

Notes on the Contemporary Imperative to Collaborate, the Traditional Aesthetics of Fieldwork That Will Not Be Denied, and the Need for Pedagogical Experiment in the Transformation of Anthropology's Signature Method

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This collection of notes, propositional in form, and all, of course, debate-able, is a preparatory step to a more formal essay that attempts an account of a major transition occurring in anthropology's signature fieldwork-ethnography tradition embedded in the habits and learned aesthetics of its professional culture. Leaving aside here the question of how this transition came to be in anthropology's recent history, I am more interested in the current challenges that the ecology of designing and implementing ethnographic research today presents to the still powerful culture of method in anthropology, especially as it is manifested in the production of apprentice research by anthropologists in the making. These notes will help me to see, I hope, how distinct pieces of the story need to be put in narrative relation to one another.

In terms of previous writing, these notes represent a further meditation upon the emergence of multi-sited ethnography, beyond the understanding of it through the 'following' metaphor that I introduced in the 1990s. Now more than then, I perceive powerful pressures that challenge the viability and ambitions of ethnographic research in its mythic scenes of Malinowskian or Boasian encounter, however revised by 1980s critiques, and beyond certain limiting scripts for it through which it still thrives. It is on its frontiers or edges of contemporary application (for which research in realms of technoscience and society, among other kinds of expert knowledge forms, has been a crucible of applied experiment), in which ethnographers redefine the time-space and practical boundaries of their projects in multiple theaters of reception, that basic questions of scale, function, purpose, and ethics are being asked anew. Ethnographic writing and the reading of ethnographic texts, as in the 1980s, remain important perspectives here, but the production of research itself within its professional culture, behind these still traditional forms, and not limited by conventional thinking about method within tales and procedures of fieldwork is where the theoretical action is now, so to speak.

The present challenge to the pursuit of the low tech phenomenology of ethnography--face-to-face-- to which anthropologists remain committed, within the ecology of changing scales and forms of inquiry, driven by technology, and the idiomatic response it seems to be eliciting in the name of collaboration is perhaps where to begin.

I. Collaboration

The spectral figure of fieldwork as collaboration has long haunted the overwhelmingly individualist conventions of producing ethnography. From time to time, the exposure of the repressed or suppressed collaborative relations of fieldwork have served the purposes of critique (as in the 1980s) or the effort to make fieldwork normatively collaborative in the highly politicized terrain of social movements among the peoples who have been anthropology's traditional subjects.

And there has been a long, but intermittent history of collaborative research in anthropology in its own self-organization and in its joining interdisciplinary projects, corresponding to periods of expansion, optimism, and the availability of resources in the development of university disciplines (famously, for example, the Torres Strait, and the Chiapas project; infamously, the Neel/Michigan studies of the Yanomami).

In the context of the history of fieldwork, it has been primarily ethical concern that has driven the motivation to encourage an explicit, normative modality of fieldwork as collaboration. In the context of the history of anthropology as an institution, it has been primarily disciplinary ambition and sometimes intellectual excitement in the making and breaking of reigning paradigms that has driven collaboration in the past.

But, today, I believe that the clear salience of a norm encouraging collaboration in anthropology has a different generic source and a different expression than in the past. The dominant form of collaboration of the present era is the technology driven collaboratory (wikipedia: "an environment where participants make use of computing and communication technologies to access shared instruments and data, as well as to communicate with others"). Collaboratories have dramatically encouraged the adoption and experiment with forms of collaborations within the traditions and cultures of inquiry across many disciplines and in the way that universities are restructuring themselves, and in some, like anthropology, however positively collaboration was valorized in the past, the current tendency, originating in efforts to organize knowledge making within the oceanic realm of connectivity, is experienced as pressure, as imperative to which the reaction, while it might be creative, is also anxious, sometimes defensive.

The aesthetics of research practice are deep within and constitutive of the professional culture of anthropology, which as I will address is strongest in apprentice pedagogy and in the norms of receiving results of research, together still holding the powerful professional culture of ethnography in place within its traditions, and they will not be denied, under current pressures and imperatives. While deserving a complex treatment, these aesthetics are individualist, face-to-face in nature, as in the mythic scene of Malinowskian, and more lately Geertzian encounter. The creative, experimental question at the moment is not (or not yet) how are these aesthetics to be overcome, but how are they to be adapted to equally powerful pressures to produce ethnographic knowledge within the terrain and ecology of collaboratories.

The problem for ethnography in assimilating collaborative strategies and norms of research practice, finally, is not so much to preserve doctrinally the individualism it entails (that is the preservation of individual performance, expressions, and rewards of inquiry), by

providing a cocoon or a protective mimicry for it in the current environment, to make it pass like a form of the 'native' emergent collaboratories today, but to preserve what is very valuable and precious of an older, simpler technology of knowing that the individualist aesthetic of ethnography entails even in its new environments of collaborative and distributed knowledge forms, organized in oceanic cyber-space, which it engages in closely observed conventional sites, in laboratories, in board rooms, in villages, and other existential locations. So experimental collaborative strategies of ethnography now in anthropology arise not so much from its history of ethical concern for the other, so to speak, but from new ecologies and scales of research which challenge anthropologists to produce the scene of fieldwork and its aesthetics within and across scales that are now hyperorganizing as collaboratories, that are imbued with 'the vision thing', imaginaries of practice that are conceived in emergence. And it seems to be the job of a wide swath of social/cultural anthropological research today to work through these 'native points of view'—to evoke the old interpretative object of ethnography— as imaginaries of anticipation and possibility found within the collaboratories, or assemblages, of institutional and other sorts of actors in the contemporary.

The emergence of forms and norms of collaboration in ethnographic method today, alongside and operating within its complex objects of study—themselves collaboratories—would function as cocoons or incubators of concepts, ideas, shared with subjects, which serve to rescale and slow them down, and modulate them to the tempo at which anthropologists have traditionally done their work. Anthropological collaboration of this sort would create a belated, but relevant form of ethnographic knowledge in relation to the scale and pace of its contemporary objects and contexts of study.

So there are two functions of collaboration now in the reinvention of anthropological ethnography—one is to create the conditions within the bounds of research projects to generate the kind of results that ethnography has traditionally contributed and valued—perhaps conceived as concept work that requires a space and tempo that slow things down. Collaboration thus creates the opportunity for the process that is distinctive of ethnography. (A treatise would now be required to describe systematically what would actually happen to the tropes, habits, and aesthetics of the anthropological tradition of research thus preserved. This treatise should be pedagogical in nature as I will argue, since this is where method is most at stake in anthropology today).

The other function is to create an adapted identity and space for ethnographic projects to operate in the collaboratory arrangements of others as subjects. The individual fieldworker in these complex spaces is increasingly an alien, uneasy presence for which mere affiliation with a disciplinary or professional community/collective is not a sufficient surrogate for belonging to a collaborative research effort of varying scale. Collaborations built into ethnographic research provide identity and space in topological terms to relate the human-scale of ethnography, to which its aesthetics of method remains committed, to the complex scales of collaboration in which it must define its own objects and boundaries.

So collaboration can be in any ethnographic project an ambiguous process. On the one hand, it is a proffer to subjects to create the classic conditions of fieldwork; on the other

hand, it is a proffer to colleagues to produce collective work. I want to pursue this ambiguity by briefly referring to my understanding thus far of a notable current effort to innovate an anthropological scale research collaboratory : the ARC (The Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory) , based at UC Berkeley.

I have been privileged to follow the evolution of this project and to have conversations with its principals. Its development thus far is worth a full account as a case study in the reinvention of anthropological research aesthetics, but here I want to contemplate it in relation to the differing approaches to collaboration that it more generally illustrates.

ARC has two primary identities interestingly integrated and managed. Initiated by Paul Rabinow and his former students, it is both a project that does research on biosecurity—its contemporary modalities, paradigms, and institutions—and seeks to experiment and design new forms and norms of inquiry with roots in anthropology, but as informed by the broad transformation in theory and practice during the 1980s and 1990s that characterized academic disciplines concerned with the study of culture. On the one hand, it has produced a collaborative form that seems of the conventional social scientific sort generated by an ecology of expectations, determined by sources of funding, and the institutional cultures of expertise and science with which ARC interacts—in this sense, and in a formal way, it has ‘gone native’. On the other hand, in its collegial intimacies, through the research that it has proposed to do, and understanding the moving ground of older methods, it has the ambition of innovating practices of once ethnographic inquiry by viewing its research tasks as experiments in this regard. The ARCists are second order observers of their own research functions.

This can result in a dizzying complexity if it were not for the natural logic of group process—decisions to go one way rather than another, to determine emphases. In my outsider’s observation and interest in this process thus far, I am fascinated by two models of collaboration which ARC suggests, that I can only sketch here, each of which poses a way that the development of collaboration within the current professional culture of anthropological ethnography might go.

A key question here is the conceivably variable role of the individualist project of ethnographic research, as the component or modality of the ARC that evolves collaboratively. By one model, let’s say, the science version of ARC, (and the one that I think it actually favors), the principals develop an increasingly coherent perspective on particular topics; they process fieldwork as data for their own concept work—collaborative artifice and innovation is concentrated in the work of the principals. The collaboration within the scene of fieldwork—traditionally repressed and underdeveloped—while recognized is clearly subordinated, as an object of experiment, to the collaboration of the principals in their concept work. The creation of knowledge in the scene of fieldwork itself—partial to the traditional mythos of fieldwork—is displaced for innovations in collegial collaboration. This is a true diminution of the individualist project and its ideologies.

By the other model, let's say the avant-gardist one of experimentation, the accent is on the found collaborations in fieldwork investigation, making something of the long repressed collaborative basis for developing ethnography in the field. It is closer to the longstanding ideologies of fieldwork with the individualism diminished in favor of developing the collaborative impulse always there, but now not out of ethical concern, but from the conditions that constitute the subjects and objects of ethnography today.

In this version, the ARC finds and assimilates diverse projects of ethnography, already going on out there, with speculation and surprise; it is porous to the collaborative forms and norms being innovated in fieldwork and its own collegial collaborations are driven and stimulated by this. It sacrifices precision and analytic power in results for constantly pushing the categorical boundaries of biosecurity paradigms. It remains a bit of the outlaw in these paradigms, as anthropology has traditionally preferred to be as part of its aesthetic. In the science model, the work becomes more refined as it expands—there is increasingly better control of the conceptual apparatus rather than openness to inclusion of diverse topics, and research on its peripheries. Participation in working on, changing the major paradigms of biosecurity matters more than critique from the margins.

Now ARC has both of these collaborative styles within it, and as such it is one prototype for how the reform of method out of anthropology might be grown. But ARC in its experimental ethos is more than a research project that inventively engages the imperative of collaboration within the sensibilities of the anthropological tradition of ethnography. It also has pedagogical intent, moving toward becoming a design studio of sorts for rethinking and altering the norms and forms of dissertation training and production in anthropology. I actually believe these changes are occurring on a widespread basis, but more circumstantially and by negotiating older models and the conditions of fieldwork than by articulation, design, and rethinking what fieldwork becomes in a broader sense of the research terrain. This is precisely what discussions of collaboration—its meanings, ideologies, present forms—precipitate. So now I want to consider the question of apprentice pedagogy in becoming an anthropologist and its strategic importance as a site for considering the rearticulation of the norms and forms of ethnographic research.

II. Pedagogy

Classic anthropological ethnography, especially in its development in the apprentice project/dissertation form, was designed to provide answers, or at least data, to questions that anthropology had for it. Nowadays, anthropology itself does not pose these questions. Other domains of discussion and analysis do—some academic or interdisciplinary in the conventional sense; others not—and thus it is a contemporary burden of projects of anthropological research—and especially apprentice ones—to identify these question asking domains—domains of reception for particular projects of research -- as part of learning the techniques of research itself. In this development, the function of the research project is not simply descriptive-analytic, to provide a contribution to an archive or debate that has been constructed by the discipline—it hasn't. At best contemporary anthropology provides a license and an authority to engage, not a reception itself. No wonder then the current

dominant impulse and fashion at the core of the discipline to call for a public anthropology—it remains to think through what this means beyond doing good. In this license, the function of ethnographic research out of anthropology becomes a mediation in some sense; it sutures communities and contexts together in addressing those communities, in presenting its results in constructed contexts of collaboration as a key issue in the increasingly broader design of research beyond mere fieldwork.

Indeed students are pursuing questions that fieldwork itself in its conventional aesthetics can't answer. And it is in the process of apprentice research—in dissertation making—that an anthropologist is most subject to these aesthetics and regulative ideals of research practice as they are imposed, not by rules of method, but by the profound and redundantly instilled psychodynamics of professional culture. Here the process on its own is not at all stuck, but in transition. What is missing is an articulation of these changes—and talking of the observable vulnerabilities of the old practices as a way to systematically formulate alternatives and modifications (e.g., the reading of ethnographies does not so much serve in any straightforward way, as it once did, of teaching method—exemplars to follow or moves to try out—as collections of 'symptoms' that provide clues to alternative pedagogical strategies. So ethnographies no longer reflect the classic fieldwork situation, but rather the broader topology of research, encompassing classic fieldwork, that requires a more complex notion like design).

This is where anthropological models of collaboration, discussed earlier as a contemporary imperative and condition of inquiry across disciplines, could make a considerable difference. They immediately suggest a broader frame for constructing research than that which is focused on the norms for preparing for and conducting conventional fieldwork and then reporting on it in a dissertation. At present, as a halfway measure, what prevails is a renewed experimental ethos for the conduct of ethnographic research which makes a virtue of the contingencies deep within its traditional aesthetics, and which works very well for the exceptional talents who enter anthropological careers by embracing this experimental ethos.⁽¹⁾ In producing standard work, however, the experimental ethos serves far less well—it produces more often rhetorically driven repetitive versions of singular arguments and insights. A fuller account is badly needed of what kinds of questions contemporary ethnography answers, with and in relation to whom, what results it might be expected to produce on the basis of what data. All of these very elementary questions are in urgent need of being addressed again with ingenuity and theoretical insight. There are a number of ways to produce such a reconsideration by looking ethnographically at current negotiations and compromises with the aesthetics of method in the course of dissertation projects as they unfold. At present, if one listens to student tales of fieldwork today, what transpires is far more complicated and interesting than expectations of fieldwork reporting allows for. To probe the collaborative dimensions of contemporary research, which the present ideological tendencies surrounding collaboration encourage anyhow, would generate informally and formally different accounts of fieldwork, leading to a much needed broadening of the pedagogical expectations of dissertation research.

I also want to conclude this section, as I did the first one, with the discussion of a particular example, this time referring to my own effort to implement a so-called para-site experiment in the pedagogy of graduate research, through the recently established Center for Ethnography at UCI.

I reproduce the Center's explanation of this experiment:

We invite graduate students engaged with ethnography at UCI and elsewhere to propose projects where the Center event can serve as a para-site within the design of specific research endeavors. This theme signals an experiment with method that is directed to the situation of apprentice ethnographers, and in turn stands for the Center's interest in graduate training and pedagogy as a strategic locus in which the entire research paradigm of ethnography is being reformed :

The Center As Para-site in Ethnographic Research Projects:

While the design and conduct of ethnographic research in anthropology is still largely individualistic, especially in the way that research is presented in the academy, many projects depend on complex relationships of partnership and collaboration, at several sites, and not just those narrowly conceived of as fieldwork. The binary here and there-ness of fieldwork is preserved in anthropology departments, despite the reality of fieldwork as movement in complex, unpredictable spatial and temporal frames. This is especially the case where ethnographers work at sites of knowledge production with others, who are patrons, partners, and subjects of research at the same time.

In the absence of formal norms of method covering these de facto and intellectually substantive relations of partnership and collaboration in many contemporary projects of fieldwork, we would like to encourage, where feasible, events in the Center that would blur the boundaries between the field site and the academic conference or seminar room. Might the seminar, conference, or workshop under the auspices of a Center event or program also be an integral, designed part of the fieldwork?--a hybrid between a research report, or reflection on research, and ethnographic research itself, in which events would be attended by a mix of participants from the academic community and from the community or network defined by fieldwork projects. We are terming this overlapping academic/fieldwork space in contemporary ethnographic projects a para-site.(*). It creates the space outside conventional notions of the field in fieldwork to enact and further certain relations of research essential to the intellectual or conceptual work that goes on inside such projects. It might focus on developing those relationships, which in our experience have always informally existed in many fieldwork projects, whereby the ethnographers finds subjects with whom he or she can test and develop ideas (these subjects have not been the classic key informants as such, but the found and often uncredited mentors or muses who correct mistakes, give advice, and pass on interpretations as they emerge).

We would like to sponsor and design Center events, workshops, mini-conferences, seminars, meetings simply-- that would further this dimension of fieldwork.

*The usage is inspired by the concept for the 8th volume of Late Editions, the fin de siècle series of annuals, edited by George E. Marcus through the 1990s: *Para-Sites: A Casebook Against Cynical Reason*, Late Editions 8, Cultural Studies for the End of the Century. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

The first event that represents such an experiment occurred on November 5. Jesse Cheng, an advanced graduate student, is studying a movement among activist lawyers to mitigate the death penalty in capital cases. A former practicing lawyer, Cheng is working with them and in other directions that their activities suggest to study the operations of the death penalty through the para-ethnographic, descriptive-analytic work that the mitigation lawyers produce in their advocacy. He conducts his own investigation through the forms of their investigation. This is the analogous space of the classic 'native point of view' but without a compass in traditional practices to do this kind of research that requires collaborative conceptual work to enable a project of anthropological ethnography.(2) This work needs a context, a space, a set of expectations and norms, better than the opportunistic conversations that occur in just 'hanging out'. The para-site experiment is intended to be a surrogate for these needs of contemporary research that are certainly anticipated in practice but still without norms and forms of method. It encourages addressing issues of design before a concept of design has reinvented the expectations of pedagogy in anthropological training. Undoubtedly, the para-site will take different shapes and participations between the field and the conference room in other dissertation projects. But in all cases, it is a response to the imperative to materialize collaborative forms in contemporary ethnographic research.

NOTES

(1) The influence of 'experiment' as a satisfying characterization of the present state of fieldwork challenged by its complex terrains is, for example, the resonance for some anthropologists in new terrains of Hans Jorg Rheinberger's formulation of 'the experimental system' with biochemical research in mind for their own research practices, on the hand, and on the other, some recent bon mots of Marilyn Strathern which are consistent with the spirit of Rheinberger and celebrate the resiliency of "plain old" ethnographic inquiry in the midst of very elaborate collaboratories.

Compare:

Rheinberger: Experimental systems are to be seen as the smallest integral working units of research. As such, they are systems of manipulation designed to give unknown answers to questions that the experimenters themselves are not yet clearly able to ask.

Strathern: Social anthropology has one trick up its sleeve: the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection..a participatory exercise which yields material for which analytical protocols are often devised after the

fact...ethnography allows one to recover the antecedents of future crises from material not collected for the purpose..to anticipate a future need to know something that cannot be defined in the present...

Personally, I find this a very appealing mystique for ethnography, and it COULD perhaps actually function in this way, but I think that the Strathern rendition of a Rheinberger like experimental virtue of ethnographic research is deeply flawed because the equivalent virtues of Rheinberger in ethnography seem to arise from the application of its time-tested aesthetics. From my perspective, they can only arise from the latter's revision. In this sense, collaboration is anthropology's experimental system and could be thought through as such.

(2) The following is the reaction I sent to the student who orchestrated the first para-site experiment, at UCI, Nov. 4, within his research. It deals with how (1) the form of paraethnographic engagement, that defines the basis of epistemic collaboration in contemporary fieldwork, might be located and clarified through the para-site surrogate for collaboration in the absence of explicit norms for it in the present state of training ethnography ; and (2) how such para-site needs a 'third' --a common object or a specific community of reception to address—like high minded debates about the death penalty—as the basis for the complicit solidarity on which collaboration might be created in contemporary contexts of research, full of causes and activist motivations:

Jesse,

That was a great event and sets a very high bar, appropriately, for the development of para-site experiments as a feature of the Center. Thanks so much for your skill, intelligence, and energy in making it happen. Also, what a group of fascinating people to make fieldwork out of.

Just a couple of personal notes:

for me, the key to exploring 'reflexive knowledge' ethnographically among expertises and 'projects' of various sorts in the world is to locate/discover where and how it is constituted paraethnographically, so to speak--to find a 'form' amidst practices. In our session, this moment materialized after lunch, when Russ revealed in response to my question that all of this elaborate research is built into the advocacy process as a front-loaded phenomenon in a situation of anticipation. And then at the end, Bill crucially associated this 'space' with the formulation of the nature of contemporary ethnography itself as anticipatory, in the bon mots of Strathern that he (and I) likes. So this is a space of both 'fact-finding" and the imaginary, depending upon the development of reflexive knowledge. The question remains of what the role of the ethnographer/ fieldworker is in this 'found' space of

para-ethnography. To describe it?, to analyze it ?, to partner with it? to encourage the development of it? to pass it on, represent it elsewhere by some sort of mediation...?

and this gets to some of the remarks of the final discussion about what the stakes for anthropology are in research like this--for its own project-- and not part of helping to strategize (epitomised by Roxanne's fortuitous performance)--and when anthropologists in collective work among themselves have no adequate reception for this research. Well, my current solution to this is that work in anthropology like yours has to be designed with a 'third' primary area of reception for ethnography in mind-- that is neither, the community of anthropologists who are not prepared to discuss such work deeply, nor the subjects themselves who have their own purposes and interests in developing your work with you. So what is 'third'-- well, I evoked high-minded, often high literati discourse on capital punishment that usually has no subtle knowledge of ethnographic objects/subjects (with the reflexive knowledge work that goes on inside them), but cumulatively is really important in effecting change. So ethnography in its production is inherently dialogic where the key partners to dialogue are often not just the 'natives'. This means the very conception and design of projects of ethnographic critique should incorporate a deeply understood (itself ethnographic in nature?) dimension of intended reception outside the scene and interests of fieldwork itself--another way to, or sense of, multi-sitedness? In this mode, the ethnographer sees the function of his work as mediation in a very specific politics or topology of knowledge that incorporates anticipated reception.

This second point is more for me than for you in my interest in remaking the norms and forms of pedagogy.

So thanks for everything,

G.