Renewable ethnography: Ethnographic pebbles & Labyrinths in the way of theory

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Renewable Ethnography:

Ethnographic Pebbles & Labyrinths in the Way of Theory

Michael M.J. Fischer

Introduction:¹

Ethnography is not what it was, nor was it ever

Beyond the door I hear the click of computer keys under voices weaving German and English into a web of nervous patter. I already know the drift of this day’s whispers: the British report on climate change, a cry of fire in a crowded theater with no exits. Suddenly they're worried: we’re killing the planet. Surprise.

All is layers: stacks on stacks, facts covering fictions resting on facts.

-- Askold Melnyczuk. 2008 The House of Widows, p. 5., 6

I begin with a “reading for the ethnography” (see fn 1) of current repertoires of fieldwork design and writing, before turning to what I will call “the Rice mark” (the agenda of retooling or renewing ethnographic methods) explored in the work of the Rice Anthropology Department in the 1980s and 1990s), and then thirdly to the possibilities of design studio training, currently called at the University of California, Irvine, “para-site modules.” These last are stagings of

¹ NOTE: The following essay was written originally at the invitation of George Marcus and James Faubion as a preface for their book, Ethnography is not what it used to be, (Cornell University Press 2009). The book intends to raise questions both about how to write ethnographies today and how to teach graduate students. The book emerged from a workshop that Marcus convened at his new Center for Ethnography at the University of California, Irvine. Having recently moved from Rice University, he invited six recent Ph.D.s from the Rice department who had been mentored there by Jim Faubion and himself, plus two others connected to Rice, one a former Rice Ph.D., and the other a new Rice faculty member. At a later stage I was invited to contribute a preface, as I had been part of a previous incarnation of the Rice department and a mentor to the latter two essay writers. As I read through the draft essays, I reacted both positively and negatively: very positively to the on-going research efforts, and a little negatively to the rhetoric of caricaturing earlier modes of fieldwork, writing ethnographies, or constructing anthropological theories. Marcus’ primary interest was in the pedagogy of the dissertation-writing process. I think of this as continuously renewable ethnographic methods. Knowledge production (in anthropology as elsewhere) is spiral: problematics in one generation become exhausted or are no longer felt to be productive, but a later generation rediscovers, reformats and readdresses them for newly emergent social and cultural issues. One of the things that makes this possible is writing out ethnographic details. One can then go back to older work looking for empirical evidence even if one no longer accepts the theory or argument. I call this reading for the the ethnography. As “the devil is in the details” in legal instruments, so too in ethnography: these are the pebbles that make abstract theory wobble and require further empirical and theoretical work, and labyrinths (multiple connections) that make up the social fabric. For more on ethnographic pebbles and labyrinths, see my Anthropological Futures (Duke University Press, 2009). – mmjf
selected elements of a “fieldsite” brought into the university to generate new questions and insight before returning to renewed phases of fieldwork (a modality that has also proved effective at MIT).

At a workshop at the Center for Ethnography at the University of California, Irvine, six recent Rice University Department of Anthropology Ph.Ds were asked to provide accounts or “audits” of their six dissertation projects done in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They are about (1) archeologists and the local communities whose labor they hire, whose land they excavate, and whose precursors they prepare for tourists; (2) the faux statistics and the corruption stories that not only inhabit but structure the transnational humanitarian and development industries in places like Nigeria, Switzerland and Washington; (3) venture capital industries and their claims to innovation based on a kind of “social capital” that itself proved to be a finance bubble; (4) an Ethical Social and Legal Issues (ELSI) project —associated with the HapMap (haplotype map) genomics program — that may illustrate commodification of, and regulatory capture of, bioethics; (5) indigenous justice forums that mediate between First Nation autonomy and nation-state devolutions of court, bureaucracy and jail burdens; (6) and the classificatory technologies and addressees of human and civil rights NGOs in Washington, D.C., drawing on the (illusions of) proximity to power, and deployed like fishermen’s nets to catch and adjudicate the past and prepare the future.

These are substantive and rich arenas in today’s worlds to be read for their ethnography including the mediations of guarded, packaged, and traded elusive information. The structures of the circuits are often as important to understand as the veracity or validity of the facts and factoids in the circulating packets of information. “Assemblages” are another passing metaphor for such relations between circuits and information effectivity, hinting at modernist ancestors (montage, collage, constructivism) as well as to the pedagogy of design studios (to which we will spirally return).

That these are all projects with science studies interfaces is something that anxiously arises again and again in the audits, in the accounts of the dissertation writers. Do these contemporary interfaces (with their trade-marked “look and feel” intellectual property packaging), account for ethnography not being “what it used to be”? Or are they helpful analogues articulating the accounts into something more than “messy,” “contingent,” “just do it” mystifications by people still emerging from the experiential malstroem of fieldwork not yet quite sure what they have accomplished? Ethnographies are “not what they used to be” because ethnographies were never so (orderly) in the first place. But are the ethnographies today —to continue the intellectual property, trademark and patent metaphor — new “compositions of matter?” Does their ethnographic content makes them different?

To answer this question requires audits (listening, accounting), projects (promissory logics, transitional objects, projections), and the active value-added work of interpretations. Nahal Naficy, one of our six dissertation writers, calls this “cultural encounters that are between different modes of perception and representation of reality, what one could call culture, I suppose.” These audits, projects, and interpretations apply historically as well as biographically, to objects as well as authors. Transitional objects (ethnographic objects) are multi-faceted, opening (if one looks) into multi-faceted labyrinths.

I

READING DISSERTATIONS FOR THE ETHNOGRAPHY: AUDITS, PROJECTS, INTERPRETATIONS

Dissertations are training in first extended professional projects. In listening to (or reading) how the fieldwork was done and the writing was composed, the workshop was asked to attend to accounts hidden in the ostensive audits (writers do not always know all that they relay),
to the writers' status as themselves transitional objects (as anthropologists in training), and to the shifting framings of cultural encounters in the fieldwork as the writers gain experience and polish. Like Jacques Lacan, we will come to the analysts of these self-narrating analysands later: the pedagogues (professors, mentors) who occupy the place of s/he who should know, who mirror the perpetual struggle against the myths of earlier ethnographies: ‘primitive tropes, genres and double-binds all to expose, ‘tis an epistemological-historicizing, stake-clarifying, mission of ethnography’). The investments in the returns of ethnography constantly devise new portfolios for both pedagogues and apprentices.

AUDITS (LISTENING, ACCOUNTING):
AMIDST THE ARCHEOLOGISTS AND THE AIDS DONORS

This is the game. This hospital has for Khartoum a propaganda value. Somebody like Amnesty International reports that the government denies aid to the Nuba, the government points to us and says, 'Wrong, and there is the proof, a fine one-hundred-twenty-bed hospital run by the most efficient Germans.' But we are also a little problem. The government wants the Nubans to go to its so-called peace camps for medial attention. Once they are in, very hard to get out. . . . We are here a little sanctuary. So Khartoum needs us on the one hand, but we on the other hand make it more difficult for them to subdue the Nubans. Therefore it makes things a little more difficult for us. Our water supplies?" Manfred turned an imaginary tap. "Enough to survive, nothing more, and I dare not protest."

[. . .] Poisoning a well was forbidden by the Koran, but the holy book was silent about plastic explosives, so that was what the murahaleen used. . . . [Water] was delivered by lorry in fifty liter drums . . . when the track . . . was passable . . .

-- Phillip Caputo, Acts of Faith, 2005: 91

"I thought the Dinka were at war with the Arabs."
"We are, yes."
"Then what are they doing here?"
"We are not at war with all Arabs."
"You mean, with their tribe? You’re not fighting this Messiriya tribe?"
"Messiriya. We are fighting them all the time. The Messiriya and the Dinka — He made fists and knocked them together, knuckle to knuckle. She gave him a long, searching look. "I'm confused."
"Oh yes. The war makes a big confusion. . . . The omodiya [clan] of those fellows is not at war with us. For now. A few months from now —"
. . . The clan of those fellows has made peace with the Dinka for now because they need to graze their cattle on Dinka land and also to come up to Dinka towns to buy things. Soap. Sugar. Tea. Also to sell slaves. . . . They go about in the north, buying slaves . . . and when they have so many, they bring them here to sell them back to their families for cows or goats, sometimes for money. . . . Three cows for one person . . ."
. . . By buying freedom for these people are we promoting the trade instead of ending it? . . . [That's] the UN's criticism."
--Acts of Faith, p. 139, 152

Complications outrun the concepts and repertoires that repackage reality (the real) into clarified models with which we do our policy-making, our bioethics, our history-writing, our rationalizations.

Lisa Breglia’s engaging account of her fieldwork on the archeological sites of Chichen Itza in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico — with its hundred year history of archeologists hiring local labor, and with its five year old Pakbeh Project at Chunchucmil — is an inquiry into communities of expertise (the archeologists) and communities of practice (the interface between
archeologists, local labor, and the local landed communities based on ejido land grants of the
1930s) with whom the archeologists must negotiate to be allowed to dig. Breglia brilliantly poses
the “work-break game” (or “time out”) from formal methods of fieldwork (note-taking, formal
questions) as the free association spaces of “ahah!” revelations that can spontaneously and
serendipitously emerge, reordering prior understanding. This tacit agreement by researchers and
interlocutors to pretend that such moments are breaks from fieldwork, rather than constituting the
fieldwork itself, reflects, she suggests, something about the aesthetics and modalities of fieldwork
that also escape the instrumentalization of ethics by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and ELSI
(ethical, legal, and social issues) projects, that Deepa Reddy (below) puts under skeptical review
in her dissertation. Here Breglia turns explicitly to anthropologist and science studies scholar
Diana Forsythe as an analogue. Foresythe examines the misrecognition of myths of a single
scientific method in the sciences and especially in software engineering and information
technologies. Breglia similarly claims to be most sympathetic to that part of the 1980s Rice
Department critiques that recognized that ethnography has always been experimental
(Marcus and Fischer 1986).

Breglia might have followed the science studies clues a bit further. She might have
compared a bit further the “cultures of expertise” and “cultures of practice” of various fieldwork
sciences (archeology, field biology, ecology, musicology). There is no point in satirizing the
“phantasm” of the “Traditional Fieldwork Model” as something to overcome. Surely the
comparative and regional legal and economic projects of Rhodes-Livingston Institute, the
inquiries into the famine caused by the copper mine labor practices, the Rorschach and TAT tests
piloted by Cora du Bois, the structural comparative projects of shifting cultivation and the effects
of taxation in kind in order to enforce cash cropping, the studies of relocation of villagers for dam
projects, the seminars in comparative Catholic and Ndembu symbolism recounted by Victor
Turner and Muchona, the separation of academic and administrative anthropology by Malinowski
and Radcliffe-Brown were not all the same in method, analysis, or comparative style. Nor are
their positivism and archive building to be easily dismissed or belittled.

The “work-break game” might be used to explore not just archeologist ethnographer
interactions, but also the amount of energy, organization, knowledges, and misrecognitions that
go into relations with the local labor and their communities: the “cultural encounters that are
between different modes of perception and representation of reality” that account for the
archeological work space. Not least here is the disjunction between Mayan laborers who do not
regard the ancients whose artifacts are being dug up as their ancestors, or who learn to make
that identification in the interest of participating in the tourist trade. Ethical concerns here are
complicated. Breglia feels it not right to gossip about her daily discoveries about the villagers to
the casual questioning of the archeologists. What about, then, the gossip of competitions and
jealousies among the archeologists? “Who is the dirtiest amongst us?” and “How did we get so
dirty?” are light-hearted jibes, but they also, in a less light hearted mode, might be ethical
questions, or questions of power relations, also for museum acquisitions, antiquities dealers, and
credit taking in academic publications. And will not her writings in any case expose some of what
she learns about the villagers to outsiders, including precisely to the most interested: the
archeologists? The effects of archeological excavations on local communities and vice-versa
(e.g., illicit antiquities trading) is a topic of long standing interest, as are the struggles over
ideological uses to which archeology, like other historical forms, are put.

The ethnographic tools in such circumstances are not the application of common sense
tools to common sense objects, but vigorous conversations, arguments, debates and dialogue.
Even for Clifford Geertz, it was a matter of deciphering across intersubjectivities. Reading over
the shoulders of informants was an observation about communication, public language,
deciphering other people’s signals, gestures, and words whether across differences within one’s
own community or across linguistic differences. This accounting can be as technical, interpretive,
or general as is called for, but it is not some unaccountable “just doing it.”
Breglia resists quick and dirty reductionist and instrumentalist trivializations of ethnography. And yet this is not to say that certain forms of ethnography cannot be used within and for corporations: purposeful reductions of ethnographic method in efforts not only for instrumental ends (to suss out markets, to improve organizational efficiency, flexibility and enhancement of “learning organizations” or to flatten hierarchical structures) but also to generate knowledge about symbols, affect, humor, and comparative advantage. There is nothing wrong here with ethnography practiced in corporations (see below on the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conferences, EPIC).

Kris Peterson’s account of her fieldwork project with AIDS programs and drug clinical trials in Nigeria, is equally ethically charged, embedded in complex power relations and contentious interests. Her fieldwork perforce must negotiate and attempt to characterize insidious and pervasive issues of corruption involving large organizations — rentier oil states, transnational humanitarian NGOs, domestic and multinational pharmaceutical companies, banks and financial institutions — all eager to keep money flows secret and separate from their social embedding. Peterson makes her inquiry turn on what Naficy calls “cultural encounters” and Peterson calls tracking “spheres of knowledge in which new analytical and epistemological domains have arisen.” Centrally at issue are the numbers generated where no reliable statistics exist (powerful numbers in reports, planning documents, and legitimations of government actions), and paranoid conspiracy stories that smack of some truth even if literally false, or stories of things hidden in the open, protected from prosecution or extradition.

Like Breglia, Peterson turns to an anthropologist and science studies scholar, Kim Fortun, for a comparison and analogue case: Bhopal after the Union Carbide disaster and the necessity of victims’ lawyers and advocates to operate in an environment of denial of information and prejudicial state classifications of injury. In Peterson’s Nigerian case a series of well known deformities are traced: first the “orientalist” distinction between legitimate and illegitimate capital flows where the actors in both are complicit with one another or even identical; second, the structural adjustment policies which downsized the state in the 1980s making it incapable of meeting the demands for policing WTO/TRIPS (World Trade Organization/ Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreements in the 1990s such as combating counterfeit drugs in a market where 80% of drugs were counterfeit; third, the promotion of AIDS prevention over treatment, including by the World Health Organization, for “reasons of cost” despite operating in an economy generating huge oil windfall profits; and fourth, the 2003 United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) program to treat 350,000 of 5 million HIV-AIDS infected but only with U.S. brand name drugs. Like pebbles unsettling these macro-structural forms — in which she says “development aid is used to finance perpetual militarization, experimental medicine [clinical trials], and new drug markets” — Peterson’s detailed on-the-ground ethnography traces out a complex set of interactions.

To help chart these, she turns to Fortun’s framework of “ennunciatory communities,” which are called into being by the double-binds and trade-offs of imperatives for action. Unlike the analysis of stake holders who have stable interests, ennunciatory communities are divided, almost always in some unstable state of compromise between competing needs, compromises which will have to be good enough for the moment, but may not endure. One thereby gains a much finer grained analysis of social forces and interactions than stakeholder analysis, and one which suggests that one look for the double-binds as a source of dynamism or perturbation and disruption. Fortun also draws attention to genres and rhetorics that must be used in different public spaces (legal briefs, press releases, policy bullets, protest information bulletins, newspaper stories).

The circulation of “phantom epistemologies” as forms of “cultural encounters” under conditions of scarcity of verifiable information has been charted by other scholars such as Lawrence Cohen’s “scandal publicity” in the case of organ transplantation in India, or similar “mafia stories” in Turkey dissected by Aslıhan Sanal; or the older analysis of vampire urban legends in East Africa by Luise White. Peterson’s examples differ by the scale of the circulations
she names and by the complicity of major “legitimate” Western state, NGO, and banking actors. What is ethnographically value-added to the abstract literature is the detailing that allows one to understand the capillary power, as Foucault might say, of these processes, not just their abstraction. The only other way to do this is through novels such as Philip Caputo’s remarkable *Acts of Faith* about the Sudan, the UN, aid and gun runners, including American missionaries.

**Projects (Transitional Objects, Promissories, Projections)**

I’d specialized in oral history. My skill was getting people to tell me their stories, while allowing me to keep mine to myself. (Melnyczuk, op cit., 27)

The child may well be the father of the man, but I dare anyone to draw a straight line between them. (ibid., 45)

Father was the master of the unsaid. (ibid., 45)

Venture capital firms in Korea rode the wave in 1998 to 2001 — spurred after the Asian financial crisis by government tax incentives and credit meant to stimulate the economy — and then collapsed in 2002 as capital shifted quickly into much higher rate of return investments in China and into mergers and acquisitions of mature firms (rather than start-ups). Jae Chung worked in several of these firms for short periods, and what she is able to ethnographically detail is the rhetoric of “social capital” that these firms claimed distinguished their value added. This value added was claimed to reside in the due diligence that they would bring to investments, their active role in management, and the experience they claimed to provide to young start-ups.

This turned out to verge on phantom epistemologies somewhat like those traced by Peterson, but Chung is able to also point to two important kinds of objects that have become important in anthropological science studies: first, financial instruments that “reformulate scarcity” (one thinks of the work of Vincent Lepinay and Donald MacKenzie in particular on such “new technologies,” but also Karen Ho, Karen Knorr-Cetina, David Stark, Daniel Beunza, Ben Lee, and Annalise Riles on the anthropology of finance); and second, the notions of assemblage and actor network theory of Michel Callon and John Law. Chung seems to make a key anthropological critique of actor network theory, namely that it explicitly accounts for the market in terms that resemble economic theory, although claiming thereby at the same time to demonstrate a circularity in the latter (that economists format their accounts of the market in ways that merely confirm their theories). Moreover, she seems to use the notion of assemblages of human and non-human actors to argue that in the case of venture capital firms their knowledge horizon is limited to the level of firms and cannot accurately monitor larger scale assemblages structured in non-linear ways between micro and macro (hence her employers asking her to clip newspapers for “interesting stories” that might inform their practices). Since a venture capital firm’s value is promissory, standard accounting methods cannot account for its worth. In lieu of non-linear accurate models, they depend heavily on aggregate indices of linked stock markets and national interest rates.

A third potentially interesting object of analysis, which however she says she failed to mobilize to much effect is the notion of “social worlds,” which ideally might be crucibles for understanding non-formal influences on decision-making. Such social worlds are described in novelistic form in Ben Mezrich’s *Rigged* (2007) about the New York Mercantile Exchange and the founding of the Dubai Mercantile Exchange.

Deepa Reddy has a set of somewhat similar transitional objects to follow. She tracks both the promissory of ELSI (ethical, legal, and social issues) consultation with the Houston community of Gujarati immigrants (to preempt protests or disruption of blood collection for a new bioscience project, the Haplotype Map) and her own discomforts of being selected for the project
because she was a member of the community and so was “obligated to build and maintain the
very ties I was presumed to have” and was made to become a “producer of the culture” with
which she was to negotiate. If in that sense the project is transitional both in her identity
formatting and the community’s relation to the HapMap Project, there is a third more troubling
object that is being formed through the ELSI process: a routinized bioethics and ethnographic
practice. “Virtually all our decisions as researchers were subject to IRB scrutiny: confidentiality
and consent needed to be explained over and over. Paperwork needed signing. Documentation
of all sorts from meeting minutes to mileage to assiduous quantification of participant
observation.” Here the experimental promissory of her teachers’ optimism that method can be
“made out of a rhetoric of circumstance” is blocked by the IRBs, funders, and other
bureaucratized formatings for the convenience (and liability protection) of these large
organizations.

The blood itself, moreover, turns out to be lively in ways that would have delighted
anthropologist David Schneider, the lead founder of the Society for Cultural Anthropology, who
famously “defined” American kinship as a combination of substance (blood) and code for conduct
in his technology of “accounting” practices (American Kinship: A Cultural Account). For the
Gujuratis, blood was “unproblematically a possession but alienable” while for bioethicists its was
“abstract but ethically a problem.” Blood and kinship accounting aside, Reddy found the field
polarized by critics of the HapMap Project who accused her of complicity on the one hand, and
cynical promoters of the ELSI process (such as geneticist James Watson) who instrumentalized it
as merely a way to preempt critics.

More frustrating yet is the scientists’ sense that the critics are constantly reinscribing
“race” into the discussion in precisely ways that haplotype mapping is supposed to displace as a
matter of decomposing the biology into its recombinatory elements. It would have been good to
have some discussion of the science puzzles and instabilities in haplotype biology, which is
where a science studies anthropologist might have taken at least some of the discussion. One
sympathizes with Reddy’s finding herself falling between two stools of being pigeonholed in area
studies (India) and in science studies where she claims area studies has no place. But I would
like to suggest that this dichotomy is also outdated, and that there is a genealogy of
anthropological science studies that is attentive to geography. This is not just the mechanically
repeated observation about science being allegedly placeless but actually a European and
American perspective; rather it is an ethnographic query about how science gets performed in
distributed sites. This in turn might in part transform Reddy’s invocation of the Dalit example from
ontologically given to cosmopolitanically and culturally contested.

**INTERPRETATIONS (INTERFACES WITH THE HUMANE AND THE SCIENTIFIC; WITH
HISTORIES AND FUTURES)**

Wasn’t that how Orpheus finally shook off Eurydice, though mythmakers bend
over backward persuading us he’d made a mistake and was grief-stricken to lose her?
But don’t look back was his only instruction. Glance over your shoulder just once, and
she’s gone – and what did he do? (Melnyczuk, p. 59)

History was a game played in library stacks until Father showed just how rough a
sport it could be. (ibid., 27)

Nahal Naficy’s work is rhetorically polar to Jennifer Hamilton’s distanced account and
assertion that the awkwardness of her dissertation fieldwork was overcome by the time of her
managerial role in the HapMap study for which Deepa Reddy was the liason to the Houston
Gujarati community. There are labyrinths named but not pursued in Hamilton’s overview,
particularly the youthful attitude towards advocacy (“a fairly consistent state of outrage” which
stunted the openness to ethnography), the ways in which “legal actors deploy the idioms of
indigeneity in novel and unexpected ways” (referencing Elizabeth Povinelli’s work with advocates of aboriginal land rights in Australia; she might have cited as well Alcida Ramos’ work on “the hyperreal Indian” in Brazil); and the way her first project dealt with people “loosely affiliated via bureaucratic conventions, welfarist programs, spatio-legal practices such as police surveillance, in relationships, multiculturalist policies, my own ethnographic gaze, fraught with a history of association with anthropology.” One longs for some reflection on this association and how it is variously negotiated. One thinks of the term “public ethnography” which anthropologist Barbara Tedlock finds allows the Mohawk in the Buffalo area to take some ownership of what they do together with ethnographers while strongly eschewing any reference to “anthropology.” Social relations are indeed important given many troubled histories.

Naficy’s ballet (one thinks of Derrida’s choreographies) poses the pressing question, “could it be that what we didn’t say . . . was what we saved”? This aesthetic — political, philosophical, stylistic — of restraint, tact, self preservation, and recombinatorial attention delightfully upsets expectations on all sides, particularly where the call for transparency and information can entrap rather than be productive of accountability. The “narrator function” of Naficy’s text is a split or oscillating persona, maybe even a nervous one in anthropologist Michael Taussig’s sense (expressive of collective nervous systems). On the one hand, the narrator is a picaresque figure, someone to whom things happen in the movement of life and who reports on this in an experiential voice. On the other hand, the narrator function is a voice of resistance, for instance, to enrollment by a human rights activist into a publicity function or her data bank. The anxiety of the narrator (like that of Everyperson today) is with the functioning of propaganda semiotics of both journalism and political functionaries, and the recognition that such semiotics rarely leaves space for anyone’s actual life. This “actual life” is the ethnographic beloved, to use a Persian poetic idiom: elusive, tempting, motivating, moving, seductive, unpinnable, hence alive (ticklish in Zizek’s idiom, abjecting in Kristeva’s).

A second such lively ethnographic object or function is the tracking of the mystery of the political: the indirection of language and action, the dispersal of power, the functioning of gossip, the blood-sucking (khun-asham) metaphorics — Dracula, the noble Count and the savage mind within, noble savage emerging into the typewriter world). Persian political speech is laced with a rich semiosis of infiltrating infections and corruptions, paranoias, conspiracy theories, and affective reactions to obvious wrongs hidden in the open of official legitimacy and moral illegitimacy (committed by various sides: the previous monarchy, the current Islamic republic, the Americans, the British). In these pervasive modalities of interpersonal relations and leveraging of proximity to power (in Washington in this case), an immobilizing net of power operates, which the ethnographer wishes to resist and chart, avoiding becoming either a supplier of “packets of knowledge” in the pundit flea market, nor a trafficker in such colorful and emotion-seizing accusations.

In this “landscape of affects,” a third ethnographic object, as Naficy writes in her longer work, Dracula names a modality of “character rot,” the Count Dracula within who is the carrier of a glorious past living unnaturally in the present, out of joint with the times, dysfunctionally. This is both the three millennium old heritage of the ancient Empire and also the reinvention of the thirteen hundred year old heritage of early Islam. It is this that is evoked in the ethnographic backstory of Reading Lolita in Tehran. This latter book was conceived and written in the disjunctive double moment of, on the one hand, the heady aftermath of the Beijing conference on women (generating feminist workshops across the Middle East), and, on the other hand, the election campaign of President Khatami, which Azar Nafisi and her group felt was not even worth participating in, so alienated had they become. The first indicates that the reading group in the memoir was not quite so unique, that there was a more widespread movement, a sense of shared problematics. The second indexes a disjunction within even the progressive political currents in Iran who thought their time had come. Times out of joint are out of joint yet again when Nahal Naficy is asked questions in Washington a decade later, questions premised on the freezing of that moment of alienation or of the earlier moment of Terror and repression, asking whether
friends and family survived (many did, many did not, and Nahal wants to get on with the liveliness of her young life, not the aging Dracula of past wounds).

Part of the resistance performed in this text is the back staged, but ever present, historicizing refusals of essentialized cultural accounts, and the front staged eye for detailing and holding to account the tragicomic semiotics of emotions and affects, the extraordinary overlay of warmth of expression that often hides an underlying anxiety, steely intolerance, and devious mind-game manipulations. This complex of moves, double-binds, conspiracies, infections, cultural encounters, out-of-joint temporalities, like Peterson’s “phantom epistemologies”, Breglia’s “work-break” intensities, Chung’s promissory capitalism lodged within non-linear assemblages, Reddy’s enrollment into being a producer of the culture she was to negotiate, and Hamilton’s rhetorically fine-tuned indigeneities, affects of outrage, and fraught histories—all these are central Moebius Strip-like topologies proliferant in contemporary life. They have been thematized in social theory and philosophical frames (Beck’s second order modernization with its political bipolar mood swings between hype and cynicism; Zizek’s logics of cynicism in which we understand that the official stories are false and yet we act as though they were merely per-versions, temporizing diversions at which we laugh and rail as we nonetheless perform as they ask; Adorno’s wry observation that we are all in a culture industry now and can only impotently protest or extract surplus enjoyment and profit.)

These are social facts, complicated far beyond kula and potlatch, but for all that no less “hard” social determinants and effects, whose repression only causes them to reappear playing peek-a-boo, fort-da.

II

The Rice Mark & Anthropologies of the 1980s

There is a Rice mark. I think it most productive to read these six dissertation offerings in ways that do not satirize older anthropologies and instead build upon, and extend into a new era, a recursive series of intellectual conversations and experiments: the Rice Circle; the inaugural editing of the journal Cultural Anthropology; the writing and debate surrounding Anthropology as Cultural Critique (ACC) and Writing Culture (WC); the Rice Center for Cultural Studies and its six year long hosting of a Rockefeller Residential Fellowship program; the decade long Late Editions Project; the follow-on volume Critical Anthropology Now (a decade after ACC and WC); the engagement, with the arrival of James Faubian, with Foucauldian thematics (both in the idiom of classical Greek philosophemes, Faubion bringing his ethnographic expertise as a scholar of Greece, and in the translation and codification of the Foucauldian corpus, Faubion being one of the editors of collections in English) as well as his ethnography of fundamentalist discursivity in Waco, Texas; the initiation of conversations regarding both transnational (China and East Asian) cultural studies (with the. albeit brief, presence of Ben Lee) and more persistently anthropology and science studies through the hiring of first Sharon Traweek and then Chris Kelty and Hannah Landecker.

This is not an occasion to write out this history, only to try to distill a five indexical features that both mark the productions of the Rice department and illustrate the spiral nature of knowledge production.

(1) Cross-discipline experiments: The Rice Circle was a faculty discussion group composed of a core of (in principle) two philosophers, two historians, two religion scholars, two literature scholars, as well as the anthropology faculty (which included the comparative literature scholar Kathryn Milun, whose brief was to help engage the critical philosophies that arose with interest in third world and postcolonial literatures, poststructuralist and deconstruction reading strategies and whose own work was on modernist projects of settlement via terra nullus claims
(that land in the Americas and Australia was empty and available for the seizing because no recognized government was present) and agoraphobia inducing empty centers of reconstructed post-World War I and II European and United States cities).

The agenda of the Rice Circle was cross-disciplinary engagements on annual themes. One of the more coherent themes was the comparison and even stronger contrasts between the practices and theories deployed by psychotherapy and ethnography, precisely because psychodynamics and psychoanalytic hermeneutics (in its various forms) had so infused the humanities. This included one year a collaboration with family systems practitioners at the Texas Medical Center, watching and discussing together tapes of family consultations and interventions, providing one another with contrasting observations and interpretations. Somewhat more contentious were efforts to explore critical theory across fields of contextualizing social science and reconstructive canonical intellectual history focused on iconic individuals and making sense of their argumentation.

(2) **Re-reading, recontextualizing, and reformatting** for the contemporary world the modalities of *anthropology as cultural critique* developed at various historical conjunctures (World War I, the Great Depression, World War II) and engagements with adjacent practices: (a) social anthropology in a generational shift between nineteenth century grand comparative work and twentieth century detailed fieldwork; (b) 1930s-40s documentary and photographic realism, surrealism and the Collège de Sociologie, and Frankfurt School schools retooling of Freud and Marx for mass politics, mass propaganda, and mass consumer society; (c) a generational shift again in the 1960s involving the integration of political economy and cultural analyses as well as the reopening of questions of how understandings of subjectivation and subjectivities rework older notions of affect, emotion and personhood; (d) an agenda of continued experimentation for the 1980s. The subtitle of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: The Human Sciences in an Experimental Moment*, signified both meanings of experiment: modernist experimental art forms, and the increasingly de-idealized and non-uniform understandings of the methods of the experimental sciences as analogues of, and subjects for, validity in the communicative and human sciences. If *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* focused on *fieldwork reports* as the crucibles for social theory formation and epistemological testing grounds for cultural and social critique, *Writing Culture* renewed discussions about composition of and rhetorical forms in ethnographic writing, again using a cross-disciplinary conversation, in this case, with historians and literature scholars.

My own experiments, with Mehdi Abedi, in *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition*, paying attention to the weave of oral, literate and visual media in pre and post revolution, and domestic and diasporic, Iranian social and cultural contestations and transformations were illustrative. So was Kim Fortun’s *Advocacy after Bhopal*. In her dissertation version, she literally wrote different chapters in the different rhetorical genres required by the communicative situations at issue. The intent was to performatively display and explore modalities of making form fit and interrogate content, and explore how form made content. In the vastly reworked, and now comparative and cross-national, book, these genres were integrated with a matrix of analytic questions into one of the most powerful and well-tuned critical ethnographies of the contemporary “new world order.” Although glib critics of *Writing Culture* have often insisted that the Rice mark was merely about writing and not about fieldwork, neither of these ethnographies can be dismissed as being either just about writing or lacking in attention to the materiality of political and economic issues.

(3) **Reinventing the ethnographic interview form.** The *Late Editions Project*, a series of topical volumes over the course of the decade of the 1990s experimented with paired collective editorial workshops (including all authors) to plan each year’s thematic topic and then to workshop draft papers. Form was meant to be determined by the richness of ethnographic content, and could vary from lightly edited transcripts to *New Yorker* style profiles, French style *entretien* in which questions and answers are reworked until each participant is satisfied with the polished product, to even, in one case, a collage of documents. The topics moved from directly
topical concerns formatted in standard categories — newly perilous states in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Cold War, technoscientific imaginaries, media, and corporations — to topics responsive to, intensified by, and reformatted by the dramatic revolution in media of communication with the arrival of the World Wide Web in 1994. For a review of how the shifts in writing style over the decade tracked the shift in media consciousness, see the final volume.

(4) **The shift in anthropology’s primary interlocutors** from being in the humanities (1980s) to science studies (1990s-2000s). By “reading for the ethnography” I have noted the explicit reference points to science studies in the six dissertation projects even though none of the projects are explicitly framed or disciplined as science studies. The department in the early 2000s affirmed this connection by hiring Chris Kelty and Hannah Landecker from the Program in Science, Technology and Society at MIT, though they have now moved on to the University of California at Los Angeles.

(5) **Interventions in academia and the world outside academia.** The Rice Center for Cultural Studies, which I directed for six years, attempted to foster conversation among social science and humanities approaches in a global context. The Rockefeller Residency Fellowships obtained by the Center were a mechanism to bring to campus both international scholars and representatives of topics and approaches not well represented on the faculty, with the hope that their presence would encourage the hiring of people with such skills. This way, and in supporting faculty reading groups, the Center helped foster the creation on campus of expertises in feminism (Jane Gallop), film studies (Tshombe Gabriel, Hamid Naficy), African studies (Atieno Odhiambo, D.S. Masolo), comparative religion (Masolo, Anne Klein) and the like.

The journal, *Cultural Anthropology*, under Marcus’ inaugural editorship also attempted to reach out to contributors in others fields than anthropology in order to enrich the discussions in both directions. It signalled its ambitions physically in the “little journal” format of uncut edges and rag-textured covers. This has been reinvigorated by current editors Kim and Mike Fortun, physically returning to the little journal format now in color; configuring content and topical foci sections and marking the spiral of knowledge formation with reminders for each article of previous ones on the same topic; instituting an active web-site; and building a public board of advisor-interlocutors outside of academic anthropology.

Three arenas outside pure academia have been of continuous interest: architecture, forms of writing, and ethnography inside large corporations. Jamer Hunt, a graduate of a 1980s cohort has built a career in design worlds at the Philadelphia University of the Arts and the Parsons School of Design at the New School for Social Research. His dissertation on Sylvia Bataille was one of the dissertations around which our experimental writing discussions revolved, along with dissertations by Jeff Petrie (a highly evocative collage of meditations and ethnographic accounts of the Christian minority rebel groups in northern Burma), Ryan Bishop (a novel about the cultural horizon at the time of Beethoven’s death in Vienna), and David Syring (short stories about the culture of the hill country in Texas). Hunt’s dissertation, he joked at the time, was a dissertation with a missing center and a recursive spiraling structure: Sylvia Bataille was still alive, but elusive, not willing to be a subject, yet her moving locus in a network of celebrities and productions made the topic still eminently explorable and configurable. The work of ethnographers within corporate worlds has become the object of discussion in a volume edited by Rice graduate Melissa Cefkin, *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter: Reflections on Research In and Of Corporations* [Berghahn 2009]. She is one of at least three Rice students who have worked in the cultures of expertise and communities of practice of corporate worlds.

III

**Design Studio Style Ethnographic Training: four takes**

What do these six plus dissertation projects tell us about pedagogies for incubating such contemporary and future ethnographies? Dissertation advisors Marcus, Fortun, Kelty and Faubion have four different “takes:” Marcus has been formulating a design studio approach he
has dubbed “para-sites”; Fortun deploys shifting figure/ground tactics for dealing with open systems understandings of social life; Faubion approaches ethics topologically; and Kelty explores recursive public spheres using experimental field tactics. Kelty and Fortun draw explicitly on anthropology of science approaches, while Marcus has long acknowledged the productivity of anthropology’s engagement with science studies, and Faubion remains skeptical.

**Para-Site Modules.**

The term “para-site” has been morphing into a design studio style protocol to make something ethnographic arise in the artificial setting of a university seminar. Earlier it had referred to spaces and discourses existing in the world apart from anthropology that performed the critical reflections that social science often claims to perform. The inversion is dialectically, and reversibly, dynamic: site becomes par-site, para-site becomes site, generating in the movements back and forth new insights and perspectives.

Stimulated by Michel Serres’ 1980 book *The Parasite*, the penultimate volume of the *Late Editions* series was called *Para-Sites: A Casebook Against Cynical Reason* (2000). In subsequent articles, George Marcus and Douglas Holms modified the term to “para-ethnography,” picking up the argument from *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* that the ethnographic style of cultural critique depends upon the locating of critiques in the play or dialogue of discourses in the world, rather than in the inventive genius of the essayist-anthropologist. (In *Debating Muslims*, Abedi and I put on display the internal cultural resources of critique within Islamic social worlds as well as cross-culturally in a global world, and the *Late Editions Project* was premised on finding interviewees jointly interested in puzzling out the ways in which the changing world has outrun the pedagogies in which practitioners as well as analysts have been trained.) The dialectic of Enlightenment is still with us, if often *sotto voce* — “against cynical reason”, and in the previous volume (paranoia) “within reason” — reconstructing social worlds, working through the problems we have created, finding new material compositions within which to live.

At Irvine, Marcus has turned these reflections into a true studio-design technique, and the term para-site has taken on the literal meaning of a space alongside, and different from, an actual fieldsite. The idea is to take mid-dissertation projects and bring them with some of the interlocutors back into the university. As simple a format as a round-table discussion will do. The dissertation writer brings in several people with different perspectives and standpoints from the discursive spaces in which the research occurs and designs the discussion in such a way that other academic colleagues can get a taste of the problematics and bring their perspectives, disciplinary practices, and insights to the table. This is a more dimensional modality of design studio technique than the usual workshopping of work in progress where the sources of insight come from essentially one discipline or from academia alone.

It is moreover a conceptual framing for what occasionally happens in wonderfully explosive cross-disciplinary conferences, or in courses where non-academics are invited into the classroom where they can interact with one another and academics outside their normally overly scripted roles. In an MIT course I taught with historian of science Charles Weiner, on Superfund toxic waste cleanup sites in Massachusetts, we brought together regulators and activists in a neutral space, sparking unusual conversations. In another MIT example, an unplanned but pedagogically powerful explosion occurred when a public health school risk analyst was challenged by other actors over risk models, precautionary principles, incentive structures, and bad faith of high profit extractive corporations with whom she wanted to have friendly collaborative engagements. Both activists and watchdog academics violently objected that the set up was such a uneven power relation that the risk analyst was inevitably enrolled by the corporation into their Latourian network of power. This was a panel organized mid-dissertation fieldwork on a high-stakes conflict between oil and gas interests and health researchers collecting data on endocrine disrupters. There is no polite academic seminar resolution.
Para-site modules have the potential to focus attention on analytic and fieldwork dynamics in ways that reconfigure the usual academic training environment. It is an experimental setting, not in the sense of “experimental subjects” of IRB concern, but in the sense of working with a model of elements that can be taken out of their routine settings, and placed with in an interactive space in which participants can be reflective along with the ethnographer, and outside the normal ethnographer-interlocutor routines. These are in effect micro-public spheres in a quasi-but-non-consensual Habermasian sense, spaces for reflection and debate, that can reinvigorate the modalities of ethnographic cultural critique.

**Figure/Ground Shifts in Open Systems**

Kim Fortun teaches a course in Advanced Cultural Analysis that foregrounds the experimental nature of ethnographic methods attuned to the languages of the scientists, lawyers, public health officials, and other professionals with whom she works. For her project on toxicogenomics and her collaboration on a project on asthma and toxic accumulations, she must pay attention to the ways in which large data sets from multiple disciplines are statistically manipulated together to find diagnostic correlations or even potential causalities. She watches how a range of technical prostheses and information resources turn oscillation between figure and ground into routines of discovery. The shared languages of ‘open system’ and ‘complexity’ as used by environmental and computer scientists, military strategists and financial analysts provide grounds for recognizing epistemic encounters, and for awareness that even well-intentioned ways of representing disaster easily play into the workings of disaster.

This is a dramatically new set of terms of analysis for ethnography, drawn from the new sciences, technologies, and awarenesses they bring. And yet, there are resonances here of Kris Peterson’s uncertain but powerful statistics, her complexities transmuted into conspiracy plots, as well as Nahal Naficy’s “cultural encounters” across cultures of expertise, communities of practice, and factions of mutual suspicion, now forced to work together. These operate in disasters such the Union Carbide chemical release disaster in Bhopal, where how the statistics were collected dictated the kinds of medical and other help the state was willing to provide, one of the topics of Fortun’s innovative ethnography, *Advocacy after Bhopal*. They operate as well in new informatics fields, such as toxicogenomics, where data banks are played against one another without being able to predict the non-linear relations in the assemblies, as Jae Chung put it in her fieldwork on another informatics field, that of venture capital.

Fortun’s students’ projects in her Advanced Cultural Analysis course are not merely pedagogical sites, but further experimental spaces for the ambitious agenda of understanding open systems that facilitate and channel, constrain, and shape our lives, desires, potentials, and imaginations. There is recognition here of both the transitional object mobility of ethnographic work (scanning across virtual matrices, filtering varying epistemic objects through different screens) and also the anxieties of coordinating multiplayer simultaneous experimentation.

**Coordinations and Compositions of Matter**

Kelty’s pedagogy, similarly, directs graduate students to do experimental ethnographies with (rather than “of”) computer scientists who work on electronic voting machine technologies, or with wet/dry nanotechnologists worrying how to design safe nanoparticles. This is part of a larger project of understanding how the ecology of media within which we all now work can be fashioned into open recursive public spheres that allow social groups to intervene in the infrastructures of their own facilitation and production, recursively adjusting, experimenting, changing their features. “Ethnographic fieldwork, Kelty asserts, shares [Linux’s planned incompleteness] over against a commitment to research design that sets questions in advance and for which fieldwork is mere data-gathering.” This needs to be understood by IRB institutions.
if they are to work with, rather than against, ethnographic creativity and utility. It is also at the heart of much of scientific, bioengineering, and computer science activity. Kelty’s book, *Two Bits*, on the history of free and open source software is both an account of the contemporary history of our new media infrastructures, and even more importantly an invitation to experiment further with open source, with interoperabilities, with different functionalities. Since the early 1990s, computer scientists have played key roles in the recursive public sphere debates over the architecture of the internet and whether it will or will not be subject to “regulatory capture” by corporations, or plain old fencing of the commons. “More often than not,” Kelty observes, “they referred to . . . issues that were not part of everyday practice as ‘ethical’, meaning not moralism but rather the “fateful consequences of technical design.”

**Connectivity Ethics and Topologically Modulated Comparisons**

*Connectivities* is a term of our times, an electricity trope now advanced to the computer and Internet age, where again many worry about the interface and the ethics of connectivity affecting personality development and addiction (between on-line and Real Life), accountability, verifiability, integrity (between performative self and masquing self), inequalities (between those with high speed access and those with none or few permissions), exclusions (across language interfaces), and so on.

Faubion amusingly (wrongly, I think) takes up science studies as coming with “epistemological naivety and ontological freshness of face.” Ontology, however, is ‘as it is coded’ – a term of art in computer science that inverts the traditional philosophical meaning. Ontologies are the architectural choices programmers enable or block. They are only as fresh faced as the newest patch or upgrade, usually layered over generations of legacy code, layerings and work-arounds that generate bugs in the machine.

More fruitfully, Faubion moves to more twentieth-century mathematical grounds of topology, triangulation, scale transformations (what works at the quantum and nano scales operate quite differently at the physics of larger scales), frictions (also contradictions, wars of position, or even open warfare) among different scale-making projects, and established versus potential metrics (or virtual models).

When Faubion invokes terms like “telos” (Old Believer vocabulary) and “purpose” (operationalist vocabulary), he seems to slip back into a neo-liberal Foucauldian recursion of individual anthropologists without coordinating platforms or collaborations, surely a mode of connectivity (like the files of an early Mac or pc floppy that only allowed limited information at a time) that has long since been upgraded, thanks to the patient debugging, recoding, and mentoring of the six dissertation projects discussed here by himself and the other pedagogues. Indeed Faubion’s own *Shadows and Lights of Waco* is a project of experimental writing and ethnography of times out of joint in the best Rice tradition.

**IV**

**Conclusion: The Returns of Ethnography**

The complexities of our times require renewed ethnographic skills. In reading for the ethnography of these recent dissertations and pedagogical projects, I have stressed the interfaces with anthropological studies of the contemporary sciences and technologies. Cultural vocabularies and social understandings of today’s worlds increasingly draw analogies from the new technosciences of the 1990s and 2000s, especially from the life sciences and information sciences, instead of from the mechanical, physical and physiological sciences, which provided
much of the functionalist and structuralist imagery of the early twentieth century. At issue are not just new metaphors or better methods but a return to some of the most fundamental moral and cultural issues that anthropology and cultural analysis have long addressed: issues of class differences, culture wars, social warrants, social reform and social justice; of mental health and subjectivation; of democratic checks and balances, institutions of ethical debate, regulation and the slow negotiation of international law; of access to information and the formation of new kinds of public spheres. Cultural analysis, based upon ethnographic empirical work, has become increasingly relational, plural and aware of its own historicity, the contextual nature of its own concepts and tools. Its openness to the historical moments in which it is put to work makes it capable like experimental systems in science of creating new epistemic things. Return to fundamental moral and cultural issues, like the return to religion which Jacques Derrida points out in his commentary on Kant’s notion of religion at the limits of reason, is never a return to the same, but more like respiration, a return after taking a break, a renewal of inquiry, a spiral of knowledge production and of understanding.

We need perhaps today a more informatics and biological imagination. Both biology and information are lively, ever escaping their temporary restraints and regulators, creating anew. Ethnography today is thus held to a higher standard than ever: it is a matter of opening the simplified accounts, making accountability possible at different granularities, signposting the labyrinths of possible inquiries for their relevance, their points of no return, their conceptual reruns, of reinvigorating civil society and its recursive public spheres.

Just consider again the six dissertation projects on archeology, humanitarian development organizations, venture capital, bioethics, justice forums, and rights NGOs in Washington. To transform the gaze from archeology as reconstruction of pre-history from material remains to relations between labor, communities, tourism, illegal markets and nationalism is not to denigrate the former, but to put it within more realistic contexts and evaluation vantage points. Likewise the problems of information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom in venture capital markets, drug discovery and therapy regimes, and bioethics are made more, not less, tractable by understanding the sources of non-linear interactions that are overly simplified by various algorithms and models, useful as heuristics but leading to trouble if relied upon as if incontestable. The illusions of power and control through proximity to imperial power refract illusions of power and control of larger organizations operating on the basis of heuristic statistics and narratives created to simply impose order on lively realities. So too with the projects of the pedagogues: protecting voting machine technologies from fraud or systematic malfunction, figuring out the alliances necessary for safe new nanotechnologies, working with the mysterious accumulations and interactions of numerous toxicities.

These are the challenges of contemporary ethnography, and in the pedagogies of learning to deal with them, para-site design modules can be important experimental systems, as are real world experiments with recursive public spheres, or methodologial ones with multi-disciplinary efforts to engage different kinds of informatics of massive data sets whose interconnections cannot be simply controlled. The analogies from worlds of science studies are as often not with the science per se but with the necessity for scientists to work across disciplinary and subdisciplinary cultures as well as with the markets and polities in which their technologies must be implemented and their inquiries supported. It is those interactions that are both themselves emergent social worlds (the very subject of anthropology) and analogues for the kinds of interactivity that ethnography requires.

Finally, none of this is entirely new, and old ethnographies provide valuable resources for understanding changes across time of landscapes, ecologies, economies, polities, jural systems, and many other social things. What makes ethnographies more or less valuable in any restudy or effort to refunction them in new mosaics of knowledge is the depth and breadth of their ethnographic detail. That remains true today for new ethnographies as well, where there is often a temptation to paper over thin ethnography with theoretical abstractions and handwaving. Thin
or thick, ethnography grows spirally, returning again and again picking up new insights as questions, analyses, and theoretical frames change.

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