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Public Ethnography and Multimodality: Research from the Book to the Web

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Good ethnographic research is known to *show* first and only *tell* in the second instance. By way of "showing" ethnography paints a vivid portrait of places, people, and their actions and interactions. By way of "showing" ethnography engages in thick description—in the kind of reporting that animates, evokes, ruptures, and renders the lifeworld in colorful and vibrant ways (Stoller, 1997). This is what most obviously sets ethnography apart from other research strategies. Whereas for the most part other research strategies focus on "telling"—e.g. displaying statistics, contextualizing interview excerpts, summarizing laboratory findings, or deconstructing the meanings of texts—ethnography, or at least good ethnography, focuses on enlivening multiple realities and on bringing the reader "there." And to do this effectively there is only one way: good *writing*. Or, well, at least that is what most ethnographers have been taught.

When ethnography became an accepted research strategy in anthropology and sociology early in the twentieth century no mode of representation other than writing was available to ethnographers. While sonic recordings (see Neumann, this volume) and photographs became more common as the years went by, it wasn't until the latter part of the century that ethnographers began to employ media other than the written word. Visual ethnography, however, still remained uncommon for a while—limited by high costs of image collection and reproduction, lack of training opportunities, and relatively low acceptance. So, while film and photography seemed an obviously efficient way to show the details of a lifeworld, ethnographers for the most part continued to rely on the monograph—in book and article form—as the dominant way of sharing knowledge and advancing their careers. Methodological debates and advances, therefore, mostly concentrated on writing and very little on other modes and media.

However, as various cultural turns and the qualitative inquiry movement in the social sciences continued to blur genres and to lead to experimentation with alternative strategies of representation in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) new options to collect, organize, and disseminate ethnographic knowledge became more available and accepted. Thus, ethnographers began to exploit more meaningfully the full range of visual options, as well as newer approaches including performance, narrative, and arts-based forms of ethnographic inquiry (Denzin, 1997). By now, audiences of ethnographic research have not only become fully accustomed to a way of showing that de-centers the role of the written word, but in some cases audiences like young students would seem to even prefer descriptive representation that is fully multimodal.

Recent developments in the process of communicating research multi-modally—that is, through a diverse range of modes of communication such as combinations of sonic and visual elements—are bound to change drastically the way in which ethnographic knowledge is generated and shared. The potential of digital technologies to make these productions easier, cheaper, and more aesthetically compelling compounds these effects. This chapter focuses on these developments, concentrating in particular on the multimodal ethnographic book series *Innovative Ethnographies*, published by Routledge. I begin by introducing the series and highlighting my own contribution to it as an example, and then reflect on its potential to change the way audiences learn from ethnographic research. I conclude by examining a few lessons learned in the process of producing this series.

Innovative Ethnographies

In the fall of 2009 I decided to pitch to Routledge a new book series, to be titled *Innovative Ethnographies*, which would combine the book with the web. The idea was simple: every book published in this series would come with material to be uploaded on the book series web site. Such material was not intended to be ancillary educational material (such as test banks, powerpoint lectures, appendix-style writings, etc.) or what I called "incidental postcards from the field" (such as amateurish photographs). Rather, inspired by ethnographers' calls such as Behar's (1999) I launched a call for contributions that boldly stated the following:

> Recent methodological innovations have opened the door for a new kind of ethnography. No longer unsecure about their aesthetic sensibilities, contemporary ethnographers have expanded upon the established tradition of impressionistic and confessional fieldwork to produce works that not only stimulate the intellect, but that also *delight the senses*. From visual to reflexive ethnography, from narrative to arts-based ethnography, from hypertext to multimodal ethnography, and from autoethnography to performance ethnography, fieldwork has undergone a revolution in data collection practice and strategies of representation and dissemination. Contemporary ethnography is no longer a matter of taking good notes and writing them up with abstract theory in mind; it is now a catalytic field of experimentation and reflection, innovation and revelation, transformation and call to action.
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> The Routledge "Innovative Ethnographies" series is meant to be at the forefront of this movement. It will publish innovative ethnographic studies that appeal to new audiences of scholarly research through the use of new media and new genres. It will interest both informed general publics and scholarly audiences, as well as students in the classrooms. It will challenge the boundaries between ethnography and documentary journalism, between the scholarly essay and the novel, between academia and drama. It will not invite authors to abandon analysis or methodological sophistication, but by eschewing theoretical excesses it will strive to be more popular than the traditional scholarly monograph. From the use of narrative and drama to the use of reflexivity and pathos, from the contextualization of ethnographic documentation in felt textures of place to the employment of artistic conventions for the sake of good writing, this series would invite ethnographers to produce works that aren't afraid to entertain while being enlightening.

Well written books—the call for proposals continued—would no longer be sufficient on their own. What I wanted (and still want, as the series is ongoing) was ethnographic work ready to exploit the full potential of multimodal communication and electronic distribution. High-resolution photographs, professionally-produced HD documentary films, digital audio documentaries, electronic art exhibits, graphic design, and painting were some of the multimodal opportunities the book series website was intended to make available to ethnography audiences. While the books would continue to be printed and sold by Routledge, the material posted on each book's micro-site would be entirely free of charge to the public.

The purpose of this series was to rejuvenate ethnographic book publishing. To do so the proposed series was designed to be characterized by the following three features. First, it would publish ethnographies that move beyond the old writing canon as an exclusive *genre of representation*. Drawing inspiration from various popular culture formats it would include writings that are highly appealing to readers because of both their content and their style. Ethnographies—as opposed to other scholarly monographs—*can* be moving, *can* be passionate,

and *can* be fun and popular. Borrowing from the conventions of popular culture formats would mean actualizing the aesthetic potential of ethnography. This would mean that books in the series would feel more like film, or like art, or like music, or like literature, or like performance than they would feel like the same old scholarship of the past.

Second, it would publish ethnographies that transcend the limitation of the book as a *medium of dissemination*. As more and more students, scholars, and other audiences of research become familiar and comfortable with contemporary media of communication, the traditional written page runs the risk of falling out of grace, especially with younger publics like undergraduate students. Publications in this series would address this trend. Books reporting ethnographic studies would be accompanied by other media material produced by the books' authors and hosted on the web. This materially could then be easily integrated into the classroom and into the electronic (i.e. distance-learning) classroom.

Third, it would publish ethnographies that appeal to *new audiences*. In virtue of their high aesthetic appeal and in virtue of their popular media-readiness (and usability in the classroom), the books in the proposed series would be easily marketed to multiple audiences. First, they could be marketed to the general public—since every book's substantive topic and research approach would be lively and of great contemporary relevance or popular interest. Second, they could be marketed to forward-thinking scholars and students, since more and more researchers are seeking novel examples of research crafting and distribution, and also sources of inspiration for reaching out to new audiences.

In sum, books and multimodal web material in the series would lead the way toward a popular and humanistic approach to ethnography and qualitative social scientific research; an approach marked by the flavors and tones of the art and popular culture that so powerfully draws us to movie theaters, galleries, performance venues, and concert halls. Rejecting anonymous experiences, faceless informants, story-less field practice, uncommitted analysis, un-interactive interaction, and the instrumental logic of making "data" subservient to theory, this series of books would inspire audiences just like the great documentaries and films of our time do, and make ethnography more fully public. A lofty goal indeed.

How it all happened

When the publisher agreed to run the series, the difficult task of finding contributors began. It is hard enough to find well-written ethnographies which show first, and only tell in the second instance, let alone to find ethnographers who are also prepared to produce high-quality multimodal material. Another problem compounded this challenge: the ethnographers that are the most likely to produce innovative multimodal material are generally young. From junior faculty with limited time to produce artistic material that some tenure committees still struggle to recognize, to fresh PhD researchers with limited name recognition (and therefore limited chances of convincing editorial boards to issue a contract), the editorial struggle to find contributors was obvious from the get-go. With time, patience, and extensive distribution of the call for proposals, however, the first solid examples of this new approach started flowing in. While still in its infancy, today the *Innovative Ethnographies* site has begun to showcase some of these works. Because I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to share my own fieldwork this way, I now proceed to reflect on this process.

Between 2006 and 2010 I worked on an ethnographic project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This project aimed to understand the multiple roles played by ferry transportation in the everyday life of residents of British Columbia's islands and coastal towns. The research required a lot of travel, since about three

dozen different routes serve multiple destinations throughout this vast region. Some 250 trip and about 400 interviews later I began to assemble the material with an eye to making it fully public. Thanks to the assistance of Phil Saunders—my university's media relations manager (see his chapter in this book)—and due in large part to the profound local relevance of the topic, my ongoing research had been regularly featured on the pages of local newspapers and magazines, and on local and regional radio and TV stations. Throughout this time it had become apparent that the local public wanted to access the final outcome of my fieldwork. My pool of interviewees alone had enthusiastically asked to read what conditions other ferry-dependent community residents experienced.

Therefore, I decided early on to produce the outcome of my fieldwork through three different media to maximize outreach. The first medium was the book. Scholarship often demands written reflection and storytelling, and this case was no exception. Writing a book that captured the attention of both specialist audiences and the general public, however, was no easy task. Hence, aiming the writing "in the middle" seemed the only solutions. While specialist audiences were "targeted" through a series of peer-reviewed journal articles, and simultaneously local audiences were "targeted" through a series of radio appearances and newspaper op-eds and interviews, the book—I felt—could appeal to both audiences by losing its pesky edges. I shaved off a lot of high-level terminology from my writing, as well as a lot of local politics and parochial references, and I aimed writing at the typical undergraduate university student. If a freshman who has never been to British Columbia can fully understand and enjoy mostly every page of my book—so would (mostly) anyone else.

Writing a book that way entailed thinking outside the box a little bit. Chapters became shorter and shorter—to keep the writing fluid and the attention alive. Some three dozen chapters, each of 2,000-3,000 words, made up the book. The book was also organized to mix up the pace of showing and telling evenly. For the most part, organization demanded that a chapter of evocative and narrative "showing" of the "data" would be followed by a chapter filled with interpretations and contextualizations. That way the stories could stand on their own—without much theoretical interference. The main title of the book, *Ferry Tales*, was designed to denote its storytelling value. Along the same lines, ethnographic representation featured dialogues, events, and descriptions similar to those you might find in a paperback novel. While I make no claim to being a novelist or a particularly good writer, for that matter, I tried to emulate some of the good travel writers whose tales I like to read in my spare time. I did not shy away from including humor, colorful characters, and oddball details to make the ethnography, as much as possible, a fun read. Finally, to increase the flow of the writing I did not employ in-text citations—using footnotes instead.

The book's chapters were assembled together in seven different parts: an introductory part, following by six parts built around the ethnography's main substantial focus. Each of the seven parts of the book came with a 7-minute audio documentary, uploaded on the book's website. The audio documentaries were produced in collaboration with Lindsay Vogan, a student of mine with a technical background in radio. Lindsay's talent caught my attention one day in class, when during a presentation on a small fieldwork project she played a clip from an audio documentary she had been working on. Her voice was that of a professional, and her skills—it later turned out—had been award-winning. The decision to hire her was a no brainer. I had set aside some funds in my grant for this type of work, so soon enough Lindsay was following me around boats and taking part in interviews—digitally recording informants' words and ambient sounds. Lindsay and I co-scripted the seven documentaries, she edited everything with her

software, and quickly after that the work was done. Lindsay's work was of such high-quality—and the research topic so easy to sell—that regional CBC Radio 1 stations played segments of the documentaries, followed by interviews with me.

At that point, the work of assembling everything for the web remained. Because most people living outside of the region (e.g. anonymous reviewers of journal articles, colleagues at conferences, etc.) complained that it was rather difficult to visualize the area and its feels, my research assistant for this project—April Warn—suggested we create an artistic map-like rendition of the area. That is, not quite a map drawn to scale—which would have been somewhat dry and unimaginative—but rather an artistic map. All the ferry-dependent communities on the map were drawn larger than normal to facilitate the insertion of hyperlinks. Clicking on any of these destinations opens up a slideshow of images and other material (poems, letters, songs, newspaper articles, etc.) collected through fieldwork in that community. The web site, of course, also serves as a navigation point for downloading and playing the seven audio documentaries. Some written material excerpted from the book was also made available on the site.

To spread the word about the book I generated a media release and sent it to local and regional media outlets. Because news media outlets are generally interested in following up on a story or a project after they first covered it, the media release yielded a very good amount of attention—free publicity, as it were. I also notified all my informants who had expressed desire the see the final outcomes of the research. While it's early to determine popular response to this communication plan by book sales volumes, it seemed rather clear to me that the response was very positive. As an informant-turned-reader/listener told me: "it's nice to see academic research that you can easily relate too—as a matter of fact this doesn't even really feel like academic research." And to me, that sounded like a compliment.

While it is early to gauge the success of the Innovative Ethnographies series, or of *Ferry Tales*, it is obvious that rethinking the book as a sole medium for the dissemination of academic research to the public is necessary. But of course, we should not do away with books. Books are fun to read as much as they are fun to write, but if we are keen on exploiting the potential of the written word we need to think carefully about the material we select for our research, about the way we tell research stories, and about the way we organize them, and market them—as well as to the way they lend themselves to multimodal rendition. My intent in creating the *Innovative Ethnographies* book series is an attempt to, not only make ethnographic books more pleasurable to read, but also to exploit the potential of other media to show ethnographic tales.

References

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