
Ethnographic Life: Method for an Ex Post Facto Anthropology

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Abstract: Every ethnography has a beginning and an end, decided more or less arbitrarily by the anthropologist. In general, it has a simultaneously temporal and spatial beginning. Currently, spatial issues have been relaxed, but temporal issues are still a definite limit. This article reflects on the constitution of anthropological knowledge when the field has no such limits. What if any moment of our experiences can be seen a period of “ex post facto” ethnographic fieldwork? Is it possible to perform an ethnography without borders? What methods should we articulate to build knowledge without the separation between life and ethnography? Why is ethnography a life experience, when we do not often think of life as an ethnographic experience? And what happens if we think that life is indeed an ethnographic experience? This article deals with anthropological knowledge without borders and memory as a methodological resource.

Keywords: ethnography, time, space, biography, fieldwork, auto-ethnography

Résumé : Toute ethnographie a un début et une fin, laquelle est décidée plus ou moins arbitrairement par l'anthropologue. De manière générale, le début est à la fois temporel et spatial. À l'heure actuelle, les limites spatiales sont plus floues, mais les limites temporelles demeurent nettes. Cet article propose une réflexion sur la manière dont se constitue le savoir anthropologique lorsque le champ est dépourvu de telles limites. Et si tout moment de nos expériences pouvait être considéré comme un moment de l'enquête de terrain « ex post facto » ? Peut-on réaliser une ethnographie sans limites ? Quelles méthodes devrait-on articuler pour construire un savoir qui ne dissocie pas la vie de l'ethnographie ? Si l'ethnographie est perçue comme une expérience de vie, alors pourquoi la vie est-elle rarement considérée comme une expérience ethnographique ? Et qu'en serait-il si l'on considérait que la vie constitue bel et bien une expérience ethnographique ? Cet article traite du savoir anthropologique sans limites et aborde la mémoire comme ressource méthodologique.

Mots-clés : Ethnographie, temps, espace, biographie, enquête de terrain, auto-ethnographie

This article discusses the possibility of constructing ethnographies after the fact (ex post facto¹), organised by memory – that is, the idea that is possible to transform an event or series of events experienced in an ex post ethnographic field. This implies that during the event, it was not known that it was a period of ethnographic fieldwork, and only memory reconstructs the events and facts as an ex post facto ethnography. This has implications for a reflection on the place of time in constituting the ethnographic work, a practice that I intend to develop in this article, in parallel to a defence of the possibility of ex post facto method. I will take this discussion as a premise for another simple question, yet little explored, on the status of ethnographic work: What happens when we remove the notion of limit/margin from the idea of ethnographic fieldwork?

Every ethnography has a beginning and an end, decided more or less arbitrarily by the anthropologist. My purpose in this article is to reflect on the constitution of anthropological knowledge when the field has no such limits. What if any moment of our experiences can be seen as “ex post facto” ethnographic field research? Is it possible to perform ethnography without predetermined temporal borders? What methods should we articulate to build knowledge without the peace of mind that the margins provide us by establishing a separation between life and ethnography? Why is ethnography a life experience, when we do not often think of life as an ethnographic experience? And what happens if we think that life is indeed an ethnographic experience? This article deals with anthropological knowledge without borders and memory as a methodological resource.

However, I am not dealing with what has become known as “anthropology of biography” (Herzfeld 1997; Reed-Danahay 2001). Although the research contexts of an ex post facto anthropology are necessarily self-referential, the result is not an autobiography or an ethnography of third-party biography:² it is an ethnography of something other than the

anthropologist's life. Biographical experience is only a means for producing anthropological knowledge about the other.

Methodological Traditions

The proposal of an ex post facto anthropology has obvious connections with several self-critical processes of contemporary anthropology. It especially stems from reflections on ethnographic writing, influenced by postmodern critique and the question of ethnographic authority (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Fabian 1990); classic anthropological debates about memory (Carsten 2007; Fabian 2007; Halbwachs 1968); discussions in Brazilian anthropology about writing and memory (Duarte and Gomes 2008; Peirano 2008; Toledo 2012) and, more obviously, reflections about autobiography (Collins and Gallinat 2013; Okely 1992; Reed-Danahay 1997).³ There are also connections with the very idea of ethnographic fieldwork. Contemporary works on what is, in fact, fieldwork still refer to Geertz (1973) and his *thick description*, the most recurrent renewal of the Malinowskian tradition of fieldwork. If the issues at the end of the twentieth century placed ethnography as a method under discussion and anthropological writing under scrutiny, with the ever tragic risk of ethnographic authority, concerns have changed focus since then. If we were dealing with dialogue, now the question is a certain morality in the relationship with the “natives.” We have gone from an ethical issue of “affectation” in Favret-Saada (2007) and moral identification with natives to a theoretical/moral question of appreciation of native constructs as concepts in dialogue with the anthropologist (Viveiros de Castro 2002).⁴

Ethnography involves two types of writing, as noted (critically) by Gupta and Ferguson (1997, 12): field notes and ethnographic accounts. They are performed in two different places and times and are critical to anthropological production. This distinction between two moments of ethnographic work is recurrent and authors take it as constitutive. This issue of the distance between ethnographic writing and living is also discussed by Strathern (1999), for whom “the writing only works . . . as an imaginative re-creation of some of the effects of fieldwork itself” (1). Ex post facto anthropology aims to reflect on these two moments, trying to think what happens when the different moments (the field and writing) are not planned as such. Anthropology produces the magic of turning a subjective relationship (the field notes) into supposedly objective “data” (Fabian 2014). This masks the autobiographical character of any ethnographic experience. Ex post facto anthropology aims to bring the autobiographical character in evidence, not to produce a

self-anthropology, but to provide a methodological discussion of the limits of ethnography. If any ethnography, in the end, is an autobiographical account, why not discuss memory itself as a form of ethnographic fieldwork? How are we to consider the production of a reflection that was not *originally planned* as fieldwork?

An important issue highlighted by Reed-Danahay (1997) is “self-ethnography”, a gathering of three different writing styles: anthropology written by natives, ethnic ethnography (written by members of minority groups), and “autobiographical” ethnography, in which the anthropologist inserts parts of his or her experiences into the narrative. We deal here with something resembling the third type of writing, not in part, but in its entirety: an ethnography without boundaries between fieldwork and nonfieldwork, necessarily autobiographical in the sense that ethnographic fieldwork experience comes from life experience, but differently, in that the result is an ethnography and not a narrative of the self.

The autobiography of the anthropologist is then placed at the service of anthropological reflection on the relationship with the others who formed the field experience. The autobiography therefore intends to dismantle the positivist machinery of ethnographic writing (Okely 1992, 3). We are in a field where critical reflection on the very relationship with “natives” is part of the analysis, and memory is memory not only for the “data,” but also for the relationships and how the relations are implied in the construction of certain “data” and in the failure to collect other “data.” But we are still not on the radical ground of anthropology ex post facto, where all memory is itself an ethnographic object of reflection a posteriori, in the sense that a new field is made up after the fact.

Relevant discussions on the production of contemporary ethnography, after the postmodern wave, are connected to what became known as “multi-sited ethnographies,” following the definition of Marcus (1995). This presupposition calls into question the traditional idea of fieldwork linked to a specific space/time, requiring us to rethink the borders and boundaries of the idea of ethnography. If ethnography in a global world requires a search for connections between various spaces, the very definition of “field” can only be made after research: there are no places surely defined. If this perspective take us to a relativisation of the role of space and place in ethnography, it does not yet systematically advance a relativisation of time.

Time is fundamental in ethnography: it is time, in a certain way, that defines even the space. The issue of defining what the ethnographic space is had in Gupta and Ferguson (1997) and then Comaroff and Comaroff (2003) reinterpretations that have flexibilised it as a

solid construct of ethnographic method: the first authors argued that the space itself does not exist in itself and setting the method by simple reference to a particular space is an illusion, because the space is constantly renovated and created in the flow of the native's relations and in the flow of the relationship between anthropologist and native. The space of ethnography, therefore, is only built a posteriori. Thus, it is the temporal dimension that ultimately will determine exactly what has been the space of research at the moment of writing the text.

These positions indicate to us that, in methodological discussions on the ethnographic method, the space has been constantly put into question as the definer, as a centre of effective production and as a constituent of any ethnographic object: it is not enough in itself. Thus, entering and exiting the field is a much more complex issue in contemporary anthropology than it was in classical anthropology, but this complexity seems to be constantly eclipsed in the time of writing monographs or articles. The fact that the space is subject to the temporality of writing does not seem to be so obvious in its possible consequences for the redefinition of the method. And time, once again, is the instrument for setting up this controlled fiction of ethnographic space: it allows the organisation of flows in retrospect. We could say that it always constitutes the space of ethnographic field research a posteriori.

The fieldwork only effectively exists as a field when we write about it and, in this regard, it is always completely an ethnographic project of memory, assisted by all data collection mechanisms we have, of course, but in the end, a descriptive exercise of our memory. Assuming the prominence of time over space in the ethnographic exercise leads us to admit the inevitable arbitrariness of separation between fieldwork and nonfieldwork. This may justify the production of an unforeseen or unprepared anthropology, by sounding out and studying our own memory in search of ethnographic possibilities thrown into our lives more or less at random.

We can continue to affirm, however, that this "effective" space of ethnographic fieldwork only exists at the time of writing, subduing the space to the temporality of writing. But the tendency to set this fact aside is very large. Thus, ethnography is composed throughout an exercise of memory about the event. By pointing out that any ethnographic field research is a work of memory, we do not aim to criticise this fact: it is an observation. But it is an observation that seeks to bring legitimacy to anthropology ex post facto that now appears to us as another exercise of memory in arbitrary constitution of an ethnographic project. The only significant change is whether the anthropologist is aware of whether or not he

or she is conducting ethnographic fieldwork during the process. This has implications, of course.

I assume that to anthropology ex post facto all memory is itself an ethnographic object of reflection a posteriori, in the sense that a new period of ethnographic fieldwork is made up after the fact. Marisa Peirano (2008) thinks that, for the fieldwork to exist, it is necessary that the anthropologist define for himself or herself that he or she is conducting fieldwork (a statement of arbitrary will, therefore, but made at some point in time). It is that moment of decision that a future time will trigger legitimisation of the fieldwork as experience by writing about it. But this implies, as the author says, that "the 'fieldwork', therefore, is not there; it is within us" (Peirano 2008, 5). This approach allows us to assert once again the arbitrariness of differentiation between fieldwork and nonfieldwork, mediated in this perspective by the key issue of the researcher being aware that he or she is performing research. The issue my methodological approach aims to raise is whether the field can be "within us" without our knowing it, or at least without our knowing it until we figure that out. If everything tells us that the constitution of the field is the result of an arbitrary desire of the anthropologist, why wouldn't it be possible to figure out in oneself a field a posteriori?

Thus, ethnographing memory is finding in it alterity, the anthropological object par excellence. Disrupting the relationship between ethnographic fieldwork and home is a first step to thinking about the possibility of anthropology ex post facto: is the memory someone's home, even if you face it from other perspectives? Could we say that memory can appear as a radically exotic field even if it has happened in the personal life of the anthropologist, caught off guard? In anthropology ex post facto, memory is the space and the space is reconstituted as memory. Home and field are inextricably mixed to the point that only further work can detach them from one another.

Anthropology ex post facto is heading toward scrambling the notions of "home" and "field." The boundaries between ethnographic fieldwork and home are always arbitrary and only spatiotemporal coincidence makes them look natural. We all know how the experience of ethnographic fieldwork continues in us when we return from a fieldwork experience, how it continues to operate as we write. That period of ethnographic fieldwork experience is not a fixed and frozen event in the field notes: it keeps changing as we write, as we produce texts about it. Fieldwork experience is always a moment that exists in memory, which appears like magic in every line we write about it. In this sense, ethnographic fieldwork happens every time we write about it: it is never the

same, it can never be the same, since our life and our beliefs are constantly changing. Field research is not a fixed and unchangeable experience in time; it is a permanent event of memory construction. Anthropology *ex post facto* only opens wide that inevitability: home and field are mixed the whole time and each text is an effort that reconstructs the difference between them, an effort that intellectually separates the period of ethnographic fieldwork from ordinary life flow.

When texts are produced specifically from events of our lives, which are separated from daily flows with the method, placed in a new light, analysed with the support of the anthropological bibliography, and then placed in anthropological resonance, it is only then that we can understand that there is no essential difference between life and anthropology. Traditional thinking on ethnographic fieldwork is a way of keeping anthropology away from our lives, keeping the frontiers between them stable.

Ethnographic Example

How does anthropology *ex post facto* work? How, effectively, does an unplanned ethnography take place, when we search for anthropological experiences in our own memory? What implications could this type of ethnographic production have and how can it help to think ethnography in general? To clarify the perspective presented here, I will bring forward one example of these kind of experience/research memory, in order to highlight some implications of this methodological perspective. In the following example, the work of anthropology *ex post facto* is the condition of knowledge production. There were no plans, nor a conscious investment of time and thought to constitute a project, a theme or an issue that the experience of ethnographic fieldwork should establish. Subjects for inquiry were taken up directly from lived experience and without mediation on the part of the anthropologist, who, subsequently, pursued the questions these subjects raised.

The first thing to note, therefore, is that the definition of a problem posed by life requires a certain intellectual dedication that forces us to leave the field of our usual intellectual investigations. One of the dimensions of method, therefore, that of bibliographic confrontation, similar to what any researcher produces in order to reflect on themes of his or her dissertations and theses, was solved with strategies of professional time optimisation: offering courses was the only way to escape the centripetal force to which involvement in a specific theme subjects us. But these unexpected questions prevailed and ended up creating spaces in the anthropologist's life that allowed their resolution. The next question was how to define the scope of the work, its precise object and its "data". This issue was solved on a case-by-case basis, with *ad hoc*

definitions for the research theme: prematurity/substance. These *ad hoc* definitions of "ethnographic fieldwork" have operated slightly different cutouts from my memory, helping to shape the method of anthropology *ex post facto*.

This case was originally published in 2013 (Machado 2013), but began to be gestated after the births of my children (in 2003 and 2005). In this text, I discuss the substance of preterm infants in neonatal intensive care units (ICUs), based on painful experiences with my children, who were both hospitalized in the neonatal ICU. The period of ethnographic fieldwork of this article has been developed in three different moments, more intensely (after the boys' birth and another experience of an undeveloped fetus curettage). But the ethnographic project has spread through everyday life, with the experience of caring for premature babies and realising the varied implications of exposing a very small child to the world. This set of situations was experienced, at the time, only as dramatic life experiences. Subsequently, along with the imposition of reflecting on what happened, an anthropological need to explain the problem was imposed.

This article culminates a fuller example of anthropology *ex post facto*, because it carries within itself all that I now understand as an effective development of the method: it clearly states that the field is imagined a posteriori, that during the event there was no intention (nor possibility) of producing anthropology, and it exposes how the issue arises and proposes an effectively anthropological analysis of the subject, in addition to making some, even if modest, contribution to anthropological knowledge

During the production of the text, I could already understand exactly that I was articulating a specific method. There was a conscious process of producing ethnography a posteriori from the beginning to the end of the article, in a very systematic and organised way. This article can therefore be seen as a mature example of using the method.

During negotiation with the journal and its reviewers, a question arose concerning the issue of the relation of the "natives" and the research, since they did not have the chance to know, during the period of ethnographic fieldwork, that they would be object of future reflection for the anthropologist in question. The journal demanded that my wife present a letter of "consent" authorising that the story be published. This surprised me at the time, but it made perfect sense, since it quoted her name textually, without any qualification. The same issue did not arise regarding the workers at the neonatal ICU, since I did not identify either the hospital or any of the workers, preserving their complete anonymity.

The journal was evidently concerned with the fact that a person had been constantly cited without their explicit permission. I found the question relevant and produced the document, which was promptly signed. However, after closer examination, I came to the conclusion that I should also protect my wife and children under anonymity, since I could not know what they would think of finding that text in the future, when this information was publicly accessible. While everyone who knows me can easily locate the names of my family, thinking of the article as a public document of unrestricted disclosure, prompted me to change the names of my wife and children so that their names would not, for example, be listed in any internet searches.

This means that the issues with the journal made me enhance the method with more careful reflection on the exposure of the subjects of the research, understanding that it would only be possible to do such research once absolute anonymity was actually achieved. This exaggerated care would be a way of dealing with the fact that the subjects had not been informed that they could be part of a specific ethnographic work, since not even I knew it at the time.

In general terms, the article proposes an analysis of how the weight of prematurely born infants is measured and considered by ICU workers, indicating a principle of substance: from a certain moment, premature babies were given a name in the ICU, and this moment was marked by the weighing. Even if the parents called the children by their name, the employees never did, respecting this “substance” threshold. The disconnect between the baby’s weight and his or her personality (the attribution of person by the parents) led to a discussion of how the notion of substance articulates a logic in many ways contrary to what appears in the contemporary discussion on the status of embryos. In that medical environment, there was no possibility of a person “existing” before a certain weight (substance) limit.

Such issues were articulated from the experience of living the moments at the neonatal ICU. Exposing a low-weight baby to the world has also generated insight into how important these issues are, indicating an expansion of the ICU logic for other contexts. This experience demanded a systematic reflection, for very personal reasons, and led me to produce a specifically anthropological reflection on the substance of premature babies.

The work was organised as an ethnography *ex post facto*: at a future point in time, I returned to the facts, with the support of a large specialised bibliography, to think of them as an involuntary ethnographic field, but

one that would allow me to say something relevant in a discussion on subjects that were not part of my academic daily life (an anthropology of health). A very particular uneasiness generated ethnographic research organised by memory. In the obvious absence of field notebooks, recorded interviews, and so on, I resorted to my memory and to the memory of my wife and some people related to the event itself, as a way to test my memory with others who have had the same experiences. This process proved to be quite efficient, allowing an effective connection between what happened in the unplanned field and the future moment of writing about it.

Final Considerations

The relativisation of ethnographic time allows us to realise that, by setting the time of the research, we also set up who the natives are (they are the people with whom we live in that particular period of time). But that does not happen in ethnography *ex post facto*, in which we only know who is or was a native in a later moment of reflection. Here we get to the point. Anthropological knowledge is and cannot avoid being autobiographical, since it is about a relationship with “natives” that is recalled at a later moment (the moment of writing). But an important issue of ethnography *ex post facto* is also clear: that the very relationship with the native itself only happens in memory, since while it happened in time, the anthropologist did not know that it was an ethnographic fieldwork experience. The temporal definition of fieldwork allows for the definition of native (those we get in touch in that time lapse). If the definition of fieldwork is *ex post facto*, the same happens with the definition of native itself. The issues arising are ethical and methodological: Is it fair to make into a native someone who did not know about that in the past? Is it possible to do it and at the same time respect the “native” in terms of an “ethical” anthropology? I think that constituting the native subsequently is not a problem if the analysis is fair to him or her and does not expose him or her without his or her consent. If someone is affected somehow by the text I retroactively seek a formal concession if applicable (and if not, I should remove from the text any reference that might compromise them). An ethnography *ex post facto* without critical reflection on this could be problematic.

Another set of methodological issues derives from the *ex post facto* definition of the native: If the relationship has not been originally thought as an anthropologist/native relationship, what is lost when it is transformed, by the memory, into that same relationship? Or what is gained? It seems to me that it loses the unasked questions, the unsolved doubts, the possibility of coeval

dialogue with the native on the research questions. On the other hand, turning anyone into a native *ex post facto* also transforms the anthropologist into an anthropologist *ex post facto*: on recalling how the relationship took place, we look not only at the native, but at ourselves in respect to the native, and somehow ourselves become the natives in different temporalities.

In anthropology *ex post facto* as a method, we assume the privilege of time in defining the object, be it the physical space of the ethnographic fieldwork, or the very existence of the period of ethnographic fieldwork. From the moment of writing, the possible ethnographic fieldwork opens a temporary passage for the events, retroactively setting both the object and the space where it has been noted, by reconstituting the relations along a stream that we intend to describe and explain. Assuming that any anthropologist draws an imaginary line between ethnographic fieldwork and nonfieldwork, we can say that proposing as an object something that, at first, had not been thought of as a period of ethnographic fieldwork in itself is perfectly possible. It is the same exercise that any anthropologist does, except that some rely too much on the physical displacement not to realise that this is contingent on the establishment of anthropological issues to be discussed.

We therefore propose a method, ethnography *ex post facto*, and an analysis of its implications for the way we think ethnography. What I propose is a closer look at the place of memory in the production of anthropological knowledge and in the very definition of the border between fieldwork and nonfieldwork. The desire to eliminate this border is the result of a slow process of maturation of a reflection on the experience of the fieldwork and the elasticity of anthropological knowledge production. The dissolution of space in the production of ethnographies has already been well explored in recent years, as we have seen in the foregoing discussion. The dissolution of time as an absolute boundary between fieldwork and nonfieldwork, however, has not been sufficiently conceived.

All ethnography is a work of memory and, to some extent, a unique experience and profoundly out of the ordinary of our lives. It is a set of relationships that alters our own perspectives and changes the reality that we experience. This autobiographical dimension of ethnography has already been emphasised in many recent works. The reflective character that such anthropological critique demands is critical to thinking anthropology *ex post facto*, but it is not restricted to this. Our perspective seeks to shuffle the secure and purified lines we try to place between ethnographic fieldwork experience and life, in most cases by a habit of the way of knowledge,

which requires it. But this requirement resembles the hybrids of Latour (1991), as it deletes and masks a process that is always reflexive and autobiographical, permeated by memory, when we write our monographs.

Our perspective produces shuffling between the borders and brings life into anthropology and vice versa. We have not found a stable boundary between the period of ethnographic fieldwork and nonfieldwork, and we understand that our ethnographic fieldwork remains in our lives, as well as that our lives are fieldwork in many other forms. The reflection outlined here helps us to think not only anthropology *ex post facto*, but also the production of anthropological knowledge in general, in this magic of translating the tense and confusing flow of relationships into beautiful, debugged and “clean” analytical texts. This simple observation, the elimination of a border, releases memory for an exercise of alternative knowledge, where recollections are placed at the service of a practice of anthropological knowledge. Anthropology *ex post facto* is, ultimately, a way of looking at both anthropology and life.

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Notes

- 1 The Latin expression, common in law, refers to what has been done, lived or thought after the fact.
- 2 There is a huge and rich anthropological tradition about autoethnography and reflexivity in the writing process. The intention of this article is to move in another direction, revealing memory as an ethnographic field *a posteriori*, without the autoethnographic inflections analysed in the anthropological tradition. For this reason I do not review this literature, which can be found in Reed-Danahay (1997). See also Buzard (2003), Collins and Gallinat (2013) and Reed-Danahay (2001).
- 3 Many ways to rethink anthropological writing have developed since the end of the last century, from experiments with fiction to discussion of the relationship between home and fieldwork, experimental writing methods and many other ways. In the scope of this article, we will discuss further developments of autoethnography, leaving aside the many variables of anthropological writing.
- 4 In this latter dimension, the discussion is not about the character of ethnography, although it is a methodological discussion: the issue is the status of the relationship between researcher and researched and the place of the constructs of the “native.” Latour (1991), Strathern (1999), Viveiros de Castro (2002) and Wagner (1981) are examples of this attempt to reposition the place of native theory in anthropological theory. Thus we have a theoretical, methodological and moral discussion, which aims to resolve – on a different level – the question of authority raised by postmodernists: when we use native concepts to rethink

our own, we are placing the knowledge of the *Other* in the centre and, in this case, the writing and place issue of ethnography seems innocently resolved beforehand.

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