

# QUIET OBSERVER IN THE SILENT FIELD: ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE PRESENT TIME

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## ABSTRACT

### **Quiet observer in the silent field: Ethnography and the present time**

The article deals with some of the methodological concerns arising from practiced anthropological concept of the fieldwork. Through the legacy of methods used by the traditional anthropology, it criticises the notion of stereotyping and silencing of *the other*. The article follows the path of ideas of *authentic life* and *authentic culture* and examines the notions of universalism and essentialism in the contemporary methodological debate within cultural and social studies.

**KEY WORDS:** ethnography, methodology, otherness, representations, authenticity

## IZVLEČEK

### **Tih opazovalec v nemem prostoru: etnografija danes**

Članek predstavlja metodološke probleme, ki izhajajo iz antropološkega koncepta dela na terenu. Govori o metodah, ki so jih uporabljali tradicionalni antropologi in podaja kritiko stereotipizacije in »utišanja« *drugega*. Članek sledi ideji in konceptu *avtentičnega življenja* in *avtentične kulture* ter raziskuje pojme, kot so univerzalizem in esencializem, še posebej v sodobnih metodoloških razpravah v kulturnih in družbenih študijah.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** etnografija, metodologija, drugačnost, reprezentacije, avtentičnost

## Evaporation

Dan, 11.54am, Mon 17 Jan, Canberra

Here we go, kids. Breathe in a lungful of petrol  
fumes, and take flight, high on fossil fuels.  
Scatter now, travel is cheap – but it won't be forever.

What is we are the last airborne generation?

It's my birthday.<sup>1</sup>

I wanted to know Helen's body so well I could climb in and zip up her skin around me.  
(Evelyn Lau, *Other Women*, p. 184)

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<sup>1</sup> Undergrowth #7. *Nomadology*, p. 9 (*nomadology.undergrowth.org*).

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnography and ethnographic methods, constant evaluation of field work, quantitative/qualitative dichotomy and day-to-day justification of research aspirations often determine the path of many researchers, especially in the social and cultural studies. Despite a shift away from traditional ethnography (which places researchers into the other culture and among other people) in the last couple of decades, ethnography remains the basic and conventional methodological approach in anthropology and cultural studies. Many researchers however still avoid questions arising from the methodological debate. Maybe the reason for avoiding these questions lies in some intrinsic belief of some researchers in social sciences that the researcher does not really choose their method, rather the method chooses the researcher. What I mean by that is that the problem constitutes the method and that the method, as such, is not consciously chosen by the researcher; rather the research problem already entails the appropriate method.

Regardless of my scepticism of what social or cultural inquiry actually means and what abilities it has to reflect on the ideas that contribute not only to humanity but also to *knowledge*<sup>2</sup> in some absolute sense, I still think that dealing with methodological concerns is a necessary part of any *field work* based research.

### **Rooted, static ethnography vs. ethnography of movement and transnational ties**

Classic ethnography is characterised by field work performed by the researcher, usually the anthropologist, and it entails the serious ‘participant observation’ in which researcher engages in the everyday life, communicates and contributes, takes notes and then analyses the material at the end. As Peter Metcalf notes, good participant observation requires living and participating “in the lives of local people, living as they live, doing what they do” (Metcalf, 2005: 11). Raelene Wilding talks about two central ideas that inform the archetype of ethnographic fieldwork. First, the field remains in one place. It is a site in which the ‘culture’ of the residents remains located, regardless of whether its content might shift across time. Second, there is a strong trope of movement, of migrancy, throughout the above description. “Travel between places, shifts in identity and status, movement between conceptual frameworks, and travel from home to home to translate one set of worldviews (usually those who are studied) into the framework of other sets of worldviews (usually other anthropologists and academics)” (see Wilding, 2007: 334).

<sup>2</sup> Here I do acknowledge the concept of ‘power/knowledge’ as constituted by Michel Foucault for whom mutually reinforcing relation between the circulation of knowledge and the control of conduct exists. However, I still believe that it is possible to accept that some *other knowledge* that is unrecognisable and undefinable may exist.

When movement of ethnographers became more common, there was a push towards more and more field sites within ethnographic research. Ethnographers started to do their fieldwork in many places and the ethnography became multi-sited. Places however, remained relatively static for ethnographers. It is usually the ethnographers who are moving, not the places or the people. As Susanne Freidberg notes, “although few would still question the legitimacy and value of multi-site ethnography, the difficulties involved in actually *doing* it remain” (Freidberg, 2001: 362). Some problems arising from contemporary ethnography are familiar to conventional single-site ethnography, such as dealing with several different languages or time constraints. At the same time, some new problems arise. Freidberg argues that “multi-site ethnography facilitates understanding of, and even empathy with, the positions of diverse actors within controversial commodity chains, it complicates the politics of globalisation” (ibid.: 365).

In an attempt to look at ethnography from a more theoretic point of view, I deliberately tried to avoid literature on ethnographic research, which often tends to provide us with suggestions of what is right and what is wrong without really engaging the research problem or the researched world. The literature on methodology and ethnography often attempts to eradicate almost all notions and reflections on the *self* when talking about the relationship between the researcher and the research field. It often overlooks us as researchers by referring to the *subjects* in different *settings* and by emphasising the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders. It places some kind of authority in sight which has the ability or the *knowledge* to (re)present the other and to determine the other as such<sup>3</sup>. Methodological approaches today tend to involve the researcher into the research environment to a greater extent.

I mentioned earlier that there is a change in the number of locations the ethnographer acquires in his or her quest for authenticity in the globalised world. For Hannerz (2003) the research of today is not so much ‘multi-local’<sup>4</sup> as it is ‘translocal’<sup>5</sup>. The emphasis is on the links and relationships built between places, places as such are ‘de-emphasised’. I cannot fully agree with Hannerz on this point since the place as a carrier of meaning has recently become a focus point of many researchers. The place or the site chosen for ethnographic research has only gained different meanings and cannot be identified as easily any more. The place itself does not stay static and unchangeable.

Some theorists, especially those engaging in postcolonial or feminist debates, have been particularly critical of privileging the ethnographer, and the potential exploitation of the researched. In post-colonial studies, there has been a greater attention given also to the positions and locations of writing, speaking and researching. Edward

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<sup>3</sup> All approaches, qualitative or quantitative, seem to work similarly in relation to this question.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Multilocal’ in Hannerz’s view means there are many places (and research on places) but there is no connection between these places made, recognised or studied.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Translocal’ in Hannerz’s view means a connection between different places is emphasised, recognised and studied.

Said's sustained commentary on the orientalism of Western observation has for instance strengthened the argument that traditional ethnographic texts are privileged and privileging. From a postcolonial perspective, Said has argued that many cultures which have been observed and represented have been reduced to the subjugated and muted objects of dominating discourse<sup>6</sup>. We could discuss the idea of the purpose of ethnographic research being to make the subject (or object) of the ethnographic exploration *visible*, but at the same time *mute, non-audible*, silent. I will return to this idea later.

Being static and unchangeable, ethnographic research cannot consciously continue its path into the age of transnational communications. Communications have changed the perspectives of people in the world we live in and higher and easier mobility as well as prolificacy of the world's *trouble spots* has caused even greater dispersion of people around the world. The whole system in which we operate have become more uncertain, fluid and quite unstable. Ethnographic research as a method, coined within the anthropological circles in the last century or so, and operating with stable entities can thus not successfully work in the present. At the same time, of course, we can ask whether it makes any sense to engage with any kind of research<sup>7</sup>, especially with the research on culture since we identify something or someone as separate and *different* as soon as we begin with any kind of social inquiry.

### ***Natives and primitive settings – the legacy of Franz Boas***

Franz Boas, who is often called the father of American anthropology, was best known for his work with Kwakiutl people from Northern Vancouver and the adjacent mainland of British Columbia in Canada. While studying the Kwakiutl, he established a new concept of culture and race and decided that everything was important to the study of culture. As we know, Boas was the inventor of the idea of cultural relativism<sup>8</sup> and historical particularism and is most responsible for discrediting the early twentieth century dominant scientific theories of racial superiority. In the context of this paper it may however be more important to note that he was also a strong supporter of the method of 'participant observation', which he bounded with practicing the in-depth study of cultures and objective ethnography. While practicing this method in his own *exotic* field, he never really immersed himself in the field or the culture of people he

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<sup>6</sup> See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978 and Amanda Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self. Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: SAGE.

<sup>7</sup> This is something the very first anthropologists were questioning as well

<sup>8</sup> With Boas, cultures replaced the culture and there was an emphasis given to exploring differences between cultures. The main followers of the concept of cultural relativism were Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie and Rith Benedict. Boas was, however, still convinced it is possible to study cultures objectively.

was studying. His devotion to the objectivism was criticized later on by many people, including by some of his students.

Zora Neale Hurston, writer, folklorist, anthropologist and Boas's student, questioned his objectivism while collecting data among African Americans in Florida in the 1920's. She consciously tried to insert subjectivity into her work in order to approach greater accuracy. For Hurston, "an accurate ethnographic text does not pretend to be objective, but rather takes its shape from the studied community's interests and perspectives. The ethnographer becomes an advocate for informants, working to create a text that serves the community on some level while sharing with outside readers new information about these informants" (Hurston in Jirousek, 2006: 22). She developed the "ethnic ethnographer's double vision", available only through alternating immersion in and separation from both native and outside cultures. It was about eighty years ago when Hurston talked about this need for the ethnographer to be *at home* in the research as well as being able to hold it at a *distance* – a dilemma which still dominates most of the contemporary discussion on ethnography.

James Clifford, historian of anthropology, recognizes a modern 'ethnography of conjunctures', describing the ethnographer, and thus ethnography itself, as "constantly between cultures" – neither in one culture nor in the other. Clifford defines a 'predicament of culture' involving a state of being in culture while looking at culture, a form of personal and collective self-fashioning<sup>9</sup> (Clifford, 1988: 9). It is questionable whether it is really possible to get the proper *distance* from the field or if there is even a place where we could 'feel at home'. The position of the contemporary ethnographer might really be always somewhere 'in-between'.

George E. Marcus talks about doing "ethnography all the way up and down" and he makes the strong claim that "within a multi-sited research imaginary, tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate is ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance" (Marcus, 1998: 14). Marcus shows how ethnographers' tradition of defining fieldwork in terms of people and places is now being challenged by the need to study culture by exploring connections, parallels, and contrasts among a variety of often seemingly incommensurate sites.

### **Ethics among *Ethnics***

At the end of the 1990's Alma Gottlieb wrote about "our increasing acknowledgment of continuing obligation to our host communities" (Gottlieb, 1999: 118). She argued that this comes at the same time as many within the discipline are pushing the conceptual limits of the very notion of an appropriate field site

<sup>9</sup> See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988. Also: Jirousek, *Ethnics and Ethnographers: Zora Neale Hurston and Anzia Yezierska*, *Journal of Modern literature*, 29 (2), 2006, 19–32.

or community, expanding its classic locus in non-Western villages to factories, urban elites, ethnographers' native communities, novels, science and the scientific laboratory, the Internet, the telephone, the theatre, transnational ties, multiple sites, and so on<sup>10</sup>. Gottlieb notes that long-term ethical demands of these new ethnographic practices and places have yet to be systematically charted. "While the classic field site is thus being reconstructed in daring and imaginative ways," she argues, "some of us continue to pursue more traditional-style fieldwork in rural communities in the non-Western world" (ibid.: 119). What kind of tradition does Gottlieb have in mind? What kind of ethical issues? Ethical in a way that concerns only the ethnographer, but not the *field* with its meanings?

As I have mentioned before, there has been a lot of emphasis on the multi-sited, multilocal observation and field work in anthropology since the 1980s and the number of field sites has increased considerably. Maybe the sites became more difficult to grasp on as well. Remaining out of the field site while researching the links within the site became more usual. The face of ethnography changed considerably as well. As Ulf Hannerz notes, "in a way, one might argue, the term 'multilocal' is a little misleading, for what current multilocal projects have in common is that they draw on some problem, some formulation of a topic, which is significantly *translocal*, not to be confined within some single place" (Hannerz, 2003: 206).

Locality<sup>11</sup> often disappears in this kind of research and the subject can disappear as well. What we are left with has more to do with the relationship, image or representation than with the actual people or groups of people in some *definite* setting. This can raise some new applicative problems. As Paul Sillitoe notes, "we can expect trouble applying a discipline of which one authority has recently observed that it is a very odd subject" because "it is hard to say what it is the study of", and "it is not at all clear what you have to do to study it" (Ingold in Sillitoe, 2000: 14). Given there is no agreement on what the location or the subjects are in ethnographic research, how do we then, as ethnographers, produce any kind of knowledge? Where do the relevant conclusions come from and where do they fit in?

One of the main problems of the inquiry into the modes of human existence, as I see it, is that it is searching for static, *authentic* findings that are ready to be recognized regardless of the fact that the discipline itself was never really able to remain static (it even did not want to become static) or entirely comprehensive. Searching for authenticity is thus at least conceptually quite *slippery*. When recently the discussions about the disappearance of any pure categories started to proliferate<sup>12</sup> and communication flows began to increase, quest for authenticity, as expressed in the essence of work of early ethnographic researchers, has become even more endangered.

<sup>10</sup> See Alma Gottlieb, Philip Graham (1999). Revising the Text, Revisioning the Field: Reciprocity over the Long Term, *Anthropology and Humanism*, 24(2), 117–128.

<sup>11</sup> Locality as the identity of place and/or as the place that is characterised by identity. The belief that the space is socially constructed is well established within anthropology.

<sup>12</sup> We could argue also that *pure* categories never truly existed.

Research practices in the age of transnational communication, dispersion of people, exiles, migrants and mixing of cultural flows inevitably came under re-construction and had to go through the process of re-evaluation. The theory bound to ethnographic field research and to the social, cultural inquiry as a whole was certainly no exception to this.

It would be practically impossible to ponder on the essence of the idea of authenticity within this paper. Let me just mention its origins. The idea of authenticity started to be used more extensively in the work of phenomenologist Martin Heidegger and it is grounded in the idea that absolutely all *Dasein*<sup>13</sup> is characterized by mimesis. Authentic existence begins from self-understanding and authentic life is possible if our being-toward-death is resolutely confronted. “Once one has grasped the finiteness of one’s existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one – those of comfortableness, shirking and taking things lightly – and brings *Dasein* in to the simplicity of its fate<sup>14</sup>”.

There was a lot of criticism of the concept, and of moral ideas of authenticity, throughout time, but there have been some defenders as well. One of the latter ones was Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, known best for his work on the politics of recognition<sup>15</sup>. Taylor invited his readers to “listen to the human inner voice” and argued that there is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. Being true to myself, being true to my own originality, that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself<sup>16</sup>. According to Taylor the genesis of the human mind is not monological, it does not depend solely on the individual, it is dialogical. That means that the identity of an individual crucially depends on dialogical relations with other people. This *need for recognition* is however not something new for the modern age. Genuine (according to Taylor) “are the conditions in which the attempt to be recognized can fail<sup>17</sup>”.

For Taylor, the idea of authenticity fits well into the modern understanding of difference, originality and of acceptance of diversity. But what exactly links the politics

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<sup>13</sup> *Dasein* is one of the central terms of Heidegger’s philosophy, which he talks about extensively in his famous book *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*. It is the German word for ‘existence’ or ‘being-there’.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, NY: Harper and Row, 1962 and: de Beistegui, *Heidegger and the political. Dystopias*, London, NY: Routledge, 1998. *Dasein* is itself only by being other than itself, by being stamped by alterity, prior to any actual encounter (whether friendly or antagonistic) with an other *Dasein*. My relation to the Other, when understood *properly*, and this means when *understood* through *hearing*, is a relation of friendship. The Other is my friend.” (de Beistegui, 1998: 150).

<sup>15</sup> The term recognition was first used within the thought of German Idealists and Taylor extracted the term from the Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

<sup>16</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, 35.

of difference and recognition to one's individual, unique identity? Or, as Seyla Benhabib asks, "why should an individual's search for authenticity, for the expression of one's unique identity, take the form of a search for collective self-expression?" (Benhabib, 2002: 52). According to Benhabib, there are difficulties in rendering the ideal of authenticity coherently in moral philosophy. Quoting Maeve Cooke, another critic of Taylor's work, Benhabib asks: "How can the ideal of authenticity<sup>18</sup> be given moral content without falling into some form of romanticized essentialism, which ascribes to each individual a unique selfhood, over and against which her actions and conduct can be judged to be authentic or inauthentic?" (Cooke in Benhabib, 2002: 196). Are there inter-subjectively binding criteria for judging what counts as an *authentic* life?

The main concern within the concept that Taylor uses to discuss the politics of identity and of difference is thus putting forward the idea of the binding groups which are known and recognised. For Benhabib, the theoretical mistake comes from the homology drawn between individual and collective claims, "a homology facilitated by the ambiguities of the term *recognition*" (Benhabib, 2002: 53).

Benhabib expresses a very relevant concern when she says:

*"But then some cultures can be 'inferior' to others in the degree of respect for equal dignity as well as individuality they can grant their members; thus intercultural as well as intracultural evaluations and hard choices are inevitable. .../ Holistic statements about the presumptive equality of cultures as wholes are no less misguided than statements about their worthlessness. Defenders as well as detractors of cultural recognition claims still commit this holistic fallacy"* (Benhabib, 2002: 57).

Cultures are not homogenous entities and they are not coherent either. Essentialising and categorising, even differentiating cultures that Taylor indirectly proposes and ethnography regularly uses, can be quite dangerous. "It is both theoretically wrong and politically dangerous to conflate the individual's search for the expression of his/her unique identity with politics of identity/difference", Benhabib notes (Benhabib, 2002: 53). "Can there be a politics of recognition that accepts the fluidity, porousness, and essential contestability of all cultures?" (ibid.: 68). This is a very political question and an ideological one as well. It connects to the political and social inquiry and to the ambiguity of social and political systems.

Along with being important in the intimate sense, identity politics and the politics of (equal) recognition has come to play an ever larger role in the public sphere. Today's political climate in many places around the world, and especially 'in the West', has to some extent, inherited the pursuit for some kind of objective identities and *authentic*

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor does not specifically talk about the authentic culture or authentic life (he addresses authenticity of cultural identity). His explanations are, however, designed to work with essentialist categories and collective wholes.

practices. As we know, the view that cultures are unified, harmonious, seamless wholes that speak with one narrative voice is the view of cultures from the outside. Benhabib argues that “the outsider is the observer, as distinguished from the actor. The outsider who is a *stranger* in the eyes of the group can also be very much an insider, in that he or she may have a full understanding of the complexities and perplexities of the culture to which he or she is denied admittance” (Benhabib, 2002: 102).

Ethnographer is more than the observer though. Ethnographer is the narrator<sup>19</sup>. Claiming some kind of natural privileged position of the observer and narrator has destroyed the rights of people to represent themselves and it also made equal recognition almost impossible. Taylor does not endorse the view that would subordinate individual’s search for authentic identity to the self-assertion of particular groups, “yet can he avoid it?” asks Benhabib (ibid.). Recognition in Taylor’s view needs authenticity and the authenticity needs to be recognised. Taylor’s explanation inherently presumes that cultures are collective wholes and this supports universalistic and essentialistic logic. Cultures consist of individuals with different needs and different ideas about what the culture is. Privileging one explanation over the other, one group over the other, one idea over the other, is not something researchers, especially ethnographic researchers, should do. However, ethnographers often fall into the trap of cultural essentialism.

### **The silent “Other”**

Authenticity leads us further, towards the question of representation. Who is representing and who is being represented? Who is speaking for whom? Which *ghettoized*, essentialist categories are used in relation to representation? Who has the right to choose and who has no rights at all? Perhaps we could say that meanings within the contemporary postmodern and highly individualised world have some value only when referring to an individual. There is no universality of values. It is possible that any kind of categorisation, which is almost inherent to the concept of representation, does not actually make much sense.

Questions of representation provoke other concerns related to ever larger emphasis given to cultural differences and production of *otherness* not just in terms of the sole cultural front, but within issues of gender, race and so on. As Hallam and Street note, “other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but made”. Anthropology has made a great impact in forming and promoting *the other*. For James Clifford, *the other* is, for instance, exactly the anthropological representation of the other. Clifford asserts that culture is “composed of seriously contested codes of meaning and representation” (Clifford, 1988: 2). Hallam and Street follow up some of the Clifford’s work by saying that “constituted within relations of power, and

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<sup>19</sup> What I mean here is that the narrator tells the story and includes herself or himself into this story. Narration involves selectivity and contextualising.

institutional constraints together with the use of particular conventions, ethnographic writings convey partial truths which are always mediated in historical context” (Hallam and Street, 2002: 2).

We could say that within the ethnography the very concept of the ethnographic research is problematic. As the history of ethnography showed, this methodological discipline prefers its own voice over the voices of those studied. Maybe it is its non-deliberative intention to *silence* everyone who is pushed within the borders of the study group. We can argue that Franz Boas did exactly this, *silencing*, when spending his research time among the *natives*. Also Bronislaw Malinowski, even if his research among the Trobrianders was already “going multilocal” (Hannerz, 2003: 202), he was still *making sure* that divide between his world and the *other world* existed. By translating from one language to another, from one value system to another, or from one culture to another, these early ethnographers lost at least some of the meaning – a part which might be holding some of the most important messages.

Ethnographers have made their studied groups, individuals and locations visible to the western world. At the same time they kept them *silent*.

Personally, I find the relationship between the visual and the audible fascinating. This is especially relevant in relation to remarks about *silence* and *silencing*. Sneja Gunew in her book, *Haunted Nations*, explores the issues of acoustic transgressions and identity politics within the frame of today’s multiculturalism and policies of different states shaped around the term multiculturalism. Gunew talks about the Canadian poet and short story writer Evelyn Lau who is perceived to be flouting or refusing the so-called ‘empowering’ categories (Asian-Canadian) with which critics are eager to provide her. Rather, she resorts in her poetry and short stories to the life on the street, away from her (Chinese) family, exploring underworld of sadomasochism, prostitution and drug addiction. This is an example from the world of art, but the poet’s apparent refusal “invites one to revisit theories around the question of how to situate the authority to speak and write for those designated minority cultural players and how to set up interpretive strategies which move beyond the thematization of cultural difference, a thematization which, in turn, functions to reinforce difference as a mechanism leading to marginalization since difference is always posited in relation to an implicit (and invisible) hegemonic norm” (Gunew, 2004: 83).

Sneja Gunew proposes an alternative way of understanding and more allegorical reading of Lau’s rebellious work. She suggests splitting the visible and the audible, which would eventually help us recognize that “what you see is not what you get” (ibid.). She refers to one of the essays of Slavoj Žižek in which Žižek argues that “voice is that which, in the signifier, resists meaning, it stands for the opaque inertia that cannot be recuperated by meaning ... the moment at which the singing voice cuts loose from its anchoring in meaning and accelerates into a consuming self-enjoyment” (Žižek, 1996: 103–4).

If we return to ethnography at this point, we can say that ethnography as a methodological discipline throughout its history legitimized differences and vigorously

categorised cultures from its own ethnocentric point of view. It actually *de-voiced* individuals and groups and, at least partly, erased the meanings of what it was talking about. It always strived for some kind of control over the objects (or subjects) of its research. As Seyla Benhabib argues,

*“It is the epistemic interest in power /.../ that leads to the silencing of dissenting opinions and contradictory perspectives, and yields dominant master narratives of what the cultural tradition is, who is in, and who is out. This epistemic power interest can be exercised by the tribal chief as well as the enemy in general, by the anthropologist in search of the truth as well as by the development worker in search of social control”* (Benhabib, 2002: 102–3).

Like the ‘colonial silencing’ of people around the globe, partly eradicating languages inhabiting different lands and replacing them with English or French or Spanish etc., there has been (and is) also silencing of people by anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, political scientists along with politicians and others in the contemporary world.

The question of ‘de-voicing’ and of the relation between voice and image is a complicated one though. If we think about it in a slightly more detailed manner, sight and sound often do not seem to complement each other harmoniously. As Slavoj Žižek notes, “the moment we enter the symbolic order, an unbridgeable gap separates forever a human body from ‘its’ voice. The voice acquires a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, so that even when we see a living person talking, there is always some degree of ventriloquism at work: it is as if the speaker’s own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks by itself, through him<sup>20</sup>” (Žižek, 1996: 92). It is the position of the object, which is destined to be left mute, ‘stuck in the throat’. “The object is here as long as the sound remains unarticulated; the moment it resounds, the moment it is spilled out, the object is evacuated” (ibid.). Following this idea, we could argue that there is *something* to be researched for anthropologists only until this *something* remains silent.

### **Ethnography and communication flows**

Anthropology and ethnography of the present need an epistemology which combines theory development with engagement in the contemporary social world. Epistemology would hopefully have the ability to demonstrate how it is possible to move into the sphere of broader public issues, which affect us all. Efforts of the

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<sup>20</sup> The point is therefore not only that voice fills out the hole in the image: the voice simultaneously *cuts out* this hole (1996, 119).

research within the online environment and the potential of internet to study cultures, for example, have not been fully explored yet. As Luc Pauwels argues, “while the popularity of new communication technologies in the media and in culture at large, strangely enough, is still not matched by a comparable amount of empirical research, a growing number of empirical researchers (Bassett, 1997; Cheung, 2000; Hine, 2000; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Miller and Slater, 2000; Springer, 1996) have gathered evidence of various kinds that seems to substantiate the conclusion that the so-called virtual world is not so virtual with respect to the majority of uses and users, and that the uses of the internet are very much dependent on and linked to a ‘real-life’ context” (Pauwels, 2005: 605).

One of the largest problems of the qualitative empirical research within the present online environment is perhaps again the incompatibility of the nature of ethnographic methods and the aspirations of the online world. Internet had traditionally more to say about global connectedness, cultures at large and quantitative data. At the same time, internet was always targeting the individual. Traditional ethnography in the online environment in many ways *lost* the main subject of its observance which was the group rather than the individual. With its liberalistic stance in its nature and governance, the internet probably presents one of the biggest challenges for today’s ethnography.

Another challenge that has been posed by the proliferation of the internet is again its relationship to the representations. Who gets a chance to be represented online? How valid is the information we encounter on the web? As Lee comments, “the diffuse and democratic character of the internet, the very attributes that make it such a valuable source for information, also make the finding of available information difficult” (Lee, 2000: 119). Furthermore, as Pauwels argues, “one should be aware that the web is a huge data repository but not necessarily a very permanent one. We should never be too comfortable having found a treasure of data on the web, for what’s there today may be gone tomorrow without leaving a trace” (Pauwels, 2005: 606).

Mann and Stewart (2000) seem to regret the absence of much contextual material in the online environment. “In the mainly black and white world of text,” they contend, “we lose the Technicolor of lived life and its impact on most of our senses. We cannot observe the world in which participants live. We cannot see them and we cannot hear them” (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 197). While this statement voices a legitimate concern of ethnographers that have to cope with a mediated world rather than real-life experiences, it also demonstrates the methodological limitedness of some of the presumptions about ethnographic research. Some authors overlook a very important aspect of the internet, which is vibrant, full of colour and impacting a growing number of our senses. As Pauwels argues, “the online environment in the form of websites uses many expressive means and calls upon many of our sensory faculties<sup>21</sup>” (Pauwels, 2005: 608).

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<sup>21</sup> It is therefore remarkable, for Pauwels, that the textual bias is replicated even in website analysis.

With the qualitative empirical research of the present proceeding, especially with moving of the field from the exotic foreign places back to our own ‘living rooms’ and turning the (post)colonial binocular around there still seems to be a chance for ethnography to get its fair share of the research web cake. Exactly in the vast field of the technology there is still a lot to be explored.

## CONCLUSION

We might say that the time for serious ethnographic field research in its traditional sense – that was clearly promoting the idea of the object that is *de-voiced* versus the subject that speaks – should be or has to be almost over. Anthropologists seeking the truth beyond the world that does not *speak* to them or through them does not have any particular sense. It never really had one.

However, I think it would be quite gloomy and pointless to finish on this pessimistic note. With re-definition and changing of the focus of the discipline, in realizing that there is something *beyond* the sole image of the people that we see on the field, there is still a lot to be done for ethnographic research of the present and of the future. As Amanda Coffey writes, recently “the approaches to qualitative data analysis and the writing of fieldwork have become much more self-conscious /.../. Qualitative researchers have increasingly looked beyond the actual experiences of fieldwork, towards the production and reproduction of the field” (Coffey, 1999: 135). In a way, the field, the site and the place returned to the ethnography. Qualitative research technique as one deployed by ethnographic researchers in fact gives opportunity (it always has given opportunities) for meaningful, imaginative and creative engagement with the field, the site or the place and everything that belongs to it. We could even say that the great characteristic of ethnography is its ability to move ‘beyond itself’, to engage with the self rather than the subject of observance. Some people may say that what this means is again nothing else than confirmation of the end of methodological discipline. I do not agree with this view though. What it means, I would argue, is the ability of the discipline to make a step forward. To connect people’s faces with their voices. To re-create, re-modify and re-investigate the knowledge of the past and make a more determined step into the future.

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## POVZETEK

### TIH OPAZOVALEC V NEMEM PROSTORU: ETNOGRAFIJA DANES

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*Etnografija kot metodološka disciplina se danes srečuje z mnogimi spremembami v antropologiji in sociologiji, v mobilnosti in gibanju, v čez-kulturnih in transnacionalnih vezeh itn. Na etnografe čaka vse bolj mešan svet kulturnih elementov. V antropologiji je bila nedefinirana pozicija raziskovalcev znotraj družbenih procesov vselej pomemben del metodoloških razprav. Kontekstualne in demografske spremembe znotraj discipline postavljajo zdaj v ospredje tudi nova identitetna vprašanja pri samih antropologih in njihovega odnosa do tistih, ki jih proučujejo ali tistega, kar raziskujejo.*

*Čeprav upravičenost in korist več-prostorske etnografije danes skoraj že več ni vprašljiva, se še vedno pojavljajo težave pri tem, kako naj bi etnografijo pravzaprav izvajali. Kot pravi Susanne Friedberg, te težave postavljajo v disciplino »večje ali manjše prepreke, ki so odvisne od obsega projekta in časa, ki je namenjen zanj, od finančnih ter drugih razpoložljivih sredstev« (Friedberg, 2001: 362–363). Ne samo cilji, tudi značaj multi-lokalne ali trans-lokalne (Hannerz, 2003) etnografije spreminja podobo discipline.*

*Kljub temu, da je za antropologe že od vsega začetka bilo značilno, da dvomijo in da v svojem delu potujejo onkraj kontekstualnega okvirja ter da so vselej blizu vsem vrstam meja, trenutne spremembe postavljajo v ospredje raziskav nova epistemološka vprašanja in nove etične dileme. Ne le prostori, ampak tudi ljudje lahko postanejo manj pomembni v etnografskem raziskovanju. Širjenje geografskega prostora še ne prinese sprememb v reprezentacijah tega prostora.*

*V kontekstu antropološkega standarda, ki se skozi čas ni posebej spreminjal, avtorica v članku uporablja pojem »drugačenja« in »utišanja« in s tem razlaga nekatere temeljne načine, ki jih etnografi uporabljajo za reprezentacijo drugih kultur in drugih ljudi. Avtorica govori tudi o pojmu prepoznavanja, še posebej v navezavi na politiko prepoznavanja, ter razpravlja o konceptu avtentičnosti, ki se razvije iz politike prepoznavanja. Pozicijo etnografov in njihovih raziskovalnih polj avtorica navezuje na konstrukcijo odnosa med subjektom in objektom. Obenem raziskuje naravo etnografskega odnosa do prostorov raz-*

*iskovanja in razlaga idejo o »biti tam... tam... in tam«, ki je geografsko pogojena in upravičuje avtoritarno pozicijo raziskovalca v globaliziranem svetu.*

*Čeprav je bilo etnografsko prakso vselej težko zamejiti, pa lahko rečemo, da se je etnografija v zadnjih desetletjih soočila z nekaterimi pomembnejšimi spremembami. Za etnografijo danes ni značilno le premikanje raziskovalca iz enega fiksnega prostora v drugega. Čeprav se etnograf morda v fizičnem smislu sploh ne premika, še vedno potuje. Premikanje čez ne-fizične, domišljajske svetove postaja tudi v etnografiji danes vse bolj pomembno.*