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Writing an Ethnographic Story in Working toward Responsibly Unearthing Ontological Troubles

An ethnographic story entitled “Bus Passenger” opens my essay. This story is the data in a science and technology studies (STS) ethnographic project that reveals some of the ontological troubles that Aboriginal Australians need to negotiate on a day-to-day basis while living in a contemporary Australian city. Bus companies decree a normative category that standardizes the entity “Darwin bus passenger,” which Aboriginal Australians going about their everyday life experience as an ill-fitting category.

As a story, “Bus Passenger” is a decomposition of experience. It takes the tangled whole of experience and pulls on just one thread. The story is an abductive, whole-parts type of generalizing. Three comments follow the story in a form of qualification. Each comment speaks to a need for ethnographers undertaking such an ethnography of concepts to develop particular practices in learning to write such stories knowingly, in decomposing experience to generate ethnographic data. My first comment proposes that ethnographers need to learn to attend to ontological constitutions in reading and writing. In beginning to write a story, start by wondering how the figures of the author-in-the-text and the reader-in-the-text are being rendered as ethnographic knowers. In writing, be attentive to the places where author and reader participate and are co-configured.

Writing an ethnographic story involves negotiating two tricky passes. The second and third comments relate to these. In writing your story, how will you show that you recognize “physical stuff” as a lively participant in the situation you are describing? In learning to negotiate this “stuff” as a participant in collective action, you respect your inchoate experience but

resist the fallacy of experiential immediacy: the idea that objects and their knowers are given ontologically before experience. Writing an ethnographic story should express this.

Then in actually writing we need to be careful in deploying words as we (re)experience our inchoate experience of experience. Our stories are always *re*-presenting rather than representing. This re-presentation is making passage with words in composing an “experience-as-story” that keeps open myriad possibilities for mutual ontological co-constitutions of knowns and knowers in the resituating experience in interpretive writing and reading.

When your story hangs together well enough, you have inferentially assembled your data. In making something of your data, however, in presenting your story as a generalization that can intervene, you are only halfway there. Three further interpretive steps are necessary in order to complete your argument. The six steps of the protocol articulate epistemic practices of using ethnographic stories to intervene. I attend to the first three in this text.

BUS PASSENGER

Darwin's buses are an inexpensive way to travel. In my experience they are rarely less than half full, but on the other hand they are almost never crowded. They are comfortable without being luxurious, air-conditioned so that it is usually quite pleasant to step into a bus, the journey a brief respite from the tropical heat. The city is small and its suburbs are few. The buses move in and out of the tiny city center and circumnavigate both clockwise and counterclockwise. Many passengers who use the buses travel in groups, and they often hop on and off buses several times a day, circulating through Darwin's public places. The buses generally buzz with cheerful conversations and have a comfortable, homey feel. Few express buses run, and most buses halt at every stop along a route.

One week I traveled twice a day on the buses, moving along two routes during each journey to and from my office at the university. I find the life on buses interesting, and during this week several incidents occurred that I found disconcerting in the sense that they puzzled me. I felt a need to keep them with me so that I might turn them over, look for places to “get inside” them, so to speak. It seemed they were moments when some sort of undertow broke briefly through the surface banality—the very ordinary experience of traveling on a bus in a small Australian city.

It was a weekday, the start of the work and school day, and I was traveling away from the city center. At a stop some ten minutes into the journey, outside a Catholic secondary school, several children got off and quite a large group of neatly dressed Aboriginal women and children got on. A middle-aged woman paid the bus fares for the several younger women, all the while addressing the brood loudly in an Indigenous language I could not recognize. The children (who travel free on buses) bundled aboard, rushing to get their favorite places, their boisterous tumbling about calling forth shouted admonitions from the matriarch. As it happened, this was the only day that my bus ride featured the presence of transit officers, and one of the officers took exception to this behavior.

According to a government-maintained website, a transit officer can do any of the following:

- Direct a person engaged in unacceptable and antisocial behavior to leave a bus, interchange or bus stops
- Remove a person from a bus, bus stop or interchange
- Ask for a person's name, address, or date of birth if the officer reasonably believes the person may have committed an offense or they can assist in the investigation of an offense
- Direct a person to comply with the rules of behavior on a bus
- Require a person to get off a bus, keep away from a bus station, and use reasonable force if necessary
- Issue on-the-spot fines
- Arrest and detain a person (without warrant) where the officer believes on reasonable grounds the person has committed an offence warranting arrest
- Search and seize dangerous articles from an arrested person¹

Upon boarding the bus several stops earlier, the transit officers had positioned themselves deliberately. One officer stood near the back door, and a second, a younger and fitter man, stationed himself in the narrow passage that all passengers (bar those who occupy the very front row) must move through to take a seat. The narrowness of this passage meant that those boarding must squeeze themselves past the officer. His position made it easy for him to block passage. The discomfort of passengers joining the bus in these circumstances was obvious, the exception being some children who bent low, put their heads down, and charged. It was this behavior that had provoked loud shouts from the woman paying the fares for her adult family members.

She was still fumbling with her coins, the line of tickets she had purchased fluttering from her hand, as she turned from the driver to pass into the bus. The transit officer shifted his position to confront her, uncomfortably close, preventing her passage. She concentrated on getting the coins into her purse. Very loudly, exceeding the volume of the woman's shout at her brood but with a quite different tone and speaking English, the transit officer barked, "When you board a bus you *must* behave like a bus passenger!"

The bus fell silent; the driver seemed to still the engine. The woman looked at the officer squarely, unmoving and calm. "Yes, *sir*," she said loudly into the silence. Several passengers sitting nearby burst out laughing at her deadpan performance with its perfect comic timing. "Passengers *do not* shout!" he shouted, somewhat lamely, as he stepped aside, with as much ceremony and dignity as he could muster, to let her pass. He was still glowering minutes later.

I was one of the passengers who had chuckled out loud, yet in addition to the amusement expressed in this involuntary act, I felt both offended and puzzled by the episode. It was a tense moment, punctured by comedy and unexpected collective laughter. Was the transit officer behaving in a racist manner? Yes, that and more. He had silently harassed all boarding passengers, succeeding in making his intimidating presence felt all through the bus. That some smaller children clearly had a well-established routine for evading his methods suggested this was not a new experience. And it was clear that the matriarch was no less experienced in dealing with racist transit officers than with boisterous grandchildren. Along with everyone else on the bus I knew that public transport governance had happened; that we all noticed it actually attests to it being a failure of mundane governance. Of course the pain of the experience of racism embedded in this happening of governance was felt by each of the bus passengers, although it differed markedly in degree. And of course others would likely tell the story of the event quite differently. My motivation in telling this story is to (re)enact a happening of governance in order to articulate a situated truth of governance.

Walking across the university campus, from the bus stop to my office, I re-experienced delight in my copassenger's performance; the collective laugh became my start in feeling my way toward a story. *Story*, like its cousin *history*, originates in the ancient Greek idea that narrative as a form of knowing, when wisely deployed, "outs" something, brings something hidden to the surface. My ethnographic story "outs" a happening of the present.

I am almost certain that in the course of reading my story most of you did not concern yourselves with how you as a reader were being ontologically constituted in the text, and that you took my ethnographic story as being about certain designated things: buses and shouts, Indigenous Australian languages and small children, women and tickets, laughter and discomfort, racism. Along with those things, no doubt you assumed the “I” in the text to be ontologically constituted as a sensible individual who experienced those named things through seeing and hearing—a sort of natural knowing subject who is familiar with those real things as given parts of a knowable world. This is not the reading of a trained ethnographer.

In the default reading the ethnographer becomes a duality: the “I in the flesh” ineluctably distinct from, and set against, the “‘I’ in the text.”² That sort of reading takes the story as a representation, a picture that claims to mimetically represent a situation “out-there.” That reading might indeed be appropriate were you a reader of a social science text that aimed to represent in order to generalize inductively. But this is not my purpose. A generalization is enacted here, but it is not inductive. A different sort of generalization is made here, and I say more about that in my next paragraph. But beware, for making this different sort of generalization is just the start of a quite different set of epistemic practices than those associated with induction.

We might imagine the general human experience of racism as a vague whole, distributed in time and space, or better, as coming to life again and again, repetitively yet subtly distinct in myriad time-places. Each and every experience of racism is a part of the vague, ramifying whole. The story I tell adduces, or brings to the fore, just one tiny part of that vague whole. We could say the story adductively generalizes, but it is more usual to use a slightly different prefix and say that it *abducts*.

Part of learning to generalize abductively is learning how to read differently. Reading my story, I ask you to experience the story differently as you read. I invite you to identify as my specified reader-in-the-text and, like the writer, to ontologically reconstitute yourself. As writer I am committed to becoming a complex, distributed, extended figure—the ethnographic knower. I announce my narrator in the text as coming to life as an extension, as an externalized wordy protrusion inseparable from the narrator in the flesh, albeit taking a radically different form. I am not making the absurd claim that no difference exists between a figure embodied as a walking,

talking author and a wordy author-in-the-text. The claim is that as a continuum the figures constitute a singular participant in the collective action of ethnographic knowing. It is a claim made within epistemology—the study of how we can know we know—a claim about epistemic practice in ethnographic empiricism. I urge you to consider this bothersome work of learning to be a different sort of reader as necessary method work in order that we might recognize first-person experience empirics as epistemic practices.

Our ethnographic knowers here are equally the author-in-the-text and the reader-in-the-text.

Part of what I hope to achieve with this section is to urge you, dear reader-in-the-flesh, to consider how you constitute yourself as reader-in-the-text. I am asking you to attend to the ontological happening of yourself as reader-in-the-text. I am proposing the “I” of ethnographic empiricism as a singular particular knower constituted in the circuit of collective action—passing from an inchoate experience you have had to the composition of “an experience” in wording a story or in inferentially cognizing a story you have read. This “I the ethnographic knower” is like all other knowers (human and nonhuman) in that knowing necessarily expresses the tensions between realness experienced as “a happening to” in a particular here and now, and realness experienced in some “expressive outcome” of being in a here and now. That could be a definition of participation.

Focusing on this work brings to light a further concern in the practice of ontological constitution: the conventional formulation has that “I in the flesh” immediately experiencing buses and shouts, women and children as such: as things. Writing an ethnographic story as I articulate it here refuses the easy assumption that named things are immediately knowable as what they are. Significant ineluctable and unavoidable ontological work connects with words: buses as experienced and buses designated as buses. In their methods practices ethnographers need to explicitly and knowingly do this work. But more, they must recognize that the ontological constitution of entities—the knowers and knowns that will emerge in their story—that emerges is just one possibility among many. Good abductive ethnographic stories invite readers to do it differently.

“PHYSICAL STUFF” AS A LIVELY PARTICIPANT IN ETHNOGRAPHY

We find puzzling certain things about the process of experiencing. This is because we are not puzzled enough by the actuality that it is possible to have and to story experiences.³ That is my maxim for this set of practices

in negotiating the first tricky section in the passage from inchoate experience to a written ethnographic story.

I start by asking you to imagine a little old lady, the embodied me, ethnographic storyteller in the flesh, there in a bus, the journey happening to me and around me. Gazing out of the window most of the time, a chuckle my sole utterance during the journey. Imagining yourself into that body, you will understand that it was experience itself that was actually experienced by that embodied narrator.⁴ She will later expand her experience of the experience of being a bus passenger by experiencing the wording of experience as she writes the story you have just read. That wordy re-experience of the experience of being a bus passenger is the focus of my next section. Here we imagine experience as a particular little old lady on a particular bus.

The inchoate, sensed beingness of sitting on a comfortable enough seat among others and being surprised when amusement erupts as noise from my throat was experience that happened to the embodied me. Recognizing physical stuff as a participant in the collective action starts by lingering in the journey as an inchoate experience of experience. I did not exit my experience of the journey when I exited the bus. The journey stayed in me and I in it; I played with my experience in my imagination, mostly trying to picture what had happened and when and how things were arrayed with respect to each other in the sequence of happenings, in order to identify some of the significant relations enacted in the event. I kept coming back to the collective laugh, my out-loud chuckle, instantaneous, not something that arose from thought or words. Knowing that the collective laugh happened was at the time simultaneously a knowing that racially inflected governance had happened and that it had been resisted and subverted. Recognizing that I had been moved by the collective action of this bus journey as a performance with a cast consisting of both nonhumans and humans, I delayed as I walked through the lush vegetation of a tropical university campus; literally I tarried in the twain of staying/leaving inchoate, sensed, non-inferential knowing in (re-)experiencing experience.

This, my second set of practices, is more specific than the first set I sensitized you to. The beginning lies in recognizing that the ontological constitution of things that happen in a here-and-now is unknowably complex. The possibility for storying a happening begins by a delay in the experience as such. This delay has the ethnographic knower partially refusing the convention of empiricism. Orthodox “immediate empiricism” has truth about things as knowable “straight away” and without any conceptual

mediation. Refusing this proposition, the ethnographic knower of my story accepts knowing that we know can be immediate: in experiencing experience as such, merely that I know is immediately knowable.⁵ Conceptually, the ethnographic knower cannot know immediately precisely what she knows, or how she knows she knows. These are epistemic matters and lie on the other side of words and require conceptual mediation in inference.

DEPLOYED WORDS EFFECT THE RE-EXPERIENCE OF INCHOATE EXPERIENCE

So, how to carefully stop delaying in an inchoate experience of experience and start writing a story? In this process inchoate experience will become “an experience” and be forever changed as words strung together work like a palimpsest in the experience of experience—setting it in form. My habit in starting is to find someone who will be interested enough to listen to me tell a story. Not that I announce it as a first version of what will become an ethnographic story, although those who are my familiars by now often realize that they are being “used” as co-ethnographic knowers when they find themselves enduring yet another of Helen’s tales. In the case of the story I tell here it was a young colleague in the Northern Institute who endured the first version of this story. She showed interest, was suitably outraged at the officer’s behavior, and managed to politely change the subject by sympathizing about my undertaking long bus journeys in order to travel the short distance between the university and the city center. Of course, the story did not have the form it has now, but the disconcerting laugh as climax was there.

To dramatize what is at stake in this cluster of practices, I again ask my readers to imagine. Two women feature in my story, the narrator and the accomplished comic as the subject of the story, the latter an Indigenous woman speaking mostly in her first language except when she spoke two English words to great effect. She, along with her group, got off the bus a few stops down the road, and I imagined her and her companions heartily enjoying the moment again in their conversation. I have told my story in English, which designates distinct spatiotemporal entities that act in space and time. The entities designated in Australian Indigenous languages are quite other than those in English and are articulated as enacting quite different forms of being.⁶ My reason for imagining this conversation is to remind you that the story could be told in infinitely many ways, including (of course, quite differently) in English. Imagine for example how the transit officers would word their English story; a very different story than I have

told would ensue. The point is that there is no way to decide on “the truth” of one version or another. Each story is its own passage through the treacherous fog that separates wordlessness from wordiness.

Let me focus on that passage. To tell a story is itself an experience, and I propose it is the experience of negotiating an *aporia*. In this section I attempt to articulate what I know from feeling my way with this experience as I subject myself to its happening. I use words to express the rigors and difficulties of attempting to inhabit an a-wordy experience of experience while dwelling among words that at any and every moment threaten to drown that minimal and hard-won experiential capacity to be outside words. In composing I feel myself carefully selecting a way to proceed that will avoid inadvertently opening floodgates and finding myself carried off on currents that take me to places—topics of analysis—that I wish to evade.

It may be that you are unfamiliar with the term *aporia*, and perhaps, too, with the experience of negotiating *aporia* of the sort I describe in the previous paragraph. Coming to terms with the term while feeling your way into the experience I am gesturing at in writing *aporia*, is the imagining I am asking of you here. The etymology of *aporia* takes us back to stories of ancient Greek gods.⁷ The figure who is the subject of those stories is Poros, said nowadays to be “the God of expediency,” so a-*poria* is the state of not being able to work out what is expedient in this here-and-now. As I use the term here, *aporia* is being in a quandary about which word to use in order to effect a story that somehow plumbs the depths of what that experience means when it come to this analytic purpose.

Why is *aporia* a good term here, in telling this story about wording a story? What makes *aporia* useful for me is that in those old stories about Greek gods, Poros’s mother, Metis, was a Titan known for cunning and wisdom. For me Poros and Metis provide an indissoluble link between journey, transition, crossing, resourcefulness, expediency. Here we are concerned with passage tracked across a chaotic expanse. A porotic way is never traced in advance; it can always be obliterated before one’s eyes, and each time it must be traced anew in unprecedented fashion. In infernal chaotic confusion—in my case the infernal excess of words—the poros is the way out, the stratagem that allows escape from the always threatening impasse, associated always with an attendant anxiety. Effecting passage here—getting a story just so, after much redrafting—is not purification; the mess of the experience as experience is not left behind. It is there in the story, embedded in the strategies, the *techne* of the wordsmithing.

The story is an abductive generalization; it articulates a part of a vague whole, the world of public transport. But what comes next is contingent. In interpretation it could be used in generating an explanatory account, for example in mobilizing an actor-network theory account, revealing what it would take for an advocacy organization to challenge the bus company's ontological standard bus passenger. This would tell of actor-nets and their network strengths, showing how a particular society is assembled in a sociology of translation.⁸ Another way to use the story would be to juxtapose it with another that I could tell involving a well-dressed German tourist, a woman about the same age as my Aboriginal copassenger. This would be to enact a social constructivist framing such as Strathern uses in reifying the object of ethnographic knowledge, juxtaposing a story of Hagen men displaying shells and pigs with a glimpse of the "retreating back" of her companion "humped with a netbag full of tubers, digging stick clasped over her head, a steep path in front of her, hurrying home."⁹ The way I hope to use this story is neither of those. Rather, I hope to use the data that is the story in an interpretation that can intervene. The plan is to assemble many such situated truth claims in order to unearth a glimpse of the ontological work that "others" must do to enact difference in modernity.

PROTOCOL

- During fieldwork, cultivate a sensitivity to disconcerting happenings.
- When such a happening stays with you, compose a story of the experience orally and tell that story to a friendly listener.
- Write the story up as an ethnographic vignette, with the disconcertment (in my example the involuntary uttering of a chuckle) as the story's climax. In writing your ethnographic story attend to the three practices I elaborate below. When your story is complete you will have completed the first decomposing element of ethnographic analysis and assembled your data.
- To go beyond what I attend to in my text and put the data to work in making something of your story, first settle on the concept your story turns on. Perhaps you will need to rework your story when you have this.
- Identify the institutional or cultural milieu your story speaks to.
- Be explicit about your metaphysical assumptions; these will determine whether you make a universalizing, relativizing, or situating

knowledge claim about the salience of the happening that your story presents to the institutional or cultural milieu. (I usually write towards making a situated knowledge claim, although it is possible to write a story that can do both relativizing and situating epistemic work (see Winthereik and Verran 2012.)

NOTES

1. Northern Territory Government of Australia, “Transit Officers,” last updated June 16, 2020, originally accessed October 8, 2018, <https://nt.gov.au/driving/public-transport-cycling/bus-information,-safety-and-alerts/transit-officers/>.

2. This is the dualistic self of the autobiographical philosopher in the Western tradition (see Wright 2006). Here “an Outer, rhetorical self, the literary, social, and/or psychological ego represented in texts as the source of one’s identity [and authority]” (Wright 2006, 9), is set against an inner “self as referent of particular statements and actions, an internal (Inner) perspective of the self as active creator of one’s statements and actions” (5). These two given or found entities, which are metaphysical commitments of such a philosopher, are separated by a “chasm [that] never collapses completely” (9).

3. Wittgenstein (1953). This is a misquote of “We find certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough” (212e).

4. See Dewey (1905). Dewey acknowledged that this claim that we experience seems “insignificant and chillingly disappointing . . . [in that it] just comes down to the truism that experience is experience, or is what it is” (399).

5. This claim is the one that Wittgenstein is making in the section of *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) from which I derive my maxim.

6. See Verran, the Yirrkala Yolngu Community, and Chambers (1989).

7. Sarah Kofman’s “Beyond Aporia?” (1988) is my inspiration here. She takes Plato to task for leaving Metis out of the story of Poros, thus rendering philosophy as pure.

8. See Latour (2015).

9. See Strathern (1999), esp. 13 and 19.