

A Portfolio on Ethnography

Spring 2011 Honors 394

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US + THEM + HERE + THERE

We shall not cease from
exploration
And the end of all our
exploring
Will be to arrive where we
started
And know the place for the
first time.
--T.S. Eliot

This portfolio is meant to mark my growth as an ethnographer. It archives the research and questions that guide me in my future travels. This portfolio is, by no means, complete. As uncertain as my definition for ethnography remains, so does my trove of knowledge expand.

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What is ethnography?

Through my disciplinary lens of Engineering...

- Research
- Getting to know *needs* of a people
- Getting to know resources
- What can engineers give & how can the locals help to meet that goal

Through my own personal lens...

- Research
- Learning stories, exchanging stories
- Culture

Through the lens of other disciplines represented in our classroom...

- CHID: a new way of thinking from old school anthropology
- Geography: inductive reasoning; you see and then make a theory
- Psychology: culture reveal certain truths of the human mind
- Health: needed to learn and teach so that the needs will make sense
- Art History: discover a people's interaction with materials
- Women Studies: deconstruct the very categories of ethnography
- Literature: a newer, more open version of The Canon
- Philosophy: Does it fit into the logic? If not, then it's the thing that is wrong
- Accounting: information in this global phase shift—should there be a universal standard or case by case basis?

What are we doing this quarter?

What (and why) are we doing this quarter? Why have we started with discussion of texts rather than history, language, or other subjects common to pre-departure courses?

This quarter I believe that we will be recognizing and dissecting the ways of our thinking to enrich our travel and the discussion abroad. To get the most out of our travel and ethnography.

A response:

Hello, old cautious me. I feel this short, painstakingly written response is a prime example of the writer I once was. When I'm approached with a question, especially in the academic setting, I tend to answer concisely and with resolution—totally in disregard of the power that questions hold to incite more questions. If I were to answer this question now, now that the 10 of our 10 plus 4 have passed, I would answer quite differently; absolutely as a result of having experienced what we have learned this quarter, but also presented in a different style.

I believe that Old Cautious Me has done a job well done in extrapolating and nutshelling the entirety of the course within the time span of the first lecture. Can I blame my education in engineering (where time is money and talk is colored using the grayscale) for this need to whittle down my thoughts to the bare minimum? But I feel that the me now would also reach—respond with questions of: why is learning about the history, language and etcetera commonly followed? How will we assess whether or not we've met the goal of this quarter (possibly through a portfolio)?

April 1

How will I be embraced or rejected in Bangalore?

How will I be embraced or rejected in Bangalore? How will I occupy the murkiness in the middle?

I feel no matter how similar a traveler might be to the locals they visit, there will inevitably be a sense of alienation setting them apart. Even if I tried to learn the cultural norms, details, like appearance will immediately separate me as a traveler—referring to Hartman’s passage on imagining they [the people of Ghana] had looked at her as “an alien tightly wrapped in the skin of a blue rain slicker” (Hartman 3). I think as a student and as a tourist, different types of stares are in store for me—on one hand I think locals will look at me as just another tourist with no consideration for the troves of stories, but with money for souvenirs and a camera ready to share postcard landmarks with relatives. But I also think as student from the University of Washington and working with NGOs there’s a sense of credibility and respect that will embrace us.

I do not know how I will deal with the murkiness. I know it will be awkward, but I hope that I will take it in me not to overreact or take it personally. I will also remember that my fellow classmates are experiencing the same thing and we are not in for the awkward moments alone.

What gifts do I bring?

Educationally, what gifts do I bring to myself/colleagues?

To myself...

- Debating skills
 - The ability to see/ argue for both sides of an issue
- Organization of thoughts (when I push myself)
 - I'm good at putting all my ideas on paper
 - I like to make To-Do lists (but have a problem with implementation)

To my colleagues...

- My point of view as an individual with an engineering education
- Motivation to get things done in a logical manner
- The ability to ask questions
 - That turns into constructive criticism
 - Helps to really narrow down and focus thoughts

What does it mean to have an opinion?

What does it mean to have an opinion? What does it mean to be vulnerable?

I feel that these two, having an opinion and being vulnerable, go hand in hand. One quote from a classmate that still resonates with me as I write this is “we won’t have the luxury of deferring an opinion.” Thus, in order to be participants while we are abroad we must see this as a necessity to take on an opinion. I think being vulnerable is still walking forward when you sense that you are wading in “the swamp of discomfort and fear.” There is also the entirely controversial dichotomy within The Academy that science is reason and the humanities is opinion which brings me to the questioning of the position I am in to even make an opinion. Is my opinion valid without an equation? Or, as the dichotomy points out, does my knowledge blur my true opinion? Even Behar tells us that after attaining a high rank and tenure in academia her writing was thwarted. If opinion and vulnerability are merely defined by being able to voice and trust our gut instinct, then why are we voicing our thoughts anyway? Why are we risking humiliation or offending someone? Maybe everyone should take the statement of an opinion with the grain of salt that “I should keep an openness to change.” We have the right/responsibility to hear each others’ opinions and state our own in order to parse out similarities and “truths.”

A response:

The answer to this question is still cloudy for me. At this point we were already halfway into *Vulnerable Observer* so we should have a good sense of what it means to be vulnerable, right? But what is it to have an opinion? Now that I’m fitted with my new Tool of Inquiry I’d like to answer this question with other questions—an implication that there is no one answer.

Can one not have an opinion? As I see it, as long as you’re thinking (not even so much *engaged*) your brain formulates even a smidgen of an opinion. Or does this definition of an opinion call for a stronger feeling of bias? Does this then mean there are *levels* of opinion?

If I were to rewrite this assignment I would most definitely pull from the texts and compare their definitions of opinion and vulnerability. Even if they aren’t concurrent, there’s a common truth among them that needs to be found.

What is the best travel advice you've received?

Received...

- Journal everything! Maybe not about the drama between fellow travelers but all the things you saw, little things you noticed and how you *felt* during those moments on your travel

Offered...

- Other than journaling EVERYTHING, learning about places you'll be visiting in advance and seeking out the hidden gems so that you *will* notice them while you're there, rather than wishing you had afterward.

Advice picked up from fellow classmates...

- BRING TOILET PAPER!
- Pack light
- Get lost the first day. Bring a journal and write how you got home
- Listen to your instincts (but remember safety)
- EARPLUGS
- Have what you need to survive for a few weeks in your backpack
- Bring something silly to read
- "Oh, no you didn't" is a great piece of advice (a.k.a. know your boundaries)
- Know when you are a spectacle

A response:

This is the project I most enjoyed. I loved looking through blogs and analytically comparing the style and influence of each one. I felt an even stronger, albeit somewhat voyeuristic, relationship with the authors I had already personally known. I don't think I would have approached this in any other way, but I do think I would've actually enjoyed taking more time perusing more blogs and writing about the efficacy or simply the impact they have. I think it would be interesting to converse with the authors to reveal what persona they were trying to convey or even any ulterior motives.

When I wrote this I saw almost no better way to share my travels with friends, family and sponsors than blogging. Now I still see it as a viable and legitimate medium, but am absolutely worried at how many blogs I will need to keep in order to fulfill the performance needs of multiple audiences. Retrospectively, I would expand more on the stakes I have in researching and writing about travel blogs. I would state the audiences I hope to appease and brainstorm the ways besides travel blogs to do that. I believe that in this paper I did a fine job in stirring up my thoughts on the seemingly simple act of blogging that I had once blindly wholeheartedly believed in.

What do we think of Poulos' project?

What do we think of Poulos' project? How can we stretch it? How can we defend it?

Poulos' project as an ethnographer seems to be justifying his exhibition of his family's secrets (his Martas) by reflecting and rallying others to partake in the same style of storytelling. This relates to our own colleagues' feelings about storytelling because many of us ask/question the stories we can tell. Many of us realize the need to tell others stories along with our own because all of us were shaped by another. Like Poulos we find precariousness in this business. His project shines light on hidden things and explores storytelling as a way to communicate and to heal. We might be delighted to read this now because we've *read* stories, and now this allows us to excavate and tell our own. If I really did take up the offer to converse with Poulos on page 30, I would like to see/talk with him with many questions in hand. Is he asking that we all share family secrets? Are there any secrets we shouldn't tell? What if friends/family members get hurt from the story I tell? What should I do then? Tell more secrets to catalyze the healing? What stories do you not share? Do you think there's any worth to not telling secrets?

Even with all the questioning we find that there is weight to a secret. "Secrets are a level of communication." Secrets have an agency to it. Gossip usually carries more leverage than the facts. And in the world of psychiatry, healing is initiated by turning the established.

A revision:

Performance

This brings us to the intermittently popping up subject of performance. We are always performing in the midst of a culture because culture itself is a product of individual performances with similar traits. Performance directs not only how you act, but undeniably how others react to you. As Hartman walks to the beaches of unforeseen waste and decay she performs both as a woman un-phased, only looking for what she seeks and as the comparatively privileged African American looking to shed tears over their ancestors taken from the homeland. In another example, Behar shares a motive for traveling incessantly to Cuba with second generation Cuban-Americans. She quotes her friend Nena, who says, “Cuba is an addiction” (Behar, 139). Behar tells us that their motive is “always about recovering our abandoned childhoods,” and to prove they aren’t afraid to go back. What is it these women feel is so imperative to prove when they leave behind careers, families and the comfort of their own home? Here performance isn’t just something solely derived from culture, but also from the stakes that person has in their performance. What will traveling to their *motherlands* show others—or what is it that they believe others want to see?

Alexander struggles with performance and motive. When he watches the spectacle of Ms. Behavior perform for the classroom he feels the need to link what the class was experiencing to words—information that makes a spectacle into something with meaning (Alexander, 109-111). He simultaneously feels the urge as a gay man (though he hopes his students don’t see his actions in the classroom purely as this) to connect the performer with the performance and to clearly present the lines of what it means to perform as a man/woman that Ms. Behavior sought to show. Performance can be determined by our

culture and our personal motives, and, in turn, performance governs the information we collect and the reflection of that.

This is where the complexity of performance becomes much more than what culture you associate with at that moment. If our motives stem from the need for personal achievement and our standards are set by the environment we're raised in, doesn't the motive circle back to the need to please others? To not only belong to the culture, but to be held on its high pedestal?

Amongst any culture we are performing. We are performing when we are alone. Others around us perform. As ethnographers this becomes extremely difficult. To consider we're all performing can devoid the credibility of our observations and our work. How can we distinguish what is real—what *is* the culture? How can we distinguish what is us and what is them—what is here and what is there, if we are all focused on meeting each other's standards. What individuality is there left to find if we all want to belong. In Bangalore our actions will be somewhat restricted, but our observations of the people and its culture are left to the individual. Do we find answers from what we see at the surface or do we dare cast our line into deeper waters unsure of what we'll catch or if we'll just be lost at sea?

A response:

I most definitely need to expand my three sections more. I think I would first collect views about each section from each text. Using these examples I would compare similarities and differences and analyze possible origins of those. Like I did above for the section on Performance, I would definitely expand more on the general conversation and absolutely include more on how this effects us as ethnographers. I think that if this is my *guide* to being an ethnographer questions, problems and concerns I would run into should be addressed. For example, what are the repercussions of (not) interacting with locals or what are the outlets (and their pros and cons) for sharing my findings?

May 25

Response to Anu's E-mails on "The Other Side of Silence"

Poulos jumps to mind. Telling family secrets is healing, is enlightening. We all have families larger and more plentiful than the one we call immediate. One of my families is the United States, another the Philippines. I feel strongly accountable to defend them, but it's also pertinent for 'outsiders' to know the truth. You expect the same from other families; we expect there to be an exchange of honest. Not everyone can claim their perfect; our imperfections probably hold more weight than accomplishments. Sharing the oh-so "human" (as opposed to robots) side of things links families closer, thus creating a strong family consisting of all humankind. We all have hidden stories. I hope in the university setting the atrocities committed by a fraction of the people aren't extended to the entire culture. I think if students chose to label people it is their own ignorance they have to blame for any blindness or unwarranted loss of kinship.

A Letter to Myself

Dear Donelyn of Bangalore,

As you walk the dusty streets of Bangalore for four weeks, time zones away from where you are now, remember the “training” from the first ten. Keep in mind the words of Hartman, Behar and Poulos. Remember the stories Butalia revealed. Keep trying to figure out Alexander’s definition of the problematic.

Realize where you are. Recognize what others might see of you. Recover who you are. Whether you choose to play center stage or tech crew, remember to consider this in your analysis/memory of that situation. Consider EVERYTHING! Expect things, but don’t assume people’s actions or reasons. People—cultures, perform for many reasons, and as an ethnographer it is your goal to seek those reasons out.

I want you to be uncomfortable. I want you to extend the intentional self-pushing from your personal tour of Kerry Park to this trip. Climb a ledge, ask a stranger for directions, ask someone what they think of Americans. Encounter people; engage with locals. Intellectually push yourself by wrapping your head around their stories. Think about how you can bring those stories back home and back into your life. Push yourself to be candid (but appropriate) with your acquaintances. Don’t just tell stories, *exchange* stories.

When you find yourself in times of trouble, let it be. Let it be. But really, when you want to change the world remember the repercussions. When your heart is breaking because you can’t buy an education for all the children you meet, rebuild that beating muscle stronger than before. Use the hurt to inspire action in yourself and in others. When thinking brings you to tears and hopeless realizations take a deep breath and remember that these are the moments to grow. Remember that any discomfiting moment is time spent outside your comfort zone and in the growing zone. Stretch, stretch and stumble frequently! This is your chance to do so without (too many) inhibitions: the class is your safety net.

Whether or not it’s a dull or exciting, happy or sad moment, try and remember. Commit your feelings and thoughts to memory so that you may go back and remember that time—so that you may share what you really felt with others. Ethnography doesn’t wait for anyone. That moment you’re in is unique and fleeting. Enjoy!

Love Always,
Donelyn of Seattle