Chapter 7
Fieldwork Poetics: The In-Betweenness of Ethnographic Alterity and Researching with Music

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Abstract This chapter is a reflexive exploration of ethnography. Of the issues that arise when we consider its problematic history, the asymmetric relations between those involved, and the confusing positionalities that emerge when moving from the place of study to the place of research ('the field') and back again — even when research is done 'at home'. Throughout the text, I consider the theoretical and poetic ideas of diverse authors and disciplines — from anthropology, to poetry, to geography — discussing how they can provide a framework for ethnographic work, and for understanding our positionalities, as well as how they can help us answer the questions that arise while in the field. How do we navigate the otherness of research? What ethical issues come up when dealing with Others from what often is a position of power, and how do we (try to) overcome these dilemmas? What are the stakes for us, and for the Others we are researching (or 'researching with')? Who benefits from our work? Where lies the fealty of the academic? In this text, I explore how these questions looked like in my PhD research, and try to elucidate these issues through a lens of relational poetics.

Keywords Ethnography · Alterity · Poetics · Relation · Mexico

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7.1 A Kettle of Fish

'I don't know why we write....
And sometimes I wonder why later.
we publish what we have written.
(Pacheco 2007)

Ethnography is a strange thing — a kettle of fish. Its practitioners know this, and many have written about it. Is there a need for yet another reflection on the subject? I don't know, like I don't know if there's a need for yet another ethnographic text. Still, here I am writing my experiences of doing ethnography while researching music in south eastern Mexico: the strangeness, self-consciousness, and ethical qualms that came over me while working in the region of El Sotavento ('The Leeward'). My current research looks at *son Jarocho* — The Leeward's folk music — and its relation to landscapes. I am interested in how culture/nature is/are conceptualised in this particular region, especially through Sotaventine music-culture. Given the subject of my research, my fieldwork consisted in following musicians and visiting music-making communities around the globe — from Paris, to small cities and ranches in El Sotavento, to Mexico City, to L.A., to Tijuana, and back again — chatting and playing the *jarana* (a small cedar eight-string guitar) with them.

Most of my fieldwork took place in Mexico, my country — 'at home' — but in a region that is not my own. I had been to The Leeward before as a tourist or passer-by, but I had not worked there until now. Being there as a researcher made the place new to me. Part of the novelty was the in-betweenness of being foreign-yet-at-home. A good example of this uncanny feeling happened the first night I was in Santiago Tuxtla, a small city in The Leeward.

In the city centre of Santiago, amid palm-filled gardens and park benches, stands a colossal pre-Columbian Olmec head carved in basalt. Olmec heads are the sort of archaeological marvel we learn about during primary school but forget exists somewhere beyond our textbook until we come across it while casually strolling down the street. Finding it there felt how I imagined it felt to find the bones of King Richard III under the tarmac of a Leicester parking lot, or how it would feel if they'd made a permanent exhibit of the monarch's remains in a little square across the street from a Boots and a Tesco.[1] I'd heard of Olmec heads, I'd seen them in pictures and museums, but never so unexpectedly in such an everyday spot.

Is that an Olmec head?!

I asked, stunned.

Oh, yeah.

Someone answered quite matter-of-factly, as if I'd asked if a tree was a tree or if a bench was a bench, and as if it were perfectly normal to find trees, benches, and colossal Olmec heads in little town squares.

[1] Boots and Tesco are common franchises throughout the UK, the former a chemist, the latter a supermarket/convenience store. Like CVS and 7–11 in the US, or *Farmacias Guadalajara* and OXXO in Mexico.

With strange meetings like this, one quickly realises (or remembers) that ethnography is not only a kettle of fish, but that each ethnography is a different kettle of fish altogether. Ethnography is some fuzzy thing[2] that, under different circumstances, becomes a different *some*thing. Partly because of this, the notions of foreign and home quickly dissolve when going into 'the field' — even into a field you (somewhat) know. This is particularly true when one is based in a 'foreign' university doing research 'at home'. What follows is my attempt to unravel the questions and ideas that grew from this particular kettle of fish (many still unanswered), starting with what arguably lies at the heart of such strange encounters, or rather, what makes these encounters feel strange: the question of otherness.

7.2 In-Between Alterity and Alter Egos

The central question of anthropology, and indeed, all human disciplines, is alterity. At least according to Krotz (1994). To him, otherness is the starting point of all anthropological explorations and is emplaced in cultural contact.

This otherness is particularly strange when we are placed in-between 'here' and 'the field'. Especially when 'the field' is supposed to be home and 'here' is supposed to be foreign. 'Here' and 'the field' seem like two different worlds; one imagined, the other real. Identities become muddled and we no longer know where 'foreign', 'field', 'here', and 'home' are anymore. Alter egos emerge as we move (in-)between worlds.

I was born 'here', in England, but I have never been English. I have always been Mexican, even before setting foot in Mexico as a toddler. Returning 'here' makes my otherness palpable. In the UK, I'm seen as a somewhat exotic, brown (or brownish) character that doesn't comply with expectations of Britishness and/or whiteness: I have a strange accent ('Oh, but your English is SO good!'), I have a strange name, I have been told to 'speak in English' and to 'shut the fuck up'. I am clearly Other in this island.

On the other hand, I'm Other in 'the field' as well — when 'at home' — as the following interaction illustrates. One afternoon, in the town of Tres Zapotes, I was sat on the curb, under the shade of a tree, waiting for a *versador*[3] to return from picking maize in the field — an actual field. Near where I was waiting were two older ladies and a girl, sitting in their porch. After a while, the girl shouted:

> *¡Ey Güero! Que si no quiere sentarse acá en la sombrita.*
> [Oi Blondie! They want to know if you´d like to come sit in the shade.]

[2] Some would speak of ethnographic methods (Malinowski 1932, for instance), others of ethnography as a discipline (Crang and Cook 2007), others would say ethnography is the writing that results of anthropological research (for example, Ingold 2014). In this chapter I will use the term as all of these interchangeably. While this definition is a fuzzy definition, it seems befitting, seeing as ethnography is a fuzzy changing thing.

[3] A *versador* is someone who knows/makes and declaims/sings verses.

I shyly accepted their invitation and sat in the porch from where I could still survey the street for my would-be interviewee. They asked what I was doing and we started talking about my research and music and life in Tres Zapotes. At some point in the conversation one of them said:

> We were looking at you sitting on the street and we took pity, I said:
> "He´s going to get sunstroke!"
> So I told my granddaughter to call you in, but she said:
> "We don´t know him! I don´t know his name, how am I supposed to call him?"
> And I said:
> "Just call him *güero* [blondie]".
> And she did,
> and you replied,
> and here we are!

I should probably mention now that I have dark brown hair. Although it's not uncommon for people in Mexico to use '*güero*' as a catch-all term — like 'fella' or 'hey you' — this little field incident made me realise that I was seen as a somewhat exotic white (or whiteish) researcher prone to sunstroke: I have a posh(ish) accent, I speak two foreign languages fluently, and I am studying in a foreign university. Not that being white is unusual among Leeward musicians — renowned Sotaventine guitarist Andrés Vega is nicknamed '*El Güero*' — but whiteness is another thing altogether. My alterity is palpable even 'at home'. It sometimes feels as Lévi-Strauss (1961: 58) says that the ethnographer 'acquires a kind of chronic uprootedness from the sheer brutality of the environmental changes to which he is exposed. Never can he feel himself at home anywhere'.

This alterity of the in-between is both consequence and driver of social research, but it 'has a high price: it is not possible without ethnocentrism' (Krotz 1994: 9). This can be problematic given our disciplines' past. Geography and ethnography were used repressively to reassert the centrality of the Western *ethnos* against the colonial Other (Smith 1999; Glissant 2010), who was often seen as a savage and a Cannibal (de Certeau 2000; Jáuregui 2008). While we do not adhere to this imperialist and totalising vision anymore, historic implications cannot be dismissed on the basis of good intentions (Krotz 1997). Even if we do not use our research to construe otherness as wildness to be civilised and subdued, we still imagine and organise the world from a place of power-knowledge (Smith 1999; Crang and Cook 2007). But alterity need not be totalising, as Glissant points out: '[t]otality's imaginary allows the detours that lead away from anything totalitarian' (2010: 18). Likewise, we can deploy Said's (1994: 161) counterpoint, wherein we consider both imperialism and resistance, and 'read ... retrospectively and heterophonically with other histories and traditions counterpointed against'. In this sense, rather than continue writing alterity from a place of power we can attempt a more poetic approach where we acknowledge our otherness, partiality, and privilege, and the kettle-of-fishiness of it all (Clifford 1986). As Glissant (2010: 29–30) points out, 'the power to experience the shock of elsewhere is what distinguishes the poet'. Similar things have been said of the ethnographer as we read in Lévi- Strauss (or as we can read in Rosaldo 2016). We shall then look for theorists of alterity in the world of poetry.

7.3 Poetics of Otherness

Many poets have spoken of otherness. One of the better-known ones (at least in Spanish) was Octavio Paz. Throughout his writings he explored questions of identity, solitude, and alterity (Xirau 1970; Wilson 1979). Some images from his poem *Piedra de Sol* ('Sunstone') can be useful to us for thinking of otherness in ethnographic work.

However, first an important caveat must be made. While Paz is one of the best-known Mexican poets, he has also been criticised for his treatment of certain Others. His cavalier writing on rape, and his treatment of women and the feminine is problematic — both in his writings and personal life — as is his treatment of homosexuality and of Chicanos. Paz has been criticised for this (Vera Tudela 2018), and called 'racist, misogynistic, and homophobic to the extreme' (Gaspar de Alba 2014: n. 50: 222–223). With this in mind we must read Paz contrapuntally; considering not only his voice, but also the voices that speak with and against him, so as to not perpetuate the ideas that make him 'dangerous ... to those ... that he maligns' (Ibid.).

But Paz', own words — at least these words — seem to counterpoint his own problematic side:

para que pueda ser he de ser otro,
salir de mí, buscarme entre los otros,
los otros que no son si yo no existo,
los otros que me dan plena existencia
[for me to truly be I must be other,
get out of me, seek myself in the others,
the others that are not if I am not,
the others that give me a full existence.]
(Paz 1957: ll.515–518, all translations are the author's own, unless otherwise stated.)

The idea that our very existence is linked to the Other and to our search for the Other is clear in these verses. In Paz' poetics our being depends on alterity. This poetic ideal can be enacted in ethnography: the search for Self in the Other drives us, for only in knowing the Other can we get to know ourselves.

muestra tu rostro al fin para que vea
mi cara verdadera, la del otro,
mi cara de nosotros, siempre todos
cara de árbol y de panadero
de chofer y de nube y de marino
cara de sol y arroyo...
[show me your face at last so I may see
this true face of mine, the face of others,
my face of ours, always everyone,
this face of tree and this face of baker
of chauffeur and of cloud and of sailor,
face of sun and of river...]
(Ibid.: ll.526-531)

Our true Self is revealed in the Others', our face is like the Others' and is indeed the Others'. This idea is not new and we run the risk of falling into platitudes and

commonplaces if we continue this way, but maybe that's precisely what we need. Glissant (2010: 31) proposes that 'amassing commonplaces is, perhaps, the right approach to... the entanglements of ... relation'. We see this relational dialectic with the Other in the work of many writers. Reyna's sixteenth century translation into Spanish of the biblical Proverbs puts it this way:

Como vna agua ſe parece à otra,
anſi el coraçon del hombre àl otro.
[As one water is alike another,
So is the heart of man to the other.]
(de Reyna 1569 Prov. 27: 19)

Looking at these poetics, a dialectical relationship emerges, in which there is no Self without the Other. We need the Other to fully understand; we cannot build knowledge (or *be,* for that matter) in isolation. This has implications for ethnographic research. If we need the Other in order to know, then ethnography must strive to truly be an intersubjective understanding of the world (Crang and Cook 2007).

Nevertheless, searching for the Other only for the sake of (Self-)knowledge can also be problematic. Would that not be, once again, a return to totalising alterity rather than an enactment of poetic otherness? Again in a proverb, though this time from Antonio Machado, we are admonished against this:

Busca en tu prójimo espejo;
pero no para afeitarte,
ni para teñirte el pelo.
[Find in your neighbour a mirror;
though not for shaving,
or dying your hair.]
(Machado 2018, CLXI § XXXIX)

We must assume our ethnocentrism poetically, rather than as totalising expansion. We listen and make space for the voices of Others. We try to find the mirror of the Other's heart, and to show the mirror in our own. And yet, the temptation of a clean-shaven face lingers. The tension between poet and explorer remains in spite of our best contrapuntal efforts, and we struggle to relate to the Other in the uncanny in-betweenness of alterity.

7.4 Beware the Researcher My Son!

Regardless of the new outlooks that poetics of otherness may bring to our ethnographic pursuits, the researcher is approached with caution. When I started my fieldwork in the 4th Encounter of *Jaraneros*[4] in Paris, someone who knew about my research came up to the group I was chatting with and said jokingly:

[4] Jarana players; *son* Jarocho musicians.

Beware! He´s a researcher! He´ll investigate you!

Perhaps he said it half-jokingly. Either way, it seems that we researchers are someone of whom the Other should be weary. We are nosy characters, sometimes interesting, sometimes intrusive. In poetry we find numerous images that could well be a warning against our intrusions; for instance, Thomas' verses (1938):

O make me a mask and a wall to shut from your spies
Of the sharp, enamelled eyes and the spectacled claws

Am I a spy with 'sharp enamelled eyes' and 'spectacled claws'? Are we like Carroll's Jabberwock? ('Beware the [researcher] my son! / The jaws that bite! The claws that catch!'). Are we building masks or trying to catch a glimpse of what's behind? Paz' poetics point towards unmasking (Paz 1957: 363–368):

...las máscaras podridas
que dividen al hombre de los hombres,
al hombre de sí mismo,
se derrumban
por un instante inmenso y vislumbramos
nuestra unidad perdida...
[...the rotten masks
that divide man from men
man from himself,
crumble down
during an immense instant and we half-see
our lost unity...]

Is unmasking then a violent act or a necessary process? Even if it were beneficial, don't we put a mask on the Other through our writing? Ethnographers, like poets, make up worlds with their words. Our accounts are always partial; it's all a fiction, as Clifford points out (1986). Even if we do not 'strive to estimate [our] fellow men from a lofty and distant point of vantage' as Lévi-Strauss has proposed (1961); even if we do otherness poetically and get a glimpse of 'our lost unity' — isn't it all lost in the printed page? Isn't the counterpoint of the Other's voice silenced in our fabrications? We listen to them and capture them in tape — or mini SD cards — only to code and use their voices in our fictions. Perhaps we must re-read Paz' request (Paz 1957: 526–527) as a plea not just for the Other but for ourselves: 'show me your face at last so I may see / my true face...'. We too wear masks — sometimes we're the makers (is this chapter not a mask?), sometimes it's the Other ('Hey, *güero!'*). We all play this game of hide-and-seek, masking and unmasking; we are all trying to reach this intersubjective understanding of Other and of Self, this 'lost unity'. We must take off the mask we wear and show our face, if we are to encounter the Other, even if only for one 'immense instant'.

But how do we go about doing this? How do we take off our masks? How do we enact a relational poetics in our work? Smith (1999: 16) suggests we ought to 'share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented'. Though when I talked of 'geopoetics' and

'ecopoetics' with master musician, writer and luthier Patricio Hidalgo, the conversation didn't quite go as expected:

Oh such terms! Such big terms laddie! — he said.
Yeah, well there´s this book by a bloke called Bate (2001)... — I replied apologetically.
Ah — he laughed — and here´s me thinking you´re making words up!

Funny as it may be, this interaction makes me wonder how much of our 'big terms', 'theories and analyses' are relevant outside of academia. They appear to be (or easily become) yet another mask we wear as researchers. After this, sharing theories and analyses was not a central part of my research[5]; however, there were two things that did help to break down walls and take off masks, if only for a little while. The first one: sharing my Self.

If, as Crang and Cook (2007) say, social research happens through social relations, shouldn't we share our own lives as the Others do? After all,

El ojo que ves no es
ojo porque tú lo veas;
es ojo porque te ve.
[The eye that you see is an eye
not because your eye can see it;
but because it can see you.]
(Machado 2018: CLXI § I).

This approach might lead us somewhat astray from Lévi-Strauss' detached ethnographer. However, as feminist scholars have pointed out, detachedness is neither achievable nor desirable (see England 1994; Rose 1997; Pink 2008, 2009). In the field I tried to be open about my life with interviewees, as they shared theirs. I welcomed the Others' questions, even if they made me nervous and I ended up rambling about strange theories and big terms. This is, to me, part of taking off the mask.

Besides sharing my Self and my story, the best way I found to traverse the tension of ethnographic alterity was music. Rather than merely researching music, I researched with music. Music is a language in itself and a constant dialogue, which has been recognised and utilised methodologically in ethnomusicology for a long time (Hood 1971). Music — at least folk music — is a communitarian endeavour; and so, music provides both a literal and theoretical counterpoint. Call-and-response verses counterpoint each other, and the syncopated beats of dancing shoes respond to cedar chordophones. At the same time, a moment of relational creation shifts the focus from rigorous academic sapience to traditional knowledge — from observing and estimating, to listening and making a joyful noise — this overturns the knowledge-power asymmetry of research, even if only temporarily. When making music the literal tension of the strings turns into sound; likewise, in sound the tension of alterity finds purpose in community. Sotaventine music requires alterity: while one can play alone, music produced in isolation is never on par with music made communally. This communal musical praxis embodies the ideals of poetic

[5] Though discussions on *topophilia* and the meanings of 'space' did flourish in other interviews.

alterity better than any ethnography ever could. But music is bound to come to an end. Is that enough? Does a moment of community compensate for our ethnocentricity, and for all that we take with us? Is this all we can leave in the field?

7.5 Life and What We Leave Behind

We can speak of poetic otherness all we want, we can talk about counterpoint and music, but in the end we are still writing about the lives of Others for our own benefit, even if we leave bits and pieces of ourselves behind. After 3 or 4 years of research (and only a fraction of that in the field), we get a piece of paper that says 'Doctor of Philosophy'. We make a living by laying bare the lives of Others for all to see. And what do they get out of it? Are music and anecdotes enough?

Even if we return the outcomes of our research to the communities we work with, what good is a thesis in academic English to an ageing rural Mexican musician who never learnt to read? It can be a gesture, and a powerful one in some cases, especially when one gets to know a community quite well. And it can be useful when research is planned and undertaken with the community. But when research is done all over the map, meeting people only a few times, what can we give back, and to whom?

Our research is seldom useful to the Other, particularly doctoral research. 'Your PhD research is not going to change the world', my supervisors told me in our first official meeting. Add to that the barrier of our academic lingo. Why do we research then? Only for the title? Can we (should we) be so cynical? What do we leave behind us in the field? If we manage to take off our mask and see the Other, perhaps we'll leave some memories — a little curio in the corners of their mind. Perhaps we give ourselves too much importance thinking people we meet once or twice will remember or care about us. This,[6] however, shouldn't dissuade us from trying to give back. For me, a simple, yet powerful way of giving back was photography.

As part of my research, I took portraits of the people I interviewed, and of the people I met. As I did this, I asked for their permission to use their portraits in my work. Photography is a lot like ethnography; it is too '[g]azing on other people's reality' (Sontag 2005: 42), and like ethnography, it is sometimes aggressive and predatory, turning 'people into objects that can be symbolically possessed' (Ibid.: 10). But in photography it is much easier to go from the totalising to the poetically relational by returning the mimetic object to our ethnographic Other.

Given the above, returning portraits to those portrayed became an important part of my fieldwork dynamics. I would walk around with the printed pictures, looking for my interviewees, returning their portraits to them. Returning photographs meant giving back something tangible, even if only a piece of paper, and leaving something that can be touched and kept seemed important. Furthermore, given the

[6] And much of this self-consciousness, I think, might just be in my (or our) mind(s).

kinship between photography and ethnography, returning a photograph seemed like a symbolic way of returning my research, or part of it. Those of us who grew up before the advent of digital images will remember having frames and photo albums at home, and how flicking through old pictures brings people together. I hope that my pictures may become artefacts that allow for this sort of encounters. Though, again, I don't know if it's too arrogant of me to think this might be the case. What makes me hopeful were the reactions of the people upon receiving their portraits: their smiles, laughter, and comments. In many cases, the reaction was surprise: the astonishment of getting something back from a researcher.

One man I talked to spoke of a person who had lived in Santiago Tuxtla for some time, interviewing and recording many musicians:

> They came and made records, and asked questions, and stole everything from us.

I have met this person. They seemed perfectly decent. I've heard their wonderful field recordings and seen their excellent work. Still, in spite of all this, their memory is one of mistrust.

> Beware! He´ll research you!

Said the man in Paris.
Perhaps he wasn't joking.

7.6 Death, and What We Take with Us

Spy, thief, child playing hide-and-seek, portraitist: what part does our ethnographic mask bestow upon us? We take away from the field our notes and recordings and bring them back to the real world. Or were we in the real world all along and are now retreating from it? Who knows? We listen and write, and time moves on.

Some months ago, I sat in England listening to the voice of one of the great guitarists of the city of Tlacotalpan — Mr. Cirilo Pomotor — who, I'd just learned, had passed away a few hours back. There is a particular strangeness to hearing the dead speak. The aural records of past masters reverberate with voices now gone: of players and of instruments. I feel both as a guardian and as a thief. I have some minutes — perhaps an hour — of a man's life encased in an mp3 file. It's a higgledy-piggledy interview: there is no music (he couldn't play anymore because of his aches), and the conversation is somewhat hectic (he couldn't quite hear my questions and I couldn't quite phrase them right); and yet, it's his voice and part of his story. What am I to do with it? Transcribe it, use the data, and delete it, all in due time, as per the accepted protocols of our trade? The same ethical procedures would have me anonymise this master musician. But wouldn't this erase him from memory as well? Should I share this recording? Upload it some place where it may be heard by those who knew his voice better than me, and by those who never had a chance to hear it?

While I was 'in the field', another great musician passed away: Andrés Flores, a *jarana* and tambourine player, exceptionally skilful, amiable and funny. I met him briefly in the *Luna Negra* 'Seminar' — a music retreat that takes place every Easter. We spoke over breakfast about carving spoons and played in the same nightly gatherings that week, but I didn't get to know him well on a personal level. Later that year he passed away, almost at the same time as another very young Sotaventine musician. I was in Santiago at the time. These losses hit the musical community very hard. They were both sudden and took everyone by surprise. Andrés' wake and funeral — a musician's funeral, with processions of musical instruments playing alongside the casket — were to take place in his hometown, a couple of hours away from Santiago. I was unsure about going.

On the one hand, I felt the need to go and pay my respects to this great musician I'd briefly met. I was curious to see and be part of this rite of farewell that happens when a Leeward musician dies. At the same time, it felt wrong to go for the sake of sating my curiosities. I felt like I would be imposing on the mourners. I could already see the grief and confusion of my friends in Santiago, and felt it myself even though I hadn't known Andrés well. How could I possibly take this and write it into my work? How could I even think about it? Here my ethnographic otherness weighted heavily; it felt wrong, like I'd be profiting from the pain of Others if I turned this into 'data'. Yet, am I not doing now what I hoped to avoid? Here I am, writing Andrés' death into an ethnographic 'reflective' text, using it like I thought I shouldn't.

A few months after the funeral I found among my recordings four files from a night when Joel Cruz Castellanos and Claudio Naranjo Vega — two notable Leeward guitar players — were jamming together. As they played, a group started to gather around them, listening as they wove their melodies.

In the second of the four recordings, one can hear that a *jarana* starts to sound, strumming softly in the background. By the third, Andrés Flores is heard singing verses and answering refrains. I'd forgot Andrés was playing that night in that impromptu ensemble. It felt strange to listen to his voice and instrument, particularly singing *Las Poblanas* and *La Lloroncita,* both tunes that speak of death and dying:

Nacer es un sacrificio,
morir no tiene igualdad,
al ser supremo le aviso:
no estoy de conformidad
aunque morir sea preciso
[Being born´s a sacrifice,
and there´s nothing quite like death,
to the supreme being I say:
I do not agree with this
though I know my life must end.]

Re-encountering this voice in County Durham hit me hard. I listened to the recordings on loop. I edited the files a little and sent them to Joel. I thought he'd like to have them. It felt like perhaps my intrusions in the field and my ethnographic

ramblings — my otherness — might not be entirely totalising or devoid of sense; like there might be something valuable I could give back to musicians and friends back in 'the field'.

7.7 Return to Alterity

How then do we research? Or how should we try to research? Here I propose that poetics can help us enact alterity in our work in such a way that we may overcome some of the issues of ethnography. The idea of doing poetic ethnography is not new — Clifford and Marcus (1986) edited a whole volume devoted to it decades ago — this is merely my attempt at gleaning out of poetry a means for ethnographic fieldwork that might answer some of the problematic aspects of the method that have conflicted me in the past (and that still do). To me the poetics of fieldwork ought to be relational and reflective and can be aided by creative practices, particularly collective ones, such as music and poetry. It is poetic not only because it is a fiction — our version of events — but because like poetry (Pacheco 2007), it ought to be a profound and collective endeavour, even if encounters are brief.

I'm not pretending to claim these ideas of poetics or alterity as my own, nor to say that my version is the final one; numerous scholars have written and discussed these things before (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Taussig 1993; Said 1995; de Certeau 2000; Todorov 2007; Glissant 2010; McKittrick 2019; etc.). What I've tried to do here is to share my attempts to enact alterity poetically in the field, and my reflections upon these attempts. Although, as Pacheco (2007: 70) says, 'personal opinions / are really not very interesting'. Still, I hope my reflections may be useful to Others.

Looking at poetry and at poetics gives us tools to think of and enact ethnographic research differently, it might even help us narrow down the fuzziness of what sort of *thing* ethnography is. If we conflate the poet with the ethnographer (Rosaldo 2016), we can take Pacheco's words on what poetry is and apply it to ethnography:

> ...it is another thing:
> a form of love that only exists in silence,
> in a secret pact among two people,
> almost always unacquainted.
> (Pacheco 2007: 70)

Pacheco writes of reading (or being read by) a stranger. We could place our poetic ideal of ethnographic work along these same lines, following a relational alterity in which we seek community and knowledge alongside the Other. We should not look for relationality for the sake of Self, nor for the sake of knowledge in and of itself; as another old Hebrew proverb says, 'of making many books there is no end and much study is weariness of the flesh' (Eccl 12: 12). Or as Pacheco would put it, 'we throw/a bottle to the sea, filled and overflowing / with rubbish and messages in bottles' (Pacheco 2007: 69). Still, 'it is not useless, this shipwrecked gesture' (Ibid.); poetically we can take our alterity and our encounters beyond mere

'black signs in the white page' (Ibid.). But how do we do this? 'Only in love is it possible to capture what is radically Other without reducing it to consciousness', wrote Paz of Machado's work (Paz 1976: 147). Poetic ethnography, then, should be 'a form of love', though not necessarily silent. This might sound naive, corny or commonplace, but — as mentioned earlier — we must amass commonplaces to better grasp relationality. A poetic ethnography, then, must forget the self-absorbedness that often characterises academia and seek to encounter the Other earnestly and lovingly (for more on the idea of love in critical geography see Mould 2019). Granted, this might not be the right approach always — for instance, this idea becomes quickly implausible (or impossible) in institutional research, or when dealing with questions of corruption or violence; here a different poetics would have to inform our alterity. Nevertheless, at least for this kettle of fish, this particular poetics of otherness seems like the best framework.

Perhaps Machado (2018, CLXI § LXVI) said it best:

Poned atención:
un corazón solitario
no es corazón.
[Pay attention! Hark!
A heart that is all alone
is not a heart.]

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