Introduction

“The illusion has become real and the more real it becomes, the more desperate they want it.” (Gordon Gekko, Wall Street, cited by Denzin, 1990, p40)

This short paper aims not to define ‘postmodern’ organization or to label its ethnographers as ‘postmodern’. Instead we seek to problematize nostalgia, as attributed to ‘the postmodern condition’ (Davis, 2004; Stauth and Turner, 1988). The purpose of this paper is to locate the time and place of nostalgia in organizational ethnography.

As a critical inquiry, we examine two current debates in the Organization Studies literature, namely the intersubjectivity of narrative inquiry (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Cunliffe, 2011; Cunliffe et al., 2004), and the ethical standpoint of the antenarrative (Jørgensen and Boje, 2010; Paquette, 2012; Rhodes et al., 2010). We find nostalgia to be implicit but not explicit in those debates, and thus draw on the broader literature to offer a contribution that we believe can unify these debates. We find willful nostalgia underpins the intersubjective temporality of antenarrative. Collectively, such nostalgia distances antenarratives from the domination of organizational metanarratives to afford agents resistance. Hence we identify three implications for the intersubjective reflexivity of organizational ethnography. We propose that there is opportunity in nostalgia to extend allegorical inquiry; that the ethnographer’s self-reflexive awareness of their own nostalgia can be advantageous; and that the ethnographer treads a fine line between antenarrative and metanarrative complicity. We do however believe our paper offers more questions than answers. And so we see opportunity to extend this debate.
The intersubjectivity of organizational ethnography

Organisation Studies is not the preserve of the ethnographer, but the extent to which the organizational researcher’s ‘I/eye’ (after Kondo, 1990) has been interrogated throws a spotlight on narrative fieldwork, headwork and textwork practices (Van Maanen, 2011a) of ethnography. Narrative inquiry remains at the margins of the social sciences, but from there it has a freedom of expression that affords alternate perspectives on the minutiae of everyday life that may otherwise go unseen (Van Maanen, 2011a). The ethnographic craft itself is no exception.

Conventionally viewed as a subjective practice, ethnography has focused on the multiple meanings participants make of their socially constructed lives. How these are expressed are not through language alone (Cunliffe, 2011). Narrative inquiries are emotional encounters (Cunliffe et al., 2004). Storytelling in fieldwork is a corporeal experience for the teller (participant) and the listener (researcher) (Cunliffe, 2011). And through headwork and textwork, the ethnographer’s craft is to re-tell those encounters, to bring out fresh insights from our own embodied experiences, and engender an emotional response in our readers. The ethnographer’s *modus operandi* is evocation (Tyler, 2010).

However, the subject-object dichotomy, named here as participant-researcher, is a dated formulation. The researcher’s ‘influence’ can no longer be ‘ignored’, and nowhere is this more pertinent than in ethnography. The ethnographer is too a research participant (Cunliffe, 2011). Fieldwork stories are not told, they are shared. Through the embodied telling of tales, participants (tellers and listeners) make our own sense of stories by interpreting and exchanging meanings. Likewise, the evocation of headwork and textwork too afford fresh meanings for both writer and readers. Ethnography is not, and never has been merely subjective. It is an intersubjective practice (Cunliffe, 2011). And as such its outputs are not confined to textwork alone. Filmic narration and other visual methods are increasingly common, extending evocative possibilities beyond the discursive (Wood and Brown, 2012).

The methods of narration are not what we will discuss here though. Being corporeally aware, the ethnographer has considerations beyond those of mere method alone (Van Maanen, 2011b). Implicit in ethnographic work is identity work. Exchanging stories negotiates possibilities of similarity and difference (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). Ethnography is confronting. Its participants face questions such as ‘who am I/are we/are you?’, why do I/we/you
think these things?’, ‘what caused me/us/you to think this way?’, ‘how have I/we/you come to be here?’, ‘what does this mean for my/our/your future?’, and so on. This intersubjective identity work melds together the ontological and the epistemic - the reflexive hermeneutic (Cunliffe, 2011). “Reflexivity challenges [participants] to address fundamental questions about the nature of reality, knowledge and our own ways of being – to take a leap into a constantly shifting ocean rather than studying organizational life from the security of the shore (Cunliffe, 2003, p.999; parentheses added).

This ‘constant shifting’ of the metaphorical ocean is also for consideration. Sensemaking is perpetually in transition, melding and shifting whenever and wherever it is evoked. Yet Cunliffe et al. (2004), following Sartre, subjectively see narratives as synchronic. While previous narratives can be retold to afford new meanings, each ‘version’ is spontaneously polyphonic and dialogically ‘performed’ in situ. This ‘narrative temporality’ (Cunliffe et al., 2004) engenders the discontinuities implicit in Van Maanen's (2011a) fieldwork, headwork, and text(/film)work distinctions. The ethnographer’s craft is thus to listen to the many voices at play through time and space and navigate their multifarious meanings. Not though to produce a ‘definitive narrative’ on a subject (after Alvesson et al., 2008), but to offer something of a time and place that others might usefully make sense of. That is not to say that the flows of everyday life are equally discontinuous. Past and present encounters are perpetually drawn upon to make sense of and rationalize a narrative moment and seek to anticipate the future (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012).

Indeed, while writing this essay, the cricket is on the television. With nine wickets down and an impending low total, the task of the remaining two batsmen is one of ‘rescue’. The commentary team’s narrative of this moment draws on a similar yet more momentous situation from the archives. In doing so, they contextualise the present and evoke future possibilities. It is this relationship between past and present that we seek to problematize. Though a move to rationalize the present, the invocation of prior narratives brings with it emotion (after Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012).

Nostalgia and ‘the postmodern condition’

The organizational ethnographer’s gaze is more often than not on transition (Jeffcutt, 1994). The journey metaphor comes to the fore to make sense of perceived disorganization and decline (Butcher, 2012; Jeffcutt, 1994; Ylijoki, 2005). As organizational structures shift, their
metanarratives are adapted (Clegg and Baumeler, 2010), and their agents question institutional motives and ethics (Jørgensen and Boje, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2010). Hence agents go in search of past narratives, whether internal to the organization (Ylijoki, 2005) or externally (Paquette, 2012), to juxtapose their current predicament against seemingly ‘better times’, creating antenarratives (Jørgensen and Boje, 2010). Nostalgia is at play (Gabriel, 1993).

This tendency to decline is not though confined to Organization Studies. The Social Sciences have commonly witnessed the broader decline in Western society brought on by the discontinuities of the ‘modern’ transition from the cultural ideals of Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft (Robertson, 1990; Stauth and Turner, 1988). With ‘modernity’, first came Western political and symbolic ideals of nationhood, homogenizing societies. Later has come the ‘global imaginary’ as Gesellschaft has diffused from the West. The grand narratives of globalization ultimately affirm a discourse of humanity as organization, where autonomous agency is lost in the milieu of the ‘globality’ (Robertson, 1990). History is in decline (Robertson, 1990; Stauth and Turner, 1988).

One perspective on the Western response to this overarching, all-consuming, despairing metaphor is ‘the postmodern condition’, an “incredulity” to globalization’s grand narratives and indeed the metanarratives of organization (Lyotard, 1994, p.27). The discontinuities of ‘postmodernity’ are the sources of nostalgic sentiment (Davis, 2004). Nostalgia has a collective ‘anti-modern’ undertone (Gabriel, 1993; Stauth and Turner, 1988). “Since we live in a world of mere perspectives, the absence of stability in ethics and values results in a certain loss of direction which in turn leads to pessimism, disenchantment and melancholy. The world has become unhomelike, because we have lost all naivety and all certainty in values” (Stauth and Turner, 1988, p.516). The secularisation of culture fosters a collective sense of homelessness and melancholy (Stauth and Turner, 1988). The ‘postmodern’ incredulity to the grand narratives of Gesellschaft give rise to collective nostalgia for Gemeinschaft.

Nostalgia is not though about living in the past, but about reflecting on the juxtaposition between the past and present through active engagement with the past (Davis, 2004; Gabriel, 1993; Wilson, 2005; Ylijoki, 2005). “Nostalgia is a way of ordering and interpreting ideas, feelings and associations from our experiences. It’s not a desire to return to the past” (Smith, 2000 cited by Wilson, 2005, p.27). Homelessness does not necessarily drive the homeless to return home.
This *not wishing to return to the past* is important to understanding the enactment of nostalgia. The nostalgic past may indeed not be a ‘real’ or complete memory of the past. Nostalgia selectively phantasizes idealized symbolic moments to retrospectively mythologize the past and evoke a “glowing emotional response” (Gabriel, 1993, p.121). The past will thus always be seen as superior to the present, illustrating the decline of history. The past though will be forever and irretrievably lost (Gabriel, 1993).

Yet nostalgia is rarely viewed in a positive light and possibly is even seen as perverse (Cunningham Bissell, 2005). For Turner (1990), nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft* is a paralyzing “anti-modern romanticism” that inhibits ‘postmodernist’ thought (p.12). Such romanticism has found its way into ‘postmodern’ cinematic perspectives of imperialism. Evocation of what imperialism destroyed is problematic, and thus might too easily be dismissed as emotional, irrational or synthetic (Cunningham Bissell, 2005; Robertson, 1990; Rosaldo, 1989). The same might be said of nostalgia for the loss of the academic freedom of ‘the University’ to the neo-liberalism of ‘the Higher Educational Institution’ (Ruth, 2008; Ylijoki, 2005).

However nostalgia might more usefully be viewed as resistance to domination. Its local narratives reinforce dispositions against the contradictory rhetoric of metanarratives (Jozwiak and Mermann, 2006). For example, tales of childhood interlaced with one’s professional career narrative can provide the temporal distance needed to make sense of organizational life (Paquette, 2012). Ethically, childhood antenarratives can withdraw identity from the discontinuities of an organizational setting to position ‘self’ as ‘other’, thereby enacting a personal ethos against institutional pathos.

Employed *wilfully*, nostalgia is “a form of cultural politics” (Robertson, 1990). It is not marginal but pervasive, permeating stories and creating folklore (Gabriel, 1993). Antenarratives, we argue, are intersubjectively imbued with wilful nostalgia that enables the taking of an ethical stance against a dominant discourse.

Discussion

Our departure from the literature seeks to unify two current debates in Organization Studies - the intersubjectivity of narrative inquiry (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Cunliffe, 2011; Cunliffe et al., 2004), and the ethical standpoint of the antenarrative (Jørgensen and Boje, 2010; Paquette, 2012; Rhodes et al., 2010). The omission of nostalgia from these debates is
unsurprising given its tarnished reputation (Turner, 1990). Nevertheless, we find from the broader literature that it is a phenomenon that cannot be avoided. That is not to say that it is something to be tolerated, but is rather something of cultural significance (Robertson, 1990). Wilful nostalgia underpins the intersubjective temporality of antenarrative.

Given that intersubjectivity and antenarrative are the stock and trade of the contemporary organizational ethnographer, how might wilful nostalgia play out in current narrative inquiry?

Not being on a quest for truth (Clifford, 2010), the ethnographer’s task is not to weed out nostalgia to de-mythologize participant antenarratives. Instead through shared nostalgia come allegories. The ethnographer’s fieldwork task is thus to listen through the polyphony to locate hidden meanings. In headwork, it is to situate those allegories theoretically. And in text/filmwork it is to offer readers/viewers opportunity to situate themselves in the allegories and learn from them.

We do not of course exclude the ethnographer’s own nostalgia from the polyphony. The self-reflexive ethnographer will be all too aware that her/his own past will play into the present. As discussed above, academics are not immune to nostalgia (Ylijoki, 2005). We are in affect predisposed to it (Stauth and Turner, 1988); ethnographers more so than others. We are the proverbial ‘exile’ (Van Maanen, 2011b). We find our ‘selves’ homeless, attempting to situate the ‘I/eye’ in the homes of ‘others’. As such, we believe that the ethnographer’s own nostalgia may surface less wilfully than other participants’. Being mindful of romanticism in all three forms of ethnographic work is not an original recommendation, but fostering awareness when wilful nostalgia tips over into the romantic is. At this point, the ethnographer must decide how to manage this situation. Not being an empirical paper, we offer no further recommendations on this, but do raise an ontological point. In fieldwork in particular, the perennial questions of ‘how long is long enough?’, ‘how long is too long?’, and ‘how embedded should I become?’ might in part be answered by perpetually questioning (without essentializing) one’s own nostalgia.

And finally, we pick up a point that is central to Rosaldo's (1989) criticism of imperialist nostalgia but not discussed here previously. Through the logistics of going to, being in and leaving the fieldwork context, anthropologists have always been complicit in colonialism (Rosaldo, 1989). Likewise, we wonder to what extent the organizational ethnographer is party to the domination of organization in gaining access to its agents. And so how might this affect the polyphony of resistance.
Conclusion

In this short essay we have attempted to draw together two current debates in Organization Studies and introduce a discussion that has emerged from time to time in the broader literature. We have sought to problematize nostalgia in organizational ethnography to begin to understand its affects on intersubjectivity and antenarrative. As such we find wilful nostalgia can underpin antenarrative, enabling the ethical positioning of agents against dominant metanarratives. Nostalgia must thus be accounted for in intersubjectively reflexive research.

Finally we return to our very first quotation. The fictional Gordon Gekko’s statement, in the Lacanian spirit, alludes to an observation we have about the overall ethnographic project. As we become seduced by the polyphonies and corporealities of everyday life and their multifarious meanings, can we distinguish between what is real and what is imagined?

References


On nostalgia: organizational ethnography and ‘the postmodern condition’

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