

Beyond the Eighth Moment: Alternative Modes of Evaluating Postmodern Ethnographic Work

Christopher T. Conner

Washburn University

Cigarettes & Wine

By J. E. Sumerau, Sense Publishers,
Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2017.

One overlooked issue raised by postmodernists is the way in which social scientists represent the social world (Dickens 1995; Dickens and Fontana 1994). While some social scientists have answered the postmodern call to introduce new models of representing their subjects (see Denzin 1989; Ellis and Bochner 1996; Fontana and McGinnis 2003; Halton 2016; Richardson 1997), it remains an underdeveloped idea. One promising area, however, is the genre of “social fiction.” Expanding postmodernists’ critique of traditional ethnographers’ search for truth, and the criticism that producing valid ethnographic accounts is impossible, this work pushes such critiques to their logical conclusion by producing fictional accounts of the social world. J. E. Sumerau’s *Cigarettes & Wine* blurs the lines between ethnography, autoethnography, and fiction, creating a new way of presenting ethnographic accounts. This type of work creates an intimate connection between author and reader, potentially reaches a wider audience than traditional ethnographic texts, and may offer greater insights due to the flawed nature of scientific models.

While not a “scientific account,” this work evokes a passionate emotional response as the reader is drawn into a world where keeping secrets about one’s identity, behaviors, and feelings ensures safety. Readers of this work are shown the great lengths to which some of us have to go in order to feel love, intimacy, and avoid the dehumanizing effects produced by isolation. The author does a fabulous job of showing us the internal psychological turmoil that is embodied within the characters’ psyches as they move through life stigmatized as nonnormative and nonconforming. Another struggle of the book is how it sustains the action across its entirety, thereby maintaining interest until the very end — unlike some traditional ethnographies which can be selectively read based on one’s interest in a particular sociological concept, rather than concern for the actors in the study.

Cigarettes & Wine is grounded in the author's personal experiences as a bisexual, genderqueer person raised in a small town located in South Carolina during the 1990s, and as a social science researcher studying these issues. It is perhaps best described as an autoethnographically informed fictional account of nongender binary conforming persons. It is the author's intent to produce a work that provides an emotionally moving account of what it is like to be and feel different in a geographically heterogeneous small town. While traditional ethnographic accounts give us a bird's eye view of the social world, they are often incapable of evoking the emotional responses that produce understanding and identification with others as human beings, which seems more characteristic in artistic and literary works.

How we evaluate these new forms of ethnography remains a contested area which J. E. Sumerau has cleverly resolved by offering a tool for teaching rather than a standard academic text. Traditional ethnographies are evaluated based on their adherence to scientific standards, including validity and reliability. By framing zir work under the rubric of teaching, alternative forms of evaluative criteria emerge. These questions — such as does this work connect with students, does it engage the target audience, and whether it leaves a lasting impression — are perhaps far more useful than more traditional criteria. As such, *Cigarettes & Wine* makes for an interesting pedagogical tool for an introductory course in sociology, or perhaps a topical course on gender and sexuality. It is a text that is accessible, entertaining, evocative, and can serve to unpack larger sociological concepts in class discussions.

NOTE

1. Ze and zir are gender neutral pronouns which the author introduces in his author biography.

REFERENCES

- Denzin, Norman K. 1989. "Reading/Writing Culture: Interpreting the Postmodern Project." *Cultural Dynamics* 11:9–27.
- Dickens, David R. 1995. "Whither Ethnography." *Symbolic Interaction* 18(2):207–216.
- Dickens, David R. and Andrea Fontana. 1994. *Postmodernism and Social Inquiry*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Ellis, Carolyn and Arthur Bochner. 1996. *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Fontana, Andrea and Troy McGinnis. 2003. "Ethnography since Postmodernism." Pp. 215–234 in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 26, edited by Norman K. Denzin. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Halton, Eugene. 2016. "Music is Rhythm, Rhythm is Life: The Living Moment." Pp. 197–211 in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*. Symbolic Interactionist Takes on Music, Vol. 47, edited by Christopher J. Schneider and Joseph A. Kotarba. Bingley: Emerald Group.
- Richardson, Laurel. 1997. *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Christopher T. Conner is an Assistant Professor at Washburn University. His research interests are deviance, criminology, subcultures, urban sociology, LGBT+ studies, and social theory. He is currently working on a variety of projects including a coauthored book with David R. Dickens titled *Electronic Dance Music: From Deviant Subculture to Culture Industry*, an edited volume *Forgotten, Neglected, and Misrepresented Social Theorists*, and a forthcoming article on gay men's interactions on the social media app Grindr (part of a larger ethnographic study of LGBT+ persons in an era of heightened visibility).