CREATIVE ENCOUNTERS

Creativity at Work:

The Craft of Editing: Anthropology's Prose and Qualms

By Brian Moeran

August 2011

The Craft of Editing:
Anthropology's Prose and Qualms

To edit is to make a choice, or series of choices. Will I write a rough draft of this essay in longhand, or hammer it out on my computer? If the latter, what font shall I use? Times New Roman, Book Antiqua, or Garamond? Once I get started, what style shall I adopt: realistic, confessional or impressionistic; or a combination of all three (Van Maanen 1988)? Should I try to impress with 'learned scholarship', or should I merely outline in conversational English a few thoughts based on my own experiences?

And once I'm done, what then?

My editor has already made her initial choices when selecting and preparing material for this book, and finding authors for each of its chapters. But will she approve or disapprove of the choices I've made, once she's read my manuscript? Does this text properly reflect her vision of the book? Is its order logical and my writing clear? Have I adhered to the guidelines for the chapter's length? Am I consistent in what I've written? Is my use of language good or beyond remedial care? Do I go into excessive detail over trivial points? Will she ask me to revise what I've written to her, or a reviewer's, satisfaction?

And once she's accepted what I've done, what then?

The publisher's editor has already decided that this volume is worth putting out in print. To do this, however, he or she needs to call on the services of a copy editor whose task is to ensure that all the chapters in the book, including my own, are 'clear, consistent, unambiguous and well organised' (Page, Campbell and Meadows 1997: 60). Ideally, the copy editor should change as little as possible of each author's text, but he or she makes her livelihood from *not* leaving things as they are. Manuscript can – indeed, should – never be perfect!

And, for the most part, they're not. A reference is missing in the Bibliography; numbers up to twenty need to be spelt out (Or is that 20? Does 'up to' include or exclude that final number?); the contents of a note bear no resemblance to the text; and so on and so forth. More choices and changes are made. And if the author doesn't agree with what the copy editor does to his text, what then? There will be a bit of to-ing and fro-ing. But, in the end, the publishing editor will probably be called upon to arbitrate. Sometimes, but by no means always, the author wins his point. At each stage of production, however, poor editing can contribute to written work becoming 'the death mask of its conception' (Benjamin 1985: 65).

Choices such as these are not necessarily confined to the written word. Having finally opened up a new file in Word, adjusted margins according to instructions, inserted numbers at the bottom of each page, and started to write,

I find myself wondering how soon I'm going to stop. What excuse will allow me to press the *Save* button and go downstairs to make some coffee, have a pee, or mow the lawn? What if my editor, who spends the summer in a village not that far away from my own, were to drive over and ask me if my essay is going to be on time? Will I reassure her with a resounding 'yes'? Or will I merely raise an eyebrow in a non-committal way, wiggle my ears for effect, and pour her a glass of Irish whiskey to keep her quiet?

Or will I make another choice out of the infinite possibilities available to me?

Every time we pause to make choices like these, we find ourselves in what Howard Becker (1982: 198) calls 'editorial moments'. These moments involve editing of both the self and others. As anthropologists, we are aware that self-editing starts when selecting the kind of research we want to do, where we want to do it, and how to go about doing it. Fieldwork is one long series of editorial moments, as we make choices about what is and is not relevant to our observations, participation and communication. Who do we speak to, and whom do we ignore? What's the best way to broach a tricky issue like money? What questions are better left unasked? What do we, and what do we not, record? Do we write more than one 'record': a 'subjective' diary, for example, as well as 'objective' field notes? How much do we consign to memory? How much to the tape recorder or video camera?

And when we start to analyse all we've learned, we make more editorial decisions. How are we going to organize our material and structure our results? What sort of theoretical frame should we use? How much detail should we include? What sort of style should we adopt? Who, if anyone, is going to be our audience? What is the sound of one hand clapping?

An answer to one of these questions inevitably has an effect on the answers to others, which in turn may enforce a change in the first. Editorial moments are messy, not least for anthropologists. They do not constitute a neat or logical process, if only because of their variety. In the words of Clifford Geertz (1995: 20):

> One works *ad hoc* and *ad interim*, piecing together thousand-year histories with three-week massacres, international conflicts with municipal ecologies. The economics of rice or olives, the politics of ethnicity or religion, the workings of language or war, must, to some extent, be soldered into the final construction. So must geography, trade, art, and technology. The result, inevitably, is unsatisfactory, lumbering, shaky, and badly formed: a grand contraption. The anthropologist, or at least one who wishes to complicate his contraptions, not close them in upon themselves, is a manic tinkerer adrift with his wits.

My oldest friend, David Kennedy, is a sculptor who loves to make such grand contraptions out of numerous lengths of wire, roughly hewn wood in the shape of a guitar, old cutlery, tin plates, *papier maché* figures, a toothbrush and false teeth. He winds a handle like a barrel organ and, with splendid, ear-splitting

cacophony, everything moves. One figure clashes symbols with a knife and fork, another strums the guitar, a third – the singer – has his teeth cleaned between jerking upper body movements and singing into a microphonic spoon. The effect is overwhelming, wondrous, and guaranteed to elicit a smile, even from the most hardened police officer or *apparatchik*.

But grand contraptions, with all their attendant tinkering, are not enough for David, who also sculpts and welds in steel finely wrought forms – of cats and goats in the main, but also delicate figurines of women working in the garden, playing a cello, and dandling a new-born child. It is this blend of styles which, together with an occasional jug of *retsina*, keeps him sane. But what of anthropologists? Do we, too, need to find a balance between these two forms of expression, attendant in our monographs and articles? How many qualms accompany our prose?

Editing is not writing. The two should be kept separate as activities. When I write, I go with the flow, allowing the words to form their own spaces, to take over from my thinking self, and to express ideas I never knew I had. In writing, words should have a mind of their own. This is the point at which creativity begins. When I edit, I put down anchors to stem the flow. It is at this point that my logical mind takes over. I have to be careful, of course, to balance the two activities, the two states of being. The perfectionist is someone who edits all the time and doesn't allow himself to write. This leads to writer's block. Or is it editor's block? Whichever, at that stage it's time to learn a few tricks of the writing trade (Becker 1986).

When writing, we compose, we build, we weave our prose (Benjamin 1985: 61). So, at the beginning at least, writing should exclude editing. This is particularly important for anthropologists, who often have to wrestle with mountains of data that they believe should be theoretically framed. How on earth are we to get started?

When I was in the middle of the second year of fieldwork studying folk art potters in Japan, my supervisor, Rodney Clark, unexpectedly wrote to me, saying that he was coming to Tokyo and that I should send him the first draft of my thesis, 'with a beginning, a middle, and conclusion, and no loose ends', no later than November 15th. I had exactly three months and two days from the time I received his letter (this was before the era of e-mail) to write my thesis.

Because I was, in spite of appearances maybe, conscientious, I settled down to do as he asked. But because I was in the field, I had no scholarly books to read and rely on for help and the nearest university library (which, in fact, had few of the works I needed) was more than two hours away from my fieldwork site. This was a blessing in disguise. I had no choice but to write the whole of my thesis on the basis of my copious field notes and nothing else.

I had two sets of notebooks. One was unexpurgated, raw material, consisting of hurriedly jotted field notes made during interviews, making

pottery, and *sake* drinking sessions. The other consisted of larger notebooks, in which I had neatly transcribed these jottings in greater detail, and edited them too, according to specific themes such as household organization and community structure, pottery production and distribution, and aesthetics and the Japanese folk art movement.

Beginning is the hardest part.

I remember gazing rather hopelessly at these two sets of notebooks piled on a table temporarily set up on the earthen floor of a storeroom in our house. I remember, too, the harsh symphony of cicadas in the pear orchard outside, and the keyboard of my portable typewriter with a fresh white sheet of A4 paper inserted, straightened and with margins adjusted. Gradually it dawned on me that all I could do was tell a story – a story about the community of potters I'd been studying and how they'd been caught up in an artistic movement that they didn't really understand or appreciate. I would tell the story they had been telling me the past eighteen months.

And so I began to write that story – a long story maybe, but a story nevertheless. I edited it, of course, to fulfil Rodney's criterion that it have a beginning, middle and conclusion – themselves prerequisites for what constitutes a story. But because the emphasis was on *writing*, and writing a *story*, rather than on trying to fit the details of that story into some kind of theoretical framework, I managed to finish the whole of my thesis two days ahead of the stipulated time.

'Very interesting,' Rodney remarked when I went up to Tokyo to hear his judgement on what I'd written. 'Now go away and find a theory.' It was then that I started editing.[1]

Editing, then, is not writing but re-writing. Already I've made three changes in the sentence you've just read, before moving on to this one. Before I'm through, I may well have made several more, or less, significant changes, or even deleted what I've written altogether. In which case, you will not read any of this paragraph. How do you read a cut without the paste?

Re-writing isn't easy. You have to learn to be tough with yourself. You have to stand back and read what you've written with the eye of another. You have to make sure the theory makes sense, avoid clichés, eliminate *inconsequentia*, check those ingrained habits that lead to the same old spelling or grammatical mistakes, and cut down on all those fascinating snippets of research detail so that they do no more than illustrate a particular point you wish to make. Editing operates at two levels in particular: one at that of grammar and style; the other, of organization. The first demands an experienced love of language; the second clear-headedness. What you have

---

[1] None of my doctoral students, alas, has ever followed my suggestion that they write their theses in the same way.

written must be clear and simple, and it must be organized in such a way that your reader can easily follow your argument. Organization's the key.

So, how do you know when your written work will be judged sufficiently well written to be understood by people potentially interested in what you have to say?

Rodney Clark helped me with this, too. After reading one particularly tortuous theoretical section in the third draft of my thesis (there were six in all before it was ready to be examined), he said: 'why don't you read this aloud to your elder son when you go home tonight? See what he makes of it.' Poor Alyosha was only thirteen years old at the time. He was bewildered by my account of the intricacies of the Japanese household system and what made it different from a family. Dutifully, though, he managed to ask a question when it came to my description of how to make pots ('Is Takuchan going to be a potter like his dad?'). But he soon fell asleep night after night as I read aloud extracts from what I'd written.

From this I learned two things: first, how to put a restless child to sleep; second, to write more simply, in such a way that Alyosha – or someone like an intelligent baker in a Greek island village (Moeran 2005a) – could understand what I was communicating, if he put his mind to it.

It's an effective test, or trick of the trade (Becker 1998), but not many of my colleagues seem to have tried it. You can see how people nod off in department seminars as the speaker drones on in what, to a layman, is pure gobbledygook. It was during the course of reading my second departmental seminar paper that I realised that what I'd written sounded pompous (a common feature of theory), and didn't make sense, even to myself. I stopped in mid-flow and extemporized, speaking to what I'd written. People woke up and smiled encouragingly.

If only we could all learn from our mistakes! I was once invited to attend a workshop on 'Advertising and the new middle class in India'. Other participants included a dozen or so, mainly American, academics and a handful of representatives from the Bombay (or should I say Mumbai?) advertising industry. Five minutes after one, rather famous, anthropologist had begun reading a prepared paper, littered with obscure phrases about an epistemological this, a postmodern that, and a subaltern other, one of the advertising executives interrupted the speaker: 'Excuse me,' he said, 'But I don't understand a bloody word you're saying. Could you please be speaking in plain English? That's what we have to do in advertising. Get to the point.' Alas! The rather famous anthropologist was rooted to his text and was totally unable to engage his audience. We dutifully nodded off.

Don't forget, then. Your audience is an intelligent layperson, not just a colleague.

Not all editing is self-editing. Editing a book, for example, requires being tough in a different way. You have to be tough with other people, your contributors, as well as with yourself to make sure that you're properly tough with them. Since your contributors are often your colleagues, as well sometimes as your friends, it can be difficult to be honest about what you think of what they've written. After all, as authors, we're for the most part convinced that nobody has the right to tamper with our thoughts! What we fail to realise is that if our editor, who is, after all, a reasonable and intelligent person, finds something we write to be ambiguous, then it's likely that other readers will be likewise bemused (Powell 1985: 119).

As an editor, then, you need to be sympathetic, yet prepared to say what you dislike or find irrelevant. At the same time, you have to be able to 'read' your authors and judge how they may react to criticism (Powell 1985: 120). Too often, though, we let things slide. As a result, we find ourselves reading too much sloppy writing and too many badly edited books. Maybe, after all, publishing editors are right: academics get the books they deserve (Kadushin 1979: 64).

As an editor, you must, first and foremost, have a vision – a vision for a book or a special issue of a journal (or even for a journal itself), it doesn't matter. Secondly, you must be able to communicate that vision to others: to the publisher whom you wish to take on the manuscript; and to those you ask to contribute to it. Thirdly, you have to know the field of scholarship required. And finally, you need to work, and work long and hard, to ensure that the vision is realised to your satisfaction.

Vision affects both content and form. As an editor, you first map the field that you wish your contributors to cover: writing in anthropology or the social sciences, for example, and the different facets that the topic of writing presents. Then you have to decide how best to put these different facets together into a seamless work. For this you need *flow*.

I've already talked about the need for a flow in writing. But you need to ensure that a written text – whether it be a monograph, journal article, case study, edited volume or contributing chapter thereto – has an appropriate flow. If you stop to examine other media forms more closely – a television series, for example, or fashion magazine – you will see the same. Works that draw you to them tend to be characterized by flow. Flow is part of organization.

In an edited book, the editor needs to ensure that each chapter follows on smoothly from the one before it. It must exhibit a certain consistency of style and subject matter, ideally perhaps, through reflecting points made in the book's Introduction. At the same time, each chapter *anchors* itself in a particular topic that is different from those of surrounding chapters, in the same way as advertisements anchor textual matter in our magazines (Moeran 2005b). Anchorage and flow are crucial components of all media productions (Barthes 1977).

The need for flow means that you shouldn't just edit a book on the basis of a set of papers presented at a conference. True, it's not impossible, provided you've organized the conference really well and brought in as many participants as necessary to cover all the topics you envisage are necessary for the volume you wish to edit. But even then, things can go wrong. One of the participants suddenly decides to ignore his abstract and talk about classical music instead of contemporary art. Another fails to turn up, or presents a paper that is so scrappy that its only place is, indeed, on the scrap heap. However well you communicate your vision to your colleagues, one of them will almost always ignore you.

So what do you do? You ask, you cajole, and occasionally, if you're senior enough, you threaten. You may decide at one point that you have to drop one chapter already to hand because it doesn't quite fit into your vision. That's a tough decision, especially when its author has been meticulous in delivering various versions of the paper on time. Some colleagues accept your decision; others complain bitterly and become your sworn enemy for life. Editing encourages the biting of backs! Some of us have the scars to prove it.

You may also find yourself seeking new chapters. In a book that I recently co-edited, I realised that we needed to commission three new chapters, even though the workshop on which the book was based had been meticulously planned. One was needed to plug a gap: we had one chapter on the French *Salon*, another on art biennales, but none on art fairs, even though many of the other chapters were concerned with fairs. A second was needed to help the flow of the book and effect a transition from exhibitions to fairs through a focus on auctions. The third was commissioned because, as editors, we were convinced (it turned out, wrongly) that one of our workshop participants would not deliver what we required on time. As a result, the finished volume has – at the risk of editorial *hubris* – a flow that helps the reader move seamlessly from Introduction to Afterword (Moeran and Strandgaard Pedersen 2011).

Editing isn't confined to academics, but extends to publishers' editors, who are so called because their task is also to work with authors and turn a manuscript into a publishable book. These editors have at least two sets of questions that they ask of every manuscript. The first concerns its content. How well written is the manuscript? How much work is it going to need to make it publishable? Is it worthwhile spending time on and, if so, how much time? And does the manuscript make a substantial contribution to scholarship? The second concerns its target audience. Who will the manuscript appeal to? Will it be adopted in courses? Answers to questions like these determine print runs and retail pricing (Powell 1985: 103).

Once upon a time, editors actually read manuscripts and, in close collaboration with their authors, edited them to whatever extent was needed. They still do in a country like Japan where publishers insist that, ideally again, an editor should be a *kuroko*, a black-robed Bunraku puppeteer, who remains

invisible. The lifeblood of a publishing house lies in the trust that is built between author and editor – a trust based on editorial skill and knowledge.

Such trust is rare in the English-speaking world of academic publishing, for two inter-related reasons. One lies in the effect of the changing nature of the trade publishing industry on academic publishing, where editors now tend to move from one publishing house to another with some frequency, and where many of their responsibilities are beginning to be taken over by literary agents (Thompson 2005, 2010). As a result, and this is the second reason for the breakdown of trust, publishing editors of the old school are a dying breed. There is no longer anybody to appreciate us as authors, to stroke and curry us (Powell 1985: 116). Feeling forlorn, we send our next manuscript to any publisher who talks to us encouragingly at a conference bookstand.

Of course, we're being deceived; that's the nature of the game! Nowadays, even more than they did a quarter of a century ago, editors spend almost all their time planning new titles and talking to authors about the possibility of delivering manuscripts down the line (Powell 1985: 11-12). Publishers no longer employ editors to re-write manuscripts in the way that they used to. It was in the same year as Walter Powell published his book about decision-making in academic publishing houses that I last had a publisher (Grant Barnes at Stanford University Press) who took the trouble to read one of my manuscripts carefully, pointing to a grammatical mistake here ('my data reveals that…') and a *non sequitur* in the argument there ('given that your data have not yet been presented, they cannot "reveal" anything at this point'). Publishing editors nowadays are not textual editors, but *commissioning* editors (usually under pressure to produce so many [hundred] thousand pounds or dollars' worth of turnover in new books every year). Editing itself is a dying craft.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, publishers aren't that enthusiastic about edited books. They need too much real editing work, especially when many of them are churned out without much regard to vision, flow, or anything else I've talked about here. Too often, edited books are the result of the proceedings of some ill thought-out or insufficiently theorized conference, on the one hand, and of both editors' and contributors' misguided respect for research ratings, on the other. It's easier to turn a conference paper into a book chapter than to sit down and *think*. What actually needs to be written about that hasn't been put on paper already?

As, finally, I accept that I cannot ignore the subject of journal editing, what is there to add? Much of what I've already written here holds true for journal editors. They must have a vision; they should at least be aware of flow; and they should know how to communicate. They cannot hope to be abreast of all the latest developments in all the fields of knowledge covered by their journal, but for this they rely on referees, who assess manuscripts and make editorial judgements about their worth (or lack thereof).

Even so, a journal's editor has to make decisions. Which accepted manuscripts should be placed together with which, and in what order? Should a referee's recommendations be followed to the letter, or should the author be allowed some leeway in revising his manuscript? And what if two referees give totally opposing assessments and recommendations? The editor of one journal to which I submitted my first article on advertising sent the manuscript out to three reviewers. One liked it very much and recommended it for publication as it stood; another thought it lacking in scholarship and rejected it; a third regarded it as a bit like the Bishop's egg: good in parts.

I was asked to revise in the light of reviewers' comments. I did so and sent the manuscript back. Unable to make up her mind, the journal editor sent it out to three more reviewers, one of whom liked it, another disliked it, while the third wavered between hot and cold. Since the journal editor still couldn't make up her mind, I sent the manuscript to another journal, together with the six reviewers' assessments. It was published without further ado!

Flexibility, adaptability and an openness to new ways of doing things are crucial aspects in a journal editor's work. Here we have a classic case of structure versus agency. A journal's name and reputation enforce a particular kind of article to be found therein. This limits editorial choices. But an editor should be able to spot a gap and broaden the field of her journal's enquiry, thereby encouraging the publication of slightly different kinds of articles that still maintain the reputation of the journal's 'brand'. She should also realise that journal articles generally make very little contribution to scholarship, if she insists on their following a format that includes problem orientation, research question, literature review and methodology sections before presentation of the actual data.

Digital technology has broadened a journal editor's field of possibilities. In launching a *Journal of Business Anthropology*, Christina Garsten and I were faced with the initial challenge of selection of a publisher. Should we go for Wiley or Blackwell, Routledge or Taylor & Francis? One of our supporters asked: why not Open Access? Anything to do with computers not being my strong point, I approached my university librarians for advice. Easy, they said; we have all you need. As they showed me some of the other journals that they were running on line, I began to realise the possibilities open to us. We didn't *have* to publish just two issues a year. We could also run in parallel case studies, field reports, book reviews, debates, and blogs – all of them developing all the time, as contributions became available. The whole concept of the phrase 'academic journal' began to take on new meaning.

Still, it doesn't mean that editorial work isn't needed. We still have case studies assessed by anonymous reviewers, and, as editors, we select (and edit as appropriate) the field reports sent in. We need to establish topics for debate and to monitor blogs. Because of the so far ill-defined nature of the field of 'business anthropology' (what's wrong with 'organizational', 'economic', or even 'enterprise' anthropology?), we can use the reviews section to comment

not just on recently published books, but on everything written during the past century or so that has contributed to the anthropological study of businesses. We can, as they say, 'configure' the field (Lampel and Mayer 2008). The sheer breadth of publishing opportunities made available by Open Access then allows us to focus on what themes we wish to cover in each issue of the journal and to commission articles (which are then peer-reviewed). Things certainly ain 't what they used to be.

As we all know, properly done, editing requires almost as much work as writing our own articles or even monographs. And yet we get virtually no credit for it. Edited books are of secondary significance when a promotions committee considers an applicant's publication record. They rate a remarkable zero points (*nul point*, *null punkte*) in the arithmetical tables now foisted upon us in Scandinavia by ardent administrators who believe they can actually measure 'scholarly value'. The only credit you'll get for editing a book is 0.75 points for writing its Introduction (compared with similar absurdities, like 3 points for an internationally refereed journal article and just 5 points for a monograph). This princely sum is divided accordingly if you are rash enough to write your introduction with one or more colleagues!

Logic suggests that, in future, edited books will cease to feature very much on an academic landscape devoted to arithmetical formulae rather than to scholarship. Publishers will probably breathe a sigh of relief, but wonder how they'll now increase their annual turnover. Libraries will take advantage of the trend as they struggle with financial cuts. As an academic, all I can say is: thank God for old age!

References

Barthes, Roland 1977 *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana.

Becker, Howard 1982 *Art Worlds*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Becker, Howard 1986 *Writing for Social Scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Becker, Howard 1998 *Tricks of the Trade: How to think about your research while doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Benjamin, Walter 1985 *One Way Street and Other Writings*, with an Introduction by Susan Sontag. London: Verso.

Geertz, Clifford 1995 *After the Fact: Two countries, four decades, one anthropologist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kadushin, Charles 1979 'The managed text: prose and qualms.' *Change* Volume 11 (2): 30-5, 64.

Lampel, Joseph and Alan D. Meyer 2008 'Field-configuring events as structuring mechanisms: how conferences, ceremonies, and trade shows constitute new technologies, industries, and markets.' *Journal of Management Studies* 45 (6): 1025-1035.

Moeran, Brian 2005a *The Business of Ethnography*. Oxford: Berg.

Moeran, Brian 2005b 'More than just a fashion magazine.' *Current Sociology* Volume 54 (5): 725-44.

Moeran, Brian and Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen (eds.) 2011 *Negotiating Values in the Creative Industries: Fairs, festivals and competitive events*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Page, Gillian, Campbell, Robert, and Arthur Meadows 1997 *Journal Publishing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Powell, Walter W. 1985 *Getting into Print: The decision-making process in scholarly publishing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thompson, John 2005 *Books in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity.

Thompson, John 2010 *Merchants of Culture: The publishing business in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Polity.

Van Maanen, John 1988 *Tales of the Field*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.