This essay tries to be true to a podium talk I presented at a conference in March, 2008. But, of necessity, certain consolidation liberties are taken. Beginning with a brief and broad treatment of ethnography as a paired written representation of and lengthy personal experience in a particular social world, I move to consider why the former, the text, has been so infrequently examined in lieu of the latter, the so-called method. I then move to ethnographic texts themselves and look at what I take to be some broad changes the seem apparent – particularly within the organizational ethnography domain – over the past 20 or so years. Alongside these changes comes the emergence of several distinct genres treated only lightly (or not at all) in Tales of the Field. I end by considering what seems to have stayed the course in ethnography and why.

Keywords: ethnography; text; textwork; culture; tales

This essay is shaped by a ceremonial talk. In the talk, I invited my audience to pay more attention to the spirit of my remarks than to my words because a pulpit performance allows and encourages one to take certain liberties they might not take in cold print. Here, however, I must reverse the prescription. Text is all I can offer. Whatever spirit remains—or what a reader might take away from a text beyond the words it lays down—is something of an open question. It is however a question not much considered by organizational researchers for reasons well-worth exploring.

On the Importance of Writing . . .

To get quickly to the heart of the matter, the shameful truth of any research trade is that we traffic in communications and communications implies that we intend to alter the views of our readers. From this perspective, our task is then rhetorical. We attempt to convince others that we have discovered something of note, made unusual sense of something, or, in weak form, simply represented something well. This is to say that a good part of our writing is both explicitly and implicitly designed to persuade others that we know what we are talking about and they ought therefore to pay attention to what we are saying.

Things get interesting here because, when it comes to writing, the literature in organiza- tional studies and elsewhere in the social sciences is relatively silent. While our findings, theories, and methods are well inscribed in an ever-increasing number of journals and
books, there has been little attention given to just how these various writings persuade. For example, how ethnographers get from field notes to monographs or how survey researchers get from informant responses and statistical tests to research reports is rarely discussed in print. Because some writings generate a good deal more reader response (altered views) than others, it seems reasonable to ask why this might be so and inquire as to what authorial styles (and stances) lie behind such success.

To some, this may appear as a curious question because it is not clear what examining our texts might mean. For many of us, textual study is something of a blind spot because we are trained typically to read through our texts to what they say about the world they present and not to examine them for the compositional features they display. After all, most of us have little training or aptitude for analyzing metaphors, deciphering tropes, recognizing voice, or examining rhetorical ploys. Literary practices are terra incognita. Perhaps, for many of us, syntax is not about grammar but is something a smoker might pay and lexicons are not special vocabularies but right-wing political pundits. Were it otherwise, we would be going about our work in literature departments.

Yet, even if we knew something and cared about such matters, the close analysis of text might still seem strange for it would contradict what we think we ought to be doing. We should be off doing studies and examining various research literatures for what they have to say that might inform and direct our scholarly interests and projects. The student who wants to sit back and worry about the plots and subplots in an ethnographic report or detect the presence of irony (if any) in population ecology studies would seem a bit odd. Researchers should be out doing research not in the library doing some amateur or silly “lit crit” on the words and works of our trade.

Even if we were to overcome these reservations, such work might still seem—at first blush—a bit embarrassing and hardly worth the effort. It is one thing to attempt to decode the narrative structure, characterization techniques, plot lines, and authorial voices in the work of Jane Austen, Saul Bellow, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel García Márquez, and Joan Didion (or any other acknowledged star of the literary scene) but it is another matter entirely to worry about the same things in the prosaic and seemingly rule-governed work of organizational researchers who, informed by current theory, presumably get their effects by constructing texts stuffed with facts drawn from the use of well-established methods and put forth in clear, unadorned language exhibiting something close to a style-of-no-style.

It may also be that our silence rests on the vague but unexamined feeling that if we did start looking closely at the ways our major and minor work are put together, we might not like what we find; a fear that if we looked closely at our use of imagery, phrasing, allusion, analogy, and claims of authority, we might discover some literary chicanery or authorial trickery that would undercut our ability to make claims about the worth (and truth) of our findings and theories. If style were shown to play an important persuasive role in research reports, a corrosive relativism might overcome us and authors of organization studies would become players in a mere game of words, trapped in the same “prisonhouse of language” thought to be occupied by poets, novelists, and not-so-cunning memoirists. From this perspective, it is best to imitate the ostrich and not look.

Of course if I took any of these claims seriously, I would not be writing this piece. Surely it is not too difficult to accomplish at least a modest literary reading of our organizational texts. If we can handle matrix algebra, model complex path-dependencies, and produce
defensible content readings of interview transcripts, we can certainly learn some rudimen-
tary literary skills. We might perhaps become better readers in the process. Reading is, after
all, a good deal of what we do as reputed scholars. And, closer to the matters at hand, most
of us would readily admit that we often spend as much if not more time writing and end-
lessly rewriting our research reports than we do gathering the empirical materials on which
our writings are presumably based. Since writing (and reading) is such a large part of our
research endeavors, to not look closely at such everyday work seems rather myopic.

As to the claim that we have no “real writers” in our midst and thus need not worry about
how organizational researchers generate their texts, experience, and evidence suggest oth-
erwise. Indeed we have a number of quite convincing and stylish writers in our field who
have put forth some highly persuasive prose. A short list of influential writers might include
Erving Goffman, Karl Weick, Jim March, and a long list of others who are more or less
specific to readers in particular subfields of organization studies. These are powerful writers
and some of them are no doubt responsible for drawing us into the field in the first place.
Blame them perhaps but their writings have altered the way we see the world.

Misguided too is the worry that if we examine the rhetoric displayed in our texts, we will
sink the ship and deep-six its cargo. We need not be so cautious. To seriously take this posi-
tion is akin to arguing that literary criticism will destroy the novel. Literary criticism has
been around for ages, and the texts addressed and at least partially opened-up by such work
remain works of value even if we now read them more skeptically and attach a wider range
of meanings to the inscribed. Certainly good and bad criticism can be found, but it’s at least
arguable that such criticism has in a variety of ways improved (or at least changed) the
novel. So too it’s potential for organization studies.²

There are then good reasons for looking closely at the writing practices at work in orga-
nization studies. Such reasons stand behind and ground all that I have to say below. While I
focus on textual change and stability in a field of study I know best, I do think a similar sort
of approach to other fields in organizational research would prove instructive and valuable.
The conceit I hold should now be apparent: if a literary perspective helps us better under-
stand what is going on in one domain, it will help in others too.

Fieldwork and Textwork

My remarks that follow concern ethnography, a practice I take to be concerned with the
study and representation of culture (with a distinctly small c). It is a field many claim to be
the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences. It exists there-
fore somewhere in academic limbo-land (or purgatory) as a storytelling institution posses-
sing a good deal of scholarly legitimacy whose works are commissioned and approved by
the leading educational institutions of the day. It claims a sort of documentary status by the
fact that somebody actually goes out beyond the ivory towers of employment and comfort
to live with and live like those who are studied.

These are matters that are more or less given. They are not up for grabs. One becomes an
ethnographer by going out and doing it (and writing it up). Fieldwork of the immersive sort
is by and large definitional of the trade. If one cannot do lengthy and sustained fieldwork
among others who are often initially recalcitrant and suspicious of those who come
uninvited into their lives, one has no business doing ethnography (and best be advised to take up a nice academic career in economic sociology or experimental social psychology).³

Yet, fieldwork practices are also biographically and situationally varied—spectacularly so. Studies differ in terms of working style, place, pace, time, and evidentiary approaches. They also vary by textual styles and, like fieldwork approaches, these styles change over time as new ways of doing old things and old ways to do new things emerge and establish a hold on at least some ethnographers. What I wish to consider here are textual practices of the kind I explored in Tales of the Field some 20 or so years ago. My interest is directed to a few compositional and orientation shifts in ethnography. The stance is both appreciative and critical of the textwork associated with ethnography and thus is less a primer on what kind of writing we should be taking up than a look at what kind of choices we have today at our fingertips.

Textwork is a suturing together of two words meant to convey that writing is a labor-intensive craft and represents a good deal of what we do as intrepid ethnographers. As noted a few paragraphs back, there remains in ethnography as well as other organizational research fields a curious silence concerning textwork—at least compared to the fairly recent upsurge of method texts on fieldwork and qualitative research generally, a collection of work that might well fill an airport bookstore. This is not to say we do not know how to talk about textwork. Indeed we can easily hold forth when asked how we write. To wit, when asked how I write, I might well respond by saying:

I usually get up around seven or so and get a cup of coffee and bagel, fetch and glance at the morning papers and then go before eight to that sleek computer that sits on my desk for an uninterrupted three solid hours of work, usually the most productive part of my day. I take a break around eleven and gather the snail mail and read my email. Then it’s back to work – resisting by sheer strength of character the seductions of this mail. I quit around one or so, get lunch and read the morning papers. Then back to the desk for another couple of hours until my concentration inevitably fades and I sag away from the desk around five, go for a run, take a shower and begin, drink in hand, to read over whatever it is I was writing during the day.

Piece of cake. Right? The problem of course is that I get a day like this once every 2 or 3 months. I do have a family, classes to teach, a dog to walk, administrative duties to attend to, students to meet, social attractions that call, and so on. However, I do think my fictional day is rather typical of the help and advice we give when someone asks how to write.

More importantly, however, I think my altogether mundane but representative response suggests part of the problem surrounding how textwork is treated because it presents the image of a writer who writes alone in splendid isolation—a kind of ideological trope we ethnographers so often take-for-granted. It features the model of the hard-working scholar in quiet quarters (or alienated artist in the garret) with the doors closed and locked. As such, this monastic image suppresses the social and contextual aspects of writing that includes reading other writers, discussing our ideas of content and style with colleagues, the various shaping roles that are played by coauthors, critics, reviewers, readers, friends, relatives, (dreaded) thesis advisors both present and past, and the writing to and for others in a
language whose grammar, tone, voice, genre, and figures of speech literally encode collectivity.

Such collectivity is still not much talked about among ethnographers. Pandora’s box is open of course (and has been for some time) but not rummaged through or inspected closely for we continue to give the lion’s share of our attention to the much mythologized fieldwork that stands behind our writing rather than the textwork that carries it to our readers.\(^4\) This of course is not what I had hoped for in my imagined post-*Tales of the Field* world but this does seem to be the state of the union circa 2009. Given our condition, let me then sketch out something of a quick literary perspective on ethnography as it has shifted over the past 20 years and then consider a few apparently stable features of the ethnographic literature on which we still hang our hats.

**Ethnography Past and Present**

At the outset, I must say that the three categories I stuffed ethnographic writings in two decades ago (and the accounts I used to accompany such category conceits) seem to have held up reasonably well over the years. Realism is still with us (albeit in slightly different forms). Confessional tales are fewer in number perhaps, but confessional accounts are now rather routinely attached to the ethnography itself rather than reduced to appendices, turgid and one-off method chapters, or separate, follow-up monographs apparently intended to humanize the initial ethnographic report.\(^5\) Impressionist tales have fragmented into several emerging styles partly as a result of the swift moving expansion of cultural studies within the university (the “cult studs” of our day) and the continuing experimentation with ethnographic formats. Notable also is a resurgence of theory-driven writings in ethnography and the rise of ethnographic work that advances a strong normative point of view running through an entire text rather than locating moral concerns as rather circumspect expressions appearing in an author’s stylized preface or bracketing such concerns in a concluding, reform-minded section or chapter. Before examining what I take to be several distinctive “new” forms of ethnographic writing, however, I want to note a few broad shifts in the realism trade.

In line with modified and evolving new genres for putting forth ethnographic studies comes greater topical variety across all ethnographic forms. This is no doubt partly a result of the spread of the distinctly modern idea of culture as something constructed (and construed)—thick or thin—by all self-identifying groups. Everyone these days, except for those who bowl alone, has a culture and more likely has several cultures from which to draw meaning. Hence, we have lively accounts of exotics at home as well as exotics abroad, culture as constructed by motorcycle gangs, culture as constructed by art scene aficionados in lower Manhattan, and culture as constructed by those abducted by aliens and mercifully returned to us.

Relatedly, ethnography is no longer confined to single-site studies of supposedly isolated or conveniently distinct and isolated peoples (the Cultural Island approach). With the rise and expansion of vast human migrations, vanishing natives, market globalization, enhanced information, communication and transportation technologies, the anthropologizing of the West, ethnography has become rather deterritorialized. With such broad change, comes an inevitable and yet rather unprecedented shuffling and interpenetration of modes of
thought and action the world over. Thus, the emergence of what Marcus (1998) calls “multi-site ethnography” where the same people or groups of people are tracked across the different settings that make up their life worlds. Consider here, Christina Nippert-Eng’s (1995) wonderful study of integration and separation of home and work or Louise Lamphere’s (1992) detailed treatment of how the new immigrants from Southeast Asia are fairing in various communities and workplaces across the United States. Another superb example of multisite work is Jane Desmond’s (1999) *Staging Tourism*, a nuanced analysis of the construction and popular appeal of “exotic” tourist entertainment in Hawai‘i across lu’aus, hula shows, surf venues and animal theme parks.

There are also inventive ways of doing realism that include a greater role for the ethnographic subject. This is a kind of Baktin-oriented experimental style such as Ruth Behar’s (2003) emotionally riveting tale of Esperanza, a Mexican street peddler crossing back and forth across the U.S. border told in her own voice. Notable too is Paul Rabinow’s (1996) voice-giving strategy in *Making PCR* where celebrity biotech researchers and entrepreneurs seem almost to take over the text. Such ways of presenting ethnography suggest that the career paths of those we study is currently on a roll—from savage to primitive to subject to native to informant to interlocutor to, ultimately, coauthor.

In the midst of these innovations in tale telling, the burden of ethnography—to represent culture—has become heavier, messier, and less easily located in time or space. The faith in an ethnographic holism—always something of an ethnographic fiction akin to Newton’s frictionless space—has continued to retreat along with all those quaint claims of writers to have captured the “spirit” of a people, the “ethos” of a university, or the “culture” of a nation or organization. Still, the trope of holism remains strong and dangerously seductive as a kind of literary suction pump, a rhetorical imperative believed to be necessary to achieve closure to a study. This said, it nevertheless seems to me there is less tidiness and general portraiture in ethnography these days than in times past.

This lack of closure is particularly apparent in ethnographic work concerned with representations of both personal and social identity. Attempting to depict in writing what it is like to be somebody else—arguably, ethnography’s main claim to fame—has never been a simple matter but today it appears almost Herculean, given the problematic nature of identity in the contemporary world. A certain instability, rupture, uncertainty, and fluidity of meaning attends then to some of the best of contemporary ethnography.

Another shift in ethnography stems from the “epistemological hypochondria” that Geertz famously suggested in 1988 had attached itself to ethnography. This seems to have spread widely and deeply throughout most ethnographic research communities and most of us would probably now agree that all ethnographies owe a good deal of their persuasive power and wonder to contingent social, historical, and institutional conditions. And no meta-argument, reflexive turn, or navel-gazing can effectively question these contingencies. Yet, the hypochondriacs like me who soldier on rather than taking to bed have mostly come to recognize that this sublime contingency matters little when it comes to putting ink to paper because any particular ethnography must still make its points by the same means that were available before the contingency was recognized and absorbed. These means are of course the old ones that include the hard work of putting forth evidence, providing interpretations (and defending them), inventing and elaborating analogies, invoking authorities, working through examples, marshalling one’s tropes, and so on (and on).
The nature of ethnographic evidence, interpretation, authority, style may indeed have changed—more modestly I think than radically—but the appeal of any single work remains tied to the specific arguments made within a given text and referenced to particular, not general, substantive, methodological, and narrative matters. The point here is that we now can assert the textuality of ethnographic facts and the factuality of ethnographic texts at the same time. The two lay in quite different domains and hence the work of ethnography goes on in much the same way as it did before textuality came into vogue because evidence (including I-witnessing) must still be offered up to support a claim in such a way that at least some readers are convinced that an author has something worth saying.

Changes in attitude and reader response are of course possible and what is persuasive to one generation of ethnographers may look ridiculous to the next because every generation on coming of age has some stake in showing their ancestors—dead or alive—to be airheads. However, the simultaneous yet paradoxical characterization of the textuality and the factuality of ethnography vanishes with the realization that the practice of ethnography—as continually carried on by successive generations—does not remain the same because the facts, methods, theories, genres of ethnography remain the same but because in the midst of change some audience still looks to it for the performance of a given task. And in this case, an audience continues to look to ethnography for the close study and representation of culture as lived by a particular people, in particular places, doing particular things at particular times.

I doubt this mandate is likely to fade away anytime soon. It is one however that accommodates—if not encourages—a good deal more topical variety, methodological imagination, and stylistic diversity than was the case when Tales of the Field was published. Moreover, as younger researchers routinely and rightly question older (and authoritarian) definitions and portraits of culture, more subject matter is created and more opportunities can be taken to breach traditional disciplinary and substantive boundaries. It seems safe to say that there are now fewer rules for ethnographers to follow but more work to be done. This, to me at least, seems far preferable to a situation of less work and more rules.

This is not however a state of affairs that warrants joyful celebration and dancing in the streets. A predicament surfaces because students today (novices or veterans) must negotiate with their teachers (and editors) over the nature of the so-called standard model of ethnography—the single-site, year in the field, one-tribe-one-scribe, objectivist, rather detached model. We must now self-consciously select, defend, blend, stretch, combine various ethnographic templates or genres when constructing a career-making (or breaking) dissertation project or when submitting one’s work for publication to editors whose appreciation and knowledge of ethnographic means and products are often quite traditional and unbending. On top of this, more and more work is produced by those coming from beyond the usual ethnographic parade grounds of anthropology and sociology. Ethnography these days comes from students almost anywhere—cultural studies, engineering, journalism, business and medical schools, media and communication departments, observers and historians of technology, urban affairs, ethnomusicology, women’s studies, criminal justice, and many other fields too numerous to list. Such is the nature of the game today and to be a serious (and strong) player in this game requires a good deal more textual sophistication than in times past. This is not however some insurmountable barrier or game-ending problem for I submit—and have argued elsewhere—that textual sophistication can be (and has been)
learned by many and will, in the end, help produce sharp, exciting, convincing, and ultimately useful ethnographic work.

Within this world of modest change, there are at least three rather distinguishable ethnographic forms or templates (and temptations) now apparent that I more or less bypassed when writing *Tales of the Field*. Each draws to differing degrees on realist, confessional, and impressionist conventions, and each has something of a traceable history within ethnographic traditions. However, the “new” textual categories marked breathlessly below strike me as more than passing fancies, hopelessly blurred genres, or isolated, one-off experiments. They appear to me to have lasting value and may well be with us for some time.

### Structural Tales

This is a template favored by critical scholars, Marxist or not, who argue—usually with just cause—that many ethnographies suffer from a myopia that sharply delineates behavior at close range while obscuring the proximate and less visible structures and processes that both engender and sustain lines of behavior. It is analytically sophisticated, determined, ambitious, and theoretically focused. In a way, it is also something of a back-to-the-future form of ethnography for the roots of critical tales run deep. In anthropology, for example, the Manchester School of Max Gluckman set off a long run of critical ethnographies aimed at uncovering the workings and inner logic of political and legal systems. In sociology, Alvin Gouldner’s *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954) is a vintage but paradigmatic structural tale.

Those pushing for a renewed interest in building, borrowing, and elaborating on theory argue that the narrow definition (if not fetishizing) of fieldwork denies the legitimacy of social observation beyond the tête-à-tête of interpersonal interaction. Other sources of information are equally important thus ethnographers must broaden their reach and refuse to reduce ethnography to representation of perspectives or mentalities that are not contextualized by, for example, class, race, gender, and political-economic conditions. Representative and recent work in this tradition include, prominently, Michael Burawoy’s (1979, 1999) studies of labor processes at home and abroad; Calvin Morrill’s (1995) provocative examination of conflict among top corporate managers; Carol Chetkovich’s (1997) grounded analysis race, gender, and affirmative action in the Oakland Fire Department; James Barker’s (1999) theory building efforts in the domain of what he calls “concertive control”; and James Tucker’s (1999) look at the role played by folk therapy to smooth over disputes in what he calls “post-bureaucratic” organizations. I am particular fond of a work by Adreas Glaeser (2000)—what he refers to as an example of “analytic ethnography”—that looks at West and East Berlin police agencies who were merged after the fall of the wall wherein the critique of the West by the East (and vise versa) is a major theme but highly contextualized by the systemic social, political, and economic differences marking each agency.

To be clear, I am not saying that authors of structural tales do not attend to what they witness or do not bring theory, grand and small, to task when evidence is scanty. Fieldwork in this domain is as hard slogging as in any ethnographic domain, but the tales that result are noticeably distinct and keyed to certain disciplinary matters that extend into but also beyond the studied scene. For example, two recent ethnographic works in organizational studies do
a thorough job of standing some well-received organizational theories on their head while bringing in other ones, suitably tailored, to bear on the problems at hand. One is by Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda (2006) and takes a close look at contract workers—of both blue and gold collars—in Silicon Valley. Here, Barley and Kunda challenge conventional economic (and functional) understandings of contract work. The other is Michel Anteby’s (2008) superb account of a dying occupational community formed among craftsmen working for a French manufacturing firm in the aeronautics industry. In this study, Anteby takes on various general understandings of workplace deviance and shows via his field materials the weaknesses of such accounts and offers a more robust one in their place.

Structural tales are clearly on the rise but bridging both the macro-micro and general-particular chasms has never been easy. What is perhaps gained in theoretical acuity is sometimes lost in the coverage of life worlds supposedly governed by larger forces. This is an old critique of course, and the debate continues with no resolution on the horizon. However, what surfaces quite clearly in structural tales is the tight focus and selective character of the cultural representations that appear in the text. The intent is to show how a particular authorial understanding of a local practice or specific social situation travels and illuminates larger matters and thus helps resolve theoretical puzzles posed outside ethnographic circles. Much of the theory therefore comes with the ethnographer into the field and pushes the inquiry in particular directions. What makes for a structural tale however is not simply a concern for theory—for all ethnographies draw on at least some social theory—but the overall weight such theory carries in the text in terms of the framing, focusing, and generalizing the ethnographic account.10

Poststructural Tales

There is a kind of rough justice at play in contemporary ethnography: structural tales are currently doing well and so too are poststructural ones. Writers of the latter mode read structural tales as conjuring up a dreaded form of holism based on out-of-date, discredited, and canned theoretical systems. If structural tales that embrace the big-picture perspective of an orbiting satellite are not trusted in the poststructural camp, neither are the on-the-ground realist or confessional tales for they are read as slanted (contaminated) by the obscured personal characteristics and interests of the ethnographer, the political and institutional context in which social research is embedded, the topical and narrative conventions of the day, and the relative lack of a deep reflexivity displayed in the work. To the poststructuralist, reality may be a nice place to visit but no one really lives there. It is better treated as a fragile social construction subject to numerous lines of sight and interpretation.

Justification for poststructural tales derives largely from various strains of postmodern (or late modern) literary criticism and foregrounds language over other social phenomena. Textual acts are often seen as persuasive fictions and the more persuasive they appear to be, the more ideological they become. This form of ethnography has carried a slightly poisonous tag for some time, and hostile reactions are still common in certain ethnographic circles. Few ethnographers it seems own up to the label. The gist of such ambivalence is caught well by Graham Watson’s (1986) wonderful line: “Make me reflexive—but not yet.”

Yet, despite the villainous and tainted image, poststructural tales are multiplying (received of course with mixed reviews). Consider, for example, Carolyn Ellis’s (1995)
autoethnography of feeling; Bruno Latour’s (1993) claims that we have never been modern; Stephen Fjellman’s (1992) detailed, obsessed romp through Disney World; Margery Wolf’s (1992) thoughtful analysis of a 30-year-old incident in a Taiwanese village told in succession as a short story, as field notes, and as a scholarly, anthropological report; and, in organization studies, Mats Alvesson’s (2004) use of deconstructive narrative theory and political symbolism to unpack “hidden assumptions” governing the management of the so-called knowledge workers.

In all these works, textual innovation, disorder, the wavering of meaning, and open-endedness are obvious. However, three thematic features also stand out. First, there is typically an emphasis on those times and places where stable identities breakdown and the boundaries that structure identity collapse. Second, there is a focus on what Eco (1986) calls “hyperreality,” times and settings where life is exaggerated and signifiers lack clear referents. Third, there is something of an apocalyptic flair in poststructural tales representing newness, novelty, and an end-to-the-world-as-we-know-it sensibility. Three fine examples of such work are Mathew Desmond’s (2007) arresting account of wildland firefighters, Susan Davis’s (1997) image busting, behind the scenes analysis of Sea World, and Laura Grindstaff’s (2002) careful but novel, feminist take on the making of daytime TV talk shows.

The literary features of poststructural work come forth strikingly in its textual self-consciousness and purposeful incompleteness and uncertainty. Unlike other forms of ethnography, poststructural ones frequently emphasize what the authors do not (quite) know rather than what they do. The goal remains recognizably ethnographic—to represent affectively and credibly, the interaction between individuals and the social worlds they inhabit—but neither the individuals nor their social worlds are treated as if they were fixed, dependable entities, possessed of natural, inherent qualities. All is in flux.

It follows then that poststructural tales are inevitably inconclusive. Indeed, from a poststructural author’s perspective, all works are unfinished without considering the critical and differentially positioned responses to a text by specific readers. Texts are therefore always partial. This is perhaps one reason why we might call poststructural work a form of ethnography from another planet. But, however, we regard such work, it does represent the outward looking, experimental rim of ethnographic practice—in terms of both topical choice and textual style. In a sense, those working in this mode are doing what we might call ethnographic research and development.

**Advocacy Tales**

A confession is called for here because I am at a bit of a loss as to what to label work that falls in this domain. Advocacy Tales could just as well be called Moral Tales, Normative Tales, Value-based Tales, or even Judgmental Tales. Whatever they are called, however, the marker should capture those ethnographies that attempt to address some of the major wrongs in the world. While sometimes criticized for a “save-the-world” missionary zeal, advocacy ethnography of the sort I have in mind have produced some quite good work. Consider, for example, Hugh Gusterson’s (1996) biting (and terrifying) portrait of the American weapon design community; Jennifer Howard-Grenville’s (2007) nuanced treatment of would-be environmental activists employed as engineers by a large and successful
computer chip manufacturer; Timothy Diamond’s (1992) heartbreaking plea for change in America’s nursing home organizations; Malcolm Young’s (1991) informed and devastating critique of the British police; and Vicki Smith’s (2002) harsh treatment of corporate restructuring and downsizing in the “new economy.”

These works are sometimes superficially similar to structural tales, in that they generally articulate a broad grievance: that others suffer unjustly, often unknowingly, and are hard pressed to do something about it. However, they differ greatly from structural tales in the sense that righting wrongs is what motivates and animates the text. The seeming formality and precision of a structural work gives way to vigor and potency in the well-told advocacy tale. The most prominent difference lies in the emphasis advocacy tales place in the text on the necessity of change and a studied consideration for just how it might be accomplished. Theory is carried much lighter in advocacy than structural tales and is likely to be inserted more for its usefulness than for whatever explanatory or authoritative power it might provide. A main theme advanced by this work follows the sociological maxim put forth by C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 27), suggesting that the goal of a study and its corresponding text should be “to trouble the comfortable and comfort the troubled.”

Advocacy tales put forth a strong, clear point of view in which no doubt is left in the reader as to what side the ethnographer is on. Such a moral stance is carried throughout the writing and not restricted to occasionally asides regarding reform-minded policy implications or bland change recommendations in the concluding pages of a monograph (or concluding paragraphs in a research article). The entire point of the ethnography—from beginning to end—is to take on certain evils in the world, show what they have done (and are doing) and tell us what might be done about them. The prose is both moral and normative, taking up many causes including antiracist, profeminist, anti-colonial, and environmental ones.

The point here is less to enumerate the ethnographies in this domain than to merely note their noticeable presence at the moment. Ethnographic work—like virtually all other social sciences—has always had an applied wing and can easily be seen as something of a tool to help identify and perhaps help solve human problems. Certainly the legendary, tireless, and loquacious Margaret Mead is prototypical in this regard as her Letters from the Field (2001) makes clear. While some may decry such an open advocacy stance on the grounds that it puts ethnographers squarely into an activist role and thus reserves the famous charity, sensitivity, and empathy they are said to cultivate and express for only those whose cause they wish to support, others would surely point out—and rightly so—that ethnography has always served some groups better than others and making this explicit in the text is well established—if infrequently promoted or practiced—within the trade.

**Plus ça change, plus c’est pareil**

To close off this all-too-speedy glance at shifts in ethnographic writing, I want now to examine a few areas that in the face of the changes put forth above have more or less stayed the course. I have four in mind.

First, ethnography remains relatively free from technical jargon and high-wire abstraction. While polysyllabic postmodernism is not altogether absent from ethnographic circles,
it is infrequent. In what might be called mainstream realism, concepts are borrowed largely from broad public discourse and, for better or worse, an antitheory bias is still apparent in ethnography. Representation by “merchants of astonishment” rather than generalization by “human nature experts” remains the primary authorial pose in the trade and surprise, frame breaking, exceptions to the norm shape the analytic domain of ethnography. A logic of pluck-and-luck discovery is favored over a logic of verification or abstraction.

Second, because of this relative freedom from a thoroughly specialized vocabulary and a privileged conceptual apparatus, ethnography continues to carry a slight literary air compared to other forms of social science writing. It remains I think a less congealed, passive-verb, congested form of discourse, thus suggesting that a textual self-consciousness has been with us for quite some time. This I think keeps the nonspecialist interested in what we do and occasionally pushes certain forms of ethnography into the trade or general reader domains and brings the seemingly distant and alien or proximate but puzzling worlds we study to more readers beyond the warrens of our own research guilds.

Third, ethnography maintains an almost obsessive focus on the “empirical.” The witnessing ideal with its intense reliance on personalized seeing, hearing, experiencing in specific social settings continues to generate something of a hostility to generalizations and abstractions not connected to immersion in situated detail. Other forms of data are acceptable of course and responsible scholarship requires a sort of interdisciplinary contextualization of the settings in which we work. But these other forms of evidence and argument are acceptable only (sigh) as a concession to practicality. This signals the struggle structural ethnography has had over the years, a struggle that continues today despite a recognizable broadening of ethnographic genres.

Finally, there still is not much of a technique attached to ethnography despite the last twenty plus years of trying to develop a standard methodology (or at least much of a methodology that gets behind and beyond the simple cautionary stories of seasoned veterans). Ethnography it seems cannot and will not be made safe for science leaving it trapped as it were between the humanities and sciences. This I do not decry or find terribly worrisome for a standard methodology would effectively neuter or perhaps destroy the still present Columbian spirit that marks the trade as broadly inquisitive and adventurous—“bringing back the news” of what and how certain identifiable people are doing these days whether they are located at the far ends of the world or across the street.

There remains among many, perhaps most ethnographers, a general indifference if not disdain for the seemingly endless efforts of social scientists to develop methodological rigor and rigid reporting templates. In this respect, ethnography remains open to a relatively artistic, improvised, and situated model of social research where the lasting tenets of research design and technical writing have yet to leave their mark. In the end, this is the way I think it should be for convincing ethnography will always be something of a mess, a mystery, and a miracle.

Notes

1. This article is based on a talk given at the Telling Tales: Qualitative Research in Management and Organization Conference held at the University of New Mexico on March 12, 2008. I must thank the organizers of and participants in this Albuquerque affair, in particular, Ann Cunliffe, Bud Goodall, John Johnson, and Mike...
Agar for the invitation as well as the gentle critique they provided me after the talk. Such conversation made my speech giving far more than a mere excuse to wine, dine, and schmooze among old friends.

2. A cautionary note is appropriate when it comes to examining one’s own writing. Reflexivity is a marvelous skill as is clever deconstruction work. But peeking behind the authorial curtain can also create worries about losing whatever ability or magic one has to produce readable and, with luck, persuasive prose. Extreme reflexivity can lead one to give it up and stop writing as suggested by those fearful of close reading or, worse, lead one to blissfully forge ahead thinking one is a genius. The best advice I can give is simply “lighten up.”

3. As Ann Cunliffe usefully reminds us in the introduction to this special issue, ethnographers are no strangers to organizational research. There is a long history of splendid ethnographic work stretching back to, for example, Francis Donovan’s (1920, 1929) studies of “women’s work;” Whiting Williams (1920, 1921, 1922) earthy and detailed look at labor-management relations in the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe; and the contribution ethnographic methods—under the guise of anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner—brought to the Hawthorne studies carried out between 1927 and 1936 (see, Schwartzman, 1993, pp. 5-18). There are a number of classics in organizational ethnography, some close to 50 years old. Many remain in print including Ely Chinoy’s (1955) *Automobile Workers and the American Dream*, Melville Dalton’s (1959) *Men Who Manage*, Peter Blau’s (1963) *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*, and Michel Crozier’s (1964) *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*. Nor can any serious student of organizational life (or, of the history of its study) ignore *Banana Time*, the miniature ethnography of routine work unforgettable described by Donald Roy (1958).

4. This is of course not altogether true. There are a small number of important works that do in fact begin to unpack this Pandora’s box. Among those I have found particularly helpful include such textwork aids and revelations as Gusfield (1976), Edmondson (1984), Becker (1986), Geertz (1995), and the indispensable Clifford and Marcus (1986). In organization studies, the pickings are spare but there are a few useful works including Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), Czarniawska (1997), and Martin Kilduff’s (1993) witty but careful look at March and Simon (1958) *Organizations*, the foundational text of our field.

5. Two recent examples of confessional work woven into the body of an ethnographic account are Sudhir Venkatesh’s (2008) riveting (and best selling) *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* about crack-dealing in Chicago and Peter Moskos’s (2008) *Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore’s Eastern District*, a look at another crack-infested world through an entirely different lens.

6. The master of multisite ethnography is not a new name but an old one, Erving Goffman, who shines a weird but brilliant light on the interaction order wherever it arises. Almost magically, Goffman’s early work (e.g., 1959, 1961, 1963) mixes and analytically orders revealing ethnographic snippets from such diverse settings and sources as Las Vegas casinos, Shetland Island villages, city sidewalk maneuvers in urban centers, check out lines in supermarkets, daily life in the back wards of psychiatric hospitals, and Jane Austen novels. This is multisite ethnography with a vengeance.

7. Notable work in this identity domain include Sherry Ortner’s (1999) examination of the mutual dependencies and cultural conflicts between mountaineers and Sherpas in the Himalayas; Lawrence Ouellet’s (1994) gritty view of the lives of American long-distance truckers; Anne Allison’s (1994) close observations of corporate-sponsored Japanese night life; and Tony Watson’s (1994) sympathetic exploration of the everyday predicaments middle managers face in a large British telecommunication company; Helene Lawson’s (2000) account of women selling cars; and Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi’s (1998) appropriately uncomfortable look at March and Simon (1958) *Organizations*, the foundational text of our field.

8. In partial defense, I did not ignore these forms entirely in *Tales of the Field*. But, at the time of the writing, I either classified them as a modest variation of realist tales (structural tales) or subparts of the more general impressionist category (poststructural and advocacy tales). They were, however, buried in my footnotes. The three now seem sufficiently distinct, numerous and prominent enough to warrant a stand-alone position within the range of ethnographic tales, a range that probably still remains, alas, too restricted.

9. Kuper (1999) provides a useful review of a number of classic anthropological themes including political and legal system study.

10. It is worth noting that what sets off journal-length ethnography in contrast to monograph-length is usually its stark form of structural tale. Ethnographic details are necessarily cut back, stories abbreviated and contextual particulars condensed or eliminated. Theoretical constructs move to the fore with argumentation and sharp, highly selective examples pushing away representation and breath. Mainstream journal reporting formats favor the logic of verification, not discovery. Attempts to control the meaning readers take away from the
materials are rather apparent in pursuit of theoretical advancement in a particular (typically narrow) domain. Structural tales as put forth in monographs of the sort mentioned in the text are somewhat muted yet rich in narrative compared to what appears in journals. See, for example, the contrast between journal and book products of organizational ethnography as exemplified by Perlow (1997, 1998), Morrill (1995, 1991) and Barker (1993, 1999).

11. A possible exception here may be those ethnographic accounts I’ve labeled poststructural whose authors do seem to occasionally mask and obscure their work by importing specialized vocabularies – with high syllable counts – thus constructing a “difficult” or unreadable text for many readers. Yet, I would argue, the grounded character of ethnographic work—fieldwork—usually acts as something of a tether, keeping the writers tied as it were to their respective setting(s). Remember too that poststructural tales concern “poststructural subjects”—those highly mobile and multiply situated social actors who operate within a swirling, expanding universe of ambiguous signs and symbols. Numerous perspectives appear in poststructural tales and cultural coherence is more or less absent. Texts are thus less tidy than California theme parks (and other forms of ethnographic reporting) since more discordant voices, never coming to rest, are heard within them. Readers must work harder then they are accustomed to figure out what is going on because the narrative is a fractured one. True, too, those textual practices alleged to be “reader unfriendly” may also be due to reader unfamiliarity with the tools of textual analysis put into play by poststructural authors fascinated by language and language use. There are, of course, bad – indeed horrid – poststructural accounts crammed with baffling meta-analysis and pounding waves of self-indulgent reflexivity (“enough about them, let me tell you about me”) while being annoyingly spare with ethnographic details. The good ones I think curb conceptual flights, are modestly confessional and thick with detail. See, for example, some splendid, reader-friendly poststructural tales addressed to students of organizations by Marcus and Hall (1992), Brannen (1992) and Boje, Gephart, and Thatchenkery’s (1996) sampler of poststructural accounts, some of which are informed by ethnographic study.

12. This ‘literary air’ or humanistic bent is embedded in the storytelling character of ethnographic writing. Stories allow if not encourage readers to bring their own subtexts to the tale—issuing an implicit BYO subtext invitation to both specialized and general readers. Since ethnographic accounts are far from standardized, meanings readers derive from the work cannot be strictly controlled and will vary and sometimes vary enormously. To wit, we are still trying to sort out (or add to) what it is we take away from Margaret Mead’s enigmatic yet still widely read and discussed *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928).

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