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Building Bridges between Literary Journalism and Alternative Ethnographic Forms: Opportunities and Challenges

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Literary journalism bears much in common with autoethnography and public ethnography, thus offering opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

In the inaugural issue of this journal, Norman Sims argued that in order to develop a robust discipline of literary journalism studies, we must draw broadly from a range of other fields to inform a theory of literary journalism. This was essential, he said, in order to cement the young discipline's position within the academy as a legitimate, valuable area of study and to create a space in which to examine the genre on its own terms, rather than as a subset of literary studies, journalism, or mass communication.¹ But it is not enough simply to take from other disciplines to shore up our own. If we seek to build a truly interdisciplinary field while earning credibility from other parts of the academy, it is equally necessary to seek out areas of common interest. We must build bridges between our corner of the academy and other disciplines. We must demonstrate clearly the importance and validity of the work we do and study and what skills and knowledge we can contribute to the larger project of contemporary qualitative research.

The goal of this essay is to build one plank on such a bridge. On the one side is literary journalism, a subset of narrative nonfiction and long-form journalism whose identifying characteristics include "immersion reporting, accuracy, symbolic representation, complicated structures and voice."² On

the other side is ethnography, known for participant observation, thick description, and verifiable data.³ As Janet Cramer and Michael McDevitt suggested in an earlier call to incorporate conventional ethnographic methods into journalism, including literary journalism specifically, there is considerable potential for an ethnographic approach to reveal a broader range of social realities and viewpoints in mainstream journalism, particularly those that are marginalized and often invisible.⁴ This call goes a step further and envisions a two-way exchange of techniques and best practices between ethnographers and literary journalists with the goal of encouraging greater public interest and engagement. In particular, this paper charts the considerable similarities between literary journalism and two of the increasingly popular so-called “alternative” forms of ethnography: autoethnography and public ethnography. Although they have different origins, both types of writing—one journalistic, one academic—are based on in-depth qualitative research, emphasize lived experienced, and apply the techniques of literature (e.g., narrative arc, character development, rich description, subjectivity, point of view, and emotionality) to nonfiction in order to make the material as engaging as possible for a general, non-academic audience. This being so, I argue that it is time for greater collaboration between ethnographers, literary journalists, and literary journalism scholars, not merely as a means of exchanging their theoretical and critical frameworks, but to exchange best practices in the field and in the classroom as well. To be clear, the goal is not to conflate literary journalism with ethnography, for they are different types of research, but rather to enrich disciplines with similar goals, techniques, and products through collaboration and exchange.

THE EVOLUTION OF ETHNOGRAPHY

As Karen O’Reilly explains, ethnography developed from British social anthropology, American cultural anthropology, and the Chicago School of sociology. It is a mostly qualitative methodology that develops theories through long-term fieldwork that involves “direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives and (cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, and asking questions. . . .”⁵ Perhaps most importantly, it is an area of study “focused on describing and understanding social life from the perspective of the people who take part in it.”⁶ Its founding principle was to try to understand social groups from the inside out, requiring a long-term commitment from the researcher who would embed himself or herself within a population and seek to earn its members’ trust in order to study them. As such, ethnographies are richly detailed, mostly written accounts of the daily lives of particular groups of people from which

broader themes are developed, much like literary journalism. In fact, the two disciplines share many similarities. Of Mark Kramer's eight (breakable) rules that provide a working definition for literary journalism, ethnography arguably meets at least half of them.⁷ First, like literary journalists, ethnographers undertake immersive, long-term research of their subjects. In addition to conducting background research and formal interviews and sometimes even surveys, ethnographers must conduct participant-observation research, the purpose of which, according to O'Reilly's paraphrase of Bronislaw Malinowski, is twofold: "to understand things from the 'native's' point of view and to blend into the setting so as to disturb it as little as possible."⁸ This is the same type of research that Sims refers to as "hanging around access"; the chance to become the proverbial fly on the wall, "the permission to watch the conduct of ordinary life."⁹ Second, ethnographers, like literary journalists, are expected to be clear with their readers as to the veracity of their research and the source for their data. Even if they use pseudonyms for their subjects, as is often the case to protect their privacy, ethnographers are expected to make this clear to readers and explain their reasoning. Thus, a commitment to verifiable reportage and transparency is a key similarity for both groups of researchers. Third, ethnographers tend to focus their research on ordinary people, going about their everyday lives, much as literary journalists do. As Kramer points out, "Routine needn't mean humdrum. Most anyone's life, discovered in depth and from a compassionate perspective, is interesting."¹⁰ Fourth, one could argue that, just like literary journalists, ethnographers write in a plain, spare style, as Kramer suggests. Certainly, what constitutes "clear" writing differs between the two groups, given that ethnographers are writing for an audience of academics while literary journalists are writing for a more general audience, but both groups value clarity in their work and the importance of keeping one's audience in mind when attempting to tell a coherent story.¹¹ As shown, ethnography and literary journalism have many similarities; indeed, American literary journalist Ted Conover's first book, *Rolling Nowhere*, was the result of his having leftover material from his anthropology thesis, which was an ethnography of railway hoboes.¹² It should come as no surprise, then, that given those basic commonalities, forms of so-called alternative ethnography emerged over the past twenty-five years in response to the postmodern turn and the crisis of representation in the social sciences. At the heart of this crisis were concerns about

the politics of location (how researchers position themselves in relation to participants), the politics of interpretation (how lived experience is transformed into research data), and the politics of publication (how research is disseminated to various audiences).¹³

In essence, the crisis reflected a growing awareness among many researchers about social privilege, power, and the validity of the “objective” standpoint in qualitative research. Some researchers questioned whether it was appropriate or even ethical for elite scholars to provide supposedly definitive interpretations of their subjects’ lives and experiences, particularly when those research participants were often members of marginalized populations. Others spoke of a mounting concern that “objective” research was simply not possible, especially for researchers who had embedded themselves within a community and become part of it. This thinking called into question some of the crucial tenets of conventional ethnography and called for a type of social science that Pauline Marie Rosenau describes as becoming

a more subjective and humble enterprise as truth gives way to tentativeness. Confidence in emotion replaces efforts at impartial observation. Relativism is preferred to objectivity, fragmentation to totalization.¹⁴

These concerns, then, spurred demand for an adapted form of ethnography that was more subjective, reflexive, and narrative, as well as a space to describe and consider one’s research and data as one interpretation among many other worthy and valid interpretations that shift depending on one’s background and point of view.

That some anthropologists and ethnographers wanted to work with a more reflexive and narrative form was not altogether surprising given their long history with personal writing. But it is a troubled history, as Barbara Tedlock notes:

[T]he public revelation of participatory details of the fieldwork experience is still considered embarrassingly unprofessional by some ethnographers. It is as though fieldwork were supposed to give us two totally independent things: reportable significant knowledge and unreportable mysticism and high adventure. If we were to be so foolish as to make the mistake of combining these elements, it would somehow seriously discredit our entire endeavor.¹⁵

The result of this thinking was that ethnographic work published in scholarly fora were scrubbed of personal feelings and narrative anecdotes, while those same fieldwork anecdotes were published separately for general audiences, often under a pseudonym or later in researchers’ careers as popular memoirs with more of a narrative arc.¹⁶ Still, some ethnographers sought ways to create more holistic representations of their work and experiences in the field that would retain professional credibility but still be of interest to an audience of academics and general readers alike, as will become clear. All of these concerns led to the creation of alternative forms of ethnography, includ-

ing autoethnography and public ethnography, both of which aim to be more personal, narrative, and publicly engaged types of research and have striking similarities to literary journalism in both practice and product.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: RESEARCH BECOMES PERSONAL

Autoethnography emphasizes a literary approach to the writing of ethnographic research. Carolyn Ellis, one of the form's major proponents, defines it as

research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot.¹⁷

In its attempts to be more engaging, evocative, and plot-driven than most academic writing, autoethnography employs characterization, the use of dialogue, and rich description and details, much the same way literary journalism does. Additionally, Ellis argues that autoethnography should forego literature reviews and any in-depth theoretical discussion to focus instead on evocative storytelling that foregrounds the researcher's experiences, saying that autoethnography should "tell [a] story and let the sociological analysis occur conversationally."¹⁸ In this way, the emphasis of autoethnography is to create an emotional connection with the reader through story as opposed to providing a formal, analytical argument.

Although it is a fairly new form, autoethnographies have already been published in a broad range of journals in fields such as sociology, political science, education, and women's and gender studies. Given its relative youth, it comes as no surprise that there is a considerable range of works that are considered autoethnographic, ranging from highly personal pieces, in which the researcher revisits an experience from his or her own life and explores it as a literary memoirist might do, to more formal accounts in which the researcher is present as a narrator to lead the reader through his or her fieldwork experiences, turning some research participants into main characters. Likewise, there are significant disagreements about what an autoethnography should or should not include. For example, Leon Anderson eschews Ellis's notion of impressionistic, evocative autoethnography for what he calls analytic autoethnography.¹⁹ He argues that in order for the form to be considered a legitimate type of research-based scholarship, it needs to include analysis and be engaged in theory development, not merely storytelling or self-reflection. Ellis rejects this notion, arguing that it unfairly privileges analysis over storytelling in terms of providing meaning to readers.²⁰ Despite such differences, Ellis says that the autoethnographic form is still in its infancy and is something that

will, and should, evolve and change over time to the needs and demands of both researchers and audiences; as such, she says it should not be confined to a narrow definition of what it should or should not be just yet. Overall, though, its similarities with literary journalism are clear: its focus on plot and character; the use of a reflexive, personal voice; and a literary style that forgoes many of the formalities of academic writing in order to be more evocative and engaging for a range of readers.

**PUBLIC ETHNOGRAPHY:
POLITICIZED RESEARCH FOR A LAY AUDIENCE**

Public ethnography is similar to autoethnography in that it is a relatively new type of ethnography, but one that is growing steadily.²¹ It is also situated “in a broader paradigmatic shift in ethnography towards reflexive, sensuous, interpretive, narrative, arts-informed, and more-than-representational qualitative research.”²² It differs from autoethnography in that it foregrounds the need for public engagement, as its name suggests. By definition, it is a critical and politically engaged type of research that seeks to address issues of current importance and transmit its findings, like autoethnography, to the public-at-large as opposed to other academics. As such, its findings must be written and/or presented in such a way as to make them readily understood by a lay audience. There are many different types of research projects that qualify as public ethnography. As Carol A. Bailey explains, a project can be considered public ethnography if it meets the following criteria:

- (1) its primary means of collecting data is in-depth field research, (2) it is motivated by a desire to reduce social injustice, (3) it critiques the structures and social processes that promote inequality, (4) it includes active participation of the scholar in the fight against repressive conditions, and (5) its desired audience extends beyond academic circles to include some facet of the public at large.²³

Thus, public ethnographers employ the methods of traditional ethnography but emphasize the need for research that is critically engaged and publicly accessible.

The degree to which public ethnography should be politicized is a contested matter within the field. Herbert J. Gans, for instance, takes a less critical approach than Bailey, saying that sociology is the discipline that

most often goes backstage to report on how ‘society’ and its principal institutions work—and ethnographers head backstage almost automatically. Being backstage they can also study when society fails to work and why, and they can identify the forces and agents of malfunction and malfeasance.²⁴

Regardless of how its practitioners define the scope of their political en-

agement and criticism, the field itself is rooted in exploring contemporary issues of public concern, much like journalism. Likewise, it rejects the notion that such work can be completed in an objective way; instead, public ethnographers opt for an engaged, reflexive point of view in their work, much like literary journalists. As Phillip Vannini and Vanessa Milne explain,

[E]thnographers work differently from most other researchers in virtue of other qualities of their research, such as its ability to portray people, places, and times in vividly descriptive detail, and its emphasis on the researcher's immediate and direct involvement with, participation in, and experience of the lifeworld object of study."²⁵

While there are clearly similarities to autoethnography, there are differences as well. Unlike autoethnographers, who often center their stories on themselves, public ethnographers are present in their narratives but are not the main characters. Although they make a point to explain their subject positions (e.g., why they are interested in a given research subject and their personal connection to it), they do not generally *become* the story on which they report. Generally, public ethnographies tend to resemble formal academic research more than nonfiction narratives: they often include literature reviews and theoretical analysis, but try to explain them in plain language, with varying degrees of success. So, while an autoethnographer's work might closely resemble the work of a memoirist, the public ethnographer's work more closely resembles that of a long-form nonfiction writer's, who expresses a researched, reasoned point of view in a piece that is about an issue of interest to him or her but not about him or her specifically.

ALTERNATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC FORMS AND LITERARY JOURNALISM: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The similarities among literary journalism and autoethnography and public ethnography present a unique opportunity to enrich all three through collaboration and the exchange of best practices in the field and the classroom. Although interdisciplinary collaboration can be challenging, anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes has demonstrated how it is possible for conventional academics to work with long-form investigative journalists (if not literary journalists specifically). She did fieldwork on the global trafficking in human organs with investigative journalists at *The New York Times* and Canada's *National Post*, as well as with others in Brazil, Turkey, and the Philippines—not as a source or informant but as a collaborator. She did so in order to reach a wider audience than she was used to finding in peer-reviewed journals. “Collaboration with investigative reporters is not always easy and can be distressing,” she explains, adding

However, the more I collaborated with skilled national and international reporters and documentary filmmakers, the more I am impressed with their thoughtfulness, thoroughness, dedication to accuracy and their own very different ethical and political sensibilities. In teaching graduate seminars on genocide, the writings of anthropologists often pale beside the work of political journalists like Philip Gourevitch (1998), Mark Daner (1994) and Alma Guillermoprieto (1994). A little professional humility would go a long way to foster the potential for collaboration drawing on the strengths and skills of each.²⁶

Not all ethnographers express the same enthusiasm for working with journalists as research partners. According to Vannini and Milne, for example, “[P]ublic ethnography can offer more depth than news and documentary journalism can. Its in-depth treatment of issues can aid in explanation and understanding—something which journalism often has neither the means nor the interest in providing.”²⁷ Gans takes a more measured approach. While he notes that ethnographers have much to learn from journalists, who are trained in how to make their material relevant, he suggests that one of their starting points be journalists’ errors:

Ethnography can also become relevant by explaining phenomena and events journalists have only described, and by correcting or debunking journalistic concepts and findings, particularly when journalists perpetuate inaccurate conventional wisdoms or unjustifiable stereotypes.²⁸

Still, it should be seen as encouraging that there are already some scholars working in ethnography who, as the evidence shows, are doing work that is similar to that of literary journalists. Clearly, potential for some sort of collaboration exists. As such, it would be useful for literary journalism scholars to try to identify those ethnographers and start reaching out to them and building bridges across their respective disciplines. One way to nurture such relationships may be to create a bibliography of works of literary journalism that would appeal to their interests as a way of demonstrating how similar their work is.

For ethnographers who may not wish to conduct research with literary journalists, there are many opportunities for collaboration in the classroom with scholars of literary journalism. Most importantly, literary journalism scholars who teach writing could offer their expertise to ethnography students in helping them reshape and fine-tune their work for wider audiences, which is a primary concern for autoethnographers and public ethnographers. Gans, for instance, recommends that more sociology students be taught how to write in a clear, non-academic way that will endear their work to lay readers, trade publishers, and reviewers.²⁹ Who better to teach such skills than liter-

ary journalism scholars? They could also teach social science students how to become engaged in current events and pinpoint what will engage a general audience and how to create a long-form piece of research that feels like a must-read, tied directly to concerns of the day. Likewise, ethnographers would likely have much to teach journalism students about qualitative interviewing and long-term fieldwork, methodological uniformity, participant observation techniques, and the ethics involved in such work.

While such interdisciplinary collaboration is a worthwhile endeavor, it comes with challenges for literary journalists and literary journalism scholars as well as ethnographers. For instance, the writing quality of many autoethnographies and public ethnographies will be of concern to most literary journalists and literary journalism scholars. Ethnographers' writing style often feels more labored than literary, and despite these writers' best efforts to create vivid, engaging scenes and narratives, they are often mired in dense theory and methodological descriptions. For example, although Ellis has a spare, clear writing style by academic standards, her autoethnographic writing and scenes are often overloaded with details that would likely seem insignificant to a general or casual reader, such as in this description of the first day of class:

I stop and, while I wait for students to quiet down, I take in the disheveled conference room. Beige, high-backed, swivel chairs fight for space. Napkins and bags of chips left from the graduate student reception overflow the institutional, brown, metal, trash can, while half-empty, two-liter, Diet Coke bottles clutter the tops of cabinets. The disorder disrupts what would otherwise be an attractive and calming space—long, oak conference table, wider in the middle than the ends; soft, comfortable pillow chairs on rollers; a wall of windows featuring views of campus trees and clouds, and glimpses of the top of the Busch Gardens roller coaster, if you look long and hard enough. My long, purple, blue, and red titanium earrings jingle, reminding me to concentrate on what I'm saying to the students now listening attentively.³⁰

Similarly, Ellis works hard to include dialogue in her writing, just as literary journalists do. But it often feels like filler because it does little to propel the narrative, such as in this scene in which she greets a student, Valerie, at her home:

"Want to see what we've done to our house?" She nods and follows me through our reconstructed bedroom and three bathrooms, and the new screened-in porch we've added. I tell her stories about my never-ending experience of contractor hell. Then I pour coffee and we go upstairs to the library.

Valerie is nonplussed when the dogs enter and bark at her. "Hi babies,"

she coos, and Ande takes Valerie's tone as an invitation to jump on her lap and lick her face. Valerie chuckles. "They know when there's a dog person around. Sweet puppy. OK, settle down now. I don't want to have to clean these glasses again."³¹

And while Vannini has a clear, readable style in his public ethnography works about ferry passengers, his writing tends toward clichéd descriptions such as a "10,000 tonne spanking-new ferry" and "a cornucopia of hip java lounges and toasty-warm bakeries."³² Like Ellis, his attempts to include dialogue in his work feel strained and add little to the narrative:

"Didn't you say we parked by the Orca sign?" whines Ruth as she huffs and puffs her way up the stairs, back to the upper car deck. "I thought it was a whale of some kind. Or maybe a seal," Paul hollers as he slaloms around the flood of bodies walking in the opposite direction.³³

It is also clear that academics continue to grapple with how best to address the uneasy tension between storytelling and academic analysis. Autoethnographer Kimberly J. Lau attempts this by dividing her pages into two columns and telling three narratives simultaneously.³⁴ In the right-hand column is a memoir written in an appealing, literary style that examines the author's relationship with her family as well as her memories and feelings about addressing her bifurcated Asian-American identity in professional settings. The narrative that runs in the top half of the left-hand column is the essay's primary argument about how the author negotiates her multicultural Asian identity in the United States. The third narrative, which appears in the bottom half of the left-hand column, is an overview of several articles that inspired the essay and, in particular, its multi-lensed approach. Lau's aim in employing three distinct narrative threads is an attempt not to privilege one kind of writing over another, and while it is not entirely successful since it is impossible to read three texts side-by-side at once, it is an interesting attempt and a clear example of academics' tension in letting narratives and literary writing speak for themselves. So, while they try to follow Ellis's advice and give preference to storytelling and narrative over formal writing and analysis, they often fall short and end up including a great deal of literature reviews and theorizing that would interest few general readers (see also Slattery³⁵, Spry³⁶, and Walford³⁷). Likewise, even those ethnographers whose writing may come close to the style expected of literary journalism often spend too much time describing their theoretical backgrounds and methodology, as does Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, who admits that he is trying to "tread a fine line between the *analytic* and the *evocative* registers of autoethnography."³⁸

Clearly, challenges remain in bridging the divide between ethnography and literary journalism, but these are challenges that can be overcome and de-

serve to be tackled because of what we stand to gain from such collaboration in terms of enriching our own young field and building our credibility among other qualitative researchers within the academy. Such collaborations would also provide literary journalism scholars the opportunity to highlight their expertise when it comes to the creation and analysis of high-quality narrative nonfiction, including literary journalism, as well as to stake a claim to it. As previously mentioned, narrative-driven research that is accessible and engaging to a lay audience is increasingly popular and sought after in the social sciences. Thus, it behooves literary journalists and literary journalism scholars to move beyond simply creating a space for their work within the academy to staking out their disciplinary turf before it may be claimed by others. This may be a bigger threat than it seems—consider the following statement from Gans, writing about how other disciplines, including anthropology, are taking over the traditional work and research areas of his field:

[I]n some respects, sociology's most powerful competition comes from journalistic ethnographers, notably book writers, who may not have ever taken a sociology course but are trained or self-trained in fieldwork and intensive interviewing. They are also trained to be topical and to focus on subjects and issues that currently interest the educated and sometimes also the general public.³⁹

This need not be an isolationist exercise—indeed, we stand to gain more credibility for our discipline and our work by reaching out to those in the academy who may conduct similar research in order to demonstrate our areas of expertise, such as those in the fields of autoethnography and public ethnography. By actively seeking out collaborative interdisciplinary opportunities, we stand to enhance the depth and breadth of literary journalism studies and build a reputation of expertise across the academy in disseminating knowledge to the public-at-large through engaging literary journalism.

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