The making of Dutch flower culture: Auctions, networks, and aesthetics
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Conclusion

has anyone asked the roses
if they love bees who are
basically communists
and worship the female

Philip Levine

Neither a graveyard nor a marketplace but something of both.
A kind of greenhouse, too.

Tomas Tranströmer
One of the things that happens while focusing on a subject for a sustained period is that the world appears through that lens, and in my case, that lens has been Dutch horticulture. When one’s attention is alerted, one sees the many unexpected ways that horticulture in the Netherlands connects to all sorts of issues large and small. In other words, I’ve been seeing flowers everywhere. From this angle, some issues more than others inevitably stick out as particularly relevant, influential, or topical. Through Dutch horticulture I’ve followed a variety of subjects, including auctions, the international economics and politics of agricultural commodities, and more broadly, have considered the ways that common notions about the economy and practices of masculinity influence our most prominent institutions. But most of all, in the years I have been looking at Dutch horticulture, I have been struck by the increasing attention given to cooperatives. This has been true both in the Netherlands and internationally.

A number of sources have expressed enthusiasm for cooperatives, ranging from the United Nations (as noted in the prologue, the UN 2012 ‘the Year of the Coop’) to developmental organizations, as well as policy makers, economists, and scholars from many fields. They have pointed out that coops weather the turbulence of economic shocks and the recession better than other types of companies. One of the largest and best known coops is Mondragon; located in Spain’s Basque country, it employs about 80,000 people and due to its policies and practices the region enjoys half the rate of unemployment of the national average. Around the world, coops are increasingly popular among ordinary people, offering attractive options for startup businesses. In just the past several years, for instance, coops have taken off in the United States. Gar Alperovitz (2005, 2011) has chronicled these remarkable developments, pointing out the dramatic increase in democratic forms of ownership in the US, including such facts as 130 million Americans are members of coops, 25 percent of electricity production across the entire country is publicly owned, and the total wealth of credit unions (member-owned financial cooperatives) equals any of the five biggest banks in the country. He argues that these forms of institutions, while not new, are springing up and gaining traction due to the ongoing economic crisis, and more broadly, in response to the strong negative trends of corporate capitalism. His point is that just below the surface, and just beyond the radar of the mainstream press, social and economic experiments of democratic forms of ownership are proliferating.

I have not proposed, and do not believe, that FloraHolland Aalsmeer represents a turning of the tide away from corporate capitalism and toward some sort of democratic socialism. But it is a successful model of a far more democratic form of ownership than traditional capitalist enterprizes, and among other reasons, that’s a compelling rationale for studying it. FloraHolland is handling the economic crisis with a remarkable level of

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101 Most are run on a one person one vote principal.
stability, though it’s far from immune to the global economic climate. This dissertation has explored the general and particular reasons why this is so, and has illustrated the ways horticulture has been and continues to be part and parcel of everyday life in the Netherlands.

Though the focus of my research has been Dutch horticulture and the Aalsmeer auction, these topics have also opened in several directions to comment on history, socioeconomic practices, male networks, foreign policy, and spacial planning in the Netherlands. These topics are interrelated and complement and reinforce each other in ways I did not foresee prior to my fieldwork. I anticipated that racial or cultural characteristics to do with ‘Dutchness’ would play a significant role in the workings of the auction, but found that this category was quite slippery, and to the extent I could get a handle on it, could not find in it compelling explanation to the way the auction works or with the history of Dutch horticulture. Instead I found it much clearer and more convincing to look at networks, historical patterns and practices, and to discuss these issues in terms of what scholars in various fields have discovered. In uncovering connections with such work and making arguments, I have not tried to conceal my own presence or point of view. Inevitably, my own background and interests influenced the manner in which I established links, parallels, and associations.

In an appendix called “Some Reminiscences and Reflections on Fieldwork” Evans-Pritchard (1976 [1937]) makes a similar observation about how the disparate tributaries of one’s knowledge flow together in the course of fieldwork, in the idiosyncratic ways one forms and pursues questions. He reflects that “...all knowledge is relevant to our researches and may, though not taught as anthropology, influence the direction of our interests and through them our observations and the manner in which we present them...[that one’s research ultimately emerges from] what has shaped [one’s] personality, and not just academic background...“ (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 241). This has certainly been the case for my own observations and the manner in which I have presented them here. It seems to me that this basic truism is relevant not only to the style and range of this particular thesis, but also to how theory informs the arguments and connections found here. Though the role and relevance of anthropological theory has evolved considerably since the 1930s, it’s important to emphasize that Evans-Pritchard’s observation came out of a discussion of ‘theory’ and the ‘science’ of social anthropology of his day.

Some of these connections emerged, no doubt, from a common idea about how theory works. A social theory may be extrapolated from a particular set of circumstances, a particular social and temporal context, but the theory is an abstraction, a generalization. If it’s true or useful, it should be relevant and applicable to a wide range of situations and conditions. Clearly, many hold this view; otherwise, for instance, Bourdieu’s (1984) ideas about distinction would only be relevant to sociologists looking
at France in the 1960s. Clearly, notions of distinction pertain in various ways to Dutch horticulture, as I have discussed. Such generalizations allow for insight into one’s object of study, but they also make comparisons possible (or even inevitable).

Charles Smith (1989) argued that auctions take place around objects of uncertain value, and based on that insight, was able to draw some startling conclusions about how auctions work. This generalization holds as true for a Texas longhorn cattle auction as for a police auction of stolen and recovered goods and FloraHolland’s auction in Aalsmeer. Without a doubt, there are a lot of distinguishing characteristics among these auctions, but a common thread runs through each one. The commonality provides insight as it allows, or encourages, connections. But to link or associate one circumstance to another is not to claim that they’re identical; rather that this commonality, this feature, opens a link or channel between what’s being compared. By highlighting certain aspects of what one thing shares with another, whether historical periods or economic or cultural practices, I’ve thrown both in relief.

I’ve provided an overview of Dutch horticulture, and explored some of the broad implications of its history and practices, while maintaining a focus on a single institution, FloraHolland Aalsmeer. But I wouldn’t propose this as a blueprint for other ethnographies, any more than other ethnographies have dictated the particulars of this project. There are good reasons for coming at one’s subject in a variety ways, and what works best is not a one size fits all format but some sort of necessarily subjective balancing between the subject and one’s talents and frame of reference. In my own case, in taking on a long view of such a range of topics, I’ve left plenty of room for further development of particular issues and contexts. One could more deeply immerse oneself in the culture of traders, or of florists, for instance. One could do a case study of how Dutch horticulturalists established the auctions in Brazil. In covering so many subjects and places, I have risked glossing over or superficially treating the unique qualities of people, places, and practices. In citing different literatures and using an interdisciplinary approach, I’ve risked alienating readers more closely wedded to traditional fields. Yet judging from reactions thus far, this seems a welcoming and refreshing approach.

I hope that this mode of reporting on Dutch horticulture inspires others using ethnography in pursuing their investigations. Along with a growing number of scholars, I advocate for more flexibility in form and ambition in ethnographic writing. In some respects, things have changed little in the decades since Geertz opened up space by discussing the craft of ethnographic writing (1988). He examined how anthropological works convince, noting the inaccuracy of common beliefs about authority—namely, that it resides in the “extensiveness of their descriptions” or through “the force of their theoretical arguments” (Geertz 1988: 4). Instead, like other genres of writing, ethnographic works persuade through the structures and techniques of the writing itself,
which incidentally, is close to Walt Whitman’s famous observation about persuasiveness, that we ‘convince through our presence’ on the page.

Genres are not set in stone. As ideas change, as social values shift, as technology and other factors influence expression, forms evolve. This is as true for poetry as for ethnographic writing. Some of the classic works of anthropology (such as *Tristes Tropiques*) would likely be ignored or disregarded today not only because the information and discourses are out of date, but because they display literary flair and don’t adhere to contemporary conventions. Unfortunately, as many current books and journals demonstrate, writing that does not stick to mainstream conventions or regularly use the popular phrases of the day are simply not published, or aren’t taken seriously. Too often, work is not admissible without adhering to accepted formats and employing certain shibboleths, and as a result we’re left with a limited, stale diet, and are deprived of many voices, perspectives, and alternative or more expansive ways of writing and thinking. But it’s probably not fair to simply blame editors and publishers. The unstated values of the discipline, the way writing is taught (or more often, not taught), time constraints, and, among other reasons, the fact that conventions are slow to change likely explain the current status quo.

I hope that this dissertation provides a contribution to a growing body of ethnographic writing which takes seriously the craft and techniques of writing. I don’t claim any special talents or visionary insight in this regard, nor do I view this thesis as especially radical. I have merely applied what I believe are the strengths of other forms to writing this dissertation, in an attempt to produce something that I myself would like to read. I’ve not striven to be especially innovative but to present a view that’s readable, trustworthy, and has not been said before.