

FEAST AND FAMINE: THE ROLE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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To anyone who is hungry while reading this, I apologize. Some of what you will read will likely remind you of this hunger and perhaps exacerbate it. Nevertheless, a polite invitation is extended to you, to continue reading to the end, that perhaps some good will come of the exercise, and permit you to subsequently take leave to satisfy your hunger in any which way you choose.

The holiday season brings out many cherished, even craved, foods that are enjoyed with extra relish. For the author, a significant other's cinnamon rolls, made entirely from scratch are just such an item. Consider for a moment your own sinfully indulgent dessert or dish, that rouses and scintillates your appetite and carnal desires. Perhaps it's double chocolate molten cake or Italian can noli stuffed with mousse or could it be warm pumpkin pie or even fried bananas topped with toasted coconut, and served with coconut/passion fruit ice cream, all drizzled in warm, gooey caramel? Now that you have imagined your most impassioned culinary vice (and no doubt are craving it at this moment) lets discuss how, whatever it may be, it is made. It all starts with a recipe, right? Wrong! Someone else put in the time to experiment and concoct these orgasmic organizations of olfactory and palatal delight, and thereafter, having perfected their creation, have recorded the process and requisite elements, as a recipe.

Analogue to this, anthropological fieldwork and the formal culmination of it, ethnography, hold a relationship not unlike the food itself and the recipe that documents it. Fieldwork is the mainstay, and the staple of cultural anthropology. In my judgment, cultural anthropology cannot exist without fieldwork. Moreover, fieldwork without a reporting of it, is nor more useful or satisfying than eating this paper. In the same vein, reading about a people and

culture is scintillating and stimulating in much the same way reading a good recipe is. Yet, the recipe and the recipe card are not the dessert. To truly enjoy a decadent dessert, one does not read about it, one devours it slowly, deliberately, and with measured panache. The cultural anthropologist needs to not only *read* about people and their cultures, but also *taste* through firsthand fieldwork and participant observation. The reading of printed recipe cards does not and cannot supplant the experience of enjoying a dish firsthand. Indeed, for someone who has never tasted chocolate, how does one truly communicate how it tastes? The same success would be had in trying to describe to a blind-from-birth person what purple looks like.

Despite the assertion above, fieldwork and ethnography derived from it, have not always held a steady position in anthropology. Why is this so? What role then does fieldwork and ethnography play in cultural anthropology? How has this role and perceptions of it changed over time? What has influenced these changes? Has the production of fieldwork and ethnography existed as either feast or famine? In other words, has ethnographic fieldwork waxed and waned in its practice, and if so, in what ways? It is these questions, and the discussion of them that will occupy the rest of this treatise, and hopefully provide ultimately a satisfying assessment of fieldwork and ethnography's role in cultural anthropology.

Hortense Powdermaker in opening her book *Stranger and Friend*, begins her treatise by relating her own experiences of anthropology, and in particular fieldwork, by which she describes her view of the discipline as connected to these actions. She describes cultural anthropology as both a science and an art of capturing as far as possible, the thoughts, feelings, and sights of another culture's members, by participating alongside them in their society (Powdermaker 1966: 9). Her view of the discipline is no doubt informed by Malnowski's own construal of its mandate, having herself been taught by him at the London School of Economics (ibid.:33-35,38- 39).

Initially, ethnographic fieldwork was not par the course, rather work, known as at-a-distance armchair work, was conducted through the use of other's writings, letters, government forms, and colonial reports, various explorer's accounts, and large scientific multi-disciplinary expeditions exemplified by Haddon's Torres Straits work, and tourist elicitation with guides such as *Notes and Queries* (Stocking 1992:17-24, Van Maanen 1988:14-15). A new standard was ushered in by Gillen, Spencer, Haddon and Malinowski, who's work among indigents of Australia and Melanesians proved the value of extended hands-on study and participant observation in "getting at the 'why' of things" (Stocking 1992:24-36, Van Maanen 1988:16-17).

What brought about this new standard? In the case of Gillen and Malinowski, it seems illustrative for their early hands-on efforts in camps or houses near the natives became unsatisfactory; they wanted to taste the native's lives and understandings of things firsthand, in experiencing aspects of their lives, and even speaking their language (Stocking 1992:25-26,42-3 44}. Frazer even seemed to realize the need to have "men-on-the-spot" to support his musings, while perhaps not perceiving the death of his style of "armchair anthropology" (Stocking 1992:26,57). Boas in the Americas led the charge in this direction, advocating his students to go out and collect culture (Van Maanen 1988:16-17). Thus, by ascendancy of World War I, "fieldwork was to anthropology *as* the blood of martyrs is to the Roman Catholic Church" (Seligman, as quoted in R. Firth 1963:2, Stocking 1992:30). From the mid-1920s, four decades of anthropological fieldwork ensued guided by Malinowski's charter of fieldwork that both lent authority to and pressure to conduct immersive fieldwork (Stocking 1992:54,59).

It thus seems all the more paradoxical that in his own charter would lie the seeds of its own future embattlement. In his suite of practices to be emulated, Malinowski kept a journal, that when published in 1967, combined with other forces in motion to question the epistemological acumen of fieldwork and thereby ethnography (ibid.:15,59). To some, learning of his derogatory un-guarded views of the natives and not so god-like practices at gleaning information from them, called into question the role of the ethnographer, and hence fieldwork itself (ibid.:15-17,59). Combined with the growing realizations of anthropology's role in colonialism, this developed into what some have called "the crisis of [socio-cultural] anthropology" (ibid.:15,59).

Recent critiques anthropological fieldwork and ethnography have rightly stated that each fieldwork experience as truly unique can never be duplicated. This is true. Just as no recipe, however closely followed, produces the exact same results, so also fieldwork produces a unique experience, both spatially and temporally. Powdermaker (1966:19) explains that each fieldworker, as a "human instrument" brings with them to the field a unique combination of biological, psychological and social conditioning that makes them what they are, and moreover their interaction is with other people, likewise unique in construction; thus I would say no work with these factors and limited in time and space can be duplicated. So how is ethnography to be understood? Is it thus limited to being nothing more than a mutual experience and consequentially say nothing objective of culture? I rejoin with an emphatic no. Turning again the desert-recipe analogy, it is true that the eating of a dessert is far from the description of its constructive process and its parts. Yet, it does provide a sense of it, so that upon adequate study of it, if one should taste the dessert one would recognize what it is. Blindfolded I can discern pumpkin pie, and whether it has cloves, cinnamon or nutmeg in it or not. A soci-

ety's culture is knowable. It must be realized though that even desserts of a certain type do vary by myriad ways; the constituent elements though similar are not always the same, just as the production of them and the presentation vary as well.

Returning to this notion of "crisis," what was it exactly and how did it affect fieldwork and ethnography? The expansion of world-wide influence by colonial powers, first off was an impetus to the conducting of fieldwork, as it was felt that these cultures were disappearing due to acculturation {Stocking 1992:358}. Anthropological work came to be envisioned by those who had customarily been under study, as well as a growing body of intellectuals, as perpetuating a vision of backwardness engendering justification for exploitation by colonizing countries (Stocking 1992:358). Availability of "exotic" sites and funding for research to such places began to dry up, and the reevaluation gained momentum, culminating in a call for anthropology's "reinvention" (Stocking 1992:358-359). These developments directly affected the performance of fieldwork.

Another crucial element, the post-modernist critique, has indirectly affected fieldwork, through directly affecting ethnography. Fieldwork on its own cannot express culture- rather the collected and written thoughts produced from it, in the form of ethnography, comes to express or represent a culture (Van Maanen 1988:4). Since this writing, the collectivization of thoughts and ideas recorded in the field, and the actions observed that generated them, in concert with concerted thoughts of these in aggregate later on in an office somewhere far from the fieldwork, the actual writing of ethnography is to a degree independent of the fieldwork, yet informed by and tethered to it (Van Maanen 1988:4). Ethnography then can be considered as a written recipe- a written representation of, albeit far from the real thing, a society's culture or an aspect of it.

In the vein of writing ethnography, the element aforementioned, the post-modernist critique, in terms of or in connection to cultural anthropology, enters the stage most prominently with Clifford and Marcus' 1986 *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. The most influential aspect of it, reflexivity is regarded by Davies {1999:4-7} as mutuality in all social interaction including the relationship between the researcher/fieldworker and the informant. She adds that reflexivity should not to be regarded as deleterious, but rather irreducibly a part of all interaction, and thereby the product of research, meriting acknowledgment by the fieldworker by providing self and contextual reference to all aspects of the interaction (Davies 1999:4). She hastens to add, however, that ethnographers need to reject the extreme pessimism that can be derived from

reflexivity if taken to an epistemological extreme, ultimately asserting ethnography *can* be done reflexively (ibid.: 5-6, emphasis mine).

This resonates well with the dessert-recipe analogy I have proposed. For if ethnography is the ethnographer's understandings of a group's culture, so also is a recipe one's understanding of a dessert. The recipe is not the dessert, and never will be, but remains a representation of it by what it consists of, how it is organized, how it is made up, and presented. Yet, since the representation is nothing more than writing, then the conventions of written thought utilized will no doubt vary from person to person, and make each recipe differ in some manner, despite the possibility that more than one will be describing the same type of dessert or dish.

The post-modernist critique indirectly affected fieldwork through the writing of ethnography with the knowledge of writing conventions and their effect on the final product. With the realization that reflexivity, as a necessary ingredient in the text, could be planned for ahead of time and even included in the way fieldwork is conducted, altering the planning and modality of ethnographic research (Davies 1999: 73-74, 77-92). Fieldworkers in anticipation of this need could prepare to and be cognizant of various conventions, e.g. writing down one's own questions and responses in interviews with informants to thus include in the text later on and provide reflexivity, or learning the language ahead of being embedded, or examining the effects of location, history, language and various other elements on the interview or exchange itself and thereby make an effort to document them in fieldnotes and then to contextualize and include reflexivity, include where appropriate in the subsequent text (Davies 1999: 77-92, 100-107, 112-115).

In a similar vein, take the recipe analogy again. Ingredients listed and used to comprise a dish are not so straightforward. If vanilla is called for, does one reach for artificial, or real, and the type chosen will vary itself based on quality and price. Where a particular ingredient comes from, how it is processed, and even how it is added to and made part of the final dish is also important. Likewise, the details that bring into context the ways the ethnographer comes to know something, how the person or persons know it themselves, how and where and under what circumstances they relate it to you, and your own positioning in the exchange, are requisite.

These techniques or at least the idea behind them have not only recently been used in ethnography. I contest that some classical to pre-post-modern-era ethnography does indeed employ reflexivity, multi-vocality, and positionality. Malinowski, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) did indeed use the first

person, describes even including his role in them and relate the indigent's view as well as his own construal. Schieffelin's 1976 monograph *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*, a work conducted and printed well before Clifford and Marcus' *Writing Culture* (1986), copiously included what have been called or portrayed as strictly the property of post-modernist anthropological critique (46-47, 50 and all throughout the text).

With the post-modernist critique I conclude that emphasis was shifted primarily to the performance of certain conventions in the writing and reporting of fieldwork. However, it seems the emphasis remained so much on this aspect, that a majority of anthropological work came to be talking about other's tasting of dessert-others actual fieldwork, and thus ensued discussion of discussions. The detriment herein was the lack of attention to actual taste-testing, doing fieldwork itself. Sumptuous desserts await, yet are rarely enjoyed anymore due to lack of "going out to dinner" to try it.

These two elements, the onset of post-coloniality and post-modernism have been of service though. They have reminded cultural anthropologists of convention previously employed, but not always regularly so, identified those that need to be amplified and permitted the acceptance of some forms of anthropologically produced writings as ethnography, retroactively. Fieldwork has waxed and waned with the onset of these elements, which as in turn helped anthropology seem "new societies" with which to study. Whether anthropology is to feast or famine will ultimately lie as a responsibility with each of its practitioners to make cultural anthropology culturally oriented no matter who the "other" is. Your dessert awaits.

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