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Disciplinary (Per)Mutations of Ethnography

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Abstract: There has been a veritable explosion across various disciplines ‘discovering’ ethnography over the past three decades. This article argues that the proliferation of ‘ethnography’ outside anthropological circles has led to some pervasive interrelated misconceptions about ethnography, misconceptions reinforced by some of the reflective debates within anthropology. Consequently, this article argues that the broadening interdisciplinary discussions of ‘ethnographic methods’ obscure the actuality of ethnography. Practitioners in these disciplines often discuss how they employ ‘ethnographic methods,’ as if these ‘methods’ are the equivalent of engaging in ethnography. As a result, some rather significant differences in the way disciplines conceive and practice ethnography emerge because of how ethnography itself is conceptualized rather than how it is practiced. Ethnography is not simply an amalgamation of constituent parts; it is a sum greater than its constituent parts. There is more to ethnography than either its methods or its texts. While ethnography is also about the kinds of stories, narratives, and diverse ways in which knowledge is produced and its findings are presented, ethnography is so much more than a literary endeavour. All of the research methods found in ethnography are used in other forms of research, yet said methods, in and of themselves, do not make ethnography unique nor make an ethnography. Ethnography is much larger, profound, and illuminating.

Keywords: anthropology, ethnography, fieldwork, knowledge, methodology, ethnographic sensibilities, ethnographic permutations

Disciplinary (Per)Mutations of Ethnography

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8 The rum churned leaden waves sloshing in my belly mirror the waves rocking the small,
9 weather beaten boat in which I tensely sit. The rum likely has something to do with my
10 discomfort although the water's choppiness certainly reinforces my uneasy ill feelings. All is
11 dark – no stars or moon and the boat's owner runs no lights. Only the faint, distant coastal
12 town's feeble light causes the periodic whitecaps to glow faintly gold. Otherwise, there is no
13 light by which to see. The owner cuts the outboard motor and we drift on the current.

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21 Our senses strain outward to try and locate ourselves in the world. Each of us
22 seemingly lost in our own head. The older sailor sits at the helm quietly murmuring under his
23 breath. The young man in the prow fidgets, rocks in rhythm to the waves caressing the hull.
24 His hands twitch as he methodically coils and uncoils the anchor rope, staring out at
25 something only he can see. Other than the faint luminosity of wave tips, I see no sensible
26 point of reference beyond our vessel. The three of us are silent in the darkness; the
27 whispering zephyrs and squelching slaps are oddly reassuring. I have no idea where we are or
28 where we are going, much less what is about to happen.

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38 Instead, I am deliberately adrift with two "sailors" – alleged smugglers, handymen,
39 guides, fishermen, dockworkers – I met through a network of *socios* – trusted friends and
40 their close interpersonal networks. We are not supposed to be out here at night, especially
41 with no lights. Yet here we were, rocking and rolling along with the waves because of a
42 series of loosely connected events that incited me to seek out these men. Our sojourn was all
43 "hush-hush" because, technically, what we were doing is illegal. Cuban fishermen are not
44 supposed to be out at sea at night, not unless they had a *factura* (license) from the authorities.
45 We weren't fishing anyway. Fishing is not the legal question. The issue is being at sea
46 without permission. We did not leave from a designated harbor, but one of the many
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3 makeshift retractable jetties that can be put into and taken out of the water. These men, like a
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5 lot of working-class rural Cubans, fish to augment their own larders or earn enough to
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7 purchase other items on the grey market. The question of legality simply is not a factor in
8
9 their lives. Illegality is often required in 1990s Cuba if you are to survive no matter who you
10
11 are. Government official, elite athlete, academic, car owner, restaurant manager, shopkeeper
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13 – it does not matter because everyone has to find alternative sources of income outside their
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15 state-sanctioned jobs because state salaries no longer meet an individual's basic needs.
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19 In many ways these conditions are emblematic of ethnography itself. The ambiguities
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21 of assigning a "role" to these men, the (il)legality of being at sea, and the (un)certainities of
22
23 life demonstrate a crucial aspect of ethnographic inquiry. Ethnography addresses what we
24
25 don't know as part of our knowledge production. We may have some idea of what we are
26
27 looking for in the first place – that is why we go to "the field" after all. But that presumed
28
29 knowledge is transformed if ethnography is being done well. I had no intention of being in a
30
31 boat off the north coast of Cuba when planning my fieldwork. The vagaries of fieldwork and
32
33 the shifting circumstances while I pursued the ethnographic object "Cuban baseball" led me
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35 to a makeshift jetty on a relatively calm, cool, overcast winter's night. In acknowledging and
36
37 addressing the incomplete nature of human knowledge and our very lives, ethnographic
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39 research draws out the dialogic choppiness of our knowledge about the world. It tacks
40
41 between our certainties about our selves and worlds and the uncertainties that surround and
42
43 penetrate those certitudes. Much, much more than a sympathetic description and subjective
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45 analysis of a "culture," at its best, ethnography is an attempt to discern at least part of the
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47 lifeworld of a specific group of people and how they live in those worlds.
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On Ethnographic Knowledge

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3 Ethnography is a deeply powerful empirical form of knowledge production precisely because
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5 of the ethnographer's entanglement with the object of enquiry (Chung, 2009; Peterson, 2009).
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7 It is now a well-worn cliché that knowledge, even that of material things, is socially
8
9 constructed, mediated and, at best, secondhand. Outside of our narrow specialties, we are all
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11 in a position of knowing only what we read (or watch on the internet). Naturally, it would be
12
13 farcical to put too much stock in those forms of knowledge on their own. Many taken-for-
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15 granted concepts are simply ethereal and happen at such incomprehensible scales that they
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17 cannot be experienced directly and we therefore mistake their assumption for knowledge. The
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19 assertion of ostensibly perfect information produces, more often than not, imperfect,
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21 superficial knowledges that have to be discussed as abstractions taken on a necessary degree
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23 of faith. Such abstract knowledge is, of course, real and collectively imagined, but because of
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25 its very nature, it is extremely difficult to know it as such. Governments, the media and the
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27 academy, for related but different reasons, all tend to employ such abstractions as if their
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29 meanings were more or less self-evident. This creates a faux-empiricism and an illusory
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31 sense of concreteness. We are all too often unaware of the significance of things because our
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33 conceptual language simply does not articulate questions that enable us to fathom just what is
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35 actually going on. The ability to tease out problematizing questions regarding what we know,
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37 as well as the requisite knowledge needed to answer those questions, is the real strength of
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39 ethnography.
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45 The recent devaluation of ethnography as a viable form of knowledge production
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47 stems from an ascendant neoliberal ideological position that emphasizes an ability to plan and
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49 control reality via science-as-technology. Ethnography's devaluation by think tanks, industry
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51 insiders, and policy makers is underpinned by a technical "politics of understanding" that
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53 inveigles predictions and pronouncements that never require actual use of knowledge
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55 (Luhmann, 1998, p. 69-70). Instead, the function of "experts" in this environment is to
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3 establish points of discourse and discussion surrounding established “facts” that must be
4 managed by reducing various forms of knowledge to a single quantifiable standard (Merry
5 2016, p. 27-43). The emphasis on the management of knowledge through a quantifiable
6 process means that ethnography, allegedly, has no practical outcome or “impact” – a grave
7 concern given national funding bodies’ recent emphasis on “impact.” They fetishize “facts”
8 as discoverable entities existing outside human reality waiting to be found on a seashore
9 rather than engaging with the undulating and oscillating lived human realities from which
10 facts form. Under this authoritarian regime of “expertise,” ethnography appears to be
11 irrelevant – transformed from an assertion to an anecdote, or even a mere asterisk, that
12 obliquely supports already known “facts.” The neoliberal transformation of universities has
13 reinforced this mutation of ethnography. Even within the discipline, some anthropologists
14 engage in theorizing and philosophizing over “facts” rather than using their field-based
15 experiences to produce their own anthropological knowledge.

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Ethnography, however, begins from the position that one is not “authorized” or
“expert” within the worlds of the people with whom the ethnographer works. Just because I
had “expert” baseball knowledge and skills did not mean that I had the requisite knowledge
of baseball as it exists in Cubans’ world. My knowledge of baseball reconstituted as I
experienced Cuban diamonds and stadia. I had to learn the Cuban way of baseball and
through that process, gain an incomplete understanding of what it means to be Cuban (Carter
2008, pp. 159-182). My knowledge garnered from my fieldwork in the 1990s mutated with
subsequent fieldwork in the 2000s and in the 2010s precisely because Cubans’
epistemological worlds were changing as well. My insistence on long-term study forces me
to acknowledge the situatedness of my work. My knowledge as a former player, a white man,
and an American citizen all influenced my interactions with everyone there. My position in
Cuba was ambiguous since most of the people with whom I worked knew only two kinds of

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3 foreigners: tourists and journalists. Tourists would disappear after a week or two. I did not
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5 disappear, ergo I was a journalist as far as they were concerned, even to those to whom I
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7 repeatedly explained what my research was about. Further, the seasons I spent in Cuba were
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9 at a time of extreme uncertainty. The political and economic situation was extremely
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11 precarious. Another ethnographer studying Cuban baseball today would encounter very
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13 different scenes in the stands, on the streets, and very different arguments with fans. Of
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15 course, different interlocutors will have different perspectives on the same practice even if
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17 approached on the same day and in the same location. The diversity of experiences,
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19 interpretations, and continuously changing and shifting ethnographer-participant relations are
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21 what constitute ethnography. Because ethnographic knowledge is situated, my own
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23 knowledge of Cuba must evolve as well. Not everything I learned in the 1990s is still
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25 accurate or even real today. The best ballplayers no longer play in Cuba; they play in the US
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27 despite the near-impossibility of legally migrating directly there from Cuba. Our knowledge
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29 is situated in specific moments in time and space from specific positions in the field --
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34 baseball and ethnographic (Carter, 2011a).

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36 This is how ethnography works. Ethnographic knowledge reconstitutes itself over
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38 time. It floats lightly across the surface of people's worlds while probing humanity's depths
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40 and, in so doing, offers, not just a different perspective but a more fluid mode of knowing the
41
42 world. By its very nature, ethnography challenges forms of "expertise" precisely because
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44 "expert knowledges" close down questioning and erase other possibilities. Ethnographic
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46 inquiry repeatedly demonstrates that the "facts" or "data" are not waiting to be discovered
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48 and recorded. They are fictions in the sense that that knowledge is "something made" or "
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50 'fashioned;' not as if they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments" (Geertz
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52 1973, p. 15-16). Ethnographies are crafted and the materials used and in what combinations –
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55 how they are "made up"– are of vital importance.
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3 This does not mean that ethnographic data is not empirical. If anything, the open
4
5 questioning of the “facts” and their active construction by the researcher is an important
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7 aspect of any study. Anthropologists have long insisted that the very “object” of knowledge
8
9 changes depending on which and whether a statistical relation or a social system of relations
10
11 is privileged (Westbrook, 2008, p. 103). Similarly, the disciplinary training of the
12
13 ethnographer affects the kind of ethnography produced. This is hardly surprising given that
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15 each discipline approaches the ethnographic subject from different ontological perspectives.
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19 To illustrate, consider three widely acclaimed ethnographies on the marginalized,
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21 urban poor conducted in Philadelphia (Goffman, 2014), Chicago (Venkatesh, 2008), and in
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23 New York (Bourgois, 1996). Each ethnographer’s ethnicity, gender, discipline, and
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25 nationality differs from the other two, yet all three (re)produce the same tropes despite their
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27 ethnographies’ geographic and temporal differences. Nonetheless, the disciplinary ontology
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29 produces subtly different kinds of ethnographic knowledge. The sociologists, Goffman and
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31 Venkatesh, focus more on the determinant social structures of family, police, community, and
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33 gang shaping their interlocutors’ lives. Police and law enforcement encounters fuels
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35 Goffman’s classificatory account of “clean” and “dirty” lives, therein reinforcing her
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37 collaborators’ inability to transcend the forces shaping their lives. Venkatesh recounts how
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39 gang-life and organizational structure mirrors the corporate world, even taking on the role of
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41 “CEO” by becoming a gang leader for one day. The two inadvertently reify the structural
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43 conditions of their marginalized subjects rather than demonstrate how residents’ build their
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45 own lives and situated knowledges as Bourgois does in his ethnography on how the dealers
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47 and users of East Harlem make their lives and worlds in spite of, rather than because of, the
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49 oppressive institutionalized domination that marginalizes these urban populations: For
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51 Bourgois, the police are there offstage whereas they are active characters in Goffman and
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53 Ventakesh’s ethnographies.
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3 These three ethnographies make it abundantly apparent that ethnography captures the
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5 contradictions found in the vagaries of impersonal power that shapes individuals' everyday
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7 lives. They all challenge the dominant neoliberal political orthodoxy about individual self-
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9 responsibility within a "free market" through their implicit comparison of "white middle-
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11 class Americans" whose lives in the formal economy are as different from these marginalized
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13 Americans as the lives of Trobriand islanders are to European ethnographers. "No good
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15 ethnography is self-contained. Implicitly or explicitly ethnography is an act of comparison"
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17 (Sahlins, 1993, p.10). Ethnography is inherently comparative but the kinds of comparison an
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19 ethnography makes depends on one's disciplinary training.
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23 All social science disciplinary forms of knowledge include what human beings do as
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25 part of their endeavors but only anthropology places homo sapiens as its explicit object of
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27 enquiry and its principal emphasis on the myriad ways we become human beings.
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29 Ethnographies on the same subject will differ depending on the ontological base of the study.
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31 This broader, more holistic approach distinguishes anthropological ethnography from other
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33 forms of ethnography even as the relationship between ethnography and anthropology has
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35 become increasingly problematic. The assertion that "ethnography is anthropology or it is
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37 nothing" (Sahlins, 1993, p. 10) no longer holds water. But "if ethnography is not a means to
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39 an end in anthropology, then neither is anthropology the servant of ethnography" (Ingold,
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41 2008, p. 88). For ethnography is recursive: ethnography's contents change through the
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43 contexts in which that research is conducted. Our misapprehensions and misunderstandings
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45 inform our investigative tools and disciplinary compass so we can generate the possibility of
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47 new concepts by bringing previously unrelated ones into relationships that mutually modify
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49 the meanings of the concepts involved (Holbraad, 2012, pp. 252-3).
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53 That ethnography and anthropology are not symbiotically beholden to one another is
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55 hardly a surprise to anyone outside anthropology. Ethnography today is just as likely to be
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3 claimed as a practice in art and design studios, by education professionals, or by health
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5 practitioners as it is by anthropologists. However ethnography is practiced, that practice is a
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7 craft and to be a craftsperson represents the condition of being engaged (Sennet, 2009, p. 20).
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9 Like all crafts, ethnography requires long, skillful practice, and all skills begin, if not
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11 continue, as bodily practices. It is through these bodily practices in the field that the technical
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13 understanding of ethnography develops. While individual skills (i.e. methods) can be taught
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15 and trained, it is through their combined implementation in a specific context-laden field that
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17 ethnographic craft begins to germinate. Ethnography is not a rote-training program of steps or
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19 sequential skills developed but a honing of field-based investigative skills practiced on a
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21 regular basis in specific contexts. These skills, of course, can be learned by anyone. The craft
22
23 of ethnography, however, depends on the nature of fieldwork and the disciplinary framing of
24
25 one's epistemological practices. These differences are what lead to distinct notions of
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27 ethnographic research and writing: i.e., ethnographic sensibilities.
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34 **Ethnographic Sensibilities**

36 One reason why the relationship between anthropology and ethnography has become strained
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38 in recent decades is that what is meant by fieldwork has undergone major transformations.
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40 From anthropology's very beginnings, the constitution of fieldwork was a central question
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42 (Barth et al, 2005; Stocking, 1981). The Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski
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44 invented what now is recognized as the basic tenets and practices of ethnography, insisting
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46 that one must get off the verandah, live amongst the people being studied, interact with them
47
48 in their own language, and concentrate on the everyday minutiae of their lives (1961[1922],
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50 pp. 2-25). This logic privileges direct observation conducted in a remote site, a notion that –
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52 along with the colonially veiled constitution of civilized and savage– constructs the
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54 archetypical fieldworker as a Euro-American, white, middle-class man. Fieldwork thus
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3 became synonymous with a heroic quest into Others' territory, a trope that engendered and
4 cemented Malinowski's mythopoetic charter of modern ethnography (Stocking, 1992; cf.
5 Clifford, 1988).
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10 Ethnography, of course, changed throughout the twentieth century as paradigmatic
11 shifts occurred throughout the social sciences, including anthropology. These shifts occurred
12 because of the global shifts in power and our interlocutors' growing resistance to the
13 traditional forms of fieldwork. Ethnographers can no longer assume that they are free to enter
14 (and leave) people's lives as they please. Of course, this shift occurred not only because of
15 anthropology's self-critique, but because the people with whom we work have been pushing
16 back now for decades. Nor is ethnography tied to a singular geographic location. With the
17 advent of multi-sited ethnography associated with the analysis of global flows, of digital
18 ethnography and of the ethnography of online social media, "being in the field" is no longer a
19 sense of embodied co-presence but a recognition that spatial proximity is not a requirement
20 for meaningful human relationships. How humans relate to their surroundings and build their
21 relationships are a central part of their worlds. Recent, powerfully evocative anthropological
22 ethnographies detail these relations that exist without shared physical spaces, or even material
23 bodies (Boellstorff, 2008; Coleman, 2015) for that matter, making it apparent that the
24 relations that make any one of us human may not be comprised of intensive face-to-face
25 interactions bounded within a singular unit but an unbounded kaleidoscopic mosaic of
26 relationships that forms a Self.
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47 During the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the unit of analysis in
48 anthropology was a "culture" that existed as a discrete, whole universe. In the past few
49 decades, however, anthropological sensibilities evolved considerably from the study of "a
50 culture" to a form of cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer, 1986), of engagement or
51 encounter (Marcus, 1998), or of design (Rabinow et al, 2008). Anthropologists debated
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3 whether the concept of culture was even useful (Fox and King, 2002; Ortner, 1999). In the
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5 twenty-first century, anthropologists have taken the concept of culture in new directions.
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7 Recent ethnographies conceptualize culture through imaginaries (García Canclini, 2014),
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9 intersubjectivities (Kohn, 2013) assemblages (Ong and Collier, 2004), and as emergence
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11 (Tsing, 2015). Additionally, some ethnographically-based metaphysical introspection on
12
13 culture has challenged the previously taken-for-granted division between nature and culture
14
15 leading to a wide ranging debate as to how to conceptualize culture when it becomes the
16
17 constant and nature is relativistic (Viveiros de Castro, 2015; cf. Piña-Cabral, 2015) even as
18
19 others debated whether culture is the equivalent of ontology (Carrithers et al. 2008). While
20
21 these debates remain unresolved, ironically, culture is no longer the unquestioned ontological
22
23 object of the discipline even as it became an increasingly important object in other
24
25 disciplines. Thus, anthropology's continuing uncertainties surrounding its central ontological
26
27 object of enquiry also leads to methodological quandaries. These disciplinary self-
28
29 flagellations continue as anthropology evolves and central to these disciplinary worries is the
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31 nature of ethnography and how it shapes the production of anthropological knowledge.
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36 Amongst these worries about ethnography's (per)mutations are the changing
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38 conceptions of fields and conducting fieldwork. It has long been customary to divide
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40 ethnography into three distinct practices: that of observation, description, and comparison.
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42 These operations, however, are not discrete stages but intertwined activities that are not
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44 readily separable. One cannot say easily where, when or how one ends and the other begins.
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46 Furthermore, in anthropology, these distinctions were based on spatial distinctions – “going
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48 to”, “being in”, and “returning from” the field –that shaped field practices, making
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50 ethnography akin to that mythopoetic quest identified earlier. But a spatial circumscription of
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52 the field is no longer tenable. This spatial determinism was dismantled in anthropology
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54 twenty years ago (Amit, 2000; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). The rise of globalization,
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3 transnationalism, and other macroscale processes linking discontinuous localities forced a
4 reconsideration of anthropology's core practices. Now, it is best if the field is conceptualized
5 as a confluence of various forces enmeshing the ethnographic object of enquiry (Carter,
6 2011a; Marcus. 1998). My presence in that boat was my early recognition that the spatial
7 solidity of Cuba was my own misapprehension of the field. Cuba floats on currents that alter
8 its composition (Carter 2008, p. 36). It does not end where land meets sea. That sea excursion
9 captured a small sense of what trafficked athletes felt as they try to leave the country
10 clandestinely (Carter 2011b, p. 152-179). By going to sea for a few hours in this manner, my
11 own tense nervousness, heightened precariousness, and acute vulnerability transformed my
12 understandings about Cuban baseball, Cubans, Cuba, and how to do ethnography.
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25 An alternative approach shifts the focus onto fieldwork's temporalities despite
26 endemic temporal distancing in early anthropological ethnography (Fabian, 1983). Time
27 remains a challenge in terms of fieldwork. "The ethical profile of the good anthropologist
28 yields no methodological a priori concerning the appropriate duration of a project. Everything
29 hinges on the terms and conditions of the question of research itself" (Faubion 2009, p. 163).
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31 The critical practice of anthropological fieldwork is typically long, often meandering,
32 inescapably social, and temporally situated. It demands a critical social awareness that
33 multiple, different temporalities might be at play simultaneously (Malkki 2007, p. 177).
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3 multiply variable objects and fields. The irony is that anthropologists do not become known
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5 for being good fieldworkers but occasionally do become recognized for being good
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7 ethnographers.
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10 The simple realization that a good fieldworker is not *ipso facto* a good ethnographer
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12 raises a second aspect of anthropological unease with ethnography's travels. Ethnography
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14 mutates as it crosses disciplinary boundaries because each discipline has its own a priori
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16 ontological object, whether that object is "society" (sociology), "health" (medicine), "space"
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18 (geography), "mind" (psychology) or "culture" and "subculture" found in a range of
19
20 interdisciplinary fields (cultural studies, sport studies, media studies, leisure studies and so
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22 forth), underpinning the ethnographer's default position. These different ontological
23
24 certainties are not, in and of themselves, a problem. However, the move towards ethnography
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26 as critique, encounter, or design thins the resonant depths of ethnography as knowledge. The
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28 conflation of methods and methodology in particular makes the thinning of ethnography
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30 worrisome.
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33 34 35 36 **Ethnographic (Per)Mutations**

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38 Within anthropology there is no such thing as "ethnographic methods." Ethnography is not a
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40 set of formal procedural means designed to satisfy the ends of inquiry. Ethnography has a
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42 particular philosophical stance towards phenomena, including taking a particular disposition
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44 towards the world and thus asking certain kinds of questions about phenomena, produces its
45
46 own knowledge, and disseminates that knowledge in specific forms of exposition.
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49 Ethnographers make use of a range of methods: participant observation, interviews, film,
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51 audio recordings, printed materials, social media, and more. Thus, ethnography is a
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53 methodology – that is, a specific way of doing research and producing knowledge about our
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55 world in which the researcher engages with the limits of one's own knowledge.
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3 The question of whether an ethnographer can truly be a good ethnographer if one
4 transgressed certain boundaries was an ongoing concern in twentieth-century anthropology:
5 first as a worry about “going native” and then whether a “native anthropologist” could
6 maintain “objective” or “critical” distance because of one’s personal life history. Such
7 concerns over the positionality and voice of “native” ethnographers are misguided and
8 misplaced (Narayan, 1993; Jacobs-Huey, 2002). By the logic of this solipsistic
9 categorization, I was a native ethnographer of baseball given that I had spent my entire life
10 engaged in the practice prior to conducting my fieldwork on the topic yet I was obviously not
11 a Cuban. Of course, my lifetime’s experience of baseball necessitated a critical reflexive
12 engagement of my own embodied knowledge compared with how Cubans understood the
13 same physical acts involved in playing the sport but that in no way meant I could not do so.
14 The motions may have looked the same. I knew what to do but not necessarily why to do it in
15 a certain way. I could not presume the emotions and meanings of those physical acts were
16 what I “knew” they were “supposed” to feel and mean. Ideally, an ethnographer will have
17 some working knowledge of the practices and processes being investigated; however, even
18 with a degree of expertise, there can be no presumption that the ethnographer knows how
19 others embody skills and knowledge.
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40 Similarly, one cannot be assured of one’s competence as an ethnographer, never mind
41 as a fieldworker, simply by mastering a known set of methods despite the various methods
42 textbooks on ethnography. The vast array of field methods -- from interviews and
43 observation, to life histories, mapmaking, photography, archival work, and myriads more --
44 are all possible techniques in open, flexible, time-dependent, context-dependent possibilities.
45 Many ethnographers also need to develop specific physical skills that do not necessarily
46 transfer from one field context to another. For example, fieldwork I conducted in Cuba
47 during the 1990s relied upon my skills and knowledge that I had accumulated in my youth as
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3 a relatively skilled baseball player. While that set of physical skills and bits of esoteric
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5 knowledge of baseball trivia served me well while studying the spectacle of Cuban baseball
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7 (Carter, 2008), the ability to pitch a baseball actually hindered me on the cricket pitch in
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9 Northern Ireland where I found the embodied skill of bowling (a different form of throwing
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11 than pitching) utterly impossible (Carter, 2003). These embodied practices require sensory as
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13 well as sensorimotor skills: one has to learn how to see, taste, and otherwise sense the world
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15 in the way the ethnographer's collaborators do (Pink, 2009; Stoller, 1989). Yet there are, to
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17 my knowledge, no dedicated training tools to learn to sense the world in a different lifeworld.
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19 The only means I know of is immersion in that lifeworld in which long-term, in-depth
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21 interactions are conducted in a way that permits collaboration between ethnographers and
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23 their consultants.
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28 The range of tools available to the ethnographer, therefore, cannot be a closed set of
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30 procedures. Ethnography's open-endedness is partly why it, especially anthropological
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32 ethnography, is so difficult to teach in a standardized manner from a textbook. Generally,
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34 anthropologists have avoided attempting to write any such manual. The widely respected
35
36 manuals used outside anthropology to instruct "how to do ethnography" are barely touched
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38 within the discipline because of the anthropological sensibility that ethnography is not a set
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40 of standard or universally applicable methods.
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44 Of course, anthropology has its methods, but ethnography is not one of them:
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46 ethnography is a methodology. The idea of an "ethnographic method" is a transdisciplinary
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48 mutation invoked when something else is meant entirely. The emergence of this term appears
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50 to be a part of the transdisciplinary discussions around "mixed methods" that treat
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52 ethnography as one of several means of gathering data, again as if ethnography was reducible
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54 to a form of gathering information. In this vein, "ethnographic methods" is often conflated
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56 with a combination of participant observation and interviews. Observation, participant
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3 observation, and interviews are methods and these can be mixed in a range of combinations,
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5 but that mixture is not the equivalent of ethnography. These and all of the other research
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7 methods deployed in ethnography are used in other forms of field research. None of the
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9 methods used to produce ethnography are unique to ethnography, make ethnography distinct,
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11 nor make an ethnography. One can use any or all of these tools without actually conducting
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13 ethnography. “Nothing has been more damaging to ethnography than its representation under
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15 the guise of ‘ethnographic method’” (Ingold, 2008, p. 88). There is insufficient space to
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17 conduct an archaeological exercise into when and how ethnography came to be considered
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19 one qualitative method among many, though I suspect that the traversing of disciplinary
20
21 boundaries plays a significant factor in such a conceptual shift from methodology to method.
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25 Part of the challenges found in ethnography’s mutations are due to the already
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27 established notions of fieldwork in other disciplines. Ethnographic fieldwork differs from
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29 other forms of fieldwork because the researcher cannot know in advance how to do it and
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31 what will be found because of the open-ended nature of ethnographic enquiry. In
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33 anthropology, this is especially acute, given that anthropology’s focal point is the ways in
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35 which people actually live their lives in their specific lifeworlds. Most often, an ethnographer
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37 attempts to provide what it might be like to experience the world in other terms of reference,
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39 through other sensibilities, to be shaped by different emotional frameworks, and to live by
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41 different logics of being. In effect, ethnographers attempt to make the strange familiar and the
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43 familiar strange. Those worlds are, more often than not, alien worlds unfamiliar to the
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45 aspiring ethnographer. Even when there is a long personal history with the ethnographic
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47 subject, the ethnographer’s critical positionality allows the exploration of the conundrums,
48
49 contradictions, and ironies of contemporary lives. The conscious distancing of one’s own
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51 critical practice ensures that what would otherwise just be considered “normal” is reflexively
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53 poked, prodded, and probed. The notion of a “native” ethnographer is moot, for each
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3 ethnographer will bring their own sets of knowledges to the field. It is what the ethnographer
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5 does with one's own knowledge that matters. One either does ethnography or one does not.
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8 There is no middle way.
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10 11 **Conclusion: Ethnographic Currents** 12

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14 To engage well in ethnography is to recognize how a singular phenomenon opens up the
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16 deeper one delves into it. There is an unfolding rather an encompassment of the ethnographic
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18 object by the world. Ethnography remains central to anthropological practice because it is
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20 still the best way to capture the diversity of human life in all its magnificence while also
21
22 stripping away the deceptions people impose on themselves and others. It allows us to find
23
24 our ways when we are sailing in the dark.
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28 This article began with me being all at sea, uncertain about my very existence,
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30 realizing that I knew very little about my immediate world including where in that world I
31
32 was. It was alien, frightening, and nerve wracking and essentially captures the feelings of
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34 conducting ethnography precisely because the manner in which one conducts ethnography
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36 requires an awareness of the ways in which one does and does not understand the world.
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38 Working in an interdisciplinary department reinforces my own experience of how
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40 ethnographic currents travel across disciplines, with certain aspects staying afloat while
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42 others are jettisoned into inky depths as scholars from a range of disciplines claim
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44 ethnography as their own. Different disciplines possess very different sensibilities and
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46 ontological objects and these clearly affect the kinds of ethnography that can be conducted
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48 and the forms of ethnographic knowledge that can be produced. The anthropological
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50 ethnographer attempts to understand how humans, in contemporary circumstances, construct
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52 worlds that allow them to function, and what their practices might mean for the rest of us.
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55 How we choose to engage and deal with our world, the currents of meaning we make out of
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3 what happens to us and what we do to each other to enact our world, should be the focus of
4 ethnographic enquiry. Because the world itself is continuously evolving and changing, so too
5 must ethnography.
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10 This article mirrors the very incompleteness of ethnography. Ethnography continues
11 to change in its conception and practice. Fieldwork is losing its spatial parameters, the
12 ethnographic object of enquiry can only ever be engaged in a partial manner, and
13 ethnographic knowledge can only ever be incomplete. These conditions are hardly
14 weaknesses of ethnographic knowledge. Ethnography's choppiness – its discomfiting
15 sensations of uncertainty and its only ever partial knowledge – is what makes it compelling.
16
17 Many of the points raised here may feel incomplete, partial, and like there are no final,
18 definitive answers, which so happens to be exactly what ethnography should feel like: raising
19 uncertainties in our certitudes. My stomach still churns every time I return to Cuba.
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30 The helmsman restarts the engine on the second pull after flicking his cigarette into
31 the water. Its acrid smoke clings to us as he turns the prow toward a darker blotch of
32 blackness. I've learned how disorienting being at sea with no lights can be but I really
33 haven't captured what the sense of risking one's life in such a manner must be like, which
34 was the reason I persisted with my *socios* to introduce me to Cubans who could take me out
35 to sea. In hindsight, putting out to sea in that context was a damn foolish risk to take. I was
36 the instigator, I fashioned the circumstances by searching out those two sailors through my
37 *socios*' networks. They did not have to help me but without their help I never would have met
38 those two sailors. And those two men did not have to accept my overtures to do something
39 that many of my *socios* considered to be the height of lunacy. We all took risks – differently
40 loaded and (mis)understood – based on our individual knowledge and judgements. My
41 knowledge of being at sea in darkness is inchoate, incomplete and inconclusive. The ways in
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3 which human beings deal with ambiguities, uncertainties, and unknowns that inform life is
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5 what makes ethnography so powerful and important.
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For Peer Review

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