

ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING

Methodologies in American Studies 2nd PAAS WORKSHOP

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The “Ethnographic writing” workshop aims to familiarize its participants with “ethnography” as a distinct genre of writing, commonly identified with anthropology or ethnology, yet widely appropriated across humanities and social sciences. To understand ethnographic writing, however, is to understand the nature of the encounter of an ethnographer with social imaginaries, material practices and, above all, her or his research subjects.

Ethnography as a method is time demanding and challenging, but it produces results that can hardly be approximated by other forms of social research. Ethnography is also a literary genre, grounded in lived experiences and systematic research, but nonetheless employed to convince the reader of its veracity and accuracy by means of effective writing.

Below is a short description of preparations you are expected to complete before coming to the workshop, followed by the list of required and suggested readings.

PREPARATIONS

Critical reading

In the first instance, please focus on the required readings. A thorough and critical engagement with these journal articles and book chapters is the primary requirement for participating in the workshop. Moreover, you may want to acquaint yourself with the optional readings. These are meant to provide additional food for thought and facilitate our discussion.

At the risk of preaching to the converted, I urge you to critically examine each reading. Focus not only on the authors’ claims but also on how they construct their arguments. What positions do they speak from, intellectually and politically? How does each author connect accounts from fieldwork with theoretical proposals? Do you find their styles of ethnographic writing convincing and/or potentially useful for your own scholarly pursuits? What ways of describing individuals, collectivities, practices and imaginaries fit your own needs and sensibility?

A practical exercise

After having done the readings you should have a basic sense of ethnographic practice and especially the method of participant observation. Ideally, please reserve one full day or several hours over two or three consecutive days to engage in the following exercise.

Think of a situation in your daily life that can be the subject of your own ethnographic inquiry in micro-scale. You can choose a place, social practice or an encounter which is commonplace, mundane, seemingly boring and banal. Alternatively you may find people or practices you know nothing or little about. Either way, make sure to get the consent of the people you choose to study.

Venture beyond interviews. Try to interact with your subjects for a prolonged time: an afternoon, a whole day or even a few days if possible. Engage in the same interactions and activities your research subjects are involved in (for example: work, artistic production, leisure activity, religious practice). Observe, note down and critically reflect upon each relevant detail. The idea is to spend time with your subjects instead of conjuring up an account of their lives based on dissociated interviews or second-hand narratives of others. In light of the anthropological credo, try to make the different and exotic seem familiar, and approach the mundane as if it were extraordinary and puzzling. Ask questions and actively engage your hosts or companions.

One possibility would be to describe a family dinner and conduct an inquiry into eating habits. How do we behave at the table, what is allowed and what forbidden, are there certain conversation topics which are avoided or alternatively evoked by this particular configuration of people and the setting? Are the friends or family members given different roles before, during or after the meal (i.e. who prepares and serves the food, and who does the cleaning up?). In many familiar settings your observations and reflections will, naturally, draw on prior knowledge, but this is perfectly fine as long as you make the effort to reflect on such cultural normativity.

The above is merely an example. You may choose a game of sports, mating rituals at a music club, your workplace, a religious ceremony or whatever strikes your fancy. Any topic which allows for participant observation is suitable as long as everyone involved is comfortable with your research. You are welcome to include an interview or interviews in your research activities. Note the personality, appearance, and behaviour of your interlocutors. Describe the social context of your interviews. Participant observation and interviewing certainly do not exhaust the range of possibilities in contemporary ethnographic research, but for the sake of this introductory exercise you should employ these basic methods.

Please keep a mini-journal of your observations. Note everything you observe, hear, and feel in a given research situation, along with your reflections. In many ways the benefits of this exercise will go well beyond writing ethnography alone. If you want to make your note

taking more systematic, please refer to *Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research* by Robert Emerson (optional reading). This is by no means obligatory. You are welcome to experiment with your own ways of note taking as long as you keep to the simple principle stated above. Bring your notes to the workshop!

This practical exercise is not meant as training in research methods, although the workshop should, in fact, give you a basic understanding of ethnographic methods and their potential for your own creative and scholarly endeavours. The exercise will help us to explore the relationship between ethnographic practice as a way of attentive being among others and its written representation. Some participants may have used ethnographic methods before. Instead of doing the exercise, these individuals are welcome to think through their fieldwork and bring their fieldnotes and relevant writing samples to our meeting.

Required readings:

- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 3-30. New York: Basic Books.
- Malinowski, Bronisław. 2002. "Introduction. The Subject, Method and Scope of This Inquiry." In *Argonauts of the western Pacific: an account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, 1-20. London: Routledge.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 2004. "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage." In *Death, mourning, and burial: a cross-cultural reader. edited by Antonius C.G.M. Robben*, edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 167-178. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1992. "Nervoso." In *Death without weeping: the violence of everyday life in Brazil*, 167-214. Berkeley ; Oxford: University of California Press.
- Stewart, Kathleen. 2005. "Cultural Poesis: The Generativity of Emergent Things." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, 1015-1030. London: Sage.

Optional readings:

- Clifford, James. 1983. "On Ethnographic Authority." *Representations*, 2: 118-146.
- Emerson, Robert M. 1995. "Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research." In *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*, edited by Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw, 1-17. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1995. "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology." *Current Anthropology*, 36 (3): 409-440.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2004. "Busy" Louie at the Golden Gloves." In *Body & soul : notebooks of an apprentice boxer*, 235-256. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.