Preprint

Multi-Targeted Ethnography
By Tom O'Dell

I find the topic "Ethnography and its Audiences" to be fascinating and timely. In my thinking, it resonates with what I see as a need for us to rethink methods and re-theorize methodology from a slightly different direction than that which is predominantly taught in the cultural and social sciences. It is a direction that I shall refer to as distributive rather than accumulative. It is a second direction but not an alternative direction to what is already the norm in most discussions of ethnographic methodology. It is a direction that opens the door to and takes us into a second dimension of ethnography that some scholars have been trying to draw their more conservative peers into for a number of years now – but with only limited success. Since the beginning of anthropology, the goal has been to understand the subjects we have been writing about, perhaps it is time to more actively reflect upon how we understand and *can engage* the audiences our work is intended for.

My own thinking on, and approach to the subject of the ethnographic audience is inspired by Georege Marcus' writings on multi-sited ethnography. As Marcus explained, multi-sited ethnography was focused on highlighting connections where they had been overlooked or deemed to be beyond the realm of ethnography's potential for study. "Strategies of quite literally following

connections, associations, and putative relationships are thus at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research" (1997:81). And he outlined six modes of engaging world systems through ethnographic practices that he described as: 1) *Follow the people* 2) *Follow the thing* 3) *Follow the metaphor* 4) *Follow the plot, story or allegory* 5) *Follow the life or Biography* 6) *Follow the Conflict*

A large ambition behind Marcus' appeal for the development of more mature forms of multi-sited ethnography lie in a desire to destabilize the static and bounded notions of culture as locked to a singular place, a field *site*, a *place* of fieldwork – and it did so by uprooting the ethnographer.

The call to multi-sited ethnography constituted a manifest in six points to follow that which was not still. To a very large extent the decree "*to follow*" proved to be one of the most concrete, celebrated, and *actionable* deliverables to come out of the post-modern anthropological critique of culture – a battle cry that has been, if not followed, at least heard and considered by a generation of anthropologist since the mid 1990s.

But this word to "follow," has its own etymological implications that after more than twenty years of use, is in need of reflexive acknowledge. Etymologically, the word "follow" comes from the Middle English term "folwen," to "move in

the same direction as". In this sense the ethnographer becomes a shadow figure, an entity on the coattails of a phenomenon. Beyond this, "to follow," is a word whose cognates include "Folgon" from Old Saxon and, "Fylgja" from Old Norse, both of which are derived from "full-gan" or "full going".[1] However, to move in the same direction as something is quite different than hunting or stalking it. "Following" implies a somewhat more passive, withdrawn, and distanced perspective than other terms that Marcus might have chosen such as "hunting" "confronting", or "embracing" a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, in relation to such words as "hunting", "confronting" and "embracing", following is an emotionally much cooler disposition of mobility. Those who choose a strategy of following also choose an ethical stance in relation to their work, in relation to that which they study, and perhaps even unintentionally, in relation to the surrounding society in which they either partake, or merely observe. If we "follow" Marcus a bit further, this becomes even more apparent:

> The most important form of local knowledge in which *the multi-sited ethnographer* is interested is that which *parallels the ethnographer's own interest* – in mapping itself. *Sorting out the relationships* of the local to the global is a salient and pervasive form of local knowledge that remains to be recognized and discovered in the embedded

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[1] (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=follow&searchmode=none).

idioms and discourses of any contemporary site that can be defined

by its relationship to the world system (1998:97, my emphases).

Following for Marcus is to "parallel" something. It is to go along with

phenomena that mirror the ethnographer's own interest. It implies a sorting out

of relationships. But what does it mean to sort? IT sounds rather Linnean, and

distanced – and isn't sorting the grounds for naturalist positivist science? What

does it mean to follow?

There is reason to be wary of the role the ethnographer assigns oneself in this

context. To follow is, if we return to the etymology of the word, to be led. In my

view, this brings unsettling questions to mind as to the role of the ethnographer

assigns herself/himself as an actor. What are the responsibilities of an actor who

views herself/himself as a follower? To what extent is the empirical material that

is gathered, or the processes that are studied actants, or actionable entities, that

the ethnographer chases after or merely witnesses? To be led is not only an

acceptance of a passive role, it is one that implies a preparedness to come "just

after" that which is observed, to be in the past of that which is happening. There

is a striking parallel here to the phenomena that Renato Rosaldo (1986)

problematized in *Writing Culture* of Evans-Pritchard observing that which is

happening around him from the door of his tent, passively sitting and noting that

which occurs. For those of us, myself included, who have practiced, engaged

with, and striven to develop strategies for working with multi-sited ethnography,

I wonder how many of us have done more than swapped the old canvas tent for a sparkling new camper which has allowed us to enjoy both a degree of mobility, as well as a new door from which to sit and observe that which is happening "out there".

Multi-sited ethnography has much to offer, and in raising questions about the manner in which the ethnographer is implicitly positioned in this practice, my intention is not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Multi-sited ethnography offers ample opportunities to study and understand cultural processes that link the micro- meso-, and macro-scales of cultural processes in ways that were never possible in single sited endeavors. However, I do want to point out the degree to which multi-sited ethnography is (and has always been) framed as an *accumulative* practice, and a distanced one at that – a methodological mode through which materials are to be accumulated and brought together from different places and different times.

From Accumulative to Distributive

The accumulative process is part of the nature of most scholarly investigation and is an important means by which we create understanding, for ourselves at first, and then through our analyses, even for others. We gather information, and search for patterns, points of conflict, or taken for granted social constructions, and then work to explain them. But I am arguing for a need to even think of the

ethnographic process as not only accumulative, but also always *distributive*. The *distributive* aspect of ethnography is seldom addressed directly in methodology textbooks, but the knowledge we accumulate though ethnographic practices is of little value if it is not distributed. For most scholars, the distributive mode of ethnography focuses upon the production of the final analysis and the publication of the journal article or the ethnographic monograph. For our students the distributive mode of ethnography is encapsulated in the term paper, or thesis – a distributive mode of ethnography we spend years trying to help our students perfect, but with a VERY limited audience (almost always limited to the teacher!). But it is perhaps time to complement multi-sited ethnography with another mode of ethnographic endeavor that I call multi-targeted ethnography. I'll explain what I mean with multi-targeted ethnography in just moment.

But I want to begin by reminding us all of the context in which we currently find ourselves working. It is a context in which bibliometrics matter, students strategically stake out career paths more than they seek "bildning" (or enlightenment), and financiers and politicians increasingly demand that researchers explain how their work will be useful and of benefit to society as well as being located on the cutting edge of international scholarship. As Orin Starn has argued:

> As Jurassic a medium as print may be, the journal article and the
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> book remain the gold standard for hiring and promotion. We do hear

ritualized talk from college administrators about reworking standards

to value more highly teaching, filmmaking, community activism,

and other work… Even so, it's still just about impossible to get

tenure at a major research university…if you haven't published a

book (2015:9).

This is a context that opens for reflection on what research in the humanities and

social science might be, and what it could become. In relation to practices of

ethnography, which is my central focus here, it also begs the question, "What

are the potentials of ethnography and what would we have it do in a context in

which we are expected to be both practically useful, and intellectually

"excellent?"

Multi-Targeted Ethnography

One way in which we might proceed to do this, is by moving and teaching

ethnography in a direction that more strongly emphasizes distributive processes

in addition to accumulative processes, and one that emphasizes ethnography's

potential to be multi-targeted, as well as kinky.

As part of this process Robert Willim and I have been arguing over the past few

years for a shift in the predominant way of viewing the ethnographer's work:

from one of writing culture to one of composing ethnography (O'Dell & Willim

2011 & 2014). It is a move that acknowledges that ethnography is a textual

endeavor, but it is also a move that urges us to reframe ethnography as potentially being so much more than this. *Writing culture* is a *cognitive textual endeavor*, but *composing ethnography* moves further, *bringing the senses and embodied experiences into play*. It asks how, in addition to writing, can culture and cultural experiences be rendered sensually to engage and move different publics. Composing ethnography is not an activity done by academics *or* practitioners; it requires a relational appreciation of ethnography as being something that must take different forms and make use of different utterances in varied contexts.

 Multi-targeted ethnography pushes this compositional ethos, explicitly challenging the cultural analyst to reflect upon the form and modality of the ethnographic rendering and to ever gauge, calibrate and configure that rendering to best meet the needs and competencies of the audience of the day. And my phrasing "of the day" is important here, because a disposition to multi-targeted ethnography understands the ethnographic outcome to be temporary, contingent and ever open to change and development. This requires a bricolage approach to the melding of analytical/theoretical perspectives with materials, but it also necessitates the development of performative techniques that move beyond textual representations, and it involves *explicitly formulated distributive ambitions* often not addressed in traditional anthropological courses: including, but not limited to the oral, visual, and digital skills needed to engage clients and communicate results, the ability to translate concepts and explanations in ways

that make them relevant in different contexts, and a *belief* in the ability of cultural analysis to *provide solutions* (and in this way to provide deliverables that are more than just representations).

The movement towards explicitly developed modes of distributive ethnography is an intentional and explicit attempt to emphasize the manner in which ethnographic representations can be put together in very different ways to produce different understandings depending upon the requirements of the context at hand. It acknowledges, in short that in an age of digital communication and competency, the logocentric approach of academics my not always be most appropriate.

One example of how this can work comes from a larger project I worked on to help develop five rural towns remotely distributed in Sweden. One of the towns was Piteå in the North of Sweden where I worked with locally based academics, entrepreneurs and representatives from the local tourist office. Their question was, "How and on what basis can Piteä be developed as a unique winter destination? (Algotson 2004:17)". In order to do this, I the ethnologist, along with a recruited "expert group" of other scholars, entrepreneurs, and municipal actors were engaged in a two day workshop that strove to help find an answer – not a representation or an interpretation, but a course of action. The workshop began with a cruise up Piteälven to give us a feel for the surrounding forest and cultural geography. In the evening we were fed a local cuisine "Pyttepalt", and

then led out on a snow scooter safari under the northern lights. All of this worked to present "the field" to us. We could have been given a brochure to read up on, but being in the field engaged the senses and thus gave us a sense of the place, and this was the point.

Over the rest of the workshop models were made out of paper, ideas were sketched on whiteboards, post-it notes were stuck both here and there. The *materiality* of the props we had to work with set the *limits **and** realm of possibilities* for how a series of ethnographic analyses and possibilities came to fruition. At the same time, those of us in the "expert group" were divided into smaller competing groups who made oral pitches of our ideas to the local actors, trying to facilitate their thinking with new perspectives on the community and cultural geography around them (more than pitches these were *ethnographic performances* of cultural analysis).

(Quote 1)

At a much later date, I used materials from this and other meetings in the project as a basis for the production of classroom lectures that relied on powerpoint and other digital images, and further down the road came the production of academic texts.

As I mentioned, the workshop in Piteå was part of a larger year-long project that involved the development of five different destinations. Ideas I presented in Piteå lived a life of their own as I left the city, but the ideas that arose between

the locals and the traveling "group of experts" that I was a part of also tended to re-emerge in different places in Sweden spurring new insights amongst those of us in the "expert group" who travelled between the five "destinations" to be developed. Ethnographic analyses were, in other words, released to divergent groups of locals and "experts", allowed to run their course, and periodically, reeled in again, reanalyzed and moved in new directions. The mode of ethnographic engagement at play here was multiple, and ever changing as the context and demands of the context shifted. It involved the production of a cultural analysis that was contingently messy, entangled, and very non-linear.

This being said, I want to align myself with Danilyn Rutherford and argue that working with multi-targeted ethnography – and attempting to actively develop a multi-targeted disposition – requires us to dare to be kinky, and to develop the competencies needed to help our students become kinky. Kinky in the sense that Rutherford writes about kinky empiricism (2015:105). As she explains, kinky empiricism is:

> kinky like a slinky, twisting back on itself, but also kinky like s and m and other queer elaborations of established scenarios, relationships, and things… An empiricism that is ethical because its methods create obligations, obligations that compel those who seek knowledge to put themselves on the line by making truth claims that

they know will intervene within the setting and among the people

they describe (2015:105).

Rutherford outlines in this way an interesting position for ethnographers to take,

(that is kinky to the extent that it is dually daring and vulnerable) but in my

opinion it's still a bit too conventional and if we're going to be kinky I'ld like to

advocate a slightly more hard-core version. Rutherford is still text based in her

approach. She dares us to allow our empirical work to become entangled in the

lives of others and to be partial. But I think we can push the sensual realm

further than Rutherford does. Because, as I have argued in other places (and

have been trying to outline here), I think ethnography, to be both ***affective and***

effective beyond the academy, has to be able to touch audiences in ways that go

beyond the text and go beyond the realm of logic.

Not all ethnographies are/will/or should be multi-targeted but I believe

that we live in a time in which the targets of our research and the directions we

give it will increasingly have to be taken into consideration. The point that I am

trying to emphasize here is that composing ethnography requires us, in part, to

continue to consciously push our work in different directions, and to different

ends in the spirit of an open inquisitive stance of scientific exploration and

creativity, but it also, in part, challenges us to dare to move in different

directions (and modal forms of rendering) than very many of us have usually done before. As scholars we will have to be highly competent writers. But to optimize our potential to have an impact on society at whole, I see a potential at for us at this point in time to better exploit advances being made in digital and sensory methods to present our work orally and visually in a manner that speaks to (and with) a broader range of publics (and with a greater intensity) than we are doing at the moment. Thinking in terms of composing ethnography forces us to acknowledge that the 'representation of culture' is an important aspect of what we do, but what we do can be much more than this.

Ideas that didn't I didn't have space for in the paper
but will be developed…

(Quote 1) Up to this point in the ethnographic process, my work and modes of presenting my ideas were hybrid in orientation: inspired by the culture theory of anthropology and the cultural sciences, but presented and enunciated in non-text based forms that struck me as being best suited to move the collaborative partners I was engaged with in the local setting. I was not atheoretical in my approach, but neither was I highbrow or vernacular in my disposition. My positioning was betwixt and between. Michael Fischer portrays anthropology as occupying a third space in between "the desires of empire (of control) and the defense of the oppressed" (2003:8). …

(Quote 2) Here you could say that to be kinky requires us to allow the third space of anthropology (Fischer 2003:8) to be a sticky geography, in which our ideas become entangled in the ideas, interests and ambitions of those we collaborate with. They become ensnared in this way and we have to leave them behind, in the trusting hands of our collaborative partners – perhaps surrendering those ideas forever to our partners, but perhaps finding new kinky engagements those ideas, transformed and rethought, can become entangled in our anthropological thinking again.

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