genuine class consciousness, in which all of the persons who sell their labor to live can elaborate their opposition to all forms of systematic inequality.

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Works Cited


Postmodern Ethnographies

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The "lone ethnographer" that Bruce Horner refers to in his recent article in *JAC* is drawn from Renato Rosaldo's caricature of the "classical anthropologist style of analysis most influentially exemplified by Ruth Benedict in Patterns of Culture" (27), and this caricature depicts "perceptions of disciplinary norms that guided graduate training until the late 1960s" in anthropology (30). "Lone ethnographers" worked from a presumption that culture was a homogenous set of shared patterns of behavior isolated to a group of isolated people. "By defining culture as a set of shared meanings, classic norms of analysis make it difficult to study zones of difference within and between cultures. From the classical perspective, cultural borderlands appear to be annoying exceptions rather than central areas for inquiry" (28). Because culture was viewed by the "lone ethnographer" as a bounded set of patterned behaviors, these behaviors could be tainted by the presence and influence of the ethnographer, so detachment was mandatory.

My point in revisiting Rosaldo is this: Horner creates a useful distinction between the lone ethnographer and the critical ethnographer, but does not contextualize them in relation to other kinds of ethnography. The critical ethnography that Horner refers to collapses a variety of
postmodern ethnographies that are differently influenced by the values of the classical, lone ethnographer. Yet, the dilemmas that postmodern ethnographers face are quite different depending on the kind of postmodern ethnography they’re doing. When trying to situate my own ethnographic practices, I need to develop a framework for types of postmodern ethnography, one that I’ll describe below. Though the postmodern researchers I cite below may not characterize their methodologies as I do, this framework helps to illustrate a few points relevant to this article and should be seen as something not readily applicable beyond the scope of this response.

Not all ethnography needs to be critical to be socially just and ethical. For example, participatory action research, inter-institutional ethnography, and “strict” ethnography can be ethical, can involve invited intervention, and can include collaboration and multivocal forms of writing, but they are not critical ethnographies.

Participatory action research (PAR) as it’s used in community organizations and workplaces is invited by the organization (Johannsen). For example, Shankar Shankaran “was the supervisor of young local managers who had to take on greater responsibilities rapidly to achieve the challenging objectives set by top management” in their Japanese multinational corporation in Singapore. To do this, this scholar helped the “managers to ‘learn to learn’ by using the challenges arising at the workplace to develop ‘soft’ management skills in addition to their ‘hard’ engineering skills to become more effective managers.” In the end, the scholar and managers worked together to learn more effective styles of communication. In education, PAR is akin to teacher-research (Ray). Beverly Johnson offers this definition of PAR in education: “Action research is deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted. It is characterized by spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition.” Generally, in PAR the researcher is asked to be an outside consultant or is already a participating member in the organization or school who then deeply immerses him/herself in the institution, school, or community for quite some time. The scholar makes suggestions for better managerial, organizational, fiscal, pedagogical, or communicative practices in single-authored reports. PAR is an ethical postmodern ethnography because it’s focused on problem-solving through constructive intervention in an interpolated culture, but the study’s design and reported findings are not the same as critical ethnography.
Inter-institutional ethnography is political in its motivations and research questions, but non-interventionary. It examines in detail the institutional structures and practices that influence the lived realities of a constituency, sometimes taking a social-ecology framework developed in science and technology studies (Grabill). This kind of ethnography begins with a social problem, then traces manifestations of institutional decision making related to this problem. Elizabeth Britt's ethnography, *Conceiving Normalcy: Rhetoric, Law, and the Double Binds of Infertility* explores the problem of (in)fertility as it is addressed in a Massachusetts statute that "requires most insurers to cover medical treatments of infertility to the same extent that they cover other procedures related to pregnancy" (3). Britt describes her work as a "multisited ethnography," one that's "appropriate for research that interrogates the relationships among institutions and between the local and global" structures in which social problems are strung (159). John Monberg is currently exploring democratic participation as influenced by monopolies such as U.S. Steel and AOL/Time Warner to show policy makers, decision makers, and community organizations how they might better create participatory forums. And, Jeffrey Grabill has explored the Western District Adult Basic Education and other community literacy programs to develop a notion of institutional change and critique. By nature of the questions asked and potential usefulness of the findings for decision and policy makers, inter-institutional ethnographies are ethical and postmodern though not critical. The writing produced in both PAR and inter-institutional forms of postmodern ethnography will not be collaborative and may never be self-reflexive, but both types assume that culture can be viewed in terms of borderlands, that knowledge is socially constructed, and that the researcher can create knowledge that is helpful in alleviating problems these institutions or constituencies face. The researcher's intervention into these practices rests more in the writing delivered or published, but not as much in the day-to-day operations of organizations. This writing often includes specific recommendations for changing practices and is read by audiences who find it useful for their decision-making practices.

Strict ethnography, where the researcher is strictly an observer and unobtrusive participant, may be politically motivated, but takes in its design an even more detached participant observation researcher role (Scott; DiPardo; Besnier). Strict ethnographers are ethical and politically astute by situating their research questions in response to daily problems of community members, but they do not intervene in the practices of
community members. In this research, the scholar remains the detached observer in the day-to-day lives of the community members. Yet, even the strict anthropologist is different from the lone ethnographer—strict ethnographers are postmodern in their notions of knowledge being socially constructed by individuals in their everyday living, and by their notions of culture occurring in the borderlands where cultures meet, overlap, and sometimes clash. They’re interested in problems that community members have as they negotiate asymmetrical power relations. Though their texts would not be considered self-reflexive, they do have methodology chapters wherein they report specifics about data collection and analytical frameworks.

Critical ethnography is different from all the above because it begins and ends with the problems that community members deem important for study; the researcher’s activist intervention is important to the process, but only when invited by the community members; collaboration may take place at various stages of the research process; terms for reciprocity may be openly negotiated throughout the process and are reported as part of the methodology; self-reflexivity is some part of the process but works in conjunction with social reflexivity (Cushman and Guisnatao-Monberg). Not all intervention is activist, however—invited activism requires that the scholar takes a stand (for example, through writing, direct confrontation or negotiation, and liaison or proxy roles) with community members against systematic forms of oppression they experience (Brantlinger; Fortun; Weis and Fine; Cushman, Struggle). Critical ethnography is more than an intellectual stance taken vis-à-vis the crafting of prose as Carspecken describes it. The activist scholar facilitates community members’ goals by sharing access to cultural, material, and institutional resources. And, here Horner’s points about the materialist practices of ethnography can and do make most sense: a critical ethnographer can make apparent the material realities of the research situation, the terms of reciprocity, and the production of texts in order to disclose the material relations that influence the knowledge-making process.

In short, a postmodern ethnography can blend any of these types of ethnography together as the situation demands, but still not be a critical ethnography. I’m thinking here of Ralph Cintron’s Angel’s Town and Lindquist’s A Place to Stand; both use strict anthropological data collection processes with a self-reflexive writing style. Both Cintron’s and Lindquist’s works are smart, postmodern ethnographies, interesting and well written, ethical in their data-collection techniques and interactions with community members, and they’re centered on problems, questions,
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and rhetorical practices of community members. These are not critical ethnographies because they did not involve the research in activist intervention in ameliorating the social problems or positively altering the participants’ material conditions. And they don’t need to be. If we demand that all postmodern ethnographies should be critical ethnographies, we’ve fundamentally misunderstood ethnographic methodology. And while I agree with Horner that critical ethnographers could benefit from adopting a materialist approach, I do not think that all postmodern ethnography does.

Critical ethnographies are more rare than postmodern ethnographies because the kind of activism a critical ethnography demands is a highly situated practice and arises from invitations by community members. That is, one can not propose to do activist research in a community without being invited by community members who are located in a physical space and have day-to-day material needs at stake. When it comes to activist research, I have to agree with Horner that if “we imagined critical [activist] ethnographic work in terms of labor, in the sense of material practices aimed at altering the physical and social environment, then questions of time and commitment and pay and results would be at the forefront in how research is planned and conducted” (570). Because community members invite intervention, and because this intervention often centers on practices that help community members positively alter their physical and social environment and their opportunities and access to resources, then critical ethnographers need to account for the materialist realities of labor used to produce these texts and the capital that accrues from them. However, little is gained from asking a scholar doing, say, cross-institutional ethnography from “articulating the ethics of labor, understood as work on and with the social-as cultural material practice” (581).

Terese Guinsatao-Monberg’s cross-institutional ethnography of the Filipino American National Historical Society (FAHNS) studies a national organization that sponsors bi-annual conferences, Chicago-based events, and Midwest regional conferences (51-52). Her goal is to present “a notion of rhetoric based on hybridity to better understand how historically underrepresented groups have used rhetoric to: intervene in dominant modes of public persuasion; create new rhetorical spaces for civic engagement; and renegotiate hegemonic forms of ‘belonging’ to create new forms of cultural citizenship” (vii). To study the texts published by this national organization, Guinsatao-Monberg faced a methodological problem: “because FAHNS is a geographically dispersed
rhetorical community that situates its texts within a history that has not always been accurately documented, (re)constructing the social context surrounding FAHNS has posed several methodological challenges” (45). Guinsatao-Monberg participated in this organization, which “calls itself a ‘community-based’ historical society,” by presenting papers at their conferences and being a participant observer in their sponsored events. Her papers delivered at their conferences show her active intervention in how the community views itself and participation in the practices that the community values. The titles include, but aren’t limited to, “History and Nostalgia: Rediscovering Filipino American Identity as the Third Generation” and “Reinventing the University: Rediscovering Yourself as a Filipino American Scholar.” She also conducted oral histories with key players in FAHNS and its affiliated organizations. Each participant who offered her an interview was sent a tape recording of it along with the transcript to allow him or her to change or elaborate any of their statements after which they signed a consent form allowing Guinsatao-Monberg to quote from these transcripts as public documents.

To my mind, this is a postmodern inter-institutional ethnography: Guinsatao-Monberg intervenes in the rhetorical constructions of identity and possibilities of community members and was invited to their conferences to do so; she’s socially reflexive and self-reflexive; her text is multivocal; data collection is ethical and collaborative; and though the write-up is single authored, it has to be because it’s a dissertation (more on this point below). So how could we claim that Guinsatao-Monberg fails “to be materialist enough in [her] conception of the work of ethnography” (Horner 561)? First, this “‘community based’ historical society” refers to itself ironically as having many and varied community bases that may or may not have material needs. It has no one locale or site or place, and its material reality is manifested mostly in its public documents, its literacy artifacts and conferences. In fact, she could not have intervened in the organization more than she did because (a) she was not invited to do so; (b) because she had no material or labor contributions to offer them other than what she did; and (c) because to presume she did have something more to offer would have slipped her into a noblesse-oblige position.

When interviewed, the participants collaborated in the production of a public document. The interviews, as public documents, could exist as shared, co-constructed realities that do not infringe on copyright; thus, their material realities and the labor used to produce them (mostly the scholar’s labor) were reciprocal and ethical. The text is multivocal by
virtue of including quotes from these oral histories, and the participant observation was interventionary to the extent it could be given the material realities of this site. This multivocal text may or may not be useful to the community because it is a dissertation, though the writing that this scholar contributed at conferences may have been quite useful especially insofar as it helped to produce an institutional history for FAHNS.

Publishing, and the material realities of publishing, promotion, and tenure, for the critical ethnographer are based still on the lone researcher "—that is, non-materialist— model of ethnographic work" (Horner 568). How can risks be taken with texts and models of publishing when one needs tenure and that tenure depends upon a scholarly contribution to an existing field of knowledge? How can a freshly minted PhD eschew the exchange value of a single-authored text (especially in traditional English departments)? The problem is that a critical ethnographer, especially one who is just beginning a career, is inextricably bound by material realities of the university's knowledge production process that shape the kind of writing that is rewarded. Yes, collaboratively authored, multivocal texts have become more common, but their weight in a tenure cases varies greatly from one institution and department to the next.

A critical ethnographer new in his/her career will feel pressure to produce such a text despite the calls for collaborative publishing and experimental writing. I agree with Horner to a point on this topic: "Status is garnered either for the authors' daring or for display . . . of the privileged position the authors occupy, a position that enables them to engage in such daring" (575). Risk-taking in experimental writing of critical ethnographies is much easier when one is tenured or in a secure academic position. In 1996 I graduated with my PhD and published my first essay, an experimental piece that reported on critical ethnographic methodologies ("Rhetorician"). I did not get a secure job and missed the opportunity for many MLA interviews because of that article. One colleague who sat on a hiring committee for her major university told me that the chair of the department read aloud one line from that article, scoffed, and said "we will not interview anyone who uses the phrase 'do da. do da' in her writing." I was eventually hired at Michigan State University, after three years as a lecturer and two as an assistant professor at the University of Colorado at Denver. Yet, here, too, one colleague confided that she did not include my 1996 article in my application materials "because it was a bit too irreverent." Of course, I was grateful for her discretion, but the point is that risk-taking early in one's career may well mitigate against
earning a secure position in the university. Though that article won the Braddock Award, that award is not highly valued in traditional English departments. For the time being, then, the “privileging of the exchange value of the textual commodity [of a traditional dissertation and single-authored book]” will have to remain as it is. This does not preclude critical ethnographies from taking place at the dissertation and early career stages of professors, but it does mean that little is gained from reporting on the materialist labor practices of their writing, or from experimental and collaborative writing for that matter. Indeed, the more exchange value a new professor’s writing can accrue, the more likely that professor will be in a position to leverage change through research and writing practices when the career is secured.

Thus, as Horner observes, “new burdens of ethical responsibility are simply added to the traditional ideal of the lone ethnographer, leading to seemingly tortuous dilemmas” (564). Yes, and Horner has done much to reveal these dilemmas with his piece. Using his ideas as a springboard, my response aims to elaborate related points. (I have to agree with all the problems pointed out in Horner’s discussion of self-reflexivity and have proposed with Terese Guinsatao Monberg a notion of social reflexivity instead.) While the ethical responsibilities of critical ethnography should include the material realities and labor practices in which researchers and participants are situated, there are few critical ethnographies. Why there are so few critical ethnographers perplexes me still; though many ethical and socially just ethnographies exist that—by virtue of their design—would not necessarily have to heed Horner’s call to rearticulate the practices of labor, or heed others’ calls for multivocalism, collaboration, and self-reflexivity. My larger concern is that too often postmodern ethnographers have had their work dismissed as unethical, or have been unfairly portrayed by the caricature of “lone ethnographer” because they do not follow a critical, activist ethnographic approach. Ethnographies must be responsive to research settings and participants’ needs, but that does not mean that one kind of ethnography (or methodology, for that matter) will suit all studies.

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**Works Cited**


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**The Timidities of Ethnography: A Response to Bruce Horner**

Ralph Cintron

This response will not offer a close reading of Bruce Horner’s recent essay in *JAC*, “Critical Ethnography, Ethics, and Work: Rearticulating