

UNPLUGGED

Doing Ethnography: Walking, Talking, and Writing

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As arguably, the first ethnographer Herodotus (1987, p. 171 in Willis & Tordman, 2002, p. 394) said in the first ethnography, *The History*: “so far it is my eyes, my judgement, and my searching that speaks these words to you”.

This short paper is not exactly a manifesto for ethnography. That has already been done several times (see, e.g., Willis & Tordman, 2002), as if doing ethnography supposed constant additional justifications to counter objectivist criticisms. It is rather aimed to engage rapidly with some of the facets of this curious practice of research, which proposes to find the portal to a strange place in which we are strangers, and say something relevant about this place at the outset of a more or less readable journey (Malinowski, 1938). This is the topic of the four papers of this unplugged section: being a stranger; finding a spot from which to see things going on, engaging in a form of writing that will talk from and to the strange people we will have lived close by for a while. Understanding the power of closeness, of intimacy, the evocative strength of writing ethnographically, of researching a tiny path in the inextricable jungle of social life. And grasping that “nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them” (Behar, 2014, p. 8).

Ethnographic practice indeed raises controversies related to its very essence: Mills and Ratcliffe show that ethnography can be seen according to diverse lenses, either as a “license to explore the curious, the messy, and the unexpected” (2012, p. 147), as a sensibility to be cultivated and experienced, or as an “explicit and rigorous set of methods and approaches (...)” defending a “robust, disciplined empiricism” (Mills & Ratcliffe, 2012, p. 148). The decidedly growing market for qualitative research is indeed likely to trigger contradictory rhetorics and imaginaries about ethnography, and how it is being appropriated or rejected across a range of fields and contexts.

How can one do ethnography *today*? Clearly, it is almost accepted as a fact that lack of time and increasing ideals of productivism and the pressure for ‘academic capitalism’

(Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) moves research designs away from exploratory and long-term fieldwork, toward more tightly defined research frameworks involving less time. Ethnography as “discovery” (Mills & Ratcliffe, 2012, p. 149), whereby the researcher spends the necessary time to walk and let things happen, seems to be sacrificed to the benefit of ethnography as *discipline*, a less involving and costly approach, including the ‘four weeks’ ethnography, or the long intimate interview. This possible renouncement is unfortunate and vexing for those who still try to define their research craft as an engaged practice (see Rahmouni El Idrissi, Bougherra, & Dsouza, 2020). Keeping distance from high-speed ‘drive-by’ ethnography or ethnographically informed fieldwork carried out within predefined research schedules is absolutely necessary for defending ethnographic imagination. This is why I would rather suggest that we scholars in social sciences should apply the fundamental ethnographer’s lesson: rather than risking to import concepts or categories and to artificially implant them on a slippery reality that we fundamentally know nothing special about (because we have seen it from afar or disincarnated data), we are always better off seriously and patiently observing *ourselves* what people do (Debaene, 2017), and then write about this observation with imagination, seizing the act of writing as being integral to the method of ethnography. While recognizing that the current ‘social’ economy of research in most institutions concretely prevents researchers from spending long periods of time on the field, I think that social sciences, if they are interested in saying something relevant about people’s lives, should invite scholars (especially the nascent ones) to experience what an ethnography can do...an experience that engages “a corporeal knowledge that provides a practical comprehension of the world quite different from the act of conscious decoding that is normally designated by the idea of comprehension” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 135). This is surely what the four contributions of this Unplugged section strongly illustrate, based on current or recently defended doctoral ethnographies conducted at the Océ Research Centre-Emlyon Business School,

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Montpellier University, and Esade Business School¹: it is possible to do long and deep ethnographic work; however, that practice engages the researcher morally, corporeally, and cognitively.

The purpose of the ethnographic investigative effort is indeed moral: speaking to the reader's sensitivity as much as to her intelligence (Griaule 1957), rekindles the experience of the material and physical thickness of the world, the concrete value of concrete facts, all the more necessary in a period of fake news and post-truth, where the fascination for images and quick descriptions and assumptions is too often a substitute to the tangible and plausible adherence of everyday life; how can we say something significant to people (be they students, workers, journalists, etc.) without having ourselves seen, touched, and felt the thickness and fragility of the world? Times are in need of truly engaged investigations and request to capture 'what has actually happened' as Barthes was putting (1967). Ethnography renders possible the creation of a 'poetics of fieldwork,' not a constraining and tight methodology, but a whole of aesthetic and formal possibilities that will allow the researcher to write in the language of the world she/he wishes to know better, rather than with an estranged vocabulary following the academic formalist rituals. If that is done, ethnography will be widely read, which is not the case of a huge majority of social science research, which remains hidden behind the walls of often off-putting and disheartening journals and conferences. Ethnography also permits to exorcize the risk of abstraction, by filtering concepts through actively involving bodies (Rahmouni El Idrissi & Courpasson, 2019), transforming the peculiarities of each encounter in a form of resistance to any premature generalization or 'totalization' to follow Claude Levi-Strauss. Ethnography is also somehow the science of vacant spirits and fleeting attention, whereby the researcher allows herself to be carried along by the inevitable unexpected requests of the terrain, in order to just stay on the lookout and grab the impromptu in the apparent routine of detached observation. An attitude that makes the ethnographer *available*, because she/he is *roaming* in the field, in a version of fieldwork that is at times more passive and pensive than active, but keeps the researcher's eyes open to strangeness and imponderables. And that permits to grasp the detail that counts, the gesture that makes the difference, the word that will help understanding, at the corner of a conversation, why certain doings are meaningful and others are not in the very place where they are done.

¹ Océmylon research centre [<http://oce.em-lyon.com/>] is the centre for critical and ethnographic research at emlyon business school. The institutions from which the four papers are originated are all members of the Ethnography Workshop network, created in 2011: emlyon business school, Cardiff Business School, de Vrije University, Esade business school, Montpellier University, Dauphine University, Louvain University.

The consequence of such an approach to fieldwork is to generate knowledge that would not miss human thickness, and could give to social sciences an impetus to an empathic move, a desire to feel the same as those observed, emotions, memories, to be part of them, even to "coincide with others" (Demanze, 2019, p. 138). The authenticity of knowledge in social sciences largely depends, I believe, on researchers' interiorization of what people on the field experience and know themselves (see Ellinger, 2020; Roussey, 2020). There is an epistemological necessity to co-feel others' experience, thereby transforming the 'roamer' in an engaged actor. This suggests that such a truly *human* social science is not reserved to social scientists but includes in a wider circle of investigation and writing forms, journalists, film makers, and writers. Compelling examples of that necessary inclusion/connection are numerous: embedded with the mafia, Roberto Saviano, in his book *Gomorra, dans l'empire de la camorra* (2007), dissects from within the functioning of a mafia organization, thereby rekindling a longstanding tradition of immersive experiences of investigation; Laurent Demanze (2019) also mentions for instance Nelly Bly, interned in an asylum in 1887 to craft a series of clandestine reports, or Maryse Choisy, infiltrated in a brothel in 1928 who wrote the book *Un mois chez les filles* (1928). These are stunning exercises of *corporeal* understanding, because physically enduring what field people endure gives the body of the ethnographer an access to the abstract language of what remains a foreign experience, intimately testifying of what people do and how they do it, to give a "proof by the body" (Demanze, 2019, p. 139; Rahmouni El Idrissi & Courpasson, 2019), enacting a flesh and blood practice of research (Wacquant, 2005). The result of this personal posture is that ethnographic writing is not done first *for* the people, but *from* them, from their everyday experience and how it translates into a text. The other result is that all that intimate and embedded knowledge is hardly possible when research is done behind a desk. So let us leave our desks and take the streets...!

Ethnographic research, as well as *in situ* fieldwork more generally, are therefore instances of "reflexive socialization" (Piette, 1996, pp. 68–72), a conscious work of the observer who must both harness emotional relationships and develop an introspective acuity to learn from the transformational process she/he necessarily undergoes, because of her constant and durable presence on the field (Dodier & Baszanger, 1997; also see Sanson & Le Breton, 2020). Ethnographers need to go through the thickness of communities and cultures they observe to being able to write what Levi-Strauss called a 'total ethnography,' to discern structures in the manifold of insignificant encounters, talks, routines, and doings that every group fabricates in everyday life.

Cold and warm writing

L'âge de l'enquête (the age of investigation): This is the stunning expression used by Emile Zola to depict a 19th century overheating in an investigative fever; between the boom of documentaries, the invention of the detective novel, and the parallel development of social sciences and naturalistic inquiry 'on the field' (Demanze, 2019). This was the moment when fieldwork was instituted as a privileged mode of relating to the world, as well as a 'state of mind' and a major narrative paradigm. The 20th century has seen the crisis of this common language between literature and social sciences, and an emancipation of the latter from the language and purpose they shared with the novel: building the arguments of certain truths about people's lives through practicing *writing as a method*. Social science has spent much effort and energy to erect cognitive and formal walls between what doing science was supposed to mean, and what portion of rigor and seriousness the writing of a novel or of a newspaper article was deemed to neglect. How many times in respected conferences can we hear the remark, 'this is not serious, this is journalistic knowledge!' or 'this is literature!'...

Contrary to what these sometimes arrogant and fallacious comments may involve, it may well be that we witness nowadays a new moment of reconciliation (Demanze, 2019; Jablonka, 2017). At the crossroad of social sciences, journalism, and 'black novels,' the model of the inquiry, in the form of fieldwork, is today a major form and imaginary, which rekindles the beauty and necessity of the investigative pathway, in its hesitations, trial-and-error, doubts and humility in front of the actual *terrain* and its diverse constituencies. This possible renewed conciliation between the cold and serious world of science and the warmly poetic and 'free' world of literature is crucial to understand because we live in a very opaque moment of our history: fake news, post-truth allegations, and the precariousness of knowledge strongly call for a return of the *fact* (if not of the *evidence* and the obsessive quest for positivistic forms of social science) for encouraging the passion for investigating the concrete, socially and corporeally embedded everyday life of people, instead of relying on 'distant data.' The 21st century is marked by the contradictory split of reality: multiple competing truths are on the scene, a crisis of certainty has been opened and is opened every day at the discovery of the 'news,' largely converging with Baumanian pessimistic accounts about current processes of growing social liquefaction (Bauman, 2000). In the midst of this moral maze, the strength of tiny and insignificant stories is revealed again, the story of all those people 'who do not have history' as Edmond de Goncourt said. Saving the mundane and small traces of supposedly minor existences becomes the fulcrum of the converging mission of social sciences and literature (Courpasson, 2019).

This is, I think, where ethnography gets today some power and enhanced credibility: it is indeed a way to highlight the actual symptoms of contemporary concern about the instability and precariousness of life and fates, to show that concrete everyday life is a practical and discursive construction that is being revealed and constituted in the very movement of investigation, *together with* the observation. In a 6 months ethnography I did in 1989 in a chemical plant, I realized the symbolic centrality of one of the workshops,² where workers were dealing with dangerous and above all, dirty and extremely stinking products that were harshly affecting workers' bodies. The curious fact I had to realize was that dirtiness was the surprising key to prestige in this site: a whole peculiar vocabulary was used throughout the plant (composed of 10 other workshops of different kinds, working on less 'problematic' products) to describe the workers spending days and nights in the dirty workshop: warriors, zombies, wacko bunch of extremists, all terms notifying the cultural difference and distance together with a collective historical construction of the admiration that all workers in all units and departments of the plant [including engineers and administrative staff] had for these zombies. Wandering by night through the alleys, sharing coffee breaks and snacks with the team, and capturing their words and gestures as well as complicit glazes and conspiratorial silences at the sight of my clothes ('look at the little sociologist and his light-colored jacket (...) I would not see the jacket next week'), gave me the sense of the cardinal importance of this very workshop's territory to understand the social structure of the plant and its hectic pathway through compulsory strategic modernization. I had to smell the place, to feel the symbolic and unobtrusive power of the product that was always there, snooping around and flowing malevolently and lazily through the conduits, always susceptible to explode and damage the people and the equipment, also seeing the workers' own corporeal scars, proudly shown like gleaming medals, the pictures in the locker room (naked women and wounded soldiers, side by side) to disclose some fragments of truth about the social construction of a 'culture of prestige' in this plant. Ethnography is key to disclose these tiny splinters of truth, relinquishing, at least in part, the generic and often haughty and proud pretense of scientific interpretation, favoring the snippets of ordinary knowledge, of ordinary gestures and efforts to capture the meaning of what people do. Even more importantly, ethnographic inquiry has the power to be *enacted* (Wacquant, 2015), that is to say, to make the most of the researcher's engagement and presence, and taking advantage of the fact that, like every social agent, s/he comes to

² By workshop in this context, I talk about huge metallic buildings around and within which run kilometers of pipelines and walkways. Each workshop is 'inhabited' by teams of 12 workers including one foreman, working in a 24/7 production line.

know her topic and her concrete object of investigation *by body*; and s/he can leverage carnal comprehension by deepening his social and symbolic insertion into the [social, geographical, occupational] universe s/he studies (Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Rahmouni El Idrissi et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2015). This means that we social scientists can and probably *should* work, while on the field, to become 'vulnerable observers' in our practice of investigation ; the same goes with our practice of writing because ethnographers can decide to depart from the supposed truthful scientific interpretation that induces a posture of overhanging neutrality, and instead 'write vulnerably' by injecting large doses of "subjectivity into ethnography," as proposed by Ruth Behar (2014) (see also Sanson & Le Breton, 2020), without always being accused of generating insurmountable biases by the denigrators of an empathetic and engaged social science, favoring less risky [including for publishing!] and less time consuming 'normal' science. There is a powerful method behind what could be seen by some as the weaknesses of subjectivism and the rambling of personal biographies: to dive into the imperceptible and indescribable fabric of banal action and mundane talk to the greatest possible depth, to take the road to capturing the tacit, invisible texture of social life and action, without drowning in the "bottomless whirlpool of subjectivism" (Wacquant, 2015, p. 5).

The current reinvention of [qualitative] fieldwork now detectable across the social sciences³ helps indeed reshaping the boundaries and limits existing with literature and journalism, and that is great news. In her work on the police, Monties (Courpasson & Monties, 2017) gives the reader a vivid sense of the taste, bruises and 'social drama' taking place at dawn, when the police break down the door of a suspect's apartment, or when two police officers have to stay in a car for two days and two nights without moving a finger to keep a watchful eye on drug dealers : the schema of the unity of time, place and action, to construct an 'expansive' sociology (Wacquant, 2005), a *literary* ethnography (Debaene, 2010), is here displayed in all its power. And can turn the writing into a controversial newspaper chronicle (see Courpasson & Monties, 2016). In my own ethnographic work on a group of rebellious bloggers, how could I have captured the dramatic density of intimate engagement leading eventually to long and painful hunger strikes if I had not been everyday 'with them' for almost two years, through online observation and participation in their blog, as well as visits to their private homes

³ This revival does not prevent qualitative researchers to fall sometimes into the positivistic trap, and to present their findings and methods as more and more shackled and legitimated by pages and pages of the so-called explanations and justifications of data collection, data analysis, and so forth. This sometimes sounds like an excuse for not doing 'proper' research, whose objective and serene underpinnings would prevent the researcher from multiplying biases and be subsequently ejected from the publishing race.

and conversation with family members (see Courpasson, 2017)? Feeling the bodies of resisters deteriorating every day, through their tweets, blog's contributions, voices breaking during phone calls, and the emails of their friends and spouses, gives to ethnographic inquiry [even online] the tone of a heartbreaking social drama that only writers can otherwise offer: It entails a form of *warm writing* that, surely away from current academic canons, helps capturing the workings of *subjectivities* theorized as uncertain flesh-and-blood *agencies*. And would lead many ethnographers to form another discourse, in between facts and observation, and playing with language, in what Vincent Debaene calls the *second book of the ethnographer*.

The second book of the ethnographer

These reminders about what ethnography can bring to social sciences [and to the people] have a number of consequences on the very practice of ethnographic research, in particular in terms of writing and engagement. They are thus meant to encourage ethnographers to present their findings in a wider variety of literary and artistic genres (Behar, 2003) without being afraid of the suspicious and puzzled gaze of journal editors and reviewers.

This is all the more decisive for ethnography to think in terms of a *science of writing* as it is subject, in the knowledge economy, to other types of pressures and demands than in the original discovery-driven Malinowskian framework. Now it is also about being useful: ethnographers need to adopt a different narrative paradigm and style than the familiar disciplinary speech (Mills & Ratcliffe, 2012). On one side, the future writing narrative is claimed to be oriented toward complexity and nuance reduction, and requires growing explicitness, added value, and key points to be identified for sustaining or explaining change to field actors: this could be called efficient ethnographic writing, though avoiding that "the gap between critical intellectuals and simple salesmanship" (Frank, 2002, p. 52, quoted in Mills & Ratcliffe, 2012, p. 159) [or consultants, or design 'thinkers'] could shrink dangerously, to the risk of making ethnography a simple writing tool for entertainment, profit, and everyday voyeurism.

In any case, ethnography is essentially about writing (Humphreys & Watson, 2009): it is the account of the more or less extensive fieldwork having been done, rather than the fieldwork itself (Watson, 2008). Writing, then. But writing what, and how? In that respect, Tedlock (indeed observes that "thousands of works written in many languages and genres have been encoded as 'ethnographic'" 2000, p. 459), covering a huge range from doctoral theses converted into extended monographs to short stories, plays, and poems, even fictional writing such as those mentioned by Debaene (2010): after all, Flaubert, Zola, or Balzac were all writing their classics from detailed

observation and documentation of their contemporaries' doings and beings (Bensa & Pouillon, 2012).

Ethnographic writing is a way to both distance the ethnographer from its field, by writing from the emotionality of people she/he has encountered, and to get her closer to the field, by producing a literary theory of what people do to sustain their living under pressing constraints, rooting action in human nature, rather than only in socially determined subjectivities, in the "irreducible essence of the person – the human soul" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 91). In that effort, mingling scientific prose with literary peregrinations seems unavoidable. Debaene reminds that first among social scientists, most French ethnologists-ethnographers trained in between wars (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Griaule, Paul-Émile Victor...), having produced the first 'handbooks' of ethnography,⁴ extended their first ethnographic monographs into a 'second book,' addressing the same topic through a polished literary 'novel,'⁵ showing that literature is not only about style and elegance, but also about the possibility to generate through writing an "experience of memory" (Debaene, 2010, p. 14). The second book of the ethnographer (Debaene, 2010) is often crafted as a way to compensate for the weaknesses and shortcomings of a science, seen as unable to 'make feel the feelings' of studied people, combining, even melting in the same pot a deep concern for knowledge and an evocative capacity, helping readers to feel something of the richness, ambiguities, and emotions experienced by field actors, without renouncing to educate and instruct. This tension goes through any ethnographic work and probably all human sciences: craving for facts, while forcefully picturing an *atmosphere*. That is also surely a way to respond to a peculiar ethical necessity of ethnography: to acknowledge and shape in duly chosen words the violence involved in constituting other men as objects of study. As Devereux wrote: "It is customary to call books about human beings either toughminded or tenderminded. My own is neither and both, in that it strives for objectivity about that tendermindedness without which no realistic behavioral science is possible" (Devereux, 1967, p. xx). It remains that ethnography will always share with literature – if it is not absorbed or perverted by growing claims for qualitative orthodoxy – the hope to restore exhaustively a human reality that we scholars always fear to disregard through our words and sentences (Debaene, 2010).

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⁴ See, in particular, Griaule (1957) as well as Mauss (1947).

⁵ *Tristes tropiques* from Lévi-Strauss, and *L'Île de Pâques*, from Alfred Métraux, are two flagships of this practice.

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Navigating the Space and Ethics of Ethnography

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At my last job in the software industry in the United States, I resigned in protest. The trigger was that I felt the company had treated my coworker abhorrently. But I had been unhappy for a long time in my role as a project manager. It was like a bad relationship I could not quit. I enjoyed high tech and sometimes even the long hours that accompanied hard deadlines because I liked the camaraderie of team work. What soured me on the industry were the dysfunctional dynamics that often occur in the process of making software, a process of disillusionment that had started 14 years earlier when I was a developer and had strengthened over time.

It did not have to end that way. In many ways, I was a good fit for the role. I liked focusing on the hard problems and doing what I could to solve them. Over time, I found that most of the problems were not about technology, even though I worked on complex software. The biggest problems were about people, often about how people were being treated. Once I became a project manager, I focused much of my effort around treating people well and trusting them, which turned out to be a powerful strategy. The other thing I was naively willing to do is work long hours to optimize team process. The most extreme example of this is when I stayed up all night to make sure that teams in China and India were given systems administration support at a critical point in the software release process. I became known for saving troubled projects and regaining the trust of clients. Strangely, not only was I not rewarded for these heroics, but I was also often punished.

At one company, I was put on probation and ultimately laid off for speaking out against pressuring the developer team from India to work 12-h days, 7 days a week, for months, in order to meet an arbitrary client deadline. At another company, a vice president from another division, many levels higher than me in the hierarchy, called me into his office and threatened me for integrating team process in a way that he said encroached upon his domain. An account manager at another company did the same. A Chief Technology Officer (CTO) at yet another company fired me when I was becoming too visible in my work with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and parent company. Looking back, the best

explanation I can give is that I was power blind. I did not bow down to the hierarchy and did not wait for permission to act. I mistakenly believed the common rhetoric that we as tech workers were empowered and that management would support our risk taking. I focused on solving problems first, worked with whoever I found to help, and I was outspoken. I stuck out when I should have receded into the background.

When I finally had enough, I broke up with the software industry, and in 2015, moved to Europe to leave the US 'empire' for a while and work toward my PhD in management. Given my history, it seems natural that I was drawn toward researching the phenomenon of how companies might function in a more egalitarian, autonomous way. I was lucky. Two organizations practicing self-management agreed for me to spend months over the last 3 years hanging out in their offices, sitting in their meetings, looking at their online interactions, and talking with whoever agreed to talk with me. The funny thing is they are both information technology companies in the United States. So for a large part of my PhD time, I have worked in the same environment among the same types of workers I thought I had left behind.

My intimate knowledge of the software industry has been both comforting and confounding as I have begun to find my way as a researcher. One way it has helped immensely is to understand the context of what is happening in the moment and to make an immediate connection with those whom I speak. I know the processes. I know the terminology. I know the world and am acutely aware of the common frustrations. From my first day on the field, I felt certainly that I was able to understand things on a deeper level than I would have in an industry where I had no prior knowledge. Here is a dialog snippet from April 2019 that flowed based on my understanding of historical software (names changed):

Liv: The R4 system, which is our main financial system, is 36 years old. It is the oldest mainframe accounting system in the whole country, in the United States.

Eleu: Probably programmed with Natural language on the mainframe.

Liv: Not even Natural, it's COBOL.

Eleu: Not even Natural? COBOL?

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Liv: It's Assembly and COBOL on the mainframe. When I started, I started 34 1/2 years ago, and my first job was to write reports against this brand-new system to replace reports from the old system. That bit got ripped out. As part of my career, I want to see that replaced before I leave.

Eleu: That will be so satisfying.

Liv: It will.

At the beginning of my field work, I tried to draw clean lines between my role as a researcher and others warned by my qualitative research instructors to work in ways considered to be scientifically valid. I clung to my research protocol and regularly attempted to scour prejudice from my mind. Practitioner experience made my research life more complex by making my biases highly informed and personal. I knew the personality stereotypes and sometimes the inside jokes of software developers, managers, sys admins, and database administrators. In the field, I felt compelled to question whether my choices were informed by disciplined research approach or questionable assessments based on my history, because every interaction and observation resonated with a decade and a half of my past professional life.

But early on, I was nudged by my research subjects to engage. I was asked for my opinion about how meetings went. I was asked to contribute my opinions about how to proceed. I realized the thing I came to study, the nonhierarchical organizational system called Holacracy, required that I fully join in to really understand it. And I had a seed of faith that my inside knowledge had the potential to make my research better. In the beginning, this joining in meant being willing to not know what to do, at a point where I previously believed I needed to look and feel like I was in control. This stance long predated my entrance into the realm of research. Here is a field memo entry that I wrote early on:

27 October, 2016: I am having a real struggle figuring out how to position and what to do. I am used to being so circumspect and able to control a lot through other people's confusion but now I am just as confused as anyone else, these moments of clarity that I used to have all the time, I don't seem to have so much now, or anymore.

The next year, in early 2017, my memos reflect wading further into the big muddy of living my research. For instance, in February, I recounted how I ran into Meg in the elevator, and she asked me how I thought she should handle her elected role of facilitator for her team, a position that I noticed in meetings was causing her stress. I had an in-breath moment of internal conflict of simultaneously not wanting to affect behaviors at my research site while also believing that my mere presence was affecting everyone's behavior. After breathing out, I shared with Meg my perspective that Holacracy seemed to invite people to speak openly about their concerns. Then I

added that the truth is powerful, and sometimes, it is like playing with fire, so it is important to read the situation and speak carefully and responsibly in order to not get in hot water. That second part came purely from my school of hard knocks as a practitioner. That moment of earnestness from me has garnered years of Meg's trust and conversations of deep insight. Is this valid science? Some would say no. But I know for sure that my relationship, and I would even say friendship, with Meg has given me rich perspective aiding in theory building.

When I began allowing myself to have spontaneous discussions with people, without an agenda and with natural pauses, our dialog took on life and perspective that opened big windows between practice and theory in my mind. It was here that I took the leap from participant observation to relationship, and from distanced researcher employing ethnographic techniques to being an ethnographer who enjoys theory building. As one simple example, because of the freedom I now allow myself to converse with others, I sometimes can mark my own thought by speaking it out loud in the flow of conversation. In talking with someone, I unfold their ideas and add to them for my greater understanding, all while the recorder is running. At graceful moments, this has enabled me to do a level of data analysis *in situ*, while I am there talking with the person. Then I have this nugget in the transcript, and it can help me get multiple perspectives, that of the person I spoke with as well as my own, that I am able to analyze further through the process of integration.

My deviation away from classic case study into full ethnography started small and keeps getting bigger. I am entering my third and fourth years with my two research sites, and my inquiries continue. Though I am no longer tiptoeing around the subject of whether I am an ethnographer, the deeper I go, the more I feel that I have to think about my new role and work, which surprisingly draws deeply from my past. My former work as a project manager tended to give me a lot of responsibility without a lot of power. So, I grew my capacity to inspire and to listen, in order to assuage frustration, connect commonalities, and build teams. Sure, I got good at schedules, sequencing, and task tracking. But I believe my most important work, the work that transformed failing projects into successes, was building trust, deepening relationships, and holding confidences across an organization. This core work continues for me in the academic setting. Now as a researcher, I build trust, deepen relationships, and hold confidences every day. Here are three themes I presently ponder as a new researcher:

Leveling the power dynamic. Though I study organizations that strive to be more egalitarian, no system is perfect. In a practice that purports itself to be nonhierarchical, when the familiar power plays happen, the hypocrisy is heightened and even more upsetting. I have found that as a woman, women especially confide in me. The privacy of the interview room

and of me as a familiar face yet a safe outsider has meant that I have learned about many painful work experiences that tie into even more painful personal histories. I do not flinch. I do not pretend that I do not have feelings. I am aware that the audio recorder is on even through tears, and at times I opt to turn it off. In a transcript from 2018, I have me closing the interview, saying after a particularly pained sharing, "I think, if it's okay with you, I want to stop being a researcher and start being a friend." Their trust in me is moving, that I will make sure that they do not regret what they have exposed. Impromptu, I started sharing my stories with them that are equally exposing in exchange. I have many options to choose from. This started as an impulse and has gravitated into a code in my personal ethics. I do not want to only take and use as a researcher. I want to share with others in discussions that are meaningful for all of us.

Double agent – holder of confidences. I have come to know my research subjects well enough over the years that they speak openly, even bluntly, with me around. Sometimes, I think they have forgotten I am in the room. I have heard striking things that add new dimension to my research. Furthermore, in interviews, I often hear mutual complaints that people have about each other. As spontaneous as I am myself in these discussions, I drill into myself the discipline to keep a straight face to not betray what I know and to not share what has been shared with me in private. Though I am not an adherent of the ideas of simple researcher objectivity and distance, I believe firmly in the practice of confidentiality and the precept of doing no harm. Occasionally, I agonize over whether I slipped in a moment off guard. I very much want to remain uncomfortable and watchful with staying on the right side of the line in this respect.

Right relationship with the organization. Recently, I was riffing on some ideas with the founder of one of the companies I study. It resulted in me giving a suggestion about a way to measure performance. A week later, he told me, in the presence of an Agile coach also employed at the company, that he had implemented this idea with a group of senior developers, and he was nervous about it because, given the egalitarian nature of their company culture, it was the first time in company history he had ever given them a directive. He left, and then the Agile coach told me, 'Yeah, and they're pissed,' chuckling a bit about the situation. I did not sleep well that night. What the hell am I doing? Over time, I had become accustomed to interactions with newly hired employees just out of university that took on the nature of mentoring. But I was in no way prepared for the founder of the company taking a spontaneous comment I made and running with it in a way that could change company direction. Though I have started reading a bit more on action research, I do not feel settled about this, in either an appropriate research standard or the right ethical approach. I trust that my approach will evolve over time

with more study and interaction. It causes me to reflect that my research reality is so much more free and far ranging than so many other options I could have taken. It makes some moments complex, but it is worth it to me in what I learn and the rare quality of conversations that I am able to have.

Looking back at my research thus far, perhaps, I am working in a space of what could be called hermeneutic intimacy, where my expert knowledge in the field I am investigating gives me a cultural shorthand, a shared language with those whom I study. It is hermeneutic in the sense that I am intimate with the context and world view of my research subjects. I share history with them. Our conversations take on a dimension of a quest for shared meaning. It can be seen as intimacy in that based on my own extensive history in the field, I can complement or even reciprocate what is shared with me during interviews (Kirk, 2007). Perhaps, I am engaged in these discussions in part as a way to revisit and make sense of my own past experiences (Romanyshyn & Anderson, 2007).

To detail the concept of hermeneutic intimacy further, I first work with the knowledge banks I retain based on my past experiences. Throughout the process of observation, I generate layers of additional context regarding my knowledge of the industry, of its professional norms, and my expertise about the tasks at hand that I am watching people talking about and doing. Then I bring this contextual knowledge into multidimensionality, where I build mental models of what is happening in the present, as well as the past and future, based again on my own history. I conceive of these processes happening in a space of knowledge.

Next, using these mental models, I think about what people I am around might be feeling. I spend time with these anticipated feelings, and think about what I would want to talk about if I were in their shoes, in other words what would be the most meaningful discussion for them. I then talk with people from this space of emotion. I am looking specifically for ways to touch them. I have found that this brings a level of humane service to research, where people may feel that I have supported, listened to, or helped them through the integrative discussions that we have together. If this is ever the case, I think of it as giving back, in honor of the gifts they have given me with their vulnerability and earnestness.

Hermeneutic intimacy follows a path that runs parallel to a more typical ethnographic approach, and it adds an interior experience that builds closeness through an interplay of knowledge and emotion, both inwardly and with others. This hermeneutic intimacy seems to tap into a deep well of exploration for understanding, from which flows rich and referenced narrative. I love Schutz (1953) and draw from his careful, profound work in human interpretation, while at the same time, I challenge his paradigm of a social scientist as a disinterested observer. What is commonly viewed as the bias generated from involvement and intimacy becomes the very source of

relational depth, which I have found to be deeply relevant and advantageous for my research. This is my thinking thus far when I consider how to navigate the space and ethics of ethnography.

I am young in researcher years. I do not know yet how my research will be received by my new community, I can say I love what I am doing and I savor my world, now that I have embraced being an ethnographer.

Enacting Ethnography: Three Perspectives on Engagement with Political Communities

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Ethnography is premised on the idea that by subjecting oneself to unfamiliar conditions that structure the universe of others, one is more or less able to see and understand the life, work, and culture of a particular group of people (Van Maanen, 2011). Informed by a rigorous analytical approach, ethnographic research builds on direct observation, interpersonal interactions, and a certain level of participation with the social group under study. However, as asserted by Van Maanen (2011), ethnography is also constituted by the frequently shifting social practices that researchers perform, which may not always be strategic but are often pragmatic in that they are created, shaped, and transformed by ethnographers as their fieldwork unfolds. Engagement in the field is one such practice that has recently been debated in organizational ethnography (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Van de Ven, 2007). Engaged scholarship has, in fact, been advanced as a way to produce knowledge that helps to bring about social change (Fleming & Banerjee, 2016). Highlighting embeddedness as being key to in-depth insights and empathy (Bansal, Smith, & Vaara, 2018), many scholars have argued for its relevance as a methodological framework for pursuing their academic engagement in practice (Coleman, 2015; Hussey, 2012; Juris, 2007). In turn, other critical organizational researchers have called for more involvement with the tradition of academic activism (Flood, Martin, & Dreher, 2013).

While we do not see ourselves as scholar activists but rather budding ethnographers who share an interest in studying activist communities, that is, communities organized

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around political issues that are key for their survival, in which members' work constituted a form of everyday activism. Hence, when conducting our fieldwork, we asked: How can we identify with our informants while 'living with' or 'living like' them? To what extent should we engage with their work to get closer to them? And to what extent do we believe we can 'penetrate' their subjectivity through our engagement in their everyday activities? These questions motivate this essay, in which we reflect on how the field – and the tensions we faced navigating it – prompted us to have a more rigorous level of engagement than we initially expected. Revisiting our ethnographic experiences, we aim to show how this deeper engagement enabled us to discover previously unseen dimensions of the phenomenon we were studying and acknowledge the limits certain features of our field placed upon us.

We present our research fields as activist communities focused on different political issues and situated in distinct geographies: an isolated ethnic community in North Africa, a nongovernmental organization fighting human trafficking in India and a nonviolent climate movement in France. The first author spent 8 months living among mountain villagers in precarious and challenging conditions; the second author was involved for 11 months with a feminist nonprofit organization working with sex trafficking survivors and advocating for the abolition of prostitution; and the third author collaborated for 17 months with grassroots' climate justice activists. Through our fieldwork, we were sensitized to the political nature of

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these communities and the issues they faced, and we developed a deep affinity with their members. However, each of our fields presented us with unforeseen challenges that we were unprepared for. As such, we saw our engagement as a necessary means for developing our ethnographic pursuits and for gaining a more profound and nuanced understanding of the structures underlying the life and work of our participants. Acknowledging the fluid, multiple and agentic nature of our ethnographic experiences and the relationships we built (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013), we illustrate three different ways of engaging in the field, in response to a key tension we faced along the way relating to nativeness, gender differences, and embodiment.

Engagement through sharing a precarious life

My⁶ desire to find a new meaning of life motivated me to look beyond the boundaries of the 'modern city' and reach out to remote communities where life might have a different meaning. This led me to an isolated village in North Africa where I set out on an ethnographic journey that would tell the tale of a resilient community whose aim was to resist in order to exist through an embodied intergenerational system of life written in the bodies of its inhabitants (Bourdieu, 1990). I embarked on this journey as a romanticizing explorer heading into the unknown. I aimed to free myself from all restrictions and selflessly engage my body and soul in an obscure and precarious field characterized by difficult terrain, a rough environment and a high level of activism derived from the heroic history of the region. The field's grassroots activities embodied politically driven practices to preserve the life and heritage of the collective for generations to come, as a counter political mechanism against the hegemonic other. Although my entry to the village was conditioned by my belongingness to the same ethnic group and was guaranteed by a local host family, once I was there, I engaged in breaking into, exploiting, and extracting as much as possible from a field I knew very little about.

Naively, I initially ignored the fact that in order to penetrate the plexus of this community, I would have to live inside the skin of the villager – something I progressively came to understand. Going native for 8 months in a precarious field to experience critical life conditions, I was not accustomed to required engaging my objective and subjective selves to "grasp the native's point of view" (Malinowski, 1922). Accessing the social meaning, which can only unfold through direct, close, and vigilant observative behavior (Brewer, 2000), was important to understand the social order and to easily penetrate its layers to grasp the basic elements that characterize the individual and explain the collective survival

mechanism that takes place in such an isolated environment. During this journey, I evolved from being a cautious observer, learning the rules of the game to avoid exclusion, to being an adventurous participant who got involved in the everydayness of the community to uncover the tale of the village. This required crossing the boundaries of my body and self and moving beyond my comfort zone to become as native as possible while dealing with tough geography and weather conditions, isolation, hunger, thirst, and sickness, among other things.

As a predisposed body that shapes a field and is shaped by it, I had to test myself by engaging my physical, spiritual, and mental capacities to make this ethnography a reality, within the context of being a young female researcher embedded in a male-oriented society. I initially saw this as a disadvantage, imagining harassment and kidnapping, and I was surprised to discover a different reality: that of an exotic traveler who developed a thick skin and whose personal traits were shaped by experiencing life in such an environment. My engagement shifted from just sharing the physical space to sharing the same fate by being part of the same political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental realities. Immersing myself in a contradictory environment where relationships were characterized, on one side, by concealed repulsion, mistrust, and constant social control and, on the other side, by empathy, solidarity, and cooperation created a barbed environment I had to navigate carefully to exploit it to the fullest extent possible. Thus, embodying the necessary knowledge and skills, both preacquired and developed in the field, was an asset that helped me navigate various situations. It was both "something to know and a way of knowing" (McGranahan, 2018).

Shaping myself within while remaining fully aware of my identity as a researcher was an integral part of my immersed ethnography. I managed to 'fit in' by respecting the norms that defined the boundaries of my field and through my active participation in the daily grassroots initiatives that gave sense to life and assured its continuation, developed the inhabited physical space, overcame a challenging geography and an isolating environment, and created a form of embodied activism primordial to the regeneration and survival of the collective. My embodied engagement included giving advice, teaching, preparing food, harvesting olives, working at the oil mill, taking photographs during festivities and sport events, and transporting people and goods at times of crisis. This was an engagement I felt humbled and honored to undertake, as it allowed me to be considered as an insider and to fully understand the hidden phenomenology underpinning a community I became native to. The villager I once was came to understand the precariousness of existence and the preciousness of life from the daily collective struggle to survive and save an isolated village from ruin.

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Engagement through acknowledging gender differences

One of the main challenges I faced in my fieldwork was being a male researcher⁷ in a radical feminist organization (Hildwein, 2019) fighting sex trafficking and committed to ending prostitution in India. As I had been introduced by senior management, access to the organization was relatively easy. However, gaining the trust and confidence of the women employees and beneficiaries proved to be more challenging. It was essential for me to show that I was sympathetic to their cause, to demonstrate an appreciation of their struggle against prostitution and prove how my presence could benefit their work. For many of the women, men were the perpetrators of the problem and the cause of their suffering. And for some, the presence of men was a cause of suspicion or anxiety in a setting where they hoped to be open and vulnerable about their present and past.

While women's meetings were sometimes held behind closed doors and the few men in the organization occupied themselves elsewhere, there was one particular instance where I distinctly recall the discomfort this caused. The incident occurred during a workshop with partner organizations of my focal organization. No objections were raised about my presence when I registered for the workshop. However, soon after I entered the room with another female researcher as observers, a woman participant spoke to the moderators who were seated facing the room. After a brief discussion, she faced the room and announced that "she and other women felt uncomfortable sharing their stories in the presence of men and if there were men in the room, they were requested to leave as they would like the workshop to be restricted to women." As I left, there was a strange silence and I noticed several women exchanging questioning glances at this announcement. After the workshop, the organizers apologized for the misunderstanding in registration and the inconvenience caused. However, this incident, and others, crystallized for me the imperative of crossing boundaries (Ocejo, 2012) created by gender differences and the limits of my engagement with the particular features and structures of the anti-trafficking field (Liebow, 1967).

While negotiating these structures, I uncovered the subtle but meaningful distinction between 'men' and 'known men.' While this organization believed patriarchal interests and men to be responsible for much of the suffering experienced by the women, many of them had relationships where fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons encouraged and supported their choices and work. An older social worker, one of the first to accept my presence, often talked about her deceased father's influence on her choice of profession at a time when women were

expected to marry and have a family. With her encouragement, I opened up about my family and parts of my personal life and work, which helped to break the ice and cautiously establish common ground. On visits to the red-light area⁸ and at meetings with beneficiaries, her presentation of me as someone who was helping the organization aided my credibility and my gradual acceptance by the women.

I often struggled with the desire to engage more deeply with my subjects while needing to maintain a distance to remain critical and unbiased (Ocejo, 2012). However, since my need for the former was often greater than my fear of the latter, whenever opportunities arose to participate in their activities, I eagerly involved myself by working on funding proposals, reading legal documents, editing publications, and documenting the various organizational events and activities, etc. By immersing myself in the daily rhythm of the organization in this way, I progressively gained the acceptance and trust I needed and learned to navigate this unfamiliar social world and participate in the organization's informal circles. Sharing home-cooked meals in the office, watching anti-trafficking movies, commuting together and even exchanging views about cities we had lived in, all contributed to my shifting from being in the category of 'men' to that of 'known men.' When my opinion on organizational issues was sought, I was careful to lay out options for the women to decide rather than recommending a particular course of action. I did not want to tell them how to run their organization because of my desire to maintain a distance and not influence the organization's decision-making processes.

This relational feature of the field made me reflect on my role as a male researcher working in a context of suspicion because of my gender. It also showed me the intensely relational nature of ethnographic research (Bruni, 2006; Farias, 2019) and challenged me to seek allies (Stack, 1974) who could help build bridges over differences to obtain deeper engagement with my field. It was only through a great deal of cautious relational exploration and considerable insider help (Stack, 1974) that it was possible for me to navigate some of the structural features of my field and participate in the world of my subjects. However, while I was considered to be in their corner even though I was a man, it was also evident that I would never be able to fully identify with the complexity of their struggle.

Engagement through embodiment and apprenticeship

Driven by an interest in social movements' organizing as one of the modalities of collective action aimed at social change, my⁹

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⁸ Where many brothels (and beneficiaries) were located.

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ethnography examined how the use of civil disobedience translated into activist work practices. Along this journey, I shifted from being a novice ethnographer to an apprentice activist as I became highly engaged in the everyday activities of a specific group. My epistemological posture evolved through the research process and revealed my body as a key vehicle for understanding the ongoing cultural dynamics of nonviolent activism.

I entered the field as a young female business school PhD student from Morocco, with no activist experience. Ahead of the opening of COP21,¹⁰ my access was made difficult from the beginning by the state of emergency after the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015. As I observed the first nonviolent actions that were taking place, my apprehension about violence and police repression grew. At the same time, I quickly realized that the 'hearts and minds' of the activists I wanted to get close to were deeply enmeshed in a web of relations with their body. I would not be able to understand just by observing, but I wondered how I could ever overcome my growing fear of violence.

For the duration of the COP, in the first phase of my fieldwork, I felt absent–present, almost invisible among a mass of activists from all sorts of backgrounds in terms of experience, ideological commitment, and privileged tactics of action. I used that time to acquire, through training, the basic social competency of a nonviolent activist by learning to act, feel, and think like one. In this context, characterized by urgency and a lack of human resources, I started to feel useful when, as an extra pair of hands, I engaged in the daily practical organizing by taking notes, making banners, cooking for others, etc. (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Reedy & King, 2017). At the same time, I embodied the pedagogical techniques nonviolent activists use to forge a new body schema and examined the pragmatic designs through which they are internalized, moving from training to performance.

So, when I was invited by some activists to collaborate on a transnational project they were developing ahead of COP22 in Morocco, I seized the opportunity to dive into the phenomenon and swim along with it in order to know my object by body. By becoming an insider, that is, an organizer of an event in Tangier about climate justice issues, I inhabited a specific organizational structure, participated in the working culture, and developed an activist corporeal schema that involved more than the nonviolent techniques taught in training: less sleep, long and intense working hours, unhealthy eating habits, corporeal self-neglect, and a general feeling of social isolation. In this second phase of my ethnographic journey, I experienced critical moments of vulnerability that developed into exhaustion, leading me to withdraw from the field for a time.

¹⁰ Also known as the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP 21 was the 21st yearly session of the Conference of the Parties (COP), held in Paris, from November 30th to December 12th.

As my research interest was focused on nonviolent action and its embodiment in the performance of activists, I stumbled across violence where I did not expect to find it. Initially, despite the movement organization's external discourse that promoted nonviolence as the only strategy that might gain public support, there were still internal discussions about whether it could complement other, that is, violent tactics. However, about a year after COP21, activists started to discuss their own experiences of exhaustion, describing the self-inflicted violence they felt increasingly subjected to. By that time, my own body had become a mirror of the others' experiences of vulnerability. In addition to my informal conversations about this issue with other activists, I decided to reflect on my own experience and interview them about it.

In an attempt to develop the sense of 'acuteness,' which Wacquant (2015) defines as another modality of reasoning nourished by concrete experience from the field, I moved back and forth between being an outsider and an insider in order to disentangle how the power of the organizational cause penetrated activists' bodies. My own embodiment constituted a fundamental way of understanding this. As I was positioned in the messy zone of activism in the making, I, at first, interpreted my own breakdown and temporary withdrawal from the field as a personal failure to become a 'good' activist. Considering my own bodily experience in discussion with others, I was able to acknowledge my privileged position as an apprentice scholar and the economic precariousness of my informants' situations. I was also able to uncover the process through which what had been initially described and experienced as inevitable, immutable, and natural in the community became the object of common interrogation and critique by organizational members.

Acknowledging passion, flesh, and desire as modalities of social life, Wacquant (2015) suggests apprenticeship as a way to gain a visceral apprehension of the people studied before turning to analytical reconstruction, and he thus advances the importance of attending to our own vulnerability, as researchers, in the practice of fieldwork. In fact, my activist experience enabled me to uncover the persistence and reproduction of power relations within social movements (Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016). More specifically, the epistemological positioning I developed helped me show how vulnerability and violence were central to the experience of organizing collective action within this community.

Conclusion

In this essay, we illustrated how engagement in ethnographic practice can take different forms depending on the challenges posed by the field. Enacting our ethnographies meant that we needed to involve ourselves more deeply with the associated spaces, people, and critical dimensions or tensions we faced.

By embarking on research journeys within political activist communities and engaging with their members, we experienced and revealed some of the physical, emotional, moral, and ethical issues that structure these environments and their members' responses to them (see, for instance, Rahmouni Elidrissi and Courpasson, 2019).

Although our inputs were each different due to the nature and dynamics of these communities, as ethnographers, we acknowledge the importance of diving into the phenomena we study to uncover the significant and deeply embedded meanings, perceptions, behaviors, and patterns that shape them. We also emphasize the importance of crossing self-boundaries and participating in the field as relevant ways to get closer to the native's point of view and to be able to reflect upon it. Indeed, for us, engaging proved crucial not only for gaining access to the field and understanding the dynamics at play but was also key to understanding ourselves and building our identity as academics.

The position we found ourselves in, akin to that of "outsiders within" (Hill Collins, 2013), enabled us to reflect on the role of academics at this time of crisis we are living in. While some scholars call for "intellectual activism" (Contu, 2017) in our work as academics in a society where silence has become a less viable option, we argue for a broader understanding of research – that is, a less contemplative one – which engages with, experiments, and promotes diverse ways to be part of the social and political change we need.

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Research Ties as Social Tales: Intimacy and Distance in Ethnography

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Ethnography is, without doubt, the social science in which the researcher is the most embedded into the studied world, and in which s/he is the most prone to develop tight relationships with informants. Regardless of their nature, those ties can never be exempt from any influence on the research process, and thus constitute a core source of data. (Marchive, 2012, p. 7)

The present essay is rooted in our experience as young ethnographers and aims to shed light on the constant tension between intimacy and distance in ethnographic journeys. It is mainly based on the experiences of David, who carried out an 8-year longitudinal ethnography in a French factory, and Claire, who performed an enacted ethnography as a food-delivery courier in Lyon. Interestingly, despite their different objectives, vicissitudes, and conclusions, our experiences both highlight the same issue: while intimacy with informants enables data to be accessed, it also distances the researcher from some aspects of the field – research ties determine the boundaries of ethnographic fields by opening opportunities as well as closing doors. Hence, as Obligation (1994, p. 41) stated, “field researchers must realize that the data they obtain are refracted by the prism of social interaction”. Ultimately, therefore, this empirical balance between familiarity and strangeness with the field, ease, and unease with respondents also influences the theoretical development of an ongoing ethnographic project.

From bonds to boundaries

First, both of our experiences highlight how research ties frame the boundaries of ethnographic fields by opening opportunities and closing doors. Since ethnographic studies progress with the help of informants (Becker, 2002), the strength of bonds and intimacy developed with specific respondents plays a determinant role in the course of the investigation. In this vein, David was only able to access his fieldwork because of his intimate relationships with informants:

David: Since my childhood, I have been immersed in factory stories and imagery whose topics frequently come up in discussions with family or friends. My longitudinal ethnography takes place in a factory where my relatives and friends work. This factory is classified as a ‘SEVESO 2’ – the highest security protocol in France. Access to it is therefore strictly

controlled and the management does not allow any observers to hang around. To interview plant managers, I had to follow the official registration procedure for visits. However, this procedure did not give me access to production sites. Therefore, to access the heart of the factory and observe workers on site, my only option was to sneak into the factory at night and at weekends, i.e. when the management had left. I was only able to ‘squeeze in’ thanks to my acquaintances within the field. I therefore took advantage of my intimate and privileged relationships to access the factory with their complicity, in ‘covert’ ways.

Thanks to his friends and relatives, David thus managed to covertly gain access to a high-security factory to pursue his ethnographic observations and further develop relationships with other informants. As well as providing researchers with access to an otherwise inaccessible part of the field, informants can lead them to specific and often unplanned aspects of the phenomenon under consideration. Thanks to a spontaneous and unexpected lead from an informant, Claire got access to what would later constitute a main part of her ethnographic field:

Claire: I had been studying food-delivery couriers for approximately 6 months when Jérôme P., a Parisian courier involved in activist groups against capitalist platforms and with whom I had already had several conversations, contacted me out of the blue, saying, “Hi Claire, I don’t know if you’ve come across them, but a bunch of couriers are launching a local cooperative in your city, you might want to check it out. You can contact the leader on my behalf, if interested.” It should be noted that the aim of my project was not to study cooperatives. It was to examine courier work, and therefore I wasn’t planning to engage in organizational matters. Yet, I was pleased to get this lead, for two reasons. First, it gave me the opportunity to observe this new organization from the start – which is a methodological asset for anyone interested in analysing its development. Second, and importantly, it showed that Jérôme P. considered me to be a trusted ally and was willing to help me in my research ambitions. I felt personally boosted by this interpersonal trust and jumped at the sudden opportunity.

Here, as well as giving Claire access to a wide potential source of data, Jérôme P. also spontaneously alerted her to the burning issues in his world, thereby demonstrating trust and an interest in pursuing their relationship. These vignettes clearly demonstrate how we were able to access specific areas of our fieldwork as a result of the relationships we managed to develop with key informants, thereby shaping the contours of the investigation.

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Yet, in doing this, it is difficult for ethnographers to sustain a neutral position, and they can take on the role of confident, hostage, witness, judge, or helper; depending on their location in their informants' networks (Beaud & Weber, 2010). The way ethnographers compose data, which delineates the field's boundaries, therefore depends on both their social and affective locations in their informants' networks. The importance of the weight of relationships in shaping the data was particularly evident in David's ethnographic exercises over the years as, in the course of his work, preexisting friendships and animosities regularly took precedence over purely investigative relationships, excluding him from various groups and making him vulnerable to hostilities linked to his (real or supposed) affiliations:

David: My father and many friends are local activists in the factory and belong to a far-left union. Such affinities label me as a potential ally of unionists and protesters within the field. One of my very first visits to a production team was quite revealing: the supervisor I met at that time, known to be anti-union, said in front of the workers "it will serve his father, all of this [i.e. the observations and interviews], he is sending his son to scout us out, so that afterwards he will be able to get all the information he needs." Such filial stigma thus put me in a delicate position with some respondents. During a strike initiated by some friends, a team of workers in which I had made many observations refused to take part in the movement. Because of this disagreement, my relatives and this group were on bad terms for a long period of time. I was thus unable to carry out observations or interviews with them for several months. Of course, I never received any formal interdictions or any refusal. But this was just something I couldn't ask to do, and I knew it. I knew that a complete outsider without any ties could have pursued an investigation in both groups, arguing that scientific investigation does not allow the researcher to take any sides. But my immersion in a field involving pre-existing friendships or alliances impeded me from pretending to be blind to the situation.

These social ties and affinities within the field entangled David in an 'interlocking' situation (de Sardan, 1995) that proved difficult to circumvent and that could have forced the researcher to temporarily or indefinitely give up on getting access to parts of the field. Therefore, intimate relationships with informants can also distance the researcher from some potential sources of data.

The role of informants in framing the field's boundaries is also particularly notable in Claire's ethnographic journey:

Claire: I am writing this while I should be outside on my bike, socializing with UberEats couriers. From the beginning of my ethnographic immersion as a food-delivery courier in Lyon, France – the city I have been living in for 8 years now – I am supposed to have established contact with these men. In Lyon, most couriers come from underprivileged, probably immigrant backgrounds, they drive motorcycles or poorly maintained cheap bikes, they dress in thick cotton sport clothes typical of ghettotypes of neighbourhoods, and they speak French with an accent. They

are like the men who harass me in the street when I'm walking alone, as a well-behaved urban young woman, with blond hair and blue eyes, corresponding to a conventionally sexualized feminine body. It feels too difficult for me to go to them spontaneously. I am afraid they might misunderstand my intentions. I feel ashamed of these stereotypes, which scare me. Still, I feel paralyzed. I have talked about my fears to some – white, better-off – informants with whom I have developed a trustful and friendly relationship, and they said to me, jokingly, "a girl like you, for sure, they will gossip about it and won't believe it when you'll suggest exchanging numbers. This is definitely to be expected."

While her contacts made the exclusive examination of a nascent organization in a fragmented environment possible, her gender and socialization distanced her from one of the main populations of the occupation under study. Hence, our experiences point to the importance of considering researchers' situated positions in a field, framed by their social characteristics and by the relationships they build throughout the research process.

As fieldwork involves complex relationships between the investigator and some respondents, and as these relationships frame the field's very boundaries, investigative relationships become a paramount object of analysis *per se* (Beaud & Weber, 2010; Becker, 2002). Thus, far from being restricted to 'impurities' (Schwartz, 1993) that cripple the analysis, relationships developed during the fieldwork trigger reflexive questioning that allows researchers to better grasp the meaning and challenges of their investigation.

Empirical distance and intimacy shape-theoretical questioning

Our aforementioned experiences show how research ties determine the boundaries of ethnographic fields by opening opportunities and closing doors. Consequently, related broader research projects cannot depend on the researcher's initial strategy or theoretical focus only. The following section illustrates how a permanent empirical tension between intimacy with and distance from informants shapes the direction of the investigation and the theoretical research question:

Claire: I have always felt uneasy in this fieldwork. I don't think I have ever integrated. Every time I encounter other couriers while working, I fear that they might spot that I am an imposter. I try to remain discrete, to act efficiently. I duck down so that they cannot see my face. After months of working as a courier, I still don't feel like one of them. I am different, I am not like them.

Claire's feeling of strangeness in the field – even of being a misfit – and her inability to connect with many informants led her to problematize a dense ethnographic journey. As she gained intimacy with respondents as the research ties developed, she came to realize why she felt so different to most of the couriers: as a woman, she was able to spot the masculine

undertones of food-delivery platform work rhetoric. This aspect of the job had been neglected by previous studies and became one of her main areas of focus in the theoretical puzzle of her thesis. As shown earlier, Claire's fears epitomize the gendered nature of working in public spaces. Her growing tiredness with and dislike of pedaling all evening to deliver food reveal the difficult nature of the work and led her to conceptualize food delivery as 'dirty work.' These elements were particularly complicated to unpack during interviews, particularly because most of the respondents were male: they were reluctant to address shameful aspects of their work as it might make them look weak to a female interviewer. In this regard, her ties with some respondents were particularly informative:

Claire: I liked Killian from the moment we met. His tall and thin body, his fine-lined sophisticated face, gave me confidence. Outside of his delivery work, he always wore quite urban, fashionable clothes that underlined his sensitive, composed and calm posture. His figure didn't look muscular, which he confirmed, saying, "I am not sporty, I am too thin, I should gain some muscles"; "It's not my thing, I'm not manual." He even bought protein powder to increase his muscular mass. From the beginning, I considered him as an ally. When thinking about it, I think we shared a lack of visible physical strength, manual resourcefulness and appetite for challenge... were we too different to the stereotypical virility of most couriers?

Ethnographers tend to develop intimate bonds with particular individuals and groups that are mostly based on their own dispositions (social background, personal story, and preferences) in parallel with predefined research strategies. Therefore, the resulting research ties can only reveal broader and in-depth social knowledge if ethnographers engage in reflexive examination (Bourdieu, 1997; Devereux, 1980). Rich ethnographies therefore theoretically introspect the ways researchers are 'affected' by events in the field (Favret-Saada, 1990) – "ethnographers shape a research self as they work through a series of existential choices. [...] The choices made implicate the researcher's personality as a whole and over time the choices shape the researcher's working sensibility" (Katz, 2018, p. 16).

This resonates with David's own ambivalent feelings about his field, which are marked by inextricable social ties and affinities and yet by a growing feeling of unfamiliarity over the years:

David: In my thesis, I ended up studying the working-class background I was raised in, among individuals I grew up with. This 'coming back to my roots' partly results from a strong and ambivalent feeling towards my home that I gradually developed during my undergrad years. As I studied social sciences and evolved in a universe of elitist people, I gradually (re-)discovered my home environment from a totally different perspective, but without being able to spot what had changed. Somehow, I progressively started to feel out of place among my own kin. I realized that the what had changed was not really the places or the people, but the way my newly (re)socialized eyes saw them. As I pursued my studies, I came to judge their manners: how they would eat, talk, and even dress. I was ashamed of my home, of my relatives, and at the same time, in an ambivalent terrible feeling of guilt, I was ashamed to be ashamed and disgusted by the violence of my social judgment.

This interlacement of strangeness and familiarity has provided David with a unique position of observation and understanding, facilitating access to data while preserving a certain reflexive distance from his respondents. Rooted in a strong sense of revolt against the social violence and unfairness lived by his relatives, David thus took advantage of his particular position to broaden the scope of his investigation:

David: Familiarity with this field resulted in me sharing various activities with people I had been bonded with since my childhood, and who were now also interviewees. Such intertwining of intimacy and investigation questioned the theoretical contours of my investigation and contributed to shaping my research questions. The factory's restructurings threw, over time, an acute light on the broader cultural clash between the gradual imposition of neoliberal values at work and the resulting broader devaluation of working-class ways of being. Such cultural shifts engendered a situation of harsh violence, which I have been witnessing for many years: my affinities within the field thereby allowed for deep sociological biographies that clearly showed how restructurings at work threaten and brutalize workers in their daily existence, far beyond the professional sphere and the boundaries of the factory.

Similar to Ybema and Kamsteeg's (2009) idea of 'insider/outsider' ambiguity, David's atypical situation demonstrates how familiarity with the field and respondents can mingle with scientific detachment. His growing social distance from the home environment gradually enabled him to adopt a 'conversion of the gaze' reflexive posture. Here, deep data were only accessible because David was particularly familiar with his respondents. Yet, the subsequent theorization depended on how he managed to preserve some distance regarding the daily life of respondents. In the field, researchers are not just investigators; they come with a social and personal history, everything that constitutes who they are. Researchers are thus responsible for unpacking the process of accessing data as this development directly paves the way to knowledge (Beaud & Weber, 2010).

Unpacking ethnographic social ties reveals broader social tales. Not only do relationships with informants impact the field's empirical boundaries, thereby conditioning data accessibility, but they also induce theoretical puzzles. Therefore, research ties are rich data *per se*, which, rather than waiting to be collected, are elaborated by researchers and the relationships they cultivate during the fieldwork journey (Becker, 2002). In this regard, Claire's introspection highlights the paramount importance of taking account of one's thoughts and feelings during the research process because of the influence they have on the investigation and the research results. As David's case especially demonstrates, intimacy and distance are sometimes ambivalently intertwined. Ethnographers should therefore engage in "reflexive reflexivity" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 1391), that is, in systematic and humble socioanalysis that leads them to constantly wonder about their own social impulses, particularly as they guide choices made in the field (Kunda, 2013). Far from providing answers to a narcissistic project, our introspective

essay on the complex ethnographic balance between proximity and distance (Elias, 1993) thus allows us to better understand the stakes and shapes of the fieldwork relationships in which ethnographers navigate both as participants and observers.

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(Auto)ethnography and the Access to Others' Experiences: Positioning, Moving, Surpassing yourself

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“More than the analysis of oppression or the sense of duty toward the oppressed the core political experience of our generation may well have been to go on such a voyage, discovering for ourselves this recognizable foreignness, this shimmering of life” (Rancière, 2003, p. 2). While the voyage mentioned by Rancière could be likened to ethnographic work, several questions are hard to figure out regarding what the voyager can do with this ‘political experience’ once back home, and how (s)he could produce knowledge from it. Beyond the journey itself, ‘hearing someone else’s voice’ undoubtedly embodies “one of the main purposes and one of the main issues of writing or of qualitative description” (Moriceau, 2018, p. 109). A voyage in itself. Accordingly, it seems that trying to ‘understand man by all of his experiences and achievements’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1984) cannot be limited to having been there (Watson, 1999).

This paper proposes to return to the ethnographic study I carried out during my PhD thesis, which dealt with the

manufacture of powerlessness in the mining industry and, more particularly, to the steps and difficulties that have punctuated my own accession to others’ experiences – in this case, the Indonesian communities living in the vicinity of the mine studied. Ethnography enabled me to relate “the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred” (Watson, 2011, pp. 205–206). It paved the way to my understanding the “how and why” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 219) of the domination mechanisms at play between the representatives of Western transnational companies and indigenous communities. However, it was also autoethnography – challenging, tough, and rather unflattering (Jones, 2005) – and an exploration of the “reflexive connection between the researcher’s and participants’ lives” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30) that, in the end, allowed me to necessary and salutary surpassing of myself in aid of the translation of the words and pains collected on the way of my fieldwork.

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This contribution therefore takes the form of a personal narrative, one of the autoethnographic types highlighted by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and which Alexander (2005, p. 431) defines as the “critical autobiographical stories of lived experience.” Blending a personal journey and academic analysis (Burnier, 2006), I narrate the work required to access others’ experiences, as well as to consent to understand it. In addition, submitting myself to “personal criticism” (Miller, 1991, p. 1), I have tried to transcribe the “multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis, 1999, p. 673) that helped me to construct the knowledge project on powerlessness, and enabled me to shake the story up and “put meanings in motion” (Bochner, 2012, p. 157). More particularly, I highlight the necessarily tumultuous and uncomfortable nature of the relationship between how the positioning I had *vis-à-vis* my fieldwork was transformed and how my interpretation of the situation, once placed under scrutiny, evolved accordingly. First, I focus on the inception of my research work, characterized by my determination to *position myself* in what I believed was *neutrality*. I thus opted, at the time, to study how indigenous communities, whose living environment was greatly threatened by the creation of the mine, came to accept it (1). Second, I relate how my immersion in my field of studying a mining community in Indonesia led me to engage my body and emotions in the situation. This allowed me to gradually *move myself* and, unwittingly, *project* my own singular experience on the case under scrutiny. Immersed in this field and living through a turbulent and emotionally intense time, my body prevented me from understanding the voices of others. My own sense-making process obliged me to think that, given their precarious living conditions, the local community had no other choice but to accept the mining project (2). Third, I describe the state of grace that allowed me to *surpass myself*. Thanks to work on *translation*, which later proved to have been of paramount importance, I was able to take a distance and access the words and hardships of the people I studied. It paved the way for me to access the other’s experience, others’ experiences. I had been able to accept the storyline that I had been told from the beginning, that is, a story of lies and violence, a story of oppression and suppression, a story of anger of multiple contestations and manufactured powerlessness, and a myriad of stories, but not a story of acceptance: certainly not (3)!

Positioning myself on ‘neutral’ ground: ‘They accepted’

When I decided to study the corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices deployed by a French multinational for its project to mine a tract of Indonesian tropical forest inhabited by indigenous communities since time immemorial, I already knew that my research would not end up as an ode to the company’s management tools. Although presented as exemplary, the Weda Bay Nickel project (WBN) was part a mining industry

that depletes natural resources and marks miners’ bodies for life, generating occupational accidents, illnesses, and multiple conflicts. So, I wondered what these CSR practices looked like to the eyes of the local communities. What were the textures of the corporate representatives’ discourses promoting win-win development schemes for the Weda Bay inhabitants living on the frontline of WBN. I used to introduce myself as a ‘critical management scholar’ wanting to integrate the stakeholders’ largely marginalized voices into my analysis, that is, the “demand side of sustainability” (Banerjee, 2011, p. 722). However, despite my declaration of intent for a critical and political research agenda, I was largely imbued with the idea that I had to comply with Bloor (1976)’s argument for symmetry and, above all, to remain neutral. I decided therefore to study a contemporary mining project, admittedly contested by environmental NGOs, but also presented as ‘exemplary’ and backed by ‘concrete’ and ‘substantive’ CSR actions. This choice was almost conscious, inasmuch as I was certainly trying to soften the radical side of my knowledge project by sheltering behind a quest for ‘complexity’ so as to counter reductionism and Manichaeism and comply with Weber (1965, p. 399)’s ‘axiological neutrality’ – tenets that I had then only partly understood. As a researcher, I felt like a free spirit whose purpose was to collect the broadest set of standpoints to transcribe them as accurately as possible. I wanted to explore them all. To give them the same space and the same benefit of the doubt. At this stage of my research, my initial aim to voice the voiceless involved figuring out why *they* accepted the WBN project.

As I was preparing my trip to Weda Bay, I interviewed numerous people and collected large amounts of secondary data. The discourses of both the company and NGO networks helped me to discover an environmental protest involving Paris, Jakarta, and Washington. The protests were from national and international NGOs and a grassroots social movement triggered by local activist networks. Yet, the local communities’ acceptance of the WBN project reduced these protests to nothing. Seen from here, from my office in France, the information I was collecting in French and English signaled: “they had accepted.” I thus decided to try and understand how and why the local communities had accepted the mining project, marking the beginning of a disaster that local and international NGOs announced as inevitable. How and why were they surrendering to what the NGOs presented as the worst-case scenario – bartering their ancestors legacy and their children’s future? Just for money? Because of greed, ignorance, and stupidity, as some would have thought? Really? I decided to move myself to this distant Indonesia so as to apprehend their words in the same way as those of NGOs and MNC representatives or CSR reports. Also voice the voiceless. Comprehend the means and causes of the success of so-called ‘development.’ Grasp this implacable process whereby ancestral cultures and endemic ecosystems were to be swallowed up. Establish

access to the members of the Sawai community, who inhabit the coastal villages coveted by WBN and live off small farming and fishing. My move to this far-off Indonesia aimed to collect their words and inform the enormous paradoxes of the situation when it was viewed from afar.

Moving myself into the mining field at the risk of projecting: 'They had no choice'

Through my immersion in the environment of Weda Bay, located on Halmahera Island in the remote Indonesian province of North-Maluku, I discovered a territory left behind by development. On contact with the indigenous communities affected by the launch of the mine, I began to enter the frame. I went up and down their dangerous roads, shared their meals, experienced their precarious living conditions, saw how vulnerable they were to unexplained illness, wildfires, and the natural elements. Be it in their rudimentary homes, on their small motorcycles or pirogues, I met the members of this community and their universe of meaning through different lenses. In the course of my fieldwork, my person and body, along with their limits, became engaged in the situation. My search for observations, field notes, records, and verbatim accounts gradually turned into thrills and conflicting feelings. During the first days, my encounters and interviews were still colored by my determination to remain 'neutral.' I did my best to monitor Subhan, my guide and translator; trying by any means to pressure him into complying with what I believed to be the right position. In a context where I did not know or understand anything, I was prescribing. When he interfered in interviewees' comments – for example, talking too much for my liking and possibly influencing the respondents – or when he selected which replies he would translate or not, I silently fumed against him, cursing, explicitly citing the replies that I expected him to translate. I did my best to pressure him into complying with the ideal image of the researcher who, during interviews, is able to marshal qualities such as neutrality, cleverness and relevance, self-effacement, and a firm but discreet hand. Subhan listened to me patiently, with smiling eyes, and continued as if nothing had happened. These first moments allowed us to build up a common grammar; a mutual understanding about our differences and our respective expectations. We soon became friends and as I shared the fieldwork with him and exposed my emotions and my corporeality to his reality, this compelled me to change and move forward.

I have fond memories of a situation that happened 9 days after my arrival in Weda Bay. It allowed me to gauge the intensity of the fieldwork I was experiencing and the changes I was subject to because of it. I was about to meet the manager of the only resort on Halmahera Island, where the WBN project was setting up. A single night in the resort cost €100, equivalent to 1.5 million Indonesian rupees or 1 month of a good local salary; almost a fortune. The Western clients who arrived

there straight from the airport in an impressive 4 × 4 were there for the diving and had no interaction with the local community. The friendship I was nurturing with Subhan, his wife, and family meant that I could spend no time there, be it only one night. It would have created too wide a gap between us. Nevertheless, we were both interested in going there to interview the manager of the resort.

We had already visited several villages and islands mostly by motorcycle driving along submersible and almost impracticable roads right in the middle of a tropical forest, a vast lush jungle. More than 10 h of riding were needed to go around all the villages affected by the mining project to meet the whole range of stakeholders, and each of our trips had proved difficult. The day before our meeting at Weda Bay resort was rainy and our motorbike skidded dragging us down on the ground – Subhan, my 20 kg backpacks and myself. We lost our balance when Subhan accelerated to jump over a stony, slippery mound covered with piles of fallen rocks that served as a road. My foot was twisted and stuck in the spokes of the rear wheel and the motorcycle had fallen on top of me. I remained on the ground for quite some time, and my foot stuck and squashed under the weight of my two backpacks. I was scared that something was broken. We were 2 h from Weda, in the jungle, night was falling and it was pouring with rain. The nearest hospital was at least 8 h away. Subhan tried to pull me out forcefully before realizing my foot was still stuck between the spokes. Though 3 years later my leg still has a small scar, my wound was superficial and we rode on quickly. I got a grip on myself. I was physically affected for the first time. Over the 8 days I had already spent in Weda Bay, my body had felt different from the one I was used to. It had seemed totally indifferent to stiffness, my stomach had easily digested the food I ate, I was never ill, never tired, not eating too much of the spicy food, drinking the same water as everyone else, smoking a lot, as everyone else. My body had never betrayed me. It had had no choice – we had supported each other from the start.

This fall was the first sign of my weakness and I could not hide it: I had to sit down to overcome my fear. It was the most serious injury I had ever known and I was ashamed that I could not cope with it. The exhaust pipe of the motorbike had also burnt Subhan, but we did not even allude to it – his legs were already entirely criss-crossed with scars from a previous much more serious fall. The next day we were to interview the manager of the resort but the road was too risky for the motorcycle, so Subhan decided to take a pirogue. This was a small motorized boat that he rented, a kind of dugout tree trunk that did not inspire me with great confidence. We travelled in the company of the boat owner's two teenage sons. We made a halt to fish for our lunch. I did not catch anything, but we grilled and shared their meager catches in a cave before continuing to the resort. Unfortunately, the manager was absent and we returned empty-handed. But in the meantime, I had

been suddenly extracted from the situation and forced to distance myself.

The resort comprised several independent wooden bungalows close to the jungle and the water's edge. Hammocks were hanging in front of the bungalows we passed. After walking down a well-kept path, we arrived in a wide open room looking out onto the bay. The view was splendid. This room was the resort's dining room, sober, and grand at the same time, exuding a Zen atmosphere and comfort. A young woman, seemingly barely younger than me, welcomed us. She was elegant, in a lovely skirt and beige blouse, and spoke English fluently. She took care of me with deference, making me feel she regarded me as a 'white' guest. But I was struck by her questioning eyes. She asked a waitress to serve us something to drink and eat. In my Bermuda shorts and a stained, quite unbecoming tee shirt, I realized that I was starving, soaked, and that my leg was bandaged with a dirty plaster. She insisted on seating me on a huge sofa that I was afraid of dirtying. Subhan was looking at me, smiling and inviting me to make the most of the free feast they were giving. I stood there, frozen, and slightly ashamed. They were all eating and chatting. They came from very different backgrounds. She was from another province and had graduated in vocational hospitality. Subhan kindly teased her about the fact she, like its clients, had never been to the villages adjoining the resort. 'You must pay us a visit!', he jokingly concluded. The trouble and embarrassment I felt, like after my motorbike fall, brought me closer to the bay's inhabitants, some of them at least. To return from the resort, we had to row for hours under rain and lightning as the boat's small engine had broken down. Sharing these experiences with them drew me closer to them and I became their 'sista buleh' (foreign sister). My small injuries and big fears were both subjects of the stories that made me accepted.

As a result, I was moving away from my original position of neutrality, getting closer, siding with the inhabitants of the bay. Even so, moving myself involved a pitfall that was probably necessary to confront. My physical and emotional experiences in this situation acted as a catalyst for me to *project* my own feelings onto how I interpreted the situation and the actors' behaviors. The ethnographic experience had a strong impact on my personal feelings, encouraging me to analyze the pain and words I encountered in the field through my body and my experiences of this otherworldliness. I threw myself into the role of righter-of-wrongs. While I came to understand the 'how' of their acceptance of the mining project, I then tried to explain the 'why' of this acceptance. In fact, it was impossible to conceive that they had sold their lands for a crust of bread without understanding the precarity of their living conditions. Generally speaking, my reasoning relied on the assumption that this precarity left them no other choice but to accept the meager crumbs of so-called 'development' and that everyone would have done the same in their shoes. Like causes

having like effects, I felt it necessary to differentiate between acceptance and evil, the easy option and absolute necessity, or the aspiration to a better life. My anger was sincere, my feeling of powerlessness at a peak, and I was unaware of the condescension I was showing. I now realize, with astonishment, that the belief that 'they had no choice' was imbued with a kind of ethnocentrism, and that this belief was certainly one of the most powerful allies of the so-called 'development' that was eroding ancestral cultures and tropical forests through a violence that I needed time to think about.

Surpassing myself thanks to translation: 'They had never accepted'

A sense-making process of several months, bringing its share of troubles, extended the field of ethnography I was exploring. I returned confused, my only truth being the impenetrable veil that had thus far covered my taken-for-granted certitudes. Several months after my return home, comfortably seated at my desk and looking through my field notes, interview records, and photos, the contradictory emotions I had felt in the field surged up intact and intensely disturbing. I had gone there to voice the voiceless but discovered that a huge gulf exists between claiming to receive otherness and being able to comprehend or decipher it. I was reaching my intellectual limits. I became aware of my unexpected preconceptions and was totally shaken up. Making sense of the rupture that the ethnographic experience had caused in my research, challenging body and mind, meant that I needed to deconstruct the things I was taking for granted to gain access to the meanings that the inhabitants of the bay had tried to pass on. I had to surpass myself and to put myself outside the situation so that I could, more than voicing the voiceless, accept their participation in the sense-making process and remain open to their experience.

I then decided to start a collaboration of several months with a qualified translator, Fanny. This aimed to translate some of the interviews recorded in distant Indonesia – initially roughly interpreted from Indonesian to English by Subhan – and the written documents I had laid hands on while I was there. More than 1 year after my return from the field, I was finally grasping what the locals had said and explained to me. Their reasoning, logics, and pain were reaching me. Going there and understanding what they allowed me to see finally turned out to be two entirely different steps, separated by more than 1 year. The language played an obvious but incomplete role. If I had spoken Indonesian, I would have understood words, even sentences, but not all the sentences, given that Indonesia encompasses thousands of regional languages. Fanny did much more than translate words and sentences. She helped me to reduce the distance: listening to the stories I was telling her; crying with me, explaining to me what she understood of my experience, discussing some of my misunderstandings, some of my discomfort

in certain situations. She told me that she herself had done research in Indonesia and expressed her amazement at the quality and depth of the data I had been able to collect. She helped me to understand the codes that existed in the rooms where I had been, totally unaware of their presence. Subhan had helped me to open the doors and had accompanied me to the Weda bay, while Fanny helped me to surpass the role of righter-of-wrongs and distance myself in order to enter an understanding of others' experiences. This very gradual surpassing of what I had lived, which took a whole year, allowed me to challenge most of my preconceptions and accept that understanding the unfamiliar, even incompletely, takes time.

A group interview I realized in Weda Bay haunted me for a long time. I was interviewing several inhabitants who had agreed to sell their lands. The tension was palpable. My attention had been utterly absorbed by the interviewees' conflicting views: one woman felt cheated at the sale of her land and was crying her eyes out because her subsistence farming had disappeared leaving her unable to feed her children; one man had also sold his land, he had been paid, but the amount received did not allow him to finish building a house, he had no land left to sell and the job he was waiting for might never come; another had also agreed to sell his land, he had seen his land disappear and had been waiting for over a year for the promised compensation; two men had agreed to sell and were outraged that they still had land and still no money. After leaving this group interview with Subhan, we reached the troubling conclusion that if these people listened to one another, they would realize that their positions – especially their acceptance of selling their lands – made no sense. It took me more than 1 year to understand that I was the one who had not listened to them, despite my desire to comprehend them and what lay underneath their words. I had failed to take into account the unity of their respective accounts and the cement allowing their coexistence: anger, powerlessness, and a strong feeling of injustice. Finally, my sophisticated analysis had been my best shield against the violence of clearly assessing how the local inhabitants' needs had been crushed, against the demonstration that nothing was or could have been expressed, discussed, or able to change. They had never accepted. My fieldwork narrated a story of violence, of forced destructions, of fierce social protests crushed by a juggernaut MNC armed with paramilitary groups, supported by local authorities, some of them corrupt, all of them committed to the cause of the so-called development. I discovered a mining project that did not provide many jobs for local communities, which was destroying their 'life spaces' despite local protests, billboards, official complaints, and accounts of a 6-year struggle. I met people who had accepted nothing save the idea of future prosperity. People who, on unequal terms, had struggled, surpassed, and transformed themselves to denounce injustice and claim their right to a different and better life, to more. People

who had purely and simply been crushed by the cogs of the WBN machine, its multifaceted power, and the panoply of means it had at its disposal.

To conclude, I discovered that the ethnographic experience revolves around a process of positioning, moving, surpassing one's self – which is a prerequisite – taking into account the troubles and discomforts that mark the passage from one step to another. All of this is vital if the researcher wishes to be capable of "making the personal political" (Jones, 2005, p. 783), that is, being able to access others' experiences and make 'words matter' inasmuch as they might 'change the world.'

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