Challenges to ethnographic research

Ethnography in the post-modern era is no longer as simple as it once was – when it was normal to be an armchair anthropologist ' ethnographic' work required much less mental gymnastics – today ethnography requires researchers to walk a very fine line in order to produce a thoughtful and impactful piece of research. This has been the case since anthropology underwent a period of internal critique in the 1980's changing the face of written ethnography. Since then anthropology has been trying to put to bed our " perilous ideas [namely] race, culture, [and] people" (Wolf et al. 1994: 1) and the effort has heightened anthropology's awareness of how it produces knowledge. The tightrope act researchers must walk today requires them to carefully balance their use and investigation of universal claims with, their authority and writing style. A lapse of either one will unbalance the carefully constructed microcosm they are trying to represent. This is further complicated by calls for a more engaged anthropology that at times seems unsure of its own best practices. If we are to " engage in the utopistics of inventing the alternative order" (1994: 10) as Immanuel Wallerstein asks us to, then before we dance, we need to be sure we have made it to Rhodes.

The volatile concepts discussed by Eric Wolf are quite possibly the most problematic universals that have been used in anthropology. As Wolf ponders in this article " *how* they allow us to think." (1994: 2) and the effects of their imposed structure he reveals one of the major weight's researchers need to balance; the idea of culture. Culture as a concept has itself undergone a number of changes in its definition moving from a universal idea of a people toward a particularistic concept. Despite rallying against

typological practices Boas' notion of culture would still encourage a universal application of the concept which in part was borne out in Alfred Kroeber's work with Charley Nowell. Nowell was Kroeber's primary informant about the culture of the Kwakiutl Indians (Reed-Danahay 2019), which as a practice is entirely opposite the Boasian perspective that " no culture was due to ' the genius of a single people' " (Boas, quoted in Wolf et al. 1994: 5). To take one perspective and project it onto a group of people was not particularizing but instead a heavy-handed generalization. It wouldn't take long however for anthropology to take to investigating the heterogenous elements of cultural systems but these investigations would still fail to focus on how these elements intersected (Wolf et al. 1994).

Despite the criticisms leveled by Boas about the use of universals they continued to persist and, in many ways, anthropology via universals played a very large role in the 19th and 20th century creation of the nation-state. The monolithic idea that there is such a thing as one Russian culture that is geographically bound by the very arbitrary lines drawn on maps is profoundly false, but continues even today. Ethnographers in this way are no less innocent than geographers, the " ethnographic maps" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 7) produced in the 20th century of Nuerland is just one example that assumed that there was a form of homogenous cultural identity among the Nuer (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The world as it had been known was drastically changing in the 1990's with the dissolution of the Soviet Union rendering the " stark opposition of ' East' and ' West' … [and] the ethnocentric formula it" (Geertz 2000: 221) represented to be even more useless. This has left anthropology with two big questions that Clifford

Geertz asks rhetorically in chapter eleven of his book *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (2000) the first one being " What Is a Country if It Is Not a Nation?" (2000: 231). Paying careful attention to the Geertz's use of capitalization gives us an insight into his overall argument about this question, a title written in American English does not usually capitalize words such as ' is' or ' it'. The stress is being focused very specifically on the qualities of a country if it is distinctly not a nation. He argues much like Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson do that identities are not singular to their geography or culture area and are not homogenous (1992). Geertz uses the history of the former Yugoslavia to illustrate this, as there are people who still define themselves as a Yugoslav despite the fact that Yugoslavia no longer exists. The converse example also existed within Yugoslavia when it did exist as a nation, the people of Croatia went as far as to adopt the Latin alphabet to differentiate themselves from the people of Serbia and later from Yugoslavia as a whole (2000). Despite the fact that this criticism was offered by the Boasian's that " cultural integration could not be assumed; where it was asserted, it had to be demonstrated." (Wolf et al. 1994: 5) anthropology has continued to apply universals of culture into the present day.

Geertz's second provocative question " What Is a Culture if It Is Not a Consensus?" (2000: 246) applies much more sharply to anthropological methods and theory today. Dealing with the world in universals is much more difficult when it " is neither divided at the joints into ingredient sections nor a transcendent unity – economic, say, or psychological – … thin and concocted." (Geertz 2000: 250). The way people have come to define

themselves in the world is in opposition to their environment, it is what " makes Serbs Serbs, Sinhalese Sinhalese, or French Canadians French Canadians" (Geertz 2000: 249). In doing so however this creates methodological issues, universals such as ' American' need to be carefully analyzed for all of the aspects that do not form the consensus that is assumed to stem from ' American' culture. Anna Tsing the author of *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005) interrogates the universals she encountered during her field work in Indonesia very carefully as not only is she conducting ethnographic research but she is writing as an engaged anthropologist (2005: pt. 3).

The call for an engaged anthropology which George Marcus saw as the call for " the incorporation into the ethnographic knowledge-making process itself … of an explicit and authoritative participatory role by one's subjects, from whom ' epistemic partners' in the research emerge." (2012: 38). This focus on being collaborative with ones subjects is evident throughout Tsing's (2005) book but perhaps most notably on the very first and last pages of the book. On these pages there is an enlarged version of a list of " ' all the contents of this earth, this island Borneo' " (2005: 155) that she made in collaboration with her friend Uma Adang. This takes place in the vignette just before the last chapter of part two where she had been deconstructing the universal idea of environmentalism starting from its first inception with John Muir (1838-1914). Muir was a Scottish immigrant who arrived in the United States in 1849 and is credited by many conservationists and scholars as the first link in the chain between scholars and philosophers, with the environment. Muir's environmentalism was one of conservation seeing

nature as pure and in dire need of conservation and protection from all human impact; including the Native Americans living on these lands (Tsing 2005: chap. 3). Uma Adang in this moment is appealing to – albeit, updated ideas – of the conservationism of Muir by listing what she can of the biodiversity of Borneo. However, she is also in direct opposition to the Western classification system used to name biological life which is the hegemonic conception of biodiversity, as she is creating the list she does not use the Latin names, and considers their local uses of the flora and fauna (Tsing 2005: chap. 5). The incorporation of Uma Adang's voice in chapter five and the continual juxtaposition of the local and the universal situate this work in a more engaged anthropology framework, despite its ultimate focus on global connections (Tsing 2005; Marcus 2012).

By carefully deconstructing universals like that of global environmentalism Tsing is balancing her authority and her carefully (de)constructed universals. This no doubt comes from the rich background literature she cites in the back of the book which includes ideas on universals from Hegel to Judith Butler. In her footnotes to her introduction Tsing (2005) states that: " One must learn to generalize from one instance to another, to see an underlying or emergent principle of commonality across apparent difference. The principle must tie both instances not just to each other but to a radically open field that could at least potentially cover all other instances" (2005: 274 n. 8). Following this line of thought it is easy to see the appeal of universals, as they claim to encompass the particularities of life in all of their varieties. This technique has been used by many people with different goals including political activism, universals used for political activism are

considered engaged universals. In footnote 14, Tsing discusses two similar perspectives of engaged universals, Judith Butler's linguistic metaphor on universality which stresses the role of translation, and Ernesto Laclau's discussion of the role of contingency in how universals can foster political activism and thus create social change(2005: 274–275 n. 14). Both of these ideas need to be considered carefully in the methods of autoethnography, especially the role of contingency. Historically contingency helps the universal come to life across disparate particular realities, without it political activists cannot turn particular complaints into a community universal (Tsing 2005: 275 n. 14). This is how Tsing's book culminates, after laying out the history of, logging, resource exploitation, and corruption she recounts a meeting at which a group of activists who had drawn upon the recent history (that which was outlined by Tsing) to connect the issues of logging to issues of environmentalism and ultimately to the people of the Meratus Mountains. Despite speaking to a diverse group with different understandings of the environmentalism universal (a fundamental cause of friction or mistranslation) " The Forrest of Collaborations" (Tsing 2005: 245) was able to create social change as the activists from Manggur fought to have their voices translated into the universals of environmentalism and liberalism (Tsing 2005: chap. 7).

Momentarily lets return to Geertz's question " What Is a Culture if It Is Not a Consensus?" (2000: 246) as it is pertinent to the construction of universals. An engaged universal, despite its ontological origin, can be of particular use when it is carefully deconstructed, without its deconstruction it too simply becomes a contrastive heuristic (Geertz 2000). In *Friction* Anna Tsing

carefully analyzes the major universals at play as she records the friction of these global connections and balances this with her authority as an anthropologist at no point does she assume any kind of cultural homogeneity (2005; Wolf et al. 1994). Pierre Bourdieu (2003) offers anthropology a different method for dealing with this balancing act as he saw the task of being both being participant and observer as a nearly impossible act; his solution was " participant objectivation" (2003: 281). He specifies that this is not to be taken to mean " the practice … [of] observing oneself observing" (2003: 282) rather, " Participant objectivation undertakes to explore not the ' lived experience' of the knowing subject but the social conditions of possibility – and therefore the effects and limits – of that experience and more precisely, of the act of objectivation itself." (2003: 282). By forcing oneself to realize the relationship between the observer and their object of study he believed that anthropology as a whole could shed " anti-scientific subjectivism … [for] genuine scientific objectivity." (2003: 282). This is something that is can be achieved in autoethnography to varying degrees.

What autoethnography started as and what it is today are two very different research methods. The word itself was first used by Alfred Kroeber in 1947 when discussing the research, he undertook with Charley Nowell in his publications. In this way it was to be different from autobiography because it was more so about Nowell's societal customs than it was a personal account of his life (Reed-Danahay 2019: 4). In the 20th century however it would begin to change becoming closer to what it is today, this has been called narrative ethnography which was more an " observation of participation" style of writing and researching (Tedlock 1991: 78). However this tends to

bring the writer into the text as an actor and observer (Reed-Danahay 2019; Tedlock 1991). This style brings us back to Bourdieu's concern, " How can one be both subject and object, the one who acts and the one who, as it were, watches himself acting?" (2003: 281). His recommendation is for one to objectify themselves to better understand how they are positioned which is pertinent for doing anthropology today as autoethnography has expanded in genera but has not evolved like it did from Alfred Kroeber to Dennis Werner (Bourdieu 2003: 283; Reed-Danahay 2019; Tedlock 1991: 73).

This is not an easy task from the narrative ethnography methodological framework, as the researcher is becoming one with the research. Bourdieu's concern comes to life in Christine Walley's book *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (2013) as she and her family take center stage. While the book itself is incredibly well done, it lacks a key discussion on the American Dream when we consider again Geertz's question " What Is a Culture if It Is Not a Consensus?" (2000: 246). Unlike Tsing's (2005) use of environmentalism, the American Dream is a universal applied throughout the whole book with one meaning, the origin of this universal is hardly discussed, and the possibility of different meanings is not considered (Walley 2013: 89). Whereas Tsing discussed the varying understandings of environmentalism from the hegemonic perspectives of western science and John Muir, to perspectives held by people living in Indonesia, such as the Nature Lovers, and the Meratus Dayaks (Tsing 2005: pt. 2); Walley does not do this. Instead starting from the preface and continuing to the end of the book the American Dream is framed in one metaphor, a linear path up the American social ladder where she views deindustrialization as the removal of a key rung on

said ladder (Walley 2013: xi). The American Dream she acknowledges has been used by both the political right and the political left when it was most beneficial to them, but unlike Tsing who actively discussed governmental policy in Indonesia throughout her book and particularly in chapter four with the politics of Nature Loving (2005: chap. 4). Walley does not name so much as an individual who constructed political rhetoric around the American Dream she merely generalizes that it happened and while what she alludes to did happen, how Americanness and thus the American Dream was constructed by those individuals which is crucial to how her grandparents would have experienced it is not mentioned (2013: 23). For instance, ignoring the role of McCarthyism in damaging the reputation of unionized labor severely cripples the readers understanding of how Walley perceives the American Dream. Like other socially constructed ideas Walley's understanding of the American Dream would have been informed by the experiences her family had with it, and without investigating the role of McCarthyism or the wider context of the Cold War the picture is incomplete. Because of these omissions what is left over is just " the ' lived experience' of the knowing subject" (Bourdieu 2003: 282).

This is deeply problematic for a book discussing the social construction of being working class in the United States, and specifically in postindustrial Chicago. The only hint that Walley gives that there could be a different perception of the American Dream comes not when she is discussing what it may mean but how it is achieved. This difference of attainment follows the economic changes from the 20th century and the early 21st century, the expansion of higher education combined with the affects deindustrialization

meant that the American Dream of her grandparents – centered on "
economic upward mobility *as a community* " (Walley 2013: 91) – no longer
existed, instead, it is now individually attained where the workplace has
been superseded by education (Walley 2013: 91). But this is only focused on
how one achieves upward mobility which she defines as the American
Dream, this does not consider alternative versions of it such as the idea of
immigrating for a better life, sending money back home, or fleeing
oppression. The implication being that in postindustrial Chicago anyone who
meets the criteria of working-class longs to be middle class and that they are
all discontented with their position in life. The notion of the American Dream
is deeply tied to the experience of class in the United States of this there is
no doubt, but one must wonder if the *consensus* in South East Chicago is
that the American Dream means upward social mobility (Geertz 2000; Walley
2013).

Balancing methods and voice, while intensely researching that which is close
to home makes the job of an anthropologist very difficult. While it may not
have seemed to be a crucial detail, the lack of a discussion on the American
Dream, does not do Christine Walley any favors. By being a character in her
own research the universal she grew up knowing as the American Dream
becomes one that is applied by her writing to postindustrial Chicago. While
she paints a clear picture of how deindustrialization affected her and her
family, assuming a consensus around the American Dream creates a rather
wobbly walk down the tightrope (Walley 2013). In all fairness, it is not the
case that any outsider, " hybrid anthropologist" (Narayan 1993), or insider
would have been better prepared to write this book. Likewise, this criticism is

not meant to imply that narrative ethnography is inherently flawed, it just needs to be done carefully as it continues to develop as a method before anthropology heads for Rhodes. Focusing on the " social conditions of possibility" (Bourdieu 2003: 282) can at least help researchers who pursue a narrative ethnography framework to balance their (de)construction of universals with their method and voice and ultimately so they can recognize when they are standing on land or toxic fill (Walley 2013: 127).

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