Meghan Lewis

Dr. Torda

ENGL 389

29 January 2018

*Telling True Stories* (3-28)- Research Notes

In the given excerpt from *Telling True Stories* there are multiple ethnographic writings. The first writing, *Stories Matter*, describes the importance of stories and how they humanize us. In this writing I learned that although certain ethnographic pieces may seem obscure and void of point to others, they still remain stories and ways to connect with one another. I liked how the author in this first article wrote “*The Writer in Her Place”* from second person. I think that really allows the reader to imagine their self in Ethiopia, as best as they can. I also liked her “*Looking At What There Is to See”* section because she took the concept of the villagers chanting and telling stories and broadened it to herself and her work as a journalist. I think that is an interesting way connect to a culture so different from your own.

The second reading, *Delving into Private Lives* by Gay Talese, explores the idea of writing ethnographic pieces on the private lives of people. Talese explains that for them writing about the insignificant people can be much more significant than writing larger stories in which everyone will write about. I think this essay proved to me that ethnographic writing serves more of a purpose that just to write creatively, instead you can give people and places substance that would normally go unseen. I enjoyed how this writer talked about their father and drew many parallels in the stories they’d hear to the ones the author wished to write about. I think in my *“The Writer in Her Place”* I will look to draw similar reasons for the site I chose from the impact that close family members and friends have had on me. This writing was especially interesting to me because during the “*Sources*” part of the essay the writer talks about the concept of failure. Failure, they make note, is just as, if not more important as success. This relates to the larger point that peoples private lives and stories that may never get written (like the Chinese soccer player that missed the penalty kick), can be ethnographic masterpieces because they go where no other writer ever thinks to go. I hope in my writing I can embody that notion and use sources that are not so typical of my site, instead use ones maybe a little out there, to create a sense of authenticity in my work.

The following pieces in the given reading discuss ways to create a strong ethnographic essay. *Finding Good Topics: A Writer’s Questions* by Lane DeGregory explains that in order to write a good news story something important needs to take place. The author poses a series of seven questions that evaluate a news story to see if it is worthy of a narrative. In our case in this class, in order to write a well-rounded ethnographic essay the site must have enough buzz around it. This article was useful because it makes me think about my site selection and now I can apply the questions I read. My favorite questions from DeGregory were “Will there be interaction between my character and others?”, as well as, “Do I want to tell the story around on scene or five minutes or a whole day, or perhaps follow someone over a period of time?” (p. 21). I liked these questions because in my “The Writer in Her Place” section of my piece I want to write not only about the reason for choosing my site, but also how I feel in the site or perhaps ways the site has impacted me, although that could also come up in my final piece of the essay, the “*Looking at What There is To See”* portion. I also like the second question because I can apply it in my sources for the essay. I can choose what day or days I want to write about. I think I want to jump from small scene to small scene in my ethnographic writing, I like the idea of little vignettes working to create a larger point in the article.

In *Finding God Topics: An Editor’s Questions* by Jan Winburn, the reader is offered insight in how to select a good topic through borrowing ideas they’ve seen before. For example, the author poses questions such as, “Is there someone whose life is like that of someone in the headlines?” and “Where is the close-up on a story? Where does the mystery remain?” ( Winburn 23). These question, asked through the scope of an editor, look to pre-existing stories to see how your own ethnographic writing holds up. These questions are helpful in the sections like *“Site Description”* and “*Sources”* because they enable the writer to pick a better fitting site, one that you can forsee a story in. The also give the reader the opportunity to discover where to really look in the sources, which ones are meaningful or symbolic to the culture or site at hand. I found them useful and will look back on them when I am working on my ethnographic essay.

Next, Mark Kramer gives ten important tips on how to report for an ethnographic essay. I found these tips very useful, they broke down what exactly to look for when at a site. The first tip urges writers to think carefully about their site and to pick one that will be interesting to readers. I know in my quest to find a good site I have thought about what I would want to read, which is smoothing whimsical and symbolic, rather than something that relies too heavy on lengthy descriptions. The previous reading *Seeing New Englandly*, was amazing and beautiful, however I found it hard to get through, so I want to write a piece that is appealing to the reader and constantly changing in my sources. I found Kramer’s tip of, “[finding] the right scene details through careful sensory reporting” (27) extremely helpful because in order to write well creatively ou need to include sensory images. When it comes time to study my site I will bring a notebook and jot down all the things around me, the things I see, hear, smell, even the way the floor feels. These details will become extremely helpful in my site description and sources, they will enable me to frame my site to the reader and bring it to life to them. I also liked his tip of focusing on the subjects’ experience and not my own. I think this will be important to discover the community and culture of my site. In my “*The Writer in Her Place*” section I want to make note of how I am the quiet observer of my site. I want to sort of take myself out of the site until my “*Looking at What There Is to See*” section, and then discuss how I fit into the equation of my site.

The readings for this week showed me that ethnographic writing has importance and substance if you pick the best site and adequately account for what is happening there. In my own writing I hope to achieve interest in my site that will keep the reader wanting to read. I want to write as myself and let my personality shine through my sources and site description. I will apply the question and tips I learned in these readings to constantly check my progress in my project, especially in the first few times I visit my site.