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Space to Write:  
A Student's Perspective on Ethnographic Writing

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## Abstract

How and where do we learn to write ethnographically? What should this space look like? Although there is an emphasis on academic writing in universities, often little attention is given to ethnographic writing. This is a problem when ethnographic texts require a different skill set and can sometimes leave students lost in a labyrinth of words. Ethnographies are an entirely different species of writing from the traditional academic essay. They require the writer to bring out an atmosphere, a particular way of talking, a total sensory experience, a relationship between oneself and another, all of which can be captured in a million different ways. Drawing on my own participation in a series of ethnographic writing seminars and my own learning process and development as a writer, I reflect on what kind of environment is needed to develop these skills. Three conditions were especially important: freedom, experimentation, and collaboration. I advocate for an alternative space within universities - a space free from structured templates and marking schemes; a space where students can experiment with different styles, figurative techniques, narration, and form; a space where people can share their ideas without fear or judgement and where they can help each other find their own unique voices.

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## Space to Write: A Student's Perspective on Ethnographic Writing

Charlot Schneider

The first time I had to write an ethnography was in 2016 during the final term of my bachelor degree at the University of London. I was writing about a human rights charity. I remember sitting in the library with my field notes, theoretical ideas, and diagrams and being at a complete loss. Until that point writing had been about short, concise, and interrogative argumentation. It was about setting authors up against each other, using the literature to create a strong position; a position that did not require reflection about oneself or the description of a real individual. Instead, it was a disembodied, anonymous position from which I critiqued, endorsed, or developed on the distant theories of faceless strangers. Of course, this sort of writing is necessary in anthropology and I am grateful that I was able to hone this skill. But it is also a skill which proved to be of little service when it came to writing up my fieldnotes.

Lacking guidance on how to write ethnographically, I turned to those which had already been written. Throughout my three years of undergraduate study I had read many of these, but rarely had I focused specifically on the writing. Feeling rather panicky now, I flicked through them, looking for clues that might help me craft my own. At the time it seemed almost impossible to pin down a definition of an ethnography. There is such a vast array of ethnographies – dealing with individuals or groups, ranging from wholly subjective narratives of personal experience to objective accounts, taking into account the writer's own ethnocentricity or writing as perched on the outside. It is only now, having been forced to ask what ethnography is, that I am even beginning to have an idea. What I believe they all share is the aim of relaying an experience, be it the writer's own or that of an individual or group the writer is studying, through the use of different techniques, including metaphor, narrative, and dialogue, and embedding that experience within a wider theoretical framework. At that time though, still holed up in the library, I felt out of my depth and the reading seemed too little too late. I lacked the confidence a writer needs to flourish on paper – confidence that would have enabled me to go with the flow, to write without fear that my words were irrelevant or inadequate. And lurking somewhere further below was the knowledge that I would be marked for this first attempt.

My feelings of bewilderment and the absence of support for how to write up my field notes was not something unique. The anthropologist Van Maanen (1988: xvi) describes a similar situation to my own: 'this lack of tutoring is

perhaps most telling at that still point in our studies when we have returned from the field and sit before the blank page that must eventually carry the story of what we have presumably learned'. Looking back now, after having just finished writing an ethnography, this time as part of my master's in anthropology at the University of Hamburg, I realise how different things can be – how learning to write an ethnography does not have to resemble a clumsy walk in the dark but can and should be a rewarding process, one that is fun, collaborative, and liberating. Whilst my first ethnography was not a complete disaster, it did not leave me with a taste for more. In fact, I was glad to put my pen down at the end of it all; I'd had enough of writing. This time I had the privilege of discovering the joys of writing and the endless possibilities of words.

The first step of learning to write ethnographically is tackling the question of what ethnographic writing is and how it is both similar to and different from other forms of writing. Many anthropologists have remarked on how ethnographies encompass a range of narrative forms (Narayan 1999; van Maanen 1988; Jordan 2001). It is unlike any other type of writing in the sense that it weaves in and out of the evocative and the analytic, the self and the other, the everyday and the unexpected. As Narayan (2012: xii) argues, ethnography needs to engage the reader, emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically, to have an impact on them. For me the best ethnographies are those that evoke a connection on a personal level, make me grin or frown, push me to interrogate something I had assumed or place an issue into a new light. The aim of ethnography is to see the world from another perspective, to look through the eyes of the individuals around whom the ethnography pivots. To achieve this the ethnography has to draw in the reader, make them feel situated right in the middle of the narrative, have them think, feel, and experience as another person. This requires skill, where language is employed in a way that seamlessly transports the reader into this world.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon that excellent theorists with exciting data fail to draw the reader into the energy and atmosphere of their fieldwork. Their overuse of jargon and complex sentences leaves the reader rereading sentences with a feeling equivalent to masticating a mouthful of gravel. Whilst most anthropology students get a good dose of guidance on how to write intellectually, few will be exposed to active teaching on how to weave together narrative and analysis.

It is perhaps useful then to think of ethnography as 'real fiction' (Asad and Dixon 1985) or as 'creative nonfiction' (Narayan 2012; Tedlock 2011). Despite some obvious differences between ethnography and fiction, such terms highlight the important overlaps in the effect that both should have on the reader. Both must give the reader the impression of being inside the story: it should be 'writing that produces the presence it describes' (Tedlock 2011 p.331). This presence is more than just what is 'seen'; it is what is felt, understood, and

appreciated. Ethnography requires the ability to evoke a total sensory experience, a variety of voices and emotions, and a range of compelling theoretical insights. We therefore need a skill set that can capture more than ‘just-the-facts’ but can evoke mood, the obscure, the unseen (Van Maanen 1988: 5). We need to be able to sketch out characters in a way that penetrates into the depths of their lives. ‘Moh is 25. He is a Syrian refugee. He is a student’ just did not do it for me. I did not want to reduce my informants to a simple series of facts; I wanted to capture their individuality and personality. By engaging the reader through small details, such as the way they smoke, their proficiency at a particular game, the way they laugh or stare into the distance, the reader can picture a real human being, who comes off the page and is seen as immersed in life. The facts just do not do that in the same way.

Unsurprisingly then, ethnographic writing is not something that anthropologists can magically do. It is, like everything else in anthropology, a skill which must be honed and trained (Goodall 2000; Narayan 2012; van Maanen 1988). The University of Hamburg offered three seminar series on ethnographic writing over the course of three semesters. In the first we learnt to capture an imaginary ethnographic scene with different writing styles, enabling us to see the impact that style has on a text but also giving us space to experiment with different techniques that each style encompasses. After the first seminar we were asked to invent an ethnographic situation and then capture it in a text written in realist style. I spent the whole journey home on the underground forming ideas and sentences and, most of all, just thinking about combinations of words. When I got home, I whipped out my notebook and began to sketch out some opening lines. Very quickly a paragraph took shape and I felt the same feeling I had felt in art class, a feeling I had never felt for writing before. So, although I was definitely less concerned with the specific style we had been assigned to use and based my scene on an actual event, I had, I believe, discovered two important things – that writing can be enjoyable and that it is not so dissimilar from other artistic processes.

Whilst I was a little too excited during this first assignment to concentrate on style, it is of course something very important to think about, especially when writing an ethnography. The style chosen affects a range of factors – from what sort of audience we will attract to the very story that we can tell through our data (Van Maanen 1988; Kroll 1984). Writing is thus a core part of our data construction (Goodall 2000). In our first seminar series we concentrated on the realist, confessional, and impressionist styles – used to a greater or lesser extent in most ethnographies (Van Maanen 1988). But style is also something that we all possess on a much more personal level. It quickly became clear that even when we were assimilating different styles, everyone had their own distinct style. When reading each other’s work every week, we were able to see how each author’s unique writing style began to shine through.

In this first seminar series, we read a range of ethnographies and reflected on the particular styles and structures of writing each used. What were their first and last sentences? How often did they use the 'I' form? How did they describe a scene? Was their analysis separate from or embedded within the text? The more I read, the more I came to realise which styles and structures I enjoyed and which did not appeal to me. Whenever I found myself struggling to get into an ethnography, I asked myself why this was the case. What was making the text such a chore? Was it the content or rather the way it was communicated? I learnt to read ethnography on an entirely new level, a level that did not ignore format, style, and other literary practices but recognised how writing and fieldwork are tightly interconnected in an ethnography (Goodall 2000).

For swots like myself, being told that we would be graded would have completely changed this experience. I probably would have spent hours reading exactly how to write in a positivist style. Much like writing the ethnography during my bachelor, I would have been preoccupied by the concern of getting it wrong rather than simply concentrating on the practice of writing itself. But free from the fear of a bad grade, I experienced for the first time what it means to simply let go. Even at school, creative writing was always set within a framework of requirements, with long lists of rules and techniques that had to be ticked off. I am not using this article to call for the abolishment of all grading, but in cases such as this one its disadvantages outweigh its benefits (Peckham 2011). Its tendency to confine and even obstruct creative and experimental work would make an ethnographic writing seminar redundant. It was for me and many others the freedom from grading that transformed these seminars into spaces where we could set aside the need to perform and concentrate on creating with words.

The second seminar series was both more intimate and more practical. Every few weeks the group was assigned a social situation to observe and participate in and then to write up our field notes in three pages. Suddenly ethnographic writing was about more than just readable sentences and exploring various styles. It was about the self and the other, relationships, uncomfortable situations, smells, a mood, a thought, a question – a total experience. Describing it drew on one's assumptions, both implicitly in the characterisation of a scene and explicitly in the analytical statements formulated. Writing up these social situations created the space to practice the entire process that defines ethnographic writing. Everything was reduced to a micro scale –two hours in a confined field such as a lift, canteen, or playground and perhaps three hours writing up the notes and thinking about what the social situation means – but that did not lessen any of the key aspects of writing ethnographically. In fact, the brevity of the exercises and even the banality of the social situations (such as riding a lift for an hour) allowed one to notice the less conspicuous details of social interactions and the

broader implications and meanings they have in society. After all, we needed to find enough to fill three or four pages. When we read each other's texts in class, it was enlightening to see how such a narrow field could engender so many different features and perspectives.

The extract below shows how the seemingly banal task of describing our university canteen allowed me to experiment with my position as an observer. I tried out how I could bring my own past experiences into the text and how these biographical memories could help me capture the scene I was observing:

*It is the smell that hits me first as I walk into the Hamburg University canteen. As it wafts up my nostrils I am transported back to the dining hall of my primary school, where two crooked dinner ladies slopped slices of grey turkey in congealed gravy onto my plate, before ladling fluorescent custard into my dessert bowl. Although I can't see any turkey, gravy, or custard, it is that same sticky scent of sugar, oil, and meat that greets me here.*

In this description I tried especially hard to draw the reader into the atmosphere of the canteen. As the opening of my text, I wanted the reader to feel immediately present, not just seeing but feeling, breathing, smelling, and tasting the canteen as I had. In doing so I hoped to engage my reader through a total sensory immersion.

Since Clifford and Marcus's (1986) edited volume on writing culture, the presence of the anthropologist in both research and writing has become an unquestioned fact in the discipline. However, learning how to integrate oneself into the text is another matter. It was here that discussion and collaboration in class became core to learning how to achieve the balance between the I and the other. As Hess (1989: 169) points out, through discussion students 'learn to grapple with their own ethnocentrism as well as how to avoid writing with either "too much" or "too little" I'. This was indeed demonstrated in our class. Observing similar or sometimes identical situations, yet producing such varied texts highlighted just how subjective ethnography is. By comparing our accounts, we challenged each other: Why did you write about this? Why did you ignore that? What drew you to this specific observation? It forced us to question and account for every single description and understand the implications of every word chosen. This opened up new challenges. When and where does one write oneself into the text and how does one do it without swamping the reader with too much self-reflection? The feedback offered by the other students allowed us to see our own compositions through their eyes and enabled us to grasp the delicate balancing act between the ethnographer and the informant.

Another advantage of these short exercises was the considerable sense of detachment I felt. First, I did not have to identify a theme: the field was decided for me. This allowed me to focus on what was in front of me rather than worry about whether what I had chosen was worth observing. Second, it was not part of a larger text and did not require a large amount of research or grand theoretical postulations. Third, it was not something that had to be rewritten or that I had to fret about. It was simply an exercise of asking myself what I saw in a short, discrete scene, a snapshot of everyday life, and identifying what can be said about it more broadly. This sense of detachment from, and lack of ownership for, the whole process was incredibly useful as it gave me more space to experiment, to try out things that I was not sure about, and to see how my readers – my co-students – reacted to them. It also meant that when somebody critiqued my work, it did not feel like a stab in the heart. It was not a piece to which I had become emotionally or intellectually attached – it was a practice run, a time to have some fun, to try out new techniques and to build confidence in using different styles and structures. It was a freedom engendered by a lack of expectation both from myself and others.

The final seminar series brought everything together. By now most of us had completed our respective fieldwork, so that we were beginning to gain a sense of who we were as fieldworkers as well as writers. With our data at hand, we were almost ready to write our own ethnographies. Whilst these seminars still offered room for experimentation, they were more about how we could transform our raw data into something that was interesting and readable. But, and this is important, it was still a ‘safe writing space’ in the sense that our writing was not assessed, there was no right or wrong, and everyone treated each other’s work with respect and sensitivity. We used three themes/structures that are core to most ethnographies to take our first writing steps towards our ethnographies, namely ‘key scene’, ‘portrait’, and ‘dialogue’.

By this point I had finished my fieldwork, for which I had interviewed a number of refugees whom I had met through a number of non-governmental organisations. I focused in particular on the objects that the refugees took along when they fled and the roles these articles now played for them at their place of refuge in Hamburg, in particular in the act of homemaking. This was the first chance I had to practice characterising a key informant. In the following example I tried to capture something that was key to understanding my informant through the way he moved:

*I can always recognise him from afar, not from the way he looks but from the way he purposefully glides across the ground, like a puck forcefully propelled over ice. Zafar is always doing something or is on his way to do something with an aura of determination that seems to seep out of every inch of his body.*

The way Zafar moved was indicative of his drive and determination. I wanted to bring this out without resorting to bland statements but rather by capturing his essence through the use of a simile.

This third seminar series was also a chance to turn field discussions (ranging from sporadic chats to planned interviews) into precise dialogues:

*Though I never asked about Zafar's mother, she somehow always made it into our conversations. It was his very first response when I asked him what he brought with him from Syria: 'I wanted to bring my mother'. One rainy afternoon when Zafar was feeling a little down, wondering whether he would ever be able to find a wife, he stopped walking and said to me: 'But first my mother must be here – mother comes first! More important than wife, children'. Zafar, like many of the other Syrian men I have got to know, lived with his mother until he had to leave Syria.*

Conversation requires more than the reimposition of dialogue: it must capture the way conversations stop and start, the ways themes recur, and what is hidden behind or implied by the simple words.

Our seminar group was much smaller than for the two preceding seminar series, with just eight students. We split into smaller working groups and met every few weeks to discuss our first drafts, and sometimes again to reflect on second drafts. In all seminars we read each other's work and, in a profoundly collaborative manner, had lengthy discussions and gave feedback both inside and outside the classroom. In what was a very intimate engagement I learnt the unique processes that each of my peers went through when writing ethnographically. Some wrote their best pieces on the train, in a stream of consciousness, whilst others liked to think things through first. Experimenting with different settings, structures, and writing aids, I discovered that chatting prior to writing was central to my own process. The ease of speaking words and not having to see them on paper took away some of the pressure that can come with sitting in front of an empty page. Having a casual chat with a patient listener allowed me to access crevices of the mind where thoughts and ideas lurked that I did not even know I had. Speaking acted like a valve, facilitating the flow for when pen went to paper. Having someone listening, questioning, and exposing my weaknesses gave me a way of navigating my own ideas before writing. Likewise, having someone to speak to after a first draft helped me identify things that had not made it onto paper or that, in the excitement of the process, had become unclear or unnecessary. These friendly and informal discussions with peers were crucial to my learning process; it is a process that is often less possible with lecturers.

These writing courses were without doubt the highlight of my time in the Hamburg anthropology master's programme. They provided me with a



core skill for anthropology, a skill that until that point had been ignored in my studies. It is the skill to transform a scene, a conversation, or an idea into a readable and enjoyable narrative. With each class my confidence in writing grew. I discovered a passion for words, metaphors, and scene setting. I now have a fuller understanding for the potential that words carry, a sense of how to narrate a complex experience in the field so that the reader can feel present and engaged.

These seminars provided a space that is not always available at university, a space where freedom, experimentation, and collaboration were given priority; a space free from grades, strict guidelines, and the pressure of conforming. This freedom created an environment in which I could experiment with different styles, structures, and themes. It was a space in which collaboration was central from beginning to end. It was not collaboration in the sense of doing a team presentation but a much deeper form of collaboration, a continuous reflection on each other's work, ideas, and writing processes. Whilst creative writing is an incredibly personal process, learning how to do it and to improve it requires the reactions, inspiration, and opinions of others. We need more spaces like this, not just in the anthropology master's programme but also in its undergraduate programme. Ethnographic writing presents many challenges, but with the right environment, fledgling writers can blossom into talented storytellers, creating ethnographies which can immerse the reader into the lives of others.

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