THE UNBEARABLE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FIELDWORK: ETHNOGRAPHIC DILEMMAS, MORAL LABORATORIES AND NARRATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

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Introduction

Writing ethnography is a creative experience. It produces outputs and, more importantly, it leaves traces. However, such creativity is of a particular kind, for it is mutually poietic. Objects are subjects, and the practice of fieldwork makes and re-makes subjects in unexpected and indecipherable ways. From this perspective, therefore, understanding the other, knowing the world and being ethically engaged with both appear ephemeral and, as a consequence, fundamentally unsubstantial. It is as if ethnography initiated a set of possibilities while at the same time incorporating these as impossibilities. In this sense I take ethnography to be utopian because its aims are inherently unattainable: looking at the world through the eyes of the other, pretending to do so without hijacking the other's perspective and establishing an ethical relationship of mutuality and fairness is always impossible in the concrete, everyday practice of ethnographers. In this article, I intend to explore this utopian character throughout the examination of three themes: the unattainable perfection of inter-subjectivity, the unattainable perfection of epistemology in the social sciences, and the unattainable perfection of the ethic of fieldwork.

Utopia: a mutual experience

'Please, would you write the story of my life?' a Kwara'ae man from Gilbert Camp asked me once. I was strolling along the rugged road that connects the illegal settlement to Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. I laughed, because I was surprised by the request. During my training as social scientist, I had been learning that friends and informants are not so easy to find. Ethnographic encounters, furthermore, are delicate moments requiring extreme discretion. I was told that one has to be as unobtrusive as possible. Participate and observe, the 'commandment' dictates. Sometimes it's even

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better to go unnoticed, sit in a corner and write notes, taking action only when and if invited. Influenced by these ideas, I could not imagine that my informants and friends would have been so keen on getting to know me. 'You anthropologist, right? Then sit down and listen to my story'.

That is not exactly the way it goes elsewhere. When I introduce myself as an anthropologist in Europe, North America, Asia and other places, I am very often taken to be something else – an archaeologist, perhaps, or a forensic anthropologist at best. Somehow there have to be skulls and bones involved, at some point. And it is far from easy to get the message across when I explain that my interest is in cultures, customs, ideas, beliefs, and especially the people who embody them. In contrast, for the people of the Solomon Islands it is just obvious. Everybody knows what an anthropologist does, to the point that I had the following exchange countless of times:

> 'So, you, what are you doing here?'
> 'I am here to do anthropological research…'
> 'Oh, really?! Anthropology?! Man! And which group are you gonna work with? Malaita? West? Which one? They are veeeery different, so very different, did you know that?'

I felt I was being taken seriously, that what I was doing was not devoid of significance. Most importantly, I felt that what I was doing mattered to them. Initially, as I was preparing my research, I was not expecting to feel like that. I settled in Gilbert Camp with the uncomfortable feeling of being a sort of disturbing factor. I was afraid of interfering with a small system in equilibrium and being regarded as an intruder, an uninvited nosy parker. But I was welcomed as exactly the opposite. Everybody seemed happy to have me there, and they could not wait to tell me of the many things that happened to themselves, to their fathers, the fathers of their fathers, and so on. The only truly disturbing factors were, ironically, things such as my informed consent sheets. It was just so out-of-place, so out-of-the-atmosphere to ask my hosts to complete and sign those printed, white pieces of paper. We felt as if that was holding us up. It was as if a bureaucratic impediment was preventing us from delving into each other straight away.

That is how the Kwara'ae man seemed to feel. He wanted me to sit down, listen, and then write his story down. He was looking for an opportunity to meet me and, especially,

to weave together the segments of his life into a meaningful narrative. As Michael Jackson wrote, storytelling is

> a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination. This narrative imaginary involves an interplay of intersubjective and intrapsychic processes, since every transformation of inner monologue into social discourse—and every countervailing appropriation or subversion of this discourse in individual consciousness—depends as much on private reveries, fantasies, daydreams, and undeclared thoughts, as on public speech. In other words, while storytelling makes sociality possible, it is equally vital to the illusory, self-protective, self-justifying activity of individual minds. As Joan Didion observes, 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live'. (2002: 15)

To put it in other, perhaps less existentialist words, 'the phenomenal and the discursive, life as lived and life as talked about, are like the intertwining strands of a braided rope, each complexly involved in the other, in time' (Desjarlais, 2003: 6).

An opportunity to weave these strands into a meaningful narrative – that's what the Kwara'ae man was looking for. Coincidentally, I was looking for an opportunity to write his story. That's why I was there, to collect the stories of the inhabitants of an illegal settlement on the outskirts of a Melanesian capital. The coincidence of wants that characterized this encounter gave us a site in which to become transformed throughout the negotiation of our reciprocal position. I was transformed into who I wanted to be, thanks to his genuine willingness to become an informant. And he was transformed by the retrospective narration of what his life meant to him, which necessarily required a dedicated and regardful listener. We gave each other the opportunity to participate in each other's lives, leaving marks that time won't erase. And we kept doing so at regular intervals, for thirteen months, until the day of my departure. He offered me his genealogies, whose branches extended to almost five ascending generations. He offered me proverbs, legends and his personal views on my doubts and questions. Without realizing it, I was slowly turning into the anthropologist I wanted to be, or at least the kind of anthropologist he wanted me to be. And that is because he was looking at me as if I already was.

Perhaps a certain degree of *illusion biographique* contributes to such an ordered rendering of these events. As Bourdieu wrote,

> On est sans doute en droit de supposer que le récit autobiographique s'inspire toujours, au moins pour une part, du souci de donner sens, de rendre raison, de dégager une logique à la fois rétrospective et prospective, une consistance et une constance, en établissant des relations intelligibles, comme celle de l'effet à la cause efficiente ou finale, entre les états successifs, ainsi constitués en étapes d'un développement nécessaire. (Bourdieu 1986: 69)

That, however, reinforces the idea that retrospective narratives are constructed in order to live, whereby what is told (the discursive) co-exists with what appears to be (the phenomenal). Here, biography and ethnography merge, while at the same time the limits of both become explicit.

I am not sure what happened to the Kwara'ae man, how exactly he was transformed as a consequence of my listening to his story – but I am sure that he was. And so were many of the other men and women I spent my time with, doing the ordinary housekeeping, or chatting under *the* mango tree. There were moments when the conversation became very intimate, in the sense that we were sharing the space of a sort of 'cognitive bubble' in which questions, answers, memories and hopes were extremely specific and detailed. Regularly, I would reciprocate their gifts of knowledge and intimacy with anecdotes about my life in Italy, England, France and other places where I had lived. My stories would inspire them and provide them with elements to rethink their views and opinions about the world, life and people. Sometimes the conversation (should I say the unstructured interview?) took unexpected directions, and I found myself reflecting on my own culture from novel perspectives. I remember one of these, which still makes me smile.

> Gordon: So, you do not shower under the rain in England?
>
> Rodolfo: No, not really.
>
> G: Why?
>
> R: Eh… I don't know.
>
> G: Is it forbidden? I mean, people are not allowed?
>
> R: No, no, we are allowed to shower under the rain... just… we do not do it.

G: Mmm… and when people play football… and it starts to rain… do people stop?

R: No, they go on.

G: Eh eh, that's funny.

R: Mh? Why do you find it funny?

G: Just… People do not have shower under the rain, but if they are playing football, and it rains, they stay under the rain! It's just funny!

Excerpt from Field Diary, November 6th 2011

Although this is not exactly the sort of discursive epiphany that could change one's worldview or life trajectory, not to speak of far-reaching anthropological conclusions, it is an epitome of ethnography as a mutualizing utopia. One might compare it with classic examples of greater significance, such as Lévi-Strauss's rendering of the dialogue between the missionaries and the Caduveo Indians:

> The missionaries condemned the Indian men who, forgetful of hunting, fishing, and their families, wasted whole days in having their bodies painted. But they would ask the missionaries, 'Why are you so stupid?' 'In what way are we stupid?' the latter would reply. 'Because you do not paint yourself like the Caduveo.' To be a man it was necessary to be painted; to remain in the natural state was to be no different from the beasts. (Lévi-Strauss, 2011: 201)

Another classical example is the conversation that the missionary anthropologist Maurice Leenhardt had with a Pacific Islander:

> Once, waiting to assess the mental progress of Canaques I had thought for many years, I risked the following suggestion: 'In short, we introduced the notion of spirit to your way of thinking?'
>
> And he objected, 'Spirit? Bah! You didn't bring us the spirit. We already knew the spirit existed. We have always acted according to the spirit. What you have brought us is the body.' (Leenhardt, 1979 [1947]: 194)

These anecdotes marked the history of anthropology not only because of their pithy and revelatory character, but also and especially because of their narrative structure. They are structured like a joke, although they are not intended to make you laugh. They are

supposed to make you think, and perhaps change your perspective about a few human facts. They feature people, sentences, events and a punch line. Once that line is crossed, the story subverts what we were supposedly thinking about the meaning of man, soul and (if I dare placing my humble scribbles beside these immortal writings) rain.

Those few lines suggest that an ethnographic encounter might take the form of a mutual experience of transformation, the utopian character of which depends on the impossibility of grasping each other completely. In other words, despite their brevity they seem to be fulfilling the central mission of ethnography: getting as close as possible to those who are distant. It is as if these short stories were sufficiently illustrative to make a point. The inverse proportion between their illustrative power and their paucity of words prompts us to reflect upon the extent to which anthropology is fulfilling its project of knowing the other, the different, the distant. To what extent do contemporary anthropologists tell this kind of short, pithy, meaningful stories?

The American anthropologist Alex Golub writes, in a critical fashion, 'The one lesson (American) anthropologists want to spread across the world is "It's complicated". In classrooms and publications, our goal is to show the complexity of human life to our audiences.'[2] That is not necessarily an 'American' tendency only. Such an emphasis on complexity arguably emerged at different times and in different places from the reflexive turn and the postmodern critique of ethnographic writing. Reflexivity, as the etymology suggests, is an inward-looking movement. In order to be interested in it, the reader has to be interested in anthropologists more than in the cultures anthropologists study. As for the postmodern turn, its disjunction between the world and the words, between epistemology and knowledge, between representation and communication, arguably undermined the ethnographic ideal of mutualizing experience as I describe it above.

This is not to say that the reflexive and postmodern turn did not bring positive, needed and timely changes. These include an injection of theoretical humility, a strong statement about the epistemological limits of ethnography and a constant awareness of its fictional character. But it also resulted in undermining its narrative potential and therefore in establishing a limit to its relational power. If possible, it made ethnography as a mutualizing utopia even more utopian. For the emphasis on complexity and the

[2] Golub, http://savageminds.org/2014/07/02/game-of-thrones-and-anthropology/

continuous reflection on the validity and legitimacy of anthropological epistemology shifted the focus from the mutuality of the ethnographic experience to a set of professional and specialist dilemmas. The result was a kind of experience, analysis and writing that has often been described as impenetrable. Impenetrable, coincidentally, is the best antonym of 'mutual' I can think of.

In my research notes, 'The Anthropology of Storytelling and the Storytelling of Anthropology', I connected these issues – what Thomas Eriksen called a 'crisis of communication' (2006) – with the possibilities offered by a narrative turn (Maggio 2014). I argued that an anthropological understanding of the storytelling practices of anthropologists might suggest new ways in which ethnography can engage people who, with varying degrees of professionalism, are interested in knowing about different cultures. Towards the end of the article, I asked, 'How to reconcile anthropology and storytelling as a form of communication in professional contexts?' The present article and the thematic focus of this issue provide an opportunity to reflect upon ethnographies of mutualizing utopias as a possible answer to that question.

Mutuality: a moral laboratory

Marshall Sahlins, in his boldly titled *What Kinship Is-and Is Not* (2013), argues that it is 'the mutuality of being'. With the expression 'mutuality of being' he indicates the condition of humans who experience each other's lives as reciprocally dependent and intrinsically connected. Their communal dependence relies, on the one hand, upon the genuine acknowledgement of an existential contribution (I would not be who I am if you were not who you are). On the other hand, mutuality draws on the consciousness that this contribution cannot be obliterated and, hence, the connection cannot be severed. 'If love and nurture, giving food or partaking in it together, working together, living from the same land, mutual aid, sharing the fortunes of migration and residence, as well as adoption and marriage, are so many grounds of kinship, they all know with procreation the meaning of participating in one another's life' (ibid. 29). It follows that kinship does not depend upon genealogical connections, or at least not exclusively. Rather, it draws on the socio-cultural construction of human experience. '*Aeba, kyoudai*,' as my friend

Hideaki Gushiken once said, to express this concept with a traditional Okinawa proverb: 'Once we have met, we are brothers.'

Ethnographers who conduct long-term fieldwork through the classic method of participant observation not uncommonly pride themselves of becoming their informant's post-natal brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, grandchildren and even parents. Most frequently, it is one's informants who bestow these titles, and the act is usually interpreted as granting the ethnographer privileged access to indigenous kinship networks, broadly defined. Although the extent to which ethnographers gain full membership can be questioned, being referred to and even addressed with kinship terms usually corresponds to moving to a closer degree of proximity. Kinship is a particularly useful concept with which to think about the utopian quality of ethnography. The ethnographer is never completely entitled to assert that he grasped the point of view of his particular 'other' in much the same way as he is never fully sure he has become his other's brother. After the mother's brother, the other's brother has good chances of becoming a new anthropological obsession.

From the practical point of view of conducting the research, there are obvious advantages in increasing proximity and, hopefully, intimacy. Ethnographers are allowed to enter and operate in the most private spaces, notably the household, but also other areas of cultural importance. Furthermore, their new status allows them to take part in the important events of a group, including births, deaths and life-changing rituals and experiences such as weddings, graduations, legal trials, accidents, diseases, travels and the kind of discursive epiphanies cited above. This is really the best kind of data.

Beyond a shadow of doubt, these relationships are by no means stable: they must stand the test of time and the many challenges that threaten to dissolve them. Breaking a promise, disappearing for many years, failing to help when help is needed, expressing envy rather than joy for the other's achievements, all constitute social situations in which the movement towards increasing proximity and intimacy can be reversed. However, nothing can nullify one's participation in the life of the other. Not even the degeneration of brain cells can obliterate the traces of reciprocal existence, if only because the person's entire character has been marked and shaped by mutual experiences, even for just a few imperceptible elements. When death comes, it does not eradicate these marks from those

who survive. As existential companions, the living have those signs fixed in their own character, and hence their destiny – which are actually the same thing.

From a theoretical standpoint, these elective affinities constitute the elementary building blocks of the mutuality of being during fieldwork. Living the lives of our informants means not only being in the same place at the same time and sharing their feelings, such as joy at a wedding party or sorrow at a mourning session: it also, and especially, means participating in each other's situated perceptions. In technical terms, it is not just empathy, but sympathy.

Emotions are culturally constructed; they are sensations with a meaning. That meaning depends on group cohesion. Hence the ethnographic challenge is precisely to feel what our informants feel, rather than what we are inclined to feel in a given situation on the basis of our background. The eighteenth-century political economist Adam Smith clarified the concept of sympathy very effectively with the following example.

> Sympathy […] does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality. We blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour; because we cannot help feeling with what confusion we ourselves should be covered, had we behaved in so absurd a manner. (Smith 2009: 10)

From a rationalistic point of view, it follows that feeling with the 'breast' of our informants is no less utopian than seeing the world through their eyes. I remember an elderly scholar who, during the Q&A that followed a brief talk I gave at the University of Manchester in 2013, stood up and shouted, 'I cannot imagine a statement more meaningless than "grasping the native point of view"! How the hell are you going to do that??' At that time, I empathized with him. I even imagined what he would have said if I had hinted at the possibility of feeling his sentiments. But then I went on fieldwork and changed my mind.

The utopian character of an ethnographic epistemology based on sympathy is reinforced by its inherent political premises. Asserting that ethnographers could strive to experience the emotions of their informants rests on the fundamental assumption of

ontological similarity. If we wish we could feel what they feel, it means that we emphasise what makes us similar and under-emphasise what tells us apart. An alternative possibility is that we might just be projecting, placing our understanding of our own feelings upon them.

However, the perils of projection are not devoid of mutualistic outcomes. We all go to the field looking for ourselves, not just the other. Our research questions are never our ultimate research questions, if only because tentative answers are like slashing at the neck of a hydra. The more I listen to the stories of anthropologists, the more I share their workspaces and engage with their leisure time, the more I seem to perceive a limpid correlation between their character (or destiny) and their researches.

Even though we anthropologists might ask, say, how the Bororo negotiate their strategic search for romantic love with the value of moiety avoidance, we are actually learning to articulate our own love question. Even though we might be theorising the power of ritual to turn Burkinabe men into hunters, we are simultaneously asking what kind of masculinity would that ritual engender in us. I strongly believe that any anthropologist can establish some sort of correlation, if only unconscious, between the questions of his research and those of his personal existence.

Since doing that implies delineating psychological profiles, it is better not to attribute this kind of correlation to anybody in particular. As I am not in the position to declare that existential connections exist between what my fellow anthropologists say, their inner lives and their research questions, I will only speak about myself. And to illustrate how this aspect is closely connected with the mutualizing character of ethnography, I will let my informant speak again:

> ‘So, your house is in England and your home is in Italy, right?’
> ‘Yes. I went to Manchester to do my Ph.D. in Anthropology.’
> ‘I see. So… I mean… you are just like us. We are from Malaita, that is our home, but we come to Honiara in search for work. We don’t call this a home. It is a house, for us, you know, like you.’

Obviously, there is much more than the search of a job lying behind both my decision to migrate and that of my informants. The point, however, is that a correlation might exist between our research questions and the particular moment we are getting through. It

follows that the ethnographic encounter is not the beginning of mutualization. Rather, it is the concretization of the mutualizing process, which begins before the 'first contact', when a sort of Nietzschean imperative to become who we are directs us towards the distant, the different, the other.

The reflective moment that follows the encounter should therefore include a serious examination of who we have been before entering the field. Also, and especially, it should concern who or what we are becoming as a consequence of our ethnographic encounter. For example, I had to take into account the possibility that, in dealing with the moral dilemmas that originate from tensions between the values of Malaita and those of 'the city', between home and house, I was projecting my own, culturally constructed feelings of adventure, guilt and nostalgia. That was fundamental to the analytical process, because it helped me to differentiate between the specificities of home values in Malaita and in my region of origin.

The risk was that of projecting the shape of my feelings upon the 'breast' of my informants. My research question focused on the moral dilemmas faced by the migrants living in Gilbert Camp. They leave Malaita and come to Honiara because they value what is lacking in the former and can be found in the latter, but in Honiara they would like to live according to their Malaitan *kastom*. Doing so is far from easy because the meaning of their values changes when they attempt to concretize the *kastom* in their daily urban life, particularly in contexts as varied as the household, the church, the community and the market.

The challenge of overcoming these tensions results in uneasy sensations that acquire a specific meaning when shared in communal action. These tensions can escalate into authentic disputes if neglected, with the consequent threat of blood feuds. Having experienced many years of civil war, the inhabitants of Honiara know all too well that these tensions over the meaning and use of their values must be managed as quickly and efficiently as possible. And so they make use of their cultural competence to organize rituals, trials, compensations, meetings and household routines to cope with these conflicting values. How they do that is the wonderful workings of culture. The task, for me, was to describe these tensions, emotions and challenges, but the question was obviously from what perspective to do so.

I attempted to write an ethnography of the Kwara'ae people of Gilbert Camp from the perspective of the 'domestic moral economy'. This is the phrase that has guided the research project in which I have been collaborating for the past five years. This project drew primarily on the concept of 'moral economy' developed by E.P. Thompson and later re-elaborated by Peterson and Taylor for the purposes of applying it in the context of Oceanic societies. The focus on the household, the 'domestic' that Peterson and Taylor added, brought to the fore the importance of intimate spaces of negotiation in the development of the moral self.

In the several households in which I lived at different times during the thirteen months of my fieldwork, I repeatedly took part in intersubjective negotiations in which I was called to take a stand, notably a moral one. For instance, I could not accept a broken promise on the part of somebody who was calling me brother (because his father was calling me son). I stood firm on my personal conception of what a promise is, and for some reason that position prevailed. One day the rest of the family gathered in the kitchen, and I was told I was right. At that point my 'brother', who was older than me and the eldest son of my 'father', started to call me 'big brother'. And that was the end of the controversy; we never talked about it again.

But before the gathering, I had no idea of what the outcome would have been when I stubbornly decided not to insist on my definition of giving one's word. I repeatedly told myself, 'Maybe he has a different, more flexible definition of promise? Am I completely missing something? Am I being immoral with my insistence on his obligations?' It was an ethical risk that I took, as I was unable to predict how the negotiations would have ended.

That experience transformed my perception of what ethnography is supposed to be. I had begun fieldwork with the conviction that the ethnographer should refrain as much as possible from having a personal judgment of what he observes. But on that occasion I could not help it. I had my own personal and somehow commonsense idea of what a promise is. And now, after that experience, my take on ethnography has changed: nobody is less equipped to understand the point of view of another person than somebody who has no point of view at all.

Cheryl Mattingly defines as 'moral laboratories' ordinary situations like this event, where the morality of everyday life is negotiated in unexpected ways. By moral laboratories, she indicates not only households, but also hospitals, schools, clinics and any other place where personal transformation can happen as a consequence of moral negotiation. 'A soccer field', for example, 'is hardly an obvious space of social experiment, moral critique, or personal transformation. And yet, it emerges as a kind of moral laboratory that is created in the midst of everyday life' (Mattingly 2014: 17).

Mattingly looks at contexts of this kind as everyday sites where people 'experiment' with morality and negotiate their position in a moral ordinary that is, nevertheless, constantly new and unpredictable. In the process, they are transformed. This way of conceptualizing moments of moral tension, negotiation and transformation points to the etymological connection between the Latin words *experiri* (to try), *experientia* (experience), *experimentum* (experiment) and *expertum* (expert). 'Moral experiments are not challenges to something literal so much as challenges to cultural imagination' (ibid.: 157). This conceptualization therefore suggests that the mutualizing character of ethnography can be identified in the process by which ethnographer and informant get to imagine themselves as 'experts in each other'. To what extent, though, do they become expert in each other?

Testimony: a narrative phenomenology

The intersubjective experience made possible by increasing degrees of intimacy is a foundational feature of ethnography as a mutualizing utopia. Utopia is the right term not because it indicates the impossibility to feel with the breast of the other, nor because it is impossible to entirely grasp his point of view. Rather, itt is the right term because it conveys the desire to reach something that cannot be achieved. The adjective 'utopian' sits comfortably beside ethnography, for ethnography works precisely because its ultimate goal cannot be realized. Could the ethnographer see with the eyes of his informants or feel with their hearts, he would not be able to observe them and hence to describe them. He would meld with them, hence losing the possibility of perceiving them as separated and, hence, different. That distance is necessary. The utopian desire to reach a perfect degree of intimacy drives the ethnographer *as close as possible* to their

perspectives, feelings and trajectories. But no further. If he could, there would be no ethnographer anymore. The impossibility of perfect perception is, it follows, a necessary condition of perception itself. And the same holds for description.

Due to this set of affairs, it is common to meet social scientists who openly display, at best, a sense of inadequacy and, at worst, an inferiority complex with regard to the so-called 'hard sciences'. Such a sense of inadequacy may overwhelm the research trajectory if approximations are seen as euphemistic equivalents of errors. No honest researcher would want to disseminate inaccuracies.

As a matter of fact, however, approximations are generally used in the world of scientific research, and not necessarily because more precise measures are not possible. For example, the resistance of air is often neglected when calculating the trajectory and speed of a falling body. To take another example, in physics the shape of the Earth is commonly approximated to a perfect sphere in order to simplify calculations of a whole array of variables, including gravity. Approximations, thus, are not to be seen as intellectual defeats, but rather as methodological appreciations of the specific qualifies of the objects of study.

The subject matter of the social sciences is characterized by constant change and unpredictability. Just like medicine, biology, astrophysics and any other intellectual enterprise devoted to the observation, analysis and understanding of the universe, ethnography is bound to the impossibility of perfect description. For some reason, this impossibility may be perceived as unbearable, rather than necessary. Its necessity nonetheless relates to the very *raison d'être* of ethnography, namely the description of that highly unpredictable and constantly changing subject matter that is people, with their temporary enterprises, unfathomable actions and intricate relational work.

Each and every question should be approached with a methodology that suits it. Mattingly proposes that we understand the processes of moral transformation (of which ethnography is part, I add) by means of a methodological construct that she labels 'narrative phenomenology'. Narrative phenomenology is an epistemological perspective that seeks to connect the situated experiences of specific actors to larger social histories through a dramatist rendering of ethnographic events. This narrative framework is arguably well suited to moving between the particular and the large scale in a *practice-*

oriented way because narratives show us life in process; social life emerges not as completed act, or as the mere enactment of a pre-given cultural logic, but as the local improvisation of everyday actors' (Mattingly 2010: 217).

Mattingly's conceptualization of narrative phenomenology reminds one of the main theories of storytelling. Stories are often seen as low-cost sources of information and low-risk opportunities to experience vicariously. Through stories, children are socialized into their group and society, develop a theory of the mind and become able to act socially. Listening to the retellings of the Odyssey might not necessarily equip them to confront cyclops or sirens, but it does allow them to consider the advantages of brilliance, guile and versatility to prevent and/or survive dangerous situations (Boyd 2009). Similarly, narrative phenomenology might not necessarily prove exemplary, let alone nomothetic, but it provides a testimony to the possible concretions of history.

It follows that narrative phenomenology might not enable us to predict, but it provides accurate descriptions of what people do when they attempt to predict. Mattingly writes,

> Furthermore, and I think this is one of narrative's most important potentials, such a lens can help us to look at social life not just as a past flowing into the present but from the perspective of the future-life as imaginatively constructed, as hoped for, as dreaded, a vulnerable thing. A narrative phenomenology offers an especially powerful vantage point from which to see how the past and present are saturated by dreams – and nightmares – of the future. (ibid.: 217)

Rather than prediction, therefore, I argue that the epistemological reach of narrative phenomenology coincides with a conception of ethnography as testimony. This kind of ethnography is as much precise and realistic as it describes how ethnographic encounters shape and change the ethnographer. That is the reason why narrative phenomenology is methodologically coherent with the concept of a moral laboratory. The inherent quality of moral laboratories is their being non-exemplary, gradual, mutual, and 'story-like'. The tensions that exist between the values that are negotiated in these labs operate like a segment connecting the beginning and the end. As Mattingly writes (ibid.), 'to reveal the deeply experimental qualities of little moments, it is necessary to recognize the temporality of these moments in which the narrative qualities of moral experiments

become apparent as temporal moments and spaces in larger narrative trajectories.' Any episode, any ethnographic encounter, any negotiation is unique and variable, whereas they are all underscored by the reciprocal modification between those who experience the mutuality of being.

It follows that this ethnographic enterprise is, at best, equipped to provide a testimony of the cultural encounters, of social life, of reciprocity, of agency and structure, not to solve their mystery. The ethnographer is seen as one who writes what he saw while preserving the limits of what he knows. These limits are not meant to be conceived as missing knowledge, but rather as the inherent condition of ethnographic knowing. That means visualizing them not as the perimeter that marks the difference between what is epistemologically accessible and what is not. Rather, it means conceiving of these limits as an internal quality of ethnographic knowing, that is, one that makes ethnographic knowledge fundamentally possible.

In this sense, the utopian tension between ethnographic encounter and ethnographic knowledge is reproduced in the tension between writer and reader. The kind of ethnographic writing that narrative phenomenology encourages is itself a moral laboratory. The narrative phenomenologist offers not his knowledge to the reader, but his utopian desire to know, his attempt to do so, and his desire to share what he experienced.

Conclusion

'Time and again I would get a call from her, sometimes in the middle of the night, where she would simply break down. "It's too much Cheryl," she would cry. "What can I do?" I never knew what to say. I could see that she was staring straight into an abyss.' (Mattingly 2014: 149). As I move through these lines, a process of negotiation develops. On the one hand, I am still trying to understand why and how narrative phenomenology offers an alternative theoretical trajectory to the mediation between neo-Aristotelian first-person ethics and post-humanist third-person perspectives. On the other hand, I am surprised by the charming suspension of disbelief engendered by Mattingly's dramatist rendering. What is the relationship between a perspective that sees the small moments of everyday life as moral laboratories, the theoretical positioning of narrative phenomenology with different degrees of adherence to alternative (sometimes

incompatible) conceptualizations of morality, and the ethical consequences of the ensuing triangular relationship of mutual transformation between the informant, the ethnographer and the reader? That is another question for another time.

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