

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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## We Don't Need Another Hero<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** | Ethnographic work occupies an uneasy spectrum of experiences, and in this timely discussion where ethnographic challenges are being given their rightful place – my arguments join the discussion by urging a slowing down, a stopping and taking stock about what counts as good work in our current professional environment. I attempt a reflection on immersed anthropologists, and in some ways, on those amongst whom we immerse. The base queries that animate these reflections are – who, what, where and how will ‘good’ anthropological work be decided. The curious fascination with heroic, ideologically driven, ‘difficult’ ethnography is a point of departure here. Once again, they lead to questions about the allocations of labor and power in ethnographic work and in disciplinary knowledge production practices.

**Keywords:** Politics of Location; Heroic Ethnography; Global South

## I

We anthropologists, in recent times, have been surpassing ourselves - our methods, our aspirations, our limits and I am inclined to argue, our ethics as well. In this brief contribution to the “Trial by Fire” discussion, where serious ethnographic challenges are being given their rightful place – my arguments are from the other side of the mirror. I urge a slowing down, a stopping and taking stock about what counts as *good* work in our current professional environment. While the trials recognized are about immersive ethnography, I attempt a reflection on immersed anthropologists, and in some ways, on those amongst whom we immerse.

Current anthropologists are not just ethnographers; we seem to be much more. We are embedded journalists, breaking-news frontline reporters, scientists, pathologists, spiritualists, litterateurs, gang members, politicians, activists, psychoanalysts, technocrats and much more. We go where angels fear to tread and then return to our academies to earn our place, if not our laurels. Our stylized narratives would make seasoned novelists hang their heads in shame or tenacious journalists wonder about their labor, and our photography will out-dazzle the photographers who commit themselves to the art. Our skills as anthropologists make our university training only the first, often dispensable, part of our toolkit. Our unique skills and personalities must speak, and be showcased and admired. We are now larger than life super academics, committed to deeds that parallel the Avengers - all in all, we are in the business of being heroes.

Today, the books and essays that are published, awarded and adulated are those that are about heroic, ideologically driven labors of intricate ethnographies that edge their way into forbidden worlds, dangerous geographies and ways of life which are often not ours, but are the ciphers of our curiosity and the terrains of our unconcealed gaze. This is not just about entering and leaving cultures and environments with lifestyles, values and material environments different from us - this is about leaving because we cannot stay and yet, find easy to enter, leave and judge.<sup>2</sup> Students reading these ethnographies of style, heroism, danger, sensationalism and ideological correctness are dubiously inspired and challenged, in whatever sense of uncertainty, to think that there is such a thing as good anthropology that differs from usual, routine anthropology. The good here then will not apply to those amongst us who will not move with gangs, or lay with addicts, or dress like men, or live with the homeless or the deranged. Those of us in wheelchairs, in vulnerable bodies, in surveilled identities, with challenged circumstances must not then, aspire to be read with wonderment and legitimacy. In all of this, I underscore not just the anthropologists, but also the anthropological audience that exists and looks for this kind of heroism to applaud. These concerns have not gone unnoticed, and some of what I reiterate here is yet another response to ongoing, but rarely addressed issues.

Tod Hartman (2007)<sup>3</sup> writes about “anthropologists as heroes” too and he dwells, with important emphasis, on the crucial question of anthropological activism and ambiguous moral responsiveness that anthropologists carry into their field and the dangers that lurk there. My discussion here assumes that argument as a particularly unfortunate offshoot of anthropological heroism. I take another step in a similar direction to question the endorsement that such work has been and is given. Moral responsiveness and responsibility is another banner anthropologists tend to carry into their fields as an ethical compulsion. Those that cannot

or will not make their voices ‘heard’ for various powerful and compelling reasons that are sometimes too private or too costly, can be found wanting in their ethical and moral performances. Some of these reasons include the need and potential of having to live (on occasion with vulnerable families) and write from among those against whom one’s voice has to be heard. Not every anthropologist or informant, who knows the ‘truth’, can and must speak up to power.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, those who speak up, do so because there is a condition of safety - the ‘return’ to their home institutions, other passports, other support structures – that provide a protective shield from the scenes of moral disquiet and corporeal threat. We barely question that privilege or simple advantages that divide that academic labor. Hidden, thus, in magnificent melodies of anthropological ‘work’, are discordant notes that we might want to strain to hear.

## II

Raising a query about power relations in anthropological knowledge production is the opening of the proverbial Pandora’s Box. First, as suggested earlier, sensational ethnographies do not necessarily underline who is writing from where and with what privileges of access, immersion and exit from difficult geographies. If our research agendas must include ‘dangerous’ and morally challenging geographies, a lot of these geographies seem to be found in the ‘global south’. On the other hand, as ethnographers from ‘colored’ and ‘accented’ institutions, we must not attempt the entry passes into the ‘Global North’ - or to any other location except our own for that matter. It is a given in most institutions of the south that travelling to locations abroad for ethnographic immersion, leave alone the global North, for ‘heroic’, ideologically critical research, is not an option. This is usually related to funding deficits that exist in the south that rarely allows ethnographic research outside national boundaries – a situation that is diametrically opposed to Northern institutions.

Second, the corollary that accompanies is that ‘southern’ students in Northern anthropology departments are more than likely to be admitted because of their ethnographic research proposals in their home countries – they are sometimes the conduits through which ‘embedded’, ‘forbidden’ knowledge can be produced. As for local applicants in those institutions, a support infrastructure exists (like language training, funding) to encourage travel and ethnography elsewhere – and in the current flavor, to travel far for ‘heroic’ ethnographies. Laudable, morally engaged and brave ethnography is not just possible, but also the demand that academic anthropology constructs and endorses.

If the above underlines an unspoken truism and if our research cartographies are pre-determined, then our lists of who might be good anthropologists (or pre-ordained heroes) are already settled, reifying professional hierarchies. The division of labor emerging from the above etches itself deep into the writing and publication of that ethnography. Simply said, we in the south, we observe us and hope to write for others – finding a global audience is a misnomer for the ambition of publishing in mainstream Northern journals. And the global North observes everyone and writes for everyone.<sup>5</sup> Anthropological debates, queries, analytics and criteria for ‘heroism’ are often determined by institutional arrangements embedded in ‘centered’ (often Northern) institutions. Consequently, there are practical inequities of publishing, circulation and visibility. These inequities or versions thereof are evident within ‘local’ mappings as well. Pivotal

departments in India, for instance, demand some legitimacy that glosses over more provincial ones. We turn around full circle to the base query – who, what, where and how will ‘good’ anthropological work be decided.<sup>6</sup> Once again, we will not question that allocation of labor and power that we had apparently zealously revealed many decades ago.

### III

As a closing point – I return to what these immersed ‘heroic’ ethnographies might entail and also, to those amongst which they emerge from. Our research questions will be about entitled choices and not ethical choices. Our armies of intrepid anthropologists leave no stone unturned to devise questions that involve probing into lives in danger, in concealment, in survival, in poverty, in disease and in moral turpitude, to list a few. Very importantly, they will enter those fraught worlds that they are likely to have a choice to leave behind. I do not deny, nor quarrel with the imperative to witness and leave testimonies, observations, documentations that might someday aid interventions and solutions. Nor do I underplay the deep emotional or physical commitments that some of these ethnographies demand. Yet, moralistic snapshots are sometimes narcissistic documents of self-aggrandizement produced in the name of representation, rather than responsible intervention. They are performances for a much too eager audience, waiting to judge. But till we call out that ‘response-ability’, what seems to be the way of the day is that we must applaud and award rhetorical bursts of morality and ethnographic adventures, and only thus, will our anthropological careers be carved righteously in stone.

Many years ago as a doctoral student conducting my fieldwork in war-ravaged Beirut, in a long sequence of ‘officially’ misplaced passports, visa offices and a cityscape full of militarized checkpoints, I found myself in a security office pleading for a letter that would enable me to acquire a new passport and leave the country, so that I could return with a new visa. On that last day, after many visits I was asked to wait till the office hours came to a close. In a scene almost as nail biting as the final episode of a thriller series, when a phone call to the Indian consulate would determine whether a crucially worded letter could be given to me or not, I noticed that a few fully armed and outfitted men were called into the room. Given the diplomatic awkwardness of a passport ‘lost’ in visa processing, I was too tired to be even aware of what potential danger I was threatened with or might have been in, or not. Given the traffic of women, I was warned by friends, it is possible that my passport found its way into unscrupulous hands. And for years after, I found myself occasionally spending more time in international travel checkpoints.

This or other ambiguous experiences in my field have never found their way into my published writing before now, as I have preferred it that way. I do now to support my plea here. In my understanding, Beirut is a place that I went to and lived in for a while, with naiveté or with ignorance, and with all attendant challenges. I have also lived, so to speak, to tell that tale. I saw these experiences, like all embedded anthropological experience, to be a glimpse into a world that people live in and endure. In Beirut, this world is a tragic saga of unending precarity for most. My writing about them and the world I inhabited then for a while makes my place in my audience visible – theirs, far less. Sometimes, not much attention is paid to what cost our ethnographies might lead our informants

and locations to bear. All ethnographic work in my opinion is collaborative work – whether we call them so or not. We know *with people*, to use Tim Ingold's (2017:22) important intervention. When I read, write and perform my professional work, I need to understand that I do not 'own' heroic, anthropological knowledge, I share them as experiences with interlocutors – in sadness, in fear, in joy, and sometimes in contempt – but always with responsibility. Sometimes, there is very little reason to like what we do or whom we meet, as Jegathesan's and Donald's deeply troubling and honest narratives in this collection show. I make this small plea for making a distinction between the adulation of heroic, 'at any cost' ethnographies and the silencing of distressing, deeply disturbing fieldwork. At best, these are moral and ethical conundrums that should not be endorsed by easy judgment.

### *Prologue*

I write in implicit understanding of the honest and difficult concerns that the contributors in this collection write about in the context of their field experiences. These are experiences that will last a lifetime, sometimes as conduits to practical and professional wisdom, sometimes as deep unresolved fear and trauma. But I hope they will endure longer in writing. But often, and this is what I have emphasized here – the incentive regimes and the audiences of heroic anthropological work quieten or silence these experiences. Often, the reading audience is conditioned to translate them as narratives of unfortunate victimhood, which are to be explained away by ubiquitous, hostile gendered and racial environments. Or, worse still, they are made into expected, mundane itineraries in anthropological rites of passage; or celebrated as anthropological martyrdom. This is the ugly flip side of heroic anthropology – if such experiences are denounced for what they are, one might not qualify to apply for the epaulets of the ideologically correct, morally appropriate member of the anthropological hall of fame.

As I write this, the Covid-19 pandemic is raging across the world. Among many others, a few of those stranded far from anything familiar are anthropologists embarking on their ethnographic work in a variety of locations. They wait either to leave or to find ways of continuing their work in the field - which might end up being very limited in the near future.<sup>7</sup> In these new circumstances, the question of intrepid anthropologists and their heroism might need to be revisited rather urgently.

In this small plea, then, I ask for a step back and a pause - to understand what must our contributions to anthropological knowledge be and at what cost. The privileges need to be understood as much as traumas. Our engagement need not be entitled nor must it be coercive. Sometimes, an acute, reflective gaze from afar is what we need to cultivate in our ability to observe – a non-invasive, ethical, responsible and quiet gaze that does not seek loud performances, the clamor and glamour of breaking news, or angelic avenging. That quietness demands committed reflection, in taking the time to reflect between empirical groundwork and the world of concepts and ideas. The sound bites of repetitive rhetoric, or moral outbursts need a constrained audience that judges carefully the constructions of 'good' and 'bad'. We need not make anthropology great again, as a friend recently said – I would add, let us just remain in the backstage to 'observe' the play onstage. When we do 'participate' on stage, let's not take on the role of the main protagonist.

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## Notes

1. With due acknowledgement of Tina Turner's song of the same name.
2. I do not intend to suggest that gaining entry and rapport into any and all ethnographic sites is either easy or guaranteed. Nor is it always easy to exit – the point here is the prevailing inability to see the conditions that sustain those entries and exits.
3. I am grateful for the reviewers leading me to Hartman's essay.
4. An important intervention here is the “Ethnographic Refusal” initiative that some anthropologists have spearheaded. See <https://discardstudies.com/2016/03/21/refusal-as-research-method-in-discard-studies/> 4/ for a summary.
5. Qualitative differences in both contexts are plenty – I do not suggest that scholarship from outside the centers is necessarily competitive and good, or even less, better in some aspects. The concern is more about the skewed distribution of privilege and the insularity that abounds in both jurisdictional parameters.
6. Related, crucially important and a much debated question is about who will theorize and who will provide the description. The answer is well known.
7. One example is: <https://allegralaboratory.net/ethnography-at-an-impasse-fieldwork-reflections-during-a-pandemic/>

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