In Praise of Hunches
Towards an intuitive ethnography

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ABSTRACT | Reflecting on my experience in researching academic migrants, in this paper I explore the conflicts that arose between the themes emerging from ethnographic observation and the results of coded interviews. In response, I consider the ways in which we may further the commoning of anthropology by foregrounding the insights obtained through messy intuition and 'hunches' over the seeming certainties of codified recordings. Such a shift will involve narrators rather than informants, stories rather than statements, listening rather than interviewing, and hovering rather than counting. It will also involve new methods of doing ethnography and new styles of writing ethnography as well as new vehicles for the dissemination of ethnography. My plea is for a commoning of ethnography that will allow it to recover its historical role among the humanities and shed the myth of the solitary and heroic researcher.

Keywords: ethnography; writing; narrative; commoning; academic migrants

How often, when conceptualising and wrestling with writing ethnography, are we overcome with feelings of unease, of hope, of tribulation, and of being lost? Writing about writing ethnography is still a worthwhile and even somewhat-fashionable topic. It remains an important topic to write about, because our methodologies for working within anthropology require high levels of reflexivity. As the ethnographic project is constantly evolving, we are committed to accompanying this process through introspection and retrospection. One such evolving method is the co-creation of texts and, in pursuit of such co-creations, I have been following Kirin Narayan (2009) and organising ethnographic-writing workshops. For this provocation I initially planned to reflect upon commoning data creation with a focus on such writing workshops. But, for some time, I kept feeling uneasy about my proposed topic, and the sense of unease stopped me from writing the intended piece. The question became not so much how to write about this topic but why I enjoyed these writing workshops so much and how I came to do them. Sometimes writer's block is useful; it stops you writing things that you really do not want to put into words – at least not just yet. While still grappling with writer's hesitation in May 2017, somebody said something to me that made me turn round and walk back some distance, away from my proposed topic.

Here is how that walk backwards started. The months of April and May are budget time at Victoria University; school managers and Heads of School have to come up with a calculation of how much money is needed to run their schools in the coming year and the year after. As I was a Head of School, I wrestled with problems such as unknown student-enrolment numbers and, consequently, how much money we would need for tutorials and marking. I ended up requesting advice from a colleague, a sociologist and economist, who works in our finance department forecasting student enrolments. He obliged, and forecast yet another period of significant student growth for us, that is for the whole School of Social and Cultural Studies, with three majors and two minors. After some thought, I ended up ringing him, thanking him for his forecast, and asking: 'Where exactly in the school, in which discipline, will this growth happen? How might it be divided among the majors? Do you have a hunch?' His answer was: 'Brigitte, I don't do hunches'. 'Of course', I said, rather abashed, 'you don't do that'.

But I was incredulous; 'no hunches?' How could he possibly live without hunches? Indeed, how many of his hunches might be disguised as data? Most of my work, I would think, is based on intuition, even though I love numbers and counting things. Counting makes me feel better, it makes me feel as if I am doing the right thing somehow, and it can sometimes give me illuminating insights. Nevertheless, I could not imagine a life without hunches. Planning, doing, and writing ethnography, I realised then, did not make sense without a good dollop of intuition. As I still had to write a piece for our commoning-ethnography project, I engaged in some auto-detective work: I needed to know why I found myself not writing about writing workshops.[1]

And slowly I started walking backwards, retracing my steps in my current research project; thinking how I do and how I teach, indeed how we teach and do ethnography. How we receive stories, and how we then craft our academic narratives. I was now quickly retracing my steps back to the beginning, walking back with increasing pace, passing some crossroads, benches, scenic viewpoints, finally reaching a *cul de sac*. In order to reach the point where the ethnographic-writing workshops on academic mobility fit into this walk, I need to start at the beginning of my current project.

The beginning of that project was the idea of doing an ethnography of academic mobility, especially of academic migrants. I started simply by hanging out with colleagues, following and initiating conversations, listening with intent, journaling impressions, gossiping, and mostly just sniffing around, sampling stories and scenes including my own experiences. By keeping a diary, writing fieldnotes, and recording impressions on the go, a decent number of stories and, yes, hunches, emerged. I applied for and received some money to travel and hang out in other universities, carried out very similar ethnography, and also interviewed colleagues, quite a lot of them. From these impressions, I developed some pretty good notions about how to be and how not to be an academic migrant, what the key narratives are, and what stories universities tell themselves about themselves. And universities do tell a lot of stories about themselves that are quite astounding: how internationally focused they are, how much they embrace foreign faculty, how much they care for international students and academics, and how wonderful life is on their satellite campus locations. Were it not for the insights of ethnographic research and its ability to check out the facts *in situ*, we could easily imagine this as being paradise reforged.

While my many interviews were being transcribed, and while waiting for a period of research and study leave to work with the transcripts, I wrote a raft of papers, presented at conferences, and published a few articles (Bönisch-Brednich 2014). I talked about how academic migrants narrate their lives in the knowledge economy and the neoliberal university; how it is to manage love across distance; how we suppress notions of culture clash on campus; how academic migration is socially and geographically stratified by habitus; how gender structures academic mobility; and how the knowledge economy constitutes a neo-colonising field. I was planning to write a book and thought that by presenting these conference papers I would make tentative progress towards a table of contents. These papers and presentations were all based on my fieldnotes and, well yes, hunches about the broad themes that emerge when academics change campuses and countries and, often, languages. This was exciting because I received wonderful responses and feedback of the kind we all love to receive: 'You are talking about me, this is it, you nailed it for me'. I felt this ethnography growing, developing and, finally, when my research leave came, I went away with this huge pack of transcripts and walked right into the *cul de sac* I have already mentioned. I spent many months coding my transcripts and my notes; let's call this ordering-work counting things. It felt as if I was doing real work, important work. And when I finally looked at the results I was startled. None of my big themes that I had already nailed emerged from the coding process, not one. I had coded myself out of my project and away from my hunches.

It was then that I attended a workshop by Kirin Narayan, and was inspired to organise ethnographic-writing workshops on academic mobility. Spending time with other academic migrants writing stories, crafting scenes, sketching lists, reading aloud, listening, and discussing this shared aspect of our lives has been hugely rewarding. It has also meant relinquishing control, initiating commoning of data, and creating space for unexpected narratives and viewpoints that had not been revealed in the interview process and not even from just hanging out. Doing the workshops and reading and re-reading the stories gifted to me have given me insights into my own research project. It feels right to work with my migrant colleagues in this way (Bönisch-Brednich 2016, 2017).

This is what I would like to take from this story, and I hope that some of you will agree: ethnography has, to a degree, been embraced by other disciplines and is now often used simultaneously with interviewing; we have taken this on board as our research process is then broken up into manageable shifts which can easily be integrated into our working lives. In this way, we produce transcribable data and can still write ourselves cleanly into a methods chapter, claiming a degree of tidy subjectivity. Working with an ethnographic style that relies on interviews, we can assure ourselves that we are giving voice to our participants, thus calming our consciences ruffled by the post-*Writing-Culture* debates. The unease, however, has been growing and, more and more, anthropologists have voiced their concerns about attempts to scientificate qualitative data. James Davies has pointed out that, although 'codification ever more dominates official fieldwork manuals … many anthropologists have remained privately if not always publicly committed to taking seriously the value of fieldwork's intersubjective and experiential dimensions' (2010: 12). In his view, methods, and that includes coding, are limiting what we can discover and increasing what remains hidden from view. The ways we construct our fieldwork and the ordering of material at the desk at home determine how much or how little intuition is allowed to be written into our ethnographic narrative.

During the last two decades, colleagues in the social sciences and humanities have also developed much more introspective ways of writing and analysing. Autoethnography is one of them, but creative ethnography is now much broader and includes poetry, drama, podcasts, and films; in short, creative ethnographers have developed blurred genres. Some of them are now accepted into the canon, others are still considered wacky. Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon argue that methods such as autoethnography open up possibilities 'suppressed by analytic strategies that draw a veil of silence around emotions and bodies' (2006: 3). What such exploration of ethnographic possibilities has brought to the fore is the qualitative, the risky, the intuitive ways of doing research. By embracing vulnerable, contradictory research settings, by designing incomplete and tentative field sites that are not tidily constructed, by allowing for the possibility of participants designing the field for us, in spite of us, we have allowed for the emergence of 'sweaty' ethnography (see Bennett's contribution in this volume).

By allowing ourselves again to be messy, vulnerable, emotional we have made inroads into the reality of working with an intuition that comes from hovering instead of coding, from hanging out with our narratives instead of filing or ordering, and from feeling our way into and out of our fields. This almost certainly means a de-privileging of interview methods and a privileging of listening, working with partners instead of informants, and searching for stories and scenes rather than hasty formulations of methodological opinions and statements. And this extends to how we teach doing and writing ethnography, especially when doing it 'at home'. The narrative turn embraces such intuitively guided storytelling in ethnography, and it also embraces the liberating and simultaneously anxiety-ridden ethnographic styles that come with such new genres. Relinquishing the desire to be seen as doing (social) science means leaving the safety of valorising methodologies of accountability (Bönisch-Brednich forthcoming). 'Many scholars', writes Paul Stoller, 'may favour science over story, determinacy over indeterminacy and thereby refuse to accept the messiness of social relations that is so well expressed in stories' (2007: 188). When we bring

the art(?) of storytelling into writing ethnography, we accept, as Michael Taussig suggests, that the success of our fieldwork relies on listening to narrators of stories rather than on 'informants' (2006: 62).

We might, then, like to encourage our students to craft ethnography from a process of commoning that is messy, collaborative, less-planned, and altogether-less plannable – this is certainly a provocation to most other social sciences. This also involves a shedding of the constraints of writing in a framework of 'scientific' accountability. Writing in this way is guided by deep listening to stories gathered, annotated, crafted, and re-told. It demands or at least allows us to dare to write for reading, for readers who might enjoy ethnography. Ruth Behar, who tackled this subject long before me, stated that 'those who think they know what ethnography is tend to associate it with the social systems, rather than with artful forms of creative writing' (2007: 145). What she is invoking here is not only the narrative turn for anthropology, but also the old kinship and alliance between ethnology and the humanities. In the same issue of *Anthropology and Humanism* as Behar's article, Russell Leigh Sharman explores the notion of style in ethnographic writing, arguing for an ethnography that requires 'intimacy, vulnerability, warmth, and honesty', thereby challenging us as writers and collaborators with our readers. And, by daring to do this, to 'learn new styles of communication, to stretch ourselves, to be uncomfortable' (2007: 119). What this means is the abandonment of our academically trained voices, the decolonisation of our language, and the re-centring of our ambitions towards a new imagination of readership. Consequently, it means abandoning ethnographic writing as a hegemonic project maintained by an academic discourse that operates only on the intellect (Sharman 2007: 119). It also means not only to write for a good reading experience but also to write for accessible publishing outlets. If we take ethnography seriously, then we have to make sure that it is not hidden away in inaccessible academic publications. As a contribution to commoning ethnography, this journal is part of this project which has, at its heart, the desire to open up to a wider variety of readers.

What I am doing here, of course, is gathering allies to support my argument, my plea for intuition in ethnography and for a wider choice of accepted writing styles, writing that may to a degree match our fieldwork experiences, and that gives colour and flavour instead of simply voice.[2] This is, I think, what Marilyn Strathern means when she states 'that the question is not simply how to bring certain scenes to life but how to bring life to ideas' (1987: 257), or what Behar termed 'exquisite being-thereness' (2007: 151).

This project is one that speaks back in a variety of new accents from the periphery to the currently hegemonic and Anglocentric centres of institutional anthropology; it is a project that is suited to a de-colonising of the discipline. Shifting the locations that anthropology inhabits within the social sciences can shift us into a realm of different and shared discoveries about writing ethnography. We would then be crafting ethnography from narratives, pictures, sounds, and impressions – and we may want to park or re-purpose N-Vivo and 'data'. We might also consider ethnography to be a collective project so that, in essence, doing and crafting ethnography will become a process of commoning; we should shed some of the mythical illusion that we go through this all on our own.

Let us make ethnography a commons project and let us do hunches.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The original abstract reads: Commoning Data Creation. Ethnographic writing workshops are normally held to help colleagues overcome writer's block or to help postgraduate students find their ethnographic voice. This paper considers auto-ethnographic writing workshops as a mode of commoning data production and a means of redistributing ethnographic authority. Ethnographic writing workshops offer alternative modes of self-interrogation that enable participants to co-create data, contributing their voices to a common pool that explores topics of shared interest aligned with the researcher and his or her team of participating experts. Using the example of auto-ethnographic writing workshops on experiences of academic mobility, I will introduce the method as a rich alternative to interviews or free flowing conversations (Bönisch-Brednich, conference abstract May 2017).

2. For another example of thinking about hunchwork, see the recently published piece by Keith M. Murphy, Fiona McDonald and Luke Cantarella on 'Collective Hunchwork' (2017).

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