Articles

Ethnography and *An* Ethnography in the Human Conversation

Huon Wardle *St. Andrew's University, U.K.*
Paloma Gay y Blasco *St. Andrew's University, U.K.*

Abstract: What transforms the process of ethnography endowing it with its thing-like, modal character as an ethnography? This article examines how ethnography becomes an ethnography on the one hand, through the manipulation of descriptive and analytical diversity and, on the other, by way of the ambiguation (and disambiguation) of authorial agency. The purification of ethnography as an ethnography mimics some of the effects of the scientific laboratory while introducing new complications.

Keywords: ethnography, an ethnography, diversity, ambiguating authorship

Résumé : Qu'est-ce qui transforme le processus de l'ethnographie pour lui conférer un caractère modal, objectal, en tant qu'une ethnographie. Cet article examine comment l'ethnographie devient une ethnographie d'un côté, par la manipulation de la diversité descriptive et analytique et de l'autre, en passant par l'ambiguïsation (et la désambiguïsation) du rôle de l'auteur. La purification de l'ethnographie en une ethnographie imite certains des effets du laboratoire scientifique tout en introduisant de nouvelles complications.

Mots-clés : ethnographie, une ethnographie, diversité, ambiguïsation du rôle de l'auteur

In the 20th century, the ethnography introduced a mode of showing characteristics of sociocultural difference comparable to Boyle's success in making visible properties of a vacuum with his air pump in the 17th (Schaffer and Shapin 1985; Latour 1993). If the last 50 years of debate have taught us not to confuse the imaginative and analytical world of an ethnography with a concrete entity, "society," we are still learning how to build conceptual frames for other modes of human possibility. As Overing (1985) puts it, the most difficult intellectual terrain lies between relegating the others' knowledge to nonsense or elevating it to poetry. Indeed, we are still catching up with many of the constructional features of how the ethnography itself works as a form of knowledge.

Central to the 1980s reappraisal of ethnography was the task of making apparent ethnography's novelistic-literary-rhetorical scaffolding (Thornton 1992). However, the *Writing Culture* intervention opened the door to other intellectual concerns too, particularly regarding the "complexity and scale" of ethnography as a form of knowledge (Strathern 1995). And recognition of the force of these distinct critiques is gathering pace as we debate what an ethnography is not. As we argue here, an ethnography is not, for instance, simply the empirical-holistic analysis of how individuals constitute parts of a specified social whole (Strathern 1992). Nor is it merely another kind of novelistic or fictional representation (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007, Narayan 2008). At the same time, Marcus has recently suggested that we should

> take the emphasis off the monograph as we have known it. Monographs are more interesting as symptoms or indices of transformation and change. The form is bound to change further, perhaps even go out of existence, given the present contexts of publishing and new information technologies. [in Rabinow et al. 2008:97]

Hence, current ideas about what ethnography is, what *an* ethnography is, have departed from the image of

ethnography as a book to be read. But there clearly remains an expectation that, as Rabinow argues, the ethnography should continue to be understood as an "exemplar"; an instance or "case" to which "casuistic" reasoning can be applied (Rabinow et al. 2008:102).

When we wrote *How to Read Ethnography* (2007) we did not explicitly distinguish between ethnography and *an* ethnography. Our aim here, by contrast, is precisely to draw attention to that distinction. We consider that recent debates and revisions entitle (and should encourage) anthropologists to ask the question anew: what is *an* ethnography? What transforms the process of ethnography endowing it with its thing-like, modal character as *an* ethnography? What is the ethnographic case expected to achieve when distinguished from the practices out of which it emerges? And how do we, as anthropologists, and others outside the field, recognize and evaluate the effects and achievements of *an* ethnography as opposed to ethnography-as-process? Rather than limiting ourselves to particular sub-genres of ethnography or recent examples, we deliberately explore instances that span the history of ethnographic reportage.

Aspects of the Scale and Coordination of An Ethnography Versus Ethnography

Given that our primary concern is to explore the point of transition between ethnography and *an* ethnography, it is immediately necessary to acknowledge the great divergence, particularly in terms of scale, concerning what may be considered an ethnography. An ethnography can be a small, rough-hewn conversationally framed instance, or it can be a 400 page, finely tuned elaboration. Likewise, an ethnography, as developed by anthropologists, has powers of condensation and expansion that are rather striking, to say the least, when compared to the standards of representativeness expected elsewhere in social science. And, if you read many ethnographies, then one ethnography can appear initially to have little more than a vague family resemblance to another. We argue otherwise though; there exist common intellectual problems to forming an ethnography that are relatively independent of the overtly diverging styles of ethnography (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007).

Our contention is that ethnographies are considered successful, and indeed are able to dent anthropological and interdisciplinary consciousnesses, when they manage to create convincing thought experiments—self-sustaining reticulated imagined time-spaces in which alternative human possibilities are explored analytically. This is not to say that ethnographies do not depend on and establish true knowledge, evidence, fact; rather, that ethnography is premised on a characteristic mode of reasoning. This mode, built from comparative and relational patterning gives ethnography its distinctiveness and its power—the power to provoke and to liberate our conversation about human possibilities from routinized common knowledge. In order to be acknowledged as ethnographic, however, this comparative and relational reasoning has to be moulded by certain recognizable organizational techniques, particularly by well-established conventions of spatio-temporal abstraction and presentation that run across distinctions of school and style within our discipline. The conventions deployed by ethnographers have been intensified over time by distinction to other social science approaches and many features have achieved a taken-for-granted or implicit status. These parameters are accepted by readers because of assumptions they hold about the answerability of the ethnographer for her knowledge.

The idea that ethnography has conventionalized spatio-temporal limits should hardly come as a surprise—every undergraduate is taught about the synchronic move that initiated modern socio-cultural anthropology as a way of analyzing social life. More recently we have recognized the importance of the island analogy—society is like an island—as having had profound significance in how ethnography acquired its distinctiveness as a mode of reasoning (Kuklick 1996). At its loosest, ethnography is the analysis of the social and cultural life of an aggregate of people as if their interactions and communications were coordinated along logical, or at least quasi-logical, lines (Firth 1951:2). By setting "self-imposed" boundaries around, or localizing the space and time of, the social arena, ethnography achieves a certain degree of separation or abstraction from the outflow of human relations (Candea 2007). The metaphors used by two radically different thinkers, Gellner and Strathern, come together on this point: Gellner talks of ethnography in terms of a "balance sheet," Strathern uses the analogy of ethnography as a "hologram" (Gellner 1987:125; Strathern 1991). Of course there are very trenchant differences of emphasis here but in both cases the suggestion is of a reticulated form that has both spatial and temporal coherence; specifically, a hologram is a process of assessment combined as a single moment, as is a balance-sheet.

Concern about how ethnography confuses its intellectual constraints with the social reality it studies runs right through the relatively short history of the discipline. Probably the first significant statement of the problem comes in Gregory Bateson's 1936 ethnography *Naven* (anti-ethnography might be a better term). Bateson's overriding concern is to make apparent—borrowing Whitehead's phrase—the "fallacy of misplaced concrete-

ness" involved in conflating ethnography as an intellectual apparatus with society understood as a functioning entity (Bateson 1958:263; Wardle 1999). It is significant in this regard that Firth (surely one of the strongest functionalist contributors to the image of society as analogous to an island) came quite rapidly to assert the purely heuristic character of "society":

> Social scientists are usually said to study a society, a community, a culture. This is not what they observe. The material for their observation is human activity. They do not even observe social relationships; they infer them from physical acts. The anthropologist as observer is a moving point in a flow of activity. [1951:22]

Leach picks up this critique (largely without acknowledging Bateson's contribution) in *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954). Closer to the present, Strathern's jettisoning of the term "society" draws explicitly on Leach (Strathern 1990).

What we have learnt, then, is that we do not need a concrete doppelganger, "society" or "culture," to exist for ethnography to do its work conceptually. And, by and large, the story we can tell in this regard is one of increasing de-concretization and sophistication: when constructing ethnographies anthropologists are no longer dependent on measuring up to the image of a "small-scale" society (whatever that is). They can work within the schematic constraints of an ethnography without having to claim that wider fields of relations do not exist or are irrelevant. Significantly, an ethnography can be expanded or contracted, in terms of detail and analysis, without it ceasing to be the same object.

Again, it is noteworthy that one strand of the postmodern critique involved contrasting the fact of global movement with the "sedentarist metaphysics" that underpinned ethnographic knowledge (Clifford 1998; Malkki 1992). In the long term, it transpires that "movement" and "the global" do not necessarily pose the kind of threat to ethnography that these arguments presupposed (Cook et al. 2009; Mintz 1998; Tsing 2005). Having unlocked ethnography from its concern with the small-scale we are able, for instance, to envisage what might have seemed paradoxical not long ago, namely, "ethnographies of cosmopolitanism" (Wardle 2000, 2010).

A further step is to recognize that the insights ethnography creates correspond to the limits which define it. Take Evans-Pritchard's famous aperçu that Nuer are "fortunate" because they have no concept equivalent to "time" as we understand it (1940:103). Or Kwon's recognition that Vietnamese villagers, in their treatment of victims of massacre, are caught between two ways of understanding death and the dead (2006). Or Barth's point that the "netboss" status on a Norwegian fishing boat is a facet of the hierarchical interaction of skipper and crew (1966:8-9). In all these cases, the important central insight cannot take form without the holographic or balance-sheet reticulation within which it is, so to speak, trapped. In the case of the Nuer, the absence of "time" takes on positive meaning in so far as it intersects with the cattle ideal, the agnatic principle, territorial politics and generational differences. Geertz has commented on the "Euclidean look" (1988:67)—the use of geometric devices and other features—that makes the Nuer exemplary. But, with hindsight, the issues of style he emphasizes are significant but not sufficient: other ethnographies with quite radically distinct stylistics and understandings of evidence and truth do their intellectual work in a fundamentally similar way to *The Nuer*. We may, perhaps, have to accept, instead, that *The Nuer* looks Euclidean because there are Euclidean assumptions behind it.

In sum we argue that, however it is conceptualized, as a hologram or a balance sheet, the ethnographic end-product depends for its achievement on the deployment of a definable range of tools. We explored the conventions of ethnography extensively in our previous intervention (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007). However, in this article, in the light of our central concern, we focus attention on two techniques in particular. We examine how the transposition of experiential open-ness into argumentative closure becomes recognizably ethnographic, on the one hand, through the manipulation of diversity in description and analysis and, on the other, by way of the ambiguation (and disambiguation) of authorial agency. These two intellectual operations are essential in moulding and in directing the comparative and relational thrust of an ethnographic text: they do not reduce its value as true knowledge, but they give ethnographic knowledge a rather particular shape. And, as we suggest later, these features can only become more salient as the blurring of boundaries and speeding up of communication between field and academy intensifies.

The Status of Diversity in the Pattern of an Ethnography

One point of view from which to grasp how ethnography acquires its pattern as a knowledge-form is in terms of the treatment of diversity in an ethnography: certain materials are counted as integral, others constitute diversity within the world of the ethnography. It is important to emphasize that we are not referring here to the characteristically mid-20th-century focus on establishing social norms—shared rules of the group. Many latterday

anthropologists would reject the notion that there are concrete social norms on the same grounds that they would deny the concreteness of society. However, this still leaves a question concerning the intellectual treatment of ethnographic diversity. Ethnography is built on fieldwork and the experience of fieldwork is, of course, inherently diverse in its potential.

Given that the decision to "end" fieldwork is to varying degrees an arbitrary one, the experience of diversity during fieldwork is characteristically open-ended. Arguably, it is only the construction of an ethnography that carries the experience of diversity toward closure and gives it a revised meaning. That is to say, the many human encounters the ethnographer is exposed to during fieldwork, with their unlimited variety and subtlety of tone of voice, verbal imagery, behaviour and gesture, emotional interest and aversion, could lead to a Babel of different kinds of contextualization and analysis. That they do not is because ethnographers tend to apply a relatively limited set of questions and concepts to their material—questions and concepts that have emerged during the development of the discipline and which have enduring significance. This does not solve the problem that any integration of ethnographic material throws up forms of diversity corresponding to the questions being asked. Instead, that which is acknowledged as diverse comes to have integral significance in the construction of the self-contained world of the ethnography vis-à-vis the theoretical questions directed at it.

In an ethnography (as opposed to this open-ended diversity of fieldwork experience), diversity takes on its meaning in a balance with processes of intellectual integration created by the need for a clear framing of anthropological questions. Take the following example from Monica Hunter's analysis of relationships between Bantu farmworkers and white farmers in South Africa:

> Relations between servants and employers vary considerably. On some farms the personal relationship is very friendly, servants and employers having known each other for long, and getting on well together. Sometimes the farmer takes an interest in his people's school, attending concerts, and occasionally contributing to the teacher's salary. Some farmer's wives make wedding cakes when a son or daughter of the farm marries; some are brought gifts of green maize and other fresh produce grown by their servants' wives. On other farms there is mutual irritation and fear. One employer told the writer that he never went near the servants' huts without a revolver; another said: "I think sometimes that we are cutting our own throats by stopping beer drinks. If they (Bantu servants) had them they would kill each other. As it is now they are increasing, and will come and kill us." [Hunter 1937:397]

The cautiousness with which Hunter approaches her analysis ("some ... sometimes ... some ... On other farms") goes with the fact that she is approaching a new kind of subject matter. While by the late 1930s, a substantial amount had been written on "traditional" Bantu social life, relatively little had yet been published on the lives of people, displaced by colonialism, who were working on European-owned farms. Hunter is careful not to assume that there is a common cultural framework that all farms share. On the contrary, the farm situation holds the potential for profound mutual misunderstanding and violence. This does not stop her from drawing her essay to a close with a generalizing statement: "in spite of extreme poverty and severe restrictions upon his liberty, the African farmhand yet manages to preserve his self-respect and to enjoy the company of his neighbours" (1937:404). The emphasis on diversity here indirectly serves the purpose of demonstrating the totalizing context of poverty and loss of liberty for Bantu workers.

By contrast, we can explore the balancing of diversity and context by looking at a recent investigation by Latour (1996) of French technology and technologists. Latour's ethnography, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, is focused not on a single culture but on a project, the unfulfilled attempt during the 1980s to bring into being a new automated transport system, "Aramis," for Paris. Latour examines Aramis by moving between the perspectives of the interested parties—technicians, politicians economists and others—each with their own priorities and imaginings of the future. He also includes Aramis' perspective as a fictional counter-voice, destabilizing the truth claims of the others. The style of presentation is playful and jerky with radically divergent perspectives shown by the use of distinct type-faces and other visual and authorial tricks. Each group, though focused on an apparently shared project, vaunts its own framing of reality, at certain points attempting to displace the reality assertions of the others, at others, making compromises in order to sustain its own vision as the project moves toward realization.

> Was I obliged to leave reality behind in order to inject a bit of emotion and poetry into austere subjects? On the contrary, I wanted to come close enough to reality so that scientific worlds could become once again what they had been: possible worlds in conflict that move and shape one another. Did I have to take certain liberties with reality? None whatsoever. But I had to restore freedom to all the realities involved before any

> of them could succeed in unifying the others. [Latour 1996:ix]

Latour wishes to show intermingling realities and partial solutions. He describes diverse possible worlds converging within a single unrealized project. But perhaps the distinctness of approach from Hunter's is not as great as it seems. In Latour's work, the diversities of these "scientific worlds" with their differently combined elements—including ideas about the future—are best understood once framed within the totality of the project that brings them together. Latour asks the reader to relativize the claims made by the occupants of one or other "world," to avoid giving validity to one worldview, to pay attention to the competition between realities that brings these worlds together. In other words, here are standard ethnographic techniques answering a new question. Latour argues that the world versions of the different actors are malleable and emergent—poor performance will lead to failure in the everyday.

Two points are worth emphasizing here. The first is that, with hindsight, Latour's deployment of diversity as a signifier may be considered more sophisticated than Hunter's because it is not dependent on a normative idea of "society." But, nonetheless, "diversity" works in a fundamentally similar way in his text in terms of what it contributes to the construction of the ethnography. The second point may be more contentious: a logical consequence of recognizing diversity as one signifier amongst others is to expose the fallacy that by increasing the amount of analysis given over to acknowledging "diversity" in the ethnography we are increasing the "realism" of the ethnographic account (ethnographic knowledge is not "realistic" in that sense). A comment of Gellner's is relevant here:

> If we invent rapidly changing concepts to cope with changing societies, or contradictory concepts to cope with societies in conflict, we may find ourselves with an unmanageable language, but we shall still not be able to be sure that the concepts change or internally conflict in just the way that the society is changing or conflicting. [Gellner 1987:97]

Leaving aside the meaning of "societies" in this quote, Gellner's comment concerning the potential unmanageability of language is apropos in the following sense: as is the case when we recognize the "complexity" of a situation, the assignment of a value to diversity is essentially a stage in the process of comprehension, not a property of what is observed in itself.

The result then is that the expression of diversity—those elements which are acknowledged as diverse as opposed to congruent—has particular work to do in the formation of the ethnography. What we need to recognize is that particular organizations of diversity make specific positive contributions to the relative closure of ethnography as it emerges into the form that we recognize as an ethnographic world, an ethnography. Having said this, suspicions we may have about highly formalized ethnography—ethnography that minimizes the relevance of acknowledging diversity—are probably well-founded. The more that divergent conceptions, alternative levels of logical analysis, or inconvenient types of information are excluded from the world of an ethnography, the more we may feel, as its audience, that we are witnessing a doctrine in the making, rather than a contribution to anthropological dialogue and critical debate (Gellner 1987:43).

Can there be a generalizable rule of adequacy for how diversity is treated in an ethnography? It seems unlikely that any rule of this kind will hold because of the way ethnographies are characteristically positioned as interjections in anthropological or social scientific debates. Below, Mahmoud analyzes how her female Egyptian informants situate themselves in the current Islamic revival. A primary purpose of her ethnography is to destabilize a widespread reductionist view of Islamist women as reactionary and self-subjugating. She explores the concept of *sabr*, the Islamic virtue of patience: for women like Nadia in this excerpt the practice of sabr is liberatory in a way that "poststructuralist feminist theory" is ill-equipped to recognize (Mahmoud 2001:208). Mahmoud enriches her interpretation of this Egyptian setting by exploring the views not only of Nadia but of another informant, Sana, picking out their disparate viewpoints concerning the negative connotations of remaining single for Egyptian women:

> Although Nadia and Sana share their recognition of the painful situation single women face, they differ markedly in their respective engagements with this suffering, each enacting a different modality of agency in the face of it ... Just as the practice of self-esteem structured the possibilities of action that were open to Sana, so did the realization of sabr for Nadia: enabling certain ways of being and foreclosing others. It is clear that certain virtues have lost their value in the liberal imagination (like humility, modesty, and shyness) ... What Nadia's and Sana's discussions reveal are two different modes of engaging with social injustices, one grounded in a tradition that we have come to value, and another in a nonliberal tradition that is being resuscitated by the movement I worked with. [2001:221-222]

In this example, as in the others above, "diversity" plays its part in triangulating evidence in relation to social scientific dialogues. Ethnographic insights in this case are explicitly organized vis-à-vis a teleologically framed debate about women's empowerment (notice the ambivalent use of "we" in the paragraph). Given this vis-à-vis in the comparative framing of ethnography, it is not likely that any stable principle for how diversity should be regulated in an ethnography will be able to outguess the changing roles that the ethnography plays within broader social scientific conversations.

What is at issue, then, is how the deployment of diversity in an ethnography acts as an index or signifier of the "closure" of an ethnographic world. However, this necessarily points us to something else: how the status or personhood of the ethnographer necessarily changes in tandem. In building up a picture of the transformation of ethnography into *an* ethnography we need to take account of how the agency of the ethnographer, acting in different fields of knowledge and action, is necessarily ambiguated in order to "close" the ethnography as the authorial utterance of one person—the anthropologist.

Ambiguating the Agency of the Ethnographer

If we accept that there is a necessary tipping point from the open-ended diversity of fieldwork into the relatively closed world of an ethnography, then we may note corresponding changes in the status of the ethnographer. Ethnographic knowledge is always relational, the product of multiple cross-cutting conversations across diverse contexts, not only between anthropologist and informants but also between anthropologist and others in the academy and more broadly "at home." In this sense, we agree with James Clifford when he says that the activity of ethnography is always "plural and beyond the control of any individual" (1983:139).

And yet, conversations involve exchanges and hence not only depend upon but perpetuate the existence of distinct conversationalists. Although ethnographic knowledge is conversational, authority over an ethnography stays firmly in the hands of its anthropologist author. Indeed we would go further and argue that ethnography, as a particular mode of knowing, depends on the creation of a singular or individual authorial self. And so indeed it should be, we suggest, because the ethnographer is answerable not only intellectually but also ethically for what they have to say. Paradoxically, then, it is precisely out of a multiplicity of relationships in the field and "at home" that ethnographic authorship emerges as individual and authoritative, rather than as shared and precarious. In ethnographic writing, it is relationships between informants and anthropologist and among anthropologists that are seen to lend validity to an author's experiences, accounts and conclusions. These relationships, in other words, are understood to endow an individual with a particular kind of agency: agency to know, to represent and to argue—to present an ethnography.

One of the most complex aspects of ethnographic presentation concerns, then, how assertions of agency as an author of an ethnography are ascribed and disclaimed, made visible and invisible in ethnographic presentation, and the effects that this has both on the construction of a text and on the creation of anthropological knowledge. Our concern here, in other words, regards how, in the making of an ethnography,

> the notion of agency is invoked or ascribed, concealed or obfuscated, more or less strategically .,. how agency is attached or detached in social practice, how it is owned or disowned, to whom or to what agency is referred, and what motivates agency to go around, come around, and otherwise slip around. [Battaglia 1997:506]

From the classics of the early 20th century to more recent postmodernist ethnographies, at the core of the anthropological enterprise lies the construction of an authorial self through encounters with others. And, although this self retains ultimate control over the text, it is nonetheless variously presented as able and not able to make claims to various kinds of knowledge. A tipping point of ethnographic exposition, we argue, is achieved when the (often autobiographically charted) loss of agency entailed in fieldwork, has become evidence for the author having acquired sufficient agency to create an ethnography.

A common feature of the opening pages of ethnographies is a look back at the fieldwork process in which the ethnographer recapitulates feelings of displacement or estrangement as they were thrown into the field situation. These opening frames of ethnographies which describe meetings between anthropologist and informants have received considerable attention in terms of their literary values (Marcus 2007). In these descriptions, anthropologists explain having to relinquish control over their lives to others, either through ignorance of the language and social norms or out of the need to fit in and be accepted and trusted. Writers often describe a diminished or altered sense of self and a lack of agency extending to feelings of personal disintegration—of "being sent slowly mad" (Busby 2000:xv)—or of childlike dependency.

In these narratives ethnographers stress their incompetence, their dependence, and their ensuing peripheral-

ity to the world of properly functioning adults. And so, writers of ethnography describe being treated as children and even spending time with them rather than with others, being burdens on the community, and slowly learning how to function as adults. As children the agency of ethnographers is incomplete. And this agency that they lose is gained by their informants, who are presented as the ones in control. This first stage of fieldwork and loss of agency is followed in these stories by a period of enlightenment and recovery of agency which repeatedly involves transformations of the self.

Eventually in fieldwork stories "them" becomes, even if only transitorily, "us." Moments of heightened emotional discomfort lead in these narratives to particularly important insights, and sometimes there is a single event that catapults the writer from the margins to the centre of the community. This event allows informants to see the anthropologist in a new light, no longer as an outsider but as an adopted member of the group or at least as "our outsider." In Abu-Lughod's description of fieldwork among Egyptian Bedouins, it is sharing the pain of an old woman over her brother's death that makes her "fully human" in her hosts' eyes (1986:21). This is how she describes her sense of belonging:

> On entering the tent crowded with women, I knew exactly which cluster to join—the group of "our" relatives. They welcomed me naturally and proceeded to gossip conspiratorially with me about the others present. This sense of "us versus them," so central to their social interactions, had become central to me too, and I felt pleased that I belonged to an "us" ... Later, when we sat around the kerosene lantern, talking about the celebration we had attended, swapping bits of information we had gathered, and feeling happy because we had eaten meat, I became aware how comfortable I felt, knowing every one being discussed, offering my own tidbits and interpretations, and bearing easily the weight of a child who had fallen sleep on my lap as I sat cross-legged on the ground. It was only that night, when I dated the page in my journal, that I realized it was only a few days until Christmas. My American life seemed very far away. [Abu-Lughod 1986:20-21]

Here agency appears and disappears from sight, is lost and regained, and moves around between persons: the Bedouins have granted Abu-Lughod agency by accepting her, but she herself had to elicit this acceptance by her appropriate behaviour. And, significantly, this movement of agency from ethnographer to informant and back again goes hand in hand with a transfer of knowledge. Richard Fardon has described how

> the ethnographic and anthropological processes (from research to writing) can be seen as a succession of states of play in the allocation of different types of ignorance and knowledge; often the trajectories of informant and ethnographer intersect. Beginning in ignorance the ethnographer acquires knowledge; but as the informant divulges information so the ethnographer begins to see him as ignorant of his own society. [1990:9]

Thus, in these stories the process of becoming during fieldwork is not indefinite but has a culmination: after a personal and often traumatic journey of transformation, a new self comes into view, endowed with the capacity to talk about others. In other words, through the ambiguation of agency that we have described, the ethnographer eventually emerges as able to represent. Often, as Fardon explains, the ensuing representations are presented as superior to those of our informants. Then, ethnographers not only claim the insight of an insider but also the neutrality and analytical ability of an outsider, as well as the capacity to deploy specialist knowledge. Alternatively, a personal transformation is described but it is not said to yield any kind of absolute knowledge about the Other. Instead, the focus of the ethnography is on exploring, from a deliberately emphasized position, the relationship between informant and ethnographer.

Given the changing conditions in which anthropologists undertake their fieldwork, as well as the varied forms of collaboration and institutional compromise involved in latterday research settings, might not our picture of authorial agency represent more a nostalgic ideal than a current actuality? Our response is that, though it is in many ways remarkable, the form of relationship between ethnography and author described here remains strikingly resilient. And in certain respects, this is quite predictable once we take the reticulated, and casuistic-gestalt qualities of an ethnography into account: the fact that an ethnography is attached to its anthropologist corresponds to the fact that the agency of the anthropologist requires an ethnography.

We can evidence what is prized in this respect by—quite literally—examining the ethnographies that are awarded prizes. Take, for example, Scheper-Hughes' *Death Without Weeping* (1993, J.I. Staley Prize *inter alia*), or Tsing's *Friction* (2005, American Ethnological Society Senior Book Prize), or Chernoff's *Hustling is Not Stealing* (2003, Victor Turner Prize)—we could extend this list—in each case, while the argument of the work undoubtedly challenges familiar expectations regarding ethnography, as *an* ethnography, these works nonetheless deploy techniques, and have been received according to expectations, that we have explored here. Originating in the ambiguity

of fieldwork, the ethnography has become, with decreasing ambiguity, authored. The briefest of indications from Tsing's monograph will hopefully suffice: "I originally entered the Meratus forests with the eyes of a naturalist ... It was only by walking and working with the Meratus Dayaks that I learned to see the forest differently" (2005:vi).

In making these transitions visible—this should be underlined—we have not aimed to bring to light a deception or sleight of hand by anthropologists; the experiences they describe are surely true enough. Instead, we argue that these are necessary but largely unrecognized components in the architectonics of an ethnography. Discussions and analyses of personal transformation provide a shorthand, and attempt to account, for a dubiously measurable transition. They bridge the open-endedness of the fieldwork experience with the authorial closure of the ethnography. They evidence and authorize, schematically and in retrospect, expectations concerning social relationships that the ethnographer has reacted to during fieldwork—tried to learn and to adopt, consciously or unconsciously resisted and experimented with. As a result, the ambiguation and mediation of agency involved will be re-encountered throughout an ethnography.

Finally, it is worth noting that a number of influential ethnographers of the 1980s emphasized "fragmentation" as a virtue in ethnographic writing because it would remind the reader that the culture in question remained open and the text did not represent a "single point of view" (Atkinson 1992:41). In retrospect the limits of this argument now become visible in so far as (a) it assumes that there exists a realistic measurement of how "fragmented" an interpretation should ideally be (what can be said about "diversity" can be said of "fragmentation"), and (b) it may well obscure rather than enhance the ethical answerability of the ethnographer for her contribution to a dialogue. In contrast, the postmodern emphasis on a dialogic or conversational anthropology points in a different direction: if we take the ethical significance of dialogue seriously then we should be equally serious in our treatment of an ethnography as the unique utterance of an—ethically and intellectually situated—conversationalist (Bakhtin 1994:67-85).

Concluding Remarks

As Schaffer and Shapin (1985) show, with his vacuum pump, Boyle succeeded in inventing the laboratory as the purified space where the laws of nature are localized and laid bare for a community of scientific experimenters. Latour adds that, in so far as Boyle's laboratory and its descendents have become things-in-themselves devoid of human fabrication, they have also become the lynch-pin for maintaining the division between the laws of nature and the laws of society (1993:31). The purification of ethnography as *an* ethnography mimics some of these effects but is also part of their complication because the ethnography characteristically pluralizes nature, community and knowledge (Latour 2009). As any professional anthropologist comes to know when they apply for money from a foundation supporting social science, ethnographic aims can be well-nigh incomprehensible to those social scientists who take the metaphor "positive knowledge is laboratory knowledge" to be a concrete truth.

The artefactual quality of the Malinowskian ethnography vis-à-vis social reality as lived was recognized very early in the development of social anthropology. Bateson published *Naven* as a critique of Malinowskian assumptions only 14 years after *Argonauts* was published. Half a century later, the recognition that ethnographic monographs relied on literary tropes for their consistency shook confidence in the validity of ethnography as a kind of knowledge. But the narrow focus on writing broadens again once we accept that, while perhaps still more legitimately a written form, an ethnography is most frequently presented orally—the lecture, the seminar example, the student discussion. So, by shaking naïve empiricism out of its comfortable basket, the postmodern turn succeeded in laying the ground for much closer attention to the institutional settings, and kinds of dialogue, in which an ethnography becomes relevant as knowledge.

Alongside providing the fundamental pattern for the ethnography, Malinowski also familiarized social scientists with the idea of a "long ethnographic conversation" with and between informants where not only words may be exchanged but "from time to time also things, animals, people, gestures and blows" (Bloch 1977:278). However, it is necessary to reiterate with Ingold that, within the intellectual division of labour, "anthropology is not ethnography": the plural ethnographic accounts derived from ethnographic conversations are, in certain ways, at odds with the unifying aim of anthropology to seek a "critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit" (2008:11). To this we would add that, in this larger anthropological conversation about what humans hold in common, the ethnographic interjection has a particular value. This value derives from how the coordination of an ethnography acts to disrupt the tendency for dialogue about human-ness to turn into an experientially evacuated set of theoretical monologues. On this point we would concur with the answer that Feyerabend provides to his own rhetorical question:

> how can we possibly examine something we are using all the time? How can we analyse the terms in which we habitually express our most simple and straightforward observations, and reveal their presuppositions?... The first step in our criticism of familiar concepts and procedures ... must ... be an attempt to break the circle. We must invent a new conceptual system that ... confounds the most plausible theoretical principles and introduces perceptions that cannot form part of the existing perceptual world. [1975:32]

We would simply add that the ethnography, at its best, already exists as a means to introduce systematic conceptual plurality of the challenging sort that Feyerabend prescribes (Holbraad 2008).

Over the last century, ethnography as an imaginative-analytical vehicle produced true knowledge about a great range of patterns of human relationship. Whatever questions we have about his epistemological or paradigmatic assumptions, need we doubt, for example, that Fortes (1959) contributed facts about the relations between the living and their ancestors in West Africa? The factuality of this knowledge depended, and continues to depend, on the apparatus of the ethnography—the ability of an ethnography to capture social particularities as significant within a reticulated network of insights. It is curious to note in this regard that the ethnography has proved far less fragile historically than the anthropological theories it often purports to test out or the paradigms it seeks to confirm. Theories turn out, in the long run, to be those anticipations of knowledge that are characteristically discarded as ethnography establishes its own integration. It is only because it can turn the process of ethnography into the modality of *an* ethnography that a fundamentally important anthropological task can be achieved; that of showing that there are "many radically different modes of inhabiting the world" (Latour 2009:2).

The two aspects isolated in this article, regarding how the ethnographer brings the ethnographic process to a moment of culmination, can equally be understood in terms of the institutional positioning of ethnographic practice vis-à-vis anthropology as a theoretical or thought-centred activity. As Hart observes, the radicalism of ethnography consists historically in how

> a segment of the intellectual class crossed the divide between themselves and the rest of society as a means of finding out how people live. This meant that they had to join their social objects as individual subjects, thereby muddling the conventional separation of subjects ("thinkers" working for those who take the decisions that matter) from objects ("doers" or those who perform the routine work of society). [Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007:179]

As much as we can recognize it as the product of a particular author, we can equally comprehend an ethnography as taking holistic shape at the tense intersection of ethnographic conversations and social scientific debates involving many differentially placed voices. And, in this regard, we have seen above the process of authorial ambiguation that this meeting of life and ideas instigates. As the means for global communication multiply and increase in speed, the questions surrounding what distinguishes ethnography from *an* ethnography are bound to intensify; as will the debates concerning the agency of the ethnographer raised here. Nonetheless, we argue that the "muddling" effect of an ethnography will remain its greatest strength so long as it continues to impede the ideological separation that Hart describes. We are only taking our first steps toward recognizing this dialogical character of an ethnography—what Malinowski might have called its "sociological, ritual and dogmatic context" (1935:99, fn1).

Huon Wardle, Department of Social Anthropology, 71 North Street, St. Andrew's University, KY169AL, Scotland, UK. E-mail: hobw@st-andrews.ac.uk.

Paloma Gay y BlascoDepartment of Social Anthropology, 71 North Street, St. Andrew's University, KY169AL, Scotland, UK. E-mail: pgyb@st-andrews.ac.uk.

Acknowledgments

This work was originally conceived as a joint contribution to the conference "The Pitch of Ethnography," held at the London School of Economics, 17-18 March 2008. Huon Wardle subsequently took on the role of developing the argument toward the shape it has here; and to him also falls the blame for whatever flaws this article contains. Alongside the LSE audience, Wardle would like to thank members of the St. Andrews post-graduate seminar: Philip Kao, Veronika Groke, Jan Grill, Eleni Bizas, Fiona Hukula, Huw Lloyd-Richards, Daniela Castellanos, Christopher Hewlett and Eileadh Swan for perceptive comments derived from recent first-hand knowledge of the issues involved. Thanks are due also for the thoughtful and helpful commentary of two unnamed reviewers.

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