Locating ethnography

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Ethnography is still considered so much the sine qua non of our discipline that an anthropologist like me might be forgiven for asking if starting a journal on ethnography isn't like starting a journal on writing in English. What would unite studies of different aspects of our social worlds, grasped through the methodological tools of ethnography, with articles that treat this methodology as the object of study? What is the relationship between either of these types of studies and those produced out of, or reflecting on, that other meaning of ethnography so closely scrutinized in anthropology in the 1980s: the textual rendering of social worlds? Perhaps this ambiguity will be generative. Certainly the energy of the manifesto is infectious. So, it is in this positive spirit that I will offer some thoughts on the manifesto, theorizing from my 'lived experiences' in the discipline of anthropology, area studies, feminist studies, and 20 years of ethnography in Egypt.

The manifesto, it seems to me, has not lingered long enough on questions of location – questions that have been at the heart of recent theorizing in the various fields in which I labor. Don't we need to locate ourselves and our projects more precisely and consistently? I was struck by the strange disjunction in the manifesto between a fetishization of something called 'the concrete', 'the lived', 'the embodied' or 'experience' and the general language of abstraction used in most of the piece. This unintended disjuncture may be a function of the generic conventions of manifesto-writing. It may also be a product of the assumptions of a sociology that, however critical, is not as regularly forced to confront uncomfortable difference as is anthropology. However, as someone who has worked with feminist theory and on the obviously 'partial' subject of women, and as someone who has had to grapple with the complexities of writing about an Arab community for a
Western audience simultaneously antipathetic to this part of the world and informed by a deep tradition of popular and scholarly production on this region, I have been unable to escape the issues of location or 'situatedness'. More recently, in trying to figure out what an ethnography of television should look like, I have been forced to consider the locations – social, cultural and physical – where ethnography must take place.

I worked out many of these ideas in the late 1980s, after having written my first ethnography of the Bedouin community in Egypt where I did fieldwork a decade earlier. In my first book I had paid some attention to the ways my own situation as a young woman and a half-Arab shaped my research, but the main focus of *Veiled Sentiments* was on the interplay between social structure, sentiment and ideology (Abu-Lughod, 2000[1986]). In a couple of articles and then in my second ethnography of this community (Abu-Lughod, 1990, 1991, 1993), I began to explore more systematically what difference it would, might, or should make to be a feminist and/or a 'halfie' – both particular positions and identities – doing ethnography.

Finding compelling Donna Haraway's (1988) feminist critique of the ideals of objectivity, and Dorothy Smith's (1987) insights about the links between abstract theoretical language and positions of power, I experimented with the idea of an 'ethnography of the particular'. *Writing Women's Worlds* deliberately included no explicit theoretical/analytical discourse. In it, I not only placed myself in the stories I told about being in the Bedouin community but tried to recreate the immediacy of being in the field by actually reproducing conversations. I constructed the ethnography out of Bedouin women's stories of everyday life, woven together to (a) reveal something important about the relationship between what is often called structure and agency, and (b) disclose the incapacity of structural analyses (in the book represented by chapter titles such as 'Patrilineality' and 'Honor and Shame') to capture 'life as lived', a phrase I borrowed from Paul Riesman (1974).

If working on women and thinking about feminist critiques of objectivity and the languages of power led me to do an 'ethnography of the particular', living and working at the cusp of 'East' and 'West' led me to conceive of this project as a way of 'writing against culture'. I sought to fashion from my field notes and tapes a representation of another community that did not turn people in it into something object-like, coherent, whole and separate from ourselves: a culture. I had argued that we need to find ways to write that work against the typifications of communities that made them into distinct and alien cultures because of the way such distinctions are inevitably hierarchical and tied to larger geopolitical structures of power. I argued that in our own socio-cultural worlds, whatever objectification takes place in forms of social-scientific representation is countered by what I called the discourses of familiarity – the way we talk about
ourselves and our friends and family in everyday life. We know that everyone is different, that people are confused, that life is complicated, emotional and uncertain. This counter-discourse does not usually exist for us with regard to distant communities where all we might have is the social-scientific analysis, the ethnographic description, the timeless ethnographic photograph, not to mention popular racism and political domination. I argued that this absence of a counter-discourse produces and reinforces a sense of difference and distance. I took the apparently controversial position that the concept of ‘culture’ had developed too many historical accretions and negative political entailments in a hierarchically organized world to be useful, even while I continue to recognize, of course, that humans are, in the broadest sense, cultural beings (see Abu-Lughod, 1999). I did not mean to imply, in arguing for ‘writing against culture’, that all humans are the same; what I wanted stressed in ethnography were individual differences and the contestatory nature of discourses and social life within all communities.

In recent years, especially in the field of what is called post-colonial studies, there has been even greater attention given to the locations of writing, speaking and researching. I am among those who have found in this field, and especially the work of the school of Indian historiography known as ‘Subaltern Studies’, the most stimulating theoretical-cum-empirical scholarship of the last decade or so. In this work, I am always struck, and moved, by a seemingly small detail. Whether in Edward Said’s (1978) passionate interventions as a committed intellectual arguing for worldliness and against Orientalism, or in Partha Chatterjee’s (1993) sensitive uncovering of the social fragments excluded by a nationalism, or in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s brilliant efforts to explore what he calls a Bengali modernity (1997[1994]), I have been brought up short by the use of a poignant pronoun: we. This pronoun is a telling sign of the productive importance of location for ethnographic projects, in this case, ‘ethnographies’ that are, in the case of Subaltern Studies, ‘histories of the present’.

In the research in which I’ve been engaged for the last decade or so, I have been puzzling in a different way about the locations of ethnography. Having decided that if I wanted to understand some important aspects of contemporary social, cultural and political life in Egypt, it was necessary to move from the study of local, community-based forms of expressive culture such as poetry and storytelling to a nationally disseminated form of popular culture – namely, the ubiquitous genre of nationally produced television serials – I found myself confronted with the challenges of doing an ethnography, and anthropology, of the media. It turned out I was not alone; other anthropologists were puzzling over the same issues, working on video, television, radio and film in a variety of locales. In collaboration with colleagues Faye Ginsburg, who developed the innovative Culture and Media Program
at New York University, and Brian Larkin, who like myself was associated with it, I worked out some of these ideas and helped bring some of this new ethnography together in a forthcoming volume called *The Social Practice of Media*.

In my own work, trying to track the relationships between television serials and national cultural debates, on the one hand, and local lives and imaginations on the other, I found myself having to devise fieldwork that would trace complex processes of circulation, from production to reception. This required multiple sites of research, from television studios and writers' offices to village homes. It also required multiple social locations for ethnographic work — including among an educated professional elite, what one might consider the intelligentsia, and the rural and urban poor. So again, location figured as a central issue.

Although it was the 'object' I had chosen to study that guided the nature and locations of the ethnographic work I sensed were necessary, I found later in George Marcus's reflections on ethnography of unconventional sites and objects a fine articulation of this final aspect of the problem of location and ethnography that my work on media has made so visible. Marcus has developed the notion of a multi-sited research imaginary as part of his advocacy of ethnography of/in the world system. His recent collection of essays, wonderfully titled *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*, is a major intervention on the subject of ethnography. In arguing for collapsing the distinctions between micro and macro, local and global, and doing 'ethnography all the way up and down', he makes the strong claim that 'within a multi-sited research imaginary, tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate is ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance' (Marcus, 1998: 14, emphasis in original). Doing research on media entails just such description of connections and relationships among sites. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997b: 9) pointed out, it is the very way that mass media challenges conventional understandings of locality and community that may account for the relative paucity (within anthropology and until recently) of ethnographic work on media. What is suggestive about Marcus's claim is that ethnography, the set of practices dedicated to 'direct and sustained social contact with agents', as the manifesto puts it, does have the power to create new knowledge and to advance theory.

I argued some years ago in a piece on the ethnography of television that Clifford Geertz's (1973) call for thick description as the method of ethnography was still compelling, but needed some creative stretching to fit mass-mediated lives (Abu-Lughod, 1997). I acknowledged the irony that the calls for ethnography within cultural studies have been insistent. Janice Radway's (1984) study of romance readers is hailed as a classic that proved the value of ethnography in analyzing popular culture. Yet researchers have seemed
reluctant to heed the call. Ien Ang, one of the most persuasive and subtle advocates of 'the ethnographic turn' in cultural studies admits that they use a notion of ethnography that little resembles the anthropological ideal (Ang, 1996: 182).

How can the media be placed within the sort of rich social and cultural context that sustained anthropological fieldwork is uniquely able to provide? What to do with cultural forms that have no obvious and simple community and are only ever a part of people's complex lives? What kind of fieldwork is needed to track media in lives? I find it intriguing, for example, to compare the fieldnotes and material I have for my television research with the small dog-eared notebooks and simple audio cassettes that resulted from my more localized research among the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin. Now I have different sized notebooks that are filled with notes taken in very different places. Even within the pages of a notebook, observations and conversations with people are recorded alongside summaries of plots and bits of dialogue from television soap operas. Along with audio cassettes of interviews, I carry back from Egypt video cassettes of television programs and piles of clippings from newspapers and popular magazines, some with movie stars on the covers.

Even more important, what are we to do with cultural forms that are produced deliberately for people under conditions that vary politically and historically? This for me has been the main question. Tracking television in Egypt has led me to explore social relations of inequality and political power across regions and classes within a nation that is itself part of a larger regional structure and a world system. What has emerged as most crucial in my ethnography of television is what it means to be a nation at the crossroads of Arab socialism and transnational capitalism with an intelligentsia promoting modernist and developmentalist programs and ideals through a state-controlled medium to a varied population, large segments of whom remain uneducated and marginal to many developments.

Working on this disjuncture has placed me, as the manifesto notes for many ethnographers doing work among the disadvantaged, in the position of being a social critic and someone concerned with policy. This is the final 'location' aspect that my ethnographic work on media has made inescapable. Doing ethnography 'up and down' and on such a popular subject has offered me particular possibilities for worldly intervention. Writing about television in Egypt entails certain opportunities for representing to outsiders people in other societies and, more appealing, working within the national frame that is such a crucial context for most people today, including the women and men in places like the Upper Egyptian village where I have worked.

In Writing Women's Worlds I had suggested that we could write critical ethnographies, ethnographies that went against the grain of global inequalities, even as we had to remain modest in our claims to radicalism and
realistic about the impacts of these ethnographies. Television is particularly useful for writing against the grain because it forces us to represent people in distant villages as part of the same cultural worlds we inhabit – modern or postmodern worlds of mass media, consumption and dispersed communities of the imagination. Moreover, to write about television in Egypt or Indonesia or Brazil is to write about the articulation of the transnational, the national, the local and the personal.

What I find even more compelling about working on television is that it makes possible more local interventions – at the national level with Egyptian intellectuals I can admire or disagree with and who could read, criticize and debate my work. If through my thick descriptions of television in particular places in Egypt I can begin to tease apart the structures of power within which subaltern groups live their lives and the ways television is a new part of that – in households, in communities, in imaginations – can I contribute something to the concerned producers about how to think about their audiences, their political projects and their national goals? In particular, can such a study question the rule of expertise and the idea of “development”?

Gupta and Ferguson (1997a: 39) have proposed that “anthropology’s distinctive trademark” should be found “not in its commitment to “the local” but in its attentiveness to epistemological and political issues of location”. This response to the manifesto has been a plea indeed for attention to issues of location. Yet I am also making a case for the continuing value of a thoroughly localized ethnography as necessary for tracking systems of power and structures of inequality and perhaps even for intervening in them. I look forward to Ethnography as a new location for interdisciplinary work and exchange about these and related issues.

References
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