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“Ethnography to be”

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Abstract

In this essay, I overview Keyan Tomaselli’s contribution to the inaugural edition of The Ethnographic Edge; further some of his discussion of the sacred in terms of ethics; and make a call for ethnography “to be”. Ethnography “to be” prefaces hope; calls for ongoing contemplation about ideas of universalism-universality-universal; and critiques the dominance of the triumphal and utopian, for instance, surrounding initiatives in peace and development in the humanities and ethnography. My influence for the critique and call for ethnography “to be” lies in influential works like that of Vijay Prashad, but also foundational readings such as Gregory Bateson and Susan Sontag. The work Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity by Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon (2008) informs my conclusion/condensing.

Keywords

ethnography; hope; humanities; interdisciplinary; IRB; research ethics; ritual; sincerity; universalism; universality; utopia

Proem

Keyan G. Tomaselli (2017) presents *Ethnographic Edge’s* inaugural issue with an essential identification and synthesis (an “intervention” as in the title of his work) of current and future key paradigms/issues of which trans- and inter-disciplinary ethnographic work should reckon. Tomaselli rightly models that ethnographic thinking and its products (ethnography, essay, film, and more—however eclectic and/or auto-biographical—are rooted in robust methodological theory (for Tomaselli, Peircean epistemology and logics). Much of Tomaselli’s essay focuses on ethics of research, not only as tangled in iterations of Institutional Research Board (IRB) policies and their interpretive-contextual issues, but Tomaselli also makes calls to move beyond modernist scientific conceptions of non-humans to relevant multi-species ethnography.

In this essay I overview Tomaselli’s contribution, further some of his discussion of the sacred in terms of ethics, and make a call for ethnography “to be”. Ethnography “to be”

- prefaces hope (and wonder e.g., Puig de la Bellacasa 2015, 54) as important to ethnography;



- calls for ongoing contemplation about ideas of ritual (from Seligman et al. 2008); universalism-universality-universal (Žižek 2012; Diagne 2013);
- critiques the dominance of the triumphal and utopian, especially surrounding initiatives in peace and development in the humanities and ethnography.

Ethnography can heed Vijay Prashad in his chapter, “A dream history of the global south”, from *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*, in which he quotes José Sarmago, World Social Forum, 2005:

I consider the concept of utopia worse than useless. What has transformed the world is not utopia, but need. The only time and place where our work can have impact—where we can see it and evaluate it—is tomorrow. Let’s not wait for utopia. (Prashad 2012, 235)

My influence for the critique and call for ethnography “to be” lies in influential works like that of Prashad, but also foundational readings from Gregory Bateson and Susan Sontag, with the specific *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* by Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon (2008), informing my conclusion/condensing.

Tomaselli’s ethnographic sensibilities

Interwoven throughout the Tomaselli essay are bold ideas on the magnitude of the “sacred”; “surrealism”; “culturally specific and neurologically indeterminate” “metaphysical realms” and “phaneroscopic” (a “quality of all that is present to the mind”), as from voices of ancestors and ghosts; the schizophrenic; animal communicators/whisperers; spirits and plants. Tomaselli points these out as exemplars of deeper lived practices, impossible for IRBs to regulate in terms of testable science. As Tomaselli well knows, film offers a way into presenting some justice and ethnographic sense of these realms; yet how can the like be taken up in ethnographic sensibilities that query and challenge the hegemonic Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich Democracies (or WEIRD as in Tomaselli’s useful label; see Rutten et al. 2013, 525). Inscribed throughout Tomaselli’s “critical interventions” are some of the rejoinders that populate the Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines (CEAD) Hui/Congresses and interdisciplinary ethnographic publications: that illumination, discussion, story-telling, performative ventures, as well as clarification of ethnography itself, its objects of knowledge and interpretative contents, all stand in this historical moment with “no clear solutions” (as Tomaselli notes of his intervention).

It may be that because ethnography itself is a genre wrought specially with theorisation of respect and ethics that today there are no clear solutions. As Tomaselli points out, earlier “procedures introduced from the humanities” and later “writing culture” schools of thought (Clifford 1985; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1989) centred whole disciplines like anthropology on contextual-historicism of the ethical, the understanding and empowerment of others. Today, humans are not clear on ethics being built into the world anew. Cultural relativism, the centring of the other, “praise of the fragment” (Diagne 2013, 10) are questioned by thinkers nowadays as conceivably aiding if not birthing post-truth and Trumpist regimes. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, deliberating on Jean Luc Amselle and Slavoj Žižek (1998, 2012), speaks “of a world upside down ... more like a crusades conflict ... In the world in which we are now living is apparently open but in reality perfectly compartmentalized” (Diagne 2013, 9).

The contemporary ethnography envisioned and hopefully housed in *The Ethnographic Edge* can enter these deliberations concerning the meaning of universal-universalism-universality as taken up by Žižek, Diagne and Amselle in particular (also Boyd 2009, 11, 219, 414); this detangling seems imperative to ethnography in this current renaissance (or upheaval). It may be that modernity was a

moment in which humanity pretended to civilise itself with rationalism, measurement, universalism-diversity, but in the 21st century, that moment is ended.

Tomaselli on IRB troubles/IRB review expediency

I agree with Tomaselli that Institutional Review Boards, and the overall academic enterprise that values and rewards objective scientific epistemology and ontology, continue to dominate the way that ethnographic undertakings are understood and supported in academic and popular spaces. Today, IRBs are concerned to define research as that which can be generalisable/replicated and contribute to a body of knowledge. I am not sure if all ethnographers think in these terms or if they should submit to such. Ethnography's intents may be for purposes other than contributing to a body of knowledge; instead, used to advance a career, heal an ethnographer and/or interlocutors, to learn a vocabulary or architecture, or to suggest alternative ways of accomplishing a common good.

Tomaselli also spends some time in his essay to bemoan the troubles manifested in the operational administration of committees and lack of timeliness in the evaluation and approval of IRBs. The lag time in many cases has to do with contesting perspectives at local through international institutions and governing bodies as well as with social justice issues forwarded by local participants that take time to resolve, as Tomaselli well documents.

There is also an interesting reversal of this time-lag, committee-overload phenomenon that I have experienced: for the university as integrated in the global neo-liberal military-industrial complex, extreme swiftness is the status quo in research approvals (even if they are of the humanities and ethnographic inquiry), especially those funded by outside agencies. This means streamlined single-committee review and approval (or official exemption), sometimes within three to four days of submission of the proposal. Research output counts as part of the ranking of universities, so higher productivity means cultural and economic capital for the institution/state/nation. Especially today when engineering, bioengineering and technology are accused of vanquishing the humanities and arts in academe, showcasing multitudes of creative interdisciplinary humanities projects serve to assuage critics who worry about the demise of liberal arts. Interdisciplinarity, once regulated against at my university (30 years ago, doctoral committees were not approved if they were composed of members from outside departments) is now celebrated and supported—at least on the surface. More than 1000 pages of emails between top University of Illinois officials released in 2015 under a USA federal information act included exposés of the university chancellor and other administrators of the university jokingly making light of the humanities and cultural studies in their emails to each other at the same time as they publicly lauded humanities initiatives (and actively worked behind the scenes to implement a multi-million dollar bio-medical engineering school).

Enduring questions about place of ethnography in art and performance

Pioneers like Norman K. Denzin and Nancy Abelmann (Hunter and Abelmann, 2003; Thorkelson 2017) at my university fought to transform the IRB in the 1990s and early 2000s to consider alternative ways of being and communicating in academe. When Denzin was a campus IRB officer for his college at the University of Illinois, he recounts that he requested exemptions for research in which “scholars define their work as scholarship, not research, and locate it within an artistic, humanistic paradigm, including critical pedagogy, arts-based inquiry, narrative, or performance studies.” (Denzin 2010, 75). And Abelmann created an international “ethnography of the university initiative” in which hundreds of undergraduate students engaged in primary ethnographic and historic research of the entity of the university itself (Hunter and Abelmann 2003) under “blanket” IRB approval.

For Denzin, defining ethnography within an artistic humanistic paradigm to his IRB saved ethnography from being unfairly judged on scientific terms or rejected from the start. Indeed, art and performance, literature and poetry: the blur of these in some ethnography today moves them from the kind of ethnography that Tomaselli uses as examples in his intervention.

The topic of the place of the arts, apt for thought concerning ethnography across the disciplines today, mirrors ongoing debate about ethnographer standpoints: if we are artists, playwrights, dancers, poets, what is unique and significant about ethnography? Related are continuing critiques of autoethnography—what is it about the confessional and auto-biographical that means something to understanding/transforming anthropological-historical humanity and non-human life that makes the endeavour specifically “ethnography”?

Questions as the above anticipate more than standpoints (and go outside of Tomaselli’s list of “Avenues for Discussion”). Contemplating the meaning and place of art and performance in ethnography brings us yonder from the modern and post truth, to debates and plenary sessions as populate the CEAD Hui about the performative and visual; no longer striving to make theory or conclusion (e.g., Wilson 2013, 189–203) and again, as highlighted above, to coming to terms with universality.

Seligman thesis and a critique of utopian ethnography

The thesis of Seligman et al. is that we live in a broken world. Rituals—for example sports, national anthems, “half-heard chants” (Seligman et al. 2008, 103)—commonly perceived as mechanisms that harmonise human beliefs and values, actually help humans maintain precise beliefs and identities with clear boundaries. For Seligman et al., ritual constructs boundaries, not dissolves them; ritual cannot cure humanity.

The *Ritual and Its Consequences* authors observe the tension today between ritual and “sincerity”, defining sincerity as truth, unity, novelty, wholeness, order, autonomy, coherency, authenticity and individualism. The crucial point that Seligman et al. make is that moderns have erroneously understood sincerity (that should be comprised of truth, unity, wholeness, etc.) as instead neo-liberal versions of “authenticity”, “real experiences”, “material accumulation”, utopia, cultural capital and so on. Moderns attempt to capture this mistaken “trope of sincerity” through ritual but ritual too gets linked with misguided Enlightenment, neo-liberal virtues and experiences (Seligman et al. 2008, 101, 122). Seligman et al. note the enormous societal pressures to move in sincere directions (to overcome fragmentation and inauthenticity) in society today.

Seligman et al. understand the human condition as “incomprehensible” and “tragic” and it always has been; these are not unique conditions of modernity, although in modernity, humans focus on sincerity in order to save themselves from the tragic and incomprehensible. Seligman et al. makes important points for ethnography. The authors argue that ritual with its “as-if”/subjunctive quality will help humanity, but not in the way commonly understood by ethnography. For Seligman et al., ritual does *not* function to provide harmony to human community. Instead, ritual formally constructs boundaries (“the boundary between us and the other is impermeable” (Seligman et al. 2008, 94)), and it is within these spaces of ritual, that pure sincerity exists; “genuine sincerity cannot be expressed, but insists on the attempt” (Seligman et al. 2008, 176). Play between boundaries (like Gregory Bateson’s frames; (Seligman et al. 2008, 88)) offers hope:

Subjunctive worlds and the boundary play they require have much broader consequences ... than just opening the imagination. At the level of individuals, the potential space of the shared subjunctive is crucial to our ability to empathize, and hence to our potential to develop trust and solidarity ... We can share all kinds of

things in the world—subways, soccer teams, grocery stores, fear of the police—without ever coming together as a moral community, much less accepting the existence of other moral communities. Moral communities require sharing empathy, not just spaces, times and objects ... Just by showing that other worlds exist, rituals may well offer us an image of a society with room for an other (Seligman et al. 2008, 97).

Issues (for example, concerning the arts, autoethnography and universalism) posed above have been in part addressed recently with indications that ethnography is uniquely poised to perform/write the senses, sensual, desire, corporeality. These approaches are important because of their emphasis on holism, humanism, intra-species relations and affect, but seen through the thesis of Seligman et al., they can be false tropes of sincerity. Ethnographers still prefer historically-culturally specific modes of understanding (as in phenomenology, critique, analysis, interpretation, critical theory) of which some lines of ethnography, cultural studies, and literary criticism scrutinise as mis-measures of modernity; the end/telos is perceived as an impossible utopia (e.g., Buck-Morss 2000). Even Donna Haraway's provocative 2016 solution is utopian and falsely "sincere": to see the "livable worlds" in terms of the "Chthulucene":

Sympoiesis: "making with'. Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing ... earthlings are never alone ... a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for wordling-with, in company interlacing of science and art

.... We relate, know, think, and tell stories through and with other stories, worlds, knowledges, thinkings, yearnings, So do all the other critters of Terra, in all out bumptious diversity and category-breaking speciations and knottings ... with all the contaminations and infections conjured.... The biologies, arts, and politics need each other; with involuntary momentum, they entice each other to thinking/making in sympoiesis for more livable worlds that I call the Chthulucene". (Haraway 2016, 58, 67, 97, 98)

I don't ask ethnography to abandon its interpretive phenomenological critical self, but alongside those projects, to conjure other dimensions of our vocation, to be circumspect of quests for linear utopic ends.

Utopia today is to believe that current societies will be able to continue along on their merry little way without major upheavals. Social modes of organization that prevail today on earth are not holding up, literally and figuratively. History is gripped by crazy parameters: demography, energy the technological—scientific explosion, pollution, the arms race ... The earth is deterritorializing itself at top speed. The true Utopians are conservatives of all shapes who would like for this to 'hold up all the same,' to return to yesterday and the day before yesterday. What is terrifying is our lack of collective imagination in a world that has reached such a boiling point, our myopia before all the 'molecular revolutions' which keep pulling the rug out from under us, at an accelerated pace. (Guittari 2009, 307).

Hope

Corresponding to Tomaselli, I too offer to "unsettle discussion". My enduring guides are (to name a few in addition to those I previously cited in this essay): Jarod Lanier (2010), Bruno Latour (1993), Gregory Bateson (1972), Richard Schechner (1993, 233), Italo Calvino (1993), and Susan Sontag: "We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like ... can't understand, can't imagine" (2003,

125–126; see also 1961, 194). Geoffrey Bowker (2016) document the data-citizen/mediated citizen, arguing that the nature of who humans are and who society is, has changed values and ethics. Thus, for Bowker (2016), the new normative and ideas outside the norm have to be decided, coupled with the humanities and ethnography that can guide mediated citizenry. The take-away can be hope.

Prefacing/valuing wonder and hope (or concomitantly fascination and sadness” (Mohaghegh 2015, 261)) instead of analysis, critique, interpretation and/or political meaning; a going elsewhere that can’t capture reality or move us toward utopia, but feasibly conjures an infinite ethnography “to be” (similar to Seligman et al. “as if”/subjunctive). A dancing next to, or with one another, but by no means as one fused body/group/tribe/nation (as in Seligman’s dance analogy and model of ritual) may temper modern goals of resolution, solution or melding. Life’s purpose may be life/living and/or creativity (Boyd 2009, 414); ethnography’s purpose can be hope.

Condensing

Tomaselli’s intervention is crucial and important. There is more from each of us too, and as I have overviewed above, I believe that ethnography “to be” will have to do with what we make of ritual and universalism, and how we reconfirm hope and more in the life of the university and ethnography. Further, ethnography cannot yearn for utopia or sensuality as in the mania for projects aligned with peace and development, desire and aesthetics. My call does not mean evil, horror and anarchy overtake ethnography and that hope and wonder simply replace ethnography’s utopic motivations. Hope is not the unsaid framework of ethnographic research, it is a “to be”, allied with things like performative ethics and love forwarded in the work of D. Soyini Madison (2013). With Seligman, ethnography “to be” acknowledges that humans are fragmented and broken—they won’t make peace or become the other, but they can, at least, stand next to one another, perhaps converse or “tickle” (Seligman et al. 2008, example, 73–74, 77–78, 84, 94). And from Matušík (as he illuminates and configures hope), hope is an underpinning for ethnography:

The more one delves into hidden and at times dark recesses of the human odyssey, the more audibly and persistently the beckoning of hope calls ... knowing all along that the human race cannot heal all wounds of history yet, freed from all pretensions to heroism, one’s faith yields now not just to the deferrals, *aporias* and paradoxes of, but also to the exceeding, indeed saturating visitations from impossible hope. (Matušík 2008, 23, 79)

We have to make room for ethnography that possibly will not cure/heal people, discover authenticity, give voice to the subaltern, understand cultural diversity, nor assist academic, local, corporate and global discussions/policies/programmes to allocate funds/resources to tenable goals. Ethnography might not triumph in these utopian ways.

In a far future that is difficult to imagine, ethnography may not even be an art or story-telling virtual form but a “repetitive”, “social”, “temporary”, “unspeakable” ritual (Seligman et al. 2008, 11, 15, 130), perchance bounded by hope.

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