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INTERFERING WITH OTHERS

– Re-configuring Ethnography as a Diffractive Practice



This essay will concern itself with what we – ethnologists or ethnographers by any other name – do. Not primarily “do” in terms of activities we undertake; we interview, we observe, we write, we send emails, we have coffee, we print stacks of paper, we structure administrative chores, we go to meetings, we apply for grants, etc. Rather, we want to address the “do” in terms of what we make, or bring into the world through ethnography. What is it that we through the combination of all of our practices bring into being? What is that bringing into being dependent on? And, how does it influence the world? The first step to addressing these questions is outlining ethnography itself and how we – the authors – choose to articulate it. Articulation, as articulated by Donna Haraway is a process of signifying and of putting things together, letting them be diverse

and maybe even in friction with one another and themselves.¹ The concept connotes an on-going indeterminacy. The articulations made in research, we argue, should be allowed to be of a searching quality, as well as being relational and expressive. They should not excuse themselves, neither make greater claims than they can fulfill. They should never be conclusive.²

The roots of ethnography can be found in anthropology and the study of groups, tribes or villages located far from the ethnographer's native environment. It has however transcended such localities and conventions. Today it is a way of doing research found in a multitude of disciplines, being performed in countless ways and places.³ The ways of articulating ethnography are thus many and varied, but often certain research practices are put forward as its defining features. There is no denying that certain sets of (often qualitative) methods and theories, entwined in an open-ended and experimental research endeavor, form the ideal articulation of ethnography.⁴ The way ethnography will be articulated in this essay does not presuppose certain methods but recognizes it more as a mode, or perhaps a mood, of being with what we research. In one way or another, an ethnographer is a person performing research through closeness and because of this, ethnography is a practice dependent on proximity.

Physical proximity might be the first kind of proximity to come to mind when one pictures an ethnographer performing participant observation or engaging in an interview, but the kinds of closeness involved in ethnography are multiple. It might be emotional closeness, stemming from the fact that relationships *with* people are part of what is being researched.⁵ It might be the kind of proximity that emerges when one immerses oneself in large quantities of research materials.⁶ It might be a "critical proximity" where the ethnographer, even if physically distant, actively engages with and is entangled in processes of decision making.⁷ It might be the kind of proximity that can put the ethnographer in harms way, physically as well as emotionally.⁸ Or, worse still, it might be the kind of closeness that makes a careless ethnographer hurt others.⁹ A worn cliché is that the ethnographer never is a neutral observer, like the proverbial fly on the wall, but it is nevertheless an understanding of our craft that rings true; doing ethnography is a way of interfering with the world. It has been argued – and we do not disagree

1 Haraway 1992.

2 Sherry, Troilo & Deschenes 2006, p. 346f.

3 Clifford 1986, p. 10f; Davies 1999, p. 46; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis & Tacchi 2016, p. 2.

4 Gray 2003, p. 21; Latour 2005, p. 68; Pink 2009, p. 8; Pink et al 2016, p. 3.

5 Davies 1999, p. 91.

6 Illouz 2008, s. 16.

7 Forsemalm 2013; Birbak, Petersen & Jensen 2015, p. 283f.

8 Hume & Mulcock 2004, p. xi.

9 Cf. Ellis 2007.

– that every kind of research is a way of interfering with the world in one way or another.¹⁰ However, the kinds of closeness involved in ethnography enact¹¹ the ethnographer as someone who not only affects the world, but who is also affected by it in equal measure. Ethnography is more than an intellectual, logical or cognitive practice. It is dependent on the senses and on embodiment, on being with as much as thinking about people; culture; the world.¹² In the words of Donna Haraway, we hold ethnography to be a way of “being at risk” through the inevitable entanglement of the hopes and aims of the researcher and the researched.¹³ This closeness, or *at riskness*, is what sets ethnography apart. Because of its relational qualities, it continuously needs to be articulated, conceptualized and re-configured.

Let us dwell for a moment on the concept of re-configuration and the work we intend it to do throughout this text. Once again turning to Haraway, we hold figurations to be “performative images that can be inhabited”.¹⁴ Such images can be verbal as well as visual and are at the same time literal and figurative. Unlike Haraway who primarily concerns herself with the figurations of technoscience we will turn our attention to one of the tropes employed to handle the proximities of ethnography; namely that of reflexivity. Adding the “re-“ to configuration signals that our intention is to interfere. To re-configure is to modify and substitute concepts in the ethnographic vocabulary, inspired by medical anthropologist Annemarie Mol.¹⁵ By replacing “ethnography” with “praxiography”, “performance” with “enactment” and “discourse” with “logic”, Mol aspires to keep some of the concepts’ original connotation while shedding theoretical discussions not pertaining to her research.¹⁶ Paying attention to such minutiae of the research practices is a strategy for composing better figurations and in doing so forcing the ethnographer to take responsibility for the work that concepts are expected to do, rather than taking refuge in convention. Finally, the “con-“ of configuration highlights that this move is not done in isolation, but through coming together with theories, texts, our respective ethnographic fields and – as authors – each other. In the same vein as Latour offers *composition* as an alternative to *critique*, we aim to figure ethnography out as a practice of diffraction rather than as one of reflection in order for it to be “put to a different use”.¹⁷

10 Haraway 1988; Barad 2007.

11 Enactment in the way it is used here was first articulated by the medical ethnographer Annemarie Mol (2002) as a re-configuration of the performance and performativity theories developed by Erving Goffman and Judith Butler, articulating that the world itself becomes enacted through knowledge producing practices.

12 O'Dell & Willim 2015, p. 94f.

13 Haraway 1997, p. 190f.

14 Haraway 1997, p. 11.

15 See Lee 2012, p. 175.

16 Mol 2002; 2008.

17 Latour 2010, p. 474f.

Kinds of Closeness

In anthropology, the strength of ethnographic analysis has been attributed to the ethnographer's ability to "un-fit" into the surrounding environments, allowing for movement between empathic closeness and critical distance in relationship to the "other".¹⁸ This has in turn made proximity and entanglement goals to be achieved. Within our own discipline, European Ethnology, many of the methods associated with anthropology have instead been used to examine phenomena within the researcher's home country.¹⁹ It is far from rare for ethnologists to study contexts where they themselves are at home, such as sub-cultural groups or minorities, and where the possibility to "un-fit" often is small. In turn, this has resulted in re-configurations of ethnographic methods as well as of ways of understanding proximity.²⁰ The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern claims that this often leads to a heightened need for reflexivity since the ethnographer is unable to pose as the exotic and strange researcher.²¹ It has been argued that this kind of proximity need not be without advantages, but that it is dependent on the ethnographers' ability to make the familiar strange to the same extent as the strange is made familiar.²² However, any *a priori* decisions on what constitutes proximity, be it national belonging or sub-cultural interests, risk hiding other kinds of closeness that emerge through the research process.²³ The assumed necessity of reflective distance and abstraction as essential to knowledge creation, in turn hides the ways knowing is dependent on doing, on belonging and being at risk. Rather, meaningful proximity in each specific research project needs to emerge through the process and the situatedness of the ethnographic practice itself.

This leads us to our own ongoing dissertation projects and how these in their respective ways have made the trick of un-fitting problematic. Wiszmeg's research is concerned with how matter, practical skills, knowledge and the ideology of guidelines for evidence based science intra-twine to enact objects and practices in transplantations research on Parkinsons' disease.²⁴ Discussing research, knowledge and evidence with researchers within cell biology and neurology turned her attention towards the knowledge produced in her own project. Wiszmeg's own object of research is therefore partly her own co-enactment of knowledge together with her participants. Mellander examines the career paths of former students of European Ethnology and how they put their education to work outside of academia. Among the participants are former, current and, perhaps, future

18 Macdonald 1993, p. 19

19 O'Dell 1999, p. 61; O'Dell & Willim 2011, p. 29.

20 O'Dell & Willim 2015, p. 92

21 Strathern 1987, p. 16.

22 Cf. Labaree 2002, p. 100; Hume & Mulcock 2005, p. xxii.

23 Cf. Birbak, Petersen & Jensen 2015, p. 274.

24 See Wiszmeg 2012; 2016

colleagues, sharing their experiences of Ethnology and how the discipline has created twists in their respective roads through life. The shared use of analytical concepts for understanding life in- and outside of academia enacts Ethnology and its uses as that which simultaneously explains and is explained.²⁵ The research project unfolds itself as a network that is entangled in several ways, e.g. socially, conceptually and institutionally.

We have chosen to use the term “participant” to denote those with whom we enact knowledge. In relation to the term informant – i.e. someone who informs about the world – the term participant is more vague and can encompass several ways of sharing and partaking through research. Even though the participants discussed in this text mostly are humans, the word participant could potentially be used in the same manner as the Latourian “actant”, articulating other ways of acting in the world than through humanness²⁶. In both our empirical cases we have found that notions of proximity and distance, likeness and difference, become something that can only be treated as an analytical result of intra-actions with the participants. This being said, the entry into our respective dissertation projects is what afforded us the analytical breaking point leading us into this attempt at re-configuration. Since our ways of knowing the world overlap with those of our participants, we clearly needed concepts for addressing these epistemological proximities. Para-ethnography has been suggested by e.g. anthropologists Douglas Holmes and George Marcus as a term for describing the ethnographic study of those whose intellectual labor resembles the ethnographer’s own methods and analysis.²⁷ While studies under the label of para-ethnography have much to teach us about the challenges of performing ethnography, we have chosen to avoid the concept itself throughout this text. This is partly because of the ethnological tradition of studying “others” with whom we already share conceptual worlds – in the least through a shared language.²⁸ Treating para-ethnography as something set apart from other kinds of ethnography seems to presume that ethnography by definition is the study of something inherently “other”, rather than the study-through-proximity argued for here. Partly, it is because we strive to adhere to the concept of symmetry employed in actor-network theory, where different kinds of participants are treated with the same vocabulary in order not to presume different kinds of agency.²⁹ In short, setting certain kinds of ethnography apart beforehand goes counter to our endeavor of understanding how differences come to matter.

25 Cf. Mellander & Fagerström 2013.

26 Latour 1999b, p. 78; 2005, p. 42.

27 Holmes & Marcus 2008, p. 597; Jespersen, Petersen, Ren & Sandberg 2012, p. 6.

28 Cf. Löfgren 1996; Arvidsson 2001.

29 Callon 2012, p. 154f; Viveiros de Castro & Goldman 2012, p. 421.

Other ways that proximity to our respective participants emerges could be articulated as us all being academics, being some kind of researchers and as occupying jobs that would place us in the intellectual middle-class. These identity-marking categories inform our worldview and epistemic rationale in ways that make them resemble each other, even if not being identical. While such identity categories may be of importance for our relationships with participants and may subsequently inform analysis, they must always be interpreted as situational and relational to the current object of knowledge. Otherwise, we argue, they risk becoming purely introspective.³⁰ In order to avoid telling the story of the researcher, rather than our common story with the participant, we need to ask ourselves when e.g. our (collective) middle-classishness *came to matter*? Was it when we chose to study at the university? Or was it through our studies that we would become what could be referred to as middle class? And was this “category” activated, or enacted, in fieldwork? In that case, when and how? Using un-situated identity categories as general explanations for behavior can be precarious if left unspecified or un-problematized in relation to the issues we claim it to affect. Categories like class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, age or functionality should ideally not be used as ready-made matrices. They can, in a worst-case scenario, be used for explaining behavior in a causal and essentializing manner, cementing stereotypes.

The thing that brings us together as authors of this text is the question of how one can understand ways of knowing with participants in a place where we are not strange, not yet the same. This problem is no way exclusively tied to the kinds of entanglements described above. As already stated, they do however compel new ways of figuring, which is often the case when ethnography travels into new fields of inquiry.³¹ Addressing the questions of proximity, closeness and sameness leads us towards reflexivity – the ethnographic form of inquiry employed to map the ways in which subjectivity takes place in the research and in the world.³² However, as we shall see, the logic of reflexivity does not necessarily conform to the notion of mutual or entangled enactments of knowledge, thus calling for a re-configuration in the shape of a diffractive approach.

A Turn to Reflexivity

Through the post-modern or reflexive turn, previous positivist ambitions within ethnography were put aside. Ethnographers were encouraged to scrutinize the representations created through research and the ways in which their own experi-

30 Ehn & Klein 1994, p. 11f; Gunnemark 2011b, p. 248.

31 Ren & Petersen 2013, p. 99.

32 Dowling 2008, p.747f; Beckman 2011, p. 231.

ences gave shape to them.³³ The reflexive project soon grew to encompass the ways in which power gives shape to research, be it in the meeting with the “other” or in the implicit political motivations that set things in motion.³⁴ Critical voices raised within feminist as well post-colonial studies further contributed through concepts such as standpoint theory and intersectional analysis, articulating the complex interdependencies of power and how positions of subjugation allows for the world to be known fuller and fairer.³⁵ In short, the turn towards reflexivity can be said to be a turn for the better; giving better account of the conditions of doing ethnography; exploring and taking responsibility for what ethnography and ethnographers do in the world in a better way; striving for better lives for the sometimes subjugated participants in research. It is in the light of and thanks to the history of Anthropology and Ethnology that we are able to be part of the development of the disciplines into future versions.³⁶ We are historical products, in debt to what we perceive as positive as well as more negative traits of what has come before. But new turns offer other ways of thinking and making things better.

Regardless of how the current “turn” in theory is named, i.e. post-humanist, ontological, material, material semiotic, affective – and on it goes, one thing that follows with it is that knowing is as dependent on the coming together of things, places and feelings as it is on language.³⁷ Recalling Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges, her cyborg theory and the figuration of companion species, as well as the Deleuzian agencement by the way of sociologists Michel Callon and Donald MacKenzie; the apparatus in the agential realism of Karen Barad, the enactment of Annemarie Mol and the actor-network theory and sociology of translations of Latour – all ascertaining that the knower can never be singular and knowing is not an activity enacted in isolation, but through convergence and composition³⁸. In recent years the writings of theorists within the field of Science and Technology Studies have become greatly influential within European Ethnology, our home discipline.³⁹ Within the discipline this has reinvigorated the study of material culture; a long tradition that took a place in the backseat in the wake of the post-modern or linguistic turn.⁴⁰ Drawing on these influences, Jespersen, Petersen, Ren and Sandberg suggest that cultural analysis should be

33 Clifford 1986; Gunnemark 2011a, p. 19

34 Davies 1999; O’Dell 1999.

35 Lykke 2003.

36 Winther Jørgensen 2002, p. 40f

37 Cf. Åsberg 2012, p. 12.

38 Haraway 1988, 1991, 2003; Callon 2005; MacKenzie 2009; Barad 2007; Mol 2002; Latour 2005.

39 In Swedish Ethnology, various STS-influenced approaches have been employed by e.g. Gustavsson 2014; Göransson 2012; Knuts 2006; Forsemalm 2007; Frihammar 2010; Petterson 2007. These theories have also been put to good work by our danish colleagues, e.g. Damsholt, Simonsen & Mordhorst 2009; Munk 2010; Ren 2009; Petersen 2011. This is further elaborated upon in Ren & Petersen 2013.

40 Cf. Munk & Jensen 2015, p. 37.

understood as a form of intervention; a view that we sympathetically share.⁴¹ The notion of intervention, we argue, implies that research disturbs and interferes with what is being studied. Given that knowing is something that is done together with people, things, animals, theories, media materials – the list can go ever on – the world which we try to know is not distant but at our metaphorical fingertips.

Following this train of thought down the tracks leads to a place where reflection – the critical examination of the researchers' role – may be found philosophically lacking. The figuration of reflexivity, based on the optical metaphor of reflection, upholds a strong subject – object divide, conjuring up images of seeing oneself in a mirror. Alternatively, it evokes the pensive thinker immersed in intellectual labor. Neither image seems to fit well with notions of intervention, interference and disturbance. The reflexive agenda was introduced as a way of addressing that there is no such thing as “mere” description and that the researcher is responsible for the knowledge produced. But if the knower is never just the ethnographer herself and knowing is done in concert there is room and perhaps need for other concepts that challenge how the “self” comes to matter in research. While holding on to the matters of concern raised through reflexivity we strive to figure new ways of thinking and making research better.

Displacing the same elsewhere

It is safe to say that whatever the intentions and no matter the outcome, reflexivity is a figuration where seeing the reflection of ourselves is the basis for at all being able to question our positions and the worlds seen from them. This extends to encompass both the individual researcher, but more often and just as well, the scholarly guilds of ethnologists and anthropologists.⁴² But, if reflexivity has served us – ethnographers – well, why do we – the authors – feel the need to interfere with it?

In “worst practice” the reflexive project of self-examination runs the risk of becoming little more than autobiographical accounts dispersed throughout the ethnographic material.⁴³ The confessional character of such articulation does little to explore the ways in which power emerges through the research process, merely stating that it is something that one should be aware of. Alternatively, reflexive examination can become too introspective, turning the curious gaze from the “other” to the ethnographer, leaving little room for theoretical or methodological development.⁴⁴ While these extremes do not manifest themselves in ethno-

41 Ren and Sandberg 2012.

42 Cf. Winther Jørgensen 2002, p. 38, 40.

43 Winther Jørgensen 2002, p. 36.

44 Macdonald 1993, p. 18.

graphies by necessity, the reflexive figuration does manifest a circular as well as an ocular logic. This turns the world and our place in it into something that can be seen, as if from a distance.⁴⁵

What has been dubbed as “radical reflexivity” also tends toward a relativism that leaves all knowledge claims equal and abdicates responsibility through self-exposure.⁴⁶ According to Haraway, a relativist claim to knowledge is in equal measure a way of performing the “god-trick” as the claim for detached objectivity in positivist science.⁴⁷ Both traditional positivist views that hold objective knowledge as something non-situated and eternal, and a radical reflexivity that position knowledge as entirely subjective and the “other” as well as any possible world “out there” as inaccessible tend to obscure the circumstances of knowledge production. And worse still, the latter runs the risk of making seemingly innocent knowledge claims about the world. Total relativism obscures the knower, letting knowledge stem from everywhere and nowhere in particular, all at once. As such it is an abdication of responsibility for the world brought into being through scientific research. Instead, Haraway argues for strong, situated knowledge in research.⁴⁸

In striving to avoid radical relativism as well as God-eyed positivism, situated knowledge as well as so-called standpoint theory can be said to lean toward a realist stance in science theory. This can allow qualitative researchers to trace causal relations since it builds upon the crucial claim that all that is real and exists needs to be manipulable.⁴⁹ While such descriptions might primarily turn associations towards materiality, it might just as well be transferred to language, concepts and figurations, cutting across the purification of matter from meaning; nature from culture. In the word of gender theorist Kathrin Thiele “[...] concepts are not abstractions *from* the world, but an active force *of* this world [...]”.⁵⁰

The branch of realism often referred to as “critical realism” has made an important contribution in reinstalling a non-subjective world with which we can interact, back into the post-modern research landscape. As such, critical realism has been put forward as a possible onto-epistemological foundation for ethnographic research.⁵¹ Still, this line of thinkmaking research does not mainly concern itself with the compositeness of the knower. Drawing a sharp line between relativism and realism is also a precarious move. While we might not subscribe to a total or radical relativism, we most certainly share the Geertzian stance of

45 Schneider 2002, p. 469.

46 Ibid.

47 Haraway 1992.

48 Haraway 1988, p. 583f.

49 Maxwell, 2012, p. 33ff.

50 Thiele 2014, p. 203.

51 Cf. Davies 1999; Öhlander 2011, p. 25.

being anti anti-relativists.⁵² As Latour helpfully reminds us via STS scholar David Bloor, the opposite of relativism is absolutism, not realism.⁵³ We exist in relation to and with the world, forming what Latour calls a “relative relativism (or relationism)”.⁵⁴

If the knowing subject is always multidimensional and partial, incomplete, composite and situated, it is allowed to turn its gaze along the lines of “others” without making claims of inhabiting their position. To explore the knower is thus not a question of mapping out identities, but of situating relations. Situated knowledge can in other words never be traced to an individual – if we stipulate that such a creature exists. The knower is always collective, which means that the only way of truly seeing, or knowing, is to be situated, contrary to the claims of God-eyed positivists.⁵⁵ Physicist, feminist and philosopher Karen Barad follows and furthers Haraway’s reasoning on reflexivity, which she views as founded upon representationalism: “Reflexivity, like reflection”, she says, “still holds the world at a distance”.⁵⁶ Like the surface of calm water, it reflects and rather than interfere. In this sense it “displaces the same elsewhere”, according to Haraway, figuratively hindering the researcher to see the participants behind the mirror with which s/he is being composite. Since the reflexive presupposes a pre-existing split between subjects and objects, it is a purification of the world far from the entangled existence conceptualized by Barad as “agential realism”. Taking the stance of critical realism, the kind of causality that the qualitative researcher would have access to would presumably be linear and found in action between discrete objects, subjects and concepts that are already defined.⁵⁷ If we instead choose to understand the knower as composite, partial and always entangled – in accordance with agential realism – causality cannot be understood in this way. Barad instead builds her philosophy on a figuration that, like reflection, is appropriated by Haraway from the world of physics; diffraction.⁵⁸ Unlike reflection, this figuration has its focus set on the emergence of interference and disruption.

Figuring Diffraction

Haraway’s proposed use of diffraction articulates her ambition to study the ways in which differences emerge through scientific study, rather than putting all the

52 Geertz 1984.

53 Latour 1999b, p. 20.

54 Latour 1999a, p. 120.

55 Haraway 1988, p. 586.

56 Barad, 2007, p. 87.

57 Maxwell, 2012, p. 33ff.

58 Haraway 1992; Barad 2007.

light on the researcher.⁵⁹ While reflection denotes the process of light bouncing off objects, returning to its original source albeit in a weaker state, the concept of diffraction is used to describe how waveforms spread out and become distorted when encountering an object. An ocean wave passing through a narrow passage or a beam of light passing through a thin slit will not be reflected, but will spread out and create patterns emanating outwards. Letting such patterns overlap will in turn create interference; like when two stones are dropped into a pond of still water and the subsequent ripples merge, reinforcing some waves while cancelling others out. Likewise, a beam of light passing through parallel slits will diffract and create a pattern of interference. Where the wave patterns coincide and a crest meets another crest or a through meets a through, light becomes intensified and constructive interference is achieved. Where the patterns superpose but are opposite, when the crest of one wave meets the through of another, destructive interference can be observed where the light is diminished or even blotted out. If projected onto a screen, such interference manifests as intermingling fields of light and darkness, illuminating some point while leaving others in darkness. Changing one parameter in an experimental setup, like the distance between the slits, will lead to new patterns and thus difference.

Thinking along these lines – or waves, as it were – knowledge no longer needs to be understood as a result of reflection or as something stemming from straight lines of sight, but rather as something emerging through disruptive processes. Proximity or distance comes to matter as different patterns of figurative darkness and light, allowing for contrast that lets the world be known. This way the “other” is not figured as a mere surface of reflection, instead letting us think of them as sources of light and makers of waves in and of themselves.

The making of difference in the world, ways of letting it be known, thus becomes a question of cutting through its *a priori* entanglement with the apparatus of research according to Barad.⁶⁰ That division takes place is necessary for the enactment of the world, but exactly how and where it takes place, is dependent upon the knowledge producing circumstances; the apparatus. An apparatus can take the shape of an experimental setup as the one described above, but Jespersen, Petersen, Ren & Sandberg suggest that it might just as well be enacted as cultural analysis or ethnographic practice. Because of the entangled state of things there can be no external positions and thus no intervention, only intra-vention; no interaction, only intra-action.⁶¹

As Barad states, “diffraction is not about any differences, but about which differences matter”⁶², and how these differences also (seemingly paradoxically)

59 Haraway 1992, p. 30.

60 Barad 2007, p. 140.

61 Jespersen, Petersen, Ren & Sandberg 2012, p. 9.

62 Barad 2007, p. 378.

makes visible the entanglement of everything. Unlike reflection, diffraction does not presuppose a state of being where subjects and objects simply “are”, but rather makes it possible to account for how they are enacted by socio-material practices in time-space. It is not a question of how the role of the researcher or the researched is being “performed” or “constructed”, but how we enact the world itself together-apart.⁶³ As the relationship of the researcher and the researched change, so does the interference pattern. Thus knowledge is dependent on alignment and directedness with the “other” and ethnographers need to take great care when constructing and tuning their apparatuses in research. Of course, the apparatus is not solely dependent on the researcher, considering the assertion that the researcher is never “sole”. However, figuring the ethnographic toolbox as an apparatus helps us understand the responsibility we bear not only for the scientific solidness of methods, theories and accounts, but for making fair cuts. The ethnographic apparatus can in itself be employed for analyzing apparatuses – a meta-apparatus of sorts – something that has decisively been demonstrated within the field of Science and Technology Studies.⁶⁴ This is what the ethnographer can achieve when s/he attentively accounts for the cuts that matter for the object of study and the research question at hand.

Searching together-apart; to hold and be held

In Barad’s agential realism the division that cuts “together-apart” creates difference and makes the world knowable through its entanglements. It decides what is what, and what is not. To further figure the specificity of such cuts, Barad uses an example from the physicist Niels Bohr: If a person in a dark room holds a cane, it can be intra-acted with it in two mutually exclusive ways. By holding the cane firmly, the person can use it to navigate the room and the cane essentially becomes an extension of the person. If the person instead holds the cane loosely, its features can be felt, turning the cane into something that can be examined in itself.⁶⁵ Similarly, we figure the ethnographer’s relation to the participants as a way of enacting the world collaboratively or as a way of subjugating the participants to the researcher’s critical gaze. Agential cuts are sometimes made to cut us together, sometimes to cut us apart. While the researcher has a final say in what becomes part of the research report, one should also take into consideration how the participants hold the ethnographer “tightly” or “loosely”, what kind of knowledge they gain and what they can set in motion by doing so. Needless to

63 Barad 2007, p. 179.

64 Cf. Latour 2005.

65 Barad 2007, p. 154.

say, this becomes increasingly important when the participants themselves know the tricks of the trade.

If we can at all presuppose a boundary between ethnographer and “other”, we must remember that the ethnographer is not only holding, but is also being held. Much like the ethnographer, the participants will use the research situation to further explore the world surrounding them, together as well as apart. As shown by Vikkelsø the ethnographer may encounter many kinds of resistance as well as willingness to align with research projects.⁶⁶ Presupposing the intentions of such interference or prescribing it to Theory writ large should preferably be avoided. Instead, it is the mapping out of these cutting together/cutting apart through speech acts as well as other practices that can become a source of analytical movement for diffractive thinkmaking.

When neither studying “subjugated” subjects, nor really studying “up”, power structures does not seem to appear along the lines most often stipulated. This calls for us as researchers to try and ask new questions. Most often, the “site of power” in ethnographic work has been localized and analyzed at critical distance, in the sense that the ethnographer – no matter what kind of proximity is enacted during fieldwork – still is apart and different from the subjects of study. Workings of power might not come in the same shape and size from a diffractive point of view as it presumably does in a reflexive account. This does not mean that power is not enacted, only that we try hard not to presume or localize its production and producers before figuring them out; before we enact an agential cut.

To avoid essentializing partial perspectives into stereotypes of single and one-dimensional categories, an intersectional take on identities have shown to be helpful in many disciplines. This stance has been extremely valuable in uncovering the complexities of how the structures upholding unfair conditions work to exploit and repress certain people more than others, due to specific compositions of orientations, proximities and affinities. As outcomes of ethnographic work, intersecting “identity categories” have much to contribute. The problem for us, the authors, is that the philosophical foundations upon which they rest are hard to reconcile with the diffractive approach argued for here. As an alternative, figuring intrasections instead of intersections, allows for single or multiple differences (or affinities, proximities and orientations) to be cut out in each given situation. Instead of treating “identity categories” as separate and intersecting as an analytical and political move,⁶⁷ intrasectionality allows them to be enacted out of the specific socio-material practices at hand, and to be situational and compositional. Such a procedure better acknowledge the fact that they cannot all be said to be existing *a priori* in any given situation. This in turn, we argue,

66 Vikkelsø 2007, p. 308.

67 Cf. Gunnarsson 2015.

also better allows for possible not-yet-seen identities and species to matter.⁶⁸ As representing the “other” is a risky power move, we prefer to think of the ethnographer’s duty as one of fair articulation.⁶⁹ The words formed by the researcher are not representations of the world, imperfectly reflecting it “as it is”. By articulating them, we are actively making concepts such as culture come to matter. No matter how modest its claims, description is always intervention.⁷⁰

Diffractive practices

One way of performing diffraction suggested by Haraway as well as by Barad⁷¹, is to read and re-write text through each other. A recent scholar practicing this is Melanie Sehgal⁷² who made a reading of the process theories on becoming by Alfred North Whitehead⁷³ with the diffractive approaches of Haraway and Barad. Other researchers who have attempted and discussed a diffractive approach to ethnographic practice are Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, professor of child- and youth studies, as well as educational scholars Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei. The former argues that as a researcher one is uncovering one possible reality among many not yet diffracted ones. Making oneself aware of imaginary and bodymind sensibilities in composing and analyzing data, is a crucial move.⁷⁴ It is a call for cognizing and imagining, in contrast to reflecting and interpreting – a becoming-with and a diffracting-from.

For Jackson and Mazzei diffraction becomes a way to through an interview map out how a black woman teaching at a primarily white university “intra-act with the materiality of [her] world in a way that produce different” becoming.⁷⁵ They conclude that it is not her blackness that diffracts her as different, but that it is the “intra-action of bodies, discourses and institutions do so”.⁷⁶ They argue that blackness, and the concept of race in itself, is enacted by these intra-actions. Much effort is put into describing material as well as social circumstances of the interviews. Taguchi as well as Jackson and Mazzei argue that the benefit of a diffractive approach may not always be the conclusion of *what* is different, but the findings of *how and in which ways* it is.

68 Cf. Haraway 1991.

69 Haraway 1992.

70 Vikkelsø 2007, p. 306.

71 Haraway 1992; Barad 2007

72 Sehgal 2014

73 Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) was a philosopher and mathematician, and is considered to be a pioneer of process philosophy, which concerns itself with the process (and ontology) of becoming.

74 Taguchi 2012, p. 275.

75 Jackson & Mazzei 2012, p. 119.

76 Jackson & Mazzei 2012, p.125.

The accounts do however leave us wanting something more. In a way, their conclusions appear quite predictable. Naturally, we cannot always expect the process of uncovering power to be surprising in itself, but some expressions of oppression we already know quite well. What one can do as ethnographers is to try to work the diffractive approach into the designs of our ways of inquiry and not only employ it as an analytical afterthought. This may better facilitate interventional accounts, where the knowledge composed enacts and articulates the agency of the participants, in for them beneficial ways. Haraway's claim that ethnographical inquiry is a way of being at risk⁷⁷ combined with Latour's claim that ethnographers should give their participants "leeway in defining themselves"⁷⁸ affords us an additional train of thought. Not only might ethnography benefit from being re-configured as a diffractive practice; the figuration of diffraction might also stand to gain something when given shape through ethnography.

In the beginning of this essay we established that the ways of practicing ethnography are manifold and many are the methods that could potentially be configured with diffraction. We would however like to claim affinity with the four guidelines for performing "critical proximity" drawn by Birbak, Petersen & Jensen all of which point towards the open-endedness of ethnography.⁷⁹ The first is to hesitate before adopting a stance of critical distance, in the sense that grand narratives of clashing ideologies should not be the first stop when looking for analytical leverage. These may obscure descriptions of the micro-processes of everyday life. The second one follows closely on the first, regarding the purification of categories as something that needs to be explored in empirical cases rather than as existing analytical resources. Put simply this means that one should avoid premature statements of what things in the world are really about. Patterns of difference that cut phenomena as "culture", "nature", "economy" or "technology" apart should be traced and not presumed.⁸⁰ The third is to allow new roles for and relationships for researchers and participants to emerge through the process of research. To know, the researcher needs to align and ally with participants, knowing with them rather than about them. Finally they call for an appreciation for new positions for methods and an acceptance in face of the fact that research methods permeate society. No longer can methods be seen as the sacred tools of academia, jealously guarded from use in the world "outside". Methods travel and as researchers we need to follow the ways in which they adapt and are adapted in new places, rather than strive for methodological purity.⁸¹ In sum, the guidelines of Birbak, Petersen & Jensen encompass the ontological force of research and its

77 Haraway 1992, p. 190f.

78 Latour 2005, p. 41.

79 Birbak, Petersen & Jensen 2015.

80 Petersen & Munk 2013, p. 106.

81 Birbak, Petersen & Jensen 2015, p. 289f.

ethical implications. The path to reach a critical state lies not within theoretical abstractions or in wedges driven between essentializing categories, but in the scrutiny and making of these same frames.⁸² While not constituting be-all and end-all of a diffractive re-configuration these guidelines could in our opinion serve as a point of departure.

While we do not wish to make any grand claims to methodological innovation, there are several practical techniques of performing ethnography that fall well within the lines drawn above. One example is employing methods that place critical inquiry in the hands of the participants – human or otherwise – rather than performing it as a second-hand, after-the-fact, analytical move.⁸³ If the practice of interviewing is understood as a way for participants to enact ethnographies of their own lives, the task of the ethnographer is to devise forms of inquiry that strengthen those enactments.⁸⁴ In our own research, allowing participants to read and comment on transcripts from previous conversations with the researcher has been one way of making the shared analytical qualities of ethnographic interviews more explicit. Other such strategies include performing walk-along interviews in the participants' workplaces, discussing documents authored by the participants – ranging from job applications to institutional strategy statements to regulatory documents in biomedicine – and collecting diaries listing tasks performed at work.⁸⁵ In this way, critical analysis becomes a question of proximity and engagement rather than distance, as nuance and ambiguity is enacted together-apart in the interview. Using maps as a visual aid has been suggested as another a strategy for letting the participants themselves unfold their entanglements by figuring themselves “in relation to other actors”.⁸⁶ Finally, the tinkering and tweaking of research concepts can in itself be a way of doing diffracting. By figuring in new ways, we make new things and compose new knowledge.⁸⁷ The ways we think about and articulate ethnographic practice are not divorced from the practices themselves and whether we claim that ethnography reflects, accumulates, composes, renders or diffracts there will be consequences.⁸⁸ Re-configuring ethnography as a diffractive rather than a reflexive practice is therefore not an attempt to establish canonicity, but an attempt to let some of the ethnographic open-endedness extend to its own concepts and practices.

82 Birbak, Petersen & Jensen 2015, p. 281; Latour 1999a.

83 Cf. Birbak, Petersen & Jensen 2015, p. 280.

84 Cf. Mol 2002, p. 28; Mol & Law 2004, p. 59.

85 Cf. Kusenbach 2003, p. 464; Davies 1999, p. 172; Czarniawska 2007, p. 90.

86 Jensen, Munk, Madsen & Birbak 2014, p. 239.

87 Cf. Mol & Law 2004, p. 59; Woolgar & Lezaun 2013, p. 333.

88 O'Dell & Willim 2015, p. 91.

Diffracting the ethnographic thinkmaking

This essay has been an attempt at diffraction along a reflexive/diffractive cut in ethnographic thinkmaking⁸⁹, examining in what ways other figurations allows for other ways of enacting the world. We wanted to discuss and problematize the philosophical foundations upon which the conceptual apparatus of reflexivity rests and instead ask; what happens if we do not *presume* difference but rather choose to look to how it is enacted? Difference and nuances is what makes the world knowable. Without them, it – and we – would be a homogenous mass.

By putting emphasis on what is set in motion and what waves are being made by doing ethnographic research, we believe it helps both researcher and participant to better understand and appreciate the ripple effect achieved by their relationship. It is also a way to more concretely and straightforwardly make sense of and accept the interference effects that ethnographers have agreed occur in all research *anyway* – indifferent to conceptions of reflexivity or diffraction. The crucial difference is that one can avoid taking the reflexive detour and instead look directly at the reality effects of ethnographic fieldwork.

If knowing is composite and the thought is distributed, then the subjective self is always enacted and cut out in and by the research practice. Not arguing that one should do diffractive ethnography instead of reflexive, we rather suggest that doing ethnography is in *itself* more of a diffractive practice. In the same manner that Latour's⁹⁰ assertion that "critique has run out of steam" does not preclude critical thought, this essay does not call for a ban on reflective thoughts about one's own role and position as a researcher. However, we do not find the philosophical underpinnings of the reflexive project to fit well with ethnographic practice, nor with its aim of making fair accounts.

As stated in the introduction, we address "doing" in terms of what we *make*, or bring into the world through ethnography. By re-configuring ethnography as a diffractive practice, we believe that we can better conceptualize such a bringing into being and what it is dependent upon. For further figurings of ethnography as diffractive, we would pose some questions that might achieve the wished for ripple effect; *When and how do our participants and we enact the same or different objects, concepts or subjects? What unexpected ones emerge? How are they cut together-apart? How and when are we cut together-apart with our participants? And, what kinds of closeness and proximities – or distances and differences – do these cuts enact, pertaining to our research questions?* We have hereby given some clue to how diffraction can serve as a tool for figuring distance differently, while not obscuring proximity. If we, ethnographers, are to write about the lives

⁸⁹ Cf. "thought-practice", as elaborated on by Thiele, 2014

⁹⁰ Latour 2004.

of people, we must carefully consider the tools at hand for shedding analytical light on lived experiences. One of them being metaphors, concepts, words, and how these can be better put to work to reflect, or diffract, our research practices.

Maybe it is not only time to shed light. It may be time to shed the ocular metaphors of the observer altogether and instead make waves. What we argue for in conclusion is not that diffraction is better than reflexivity, but that we perhaps – to once again paraphrase Bruno Latour⁹¹ – have never been reflexive.

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91 Latour 1993.

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English abstract

In this essay we investigate ways to re-configure ethnographic practices and articulate them as diffractive. The essay problematizes the ways in which the philosophical concept of reflexivity can be understood as limiting for the inherent compositional character of ethnographic practices. These practices are by necessity carried out in proximity. That makes a reflexive point of departure problematic, since it as figuration presupposes a certain amount of distance to that which is studied. We present the concept of diffraction, as introduced by Donna Haraway and elaborated upon by Karen Barad, and discuss its possible philosophical as well as practical implications for ethnographic practices. We review examples of scholarly attempts at a diffractive ethnographic practice, as well as attempts at re-configuring ethnography through proximity by the way of other figurations. The essay takes departure in our experiences of doing ethnographic fieldwork in our respective doctoral studies, concerning different aspects of knowledge production in the fields of cell biology, neurology and in ethnology, in contemporary Sweden.