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Ethnography Otherwise and Other-wise. On the Possibility of a Feminist and Decolonial Ethnographic Practice

Sunder Rajan, Kaushik (2021): *Multisited: Ethnography as Diasporic Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press Books (\$27.95, 272 pages).

In “Multisited: Ethnography as Diasporic Practice” Kaushik Sunder Rajan asks whether a decolonial, and feminist ethnographic practice is possible. This question emerges from his observation that, while anthropologists have explicitly disavowed their discipline’s colonial and phallogocentric inheritance over the past decades through intensive investment in theory, at the same time, ethnographic methodology is still based on the epistemic objectification of the native informant that lies at the heart of colonial logic (Sunder Rajan 2021: 2). The response Sunder Rajan develops throughout the book reflects his belief that decolonial and feminist ethnographic practice is possible but must be multisited in its own ethos (ibid.: 23). Sunder Rajan provides an in-depth reading of methodological debates and ethnographies that chart some avenues towards this ethos, while abstaining from providing a clear-cut definition of such an ethos and insisting that there are no programmatic paths or guidelines on how to do research in a multisited vein. In this spirit, the book considers the feasibility of feminist and postcolonial ethnography by way of problem-spaces in terms of scale, comparison, encounter, and dialogue, all being elements of ethnographic practice. The first two chapters are concerned with the sociological function of ethnography and discuss the different ways ethnographers establish claims through scaling and comparison. Chapters Three and Four are more experimental, seeking to explore ethnography’s potential for promoting transference evocation and dialogue.

The book’s title “Multisited” alludes to Sunder Rajan’s vision of ethnography as being inspired by the idea of *multisited* ethnography (Marcus 1995), as well as feminist scholarship’s understanding of knowledge as being *situated* (Haraway 1988). Marcus’s call for multi-sited ethnography is often interpreted as encouraging researchers to go to multiple places or engage with multiple communities; however, the multi-sited ethnography Sunder Rajan proposes does not amount to a formal methodological program, but can be better understood as conceptual topology. Sunder Rajan addresses Marcus’ idea of multi-sitedness alongside the problem space articulated in “Anthropology as Cultural Critique” (Marcus/Fischer 1986), which proposes researchers study global political economic systems and structures, while at the same time attending to personhood, biography, and subjectivity. According to Sunder Rajan, following this call brings up some meta-methodological questions, including how to scale out of the intimate and proximal encounters ethnographers gain during their field research to arrive at systemic and structural claims. How to zigzag between actors’ and analysts’ categories in ways that are accountable to the former, but not reduced to them, as well as questions about how to navigate between things that are

visible in direct ways and the things that are only visible indirectly through their effects (Sunder Rajan 2021: 37). Sunder Rajan admits that going to multiple places or engaging with multiple communities can help researchers to scale out of experience-proximity and make structural and systematic claims, but emphasizes at the same time that this is not the only method to conduct scaling. Arguing for a proliferation of ways of straddling both experience-proximity and -distance, the book's first chapter therefore reviews other forms of scaling that go beyond the dictum of going to XWZ-places.

With the swap in nomenclature from multi-sited to multisituated, the book further recalls Haraway's critique of the idea and ideal of objectivity as disembodied Cartesian rationality. Sunder Rajan wonders what ethnographic forms and norms may look like once we have overturned heteropatriarchal ways of objectifying the world, getting to know it instead in possessive ways. The second chapter therefore explores the potential of comparison in a non-phallogocentric manner. For Sunder Rajan, phallogocentrism means Eurocentric and masculinist presumptions underlining ethnographic practice: here it is assumed that researchers can define figure and ground in advance, along with the terms of comparison and the nature of the entities to be compared. A comparison Otherwise, according to Sunder Rajan, would

seek epistemic unsettlement by holding open the terms, entities, and grounds of comparison, in order to see whether different anthropological problems might emerge to those normally presumed. It would thus seek to deconstruct, and possibly invert, logocentric and patriarchal center-periphery assumptions that structure the terms of dominant comparative modalities. (ibid.: 57-58)

Comparing otherwise and Otherwise therefore implies a questioning of the status of the native informant in ethnographic practice and cultivating an openness to one's interlocutors. It is not sufficient merely to recognize their answers to pre-defined questions, but also important to account for the different questions and comparisons those 'others' might enunciate in the first place.

While Chapters One and Two are concerned with different ways of establishing claims and thus address the sociological function of ethnography, the scope of Sunder Rajan's analysis in Chapters Three and Four concerns the experimental, creative, speculative, and evocative potential and possibilities of ethnographic practice. In Chapter Three, Sunder Rajan explores the relationship between representation and evocation through an engagement with Laurent Berlant's conceptions of 'intimacy', which he understands in terms of an experience-proximal mode of engagement as well as an ethical-political category of praxis. The chapter thinks with and through selected examples of literary writing and photography to ask how creative practices of evocation might allow intimate encounters to be rescripted Otherwise. Sunder Rajan's interest in exploring the potential of literary writing and photography for ethnographic practice is grounded in his observation that it might not always be possible or necessary to settle on one clear-cut meaning of a text, a picture or another artistic artifact, as there are forms of representations predicated less upon precise arguments

and stable definitions, and directed more at being inspirational. This openness entails the radical potential of art to be a transformative experience and brings in the reader or viewer by relating to their desires, as well as to the favorable conditions which may enable these desires to emerge in the first place. Given that encounter always incorporates the potential for appropriation and violence, as Sunder Rajan points out, he considers the potential of evocation in the light of the vexed histories of photography and ethnographic practices of representation and gestures towards an idea and ideal of ethnography that is accountable rather than innocent.

Chapter Four “Dialogue” offers an alternative to the Malinowskian understanding of a field site as preexisting and waiting to be discovered and represented by the ethnographer. Elaborating on Douglas Holmes and George Marcus’s call for para-ethnography (2005), Sunder Rajan introduces parasites as dialogical spaces where interlocutors develop questions and answers rather than simply providing raw material. While the subjectivity of the other cannot be maintained through becoming the Other, by recuperating the other’s voice or simply obtaining informed consent in some reductively formal or procedural sense, honest dialogue does chart a way towards an ethnographic account that manages not to objectify. Stressing that the ethnographer’s gaze has always been reciprocated in certain ways, Sunder Rajan further concludes that reforming ethnography in a multisituated disposition must necessarily be dialogic or trialogic, involving subsequent readers and viewers who come with their own eyes, their own investments, and their own transferential resonances. Chapter Four thus feeds into Sunder Rajan’s call for rescripting ethnography through deconstructing the role of the native informant by asking how to reformulate the norms and forms of ethnographic practice towards more dialogic ends. The chapter provides a reflection on the epistemological and ethical possibilities, as well as on the challenges and limits such endeavors might entail.

Throughout the chapters, Sunder Rajan considers the different elements of ethnography against a background of an increasingly diasporic student population in metropolitan anthropology departments who hold accountabilities to various communities of practice beyond disciplinary stakes. Students and researchers have different intellectual, political, and biographical trajectories and these backgrounds often play an important role in shaping how they engage in scaling, comparison, evocation, or dialogue. Diasporic commitments and biographies are at odds with the implicit assumption of the metropolitan university as the locale, and disciplinary reproduction as the purpose of graduate pedagogy that underlies the discipline of anthropology. Sunder Rajan identifies precisely these resources as capable of developing postcolonial, and feminist ethnographic practice. In so doing, Sunder Rajan does not only see the relationship between method and theory as being at stake, but also the relationship between the discipline and the university as an institution of disciplinary reproduction. Anthropology is no longer capable of containing ethnography – the set of practices that defines it. The book is an initiative that embraces this and sees it as a potential move towards a multisituated ethos of ethnographic practice.

This book will not satisfy anyone who is looking for programmatic paths or guidelines on how to do research. For Sunder Rajan, the question of how we as ethnographers seek to understand the world is a political matter, and cannot be reduced to a mechanistic performance of method. He does not tell us what ethnography is but what it has come to mean for him during his research and pedagogical investments. The idea and ideal of multisituated ethnography is therefore deeply entangled with Sunder Rajan's own biography and itinerary as a diasporic intellectual and photographer. However, this is not an epistemic limitation, but indeed the book's explicit politics. Readers who, like Sunder Rajan, are searching for different modalities of working against, around, and through the colonial and phallogocentric inheritances of ethnography will find an intriguing analysis of the politics at stake in contemporary ethnographic practice and might eventually even feel inspired to engage in its more experimental and evocative forms.

Literatur

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