diverse today. But if there is one thing that sustains its hold on the professional and popular imagination it is the imaginary of the scene of encounter. It functions like a *mise-en-scene* as developed in film theory and practice, and as such serves as a powerful highly visualized and compressed regulative ideal of method.

For a long time fieldwork tales and the mythic scene of encounter were a dynamic trope primarily of oral professional culture. Infused in discussion, shop talk, corridor chat, it held the activities of fieldwork more powerfully in place by the imagery of a certain practiced aesthetic than by any formal teaching of method could. Ironically, it was the *Writing Culture* critique that made the tale of fieldwork, the scene of encounter, textually

obligatory just as ethnography otherwise became more baroque in the way that I have recounted. The story of fieldwork relations, condensed as scene of encounter, became a powerful way to guarantee critical reflexivity—the resolved imago of a complex subject opened in 1980s anthropology and closed soon thereafter—and to identify ethnography as it came to encompass the complicated and fragmented space of the intersection of theory, its objects, and the pragmatic realities of new fieldwork situations.

This narrative of the encounter in virtually every ethnography has become diversely resolved by a feminist story, a postcolonial one, or one of global awareness and transformation. The tale of encounter has become a strategic device to link the authority of traditional ethnography to the variety of moves that has made it baroque. In another paper in progress (Holmes and Marcus nd.), Doug Holmes and I have probed and sampled the diversity of scenes of encounter that are written into ethnography today—an exercise not unlike the splicing together for humorous and profound effect the excluded kissing scenes from melodramas at the end of the film *Cinema Paradiso*. The ways their authors set up the start of research à la Malinowski about which they already know the ending is a fascinating and revealing exercise. But here, my concerns are not so much textual in evoking the “being there” tropes of contemporary exemplary ethnography as to use them to illustrate how they function as the sign of a certain sort of limit and condensed embodiment of ethnographic authority in messy baroque texts as in the case of William Mazzarella’s current writing project (Exhibit #1), and how the scene of encounter is also a vehicle to reimagine it as the displacement of ethnography and its refunctioning in the design of fieldwork as Douglas Holmes is developing in his work on central banking (Exhibit #2).

Exhibit #1: The Politics of Censorship in India

As I was preparing this essay, I attended a discussion by William Mazzarella of the University of Chicago of his maturing work in progress on censorship in India. I thought what I heard would make an ideal example or exhibit of the messy baroque. Like his first ethnography on advertisers in India, this project is brilliantly realized, full of insights, communicating an enthusiasm for what he is doing, and reflecting a deep knowledge of India. Yet, the presentation as an abbreviated version of the ethnography to come follows various symptomatic moves of the messy baroque. He begins with the dramat-

ic scene of encounter of AN Anand, a censor, raising his fist in the air in exasperation, and wittily associates in the epilogue this initial scene with the children's game of rock/paper/scissors, symbolic of the tools and ironic process of censorship. He follows the scene of encounter with a theoretical riff in which censorship as a topic is set up through the various ways it has been sliced and spliced by culture theory in recent years. He then locates himself as an observer on the scene of public culture in India, commenting on events of the day. He returns to the work and words of his informant. Eventually, the story gains depth by Mazzarella going off to a colonial archive, in which he spends a year and writes a separate full book manuscript before returning to this one. This archival research gives him his interpretive thrust for the ethnographic project—themed as the politics of obscenity and the obscenity of politics, the construction of the crowd in government discourse (from colonial times to the present), of an essentially irrational, violent populace not yet ready for the democratic system that they have and thus requiring the energetic work of the censor over the media of public culture. Mazzarella's emphasis is on the state's fear of affect.

In providing his analysis, Mazzarella defends the dialectic as an abstract mode of argument over and against the moves, for example, of Brian Massumi to merge the terms of the critic and those criticized. He considers this move, while playful, ideologically naïve and potentially reckless. While I agree with him about Massumi, he revealingly avoids the baroque of nested and networked discourse relations of fieldwork in preference for the resources of the textual baroque of ethnography whose most solid foundation is not fieldwork, but the archive.

After the talk, I wrote Mazzarella an e-mail raising this issue and received the following response.

Marcus: I found the talk very stimulating. I would have asked a question, predictably, about the topology of your fieldwork in relation to the circles of debate about censorship and politics in India—as an act of fieldwork how might you have networked and sutured this project onto your last one, by engaging your best “informants” from *Shoveling Smoke* as interlocutors in relation to this new and related scene of fieldwork? This might have made the conventional and brilliantly evoked story of encounter with which you began a bit different.

Mazzarella: The question you raise is of course a very interesting one, and just as pertinent to the earlier work on advertising. I seem to keep choosing these topics where I have to grapple in a very ambivalent way with the crushing presence of public debate on the topic. In an earlier time, I might have viewed the problem as a relatively simple one of ideology critique. But I think it quickly became clear to me that the various strands of professional discourse, public debate, and ethnographic narrative/analysis are more complexly complicit than that.

So, ultimately, Mazzarella understood, but refused these various and diverse strands of discourse as a problem of systematic fieldwork design through nested collaborations, and instead found a source of explanatory narrative in the colonial archives, which is perhaps a form of distancing that older tropes of the “observer” signified and enforced. His ethnography remains a fascinating congerly organized through the skein of tropes of the messy baroque. Yet, as such, Mazzarella avoided the alternative, as evoked in this essay, of sorting out relations of complicity as an equally baroque imaginary for his fieldwork. This imaginary would have expressed the solidarity of a collaborative fieldwork relationship based on the mutual interest or curiosity of anthropologist and informant in a common object. In this case such a relationship would have been the potential mutual interest of Mazzarella and his advertising executives in censorship moving him back and forth between this former site of fieldwork and that of his current project. The baroque here would not rest in a form of ethnographic writing but in the complexity of the fieldwork process itself.

Interlude

Mazzarella's projects can be seen as located within the traditional framings of ethnographic research, that of the culture area and/or the modern nation-state. The imaginary of situating the subjects of ethnography within processes of globalization—a source of stimulation and challenge in the late 80s and early 90s, and still such, but amid the clichéd usage of the term in the manner of postmodernism before it—did set off thinking about a different style of constructing ethnography that has generated kinds of exemplary ethnographies that while borrowing from moves and symptoms of the post 80s messy baroque are actually concerned with the challenges of constituting subjects in the design of fieldwork in multi-

sited space/ time. And these are only superficially understood as mapping issues, following known subjects as they circulate. Rather the problems and politics of collaborative relations to reflexive subjects as epistemic partners, folding reception into research itself, and refunctioning the textual practices of ethnography from description to mediations within the field of fieldwork are the problems at stake in what I have dubbed an alternative baroque form or style that requires writing techniques indeed but is based in new and explicit strategies for the design of fieldwork.

So while there are many works of exemplary ethnography within the imaginary of the global, the most interesting works for me displace or push to limits the conditions that sustain messy baroque ethnography and thus become baroque in the other ways I have suggested. It forces ethnography to develop its ideas within fieldwork without regard for eventual textual form. It has to do with the design of research, with fieldwork in many of the ways that fieldwork has been traditionally aestheticized and still has a powerful hold on anthropological practice. It pushes past the post 80s development of ethnography as an uncertain textual form to operate in the time-space of the contemporary conceived as a suspension between the recent past and the near future, with an interest in its schemes, visions, material processes, with the accent on emergence, anticipation, and the actual. In recent conceptual artifice, all the play around the notion of assemblage (as, e.g., in the influential volume *Global Assemblages* [Ong and Collier 2005]) tries to capture the contemporary as a form for ethnography study.

Schematically, I find that ethnographies of the global are either about emergent or unknown forms within known structures and the ethnography performs the aesthetic of discovery in giving an account of such a form through fieldwork. Or they are about schemes, management plans, and arrangements within expertise, science, and technology, that have considerable paraethnographic content that is the task of ethnography to appropriate, work through, and use for its own ends. Bravura recent examples of the first are my colleague Kaushik Sunderrajan's *Biocapital: the Conditions of Postgenomic Life* (2006) and Xiang Biao's *Global Body Shopping* (2007) which presents an account of the Indian transnational labor system that provides personnel for computer industries worldwide. Biao's tale of fieldwork that introduces his book is particularly fascinating in that globalization is an ideology of encouraging Chinese anthropologists and sociologists to work outside China, to deparochialize Chinese

social sciences. Arriving at an English university, he at first couches his dissertation research in one of the common tropes of the 80s-90s—the study of diasporic communities (not Chinese but Indian)—but he inspires himself to shift from this template to the labor form itself that generates diaspora in the contemporary—the underlying engine, so to speak, that produces the forms that ethnography has accommodated itself to studying as “culture.” There is nothing especially baroque about Biao’s ethnography, but it is an excellent example of the challenge of describing a discovered complex form as anthropologists once did, for example, in kinship studies, but in globalized space as one of the quite exotic, interior engines of the global economy run on an intricate form of labor power.

Now, the other, the second modality of ethnography of the contemporary concerning the finding and appropriation of the paraethnographic thought within the visions and schemes of expertise moves us into exhibit #2.

Exhibit #2: Paraethnography as the New “Native Point of View” in the Emergence Of Expert Communicative Spaces

So, there are those ethnographies that find their terms and perspectives within the schemes, plans, or de facto experimental, speculative spaces that shape institutions and their processes. This is ethnography that begins in elite, expert, or technocratic spheres without ending there as a mere ethnography of elites, experts, or technocrats. I would not like to think anthropology’s entry into fields like science, technology, banking, and finance is only about a limited curiosity in what goes on there—that is, about a mere analytic/descriptive interest in scientists or bankers. Rather work within schemes, as I call it, generates a fieldwork of found analytics that is deeply embedded in politics and arguments of graded, networked, and nested sites of knowledge production—expert and everyday. Here ethnography invests its hope for its own ethnographic insights within those found among subjects without at all being naïve about this.

Appropriating this kind of “native perspective” involves politics and challenges and new risks of course but offers also a revival of ethnography in its baroque state. This kind of ethnography is the cornerstone of much research in science and technology studies, for example, by Paul Rabinow in the biosciences (2004), and my former Rice University colleague Chris Kelty on the open source movement in information technology, among many others (Kelty, in press). This is research that requires the sort of

baroque design of fieldwork that I have described and a possible refunctio-
ning of ethnography itself, embedded in complex collaborations and
experimental systems, to allude to the usage of the historian of science,
Hans-Jorg Rheinberger (1997). Doug Holmes gives a precise evocation of
this experimental activity as emerging communicative spaces in the inter-
section between entrepreneurial science and finance capitalism, and thus
the site for an ethnography seeking after paraethnography for its own pur-
poses—the source of critical ideas that are “out there.” I quote extensivel-
ly from a paper by Holmes on which I collaborated (Holmes nd.):

What we are concerned with here is a particular variant of this narra-
tive imperative in which finance, as venture capital, alters the commu-
nicative space of science. In particular we are interested in how ven-
ture capital becomes the master interlocutor of scientific inquiry.

As scientists and engineers began in the last quarter of the twen-
tieth century to venture outside of large corporations, government
and academic settings as the contexts within which they pursued
their experimentation and invention, they also began to renegotiate,
radically renegotiate, the relationship between science and
political economy. As this “new” relationship began to take hold, it
impelled shifts not just in the organizational settings of inquiry, the
structures of incentives and risks etc., but it also recast the intellec-
tual regimes shaping scientific consciousness and the fundamental
contingencies of scientific inquiry. Stories that had been incubated
for generations as the shoptalk of scientists and engineers were
gaining a new, wider currency.

The paradigmatic discourses that initiated the shift were negoti-
ated among relatively small groups of scientists and investors—ven-
ture capitalists. Scientists with innovative ideas sought to translate
their technical innovations into commercially viable products, but
this creative process went much further. These start-ups needed sto-
ries to speak to these “new” constituencies of financial backers—
wild-tales and hype co-existed with cogent, sober, and shrewd
appraisals of unfolding technological realities—but the point is the
two great cultural instruments for engaging the future—science and
finance—were intermingled.

For more than a century the industrial corporation such as E.I. du
Pont de Nemours, Hoffman La Roche, GE, IBM, and ATT mediated

the domains of science and finance through large-scale technocratic organizations where bureaucratically organized cadres of experts managed knowledge and innovation (Chandler 1968).

By contrast, startups that emerged in the last quarter of the century, when successful, operated with unusual speed and precision often around a single innovative idea or practice in their joining of science and finance. These organizations were emphatically anti-bureaucratic. Without bureaucracy they needed new legitimizing discourses. Novel sequencings of genes or computer codes became the basis of stories, narratives, and hype, about products that might alter the human condition while generating potentially vast wealth.

More curious, these scientific narratives attained an ethnographic dynamic as they continually assimilate an array of ethical, societal, commercial, political, and legal entailments. The bio-tech startup is infused with shifting stories in which science is relentlessly narrated in relationship to the requirements of finance and the future in which scientists and financial backers have a stake. The optimism of science is continually mediated by the anxieties associated with commercial risk. For the scientists, who themselves are also typically investors in these startups, these risks often have a deeply personal character. Their stories are not merely about professional reputation, career possibilities or shareholder equity, but also about the fate of their children's education, their retirement savings, their mortgages, their marriages. And, of course, these stories premised on yet unpatented or fully tested drugs or devices to relieve human afflictions and prolong life are addressed to particular community of sufferers—the market—and to the public at large. Again, these discourses continually move among personal, professional, commercial, financial, scientific, ethical, and political domains of meaning and significance framing consciousness and sub-consciousness of our time.

Thus bereft of the intellectual regimes of the large-scale industrial corporation the employees in these startups must constantly generate narratives not only to legitimize various aspects of their scientific inquiry or the business plan, but also to clarify, refine, and negotiate from hour to hour, minute to minute, for themselves what constitutes their shared enterprise. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that contemporary science depends for its reproduction on the generation of these scientific stories, financial narratives, and existential discourses.

So, as exhibit #2, this evocation of the scene of fieldwork (as the emergence of communicative spaces in tension that require expertises to be ethnographic themselves) is much different than, for example, Mazzarella's scene of encounter, which squarely locates his situated subject—the censor V.N. Anand raising his fist in frustration—for his textual purposes. We know the terms and limits topically in which Anand can speak to Mazzarella. Such is not the case with Holmes's bankers.

In his recent research on central banking, Holmes' scene of encounter is a displacement; it beckons back toward the stuff of fieldwork, made less unruly by the communicative spaces of paraethnography. It imagines entry into a found project of common interest where mutual curiosities meet and are directed elsewhere. Holmes locates an ethnographic function for himself in the paraethnographic practices of finance, which he mines for his own purposes. At the conclusion of a paper "Central Bankers Unto Ourselves" (Holmes nd.), which deals with the paraethnographic experiments circulating among central bankers concerning the shaping of popular expectations about the economy, here is how Holmes describes the scene of encounter where the arrival of the ethnographer is anticipated:

Here is our profoundly simple ethnographic observation: all these narrative practices pursue a "master interlocutor" to whom these reflexive strategies are addressed. The interlocutor can be "real," a family member, a colleague, a patient, a client etc. Or "figurative" the market, the public, etc. but our point is that there is an emphatic presumption of a position or positions that the ethnographer can easily insinuate themselves. There is a space created for the ethnographer prior to his or her arrival on the scene. The ethnographer is no longer a stranger, but a figure whose presence is anticipated (Holmes nd.:25).

Holmes and I have devised between us the ready-made concept, or device, of the paraethnographic to assist in the more elaborate argument for the refashioning of what is to transpire in the scene of encounter in the contemporary ethnography and the ethnography of the contemporary. Its purposes have been to focus the attention of ethnography, with yet unknown consequences for its traditional genre form, back upon its conditions of fieldwork in an acute awareness of reflexive subjects, a perhaps resigned recognition that for now critique is elsewhere, but deeply

embedded, and sometimes insurgent in the processes of global capitalism, of multi-sited terrains of knowledge production, and of uncertain or unknown receptions for the work of exemplary ethnography released from its predictable circuits forged by its post 1980s successes in its baroque character.

Conclusion

So I end with a baroque form of ethnography that pushes back into the scenes of fieldwork not only to sustain ethnography in terms of its original spirit, but also to take the pressure of writing off the ethnographic form at its limit, which is the textual messy baroque of the present that I have described, the heir to the period of ferment and which at its best is very good indeed. But even in its most interesting and singular creations in the context of the mode of production and circulation that I have described, its address, its reception is unclear. It can most easily be read in the history of its embedded symptoms, reflecting now past, a period of intense academic production around critical theories of society and culture.

Clearly the refunctioned ethnography that I draw from this predicament of the messy baroque is not descriptive/analytic for an archive, or even a case for someone else's theory. Rather it mediates, it remains messy precisely in its trajectories out there, so to speak. It opens to new forms for different constituencies. It is thus ethnographic in the purest sense of its tradition, but for a different time, sense, and scale of subject in the world.

ENDNOTE

This essay in its original version was a lecture delivered on March 2, 2007, to the Graduate Literature Program at Duke University. The invitation by Jan Radway was to reflect on what had become of ethnography today following the *Writing Culture* critiques of the 1980s. There seemed to be the desire of scholars of literature to understand ethnography as possessing the same essential virtues that it had before and through the turnings of the 1980s that in themselves were inspired by the turbulence and ferment of the "theory" moment that occurred within literary studies. My posing of the baroque instead of the experimental is an attempt to argue for these enduring virtues indeed, but in a more complicated situation of production than the one that literary scholars tend to imagine and for which they are nostalgic despite their own central role in bringing the ethnographic genre to its current baroque moment.

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