

2007

Webbing Ring

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the Public Sphere

Ethnografeast III

'Ethnography and the Public Sphere/Ethnographie et Sphère Publique'

Lisbon, June 20-23, 2007

Centro de Estudos em Antropologia Social (Portugal),
Journal Ethnography/ University of California-Berkeley.



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On Fieldwork Blogging, Ethnography, and the Public Sphere

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The purpose of this short presentation is to share with you an experiment and an experience, in order to trigger a debate about making ethnography public online. In 2005 I was in Barcelona for a few months before the passing of the law that established equality in access to civil marriage for gays and lesbians. My purpose was to inquire into the terms of the public debate about 'gay marriage'. I met, interacted with and interviewed activists, politicians, academics, opinion makers in general, and couples who were considering the possibility of getting married. Instead of keeping a handwritten or computer-based journal, I decided to write my field notes in an open-access online blog. I called it *Webbing Ring*.

This was not, by any means, a first time in anthropology or ethnography in general. Although there are less ethnography blogs (Ethnoblogs? E-tnographies?) than one may think – and those that exist are written mainly by young researchers, typically doing their PhD Dissertation research – they are not uncommon. Most of them face at the

onset the same core decisions that I did. These concern such topics as the life span of the blog, access, ethics, the production of ethnography, public engagement, and others.

A fieldwork blog conveys a sense of immediacy: it is online for the duration of the fieldwork and authors tend to put them offline once fieldwork is over. Why is that? The answer for this is in the next section, on ethics. But, before going into that, I think that ethnographers seem to ‘shut down’ their blogs once fieldwork is over because they want to find a balance between this new mode of public *ethnographing*, and older modes of private fieldwork journal writing. Leaving a blog online (let us not go into the cache issue) would increase the chances of misuse of the information by others. But mostly, I think, it would radically change our notion of ‘research time’, a cultural template that says that knowledge is temporary, always under revision, and accountable for only if published (a book or a paper can ‘undo’ what a previous book or paper ‘did’; but somehow we feel that the same is not possible with unedited fieldnotes. Their ‘sincerity’ and ‘spontaneity’ seems to preclude ‘revision’).

Now, there are some serious ethical issues involved in fieldwork blogging. When you are jotting down notes in a journal or Word file you are keeping yourself within the private journal tradition: those are *your* notes, written for *yourself*. When, later on, you go back to them in order to find material to write up your paper or book, you can easily activate your ‘filters’ and the scientific community’s ‘filters’ so that ethical issues can be dealt with. Whereas when you are writing your field journal online – in an open access mode (I won’t go into the alternative: restricted access for colleagues or students or the community under study) – the ‘filters’ are constantly ‘on’. An interesting tension (or even contradiction) is thus established: that which you write online is already highly

self-censored; you are constantly (and in 'real time') making decisions about pseudonyms, about revelation and secrecy, about the flaws and mistakes of your methodological strategy, about your interpretive and theoretical hesitations and/or daring moves. You are exposing yourself and, therefore, you are also rhetorically controlling your self-presentation. At some points in time it seems that you are 'honestly' revealing yourself – in abidance to modern Western concepts of a concocted narrative of the self; but at others it seems as if you are constructing a representation that lacks the purported 'honesty of intimacy' that is believed to be inherent to private, handwritten field notes.

When you write a field journal online you are writing texts. There is no room for jotting down notes that make no sense for anyone but yourself. Whatever you write has to make sense, that is, you are communicating. And communication of this sort requires a common ground for understanding and interpretation, from language to narrative conventions. First and foremost, we have the basic structural issue of language. The private journal is usually written in one's native language. That is part of the sense of intimacy. The online journal's author is faced with a potential audience. This audience is universal by nature. Blogging – an activity I've been engaged in for four years now, and not specifically as an anthropologist – is, however, curiously national. Whether you're writing a journal for your friends and family or writing a political opinion blog, you have to choose a community of meaning. My own blog, *Os Tempos Que Correm*, is written in Portuguese. My field blog, *Webbing Ring*, was written in English. The reason is almost obvious: I was writing for anthropologists, therefore using the hegemonic lingua franca of the discipline, which is also the hegemonic lingua franca of the Internet. By choosing English I was, however, precluding the possibility of establishing a

community of meaning with the people I was doing fieldwork with – I would have had to have written in Catalan, or even Spanish, in order to have done so. So my community was the tribe of anthropology and the tribe of people interested in the issue of same-sex marriage.

This takes me to the above-mentioned common ground for interpretation, and the sharing of narrative conventions. Having no clear idea – at the beginning – about who my public would be, I had to imagine it. I knew that the people I had told about the blog would read it: colleagues, people I announced it to through my networks, and students. This helped me in establishing a convention of genre. The blog would be ethnographic and anthropological, of course. But since I announced its launching in my own general blog, I could infer that a good deal of my usual visitors would be redirected from there. That means that a significant percentage of visitors would be people with an interest in life politics and the politics of identity and, especially, people involved in LGBT rights in Portugal. This means that the construction of a community of understanding was closely tied to a public intervention agenda. In this case, an agenda for my political community of origin, not community of my fieldwork nor a generalized anthropological audience. I will come back to this. For now, I just want to stress this point: fieldwork journal blogging is inseparable from the construction of a social relationship with a network of potential readers. It is controllable up to a point – defined beforehand by the genre, language, self-presentation and purpose. It is relational and uncontrollable once the snowball effect of internet navigation and hypertextual blogging are on the move. This typically surfaces when readers start posting comments.

That is a crucial decision one has to make: should I turn on or off the comment

feature in my blog? If I turn it on, should I moderate comments or not? Allowing for comments means that you will accept people's opinions about what you write. In the case of a fieldwork blog that means that both your opinions and the ethnographic 'data' are open for discussion. That is: 'strangers' will opine about your field collaborators and about the events on the field that you (have decided to) report. The nature of your ethnographic reporting may thus change, because your views become permeated by intersubjectivity and 'debatability'...). I decided to take my chances and turn on the comments feature. I also decided not to moderate. This meant that people were free to post their comments without my refereeing. This seemed to me to be crucial. Otherwise the experiment would not have worked. Comments – as much as the publicity and the synchronicity of fieldwork blogging – are part of what makes the difference vis-a-vis private fieldwork journal writing. A series of other issues could be raised still: not everyone comments, so you do not really know who's out there; some people resort to nick names and anonymity; some people usurp other people's identities; it can get to the point where even *your* identity is usurped – for instance when someone uses your avatar and signs a comment with your name... At the end of the day you can – that was not my case, not because I did not mention the blog to my informants (I did) – interact with your field collaborators, placing the ethnography into a deeper level of intersubjective scrutiny (although the political economy of the Internet establishes hierarchies and inequalities regarding access, not to mention even more serious ones, like illiteracy).

So, online fieldwork journals can be seen as being somewhere between private note taking and the process of making sense of observation and experience – of making ethnography. They are already, in a way, a construction of meaning. First of all, because

others can participate and engage you in dialogue. But also, and that is the other point about narrative conventions, because you force yourself to write to an audience that you become to know as both fieldwork and blog progress. First of all, your ethical awareness grows as the days go by. You get to know better what and who you should or should not write about and in what terms. Blogging ethics (a sort of spontaneous on-going negotiation in the world of bloggers, with no real binding guidelines, as opposed to, say, anthropological ethics) state that no posts should be erased or edited once they've been posted. It is also useless, since readers may, anyway, have saved them, or they can be retrieved from the cache memory. This allows for your writing to be a constant makeover of previous writing sessions and posts, thus making your explanations of what's going on interpretations of what you've said previously – and corrections, and further information, and further comments...It also enhances accountability, which in the case of an ethnographic narrative is quite important.

This, however, has to do with a diachronic process: accumulation, revision, response to comments, correction, debate. It is ethnography as a process, not the revisitation of notes in a notebook (although that can be done too with a blog); it follows the logic of the arrow of time. There is, however, also a synchronic process that is characteristic of the internet and that goes by the well-known name of hypertext. This is crucial: writing online – whether fieldwork journals or anything else – is not just writing a text, but also potentially writing a hypertext. As a matter of fact, even if you do not want to use hypertextual features (such as links), someone else will do it for you: someone will link one of your posts in their blog, a third party will comment it, this will be then linked to other sites, and on, and on, in a process that won't stop and that builds up into a constellation. Hypertext may, therefore, result in the loss of authorial control. That is

why there is so much fantasizing about the ‘anti-authoritarian nature of the Net’ – because it allows for transcending authorship, it seems to be non-*authoritarian*.

Let me finish by going back to the very beginning – the topic of my research and how my experience with experimenting fieldwork blogging relates to it. When I decided to write in English I was deciding to brand the *Webbing Ring* as ‘anthropological’ (branding or labeling can also get out of hand – or at least out of the author’s hands: through the use of tags by readers who visit and link you, your text may be appropriated by logics of classification other than your own). This – the labeling as ‘anthropological’ – was a hidden statement about wanting to place myself somewhat outside my political involvement with the topic of research. I would have done otherwise today. I have been involved – and still am – with LGBT activism in Portugal and place myself in a segment of the movement that sees equal rights regarding marriage as the crucial issue for the emancipation of gays and lesbians in the present social conditions. So I had an ethical problem regarding my research that goes well beyond the question of keeping or not keeping a fieldwork blog. For the first time in my career I was clearly doing research about the same issue that I do public activism about. This has been a tremendous challenge. It has taught me a great deal about the issue at stake in this Ethnografeast conference – ethnography and the public sphere.

I have traditionally been doing a twofold work. On the one hand, researching and writing about gender, sexuality and sexual orientation from an anthropological point of view – one in which I often come to conclusions that are counterproductive for my political purposes or convictions, not to mention identity; on the other, I have been engaging in activism against homophobia and particularly for equal rights regarding

marriage in Portugal – an activity that, like any other political intervention in the public sphere, calls for a substantial amount of rhetorical tactics and even strategic essentialism... This has created some problems: of distance and proximity; and of critical inquiry versus political strategy. Fieldwork in Barcelona and the use of an open access fieldwork blog crucial in resolving this tension. The geographical and emotional distance allowed me to look into the dynamics of the public debate in Spain as a social process that could be described, systematized and analyzed with as much objectivity as possible. It has also taught me a lot, as an activist, about the terms of the debate, about arguments and rationales used, about the social and cultural embeddedness of political positions. But the fact that I chose to keep an open access fieldwork blog – with all the characteristics that I've outlined – helped me better understand what the public space is and how ethnography cannot escape it.

Let me finish with an entry from the Webbing Ring, dated April 20th, 2005:

“I've been thinking about this lately. Coincidentally, my partner raised this issue today while talking over the phone... So I feel that there's some explaining to do.

My research - or case study... - is at a turning point. I'm pretty much done with interviewing people who are active in the LGBT movement, political parties, and so on. I am now starting to interview couples who want (also some who do not want...) to get married. The former are "public" people, in the sense that they represent organizations; the latter are more "private" characters. I go to their homes; I get to know a lot of their biographies and current lives. This of course raises some ethical issues.

They are all aware that I am doing research that will be published. And they are all, in some way or another, people who either never hesitated in being interviewed for the media or people who believe that it is important to give their testimony. Of course they have their own boundaries between private and public and I respect that - they clearly say "don't mention this" or "this is off the record". I also ask them if they want anonymity. So far, so good. But the fact that I am publishing these posts on the Net is a bit different from publishing a paper or a book. I try to "censor" what I write here. I write "less" than I would if I were writing a paper or book. But I am aware that what a writer censors may be quite different from what the interviewees would like to have censored. When I was doing research in a small town in Southern Portugal years ago, I assumed that people wouldn't want me to talk about their sexuality, and so I censored a lot on that issue in my book. It turned out that they couldn't care less about it but were a bit shocked with my comments on economic issues and class and status positions....

Still, I believe that I am being fair in my posts. This is, of course, belief. Anthropological writing is constantly menaced by this problem. I will have to be more thorough about asking my interviewees whether they want to be mentioned at all in this blog. If any of them (if any of you...) is reading this now and feels that I should erase the post referring to you, please let me know and I will erase it immediately. Anyway this blog will be put off the Web as soon as my stay in Barcelona is over.”

I realize that this short and simple presentation may sound as echoing some of the debates about ethnographic writing in the Eighties – and that we now tend to think of as things of the past. I think, however, that the Internet and especially blogging constitute a new challenge for the relationship between ethnography and the public sphere – at least as much as they constitute a challenge to the common sense notion of a gap or distance or essential difference between the private and the public spheres. Ethnography can be a form of inquiry and a form of accounting (for) the world that will further democratize the public sphere. If it is ethnography about/of the silenced and invisible lives and issues of marginalized groups (whose marginality is reproduced through silencing and occultation), it can be a way of bringing them into the light of the public sphere. The medium and the mode of blogging may be a way of enhancing these possibilities.