The Timidities of Ethnography:
A Response to Bruce Horner

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This response will not offer a close reading of Bruce Horner's recent essay in *JAC*, "Critical Ethnography, Ethics, and Work: Rearticulating
Labor.” Because I mostly agree with the positions taken, I feel I have some liberty to flesh out some side issues and contexts that the readers of this journal may find helpful. I should also say at the outset that my research interests are more in sociocultural anthropology and particularly in ethnographies of rhetorical theories and practices. Horner’s interests in ethnographies of composition and writing (including wherever writing occurs, such as classrooms) are not really my bag. I speak somewhat as an outsider, then, who is quite willing to be corrected by Horner and others.

A number of years ago as an assistant professor sitting on many exam and dissertation committees in my university’s College of Education—a college I did not belong to, by the way—I became increasingly frustrated by classroom/composition ethnographic dissertations. I thought the subjects being investigated of not much consequence, and that a fairly cheap version of ethnography was being employed. Needless to say, in a rather short time I burned most bridges and was not asked to sit on any more committees. I have never systematically tried to analyze those scenes that are now a decade or more old, but maybe extrapolating from Horner’s article I can arrive at a modicum of clarity.

I have always been interested in power and how it operates materially and discursively (ideologically). These are interpenetrating realms, and to discuss one without the other is to arrive at no understanding. But any particular operation of power has vertical and horizontal dimensions, and these too need to be richly understood. Let me explain: A high school course is vertically linked to a department—English, let’s say—which is, then, linked hierarchically to a humanities group, perhaps, or a principal, and then linked further to a school district, a superintendent, a school board, and further on to a state agency, a legislature, and so on to a variety of national agencies. Horizontally, the same classroom is linked to families, communities, and to their specific values and economic constraints as well as the more general values and economic constraints of the region, state, and nation. In this analysis, then, the vertical dimension is synonymous with an institutional apparatus, and the horizontal dimension, more diffuse, resembles the breadth of social life. Of course, the “vertical” is also social and the “horizontal” is also saturated with a variety of institutions. Hence, there is no need to reify any of this analysis, but, summing up, it is my supposition that every action and discursive exchange occurring in a classroom crystallizes a whole host of forces entering from the vertical and horizontal dimensions, and are simultaneously material and ideological. All these forces snap together instan-
taneously in the actions and words of a teacher, in the responses and
interactions between students, in the interactions between teacher, stu-
dent, and principal, in the mundane conversations among teachers, and so
on. From the perspective of the ethnographic observer, all this occurs as
if on a stage set with a script that has already been written by the forces
themselves but is being tinkered with at the moment of performance.
Perhaps my metaphors betray me: the word *script*, for instance, suggests
some sort of substantive or ontologically prior existence. Hence, the term
"snap" may be a valuable corrective, for it emphasizes an exact, unique
present but, simultaneously, how the present is constituted by the past.
The present is a snapping together.

Here's another go at finding another metaphor: the performance is
improvisational, by which I mean that the broad structure has been laid
down but each instance exploits a remaining elasticity, the degree of play
inherent in the structure, which is equivalent to the amount of invention
that the structure permits. But enough of these tedious abstractions. The
point is that any classroom event is an instantiation of the intersections of
the vertical and the horizontal, the material and the ideological, and
tracking through these vectors is the beginning of critical ethnographic
work. Of course, every project has its pragmatic limits, but do the limits
we accept help to reproduce the vertical and horizontal already in place?
Not directly, I suspect, but how does one measure the absence of a certain
kind of research?

*Digression:* I do not have any grand idealization about the impact of
critical analysis and research. I understand that even the most thorough-
going critique runs into the necessarily deaf ears of self-preservation.
Moreover, what is most firmly in place has uncanny and abundant
resources available to it that enable it to survive even the chaotic
disruptions of its own making. A case in point: U.S. businesses are
surviving the current accounting scandals by asking, at most, for limited
regulatory oversight, not for a deep overhauling. In short, peaceful
resolution always has pragmatic advantage over revolution. The latter
simply costs too much—namely, real pain. Hence, the revolutionary
moment, which is nothing less than the creation of the conditions through
which people can both experience and act upon limitlessness, does not
come to pass as long as limits entrench themselves by continuing to
convince us that they are preserving everyday life—which in fact they do.

Well, that seems like a long-winded way to say that each dissertation
chose a specific ratio between very reasonable, pragmatic limits versus
analyses of the vertical/horizontal, the material/ideological, and that ratio
itself was a measure of the difference between ethnography and critical ethnography.

Thus far, I have not talked about Horner's analyses of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity. I am very satisfied with his last sentence that indicates how preoccupations with these research strategies, when couched as matters of professional codes of ethical behavior, seem to miss the point. For me the starting point is elsewhere, and I have elaborated some of that above. So, I read Horner as smartly pointing out that when we frame inevitable research problems—those between researchers and participants or between unequal collaborators—as ethical problems to be solved by ethos or good character rather than as material relations of labor, which are infinitely difficult to resolve, we are working within academic traditions that might be better labeled humanist or liberal. The same is true when we choose the writing strategy of self-reflexivity because of its high "exchange value" in the academy and ignore the "use value" of a more straightforward discourse for other audiences that might read self-reflexive passages as irrelevant or, worse, self-indulgent. The dissertations described above were, in effect, not critical ethnographies. No one, including myself, made that sharp distinction. In this absence, what emerged was the discourse most "natural" to the academy, humanism or liberalism, and these discourses obscure the more progressive traditions that give rise to the "materialist perspective." The academy's investment in humanism is not a bad thing, certainly, but humanism becomes rather dodgy when it does not question the very material conditions that support it. For instance, can it adequately challenge the origins, intentions, and distributions of alumni bucks or address class bias—that is, the relations between universities/colleges (including community colleges) and, say, the poor? These material and ideological relations are what build the physical plant of the university; and although some of the university's curricula may challenge the vertical and horizontal matrices described earlier, ethnographic writing gets built upon these foundations, even when the subject matter or fieldsite is distinct from and perhaps even antagonistic to the liberalism and secular humanism of academia.

There is an interesting story, I suspect, behind the origins of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity and their current entrenchment in ethnographic research. To be honest, I am not the one to tell it. My version is highly impressionistic, but perhaps someone interested in disciplinary discourses might wish to take on such a project. The techniques of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity are not
new. Before they ever became normative—one might even say imperative—they served the scientific aims of ethnology. A scientific aim was particularly evident in collaboration, as one might expect. For instance, Robin Ridington’s and Dennis Hastings’ *Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe* provides an account of nineteenth-century collaborations in the name of ethnological science between Anglo-American and Native American anthropologists, particularly between Fletcher, a white woman, and La Flesche, a member of the Omaha. In contrast, self-reflexivity makes an even earlier appearance in travel literature, and survives the transition into nineteenth-century “scientific” ethnology. Levi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* fuses the two genres orgiastically, and, given its mid twentieth-century date (which is very late in the history of this transition) suggests that the transition was never completed. Self-reflexivity here mobilizes delirious desire, existential angst, heroic objectivism, and who knows what else from page to page.

But the supposed originary moment of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity, that moment that starts their normative phase, dates to the 1970s and 1980s. Here, the techniques are not serving science at all, but are functioning as counters to “objectivism” and colonialism in the name of “intersubjectivism” and postcolonialism. How did this happen? Bear with me as I labor through my version of the story. In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, to name only one of the classic texts of that time, the techniques are well on their way to institutionalization as politically loaded critiques of run-of-the-mill ethnography. Interestingly, the essays emphasize the discursive and representational dimensions of the techniques—that is, the *Poetics* side of the title. The *Politics* side runs more towards postcolonialism and, most notably, postmodernism; hence, the text was severely criticized by both strands of “objectivism”: scientism and Marxism.¹

Why doesn’t Marxism play a deeper role in the text, say, that of bothersome foundation that the authors are struggling to free themselves of? The reason, I suspect, is that the authors absorbed continental postmodernism mostly free of its Marxist context because, unlike the continental theorists of the time, Marxism was not a vital part of their educational/intellectual formation. Whereas many of the continental theorists were struggling against the remains of Marxism, the U.S. anthropologists had been formed in the context of another struggle—that is, between science and Geertz’s textualism of the 1960s. Symbolic anthropology, for instance, nimbly converted a culture’s rituals and beliefs into a kind of text whose intricacies and nuances could be opened
with tour de force “readings.” What was being opposed here was structuralism and its systematic (scientific) tendencies, as well as any other scientism such as a strict economic analysis. The techniques of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity, then, emerge from this textualist orientation (even as they represent strong critiques of Geertzian anthropology); hence, they are matters of discourse, representation, and ethics, and their enemies are scientific objectivity and vulgar Marxism. From this intellectual space and time, they moved into ethnographic theory—that is, ethnography’s “how to” handbooks. This inheritance forms every ethnographer working today, no matter the discipline. The reason, then, why Horner’s essay catches ethnographers by surprise is that the landscape of his language (“exchange value” versus “use value”; “materialist perspective”; “relations of labor”; and so on) derives more from a progressive tradition, call it Marxism, if you prefer. The point is that by calling on the progressive tradition he upends the starting place of today’s ethnography. In so doing, he separates quite definitively ethnographic practices as they have become institutionalized in the liberal humanist tradition from critical ethnographic practices. In shifting the grounds of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity, he affirms the progressive origins of the “critical” aspects of ethnography and makes clear its considerable difference from run-of-the-mill ethnography.

I have only one more thing to add. Whereas Horner’s main points can be actually put into practice, what follows is less concrete. I will phrase it somewhat flamboyantly in order to catch the attention of readers: To the best of my knowledge, there are no critical ethnographies—none whatsoever, in any field—and even if we were to incorporate Horner’s perspectives on collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity, a serious shortcoming inhibiting the realization of critical ethnography would still be in place. This shortcoming is more than the fact that the vertical/horizontal and the material/ideological, as described earlier, are put aside when the ethnographer faces pragmatic limits. Critical ethnographies that claim to study social injustice, the subaltern, resistance, empowerment, and so on have a hold of only the dragon’s tail. The rest of the dragon (let’s call it the operations of power) remain imagined or inferred. Critical ethnographies by definition are concerned with social justice; hence, they turn to sites of vulnerability. But in doing so, they are well on the road to failure. Indeed, critical ethnographies are deeply formulaic: locate a vulnerable, marginal group; indicate what symbolic and actual processes are used to resist the actions of power that enforce the vulnerability or marginality; and elicit, perhaps, collaboration, multivocality, and self-
reflexivity to lessen the ethnographer's own actions of power. This ethnographic formula, of course, is the result of a larger system—namely, its entrapment in an ideology of liberalism that has been evolving for several hundred years. Liberalism's imperative to liberate the human condition and to realize degrees of equality can only be accomplished in the abstract, for it knows well that in lifting true oppression it releases vengeance. Hence, liberalism can do nothing more than soften oppression because it cannot bare the excess that would otherwise emerge—indeed, no one can. One result is that ethnographies (whether critical or not) and cultural studies in general are deeply timid and insignificant. They cannot address the real crises of their own commitments—the liberal ideology they subscribe to—for if they did they would become conservative in the face of such excess. (Case in point: consider how many liberals became hawkish after 9/11.) Rather than address the crisis head on, they choose lesser sites of vulnerability, which are, indeed, worth studying (everything is worth studying, I suppose), thereby safeguarding the very tenets of the ideology.

But there is another explanation for the timidity and formulaic nature of critical ethnographies (and, again, cultural studies in general). To focus on the vulnerable is to focus only on the effects of the operations of power. But what about the operations themselves: how, why, and through what means does power exercise itself; with what rationalizations and deliberative processes; under what pressures and constraints; with what system of commonsense; with what degree of self-awareness; and with what kinds of contradictions? Metaphorically speaking, for every hour spent among the vulnerable, an hour needs to be spent in those sites that are, in part, responsible or complicit in the making of vulnerability. Both sites call for equal attention. Without this back-and-forth, simultaneous analysis, the operations of power become at most only imagined or inferred, straw figures or empty slots that are filled by the standard critiques and interpretations against which we construct the heroism of the vulnerable. For instance, giving "voice" to the vulnerable via collaboration and multivocality is a kind of symbolic uplift that may or may not heroize, but by itself tells us little about how the structures shaping vulnerability came to be. Moreover, the "voice" given is the ethnographer's own rational voice, not the voice of excess as described earlier. In sticking only to the perspectives of the vulnerable and dodging a simultaneous analysis of the operations of power, we lose the purpose of critical ethnography, which, I take it, is social change or, at the least, understanding the complexities of what it means to make social change. It occurs to
me that social change typically is the result of sly, subtle adjustments that somehow meet the needs of both the operations of power and the needs of the vulnerable. Only when the entire dragon, both tail and body, are treated unitarily as an intricate system, can we find those possible adjustments. In sum, I wonder if too much attention is being paid to collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity and not enough to dissecting the total dragon.

So, put up or shut up, what dragon are you slaying? Readers have loud voices, don’t they? Let me answer the challenge by saying that I am currently engaged in two projects that try to do what I describe above—that is, to understand simultaneously both a vulnerable community and the operations of power that have, in part, created the conditions of vulnerability. The first project is located in Chicago’s Humboldt Park area, which has a high concentration of Puerto Ricans. A group of us working in a variety of disciplines have made a commitment to study four broad areas: (1) the history of migration and transmigration between Chicago, the island, and other U.S. localities; (2) the economic and symbolic values of expressive culture; (3) the defense of space and the making of place, both privately and publicly; and (4) the evolution of political ideology and the current ideological discourse of the community’s elected leaders. Without going into the details, this is a qualitative and quantitative study of one of the most interesting communities in the U.S., interesting because of its four decades of consistent grass roots political organizing and the vast swings that its different political visions have taken. Our analysis concerns social change as embedded in the community’s shop keepers, cultural leaders, activists, elected politicians, gang members, the unemployed, and so on. Historically, the community has both struggled and profited from gentrification and our goal is to plumb as many contrary dimensions and disparate lifestyles as possible—including the lifestyles of the newest gentrifiers, Anglo yuppies (as the Puerto Ricans call them), and the social and economic forces that grip both groups. The point is that this study moves from the streets to city hall to state and national legislative bodies, from Puerto Ricans to Mexicans to Anglos in an attempt to understand, in very broad terms, the political, economic, cultural, and discursive dimensions of everyday life in a conflicted space.

A second project is located in Kosova in the Ministry of Health. Our interests are again multidisciplinary and very much concerned with state-building and the making of a new civil society under the heavy tutelage of the United Nations. The project represents a close-up examination of
a newly emerging bureaucracy, its difficulties and shortcomings during a time of intense and chaotic globalization. The current draft of our first essay is both collaborative and multivocal in so far as Kosovar officials in the ministry are our coauthors. Ethical concerns and relations of labor are secondary. What is primary is the need for an accurate yet acidic critique of post-Cold War foreign policy that utilizes humanitarian interventions into Bosnia and Kosova as arguments for interventionism in Iraq. The Balkans are not the success stories that the international community claims them to be. As I reflect now on the urgency and controversial nature of this project, so many of the ethnographic recommendations in how-to handbooks—and perhaps Horner's too—resemble unaffordable luxuries.

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Notes

1. See Sangren for one of the more acidic critiques of the text.
2. Žižek makes a similar point: "When today’s Left bombards the capitalist system with demands that it obviously cannot fulfil (Full employment! Retain the welfare state! Full rights for immigrants!), it is basically playing a game of hysterical provocation, of addressing the Master with a demand which will be impossible for him to meet, and will thus expose his impotence. . . . we, the academic Left, want to appear critical, while fully enjoying the privileges the system offers us. . . . we all know that these demands won’t be met, so we can be sure that nothing will actually change, and we’ll maintain our privileged status!" (60–61).
3. See Packer's discussion of liberalism.

Works Cited


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**Emploing Theory to Change Higher Education**

Robert Samuels

In my *JAC* article, "Žižek's Rhetorical Matrix: The Symptomatic Enjoyment of Postmodern Academic Writing," I examined the relationship between critical theory and the troubling working conditions affecting many compositionists in American universities. One of my central claims was that the stress on theory and cultural criticism in graduate schools has coincided with a growing level of economic exploitation in most areas of higher education. In fact, many graduate students in English, who have specialized in high theory and cultural studies, have found that once they enter the job market, there are very few tenure-track positions for people specializing in theory and cultural studies. One reason for this problem is that the same institutions that train these graduate students only hire people in traditional historical areas (Early Modern, Romanticism, Modernism, for example). In order to gain employment, many of these "theory-based" graduates have pursued jobs in the field of composition, only to find out that these jobs rarely grant tenure or reward faculty for research. To change this situation, I argued that, "we need a national movement that would defend the particular cultural knowledge, experience, expertise, and degrees defining the professional status of compositionists" (350). My call for a national movement is based on the fact that we have a national academic labor pool that thrives on producing a surplus of qualified faculty members who are forced to take low paying