

INTERPRETIVE ETHNOGRAPHY FOR THE NEXT CENTURY

NORMAN K. DENZIN

AN INTERPRETIVE ETHNOGRAPHY for the next century is one that is simultaneously minimal, existential, autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical. This ethnography seeks to ground the self in a sense of the sacred, to dialogically connect the ethical, respectful self to nature and the worldly environment. In so doing, it recognizes the ethical unity of mind and nature (Bateson and Bateson, 1987, pp. 8-9, 11). It seeks to embed the self in storied histories of sacred spaces. This epistemology presumes a feminist moral ethic, stressing the sacredness of human life, dignity, truth-telling and nonviolence (Christians, 1998, p. 3).

After Behar (1996) and Jackson (1998), this ethnography works outward from those moments of existential crisis in the culture that affirm the truth that says humans must have "some say in the world into which they are thrown, that they must in some measure choose their own lives and feel that they have a right to be here" (Jackson, 1998, p. 3). This ethnography interrogates those interactional moments when humans come together in struggles over love, joy, shame, betrayal, those instances "when self and other are constituted in mutuality and acceptance rather than violence and contempt" (Jackson, 1998, p. 208).

This is an ethnography that refuses abstractions and high theory. It is a way of being in the world that avoids jargon and huge chunks of data. Viewing culture as a complex process of improvisation, it seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives. It celebrates autoethnography, mystories, myth, and folklore.

This is a return to narrative as a political act, a minimal ethnography with political teeth. It asks how power is exercised in concrete human relationships. It understands that power

means empowerment, the give and take of scarce material resources. It seeks performance texts that tell stories about how humans experience moral community.

Here is an example from Jackson (1998, pp. 196-199). It is a story about an aboriginal named Desmond, a "wiry, weather-beaten man in bare feet" (p. 196) who lives on an island in the middle of a river. One Sunday, Jackson, his wife (Francine), and his two children (Heidi, Joshua) called on Desmond. As the story goes, they are sitting in the middle of the buffalo grass near his hut. Desmond is rolling a cigarette. Heidi asks him if he would prefer a tailor-made, and she tosses him her pack of Winfields and cigarette lighter. Desmond has to lean forward to pick up the cigarettes and lighter.

As he does so, he snaps,

Don't throw things at me! Don't treat me like a dog! Don't make me take them. If you meant to give them to me you should have got up and put them in my hand. Then I would have received them gladly. . . . Do you know what I say to people at the mission? I say to them, "Name me one white person who has ever done anything for you?"

Jackson replies, "We're whites." Desmond retorts, "Well, you might be okay. I don't know. You might have an ulterior motive here, I don't know" (Jackson, 1998, 198-9).

It can be argued that Desmond believed that Jackson and Heidi (as whites) were denying him some degree of control and dignity in his life. Furthermore, he felt that whites routinely did this to aboriginals.

With Jackson (1998, p. 204) and West (1989, p. 233), I seek a redemptive, pragmatically prophetic, existential ethnography, a vulnerable ethnography that shows us how to act morally, in solidarity, with passion, with dignity—to engage the world and its dispossessed in complementary, not competitive or destructive ways. This ethnography moves from my biography to the biographies of others, to those rare moments when our lives connect, as when Jackson's daughter gives Desmond her cigarettes.

This project asks that I make myself visible in my text. I am the universal singular, universalizing in my singularity the crises and experiences of my historical epoch (Sartre, 1981, p. ix).

This ethnography inscribes the human crises of a specific culture. It endeavors to connect those crises to the public sphere, to the apparatuses of the culture that commodify the personal, turning it into a political, public spectacle.

In so doing, this ethnography attempts to better understand the conditions of oppression and commodification that operate in the culture, seeking to make these ways of the world more visible to others. The moral ethnographer searches for those moments when humans resist these structures of oppression and representation, and attempt, in the process, to take control over their lives and the stories about them.

Consider Ellison's (1964, pp. 307-308) interrogations of the image of the American Negro as given in the work of Robert Park. Park (1950) states,

The Negro has always been interested rather in expression than in action. . . . The Negro is by natural disposition, neither an intellectual nor an idealist, like the Jew. . . . He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. . . . He is, so to speak, the lady among the races. (pp. 280, 285)

Ellison (1964) replies to Park,

Park's metaphor is so pregnant with mixed motives as to birth a thousand compromises. . . . Imagine the effect such teachings have had upon Negro students alone! . . . What started as part of a democratic attitude, ends . . . uncomfortably close to the preachings of . . . Dr. Goebbels. (p. 308)

An existential ethnography offers a blueprint for cultural criticism, a criticism grounded in the specific worlds made visible in the ethnography. It understands that there can be no value-free, objective, dispassionate, value-neutral account of a culture and its ways. Taking a lead from midcentury African American cultural critics such as Ellison, it is understood that the ethnographic, the aesthetic, and the political can never be neatly separated. Ethnography like art is always political.

Accordingly, after Ford (1998), a critical, literary ethnography is one that must meet four criteria. It must evidence a mastery of literary craftsmanship, the art of good writing. It should present a well-plotted, compelling, but minimalist narrative, based on realistic, natural conversation, with a focus on memorable,

recognizable characters. These characters should be located in well-described, "unforgettable scenes" (Ford, 1998, p. 1112). Second, the work should articulate clearly identifiable cultural and political issues, including injustices based on the structures and meanings of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Third, the work should express a politics of hope. It should criticize how things are and imagine how they could be different. Finally, it will do these things through direct and indirect symbolic and rhetorical means. Writers who do these things are fully immersed in the oppressions and injustices of their time. Their ethnographic energies are directed to higher utopian goals.

Such work is vulnerable precisely at that moment when it makes its values and criticisms public, when it risks taking sides, aligning itself with one political and moral position and not another. There is a political vulnerability that goes beyond Behar's (1996) call for an anthropology that breaks your heart (pp. 19, 167, 177). It is more than a writing that inserts the personal into the ethnographic. It is more than stories that move others to tears, more than first-person narratives that turn the self and its experiences into the site of inquiry. It is more than autoethnography born of regret, fear, self-loathing, and anger.

This is writing that angers the reader, writing that challenges the reader to take action in the world, to reconsider the conditions under which the moral terms of the self are constituted. This critical vulnerability dares to use the particular and the personal as vehicles for criticizing the status quo. Thus, does Ellison move from his own experiences to criticize Park's theory of race relations in America. In the same way, Jackson presents Desmond's refusal of his daughter's cigarettes as an instance of perceived cultural prejudice toward aboriginals.

Behar's (1996) vulnerability is a modernist emotion. It is a product of an age that insists on maintaining a division between private troubles and public issues. Behar's self becomes vulnerable when its private experiences, fears, and doubts are made public. Her vulnerability presumes a gendered, multilayered self, hiding behind many masks; a self with much to lose if too much emotion is displayed. But it is not clear what Behar's term means in a postmodern age when nothing is hidden, or invisible. How does vulnerability operate when freedom means there is

nothing any longer left to lose, as Kris Kristofferson tells in his famous road song "Me and Bobbie McGee." The existentially vulnerable ethnographer no longer has anywhere to hide. The insertion of personal tales into the ethnographic text becomes a moot issue. The writing self is now called to a higher purpose, to use its experiences for social criticism, for imagining new configurations of the morally sacred self.

A vulnerable, performative ethnography moves in three directions at the same time. On one hand, it represents a call to action and morally informed social criticism. Second, in so doing, it asks the ethnographer to always connect good and bad stories to the circumstances of the media, to history, to culture and political economy. This structural move introduces another layer into the account. In connecting the personal to the historical, the political and the representational, the writer contextualizes the story being told. This pinpoints local conditions that require change, thereby providing the grounds for moving from the particular (the singular) to the universal.

In this move, the writer produces mystery accounts, multimedia, personal texts grafted into scholarly, scientific, media, and popular culture discourses (Denzin, 1997, p. 116). These mystery texts function as personal mythologies, improvised and rehearsed public performance stories. These narratives begin with the sting of personal memory, epiphanies, and existential crises in the person's biography. The writer moves from these moments into critical readings of those personal, community, popular, and expert systems of discourse, which offer interpretations of such experiences. From these critical rereadings, an empowering mystery is fashioned. In these empowerment narratives, the writer claims ownership over a story previously interpreted from within another system of discourse.

The truth of these new texts is determined pragmatically, by their truth effects, by the critical, moral discourse they produce, by the "empathy they generate, the exchange of experience they enable, and the social bonds they mediate" (Jackson, 1998, p. 180). The power of these texts is not a question of whether "they mirror the world as it 'really' is" (Jackson, 1998, p. 180). The world is always already constructed through narrative texts.

Third, this performative ethnography searches for new ways to locate and represent the gendered, sacred self in its ethical relationships to nature. An exploration of other forms of writing is sought, including personal diaries, nature writing, and performance texts anchored in the natural world. These texts, written in the first person, from the point of view of the ethnographer, focus on performance and experience as the sites of meaning.

Consider the following excerpts from an ongoing project (Denzin, 1999a, 1999b); I call them "Rock Creek Stories," or "Performing Montana, Part 2."

PERFORMING MONTANA, PART 2

In 1994, my wife and I bought a little piece of land four miles outside Red Lodge, Montana—population 1,875. We got an acre with a cabin on the river called Rock Creek and a big bluff of a rock outcropping behind the cabin. High above us towers Mount Maurice. Indian paint brush and lupine grow everywhere. In the summer, horses, elk, and deer graze in the valley above the road to our cabin. This is south central Montana, twenty miles from the Wyoming border, sixty-nine miles and 10,942 feet up and over the Beartooth Highway to Yellowstone Park.

Early June brings fields of yellow sunflowers. In an annual spring ritual, the upper ranges of the Beartooth and Absarokee mountains shed their white winter coats of snow. It is as if they were flexing their muscles, their craggy rocky seams burst apart, water running everywhere. This "flow of earth's own milk" (Rawlins, 1994, p. 394) creates raging, dark rivers. The Stillwater, Yellowstone, and our Rock Creek fill with melting snow and fallen trees, nature's debris. Winter's crystal clear water turns milky and brown. Flash flood alerts are issued for the lowlands.

Our little corner of Montana is a sacred place, a cabin along the river; this house of sky (Doig, 1978) is a place where wonderful things happen, and they happen when we perform them. Performing Montana allows us to bring a sacred self into place. We enact nature through the very act of walking in the forest, hiking along the river. Through the acts of perception and

participation, we create an embodied relationship to this natural world. In turn, all around me, nature enacts itself, showing me how to be one with her.

Rawlins (1994) puts it this way,

I could tell you about a place. . . . If you wakened there, you would hear a light wind, brushing downslope like a hand on a bare shoulder. . . . In the calm, a bird calls, is answered, calls again. . . . At the corner of your eye, a doe and fawn step into the meadow and lower their heads. (p. 389)

And, “somewhere lawless animals cross boundaries without a blink” (p. 395).

I watch in wonder as a huge mother moose teaches her young calves how to jump over a falling barbwire fence that is alongside the trout pool, next to the dam on the lower falls of Rock Creek. And the moose and her young navigate this human-shaped space, as if it were their own—this space where people from Montana, mostly men, have left their mark on the natural world.

Nelson (1983) reminds us that “A person moving through nature . . . is never truly alone” (p. 14). It is midday. I am knee-deep in the Soda Butte River, chasing a huge brown trout. Having crossed the line into Yellowstone National Park, I am more than a little nervous. I do not have a park-fishing permit. I turn back at the sound of a noise behind me. There, on a sandy spit of land reaching out into the river, stand four deer, a young buck, two smaller does, and a fawn. They are staring wide-eyed at me, as if I had invaded their home, walked into their back yard so to speak. Of course I had. And I left as quickly as possible. Later, like Senior (1997), I struggled to put words to the images of how to describe the “velvet-textured scent of the wild moss flowers” (p. 335) I brushed against as I looked back at the doe as she “spanked her fawn with a forehoof” (p. 335).

A photo sat on my grandfather’s dresser in his south-facing smallish bedroom in the 100-year-old farm house he shared with grandma and my brother and me. I have searched in vain for that photograph, a picture of grandpa in a white shirt, tie, grey fedora, Lincoln roadster parked alongside his campsite. He has a big grin on his face. I do not know who took the picture. He never told me, but I know it was not grandma, because she

never went to the park. He is holding a string of brown trout, maybe twenty of them. He told me stories about this trip to Yellowstone, how they drove by Old Faithful, how the fish were just there for the catching. The picture has been lost, but I seek today to place myself in it.

With Stegner (1980, p. 41), I have come to mountain waters late in my life, for I too am a child of the prairie. Growing up, I knew only flatlands, fields of green corn that reached to the edge of light blue, pink, and purple skies on hot Iowa July nights. I knew prairie waters, the muddy Iowa and Mississippi rivers in springtime, when the floods came. Creeks backed up over their borders. Bridges were washed out. You had to drive ten miles south before you found a road not covered with water.

We took no delight in these waters. Their sounds were the sounds of destruction, mother nature working her way across the flat Iowa farmlands, telling anyone who would listen that this was her territory, not ours. She filled basements with water, destroyed fences, floodgates, culverts, and bridges, and in her wake left muddied ditches lined with broken cornstalks, field tile, bed frames, tires, drowned pigs, and young birds.

So it was with pure delight when I first stepped outside our Montana cabin and looked upward, "where the land lifted in peaks and plunged in canyons, and [I] sniffed the air thin, spray-cooled, full of pine and spruce smells. I realized that if I climbed the point of rocks behind the cabin I could reach out and touch this five shades of blue, "improbable indigo sky" (Stegner, 1980, p. 42). I could smell the sage after the early morning dew and examine teardrops of moisture run off the petals of the blooming Indian Paintbrush in the side yard.

Like Stegner (1980), in that moment, I gave myself to this Montana place and dreamed myself back into my grandfather's photo. I walked to the river and felt its cold spray hit my face. I watched it thunder over the little falls past the water wheel up stream. I watched it run smooth and gold, and green and brown, and silver over and around the sunken rocks, and looked down-river where it smoothed out, before turning the bend under the bridge, racing once more to another set of falls, past fallen trees.

And when I returned in early spring the next year, I watched kayakers with helmets take to this river's whitewater, flying past

our cabin in a flash. Then I understood just how strong this river was. I was proud to stand on a stretch of her, before she combined again with the West Fork, to race across the valley and empty first into the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone, and finally into the Yellowstone herself outside Laurel, sixty miles north. And later, studying maps, I saw how the Yellowstone emptied into the Missouri, and the Missouri into the Mississippi, just as my little childhood Iowa creek flowed first into the Iowa River, and then, sixty miles away into the Mississippi. Rock Creek brought me back to my childhood, to my grandfather's photograph.

We must learn how to enact an enabling, interpretive ethnography that aspires to higher, sacred goals. We can scarcely afford to do otherwise. We are at a critical crossroad. "We simply cannot enter the twenty-first century at each other's throats" (West, 1994, p. 159). But with West, we must ask, "Do we have the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge" (West, 1994, p. 159)?

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NORMAN K. DENZIN is College of Communications scholar and research professor of communications, sociology, cinema studies, criticism and interpretive theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His most recent book is *Interpretive Ethnography* (Sage, 1997). He is editor of *The Sociological Quarterly*, and coeditor of *Qualitative Inquiry*.