



FORUM

That's enough about ethnography!

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Ethnography has become a term so overused, both in anthropology and in contingent disciplines, that it has lost much of its meaning. I argue that to attribute “ethnographicness” to encounters with those among whom we carry on our research, or more generally to fieldwork, is to undermine both the ontological commitment and the educational purpose of anthropology as a discipline, and of its principal way of working—namely participant observation. It is also to reproduce a pernicious distinction between those with whom we study and learn, respectively within and beyond the academy. Anthropology’s obsession with ethnography, more than anything else, is curtailing its public voice. The way to regain it is through reasserting the value of anthropology as a forward-moving discipline dedicated to healing the rupture between imagination and real life.

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Explaining what we mean

“Ethnographic” has become the most overused term in the discipline of anthropology. It is hard to say exactly when the term broke loose from its moorings, or what the reasons were for its subsequent proliferation. These reasons are undoubtedly complex and could be the subject for a separate historical study. My concern in this article, however, is prospective, not retrospective. For I believe that this overuse is doing great harm to anthropology, that it is holding it back while other fields of study are surging forward, and that it is actually preventing our discipline from having the kind of impact in the world that it deserves and that the world so desperately needs. And because the cause is desperate, I shall not refrain from polemic. The tenor of what follows is partisan, and deliberately so. I am sick and tired of equivocation, of scholarly obscurantism, and of the conceit that turns the project of anthropology into the study of its own ways of working. A discipline confined to the theatre of its own operations has nowhere to go. In



its spiraling descent into irrelevance, it has no-one and nothing to blame other than itself.

My aim is not to eliminate ethnography, or to expunge it from our anthropological consciousness. Nor is it to underrate its significance, and the complex demands it places on those who practice it. Rather, I am concerned to narrow ethnography down so that to those who ask us, in good faith, what it means, we can respond with precision and conviction. Only by doing so, I contend, can we protect it from the inflation that is otherwise threatening to devalue its currency to the extent of rendering the entire enterprise worthless. For it is not only within anthropology that ethnography is on the loose. I am sure I speak for the majority of anthropological colleagues in deploring the abuse of the term that has become commonplace in social sciences beyond our shores. How many research proposals have we read, coming from such fields as sociology, social policy, social psychology and education, in which the applicant explains that he or she will conduct “ethnographic interviews” with a sample of randomly selected informants, the data from which will then be processed by means of a recommended software package in order to yield “results”?

Such a procedure, in which ethnographic appears to be a modish substitute for qualitative, offends every principle of proper, rigorous anthropological inquiry—including long-term and open-ended commitment, generous attentiveness, relational depth, and sensitivity to context—and we are right to protest against it. And, we are equally entitled to protest when those who assess our own proposals demand of us, in the name of ethnography, the same slavish adherence to the protocols of positivist methodology, by requiring us to specify—for example—how many people we intend to talk to, for how long, and how they will be selected. Against such benchmarks, anthropological research is bound to be devalued.

Our protests, however, will be of no avail unless we can explain what we mean by ethnography in terms that are cogent and intellectually defensible. It is not enough for us to say that anthropological research is ethnographic because that is what we anthropologists do. To wear ethnography as a badge of honor is unlikely to impress anyone beyond our own charmed circle. At a time when so many of us feel that our discipline is under threat, pushed to the margins where it no longer enjoys the public voice it once had, the growing inability to explain what we really mean by ethnography is an increasing source of embarrassment—all the more so when, as a defensive reaction, we continue to fall back on ethnography as the one thing that marks anthropology out, and justifies its existence as a discipline with something distinctive to contribute. To stake our fortunes in such shifting sands is a risky strategy indeed!

What ethnography is

Consider just some of the terms to which the qualifier “ethnographic” is routinely applied: there is the ethnographic encounter, ethnographic fieldwork, ethnographic method, ethnographic knowledge. There are ethnographic monographs, and ethnographic films. And now we have ethnographic theory! Through all these runs the ethnographer. Taking this as a primary dimension of identity, it would appear that everything the ethnographer turns his or her hand to is, *prima facie*,

ethnographic. Suppose you reflect and write only on your own experience? Well, if you are an ethnographer, then that's autoethnography. Suppose that your job is to curate artefacts in a museum, collected from different parts of the world, then that's museum ethnography. Curiously, however, the term does not extend to what goes on within the confines of the academy. As students, we are not said to undertake ethnography when we train with more senior scholars. Nor to my knowledge do any of my anthropological colleagues, when they work with students, claim to be practicing ethnography in the classroom. In the settings of seminars, workshops and conferences, academic anthropologists talk a great deal about ethnography, but rarely if ever do they claim to be doing it. The ethnography, it seems, is always going on somewhere else.

I shall return to these anomalies in due course. First, let me declare my hand by stating what ethnography means. Quite literally, it means writing about the people. Though we anthropologists would likely not turn to the dictionary for an authoritative definition, others well might, and this is what they would find: "a scientific description of races and peoples with their customs, habits and mutual differences."¹ To us, of course, this sounds hopelessly anachronistic. We would move at once to remove all reference to race. We would insist that there is far more to description than the mere cataloging of habits and customs. In thickening our descriptions, and allowing a real historical agency to the people who figure in them, we might want to qualify the sense in which these accounts could be considered to be scientific. Ethnographic description, we might well say, is more an art than a science, but no less accurate or truthful for that. Like the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, the European and American ethnographers of the twentieth could be said to have practiced an "art of describing" (Alpers 1983) albeit predominantly in words rather than in line and color. Theirs is still a standard against which we measure contemporary work.

These issues have been debated *ad nauseam*. Much of this debate has fallen under the rubric of the so-called "crisis of representation." Quite reasonably, controversial questions have been asked about who has the right to describe, on what grounds any description may be taken to be more truthful or authoritative than any other, to what extent the presence of the author can or should be acknowledged within the text, and how the whole process of writing it might be made more collaborative. I do not intend to prolong these controversies. My focus is rather on what is not ethnographic. Like a written monograph, in so far as it aims to chronicle the life and times of a people, may justifiably be called ethnographic, and while the same may even be said of a film that shares the same objectives, I do not believe the term can be applied to our encounters with people, to the fieldwork in which these encounters take place, to the methods by which we prosecute it, or to the knowledge that grows therefrom. Indeed to characterize encounters, fieldwork, methods and knowledge as ethnographic is positively misleading. Autoethnography, when there are no people to describe but only the self, and museum ethnography, where there are only curated objects, are simply oxymoronic. As for ethnographic theory, my argument will be that this is to get anthropology precisely back to front.

1. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 6th ed., s. v. "ethnography."

Encountering the world

Let me begin with **ethnographic encounters**. Simply put: in the conduct of our research, we meet people. We talk with them, we ask them questions, we listen to their stories and we watch what they do. In so far as we are deemed competent and capable, we join in. There is nothing particularly special or unusual about this: it is, after all, what people do all the time when they encounter one another. **What, then, could possibly distinguish an encounter that is ethnographic from one that is not?** Here you are in what you imagine to be the field (of which more below). You tell people that you have come to learn from them. You are perhaps hoping that they will teach you some of their practical skills, or that they will explain what they think about things. You try very hard to remember what you have observed, or what people have told you, and lest you forget, you write it all down in fieldnotes as soon as the opportunity arises. Could it be the eagerness to learn, the strenuous memory-work, or perhaps the subsequent writing of notes, that lends an ethnographic inflection to your encounters with others?

The answer is no. For **what we could call “ethnographicness” is not intrinsic to the encounters themselves; it is rather a judgment that is cast upon them through a retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering and note-taking which they call forth into pretexts for something else altogether.** This ulterior purpose, concealed from the people whom you covertly register as informants, is documentary. It is this that turns your experience, your memory and your notes into material—sometimes spun quasi-scientifically as “data”—upon which you subsequently hope to draw in the project of offering an account. The risks of double-crossing entailed in this ethnographizing of encounters, and the ethical dilemmas consequent upon them, are well known and much discussed. No one could accuse anthropologists of turning a blind eye to them. This is not where the fault lies. It lies rather in a **temporal distortion that contrives to render the aftermath of our meetings with people as their anterior condition.** Johannes Fabian (1983: 37), alluding to the same distortion, speaks of the “schizochronic tendencies of emerging anthropology.” In effect, **to cast encounters as ethnographic is to consign the incipient—the about-to-happen in unfolding relationships—to the temporal past of the already over. It is as though, on meeting others face-to-face, one’s back was already turned to them. This is to leave behind those who, in the moment of encounter, stand before. Two-faced indeed!**

Over a period of time, encounters with people are compounded and folded into what we have come to know as fieldwork. Thus the objections I have raised to the ethnographizing of the former apply to the latter as well. **Ethnographicness is no more intrinsic to fieldwork than it is to the encounters of which it is comprised.** The conflation of ethnography with fieldwork is indeed one of the most commonplace in the discipline, and all the more insidious because it is so rarely questioned. **That the field is never experienced as such when you are actually *there* and caught up in the currents of everyday life—that it only stands out when you have left it far behind and begin to write about it—is widely acknowledged.** What we have been less ready to accept is that **the same goes for the ethnographic.** Perhaps then, if we are to be really consistent, we should drop both the ethnographic and the field from ethnographic fieldwork, and refer instead to our tried and tested way of working,

namely *participant observation*. Ethnography and participant observation, as Jenny Hockey and Martin Forsey (2012) have pointed out, are **absolutely not the same**.

Observing from the inside

To observe means to watch what is going on around and about, and of course to listen and feel as well. To participate means to do so from within the current of activity in which you carry on a life alongside and together with the persons and things that capture your attention. As with the encounter, anthropological participant observation differs only in degree from what all people do all of the time, though children more than most. But children have all their lives to learn. For the adult anthropologist, arriving as a complete newcomer and with limited time at his or her disposal, the hurdles are considerably greater. Now as a way of working—or better perhaps, as a condensed expression of the way we all work—participant observation is a procedure that I wholeheartedly endorse. But, I am not so sure that we have the full measure of why it is so important and so essential to what we do. In this regard, I want to make two points about it. The first is about **ontological commitment**; the second—to which I move in the next section—is about education.

It is sometimes supposed that participation and observation are in contradiction. How can one simultaneously watch what is going on and join in? Is this not tantamount to asking us to swim in the river and stand on the bank at the same time? “One can observe and participate,” writes Michael Jackson (1989: 51), “successively but not simultaneously.” Observation and participation, he goes on, yield different kinds of data, respectively objective and subjective. So how can the engagement of participation possibly be combined with the detachment of observation? These questions, however, are founded upon a certain understanding of immanence and transcendence, deeply rooted in the protocols of normal science, according to which human existence is constitutionally split between **being in** the world and **knowing about** it. The alleged contradiction between participation and observation is no more than a corollary of this split. As human beings, it seems, we can aspire to truth about the world only by way of an emancipation that takes us from it and leaves us strangers to ourselves (Ingold 2013: 5).

Anthropology, surely, cannot passively acquiesce to this **excision of knowing from being**. More than any other discipline in the human sciences, it has the means and the determination to show how **knowledge grows from the crucible of lives lived with others**. This knowledge, as we are well aware, consists not in propositions about the world but in the **skills of perception and capacities of judgment that develop in the course of direct, practical, and sensuous engagements with our surroundings**. This is to refute, once and for all, the commonplace fallacy that observation is a practice exclusively dedicated to the objectification of the beings and things that command our attention and their removal from the sphere of our sentient involvement with consociates. Recall Jackson (1989: 51): observation, he says, yields “objective data.” Nothing could be further from the truth. For **to observe is not to objectify; it is to attend to persons and things, to learn from them, and to follow in precept and practice**. Indeed there can be no observation without participation—that is, without an intimate coupling, in perception and action, of observer

and observed (Ingold 2000: 108). Thus, participant observation is absolutely *not* an undercover technique for gathering intelligence on people, on the pretext of learning from them. It is rather a fulfilment, in both letter and deed, of what we owe to the world for our development and formation. That is what I mean by ontological commitment.

An education by attention

But to practice participant observation is also to undergo an education. Indeed I believe there are good grounds for substituting the word “education” for “ethnography” as the most fundamental purpose of anthropology. I do not mean to give a boost to that minor and unjustly neglected subfield known as the anthropology of education. I want to insist, rather, on anthropology as a *practice* of education. That is to say, it is a practice dedicated to what Kenelm Burridge (1975: 10) has called *metanoia*: “an ongoing series of transformations each one of which alters the predicates of being.” Though Burridge argues that metanoia is the goal of ethnography, to my mind it much more appropriately describes the goal of education. Jackson (2013: 28), who fully concurs with Burridge in the way he thinks about his own research, much of it carried out among Kuranko people in Sierra Leone, acknowledges that “Sierra Leone transformed me, shaping the person I now am and the anthropology I do.” Exactly so: but that is why the anthropology he does is a practice of education and *not* of ethnography. “I have never thought of my research among the Kuranko as elucidating a unique lifeworld or foreign worldview,” he admits. “Rather, this was the laboratory in which I happened to explore the *human condition*” (ibid.).

With his Kuranko mentors, Jackson studies the conditions and possibilities of being human. That, precisely, is to do anthropology. But by the same token, since he is not setting out to elucidate the Kuranko lifeworld, it is not ethnography. And yet, despite this, Jackson continues to portray himself as an ethnographer! Elsewhere, however, he comes close to defining his anthropological project in educational terms: it is, he says, about “opening up new possibilities for thinking about experience” (ibid.: 88)—a process which, following the philosopher Richard Rorty, he calls *edification*. For Rorty, to edify is to keep the conversation going and, by the same token, to resist all claims to final, objective truth. It is to open a space, he writes, “for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described” (Rorty 1980: 370).

Does this sense of wonder, which Rorty attributes to the poet, not also lie at the root of anthropological sensibility? Like poetry, anthropology is a quest for education in the original sense of the term, far removed from the sense it has subsequently acquired through its assimilation to the institution of the school. Derived from the Latin *educere* (from *ex*, “out,” plus *ducere*, “to lead”), education was a matter of leading novices *out* into the world rather than, as commonly understood today, of instilling knowledge *in* to their minds. Instead of placing us in a position or affording a perspective, education in this sense is about pulling us away from

any standpoint—from any position or perspective we might adopt. In short, as the philosopher of education Jan Masschelein (2010a: 278) has observed, it is a practice of *exposure*.

Surely participant observation, if nothing else, is just such a practice. It is one that calls upon the novice anthropologist to *attend*: to attend to what others are doing or saying and to what is going on around and about; to *follow along* where others go and to do their bidding, whatever this might entail and wherever it might take you. This can be unnerving, and entail considerable *existential risk*. It is like pushing the boat out into an as yet unformed world—a world in which things are not ready made but always incipient, on the cusp of *continual emergence*. Commanded not by the given but by what is *on the way* to being given, one has to be prepared to *wait* (Masschelein 2010b: 46). Indeed, waiting upon things is precisely what it means to attend to them.

On intersubjectivity and correspondence

As every anthropologist knows, there is a great deal of waiting in participant observation. Launched in the current of real time, participant observation couples the forward movement of one's own perception and action with the movements of others, much as melodic lines are coupled in musical counterpoint. For this coupling of movements that, as they proceed, continually answer to one another, I have adopted the term *correspondence* (Ingold 2013: 105–8). By this I do not mean the endeavor to come up with some exact match or simulacrum for what we find in the happenings going on around us. It has nothing to do with representation or description. It is rather about answering to these happenings with interventions, questions and responses of our own—or in other words, about *living attentively with others*. Participant observation is a practice of correspondence in this sense. Yet cast within the schizochronic frame of ethnography, correspondence reappears in the quite different guise of “intersubjectivity.” And intersubjectivity, following Edmund Husserl, is about living with others not attentively but *intentionally* (Duranti 2010; Jackson 2013: 5).

Of ethnographic intersubjectivity, we are bound to ask: is it given, as an existential condition, or is it achieved, as a communicative result? The question is unanswerable, since it is wrapped up in the very move by which the ethnographizing of encounters converts end results into initial conditions. With correspondence, however, the question does not arise. Correspondence is neither given nor achieved but always in the making. For one thing, it is not a relation *between* one subject (such as the anthropologist in person) and others, as the prefix *inter-* indicates, but one that carries on or unfolds along concurrent paths. And for another, in carrying on, persons and things are not already thrown, as the suffix *-ject* implies, but are in the throwing. They are not subjects at all, nor objects, nor are they hybrid subject-objects. They are verbs. This is as true of humans as of beings of any other kind. Indeed, humans are not really beings at all but “becomings” (Ingold and Palsson 2013). Wherever you find them, humans are *humaning*. That is to say, they are corresponding—as letter writers do, scribing their thoughts and feelings and waiting for answers—living lives that weave around one another along ever-extending

ways. The “loose ends” that Johannes Fabian (in the themed section of this issue of HAU) finds in intersubjectivity are precisely the threads which are twined together in correspondence, and that allow life to keep going. In an interconnected world, where everyone and everything is already joined up and all lines lead from A to B, no life would be possible at all.

To practice participant observation, then, is to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study, in a movement that goes forward rather than back in time. Herein lies the educational purpose, dynamic, and potential of anthropology. As such, it is the very opposite of ethnography, the descriptive or documentary aims of which impose their own finalities on these trajectories of learning, converting them into data-gathering exercises destined to yield “results,” usually in the form of research papers or monographs. And this brings us to the question of methods. It is, of course, as common for the word ethnographic to be placed before method as before fieldwork. What is usually implied is some form of participant observation. I have already shown that the *a posteriori* ethnographizing of participant observation undermines both the ontological commitment that it enshrines and its educational purpose. Questions remain, however, around the notion of method. Granted that participant observation and ethnography are entirely different, that one is a practice of correspondence and the other a practice of description, can either be regarded as a method at all?

A way of working

That depends, of course, on what we mean by method. We could perhaps characterize participant observation as a *way of working*. This was probably what C. Wright Mills (1959: 216) had in mind, in a celebrated essay on intellectual craftsmanship, when he insisted that there can be no distinction between the theory of a discipline and its method—that both were indissoluble aspects of the practice of a craft. If anthropology’s method, in this sense, is that of the practitioner working with people and materials, then its discipline lies in the observational engagement and perceptual attunement that allow the practitioner to follow what is going on, and in turn to respond to it. But this is far from what is conventionally meant by *method* in the protocols of normal science, where to implement a method is to follow through a sequence of prespecified and regulated steps towards the realization of a determinate goal. For the steps of participant observation, like those of life itself, are contingent on the circumstances, and advance towards no end. They rather tread ways of carrying on and of being carried, of living life with others—humans and non-humans all—that is cognizant of the past, attuned to the conditions of the present and speculatively open to the possibilities of the future.

What then of ethnography, *sensu stricto*? Is it a method? As a craft of writing about the people, ethnography doubtless *has* its methods, much as Mills intimated. But that it *is* a method, applied in the service of some greater end, is questionable. I would argue strongly that it is not. Ethnography, surely, has value in its own right, not as a means to something else. We do not have to look beyond it for justification. What greater good is there, to which ethnography allegedly owes its existence? The traditionalist might answer that it is comparative anthropology. There was a

time when we were told to treat ethnographic studies as compendia of empirical data, on the diverse societies and cultures of the world, which could then be used to test our theoretical generalizations (Sperber 1985: 10–11). Still today we persist in assembling studies culled from here and there between the covers of edited volumes, in the hopes that insights of a general sort might fall out. Not only, however, is ethnographic writing grossly devalued by its reduction to “data,” but also the idea that universals are anything more than abstractions of our own has long been shown to be fallacious. Anthropology and ethnography are indeed distinct, as I have indicated, but this distinction cannot be aligned to one between the general and the particular, or between comparative-theoretical work in the study and empirical data collection in the field. Ethnography is not a prelude to anthropology, as fieldwork to writing up. If anything, it is the other way around. The ethnographer writes up; the anthropologist—a correspondent observer at large—does his or her thinking in the world (Ingold 2011: 241–3).

A conversation of human life

The fruits of this thinking are what we tend to call “knowledge.” Sometimes we speak of anthropological knowledge, sometimes of ethnographic knowledge. An enormous amount of ink has been spilled on the question of what this knowledge amounts to. There is widespread agreement, nowadays, that knowledge is not built from facts that are simply there, waiting to be discovered and organized in terms of concepts and categories, but that it rather grows and is grown in the forge of our relations with others. I will not rehearse the arguments in support of this view, but will take them as read. Knowledge, as Bob White and Kiven Strohm explain in their preface to the themed section in this issue of HAU, is *co-produced*. This is the point, however, at which to return to my earlier observation that in the eyes of most colleagues who would call themselves, interchangeably, anthropologists and ethnographers, the practice of knowledge generation or co-production that they would call “ethnographic” appears to stop at the walls of the academy, and not to penetrate within. Inside the walls, they talk endlessly *about* ethnography, to each other and to their students, and of course they write it up, but they do not *do* it. Thus knowledge co-produced with informants is ethnographic, knowledge co-produced with students is not.

Now I am not suggesting that we should become ethnographers of our students or of our academic colleagues. We are there to work *with* them, not to make studies *of* them. However, I would challenge those who insist on using the word ethnographic to describe the knowledge that grows from their collaborative engagements (or correspondence) with the people among whom they work, to explain why they would not consider it equally appropriate to describe knowledge that grows from their correspondence with colleagues and students. Is it not because, despite all protestations to the contrary, they remain complicit in reproducing a pernicious distinction between those from whom and with whom we learn, respectively inside and outside the academy? Surely when we seek an education from great scholars, it is not in order that we can spend the rest of our lives describing or representing their ideas, worldviews, or philosophies. It is rather to hone our perceptual, moral,

and intellectual faculties for the critical tasks that lie ahead. But if that is so, and if—as I have argued—to practice anthropology is to undergo an education, as much within as beyond the academy, then the same must be true of correspondences with our “non-academic” interlocutors. Knowledge is knowledge, wherever it is grown, and just as our purpose in acquiring it within the academy is (or should be) educational rather than ethnographic, so it should be beyond the academy as well.

One example of the kind of distortion to which I allude comes from a recent editorial, in the journal *Anthropology Today*, by Catherine Besteman and Angelique Haugerud. Their call is for a public anthropology. Of course, as they acknowledge, there has never been a time when anthropology has *not* been public, “in the sense that our disciplinary *forte* is ethnography and we carefully probe the views of our research interlocutors” (Besteman and Haugerud 2013: 2). Now I would be the first to agree that the careful, even forensic probing of ideas is a primary desideratum of good scholarship. To do so in the name of ethnography, however, is precisely to neutralize the challenge that critical engagement with other ways of doing and knowing can present to public understanding. Why? Because in the ethnographizing of these ways, the priority shifts from engagement to reportage, from correspondence to description, from the co-imagining of possible futures to the characterization of what is already past. It is, as it were, to look through the wrong end of the telescope. Instead of calling on the vision afforded by our education to illuminate and enlarge upon the world, the ethnographer takes his or her sightings from the world in holding up the other’s ways to scrutiny. Who would dare do such a thing to our mentors and peers within the academy? Beyond its walls, however, such treasonable activity is not just routine; we even flag it up as our disciplinary strong point!

Anthropology back to front

That anthropology has lost its public voice, or that it is scarcely audible, is certainly a cause for concern. Peddlers of other wares, often with ill-conceived, populist or fundamentalist agendas, are only too keen to fill the vacuum. Some are even prepared to fake anthropological credentials in their eagerness to feed popular prejudice. It is a symptom of anthropology’s retreat that it has signally failed to keep such miscreants in check. In their manifesto for the renewal of ethnographic theory, Giovanni da Col and David Graeber (2011: ix) go so far as to lament that anthropology, in its current predicament, is “committing a kind of intellectual suicide.” But is this, as they claim, for want of original insights? Is it the turn to philosophy—specifically of continental European provenance—and away from ethnography that has set the discipline on the path of self-destruction?

I think not. For one thing, I do not share da Col and Graeber’s pessimistic assessment of recent anthropology. There has been no shortage of original insights. Compared with most other disciplines, anthropology constantly astonishes with its originality. But if there is one thing that prevents anthropological insights from having the wider, transformative effects that we might hope for them, it is the constant resort to ethnography. “Ethnographically oriented particularism,” as Stuart McLean (2013: 66–7) has noted, “has become not only the default setting for much current anthropological research and writing, . . . but also the basis for many



arguments concerning the discipline's continued relevance to the understanding of contemporary social processes." McLean is skeptical of this "almost ubiquitously shared vision of anthropology," and so am I. For far from increasing its social relevance, it seems to me that the appeal to ethnography holds anthropology hostage to the popular stereotype of the ethnographer, which is not without foundation, as one who is bound to the retrospective chronicling of lives that are always on the brink of disappearing.

So what is this strange hybrid of pragmatism and philosophizing that goes by the name of ethnographic theory? In some ways it goes back to where I began my anthropology, as "philosophy with the people in": an enterprise energized by the tension between speculative inquiry into what life *could* be like and a knowledge, rooted in practical experience, of what life *is* like for people of particular times and places (Ingold 1992: 696). I have already shown, however, that in its ethnographization, this experience is schizochronically put behind us, even as it is lived. As for theory, it becomes a domain in which ethnographers, having turned away from their respective field sites, trade in the "insights" they have brought back. Like connoisseurs of exotic art, they aspire to put their treasures on display, and to extract value from their comparison or juxtaposition. In the museum of ethnographic theory, such concept-objects as *totem*, *mana* and *šaman*, originating from three continents of the world, rub shoulders on the shelf, awaiting the attentions of the virtuoso scholar, who will magic them into some kind of "disjunctive homonimity" (da Col and Graeber 2011: viii).

Indeed ethnography and theory resemble nothing so much as the two arcs of a hyperbola, which cast their beams in opposite directions, lighting up the surfaces, respectively, of mind and world. They are back to back, and darkness reigns between them. But what if each arc were to reverse its orientation, so as to embrace the other in an encompassing, brightly illuminated ellipse? We would then have neither ethnography nor theory, nor even a compound of both. What we would have is an undivided, interstitial field of *anthropology*. If ethnographic theory is the hyperbola, anthropology is the ellipse. For ethnography, when it turns, is no longer ethnography but the educational correspondences of real life. And theory, when it turns, is no longer theory, but an imagination nourished by its observational engagements with the world. The rupture between reality and imagination—the one annexed to fact, the other to theory—has been the source of much havoc in the history of consciousness. It needs to be repaired. It is surely the task of anthropology, before all else, to repair it. In calling a halt to the proliferation of ethnography, I am not asking for more theory. My plea is for a return to anthropology.

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Assez avec l'ethnographie!

Résumé : L'ethnographie est devenu un terme tellement galvaudé, en anthropologie et dans les disciplines liées, qu'il a perdu beaucoup de son sens. Je soutiens qu'attribuer une qualité « ethnographique » aux rencontres avec ceux parmi lesquels nous effectuons nos recherches, ou plus généralement au travail de terrain, porte atteinte à la fois à l'engagement ontologique et au but éducatif de l'anthropologie en tant que discipline, et à son principal outil de travail - à savoir l'observation participante. Cet usage reproduit également une distinction pernicieuse entre ceux parmi lesquels nous étudions et apprenons, respectivement à l'intérieur et au-delà du cercle académique. L'obsession anthropologique pour l'ethnographie, plus que toute autre chose, étouffe sa voix publique. Une façon de la retrouver consisterait en la revalorisation de l'anthropologie comme une discipline allant de l'avant et dédiée à panser la rupture entre l'imagination et la vie réelle.

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