

The diary and the field: methodological reflections on transformative praxis, or, the lesson from anthropology¹

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Abstract

The long twentieth century has had two broad effects on the ethnographic form. On one hand, decolonisation and democratisation of anthropological knowledge in the first half of the century produced the 'native' anthropologist. On another, neoliberal policies near the end of the century left institutions staring at the specter of 'resource crunch,' making exotic fields inaccessible, leaving ethnographers to do anthropology 'at home.' These forms tested certitudes by shifting the location and subject of anthropological knowledge, but despite this decentering, the near absence of a certain form of ethnography implies that evolutionism still haunts the field as some argue. We need new forms that will test us anew if we are to confront neoliberalism today and articulate an ethics of transformative praxis.

Key Words: Ethnography, Ethics, Evolutionism, Neoliberalism, Development Practice

Conception: a fateful naming

There is not one practice outside of religion as meticulously ritualised and yet so resolutely mystified as fieldwork in the social sciences across the twentieth century. Hardly limited to anthropology anymore, everyone now is in on it, it was however born to the anthropologist for it is she who gave it a proper name and with that the meanings and futures that a name bestows on people and things. Like so many names this too would prove fortuitous. For although in 1812 the English ethnography was coined for 'the science of the description and classification of the races of mankind,' it derived from the older German *ethnographie* and in turn from the Greek *ethnos* or rather *ethnikos*, used for the heathen, that is, one who was neither Christian nor Jew. What is more the term was used by the heathens for themselves.² So ethnography should have been a heathen science and a science from the *inside*.

¹ For the purposes of this paper the terms anthropology or anthropologist refer to what is known as cultural and social anthropology (CASA) and not physical or biological anthropology. Despite disciplinary alliances fieldwork and its methodological issues have had a unique and certainly richer history in CASA compared to sibling fields. This paper was conceived after a discussion with Michael Herzfeld, Harvard University, almost a decade back, and it lay dormant until recently when another conversation with him reminded me I had best get around to writing it. For such reminders, his ever generous advice and friendship, I remain deeply grateful to him. For their support and enthusiasm I am as always grateful to Anup Dhar and Deepti Sachdev, soulmates at work.

² The racial, ethnological or cultural connotations that '*ethnikos*' carries today did not appear until as recently as the nineteenth century. Before this period the word would mark a 'moral' or 'religious' community. Interestingly, its root is the proto Indo-European (PIE) '*swedh-no*': a reflexive pronoun which addresses the *subject* of a sentence. The cognates of this root are to be found in the Sanskrit *svah* (self), Old Persian *huva* (one's own), Latin

However the Judeo-Christian millennium and an ironic turn not unknown in the history of language saw the name transferred from those who used it to describe themselves to those who were meant to be distinct from it. Not surprisingly then, as *ethnikos* became an 'external' term, the fate of ethnography suddenly changed. The name that should have meant 'writing for us' had become instead the 'writing of them.'

Today ethnography still carries the mark of this distortion. Indeed anthropology itself, by its self-doubt and its self-importance, in crisis, or resurgence, remains the attempt to restore ethnography to its place. For here, says Lila Abu-Lughod, you get 'a discipline built on the historically constructed divide between the west and the non-west,' its tool, ethnography, largely a study of the non-western other by the western self, even if in its new guise, it seeks explicitly to give voice to the other or to present a dialogue between the self and other, either textually or through an explication of the fieldwork encounter. (Abu-Lughod, 1991). As for ethnography, though the name existed from the early nineteenth century, as noted, it would be more than a century before its greatest reformer, Malinowski, 'invented' it again. Along with Boas and Radcliffe-Brown, but more effectively than either, he got ethnography 'off the veranda' and hurled it to faraway places together with himself in 1914.

As war broke out, Malinowski found himself stranded in the Trobriand, unable to come home. Thinking back to the time some years ago when he was rendered immobile by tuberculosis, Malinowski decided to distract himself by reinventing anthropology. And so his terrible luck enabled him to collect a staggering quantity of data (Geertz, 1967) out of which emerged, in the post-war world, treatises such as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1926), *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927) and others which, no matter the merit of their claims today, demonstrated that the life of a vagabond could be at once an academic matter and an ethical choice (even an affluent one). As aggravating as this reincarnation of a romantic adventurer may have been to other disciplines, it was simply too well timed. The hitherto quixotic and footloose fieldworker had magically crawled out of the 'iron cage' of a taylorist world into one full of ethical and substantive alternatives. Furthermore, it was a world over which her authority could not be challenged without following her steps. This apparent deathblow to platonic universals conjured up in the cave refashioned the anthropologist as a bearer of worlds capable of existing independently of, if not against, an imperialist politics of domination. To assist her in the craft was this flawless tool forged and perfected by the master himself. So with a giant heave Malinowski tossed anthropology into a realm from where it could renew its critique of culture and in doing so established ethnography as the ethical core of that critique even if only unintentionally.

sodalis (companion), Slavonic *svojaku* (kinsman), Norse *sik* (oneself) or Irish *fein* (self). But over time the reflexive aspect faded and the word took on its modern meaning of an adjective describing the qualities of a conceptual *object*.

Crisis: the diary and the field

I say 'unintentionally' because all that Malinowski created came nearly undone by the effect of his last book, one he never intended to publish. Published in 1967, due to an arguably unfortunate judgment of his second wife, years after his untimely death, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* stirred a rage that, again, would change anthropology forever.

It is for this that I remarked above that ultimately, and for reasons he himself could not have anticipated, Malinowski proved to be far more consequential to the future of ethnography than Boas, Radcliff-Brown, or others with whom it is said he co-founded the ethnographic method. For the meticulous diary recorded, daily, his 'private' sentiments through his period of work. For example, this excerpt drawn from 27 December, 1917, 'As for ethnology, I see the life of the natives as utterly devoid of interest or importance, something as remote from me as the life of a dog' (Malinowski, 1967), or, 'On this occasion I made one or two coarse jokes, and one bloody nigger made a disapproving remark, where upon I cursed them and was highly irritated. I managed to control myself on the spot, but I was terribly vexed by the fact that this nigger had dared to speak to me in such a manner' (*ibid*) and later, 'All the time I had a subconscious longing for Elsie Rosaline Masson (his first wife) but in spite of that I scandalously pawed Nopula' (*ibid*). And from 21 January, 1915, 'At moments I was furious at them, particularly because after I gave them their portions of tobacco they all went away. On the whole my feelings toward the natives are decidedly tending to 'Exterminate the brutes'' (*ibid*). Of this diary and the man Geertz (1967) wrote, the insight into Trobriand life Malinowski apparently was unable to gain by human contact he gained by industry. Closed off, by the peculiarities of his own personality, from reaching directly what, in *The Argonauts*, he called the final goal of ethnography, 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world he reached it indirectly. Isolated, even estranged, from his subjects emotionally, he struggled to understand them by patiently observing them and reflecting about them. The special blend that Geertz attributes to Malinowski here, a mixture of estrangement and reflection, creates what was later called the 'ethnographic gaze.' The diary crisis then hastened the postmodern turn in ethnography as a critique of culture by interrogating its culture of critique. This undermined the authority of ethnography, ironically, the very authority Malinowski himself had so assiduously crafted.

At the heart of the crisis was the doubt that the *Diary* was a 'true revelation of Malinowski's fieldwork,' the real aspects of his ethnography (Clifford, 1998)). Given the claim that ethnography grasped and communicated with the 'native life world' better than most methods, given that this gift derived from being-in-the-field, which of course was not merely a method but in fact an ethical relation with the other, as being accepted and responding by genuinely accepting the lives of others was a core ethic, the diary was naturally injurious. On each count it seemed that Malinowski had failed comprehensively, whereas, to add insult to injury, generations of anthropologists appeared to have, till then, credulously honored him as an ethical standard. Although some rejected Malinowski summarily at this point many

defended him by explaining the issues the diary raised.³ In the end the diary did more to protect the status of its author than destroy it. After the dust settled Malinowski seemed to have gained in stature what ethnography had lost. The image of the archetypal fieldworker only grew sharper, and more human, for it was now tinged with a sense of tragic suffering. While critics were left to reject or refine the gift they had received from above the master had only become more powerful in death than he was alive.

It is clear from the diary crisis that the talk shifted from whether or not Malinowski as the first ethnographer was a suitable founder to the cultural bases (and biases) of anthropology itself. Thus the diary became an accidental spark that set ablaze and revolutionised an already volatile field. Ethnography and along with it, anthropology, changed after the crisis. If the publication of *The Argonauts* in 1922 marked the start of a romantic albeit innocent era of fieldwork, then the private diary of its author, four and a half decades later, saw to its end. Marcus (1994) writes, 'After the critique of ethnography all that remain are faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is charity.'

Critique: the reflexive field

This crisis and the resulting autocritique made 'reflexivity' a central concern across the entire discipline, perhaps even excessively so. By the end of the eighties it had become quite the rage. Read, for instance, these lines from a supporter and student of ethnographic fieldwork in the style of Malinowski:

An ethnographic monograph has much more in common with a historical novel than with any kind of scientific treatise. As anthropologists we need to come to terms with the now well-recognised fact that in a novel the personalities of the characters are derived from aspects of the personality of the author. How could it be otherwise? The only ego that I know at first hand is my own. When Malinowski writes about Trobriand Islanders he is writing about himself; when Evans-Pritchard writes about the Nuer he is writing about himself. Ethnographers as authors are not primarily concerned with factual truth, they convince by the way they write.

(Leach, 1989)

³ Let us hear Edmund Leach, to understand the defense constructed for the author of the diary during the crisis: 'Geertz does not seem to be worried that Malinowski, as author, never had any *intention* that this document should be published nor does he comment on the fact that the first half of the Diary has nothing whatever to do with the Trobriand Islands and was written before Malinowski had had any significant fieldwork *experience* or had developed anything resembling a distinctive anthropo-literary style. He does not mention that the expression 'Exterminate the brutes,' which has been cited against Malinowski ... is a *quotation* from Conrad which, in context, is a rebuke by Malinowski against himself!' (Leach 1989: 139; italics mine). 'Intention' (psychology), 'experience' (practice) and 'quotation' (textuality) are invoked, to separate the diary which became a subjective text concerning secrets, desires, intentions, from the objective works of its author, carrying impartial and thus inescapable truths; to reestablish the authority of ethnography by affirming that since even our best practitioners are not immune, in early stages, to hazards that await the idle ethnographer, we had best stick closely to established form; and to show that while the truth of our field notes may be found in *textual* representations, ethnography itself must only be assessed as *practice*. In a stroke then the ethnographer is separated from his practice, only to resurrect both, separately.

Out of the storm then emerged the idea that anthropologists hold dearly today, that it is no longer possible to talk about the field apart from the fieldworker. This also suggests that ethnography is no more a monolithic practice, that it can and should be conceived multiply (Table 1). The issue, Godina (2003) writes, is of where fieldwork happens and who does it. This generates, she suggests, three scenes of fieldwork in the order in which they appeared. I will only briefly mention the nuances of each for it is the fourth scene, historically unavailable, that Godina and I are interested in.

Table 1. Scenes of fieldwork⁴

		FIELDWORKER	
		Western	non-western
FIELD	non-west	1. 'Classical' Anthropology	2. 'Native' Anthropology
	West	3. Anthropology 'at Home'	?

It was the first 'classical' form that Malinowski had 'invented.' This was fieldwork in its most ideal and yet frustrating, tiresome, uninteresting, and lonely form (all from the Diary). It is not altogether unusual to hear these notes sometimes reflected in the voices of our Development Practice (DevPrac) students too. As field sites are often decided upon only weeks before the work begins, and at times only after arrival, with the necessary language and literature studies yet to be undertaken, if at all, due to lack of resources, with most field languages entirely foreign to the typical student, it is often not possible for our students to make the rigorous preparations for research that Malinowski might have recommended. But despite the differences of this form of fieldwork from the classical, a lot of the experience of doing fieldwork, I feel, is alike. When our students speak of anxieties around preparation for the field one thinks of Adam Kuper (1992)⁵, who writes of his own fieldwork that 'there was no instruction in the methods of fieldwork by participant observation. This provoked a certain nervousness as the moment approached to depart for the field. Couldn't we be given some guidance about procedures? At last Jack Goody consented to talk to us and explained there was no real method, nothing that could be taught. The important things to bear in mind were that one had to remain healthy and on good terms with the authorities, and keep duplicates of one's notes, sending copies home as often as possible.'

⁴ I take from a remarkable and courageous paper by Godina (2003) on anthropological locations in the 21st century. Godina insists that though the historical monopoly of classical ethnography was challenged and gave rise to newer forms (native anthropology and anthropology at home) we are yet to 'reverse' the anthropological gaze in a way that makes a fourth form *also* possible. As she predicts, this may well be the burden of anthropology in the 21st century.

⁵ A broad and intriguing counterpoint to the diary crisis is to be found in an Indian encounter with ethnography that took a different turn. Widely held as a classic *The Remembered Village* was written by M. N. Srinivas who is often regarded for taking Indian anthropology from a 'book view' to a 'field view.' The ethnographic text of *Village* was almost entirely based on a reconstruction from memory after the field notes of the author were destroyed in a fire by arsonists. If in the diary crisis the subjectivity of the ethnographer was seen as a threat to ethnographic authority, leading to its possible undoing, here, the subjective becomes the very route to ethnographic detail. Perhaps this would not have been possible in the classical period of ethnography but it is nonetheless useful to note that *Village* takes a rather different view of the location of the author within a work compared to that of the diary crisis.

Since the diary crisis anthropologists have also come to recognise that preparation, no matter how ample, is only a necessary and not a sufficient basis for fieldwork but without that, Obeyesekere (1990) warns, our fieldworkers are defenseless against positive or negative transferences in the field, the 'interpreter effect', repeated 'field shock' and, most importantly, the zone of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld, 1997). Culture, as anthropologists have repeatedly warned us, cannot be reduced to language. Yet to be unfamiliar with the language of the field is also to be unable to enter culture at all. Given some of these difficulties that our students face, and others I have been unable to imagine, I am hardly surprised to hear the ethnographer's guilt in Salzman (1994) echoed so regularly in the voices of our students, 'almost always, we are doing our research to satisfy ourselves, emotionally and intellectually, and to build our careers, to make our own lives better.'

Times changed and as the twentieth century plodded on the 'beautiful' (Bruss, 1982) 'classical' fields began to vanish and there appeared the 'native' fieldworker claiming her spot in the pecking order. By the end of the twentieth century, wars, overproduction, and our collective stupidity took such a toll that Geertz (1999) was finally forced to confess about classical anthropology:

The question is, is such a life and such a career available now? When graduate students refer to themselves as 'the pre-unemployed.' When few of them are willing to go off for years to the bush and live on taro and the few who are willing, find funding scarce for such irrelevance. Has the bubble burst? There does seem to be a fair amount of malaise about, a sense that things are tight and growing tighter, an academic underclass is forming, and that it is probably not altogether wise just now to take unnecessary chances, strike new directions, or offend the powers. Teaching loads are heavier, students are less well prepared, administrators, imagining themselves CEOs, are absorbed with efficiency and the bottom line. Scholarships are thinned and merchandised. Up until just a few years ago, I used blithely, and perhaps a bit fatuously, to tell students and younger colleagues who asked how to get ahead in our odd occupation that they should stay loose, take risks, resist the cleared path, avoid careerism, go their own way, and that if they did so, if they kept at it and remained alert, optimistic, and loyal to the truth, my experience was that they could get away with murder, could do as they wish, have a valuable life, and nonetheless prosper. I don't do that anymore.

The point is that the long twentieth century had two effects on the ethnographic form. Decolonisation and democratisation of anthropological knowledge produced the 'native' anthropologist, the non-western self studying itself. Decades later a 'resource crunch' in higher education created in part by neoliberal policies of statecraft made faraway fields less accessible, leaving the ethnographers to carry on with anthropology 'at home,' the western self studying itself. It is hardly surprising then that much of the debate stirred up in anthropology by the diary came to a head towards the end of the eighties, which was also the period that witnessed a massive and global restructuring of the political domain.

These two new ethnographic forms, taken together, have had the rather desirable effect of challenging the assumptions of 'classical' anthropology by shifting the location as well as the subject of knowledge and thus allowing the 'western domination over anthropological knowledge to be to some extent

cracked. But despite this de-centering of anthropology, the absence, to this day, of the fourth form of ethnography, the 'non-western' self studying the 'western' other, suggests the ghost of evolutionism continues to haunt anthropology today even if in disguised forms. Although it is very common today to find 'non-western' practitioners and apprentices among the anthropology departments of 'western' universities, one cannot bring to mind a single name from among those renowned anthropologists from this country, including the many who teach in the 'west,' of someone who has also conducted fieldwork in the 'west.' It is my hope, perhaps just a hope, that the situation will someday change, a future I imagine for DevPrac. This will not happen tomorrow, yet if we are to imagine such futures, we should disagree with Marcus, 'After the critique of ethnography remain faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is ~~Charity~~ hope.'

Conclusion: development practice in India

New forms of ethnography also raise entirely different and rather difficult methodological questions that I can only hint at here by quoting from a familiar passage in *Argonauts*, 'certain subtle peculiarities, which make an impression as long as they are novel, cease to be noticed as soon as they become familiar. Others again can only be perceived with a better knowledge of the local conditions' (Malinowski, 1922).

It will be known to those associated with DevPrac that our students engage in a form of ethnographic praxis that does not easily fit any of the three discussed above. The carping methodologist may express the reservation that ethnography by definition involves a long and continuous immersion in the field rather than the back and forth our students are used to. Such a person would suggest a close reading of a truly sensitive piece by Rosaldo (1984), where he offers an account of how he could not comprehend why *Ilongot* men reacted to bereavement with what then appeared to him to be such intense anger that it could only be calmed by killing an unknown victim. Years after Rosaldo saw this, or failed to, his own grief (at the death of his partner due to an accident in the field) helped him understand this aspect of *Ilongot* culture. Ever since then anthropologists have accepted that experience subsequent to fieldwork 'proper' are as important in helping us gain access to the field as the fieldwork itself.

I now bring together certain points anticipated in the above discussion. If ethnography today is 'no longer a uniform praxis' (Godina, 2003) we need not worry about having generated yet another version of it. Rather we need to develop the infrastructure for improving what we have. More importantly, we need to pay closer attention to what this new form itself demands and the new kinds of questions it raises. Transformative ethnography happens today in a national and post-national context which is sharply different from ethnography in its earlier variants. I suggest, briefly and only indicatively, two aspects of this form that we are yet to develop theoretically. One is on technology and its crossing with ethnography. It is beyond common now to have fieldwork supervision over Skype or Hangouts where one end of a conversation may be located in New Delhi and the other, say, at Gumla office. Also fieldworkers are themselves never out of touch with the field. Photos, newspaper reports, meetings and messages are flung back and forth across the hyperspace over WhatsApp. The experience of being 'in' or 'out' of the field has changed. We need to understand what this collapse of ethnographic time does to

transformative praxis. The other point concerns the family. In a national context where the subversion of certain cherished democratic ideals is becoming increasingly common, I wonder if our own agents of change would not need to engage with questions similar to those Adorno and others struggled with in a different century?

In order to do this we need to create, as Malinowski did over a century ago, a new kind of ethnography. To confront the challenge of neoliberalism today, with all its imaginary flattening of spaces and histories, we will do well to learn from anthropological pasts and their encounter with colonialism along with new forms of ethnography (and problems) that the decolonisation of anthropological knowledge has produced. Failure to do so may mean for us that we insert ourselves into a 'global hierarchy of value' where our very stage also becomes a tethering post, Herzfeld notes, when he suggests that one route to defying the neoliberal challenge goes through the thickets of ethnographic detail.⁶ It is time to build linkages such as the present conference and, of course, for anthropologists from the 'east' to go and study the 'west.' The trouble with creating new forms of ethnographic practice, a difficulty often underestimated, is that practices need time to proliferate and at the start one cannot always find a community of shared sentiments. Malinowski understood this and tried to make the best of it. It is perhaps our turn now.

I wish to conclude by remembering a little detail from my own childhood. It is what would eventually set me on to the path of anthropology and philosophy. It was 1991, a critical year in these parts. I was twelve. The ailing Satyajit Ray had just completed with the help of his son Sandip what was to be his last film, maybe the first and only one from India with an anthropologist as the protagonist. *Agantuk* (The Stranger) is the tale of Manomohan Mitra, an anthropologist who, years after leaving home and traveling the world, long after he is presumed dead, abruptly arrives at the doorstep of a niece one day, who has not met him and who also presumes him dead. Expecting nonetheless the usual hospitality from the niece and family, as we do, Manomohan is quick to arouse suspicions about his real identity and also about his intentions. The anthropologist, enjoying the hospitality, does nothing to allay their fears. In fact he amplifies them. Words are exchanged. At one point he leaves the house in disgust, but over time the family accepts him, if only out of fatigue, as the real uncle. Near the end, as he is about to depart, this time for Australia for he wants to live with the aborigines, Satyaki, the child in the family, the one who never doubted his identity, asks when he would see uncle again. Manomohan gently says, 'this time it is your turn to come see me.' Satyajit Ray died soon after and we could never find out if Satyaki would grow up to keep his promise. Critics of the cinema of Ray consider *Agantuk* to be among his lesser films. Some say Ray, too inspired by accounts of the possible impostor of Bhawal, an extended legal battle from early 20th century India, sought ineffectively to retrofit the details of the case within his vision of middle class Bengali households. I think Manomohan Mitra was a tribute to Panchanan Mitra (1892-1936), the first Indian anthropologist. He was, of all things, also an anthropologist of the 'west.'

⁶ In other words we risk falling directly into the trap about which Spivak, once again towards the end of the eighties, had already and famously warned us: 'some of the most radical criticism coming out of the west today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the west, or the west as subject' (Spivak, 1988). Here we should also note with Abu-Lughod, that rethinking 'the fieldwork encounter' (*ibid*) continues to be useful only to the extent that it frees ethnography from its geopolitical determinations.

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