

ETHNOGRAPHY, STORYTELLING, AND PHENOMENOLOGY: GOOD
PROBLEMS IN WRITING RELIGION

by

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Ethnographic accounts of religious practice offer rich and compelling access to the details of lived religion in local sites. Insights from the phenomenological tradition have become increasingly influential in thinking about what ethnographies accomplish. Although ethnographies of religion do well to pay attention to phenomenological concerns, ethnographic research and analysis cannot do the same work as phenomenological analysis in studying religion. Ethnographies of religion pay attention to diverse narratives and ways of storytelling, which are important aspects of members' lived religious practice but are unavailable in phenomenological analysis. Storytelling is a

fragile research practice that involves inherent ambiguities for ethnographers. These ambiguities call for a persistent and critical reflexivity to be inscribed in ethnographic writing. This reflexivity implies a fundamentally ethical way of thinking about ethnographic research and writing, one that pays attention to the care that is required for good ethnographies of religious practice.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenological tradition has strongly influenced theoretical considerations of sociological research and writing. Alongside this, there has been an increasing attention to methodological problems across methods and sub-disciplines of sociology. Generalized crises of representation emerging from so-called ‘postmodern’ literatures—primarily from the slightly more specific fields of critical theory, poststructuralism and post-Heideggerian phenomenology—seeped into the discourse of social scientists in the form of increasing hand-wringing about the nature of social-scientific research and analysis. Specifically, those more ‘subjective’ methods of social-scientific work, often gathered under the heading ‘qualitative’, were sharply rebuked for their negligence in addressing the vicissitudinous and indeterminate character of their various research programs.

Certainly more ink has been spilled on this problem in the last half-century than I could hope to address. More to the point, much of the work that addresses this problem does so in a generalized way, and works on various assumptions about what the work of social-scientific research and analysis is meant to accomplish. There is no doubt that much of this criticism has been necessary, especially with regard to pointing out the endemic problem of inscribing colonialism, racism, anthropocentrism, misogyny, patriarchy, and other forms of bigotry and bias into social-scientific literature. And there

is no doubt that one of the lessons of these criticisms is that this is very much an *endemic* problem, and one that will not go away.¹

Ethnographic research is one area of social science that has been heavily subject to these criticisms. But it has also long been an important and vital way of practicing the sociological analysis of religion. Ethnographic accounts of religious practice offer rich and compelling access to the details of ‘lived religion’ in local sites.² Serious questions have been raised about the work of ethnography. To what extent are ethnographic accounts framed by various decisions that the ethnographer makes in establishing and carrying out her research? Whose ethnographic account is being presented in narratives that proceed from ethnographic research? What is the relationship between the discoveries of ethnographic research and quantitative analysis? Is it possible to theorize based on ethnographies of religion, or must ethnography be content with offering tenuous, localized descriptions of religious practices that provide no resources for understanding patterns or typologies of religion in society? What do ethnographies of religion accomplish?

In an essay written after the publication of her seminal ethnography *Mama Lola*, Karen McCarthy Brown says that

the analogy commonly drawn between anthropology and the natural sciences has ceased to be helpful to me. While I still care about factuality and freedom from bias, those standards are no longer the

¹ This aspect of these criticisms will be addressed in Chapter IV below.

² This is the term taken up by Meredith B. McGuire in her book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). McGuire’s work will figure significantly in this essay.

most demanding ones for my work. Over the years I have come to understand anthropological fieldwork as something closer to a social art form than a social science.³

The force of the criticisms of ‘qualitative’ social-scientific research discussed above seem to tend toward a position such as Brown’s. (Or those criticisms might lead social scientists to attempt to systematize and formalize ethnographic research and analysis in ways that approach various methodologies in quantitative social-scientific work.⁴) Since the models of the natural sciences have long been the paragons of objectivity and truth in Western thinking, such an admission by Brown might appear to relegate the kind of research that she does to a lower order of social-scientific work.

Of course, Brown does not think this to be the case, and much of what comes below is intended to dispel such a framework for thinking about ethnographies of religion. Part of what I will argue is precisely that ethnographic research *does fail* to accomplish the specific kind of rigor and objectivity that is delineated by forms of social-science research that are modeled on the natural sciences. Furthermore, it necessarily fails to accomplish this because the objects of ethnographic research are precisely not available for study via scientific methodologies. That is, the phenomena that are taken up for analysis by ethnographies of religion are precisely *not* phenomena for quantitative-scientific methodologies.

³ 129-130 in Karen McCarthy Brown, ‘Writing about “the Other”, Revisited’, in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, eds. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres and Meredith McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 127-133. Also, see *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁴ For one of the more interesting attempts at this kind of direction, see Robert Aunger, ‘On Ethnography: Storytelling or Science?’, in *Current Anthropology* 36 (1995): 97-130.

Rather, ethnographic research and analysis is properly located at the intersection between various kinds of storytelling and phenomenology. The ethnographer's job is to tell critical stories about other people's stories, and phenomenology is a rich resource for how these stories can be told. While the roots of phenomenology aspired to the rigor of the natural sciences, much theory and research appropriating phenomenology to sociology provides fruitful insights for ethnographers that is amenable to the fundamental narrative quality of ethnographies of religion.⁵ But this intersection should not be construed as a way to save ethnographic research for the truth and objectivity of the natural sciences. Ethnographic research and writing is a profoundly ethical exercise that requires the persistent inscription of kinds of reflexive analysis in order to sustain itself as an activity associated with truth. Brown, for example, is very interested in truth, not as the objectivity of the sciences but as 'truth telling and justice', which are certainly more fragile and unstable ways of thinking about truth but are nevertheless the proper work of ethnographies of religion.

Chapter II attempts a cursory genealogy of the question of the object of social science, incorporating insights from Durkheim and some of his later interpreters, especially those coming out of the phenomenological tradition in sociology. I then articulate three schemas for situating social research. Through the work of Meredith McGuire and Robert Orsi I attempt to situate ethnographic research within these schemas. Finally, I return to some of the phenomenological themes in Durkheim's interpreters and show the ways in which ethnography can and cannot make use of

⁵ Throughout, I use 'narrative' interchangeably and synonymously with 'stories', 'storytelling', 'giving an account', etc.

phenomenological insights. I eventually identify the proper work of ethnography as a kind of critical or reflexive storytelling, within which much use can be made of phenomenological analysis.

In Chapter III I develop the concept of narrative or storytelling as I think it applies to ethnographic research and writing. Beginning with Michael Jackson's *The Politics of Storytelling*, as well as research by Mark Freeman, Judith Butler, and Paul Ricoeur, I try to give an extended definition of what storytelling is, and why and how we do it. After tentatively transposing this question into the context of ethnographies of religion, I argue that there is an essentially heterogeneous character to both the work and the accomplishment of ethnographies of religion such that the success or failure of the truthfulness of a given ethnography must be specific to how it tells critical stories about other people's stories. Central to the success or failure of this accomplishment is the awareness of the ethnographer regarding the nature and scope of her ethnographic activities.

Finally, in Chapter IV I argue that this awareness is an ethical comportment with regard to the ethnographer's research and writing. Returning to insights from Judith Butler, and incorporating Stephen K. White's conceptual framework surrounding 'weak ontology', I suggest that successful ethnographic research and writing—that is, truth-telling ethnographies—require a persistent and critical reflexivity to be inscribed into the research and the writing. This allows for an opening onto what Paul Ricoeur calls an 'ethics of discourse', where the ethnographer can give a rigorous and rich account of religious sites while entrusting the reader and the subject with a recognition of the

fragility and instability of the account. Moreover, the persistent recognition of this fragility and instability enriches the availability of the phenomena themselves and thus allows writers of ethnographies to give richer accounts of religious sites.

CHAPTER II

ETHNOGRAPHY AND SCHEMAS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

What do we study when we study society? Durkheim says that sociology is the study of social facts. Durkheim provides a very careful definition of social facts at the beginning of *The Rules of Sociological Method*: Social facts ‘consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him’.⁶ In the Preface to the Second Edition, Durkheim says that the ‘basic principle’ of sociology is ‘the objective reality of social facts’.⁷ Harold Garfinkel interprets Durkheim as saying that ‘the objective reality of social facts is sociology’s fundamental *phenomenon*’.⁸ Garfinkel has a complicated story to tell about what this means—specifically, what it means for ethnomethodological research—but he is very clear about what Durkheim’s aphorism proposes: that there is a lived orderliness to ‘immortal, ordinary society’ available to the researcher, and that this is the object of sociological study. The word ‘immortal’ is peculiar here, and Garfinkel explains: ‘*Immortal* is a metaphor for the great recurrences of ordinary society, staffed, provided for, produced, observed, and observable, locally and naturally accountable in

⁶ Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 52.

⁷ Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 45.

⁸ Harold Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology’s Program: Working Out Durkheim’s Aphorism*, ed. Anne Warfield Rawls (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 66.

and as of an “assemblage of haecceities”.⁹ Examples that Garfinkel uses are: traffic jams, hallway greetings, formatting queues, etc. But really, these everyday occurrences of ‘immortal, ordinary society’ are just all those activities that go into making up any social scene.

Durkheim’s social facts are objective because they are not reducible to the actions or representations of the individual. While any social scene is necessarily staffed by individuals, the production of that social scene is ‘the organizational *thing* as of their doing...but *not* of their very own, singular, distinctive authorship’.¹⁰ That is, the production of social scenes is ‘congregational’, is produced as an ensemble of members, and it is produced ‘unwittingly’.¹¹ So Durkheim’s objectivity is always and only found in specific sites of social phenomena. Objectivity here does not mean generality. Instead it refers to the paradox of society that Berger and Luckmann identify as the basic problem of sociological theory: ‘How is it possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities?’¹²

Berger and Luckmann identify the ‘marching orders’ of sociology—as issuing from Durkheim and Weber—as a sustained and simultaneous attention to the ‘objective

⁹ Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology’s Program*, 92. Garfinkel borrows the metaphor from Durkheim. See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 271-272.

¹⁰ Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology’s Program*, 92.

¹¹ See Eric Livingston’s description of this in *Making Sense of Ethnomethodology* (London: Routledge, 1987), 10-11.

¹² Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 18.

facticity *and* subjective meaning’ that is the ‘dual character of society’.¹³ This is one way that theorists have schematized social phenomena. We will see that ethnographers of religion like Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire have made significant use of this schematization in their work, and that phenomenological analyses play an important role in this approach. Berger and Luckmann’s descriptions in *The Social Construction of Reality* are in many ways a distillation of insights derived as much from Schutz and Scheler as from Durkheim and Weber. The central phenomenological problem in sociological analysis is to uncover generalized structures of existence within particular social scenes.

Berger and Luckmann accomplish this by focusing on the oscillating and reciprocal activities of institutionalization and socialization. The former activity ‘occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors’.¹⁴ And socialization occurs whenever institutionalized social practices are ‘internalized’ by a social actor.¹⁵ So, for example, there are certain accepted ways of greeting someone while passing them on the street that are intricately specified according to the kind of relationship the first greeter has with the second. When I pass my advisor, I know a certain way (or a number of appropriate ways) of greeting her that would be inappropriate in the case of greeting a student, or again, a close friend. And likewise, my advisor knows

¹³ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. 18. Properly, there are three moments that Berger and Luckmann describe within this process: externalization, objectivation and internalization.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵ Berger and Luckmann make an important distinction between primary socialization—more or less learning how to be social—and secondary socialization—where an already socialized being takes up institutional ‘sub-worlds’ within the social milieu. For our purposes, the latter is of most interest. See *The Social Construction of Reality*, 129ff.

how she ought to greet me. Not only this, but the various ways of greeting that each of us might take up are massively determined by other variables in the social scene. How long has it been since we last met? Have I been remiss in sending her some work that she is expecting from me? Was our last meeting contentious? Are we meeting in an unsurprising place, such as a hallway or elevator in the building that our offices are in, or are we meeting in a faraway city that neither of us knew the other would be in? What is remarkable about all of this is how well we know how to take account of all these things in effecting a successful greeting. We are experts at it. But of course, this expertise is localized. The specific sets of knowledge that go into this expertise vary from culture to culture, society to society, time to time. If I move to a country that requires significantly different knowledge sets in order to effect successful greetings, I will first have to learn how to greet all over again. Eventually, given enough practice and training (that is, given enough failed or awkward attempts at greeting, and given enough reinforcement by other social actors in the scene that I have not yet gotten it right), I will become an expert at greeting in these new greeting-institutions. And this means: I will do it effortlessly, not because it is now 'easy' for me but because it now *is* me.

The way that Berger and Luckmann schematize the objects of social research is fundamentally phenomenological, given the cursory definition of phenomenology that I gave above. So according to this model the sociologist must study both the social fact *things* of Durkheim and Garfinkel, and the subjective aspects of the sociological world that Weber and Schutz are interested in. And as Berger and Luckmann point out, this does not put these two polarities at odds with each other, since they are aspects of a single

milieu. But they are in tension, insofar as the processes of subjectivation and institutionalization are necessarily inscribed within a dialectical process that makes up the scenes of sociological analysis. Nevertheless, one of the problems we will have to examine below is to what extent both of these aspects can be adequately addressed by any given particular method of social research.

Berger and Luckmann's schematization is an important one for thinking about both the methods and objects of social research, but it is not the only one. Another way to think about society can be divided along the lines of what Spickard and Landres have called, in the context of the social-scientific study of religion, 'generalizers' and 'particularizers'.¹⁶ The generalizers are those—and we might think of Rodney Stark here, for example—who try to chart 'trends of religious life' and, presumably, interpret these trends through certain theoretical frameworks.¹⁷ The particularizers 'show us the minute details of specific religions', giving us localized, attentive descriptions of particular social religious scenes.¹⁸ Of course, this delineation is also found in the standard language of 'quantitative' vs. 'qualitative' research, but this is a messy distinction, given that these terms do not really give us any details about a particular research program.¹⁹ A quantitative approach could very well, in its specificity, give us a more localized and

¹⁶ James V. Spickard and J. Shawn Landres, 'Whither Ethnography? Transforming the Social-Scientific Study of Religion', in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*, 1-14.

¹⁷ Spickard and Landres, 'Whither Ethnography?', 1. The reference to Stark is my own.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ Another polarity that loosely maps onto this is the distinction that Garfinkel makes between Formal Analytic and Ethnomethodological studies (allowing for Ethnomethodology as a broad category, if rigorous). See e.g., 121-134 in *Ethnomethodology's Program*.

detailed analysis than a qualitative approach whose scope is overly broad.²⁰ The generalizer/particularizer schema is somewhat more helpful, though in any case we would need a more specific description of the methods to know what we are dealing with.

What seems very clear about the generalizer/particularizer schema is that there is much less hope for a *rapprochement* between its polarities. Simply, the more ‘particularized’ any given research program becomes, the less it will be able to speak to general patterns or trends in religion as a whole. Inversely, increasing generalization in research programs means a decreasing ability to account for details of distinctions in data.

A third way of schematizing social research has recently been articulated in an exceptionally clear and straightforward way by Howard Becker. Becker says, plainly that any kind of social-scientific research and reporting involves making and communicating representations about society.²¹ Furthermore, ‘every version of social science analysis has to do the job of making less out of more, in the process making what has been gathered more intelligible and assimilable’.²² Social science is in the business of ‘summarizing details’, and constructing representations that say something about those details.

‘Knowledge results from weeding out extraneous detail and exposing basic structures, the

²⁰ For an account of the diffuse nature of these categories in current research, see Ronald L. Jackson II, Darlene K. Drummond and Sakile Camara, ‘What is Qualitative Research?’, in *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 8 (2007): 21-28.

²¹ Howard S. Becker, *Telling About Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). This is the third in a remarkable series of texts about the work of writing social science. The first two texts are *Tricks of the Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and *Writing for Social Scientists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

²² Becker, *Telling About Society*, 59.

part we're interested in. Not everything is interesting or useful to us.'²³ This distillation of details into representations also addresses another aspect of Becker's schema of social research. Becker says that the summarizing of details and construction of representations will proceed differently according to what the researcher is interested in studying, and that every way of doing research is adequate to *some* goal of *some* researcher. 'Every way of doing things is perfect—for *something*.'²⁴ Becker points out that arguments about which research methods are the 'right' ones are largely misguided. Different research methods accomplish different things, and moreover they are designed to accomplish different things.

Becker's schema is related to the schema proposed by Spickard and Landres, and provides insight into what is going on with the generalizer/particularizer polarity. On Becker's reading, these approaches ought not to be pitted one against the other in a battle to determine which one is more authoritative or provides one with the *real truth* about religion. Instead, each pole in the schema is designed to make available to the researcher—and then the reader—certain aspects of religion and religious practice that the researcher and reader are interested in.²⁵ This will be an important consideration as we try to situate ethnography within this schema.

So far, we have briefly considered three schemas of social research that identify and highlight certain aspects of the structure and study of society. It may seem odd to

²³ Ibid., 93.

²⁴ Ibid., 72.

²⁵ Becker calls the researcher and reader, respectively, the maker and user (of representations about society). Cf. *Telling About Society*, 26ff.

group these schemas together, since the first schema seems mostly to be making claims about the *structure* of society, while the latter schemas address the *study* of society. But it is perhaps already clear that these schemas are closely related, especially given what Becker says. How they are related is part of the concern of this essay, with our primary aim to articulate how the ethnography of religion fits into these schemas, and how the relations between them show up in ethnographic research and writing.²⁶

More generally, we could say that all of these schemas are different ways of thinking about the relationship between the universal and the particular. The anthropologist Michael Jackson has written that this is perhaps the central schematic problem for thinking about the work of ethnography.²⁷ While the tendency of much social-scientific work is to think about this relationship by distilling it through formalized methods, ‘logic, theory, and academic argot’, Jackson finds in ethnography a way of addressing the question of the universal and the particular.²⁸ We will return to Jackson’s work in Chapter III.

So how is ethnography situated within these three particular-universal schemas? It may be tempting at first to say that in each case, ethnography is on the side of the particular. Ethnographers’ jobs are to give us detailed descriptions and analyses of

²⁶ In relating ethnography of religion to these schemas of social research—and tracing these schemas through the history of sociology—I am not going to pay attention to distinctions between anthropology and sociology when discussing ethnography. There may be important methodological or theoretical distinctions between the two in some cases—though I am suspicious of claims along these lines—but part of the work of this essay is to show precisely that the ethnographer does not have the prerogative to make such distinctions hard and fast. Moreover, much of ethnographic theory in anthropology speaks directly to methodological and theoretical issues in sociology, and vice versa—this is also made obvious in this essay.

²⁷ Michael Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2ff.

²⁸ Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica*, 33.

localized practices, of, in our case, members' lived religion. These intimate, personal practices ought to be situated on the side of the subjective in the Berger and Luckmann schema, since ethnographies of religion largely try to show this aspect of religious life.

Similarly, and this is what Spickard and Landres think, ethnography should be situated primarily within the pole of the particularizers according to their schema, since what ethnographers do is 'choose a specific research locale, which they spend several years getting to know'.²⁹ Although Spickard and Landres are out to complicate the traditional narrative of ethnographic authority (we have 'been there', so we know what it is really about), they do not seem worried about the straightforward identification of research methods with their schematic polarity.³⁰

The question of how to situate ethnography within Becker's schema is more difficult, since Becker's schema is formal, while the first two schemas are derivative of certain aspects of social research. In order for us to assess ethnography via Becker's schema, we need to know what ethnographies are trying to tell us about society. And this leads us back to the question of having to situate ethnography within the schemas of Berger and Luckmann and Spickard and Landres. Are ethnographers of religion trying to tell us something about how religion works *generally*? Are they trying to make available to their readers objective structures of religious practice, along the lines of the phenomenological tradition in sociology? Or are they just trying to get a handle on how this group right here in this time embodies these specific religious practices? Are

²⁹ Spickard and Landres, 'Whither Ethnography?', 2.

³⁰ Furthermore, the tone of many of the essays in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond* betrays the retention of a superior—though maligned—role of ethnography in social-scientific research. See, e.g., Karen McCarthy Brown's comments in 'Writing about the "Other," Revisited', 127-133.

ethnographers just describers? Or does ethnography do more than describe, and if so, what is that more?

Prominent ethnographers of religion have begun to readdress these questions.³¹ In briefly considering recent arguments made by Meredith McGuire and Robert Orsi we will develop a specific conception of the ethnography of religion that critically situates it within the schemas of Berger and Luckmann and Spickard and Landres, and answers the questions that Becker needs answering before any further assessment can be done. In so doing, we will begin to develop a picture of what ethnography does and does not, can and cannot, accomplish. This will lead us to consider in Chapter III *how* ethnographers of religion accomplish good ethnography.

Meredith McGuire, in her book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, describes a strong tension in the sociology of religion between systematic macro-sociological narratives of religion and the ways in which those narratives' actual members live out and practice the religions to which they adhere.³² So, for example, the persuasiveness of rational choice theory has led many to champion it as a great explanatory model for the ways in which people choose and engage in religious practices. Rodney Stark's work is exemplary in this regard, arguing for the localized reasonableness of peoples' religious practices and peculiar efficacy of certain types of religious patterns throughout recorded human history. The simplicity, clarity and *neatness* of these kinds of studies translate well from easily and often quoted surveys of

³¹ The essays in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond* provide a detailed picture of the ways in which ethnographers of religion have been rethinking their work.

³² McGuire's polarity here is clearly close to that of Spickard and Landres.

the so-called ‘state of religion’, which make their way into popular media in the form of de-contextualized statistics manipulated in order to convince the listener or reader of the death or revival of religion.

Against the prevalence of these kinds of studies and this way of framing research projects in the sociology of religion, McGuire laments that something important—indeed central—is lost in a dominant reliance on this way of doing social-scientific research. In her research, and in the research of others, she has discovered that the ‘standard scholarly concepts of religion and religiosity’ are largely lacking in the capacity to actually describe the particular lived religions of almost anyone.³³ Instead, these research projects tend to tell stories about religion that are exceedingly faithful to the official, proprietary version of that religion as told by the institutional and hierarchical leaders in that religion. This way of approaching the study of religion therefore assumes that an adherent of a religion, identified as such in a survey or interview, maps on unproblematically—or at least mostly unproblematically—to the institutional/hierarchical version of that religion. McGuire argues that this is simply not how things work with respect to the practiced religious lives of the individuals that make up the memberships of these institutions. ‘...Each individual’s biographical narrative [is not] simply a microcosm of the grand narrative of some “official” religion.’³⁴ Robert Orsi makes this same point when he writes: ‘There is no such thing as a “Methodist”...who can be neatly summarized by an

³³ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 4. And this just to the extent that they describe ‘everyone’.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

account of the denomination's history or theology... What exists are histories of people working on their worlds in specific way at specific times and places.'³⁵

McGuire and Orsi are right. Treatments of religion in sociology that attempt to track and analyze trends across large populations are necessarily in the business of generalizing and typifying results and telling a story that accurately represents the data. Furthermore, this is just what sociologists like Stark are after. They are not interested in ethnographic data, nor in specified, local practices, if they cannot be typified to reveal general structures of religion and religious experience. Of course, for any set of ethnographic data, Stark could presumably tell a story of its subjects such that they appear to be behaving according to some variant of rational choice theory. But his interest is in the structures of religious behavior that can be *generalized from* these local accounts.³⁶ In typifying across such a mass of data and diversity of practice, distortion will occur. That is, theorizing social phenomena on the level of the articulation of generalized rules and laws is not the same work as ethnography. We will see that ethnography can reveal immanent structures that are made available in the ethnographic data, and these can be related to or described in terms of theoretical constructs. Indeed, according to Becker this is exactly the work of social-scientific research and writing of

³⁵ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 168-169.

³⁶ See, e.g., Rodney Stark, 'Micro Foundations of Religion: A Revised Theory', in *Sociological Theory* 17 (1999): 264-289; and Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For a thoroughgoing critique of Stark and Finke from another angle, see Colin Jerolmack and Douglas Porpora, 'Religion, Rationality, and Experience: A Response to the New Rational Choice Theory of Religion', in *Sociological Theory* 22 (2004): 140-160.

any stripe. But there is not a deductive relationship between ethnographic data and macro theories along the lines of Stark, and there cannot be.

McGuire is concerned with what is lost in much of theoretical accounts of religion that rely significantly or exclusively on what are necessarily limited surveys and questionnaires. These methods for retrieving data, she contends, cover up or miss important aspects of the everyday lives of individuals' religious practices. McGuire thinks that the lived religious practices of the members that staff any category or type of religious institution reveals a fundamentally different picture of religion. Ethnographic research into lived religion shows us that 'the Western image of a religion as a unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices' is a false image.³⁷ Instead, religious practices are essentially syncretic and malleable. McGuire's argument is that the site of syncretism and malleability of religious practices is always the individual, and so this ought to be the focus of research—thus the importance of ethnography.

McGuire frames this role of the individual with Lévi-Strauss' concept of 'bricolage', developed in his 1962 book *The Savage Mind*. Lévi-Strauss used this term as a way of describing the spontaneous and creative activities of a social thinker/actor within a closed structuralist system.³⁸ McGuire describes bricolage (as she is using it) as

³⁷ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 186.

³⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). See especially 16-33. The metaphor of bricolage is taken up in other structuralist and post-structuralist literature, notably by Jacques Derrida in 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278-293; and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978).

‘the practice of eclectically choosing the elements of...religious belief and practice, loosely mortaring them together’.³⁹ McGuire forms both her critique of macro pictures of religion and her own positive account around the phenomena of religious practice that bricolage is meant to illuminate:

[It] remains an empirical question whether the eclecticism of much contemporary religion-as-lived is, indeed, so very different from people’s practices in other times and cultural settings...The main reason this historical question is important for sociologists is that we have tended to view popular religious practices—especially those of peasants, uneducated immigrants, and premodern times—as highly tradition-bound, passively replicated and transmitted, and not at all autonomously chosen. But what if traditional actions, such as popular religious practice, are informed *also* by individual and/or collective eclecticism and bricolage?⁴⁰

We can see here a way of beginning to think about the situation of ethnography—since ethnography (informed by phenomenological insights) is for McGuire the best access we have to this individual bricolage—with relation to our three schemas above. Again, it seems that ethnographic research will be found aligned with the poles of subjectivation and particularization, and that ethnographies of religion can only tell us about localized practices.

³⁹ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 64.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

But McGuire is not arguing for a bare individualistic interpretation of religious practices. She is fully aware that ‘although lived religion pertains to the individual, it is not merely subjective. Rather, people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality.’⁴¹ Following Berger and Luckmann, McGuire is careful to point out that ‘individual religion is...fundamentally social. Its building blocks are shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights.’⁴² Elsewhere, McGuire points to Schutz’s metaphor of ‘making music together’ as a way of thinking about the common production and maintenance of religious practices, as well as the ways in which embodiment in the work of Foucault is peculiarly initiated through certain sets of social practices.⁴³

Nevertheless, McGuire’s emphasis on the ‘bricoleur’ as the focus for ethnographic research and for the creation and maintenance of religious practice risks covering over these very social structures that she affirms are constitutive for the ‘bricoleur’. McGuire intentionally frames this emphasis *against* the distorted, true-for-everyone-and-so-true-for-no-one, ‘official’, macro-institutional picture of religion, but in so doing she overstates her position with regard to the role that the creative, agential individual plays in generating and sustaining religious practices over time. There is a tension in the polarities of our schemas that cannot be so easily dismissed by aligning

⁴¹ Ibid., 12

⁴² Ibid., 13.

⁴³ For the comments about Schutz, see *ibid.*, 112-115; for the comments about Foucault, see 118. McGuire also attends to concerns about embodiment in ethnographic research and writing in ‘New-Old Directions in the Social Scientific Study of Religion: Ethnography, Phenomenology, and the Human Body’, in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*, 195-211.

ethnographic research straightforwardly against and superior to macro-sociological analysis.⁴⁴

Since McGuire makes substantial use of the metaphor of bricolage in order to explain her position, let us see how bricolage works in Lévi-Strauss' own account. In the context of *The Savage Mind*, bricolage is described as a means of interacting with social structures that 'expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited'.⁴⁵ The bricoleur's 'universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with "whatever is at hand", that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous'.⁴⁶ The resources of the bricoleur are both finite and heterogeneous because they are fully contingent on what has come before, what is given, while at the same time being made use of in such a way as to bring about something new.⁴⁷ The bricoleur 'has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to

⁴⁴ Again, we need to be careful not to over-generalize any one of these positions. There are many different kinds of macro-sociological analysis, and Stark's research, for example, looks quite a bit different from the later writings of Peter Berger, though both are properly 'macro'.

⁴⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 17. While this quote actually refers to 'mythical thought', in the next sentence Lévi-Strauss says that 'mythical thought is...a kind of intellectual "bricolage"', so there is no problem with employing his text in this way.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁷ Critiques of structuralism will eventually center on the essential incompatibility of these two aspects in order to show up the pretenses of a 'closed' system.

his problem'.⁴⁸ Lévi-Strauss is trying to show the fundamental tension that exists in the creative and evolutionary projects of human sociality with the fact that the elements that make up these projects are always 'pre-constrained'.⁴⁹

This is exactly the tension that McGuire sets to work. But while she recognizes the structure that Lévi-Strauss analyzes, she nevertheless tends to privilege the creative over the structural with respect to the actions of the bricoleur. Ethnographic research and writing ought to be interested not in an emphasis of one of these poles over the other, but in a maintenance of and contiguous reflection on the nature of this tension in the analysis of social phenomena. While the individual is often the site or locus of particular instantiations of religious practice, this particularity nevertheless invokes and maintains objective structures that can be identified with reference to what the individual *is not*.

Robert Orsi develops a somewhat similar position as McGuire with regard to the macro/micro polarity and the work that ethnography should be doing, although Orsi tends to talk more about social fields or 'religious spaces', even though many examples have to do with individual experiences (his own and his subjects').⁵⁰ However, rather than focus on syncretic individual agency within any given scene of religious practice, Orsi focuses on his own interpretation of what Geertz called (after Gilbert Ryle) the work of 'thick description' in ethnographic research and writing.⁵¹ However, Orsi is quick to point out

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁰ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 167.

⁵¹ Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

that the ethnographer is engaging with ‘something messier than the controlled marshalling of letters on a page, something less predictable’ and that this ‘demands a different kind of attentiveness’.⁵² Orsi says that this realization ‘is a call...for attention to religious messiness, to multiplicities, to seeing religious spaces as always, inevitably, and profoundly intersected by things brought into them from outside, things that bear their own histories, complexities, meanings different from those offered within the religious space.’⁵³ But as we learned from Becker, the researcher has to decide which details are important, which are not, and how to thematize those details that remain. So the ethnographer’s job, in Orsi’s language, is to try to clean up a little bit the messiness of the social scene. But Orsi seems reticent to do this. Indeed, post-colonial critiques of ethnography have largely been concerned with the essential coerciveness of such cleaning up, and Orsi no less so. It is for this reason that Orsi and McGuire (and many others) have recently begun paying attention to the essentially intersubjective meaning-making that occurs between researcher and subject, and the inability to effectively separate these two in ethnographic reporting.⁵⁴

Orsi and McGuire are both interested in importing insights from phenomenology (and poststructuralism) into ethnographic research and writing. But what are the implications of this importation? Orsi wants to hold on to the importance of an irreducible messiness in ethnographic research and writing. McGuire, likewise, thinks

⁵² Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 164.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵⁴ See, for example, *ibid.*, 170ff; and McGuire, ‘New-Old Directions’, *passim*. This has also been a persistent theme in Michael Jackson’s work, for example. See *Minima Ethnographica*; and *Existential Anthropology* (New York: Bergham Books, 2005).

that 'at the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even necessarily coherent. Rather, each person's religious practices and the stories they use to make sense of their lives are continually adapting, expanding or receding, and ever changing.'⁵⁵ Are these commitments to messiness and instability compatible with the desire to import phenomenological concerns into ethnography?

To begin with, there is not 'phenomenology', but phenomenologies, so we need to be clear what Orsi, McGuire and others are interested in when they talk about points of intersection between ethnography and phenomenology. At the beginning of the chapter we looked at a phenomenological tradition in sociology that is closely felt in methodologies of social research. Examples of this are ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and the theories of social research and social phenomena derived from Schutz and his New School colleagues. But McGuire and Orsi are just as interested in making use of traditional phenomenological philosophy as they are in phenomenological theory in sociology. While it is important in any given case that a clear delineation is made of the way in which phenomenologies are utilized, I mean to keep open the possibility of making use of any of them in ethnographic research.

McGuire clearly thematizes her main interest in bringing phenomenology into ethnography by talking about the important implications of embodiment for ethnographic research. Religious practices are essentially embodied practices, having to do with material exchanges between practitioners and objects; ritualized movements and behaviors; and certain learned ways of being that our bodies are culturally and

⁵⁵ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 210.

organically bound to. McGuire points to the work of phenomenologists like Schutz and—increasingly—Maurice Merleau-Ponty for critical insight into the relationships between embodiment and meaning, religious or otherwise.

Orsi is more interested in a rather broad notion along the lines of ‘thick description’, whereby the job of the ethnographer is to make real for the reader the experience or the scene of religious practice that she is writing about. Besides the endless richness of the physical, material aspects of any given scene—the ways in which that richness keeps expanding, for example, from the pew to the aisle to the sanctuary to the church to the street to the neighborhood to the city—there is an expansion of the historical that is at least as overwhelming. Orsi quotes Marx: ‘the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living’.⁵⁶ One is also reminded of Faulkner’s quip: ‘The past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past’. Careful ethnography must therefore pay attention to all of those things which are meaningful for understanding any given religious social scene but which are ‘different from those offered within the religious space’.⁵⁷

Much of what ethnographers of religion do is listen to stories that people tell about their religious lived experience or lived practices.⁵⁸ McGuire and Orsi are interested in insights from phenomenology because it is clear that all that is operative in a given religious practice is not explicit, and that the religious practitioner is as likely as not to be completely unaware of the operativity of a host of social structures, material

⁵⁶ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 153.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵⁸ Orsi borrows the term ‘lived experience’ from Sartre.

contexts and histories that affect her own practices. This is why it was important, for example, to point out the reciprocity or circuitousness of the practices of the bricoleur. The bricoleur is both creative—agential, deliberative and active—and created—the very practices of the bricoleur are determined by aspects of the toolbox, which is another given, out of which the bricoleur creates. This is just as important for Orsi, even if he thematizes it in different ways and with different emphases.

But it is important to note that McGuire and Orsi are not advocating a straightforward phenomenological sociology. McGuire and Orsi are ethnographers, and as we have noted in the introduction, ethnography is primarily about narratives, about storytelling. How can phenomenological, socio-historical concerns be inserted into ethnographic writing? What does it mean to tell stories that account for these massive contexts with which theorists like McGuire and Orsi are concerned?

CHAPTER III

ETHNOGRAPHY AS CRITICAL STORYTELLING

Ethnographers are storytellers. Compelling ethnographic writing brings to life the social scenes of its subjects. But as a social-scientific practice, good ethnographies of religion do more than tell stories, even if that ‘more’ is done largely through storytelling. It might be better to say that in the context of the ethnography of religion storytelling does particular things, and that the concept of storytelling is rich and heterogeneous. So it is important that we try to get clear about what we mean by storytelling, first of all, and then, what do we mean by storytelling in the context of the ethnography of religion. This will lead us into a consideration of what it is that ethnographies of religion accomplish—or what they ought to accomplish—and how they accomplish it. My central claim will be that good ethnographic writing brings together storytelling and insights from phenomenology, and that the particular ways that this is accomplished introduce different kinds of ambiguity and instability into ethnographic writing. The consequences of this ambiguity and instability—which are ethical consequences—will then be addressed in Chapter IV.

To begin with, storytelling is always done *by* someone and *for* someone. It is certainly possible to tell a story to oneself, but the purpose of storytelling is to *give an account*. In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler argues that the very structure of giving an account relies upon certain modes of ‘subjectivation’ that implicate

a definite social context in any accounting.⁵⁹ So storytelling is a fundamentally social practice. Why do we tell stories? We tell stories because someone asks us to, either implicitly or explicitly. Stories are explanations, explanations that take the form of a narrative. Stories are told in response to questions like ‘Who are you?’⁶⁰, ‘What are you doing?’, ‘Why are you doing that?’, ‘What are you all about?’

We could say, then, following Michael Jackson’s formulation of Hannah Arendt, that ‘storytelling is a strategy for transforming private into public meanings’.⁶¹ But of course—and Jackson emphasizes this—we do not live our lives *as narratives* or *as stories*. Stories are *constructed*, pieced together from the memories of storytellers in order to communicate particular meanings in particular contexts. Jackson questions claims by some theorists that, as he quotes Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘stories are lived before they are told’.⁶² Stories provide frameworks, structures and certain ways of making sense out of the world and the storyteller’s relation to the world that are not immanent to the life or lives that are given an accounting in the story. We do not live stories but we tell stories about our lives.

Nevertheless, we give meaning to our lives and make sense out of what we are doing in the world by telling stories. Our lives are defined by narratives that we create as

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham, 2005), 17. Though used in different contexts and incorporating somewhat distinct conceptual frameworks, Butler’s use of the term ‘subjectivation’ (drawn from Foucault) can be tentatively aligned with the way that Berger and Luckmann use that term in *The Social Construction of Reality*.

⁶⁰ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 30.

⁶¹ Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002), 14-15.

⁶² Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 18.

much as by the narratives that *create us*.⁶³ But the stories that we tell are always changing. We are always telling stories, changing our story, adding new stories, or getting rid of stories. When we meet someone at a bar or at a conference, we tell her a story or a set of stories as a way for them to have access to ‘who I am’. These stories are often polyvalent, accomplishing a number of communicative goals in a single telling. And the same story might be used for different purposes in different contexts. Most of us are for the most part good storytellers—in varying degrees—who do not merely plod along with ‘and then...and then...and then...’. We shape our stories in strategic ways and incorporate various contexts in order to frame our selves or our stories’ subjects in particular ways.

Our stories are always changing. As Butler points out,

in the making of the story, I create myself in new form, instituting a narrative “I” that is superadded to the “I” whose past life I seek to tell. The narrative “I effectively adds to the story every time it tries to speak, since the “I” appears again as the narrative perspective, and this addition cannot be fully narrated at the moment in which it provides the perspectival anchor for the narration in question.⁶⁴

We can easily see this when we pay attention to the way we tell a certain story. If I run into an old teacher from my undergraduate school just weeks after having been turned

⁶³ This is another way of thinking the paradoxical schema that we introduced in Chapter II from Berger and Luckmann, where ‘subjective meanings’ can be understood as the stories we tell and ‘objective facticities’ as those stories into which we are born and whose particular ‘modes of subjectivation’ make us into the particular kind of storytelling beings that we are.

⁶⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 36.

down for a job, the story that I might tell him of my graduate work and ‘what I am doing’ might take on a completely different shape and tone then if I meet him a year later after having earned a fellowship and researching for a book, and tell him the ‘same story’.

So then, as Jackson points out, it is not quite right to say that we *live stories*, or that ‘we *are* the stories we tell’.⁶⁵ But we do make sense of our lives by telling stories. Mark Freeman characterizes this dichotomous relationship between our stories and our lives by saying that ‘I am living episodes...but I do not yet know the plot of the story to which they belong’.⁶⁶ Freeman argues that our stories about ourselves are continually being revised in light of what comes next. This continual ‘rewriting’ of the self shapes our past in accordance with whatever mold is definitive of our life at the time of the telling. The interpretive stance that we take up in telling a story weighs heavily on the history and memory that we narrate. ‘The ending we are...determines both the beginning and indeed the essential nature of how we came to be.’⁶⁷ Storytelling thus confers new frameworks, new ways of making meaning, on remembered actions.

I argued above that storytelling is a fundamentally social activity, insofar as it is always an accounting by someone and for someone. I also noted that storytelling allows us to shape our lives and make sense out of what we are doing in the world, but that we are at the same time shaped by certain stories that we have not created. Jackson points to something similar in his reading of Arendt. For Arendt, Jackson argues, ‘stories and

⁶⁵ Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 18.

⁶⁶ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), 29.

⁶⁷ Freeman, *Rewriting the Self*, 30.

storytelling are shared activities'.⁶⁸ But this means more than what we have already pointed out about the structure of storytelling. Jackson argues that 'stories take us out of ourselves'.⁶⁹ Storytelling situates the perspective of the teller in a context that is larger than herself. Stories imply worlds.

The implication of worlds in storytelling means that the teller cannot give a full accounting of her own story, as it were. Stories are never 'tell-alls'. As Butler points out, narratives are always 'disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone'.⁷⁰ We are able to tell stories because of stories, that is, because of narratives that have made us the particular kind of storyteller that we are and of which we have a thin grasp. The consequence of this is that we 'will not be able to be very authoritative when we try to give a full account with a narrative structure.'

The "I" can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one's own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 252.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁷⁰ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

This means that any story—what we might think of in the context of Chapter II as a particular or subjective narrative—implicates in its very telling that which is outside of it and which conditions it—what we might think of as the institutional or objective. What does this mean for the work and accomplishment of storytelling?

First of all, it means that part of the accomplishment of storytelling is to address what Arendt calls the ‘in-between space’ at the intersection of the private and the public, which I think we could also call the intersection of subjectivation and objectivation, or of the particular and the general.⁷² When I tell the ‘story of my life’ to someone, what I am doing is giving an account of my subjectivity—my subjectivated being—by way of that which is outside of my subjectivity, those events, institutions, and contexts in virtue of which I understand how I am.

So storytelling is a precise and strategic way that one can address the Durkheimian paradox that Garfinkel, Berger and Luckmann identified in their work. But what is the relationship between ethnography and storytelling? Much of what I have said so far has to do with auto-narration, with telling one’s own story. As Karen McCarthy Brown writes, ‘each of us moves through the world making meaning, individually and collectively, as we can and/or need to’.⁷³ But the work of the ethnographer is not the work of making sense of her own world—whether individual or shared—but ‘making meaning out of others’ processes of meaning making’.⁷⁴ Returning for a moment to

⁷² Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 11, 252.

⁷³ Brown, *Mama Lola*, x.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

Becker's schema for social research, we can see the affinities between Brown's reflection on her work and Becker's framework. Making meaning is in part a process of 'weeding out extraneous detail and exposing basic structures', as Becker writes.⁷⁵ Stories tell their 'users' what is and is not important contextually in order to understand the subject of the story. Stories tell about their subjects but saying things about how their subjects fit into what is outside of them—the private by way of the public, the particular by way of the general, the subjective by way of the objective.

Following Brown, we can say that ethnography is telling stories about others' stories. There may be other ways to formulate this, for example that ethnographers tell stories *for* others. In the preface to the 2001 republication of *Mama Lola* Brown deals with the question of how to understand the kind of storytelling that she is doing. She writes: 'Who got to speak in this book and from what perspective?...Rather than resolving itself with a single answer, the tension behind this question eased only when dozens of voices emerged simultaneously...My voices were several.'⁷⁶ For Brown the formally designated relationship between researcher and subject became problematized in her research and writing, and this problematization was for Brown exactly what it made it possible for her to write *Mama Lola*. Brown wrote that her 'job' as ethnographer was 'to see that each voice got heard'.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Becker, *Telling About Society*, 93.

⁷⁶ Brown, *Mama Lola*, ix.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.

Though Brown is certainly right that ethnographers' research and writing reveal the instability of the researcher-subject relationship, it is important that ethnographies of religion attempt to maintain a distance or distinction between their subjects' stories and the stories that are written in the ethnographies.⁷⁸ There is a critical distinction between telling stories about others' stories and telling stories *for* others. The job of the ethnographer is of the former kind. Telling stories about others' stories means that the stories that the ethnographer tells give an account of the 'in-between spaces' that incorporates the ethnographer's own critical framing and shaping of the story, rather than simply re-inscribing the shape of the story as told by the subject. Of course, the ethnographer no more than the subject can give an authoritative or final account of her subject. Nevertheless, it is precisely the job of social-scientific researchers to give critical and rigorous accounts of social scenes and social structures. So while ethnographies cannot guarantee their analysis deductively along the lines of certain popular methods of quantitative research, they can still produce critical accounts that answer certain questions about society and reveal or tell knowledge about a social scene that was previously unavailable or untold, oftentimes even or especially for ethnographies' subjects.

As for any kind of social scientific research and analysis, the ethnographer of religion is out to answer certain questions about religious practice and religious social scenes. One of the questions for the ethnographer—in both her research and her

⁷⁸ I am not saying that Brown fails to maintain this distinction. She is very aware of it, even if it is always a contested distinction. See for example, xii-xiii and 10-12. See also Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 143-151; and Marion S. Goldman, *Passionate Journeys: Why Successful Women Joined A Cult* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 49-59.

writing—is how to go about answering the question. As Becker pointed out, ‘every way of doing things is perfect—for something’.⁷⁹ One part of answering this question involves situating the research and writing somewhere within the polarities of the schemas that we considered in Chapter II. As storytelling, ethnography can accomplish this in various ways. The way that the ethnographer chooses to shape the stories that she tells determines *what* those stories tell, and what aspects of a religious practice or social scene are made available in the writing.⁸⁰

The examples of three recent ethnographies of religion reveal the complexity and contingency of storytelling in a social-scientific context. Courtney Bender’s book *Heaven’s Kitchen: Living Religion at God’s Love We Deliver* gives an account of how ‘people practice religion in their daily activities’, and she asks this question specifically in the ‘non-religious’ context of members’ talk in the kitchen at God’s Love We Deliver.⁸¹ Brown’s book *Mama Lola* tells the story of ‘Alourde’s day-to-day practice of Haitian Vodou’, though the way that Brown tells this story involves bringing to bear a thick collection of stories that coalesce in Alourde.⁸² And Marion S. Goldman’s *Passionate Journeys: Why Successful Women Joined A Cult* gives a rich, detailed

⁷⁹ Becker, *Telling About Society*, 72.

⁸⁰ While not the focus of this essay, it is important to note that the framing of ethnographic research as much as the writing determines the shape that a story will take, the way it gives an account of its subject. For example, J. Shawn Landres, ‘Being (in) the Field: Defining Ethnography in Southern California and Central Slovakia’, in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*, 100-112. Landres writes on 102: ‘...reflexive anthropologists observe that the so-called field itself exists, if at all, only because the ethnographer says it does. Each scholar defines the “field” in each given project, and in some cases the “field” only exists because the scholar sees a coherence visible perhaps only to him- or herself.’

⁸¹ Bender, *Heaven’s Kitchen* viii.

⁸² Brown, *Mama Lola*, xv.

narrative account of the lives of some women who moved to Oregon in the early 1980's to live communally under the spiritual leadership of Baghwan Shree Rajneesh. A consideration of the heterogeneous methods of shaping ethnographic stories in these three examples demonstrates the various ways that ethnographies of religion can be situated within the schemas of social research that we discussed in Chapter II, as well as reveal aspects of ethnographic writing that we will determine to be ethical in Chapter IV.

Bender frames the question of her research in a way that enables her to tell a fairly straightforward—if rich and polyvalent—story of the ways in which religion is practiced in everyday situations, situations which themselves would not normally be classified as religious. Her purpose in doing so is to address what she sees as a widespread problem in sociology: ‘Sociologists know remarkably little about how people practice religion in their daily activities, including work, volunteering, and other interactions with acquaintances and friends.’⁸³ She does this by focusing her research and writing on a narrowly delineated social situation, that of the everyday talk of volunteers at a kitchen in New York City that prepares meals for home delivery for people with AIDS. Within this carefully circumscribed scene of research Bender relates the volunteers’ talk to ways of thinking about social interaction that are ‘multivalent’ and that show up the ambiguity of the concept of ‘shared cultures’ or ‘shared meaning’.⁸⁴ Like McGuire, Bender is interested in *lived religion*, and this means looking at the *how* of religious practices in social settings. She asks specific questions, which she thinks need to be asked in any case

⁸³ Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen*, viii.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, viii-ix. Bender is suspicious of the flippancy of references to ‘shared meaning’, arguing instead for a ‘heteroglossic’ understanding of talk in social scenes. See 139-141.

in order to begin to give an adequate social-scientific account of religious practices: ‘How and when did volunteers decide to talk about religion—their own or others? When did “situations occur” in which people talked about it? How did people recognize others’ talk or practice as religious? How did otherwise mundane practices influence this talk?’⁸⁵

The questions that Bender identifies about both religious practice and social interaction mean that she has to tell the story of the stories at God’s Love We Deliver in a specific way. Her attention to the detail of what Garfinkel calls ‘the witnessably recurrent details of ordinary everyday practices’ means that she is not often able to tell other stories that could otherwise be told in order to give an account of the volunteers’ talk.⁸⁶ Put differently, certain stories that could otherwise be told do not answer the questions that Bender is after, or do not make available the phenomena that she is interested in. The story of one of the volunteer’s experiences with religion throughout her life likely will not show up—or will show up only in precisely circumscribed and truncated ways—in a discussion about various traditions of eating and celebrating during Passover/Easter.⁸⁷ But Bender is not interested in *Heaven’s Kitchen* with the religious histories of the volunteers—although aspects of these histories inevitably emerge. (And Bender’s methodology also included open-ended interviews with the volunteers wherein much more of this came out. But not first of all in her analyses of volunteers’ talk.)⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁸⁶ Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology’s Program*, 97.

⁸⁷ Cf. Bender, *Heaven’s Kitchen*, 99-103.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of how Bender thinks her interviews relate to her analysis of volunteers’ talk, see *ibid.*, 136-139.

The question for Bender is how to ‘pay attention to the history of any interaction, as far as we can, and attend to the particular interactions that precede each...’⁸⁹ But what does this mean? What exactly is ‘as far as we can’? What would be ‘the entire context and history of any single event’, which Bender identifies as the ideal but impossible goal for the accounting of ethnography?⁹⁰ Bender casts a wide net in her theoretical framework by to some extent implicating just about *everything* in the possible meaning-making of a given social scene. This view resonates with Orsi’s insistence on paying continual attention to the ‘messiness’ of religious scenes, the ways in which the contexts and phenomena that are at play in attempts to give an account of a religious scene are never fully determinable or available. On this view, we could think of the social worlds that Bender and Orsi propose as a sort of monadic system, where any given social scene is a coalescence of an infinitely expanding contextual framework that—ideally but impossibly—would take account of just all of the material, social and psychological existences that feed into that social scene. But of course, for Bender and Orsi, it is an *open* system and so such an accounting is never possible. Moreover, such an accounting would really not be an accounting at all, since as Becker writes, ‘knowing everything means knowing nothing...Not everything is interesting or useful to us’.⁹¹ Bender is not proposing that ethnographies aspire to be ‘tell-alls’. Consistent with the way that we described storytelling generally above, Bender writes that ethnography ‘provides methods

⁸⁹ Ibid., 138.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁹¹ Becker, *Telling About Society*, 93.

for seeing how the relations between people's languages, scripts, and frames are put to use within specific contexts'.⁹²

If Bender's ethnography is about the 'whats' and 'hows' of religious practice, Brown does not limit herself to the analysis of social interactions in the same way in *Mama Lola*. Moreover, she generally does not employ the same kind of explicit theorizing as Bender, instead opting to leave her 'theorizing embedded in stories'. Brown gives a different definition than Bender of the work of ethnography, though it still hews closely to the broad account of storytelling above. For Brown, 'the ethnographer studies...how people create meaning or significance in their lives, how they interpret objects and events.'⁹³ This echoes the quote from Brown above that ethnography's work is to make meaning out of others' meaning making. But Brown explicitly blurs the lines between telling stories about others' stories and telling stories *for* others. Brown thinks that 'the people who are being studied should be allowed to speak for themselves whenever possible, for they are the only true experts on themselves'.⁹⁴ This is no doubt true in one sense, and it has been to the detriment of the social sciences in the past century that they have all too often failed to listen to their subjects, or to ask what it means to listen. Nevertheless, that a subject is 'expert' does not mean that she explicitly knows what she is doing in a social scene or can contextualize her meaning making activities with any kind of critical rigor. It is the role of the ethnographer to tell *critical*

⁹² Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen*, 139.

⁹³ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

stories about others' stories, since others' stories are not always critical, and in any case they are never authoritative.

Brown's book present an extraordinary story about Alourdes, a Haitian Vodou priestess living in New York City. But part of what is at stake in *Mama Lola* is precisely who the story is about and who is telling the story. Brown quickly realized in her research that she was not going to be able to do the research that she wanted to if she did not give up certain conceptions about the appropriate role between researcher and subject. The way that she approached the research was integral to the availability of certain aspects of Alourdes' world. Brown writes about the problem she faced:

People bring the burdens and pains of their lives to this religious system [Vodou] in the hope of being healed. I realized that if I brought less to this Vodou world, I would come away with less. If I persisted in studying Vodou objectively, the heart of the system, its ability to heal, would remain closed to me. The only way I could hope to understand the psychodrama of Vodou was to open my own life to the ministrations of Alourdes.⁹⁵

The risk and openness involved in this kind of research was necessary for Brown to gain the access to the subject that she was interested in. One of the results of this was that it implicated Brown in her own research and writing, so that she ended writing herself into the story of *Mama Lola*. Among other positive consequences that Brown thinks result from such a strategy of ethnographic storytelling, she sees it as 'a reasonable strategy for

⁹⁵ Ibid., 10. Brackets mine.

acknowledging the trenchant critiques of ethnographic representation coming out of post-colonial and cultural studies'.⁹⁶ We will return to this aspect of Brown's writing in Chapter IV.

Perhaps the most controversial method of storytelling that Brown employed was the fictionalizing of Alourde's family history in the book. Alternating chapters give fictional accounts of people in Alourde's ancestry, based on stories that Brown heard, often many times and from many people, over the course of her research. She argues that this approach allowed her to tap 'a reservoir of casual and imagistic knowledge' that is difficult to incorporate into traditional ethnographic writing.⁹⁷ Brown points out that, for all of our earnest historiographical concerns with 'what really happened', history-telling does not work like that. Like other kinds of storytelling, histories are told in order to give particular kinds of accounting.⁹⁸ What is important in history-telling for Haitians, according to Brown, is the 'relevance and liveliness' of the history.⁹⁹ The telling and retelling of these histories makes them alive in the present context of their telling in particular ways. Stories are told for reasons. The truth of their telling has to do with how they speak to their hearers. For this reason Brown said that her aim in fictionalizing these histories was to 'make up true stories', in the service of telling Alourdes' family history in the way that history *is* for Alourdes.

⁹⁶ Brown, 'Writing about "the Other," Revisited', 133.

⁹⁷ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 18.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

Like Bender, the way that Brown shaped the story of *Mama Lola* determined what the story could say. In Brown's case, her goal was to 'create a portrait of Vodou embedded in the vicissitudes of particular lives'.¹⁰⁰ She accomplished this with complex storytelling and the incorporation of a 'chorus of voices', different perspectives from which the story of Alourdes was told.¹⁰¹ Brown inscribed within the text itself the reflexive problematic of just whose story is being told in ethnographic writing. The voice of the narrative was at stake in her own writing as much as in the telling and retelling of the histories that gave meaning to Alourdes and the people in her world. We can see in Brown's attention to these aspects of her subjects the fluidity and instability of lived religious practice that McGuire is interested in bringing to the fore of social-scientific research in religion. Brown shows that the instability of lived religion extends beyond rituals, practices and material contexts into the very stories that give meaning to these to begin with.

The case of Goldman's research and writing for *Passionate Journeys* is somewhat more complex than that of Brown due to the circumstances surrounding her subjects.¹⁰² Her intention was to give an account of why some women joined a cult. The controversy surrounding the group required Goldman to balance 'confidentiality and authenticity'.¹⁰³ Goldman wanted to know *why* women with successful and seemingly fulfilling lives decided to join a new religious movement in the high plains desert of Eastern Oregon.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰² See the Epilogue to *Passionate Journeys*, 249-268.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 45.

The 'why' in the question is perhaps already to resituate the sociological question in a direction different from Bender or Brown. A 'why' question implies that reasons must be given, reasoning as an answer to a question. When one is asked 'why did you do this?', one is being asked to give a *reasonable account*. Goldman wanted to tell the story of some women who moved to Rajneeshpuram. To do that, she had to ask them, among other questions and in many different ways, 'Why did you do this?' And those that she interviewed *told her stories*, which was what Goldman was looking for. Her access to these narratives was precisely through the subjects who offered the narratives. In a sociological account that asks the questions that Goldman was interested in and that relies on the extensive interview process that she used as the bases for her narratives, this is *necessarily* just the way she had access to the information she was after.

We have already noted the inherently vicissitudinous nature of storytelling and the construction of self-narratives. But it is not as if the researcher is in a better position. We tell stories from where we are, and while we can and should attempt to think critically about the implications of this, telling stories from where we are is just what storytelling is. Furthermore, part of what Goldman was interested in was 'the myriad ways that women attempt to find themselves through achievement, intimate relationships, or charismatic connections'.¹⁰⁴ Her intention was to recount the life histories of some of the women who ended up at Rajneeshpuram, to show how they were satisfied in the teachings of Rajneesh, and perhaps to see how these two were normatively related. The first two things Goldman accomplishes by giving in-depth histories of the sannyasins'

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 6.

lives. It is less clear the extent to which her research can give us access to generalized examinations of ‘how specific kinds of personal attributes and life experiences predispose some women to search for their identities within cults or in some other defining relationships’.¹⁰⁵ Goldman’s methods raise interesting questions about the possible intersection between qualitative research methods and generalizing theoretical frameworks for understanding religious practice, and her use of both rational choice theory and psychoanalytic sociology are rare in ethnographic research and writing.

Partially because of the sensitive context in which her research and writing took place, and partially in an effort to tell the stories that she wanted to tell, Goldman constructed three ‘anchored composite’ narratives based on extended ‘research conversations’ that she had with women at Rajneeshpuram.¹⁰⁶ This method was the result of the dual imperatives issuing from research to keep secrets and speak truth.¹⁰⁷ She cites Brown as an inspiration for her work, although she notes that where Brown utilized wholesale invention in parts of her book, Goldman ‘circumscribed [her] inventions, grounding each major life history theme in explicit biographical information’.¹⁰⁸ The eleven women from whom Goldman drew stories are represented in various ways in the composites. Against those critics who might argue that creating such ‘fictionalized’ accounts cannot count as social-scientific research, Goldman points out that this is just

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 214.

¹⁰⁶ Marion S. Goldman, ‘Voicing Spiritualities: Anchored Composites as an Approach to Understanding Religious Commitment’, in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*, 146-161. 152.

¹⁰⁷ Goldman, ‘Voicing Spiritualities’, 157.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 161.

what sociologists do all the time in social-scientific writing when they ‘pull together quotations from a number of individuals to illustrate a particular point’.¹⁰⁹

Goldman’s use of composite narratives presents us with yet another way of expanding the use of storytelling in ethnographies of religion. In Goldman’s case her narratives were able to incorporate the individual stories of several women; to tell their stories critically; and to attempt by way of this storytelling to generalize their ‘shared paths’.¹¹⁰

In the three examples of ethnographic storytelling above we see three very different ways of framing stories and asking sociological questions. In each case the ethnographer is interested in saying something about what stories do and how they do it. In each case their stories do something *different* in order to address specific sociological questions that frame their research and writing. Moreover, in each case the ethnographer offers a compelling and extremely rich account of religious practice and experience. Despite their diversity in focus and method, they all accomplish the social-scientific work that they set out to do. What does this tell us about social-scientific research and writing, and specifically, the ethnography of religion?

It points first of all to the fundamentally heterogeneous nature of ethnographic research and writing. The accomplishments of ethnography are determined partially by the questions that the ethnographer is after and partially by the subject of the research and writing. This is to take seriously, if critically, Becker’s assertion that everything is perfect

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 159.

¹¹⁰ See Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 213-248.

for something. There are *reasons for accounting* their subject's stories in just the way that our ethnographers above tell them. How the story is framed—that is, how the subjective is related to the objective, the private to the public, the particular to the general—and the kinds of stories that are being asked and told—that is, which subjectivities and objectivities, which private and which public, which particular and which general—requires various, contingent and tentative ways of storytelling in order to make sense out of others' stories.

I argued above that storytelling is a precise and strategic way to address the relationship between the subjective and the objective. We see in the examples of Bender, Brown and Goldman that the *way* a story is told is at least as important as the kinds of stories that ethnographers choose to tell. Since ethnographers tell critical social-scientific stories about others' stories (and do not tell others' stories), the question of what *way* to tell stories is as much a question of theory as it is about narrative structure or the construction of the narrative. In the case of Brown, her theorizing is 'embedded in stories'.¹¹¹ But this means that she is still aware of 'doing' theory, and even her decision to leave theorizing in the narratives is justified by her appeal to theory. The way that Goldman constructed her narratives meant that the stories she told were about a specific group of sannyasins as much as they were about the individual women that she interviewed. Whereas Brown's writing intentionally problematizes the ability to identify 'whose voice' is present in a narrative, Goldman's approach to ethnographic writing in *Passionate Journeys* challenges straightforward assumptions about how ethnographers

¹¹¹ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 15.

are supposed to relate the individual to the collective, the particular to the universal. All three ethnographers discovered that successful storytelling in ethnography required bringing into tension in their research and writing the traditional distinctions between researcher and subject. As Bender writes, ‘ethnography happened as I let myself speak and stopped merely listening’.¹¹²

The three ethnographies above attend in different ways to the contingent, fragile and unstable nature of ethnographic research and writing, and these characteristics show up in various ways in their writing. In the next chapter I will argue that a persistent and critical reflexivity is important for addressing these characteristics of the ethnography of religion, and that such a reflexivity is an inherently ethical practice within ethnographic writing.

¹¹² Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen*, 149.

CHAPTER IV
FRAGILITY, CONTINGENCY, AND REFLEXIVITY:
ETHNOGRAPHIC ETHICS

In what follows I am going to develop a way of thinking about ethnographic research and writing that accounts for the critical reflexivity that is necessary in order to attend to the instability and fragility inherent in ethnographic storytelling. Drawing on insights from some of the ethnographers and theorists whose work I engaged above, I attempt to show that ethnographic storytelling is a fundamentally ethical practice. After framing the question of the ethical in ethnography in light of Chapters II and III, I turn to the recent work of Stephen K. White to offer a framework in which to think about the ethical activity of ethnographic storytelling that preserves both the rigor that is sought in social-scientific research and the unavoidable fragility of storytelling.

Reflecting on her research at Rajneeshpuram, Goldman wrote: ‘Perhaps my research would have worked out differently if I had worn something in a sunrise color on my first visit to the ranch’.¹¹³ This is a beautiful and sublime acknowledgement of the central problem with which we will be concerned in this last chapter. Goldman’s hypothetical elision points to how the ethnographer is implicated in her research in any case. The ethnographer’s presence both shapes and is shaped by the subject of her work, and part of what is at stake in ethnographic research is interrogating the distinction

¹¹³ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 53. In reference to the colors of the robes worn by Rajneesh’s followers.

between ethnographer and subject. The researcher's presence in a religious scene introduces into the practices of that scene an 'outsider' who needs to be taken into account in those practices. The ethnographer is accounted for by being given a role to perform—for example, in the kind of participant observation that Goldman makes use of—and to perform with.¹¹⁴

This means that the very possibility of ethnographic research and writing involves the researcher in her subject. As Brown and others point out, this has become a commonplace critique of or 'problem' for ethnography.¹¹⁵ However, the force of this critique assumes that there would be access to the ethnographic subject that could avoid the infringement of the researcher on her subject. Such an assumption betrays a commitment to certain positivist conceptions of social-scientific research that have been subject to at least as much scrutiny and criticism as post-colonial critiques of ethnography.

Rather than look for strategies that could resist such criticisms of ethnographic research and writing, ethnographers ought to acknowledge their own implication in their scenes of research. Bender, Brown and Goldman all do this in different ways. Bender and Brown write themselves as characters into their narratives. Goldman's account of her methodology is in part a reflexive consideration of how her approach to research shaped the discoveries and narratives that made their way into her book.

¹¹⁴ See Landres, 'Being (in) the Field', 106-107.

¹¹⁵ Brown, 'Writing about the "Other," Revisited', 133.

Michael Jackson argues for just these kinds of reflexive inscriptions in ethnographic research and writing, which he argues lay bare the importance of paying attention to various aspects of intersubjectivity in social research.¹¹⁶ He writes: ‘...the ethnographic method demands not merely an imaginative participation in the life of the other, but a *practical and social* involvement in the various activities, both ritual and mundane, that contextualize and condition the other’s worldview’.¹¹⁷ This way of approaching social research—which ‘perhaps no other intellectual discipline’ accomplishes—‘abolishes the subject-object split of natural science’.¹¹⁸ Jackson argues that this implies an irreducibly dialectic accomplishment:

For while the ethnographer is both influenced by his or her initial preoccupations *and* by the other’s self-understandings, the outcome of any intersubjective encounter is never a synthesis of all the various points of view taken together, but an arbitrary closure that leaves both self and other with a provisional and open-ended view that demands further dialogue and engagement.¹¹⁹

The question for the ethnographer is how to think about and acknowledge this kind of open-endedness in her writing. Just as we saw in Chapter III that ways of ethnographic storytelling are heterogeneous in alliance with their goals and contexts, so the inclusion

¹¹⁶ See for example, Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica*, 1-36. Robert Orsi, borrowing from Sartre, develops a similar understanding of the nature of social research in *Between Heaven and Earth*. He quotes Sartre: ‘Research is a relationship...and the relationship itself must be interpreted as a moment of this history’, 174.

¹¹⁷ Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling* 262.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

of a persistent reflexivity in ethnography will be variously shaped by the kinds of stories that are being told and the way in which they are being told. Such an approach to ethnographic writing shows up the irreducible interpellations of researcher and subject, researcher and ethnographic writing, and ethnographies and readers.

How, then, are we supposed to evaluate the accomplishments of ethnographies of religion? If any ethnographic account is subject to tentative, unstable, contingent and fragile ways of telling stories about others' stories, is there any way to make judgments about the success or failure of these accounts? What are we left with? Can we ever get past the multiplicity of critical and competing voices that are telling stories about a given religious scene, for example, in order to come to some kind of *knowledge* or *understanding* about it? Is this not what social-scientific research and analysis is after?

Richard Kearney addresses this problem, in a slightly different context, in an interview with Paul Ricoeur:

[If] you allow many different interpretations...and if you claim that the healthy thing is a conflict of interpretations which disallows any final consensus—since there is no one perspective from which to say what *really* happened—how can you talk of the *abuse* of memory...? If there are only competing interpretations, each with a claim on truth, how can we speak of truth or untruth in history? To speak of abuse assumes you have some perspective from which you

can judge that someone is making a proper use of memory, and that someone is making an improper use of memory.¹²⁰

Ricoeur responds rather straightforwardly that ‘in a sense what “really happened” must keep concerning us’.¹²¹ We must not resign ourselves to a conflict of interpretations, even if conflict always reemerges in discourse. Ricoeur argues that even if we can never finally tell the truth, we nevertheless have to continue to be concerned with the truth. He maintains that conflict between narratives is inherent in how the construction of narratives works. Indeed, we saw this in Chapter III when looking at Freeman’s claim that storytelling is always situated as the present telling about the past, thereby ensuring that there will be conflicts between narratives even when those narratives are told by the same person.

So how can we understand the accomplishments of ethnographic storytelling if another story can always be told and we do not have recourse to an incontestable epistemological framework to which we might appeal in order to guarantee that one way of telling the story about a religious scene trumps another? Since these narratives can never be so sure of themselves, since there is always the possibility of critique with regard to the origins, figurations and shapes of ethnographic stories, how are we to adjudicate the good from the bad in ethnographic accomplishments? How can we maintain responsibility and care for telling the truth and enriching the understanding of

¹²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Imagination, Testimony and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricoeur’, in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), 14. For further reflections along these lines, see Kearney’s book *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹²¹ Ricoeur, ‘Imagination, Testimony and Trust’, 15.

religious practice if we cannot guarantee the epistemological success of our stories along the lines of natural-scientific models of truth? Since we saw above that storytelling cannot be aligned with the circumscription of knowledge so defined, how should we think about and understand ‘truth telling’ in ethnographic narratives?

I suggest that the recent work of political theorist Stephen K. White offers a fruitful and promising framework in which to account for this apparent tension between telling the truth about religious scenes—the properly understood work of ethnographic storytelling—and the epistemological critiques that ethnographic research and writing has been so heavily exposed to. After articulating White’s framework in relation to ethnographic storytelling—and pointing out some parallels with theorists we have already considered, especially Judith Butler—I will conclude by saying something about why this framework should be understood as primarily *ethical* in its application to the ethnography of religion.

In his book *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, White offers a framework for the articulation, cultivation and affirmation of fundamental narratives in ethical-political life that takes into account the fragility, instability and uncertainty that we treated with regard to storytelling in Chapter III.¹²² White is interested in getting past what he sees as the stultifying effects of so-called

¹²² Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also the Special Issue of *The Hedgehog Review* 7 (2): 2005, entitled Commitments in a Post-Foundationalist World: Exploring the Possibilities of “Weak Ontology”, which is devoted to discussions of White’s book. His contribution to the Special Issue, ‘Weak Ontology: Genealogy and Critical Issues’, is on 11-25. White’s newest book, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009), continues to develop some of the ideas in *Sustaining Affirmation*. The language of articulation, cultivation and affirmation can be found on *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8ff.

postmodern or ‘late modern’ theory on ethical and political discourse, partially because he recognizes that ethical and political discourse have not ceased in light of these critiques.¹²³ While this formulation might seem somewhat coy, the point here is that he wants to ‘shift the intellectual burden...from a preoccupation with what is opposed and deconstructed, to an engagement with what must be articulated, cultivated, and affirmed in its wake’.¹²⁴

These are, of course, criticisms of the same ilk as those that we have noted above with regard to ethnographic research and writing. Epistemological problems related to a refusal to allow positivist or foundationalist notions of truth to dictate the success or failure of ethnographic research fall along the same critical lines that White is interested in addressing. Our narratives can never be so sure of themselves. There is continuous critique with relation to the origins and figurations of narrative that prevents us from unmoving conviction, and this critique is shown up in part by the various reflexive entanglements inherent in ethnographic work. The problem for ethnographers, then—and the parallel problem that White is dealing with—is that if we are to sustain any responsibility, care or rigor in ethnographic research and writing we must be able to find some grounds for adjudication.

White argues that this requires a recognition that ‘all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are contestable’.¹²⁵ He continues: ‘Second, there is the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable

¹²³ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 4.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

for an adequately reflective ethical and political life.’¹²⁶ (Where White says ‘ethical and political life’, I propose that without transposition we can read ‘ethnographic practices’.) The identification of a certain understanding of one’s self and world that is both ‘fundamental and contestable’ is what White proposes to call ‘weak ontology’.

Where strong ontologies resist in various ways the designation of one’s thinking about self and world as fundamentally contestable—weak ontologies embrace the contingent and fragile nature of this broadly defined category of ontology.¹²⁷ Unlike strong ontological positions, ‘weak ontologies do not proceed by categorical positings of, say, human nature or telos, accompanied by a crystalline conviction of the truth of that positing. Rather, what they offer are figurations of human being in terms of certain existential realities, most notably language, mortality...natality and the articulation of “sources of the self”’.¹²⁸ White argues that these ‘existential realities’ are constitutive of human being in the world and of both the content and possibilities of the stories that we tell, but that they cannot be fully determined in a categorical manner in any given case. Following theorists like Charles Taylor and—more closely, I think—Judith Butler and her Foucauldian inheritance, White claims that ‘gaining access to something universal

¹²⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁷ White gives a brief account of this shift in what is designated by ‘ontology’ on *ibid.*, 3-6. See also ‘Weak Ontology’, *passim*.

¹²⁸ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 9. The phrase ‘sources of the self’ is from Charles Taylor. See *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

about human being and world is always also a construction that cannot rid itself of a historical dimension'.¹²⁹

The most interesting aspect of White's concept of weak ontology for the purpose of saying something about the ethical dimensions of ethnographic storytelling is the relation between critique and contestability. This is related to White's claim that it may be more interesting for narrative agents—ethnographers in our case—to consider whether a weak ontological scheme bolsters a 'greater propensity...to feel and imagine the rudiments of connectedness through an *experience* of common *subjection* rather than through the recognition that we each *possess* the same *power or capacity*'.¹³⁰ When heard in the context of ethnographic storytelling this kind of positioning of the ethnographer requires a certain fragility and humility in storytelling. Ethnographers would be reflexively displaced as the autonomous and unproblematic teller of stories about others' stories, and repositioned—and this agrees with Jackson's claims above—as a sharer in a common predicament, narrating accordingly if still critically.

This does not, however, mean that notions of truth and rigor in ethnographic storytelling are displaced as well. In fact, I think that the rigor and care involved in writing ethnographic stories in a weak ontological way requires much sharper analytical and critical resources and practices than those stories that purport to have guaranteed their truth unproblematically by way of an idealist or verificationist epistemology. White puts it this way:

¹²⁹ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 9. One of White's chapters treats Butler's work—especially her recent work—as being exemplary of the weak ontological position he is proposing.

¹³⁰ White, 'Weak Ontology', 25.

Felicitous weak ontologies cannot simply declare their contestability, fallibility, or partiality at the start and then proceed pretty much as before...[A weak ontology's] elaboration of fundamental meanings must in some sense fold back upon itself, disrupting its own smooth constitution of a unity. In a way, its contestability will thus be enacted rather than just announced.¹³¹

Can we not already see enactments of this contestability in some of the ethnographies we have considered? What does it do to our reading of Goldman's text, for example, when before we reach the composite narratives she wonders whether her research might have turned out differently had she worn shades of orange or red on her first visit to Rajneeshpuram? How do we understand Brown's writing as truth-telling when she gives fictional accounts of Alourdes' family history? I think that strategies of this sort in ethnographic storytelling allow for the inscription within the narratives or the text of a persistent fragility, not merely as an 'announcement' but as an 'enactment'.

Since in any case narratives about religious practices—whether self-narratives or ethnographers' narratives—are both 'fundamental and contestable', this fragility must be 'taken care of' in some way by those who are telling stories and those who hear them. Ricoeur says that this recognition entails an 'ethics of discourse'. For him, testimony—storytelling, narrative—necessitates trust. 'When I testify to something I am asking the other to trust that what I am saying is true. To share a testimony is an exchange of trust.

¹³¹ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

Beyond this we cannot go.’¹³² Ricoeur’s claim echoes White’s suggestion above that we think of the intersubjective space as one of ‘common subjection’ rather than the possession of equal capacity. If this is right, then ethnographic storytelling requires responsibility, trust, humility, and the recognition of finitude. These are practices and concerns that perhaps we are not accustomed to attaching to the accomplishments of social-scientific research.

White argues that precisely the recognition and incorporation of the ‘existential realities’ mentioned above open onto resources for sustaining practices of truth-telling and critical rigor that do not resort to appeal to uncritical foundations—in the sense of foundations that cannot be criticized.¹³³ White proposes that we understand our ‘fundamental intimations of human being’ as ‘part of a horizontal circuit of reflection, affect, and argumentation’.¹³⁴ White is saying that what is at stake in ethical-political discourse (for us, ethnographic storytelling) is not just a certain way of telling the truth, but the way that we conceive of truth itself.

The circuit is a three-cornered one... One corner is formed by the judgments and norms relevant to specific contexts of action; these, as I have said, receive a prefiguring influence from ontological concepts, which in turn constitute a second corner. But... such

¹³² Ricoeur, ‘Imagination, Testimony, and Trust’, 17.

¹³³ So he says on 11 of *Sustaining Affirmation* that ‘the framework itself is never fully immune from the work of cultivation’.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

concepts are themselves not immune from pressures for revision arising out of insights gleaned from specific action contexts.¹³⁵

The third corner in this reciprocal circuit has to do with how each instance of ethical-political discourse relates to the ‘broadest historical “we” claims and narratives’.¹³⁶ Each of these corners acts upon the other reflectively, affectively, and critically in such a way that each is always at play in any given case, though not in some definitive or categorical way. *How* each is in play and *what* that ‘each’ is in any given instance is part of what is at stake in the ‘play’ itself.

We can see intimations of these circuits in theorists like McGuire and in Bender’s book *Heaven’s Kitchen*. McGuire points out what counts as religious practices in any given instance is a question that always ought to be at stake in ethnographic research and writing.¹³⁷ The ethnographer who has already determined what is and is not religious fails to carefully attend to the religious scene that she is studying. But if it is the case that the ethnographer of religion cannot determine beforehand what is and is not religious, how does she know where to look for religious phenomena? Part of what White is saying is that we *have to* make some claim about what counts as religious practices or phenomena, but we cannot leave that claim alone. Ethnographers of religion have to allow their claims about what counts as religious to be interrogated and affected by the very research and writing that they do on the basis of those claims, thereby opening circuits of reflection, affect, and argumentation *all the way down* in ethnographic reasoning.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹³⁷ See for example, McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 19-44.

In conclusion, I would like to say something about why White's framework applied to ethnographic storytelling ought to be considered *ethical*, since I do not think that this claim is self-evident. It seems to me that it is at least as plausible to apply White's weak ontological schema in a way that frames it as suggesting best practices or methodological strategies for ethnographic work. In fact, this is one way that I think White's framework should be considered. But my central claim here is that the methodological is also the ethical.

We have already incorporated language into our descriptions of storytelling that are aligned with certain concepts of ethics. But of course what we mean when we say ethics is not always clear. I would like to offer a tentative definition of ethics and suggest some ways of thinking about ethnographic storytelling in relation to this definition. The definition of ethics that I would like to suggest is that *the ethical is just the way that human beings find themselves in the world as responsible beings*. Responsibility here should be read not as the duty or debt one has, but as the ability to respond—the response-ability that humans have in virtue of their way of being in the world in relation to other humans (and, probably, non-humans as well). Martin Buber says it this way: 'It is not that you *are* to answer but that you *are able*.'¹³⁸ This way of thinking about ethics as response-ability means that what is ethical is just how we are in the world. Furthermore, as Butler argues, ethics in this sense is also just how we are formed as ethical agents or subjects to begin with.¹³⁹ Subjectivation is the formation of the ethical.

¹³⁸ Martin Buber, 'Dialogue', in *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge, 2002), 40.

¹³⁹ See for example, Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 3-40; and *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 128-151.

Since part of our concern through the last three chapters has been the relationship between the subjective and the objective (and the other schema-polarities we have considered), this situates ethics in this sense at the center of concerns about ethnographic storytelling. Rather than only suggesting that the ethnography of religion ought to be practiced ethically, I am instead claiming that the very subjects and phenomena at stake in ethnographic research and writing are irreducibly ethical. Ethnography is concerned with ethics.

In briefly suggesting that ethics be thought of in this way, the potential confusion arises between the 'ought' and 'is' of the ethical. That is, by claiming that ethics is just how we are in the world we do not seem to leave much room for saying how we *ought to be* ethically. For certainly things are not as they should be. Is not one of our motivations for ethnographic storytelling to promote a better understanding in the service of righting wrongs? Brown argues that in fact this ought to be a guiding criterion for ethnographic work: 'Truth telling and justice... seem to be more fitting criteria than the canons of scientific research.'¹⁴⁰

My claim here is that though we find ourselves in the world as ethical beings, this way of being is covered or forgotten in all kinds of institutions and discourse. So part of the work of ethnographic storytelling is to uncover and remind us of our constitutively response-able being in the world. Surely the promotion of justice in the world is unthinkable outside of the ability to articulate the existential and ontological conditions under which the concern for justice emerges. Only if we think the work of ethnography as

¹⁴⁰ Brown, 'Writing about the "Other," Revisited', 130.

telling stories that remind us of our ethical being in the world can ethnography accomplish the particular kind of truth telling that is its proper aim.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

I began in Chapter II by tracing a genealogy of schemas about what we study when we study society, and articulating some of those schemas in relation to each other in order to try and get clear about what the study of society is. I offered Garfinkel's reading of Durkheim as a felicitous way of thinking about the central problem of social science research: 'The objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental *phenomenon*.'¹⁴¹ We saw in Berger and Luckmann a further articulation or refinement of this in their claim that the basic problem of sociology is: 'How is it possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities?'¹⁴² After articulating some schema polarities within which this question might be addressed in social-scientific research, I argued that the proper work of ethnography cannot be aligned with one pole over another but that it should be understood as variously articulating and reflecting upon the relation between these schema-poles in specific social scenes.

In Chapter III I argued that the way that ethnographic research and writing addresses these various schema-polarities is by telling stories about others' stories. After considering some theories of storytelling and ways of thinking about narrative, I argued that storytelling is a precise and strategic way that one can address the central problems

¹⁴¹ Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology's Program*, 66.

¹⁴² Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 18.

of social science as articulated by Garfinkel, Berger and Luckmann in Chapter II. Examples from three recent ethnographies of religion allowed me to articulate that not only the kinds of stories that are told but *how* they are told and the *ways that storytelling is conceived* have an effect on the accomplishments of ethnographic work, which are heterogeneous. These various choices about how to go about storytelling affect the ethnographer's access to the phenomena that are available for research. Ethnographies stories are never 'tell-all's', and ethnographers need to reflexively attend in both their research and writing to the contingent and unstable nature of telling stories about others' stories.

Finally, in Chapter IV I attempted to articulate some ways of thinking about ethnographic storytelling that account for the contingent, fragile, unstable and reflexive character of its methods and accomplishments. Focusing on the framework that White sketches around the concept of 'weak ontology', I argued that the care and responsibility that are fostered by acknowledging our stories as both 'fundamental and contestable'—and acknowledging them in the ways that White lays out—ethnographers can give rigorous accounts of social scenes that avoid foundationalist or positivist epistemological pitfalls. Furthermore, I argued that this is a fundamentally *ethical* way of thinking about ethnography, and that both the work and object of ethnographic research is ethical. I claimed that the work of ethnography should be framed as telling stories that remind us of our ethical being in the world, that is, that reminds us that we find ourselves in the world as beings that are constituted by our ability to respond, our response-ability.

There appears to be a large gulf between the reformed Durkheimian definition of the work of social-scientific research that we began with in Chapter II and the way that I suggested we should understand the work of ethnography at the end of Chapter IV. At the very least it can be said that the positivist Durkheim would not have thought that sociology can have anything to do with ethics. But if society is ‘immortally’ maintained by our common actions and interactions as actors who build up our social worlds by responding to the building of others—others before us and others alongside us—and if those actors’ own understanding of the nature of that social ‘building’ is primarily narrative, then the program that Durkheim laid out for social research ought to pay attention to the narrative aspects of the relation between the subjective and the objective in the maintenance of social worlds. A single methodology or framework is incapable of taking into account the multiplicities of the building, maintenance and reflexivity of social worlds. So ethnography should not be construed as a privileged or ‘better’ way of doing social-scientific research than others. (Though some ways of doing social-scientific research are bad, not in virtue of being less good than ethnography but in virtue of being incapable of revealing interesting truths or understanding about society.) Rather, different methods and frameworks for social-scientific research cover up certain aspects of the social, and this is constitutive of their ability to access certain other aspects. I have tried to show that ethnographers proceed by telling critical and rigorous stories about others’ stories, and by telling stories critically and reflexively, and this way of proceeding is fundamentally ethical.

This essay is both descriptive and prescriptive. It is clear from the ethnographies with which I engage that many ethnographers pay attention to the narrative, phenomenological and ethical complexities of ethnographic work that I am interested in here. What is most important for ethnographers of religion is that their work be framed properly and rigorously within these three complexes. This requires an explicit awareness of how the sociological questions of ethnographies fit into schemas of social research like the ones we dealt with in Chapter I. It further requires a continually critical reflexivity with respect to the scope of the claims that can be accounted for in light of the way that ethnographies fit into those schemas. And finally, it requires a weak ontological framework for the articulation, reasonableness, and veracity of ethnographic research and writing, a framework that calls for an explicitly ethical way of thinking about ethnography.

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