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## Irregular Ethnographies

### An Introduction

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## IRREGULAR ETHNOGRAPHIES

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Tom O'Dell & Robert Willim

In the cool of the early morning, just before sunrise, the bow of the *Southern Cross* headed towards the eastern horizon, on which a tiny dark blue outline was faintly visible .... / ... In an hour or so we were close inshore, and could see canoes coming round from the south, outside the reef, on which the tide was low. The outrigger-fitted craft drew near, the men in them bare to the waist, girdled with bark-cloth, large fans stuck in the backs of their belts, tortoise shell rings, or rolls of leaf in the ear-lobes and nose, bearded, and with long hair flowing loosely over their shoulders ... // ...

Vahihaloa, my “boy,” looked over the side from the upper deck. “My word, me fright too much,” he said with a quavering laugh; “me tink this fella man him he savvy kaikai me.” Kaikai is the pidgin-English term for “eat.” (Firth 1936:1).

So begins Raymond Firth’s classic ethnographic description of his first encounter with the Tikopia. It was an encounter which he had dreamed of since his boyhood – a chance to meet a group of people who had never ( ... almost never) been in contact with the Western world. Re-reading this passage, however, we are struck by a number of ambivalences. Others have written about the genre of the first encounter and the manner in which it works to establish the ethnographer’s presence in the field, as well as his/her position as an authority in relation to that field, the “culture” it was presumed to encompass, and the people encountered (Pratt 1986; Rosaldo 1986). But in invoking this passage here, we are more interested in reflecting upon the question of what it might tell us about the practice of ethnography itself.

In many ways the scene presented above is the penultimate anthropological trope – capturing the image of the anthropologist entering the field to begin a long and thorough period of fieldwork. Here



we find a distant island, supposedly separated from much of the world, and thereby containing a unique culture to be observed, transcribed, and ultimately translated into academic prose. As it turned out, Tikopia wasn't as disconnected from the rest of the world as Firth might have dreamed (no cultural context is ever completely isolated from all others), but still, this is the mythical encounter upon which a large portion of the anthropological habitus rests. Or is it?

Reading this small section of text from today's perspective, it is difficult not to view it as somewhat anachronistic to the times in which most of us anthropologists, ethnologists, and social scientists live. Firth's reference to "my boy" is strikingly distant and out of step with today's discussions of the role of "collaboration" in the production of ethnography (Field & Fox 2007; Marcus 2009). And while many of us have occasionally had the uneasy feeling that we might be consumed by our work and the problems of the field, the reference to cannibalisms in Firth's text is far more literal and based upon colonial fears and misunderstandings than most of us could ever understand based upon our own experiences. Then there is the field itself. À la Firth, this is a place that is distant, foreign, strange, and isolated. In contrast, much of the ethnography being conducted today is increasingly coming from places that are highly familiar to the ethnographer – places like local neighborhoods, businesses, shopping malls, and mediascapes, among many other locations close to, or even indistinguishable from, home. And finally, while many anthropologists and cultural analysts may dream of getting away for a year or so to conduct fieldwork, the reality facing most ethnographers is one in which fieldwork has to be conducted in short intervals between lecturing and administrative duties, or for those working beyond the academy, between tightly scheduled client meetings (cf Hannerz 212ff).

This, and much more which we will discuss in the following volume, leaves us wondering, what is the state of ethnography today? Many anthropologists and ethnologists bear with them idealized notions of what ethnography should be, but in light of the different contexts in which ethnography is being used (inside and outside the academy) we need a more nuanced discussion of the various forms ethnography can take. As it is employed in very different types of projects – from the study of the interplay between culture and the senses (Howes 2005) to the cultural dynamics of daydreaming (Ehn & Löfgren 2010) – how is it being adapted, changed and developed to bring insight to these and other new fields of study?

The articles presented in this volume were part of the outcome of a weekend long workshop, *Irregular Ethnographies*, held in the Division of Ethnology in the Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences at Lund University, in the fall of 2010.<sup>i</sup> The workshop attracted scholars working both within and



without the academy. Everyone was asked to reflect upon the ethnographic work they were doing and the manner in which it broke with, or challenged, the notion of ethnography – that is to say, the ideals of what we had once been taught in school in comparison to the realities we faced in our working lives. The reason for this endeavor lie in the realization that ethnography has had a propensity, in recent years, to take the form of an elusive buzzword, or be treated as a magical ingredient that might be added to all sorts of methodological potions, providing any research project (or almost any) with some form of “added value”. It would be easy to dismiss such processes as the work of less serious actors, but rather than doing that, we wanted to take a step back and reflect upon our own understanding of ethnography and its potentials in relation to the work we ourselves had done. That is, we wanted to discuss ethnography at work – the full process, and not just its most visible parts.

### **Ethnography as collaboration**

A point of departure for the workshop was to acknowledge that researchers tend to develop different styles and skills of doing and using ethnography. Some focus on fieldwork while others invest their time doing deskwork, or hunting and gathering bits and pieces of information from archives, the net, the media or just the everyday practices that are ongoing around them all the time. But to the extent that ethnography does involve a wide range of styles and skills, these practices are precipitated by the fact that ethnographers themselves are working in a wide variety of contexts. Four of the authors contributing to this volume, Katarina Graffman and Kristina Börjesson, Kirsti Mathiesen Hjemdahl, and Sarah Holst Kjær are, for example, not employed in the academy, although they have received Ph.D.s and are well aware of the rituals of academia (indeed working at times with university based scholars). Instead, they are working in contexts in which they are expected to help clients solve specific problems, provide cultural insight, or complete a pre-defined task. As their contributions demonstrate, theirs is a world in which the ethnographer must combine interview and observation techniques (among other fieldwork bound methods) with managerial skills and competencies not usually associated with ethnographic work.

In contexts outside the academy, ethnography often has a propensity to become a team activity. Where academics tend to work individually on their specific fieldwork projects, ever deepening their expertise in a particular area of study (in a context that celebrates the individual scholar's



achievements and expressions of originality) ethnographers working in applied contexts find that collaborative work can be something unto a communicative necessity. As one California based ethnographer explained to us, “If you are alone you have no voice”. Working in a team becomes a strategic asset in which ethnographers can reinforce and confirm one another’s arguments and analyses as they meet clients who are more accustomed to number crunching reports, than conceptually informed cultural analyses.

Time is also of the essence here, and the time factor is another reason for teaming up collaboratively. Cultural analysts working in (or for) corporations find themselves under tighter time constraints than their peers in the academy. Clients want results, fast, and a team of researchers can quite simply gather more information within a shorter time frame than anyone person could working alone.

Beyond the issues of communication and time, however, the papers in this volume point to another important reason for engaging in collaborative teamwork, namely, the manner in which it can function as a strategic means of broadening the set of core competencies around which the final analysis can be composed. Thus, we see in the three articles discussing ethnography beyond the academy that Graffman, an anthropologist, teams up with a designer, Börjesson. Kjaer finds herself mediating between an artist and a municipality, and Hjemdahl find herself collaborating with managers and corporate vice presidents (often collaborating with them, by challenging them).

Irregular ethnography? Not for these scholars. In the process of working in this way, they are pressing the borders of ethnography and entwining them with fields of knowledge and practice beyond the traditional field of anthropology. Their work highlights the manner in which some cultural analysts are moving beyond hermeneutic interpretations and striving (at times with great friction and frustration) to provide answers, and it points to how ethnography may be organized in slightly different ways from one context to another.

### **Forms of Ethnography**

The question of whether an ethnographic form may be perceived as regular or irregular is highly context dependent. Where cultural analysts working in consultancy contexts invoke ethnographic forms and modes to make logical arguments and provide concrete solutions to problems, others – such as those working in the arts, for example – may find the power of ethnography lies in its ability to



destabilize taken for granted truths and ways of understanding the world. Here ethnography can be mixed or juxtaposed with emergent methods of arts based research, opening “new pathways for creating knowledge within and across disciplinary boundaries from a range of epistemological and theoretical perspectives” (Leavy 2009:ix; cf. Schneider & Wright 2010).

In line with this, scholars such as Elizabeth Chin, in this volume, are moving ethnography in “more than conventional” and highly interesting representational directions, endeavoring to understand what ethnography combined with the performing arts might be as an embodied phenomenon and pedagogic tool. Where the academic endeavor of ethnographic representation has primarily taken the form of the written text, Chin’s work evokes understanding through corporeal practices she exposes students to in the classroom. She uses her experience with different forms of dance (from traditional ballet, to Haitian dance) as an evocative encounter that literally moves students to new interpretations of the world around them. The example she presents in her paper here demonstrates one of the ways in which ethnography can be used to produce understanding through an appeal to the emotions – which engage forms of bodily understanding – that are only now being problematized in contemporary discussions of the body’s role as an instrument of knowing, and knowledge production (Thrift 2000 & 2004).

### **Distance and proximity**

To the extent that Chin is challenging her students to corporeally and emotionally bound levels of ethnographic understanding, it might be said that she is making it personal: bringing phenomena such as slavery and repression to a point of physical understanding. This, it could be argued, brings the ethnographic experience closer to home than the forms of representational expression we usually find in applied and academic contexts which are more textually and rationally organized. If we are interested in the regularities and irregularities of ethnography, then the issue of distance or proximity to one’s object of study seems to be a factor at play here.

Where the field and object of study was once perceived to be “out there”, scholars have, for the past few decades, worked the issue of reflexivity and the question of how their own roles as researchers are complicit in the analyses they produce. Billy Ehn uses his article in this volume to investigate the subjective dimensions of ethnography – as orchestrated through strikingly different styles of autoethnographic representation – to interrogate the question of how very different degrees of



proximity and distance to one's object of study can be manipulated to produce highly diverse understandings of any cultural process or phenomenon. As his article makes clear, despite the fact that autoethnography has gained attention in recent decades (Davies 2008; Hockey 2006; Reed-Danahay 1999), it would be far too simple to claim that some analyses might be defined as autoethnographic, and others as not. A cultural analysis is never devoid of the researcher's subject position. But the question is, how much of the researcher is actually exposed explicitly in a study or representation? Some autoethnographies have been criticized for their "full monty stance", as being narcissistic confessions of a researcher. Others have been lauded as productive analytic endeavors. Autoethnography deals in forms of representation marked by the extreme proximity of the subject (the researcher) and the object. It has consequently had the propensity to wake strong emotional responses from both its advocates and detractors. Both sides in this debate are making points that are more than worthy of our attention (Leibing & McLean 2007:12). But as Ehn's text reminds us, ethnography is a practice ever wandering through a shadow land enshrouded in attempts at objectivity, but ever interlaced with subjective impressions. And in the end, this is a realm in need of further illumination and exploration.

Richard Wilk, pushes us into this shadow land by approaching the issue of proximity and distance from the perspective of the ethnographic field itself. In Wilk's case, it is not just the ethnographer who is ever present in the analysis, but the field itself has a propensity to follow the attuned ethnographer home, around town, to the grocery store and so on. The material for cultural analysis is ever around us. We might even say, in a world saturated with mobile digital media, that the field cannot simply be understood as being "out there" or "multi-sited" (Marcus 1998), but in many ways, it is ubiquitous. Doing ethnography, as Wilk points out, is not just a question of observing and asking questions, it involves a degree of something we might call ethnographic sensibility and open curiosity. What exactly is happening around us as we move from one context to another, and what might we discover, perhaps through pure serendipity, if we remain attuned to the fact that "the field" has no beginning, nor an end?

### **Senses and Surprise**

The serendipitous and open-ended aspects of ethnography is an important factor to both explicitly acknowledge and affirm as it is connected to the fact that ethnography often works to surprise the





researcher, and thereby, destabilize theoretical or analytical assumptions. A thoroughly planned ethnographic study may, with this in mind, sometimes be counterproductive – you may get stuck with what you want to find. But the reality of ethnographic practice is often characterized by demands for rather rigid project designs. Before signing-off on most projects, financiers, ethical boards, clients and other stakeholders want to see researchers present a transparent and predictable research process void of experimental ambitions or open ended methodological scenarios. So, how are these demands and the potential irregularities of ethnographic projects handled by researchers using ethnography?

One way to approach the interplay between structure and serendipity may be by focusing on the compositional dimensions of cultural analyses. In their discussion on *Composing Ethnography* O'Dell and Willim take inspiration from other worlds of creative expression and work in order to further understand ethnography as a non-linear process. As they argue ethnographic practices are more than a question of methods and representations, they involve a constant movement betwixt and between theory, empirical materials, and the arrangements of analyses. In line with Wilk, O'Dell and Willim remind us that “the field” is ever around us. The ethnographic challenge is to choose, mix, and compose a feasible result from an overwhelming array of analytical components, generated from a “field” which might not be as regularly delineated as textbooks would have us believe.

Indeed, if we reflect further upon the ways in which the “field” and our “objects” of study might be more irregular than we are prone to admit, then it is interesting to note the language we use to discuss them. There is a “thinginess” to this language, as if the field were a place or delineable territory of some sort with clear boundaries, and in much the same way the focus of our studies are more often than not referred to as “objects of study”. But the reality of ethnography is not always so concretely anchored, easily observed, or grippably tangible. In reality, there is a great deal of ethnography out there that focuses upon the ephemeral, including such phenomena as: waiting (Beckman 2009; Ehn and Löfgren 2010); magic (Greenwood 2005; Meyer & Pels 2003); emotions (Lutz 1998), and even “the humility of things” (Miller 2010:50)!

Against this background, several of the contributors to this volume have been forced to reflect upon the question of what happens when the field, or at least the ethnographic object of study, seemingly disappears, or is marked by its absence? How does one go about the study of something that just plane does not exist, or which is invisible? As it turns out, these are the types of problems that have been facing both Rebecka Lennartsson and Sarah Pink. Lennartsson, for example, is interested in the



study of prostitution as it took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The people she studies are long dead, the practices they engaged in have been all but forgotten, and the places they inhabited have dramatically changed over the centuries, if they have not been demolished all together. The ethnographic irregularity she faces is one of engaging and opening a conversation with people she cannot meet, in a time to which she cannot return. Some of the details of their activities can be found in various archives and historical sources, but how does an ethnography move from a series of disjointed details, to something more contextually bound? And how does one go about creating such boundaries without locking the phenomena under investigation into a shell that is all too static (cf. Bal 2002:134f.)? As Lennartsson's text illustrates, the reconstructive processes involved in the making of a historical ethnography require a set of refined analytical tools that allows the scholar to continuously move in close to the object of study, while also making it possible to step back so as to grasp the broader context through which particular details are framed.

When working with a historical material the ephemerality of one's "object" of study is quite obvious. But ethnography is, to a very large extent, the art of understanding and illuminating the ephemeral, finding the intangible, and discovering overlooked aspects of the concrete and mundane. The trick is learning how to do this. Pink helps us understand one way of proceeding through a closer attention to the role the senses can play in ethnography. This is a movement that involves forms of autoethnography that Ehn is describing, but one that also implicates the people Pink collaborates with – devising strategies of helping these people reflect upon aspects of their daily lives that are often taken for granted by them and thus, beyond the realm of words. In this sense, this a movement which not only strives to illuminate that which is invisible, but it even does so by helping others "see the invisible" on the ethnographers behalf – resulting in something we might refer to as a form of collaborative x-ray vision. The results, as such, pendulate between autoethnography and paraethnography in which the cultural analyst makes some of the observations while ethnographic collaborators are left – after the ethnographer's coaching – to contribute their own ethnographic observations to the material being collected (cf. Holmes & Marcus 2006).

### **The Irregular End (of a Beginning)**

So where does this leave us? In many ways all of this has left us reflecting upon our own ethnographic experiences and the discrepancy that lies between them and what we find written in method books



and what we were taught about ethnography over the course of our own educations. As one member in the group pointed out, “I can’t ever remember being taught how to do ethnography. It was just something you went out and struggled to do. I suspect, as a result, many of us are doing very different things.” The contributions in this volume illustrate that many of us *are* doing very different types of work, in a varying array of contexts. And while a few of us were not sure we had ever received a formal education in the art of ethnography, the remainder of the workshop participants quickly realized that whatever we had been taught about ethnography as part of our graduate educations was only vaguely related to the manner in which we had been working in the field since then.

Bearing this discrepancy in mind, one of the objects of this volume has been to bring together strands of work that might help graduate students (as well as ourselves) understand some of the diverse forms of ethnographic practice that exist around us. While there is, as we are arguing, a tendency for courses in ethnography to present a neat and easily managed world of observational techniques, interviewing practices and note taking methods with rational coding systems, we see a need to point to the fact that such a world of regularity and neatness is perhaps more fictional than factual. We hope that this volume will bring insight into what ethnographers really do when they conduct their work in the field, at the desk or wherever it might take place.

But, then, what are we to make of this word “irregular” which we have chosen to use as a means of framing the practices we describe in the following series of articles? *Webster’s New World Dictionary* explains, among other things that that which is irregular is, “not conforming to established rule, method, usage, standard etc...” (1986:745). The case may be that our educational pasts have constituted a ghost in the machinery of our shared thinking here – as the methodological lessons we were taught in the past do not seem to truly square up with the reality we work in. But the distinction between that which is regular or irregular is itself highly ephemeral and ever shifting. We would warn against any attempt to a typology of regular or irregular ethnographies. Much of what is described in this volume is in many ways quite regular. It involves interviewing, observing, being in the field, meeting people, and gathering information. However, the trope “irregular” helped us to distance ourselves slightly from our daily practices, and thus to problematize what we may have taken for granted: the fact that good ethnography is not exactly the same as empirical exactness, that “the field” has no boundaries, our work no clear end, and that the distinction between academic and applied research (or between the arts and the academy), is not nearly as distinguishable as one may first think.



As we reflect back upon Raymond Firth's words, we are struck by the thought of just how irregular his work is in comparison to what many anthropologists and ethnologists experience today, but even how regular it may be as it still resonates with some underlying notion many of us have of what "true ethnographic fieldwork" is (or can/should be). The texts in what follows strive in a similar way to continuously destabilize our manner of thinking about the regularities (and irregularities) of ethnography. In line with this, the ambition of what follows is, thus, not to nail down and define a new field of irregular ethnography, but to draw attention to some of the diverse ways in which ethnography is being worked on a regular basis to meet the needs of a growing array of projects and studies.

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