WHAT IS AT STAKE — AND IS NOT — IN THE IDEA AND PRACTICE OF MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY

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In the introduction to a recent collection of essays (Marcus 1998), I have tried to present my own broader rationales for investing focally in the issue of multi-sited research as the key expression of deeper problems of recent anthropological practice. In addition, I have recently been giving talks which convey my own preferred practice of multi-sited ethnography and clarify certain positions from the responses that I have gleaned to my original 1995 article. As a contribution to this collection, I would like to offer here the substance of those talks.

The proposal of something as obvious and inevitable as multi-sited ethnography gains its appeal at present from giving expression to an as yet poorly articulated, but distinctly felt, shift in the conditions of the production of anthropological research. The normative and regulative assumptions of social life that grounded conventional fieldwork have been challenged, but their modification into new sets of practices has not yet been clearly articulated. This is not unlike the impact of the 'writing culture' critique of the 1980s; the multi-sited proposal might be understood as a second wave, this time initiating a discussion of the ongoing changing conditions of fieldwork.

The paradigm that I want to outline concerns itself with what I think of as the *non-obvious* applications of multi-sited strategies. The obvious cases of multi-sited ethnography — tracking movements of migrants transnationally in diaspora and exile, or the history of the circulation of objects and techniques, or studying the relationships of dispersed communities and networks that define well-designated macro-processes in the global flow of capital and expertise — are the contexts of contemporary ethnographic work. These contexts are challenging traditional norms of fieldwork in productive ways and are also opening new conduits of exchange with past interdisciplinary partners in other social sciences. Arjun Appadurai's influential 'scape' essays of the early 1990s (see Appadurai 1996), for example, are a metaphorical map for this now strong wave of research.

When anthropologists think of multi-sited work, most think of projects like these whose contexts are defined by given lines of macro-social theory and historical narrative. Macro-processes may be changing, but there is nothing particularly problematic or unclear — *untrackable* — about the relationships or

Canberra Anthropology 22(2) 1999:6-14

connections of peoples or objects ethnographically probed within the framework of these processes, because they retain their commitment to analyzing observable social process.

While certainly related to and overlapping with this work, the kind of multi-sited ethnography that I want to consider here faces somewhat different challenges, and itself poses more radical alternatives to the norms that have traditionally regulated fieldwork. I am interested in those cases where the metaphors of tracking or following as a material process do not work as well in constituting multi-sited objects of ethnographic study, where the relationships or connections between sites are indeed not clear, the discovery and discussion of which are, in fact, the main problem of ethnographic analysis. I am interested here in multi-sited strategies that raise the nature of relationships between sites of activity and social locations that are disjunctive, in space or time, and perhaps in terms of social category as well. For example, Fred Myers' recent work on the circulation of Aboriginal art in different global contexts (see for example Myers 1992); Crapanzano's recent analysis of the course of fundamentalist Christian imagery through various media and social institutions (Crapanzano 2000), and in general, those ethnographies in which the social juxtaposition of, say, elites and subalterns, middle-class and poor, experts and non-experts, institutions and communities (for example, in Justine Cannon's paper in this volume) — these are examples where the social context of interrelation is *not* obvious as given in any framing regulative or normative analysis. This framework may or may not be posed by ethnographic subjects themselves (this is one of the primary questions for determination by fieldwork itself).

A NON-OBVIOUS PARADIGM FOR MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY

Schematically posed, this paradigm concerns cases where there is very little actual contact or exchange between two sites but where the functioning of one of the sites (the more strategic one?) depends on a very specific imagining of what is going on elsewhere. The complex nature of the relation between disjunctive sites, how they are coordinated, if they are, is the main objective puzzle of this variety of multi-sited ethnography. Fieldwork in an initial site is oriented primarily to explicating a shared world of a set of subjects derived from attention to situated discourse.

It is the social cartography or social referents elsewhere within this *imagined* world of community that become particularly important. It is not the subject of fieldwork as 'other' that is of interest here (he or she really is not

'other' to the anthropologist, but more complexly, the counterpart), but rather the other that constructs and is constructed by the subject's imaginary.

Literalness, a sort of naive realism, in making this move is, I would argue, both a virtue and provocation of the project. The fieldwork in the second site is often different in nature to the first site. It is perhaps less intensive than work at the first, interested in probing a way of life as well as an imaginary, but always with the first site in mind. The second site is probed for itself, but the nature of its relation to the first site becomes the foremost question. Is there a reciprocal relation at the level of imaginary, or not? Is there a material relation, one of periodic exchange, or is the relation totally virtual?

The project could end with this interpretation of the relation or connection of the two sites across disjunction where the imaginary at one site is juxtaposed to the ethnography of its literal referent, but a third phase of such a multi-sited project would define itself as intervention, presuming that the project is primarily motivated in conception by being oriented toward the regime of power/knowledge, so to speak, that defines the initial site. The project would end with some strategy of bringing back the ethnography at the second site to the first site, as some effort at cultural critique, that would involve re-engagement with one's original subjects from whose imaginaries and regimes of representation the impetus and strategy for moving the project literally elsewhere were derived.

ISSUES, QUERIES, AND CONCERNS IN RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSAL OF A MULTI-SITED IMAGINARY ETHNOGRAPHY

Having worked through a personal version of a specifically non-obvious paradigm for multi-sited research, I want now to reflect on a range of concerns that I have heard raised among anthropologists in response to proposals for multi-sited ethnography generally. A common response I have received is that multi-sited ethnography is most securely built on, and even requires, an earlier, more conventional achievement of ethnographic expertise of peoples, regions, and languages defined by the traditional organisation of culture areas. Thus, multi-sited ethnography is most legitimately understood as supplementary to pre-existing expertises, and indeed as anthropology for senior scholars, not for beginners or beginning projects of research.

Further and relatedly, it is often held that the pursuit of multi-sited ethnography is not that new but is a natural and logical extension of peoples traditionally studied now in motion and places in fragmentation. And the pathways of change are given by macro-historical views of changes in modernity, capitalism and colonial formations. As always, the application of anthropology to

these processes demonstrates their human face and implication, but while the need to move about more requires some changes in the traditional way of fieldwork, nothing radical is required.

Indeed, any more radical notion of multi-sited ethnography threatens to dilute and make superficial the traditional standards for fieldwork in anthropology. The inevitable connotation of multi-sited as a term is something that is profligate, impatient, unfocused, emphasising surface rather than depth, and requiring effort beyond the capacity of the single fieldworker.

Well, I can respect much of this cautiously moderate case for and response to the idea of multi-sited ethnography, especially in the realm of what I have termed obvious strategies for such work, but I would also oppose the limits that this set of responses might place on working out the more radical implications for fieldwork practices of changing conditions of research that increasingly face not only senior scholars but also ethnographers-in-the-making. Some of the most interesting arenas of contemporary anthropological research in the realm of what I have differentiated as non-obvious strategies of multi-sited work definitely require more venturesome re-thinkings of the norms of fieldwork, as I hope the paradigm I have outlined has demonstrated. Arguing from specifically within this realm of multi-sited research against the concerns and responses that I have mentioned, I would say first that the need for multi-sited strategies is too embedded in the ways of the contemporary worlds that anthropologists wish to study for them to be thought of as mainly supplementary or secondary to achievements of more site-specific, intensive ethnography of the traditional sort which would otherwise take precedence. While multi-sited strategies do not replace such ethnography, it is wrong to think of the former as purely derived from it, especially in the many cases of beginning scholars who must conceive of their projects in multi-sited terrains.

Here I want to articulate an argument about a traditional limitation of ethnography and how multi-sited work might alleviate it. This is tied to the suspicion that multi-sited ethnography in its very designation threatens to be profligate, unfocused and superficial. Indeed, the paradigm I have suggested proposes just the opposite. Multi-sitedness is more an imaginary than a specific strategy for designing ethnographic methodology. Multi-sited research involves innovative ways of bounding the potentially unbounded, but also of refusing the more usual non-ethnographic bounding of the intensively probed and usually site-specific ethnographic study. In the way that I have suggested, carefully moving across sites of fieldwork within a multi-sited imaginary gives traditional ethnography a means of extending itself in a disciplined, closely argued way that

it never had before when it was operating within the presumed spaces of the traditional archive of culture areas and their thematic tropes that defined and shaped ethnographies within them. The paradigm I have suggested is one way of giving anthropology something it doesn't have as a regulative ideal for fieldwork — the focused, argument-driven experiment, understood as such, in research terrains that anthropologists themselves have not conceptualised as well, except as metaphorical extensions of how they have done ethnography within their traditional archive of peoples and places.

The traditional modality is one which is holistic and relatively unfocused — topics are developed from the ground of an imagined total ethnography which is implicitly encyclopedic. A focused ethnography achieves its goal and constitutes an argument by opening up unknown territory, a contiguous category or topic against the holistic ground, or the encyclopedia. Something new for traditional ethnography emerges by filling in a new piece of the map, an unexamined part of the functionalist whole, a new category to look at. This is fine in a world of peoples and places contained in culture areas, but is far too limited where cultural formations and objects of study are discontinuous, and the product of complex circulations. The paradigm I suggested does not work like the traditional ethnography in making arguments. The argument is rather embedded in the speculative, experimental aspect of ethnographic probing that is not as certain of the contextualising ground or space in which it is working.

In a sense, this would look like the kind of partial ethnography that sociology already has but with a very different sensibility. Within the multi-sited initiative, I would argue that anthropologists in terms of their own traditions and sensibilities must develop a similar modality for themselves. As is apparent, multi-sited projects involve ethnography of different modalities and intensities within the same frame of fieldwork. In the paradigm I outlined, ethnography at the site where an imaginary is probed is perhaps more thorough, sustained, and of a different emphasis than at the site where the ethnography of the referent is tracked. Yet, the regulative norms of fieldwork in anthropology are not sensitive or accommodating to such crucial distinctions and flexibilities necessary for multi-sited projects. Good fieldwork is good fieldwork overall, and it involves the same standards that are evoked by the pioneering projects of the greats such as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Firth, and their descendants. The complex way in which the integrity of old standards are being reinvented and readapted under present conditions requires its own treatment. Deep fieldwork of the traditional sort is unevenly practiced in multi-sited fieldwork, by design, by opportunity, by circumstance, and we simply need ways of discussing, critiquing, and legitimating

for ourselves these kinds of differences in multi-sited projects for which the present rhetoric and language for evaluating fieldwork and ethnography in anthropology is not sensitive.

This is why I have consistently emphasised the multi-sited ethnography as more a matter of a contextualising multi-sited ethnographic imaginary rather than literally an ethnography which covers many sites and threatens to be overwhelmed by them. Evoking of this contexualising imaginary in the face of social theory and macro-descriptions, in favour of an at least speculative and radical ethnographic-ing of the terrain of the social, takes us to a concluding consideration of a felt condition of anthropology and of an implication of multi-sited ethnography in relation to it: the perceived loss of the social or the relative inattention to it in recent anthropology and the way that the multi-sited effort suggests a reclaiming of it. In a sense, this is what is most importantly and generally at stake in the idea of multi-sited ethnography.

THE LOSS AND RECLAMATION OF THE SOCIAL IN RECENT ETHNOGRAPHY

What is most importantly and most generally at stake for anthropology in the emergence of multi-sited ethnography is indeed a reorientation to the very idea of the social in situated cultural analysis inspired by the cultural turn of the past two decades. There is a general feeling among anthropologists today, more or less articulated in professional 'corridor talk', that the interest in all of those things that would be classed under the 'social' — social relations, processes, structures, systems, institutions, matters of political economy — have been relatively neglected in favour of attention to, for example, subject positions, identity construction, dialogic exchange and micro-examinations of embedded practices, restricted to the intimate traditional scene of fieldwork. Indeed, it might be argued that this finely wrought preoccupation with the micro-cultural is about the social (à la Anthony Giddens' location of structuration in situated agency, and Pierre Bourdieu's location of what is systemic in the situation in the habitus) — just a different way of constructing it. But there is no doubt that within the production of ethnography the description of the terrain of the macro-social has suffered in its materialities, attention to scale, regimes of exchange, and resulting exposures of and concerns for inequalities. Instead there has been a tendency in ethnography to let the constructs, theories, and work of other kinds of academics (including cultural geographers, political economists, and post-colonial theorists, among others) to stand in, so to speak, for the macro-, patterned sense of the social that

contextualises ethnographic work, while it itself probes voice, discourse, subjectivity, and identity as its primary concerns.

In a sense, letting constructs of the social define the ethnographic centre of contemporary anthropological research insulates the interpretation of ethnographic materials from essentially non-ethnographic perspectives. One major aim, then, of trying to theorise the already occurring multi-sited transformation of fieldwork is to encourage this move of a certain nomadic or rhizomic tendency in ethnography into a motivated change in the way that much contemporary ethnography constructs the space of the social as the contexts for its intimate eye and ear. The world of finance, markets, politics, and their institutions are ethnographic objects of study implicated in every fieldwork project these days and cannot be left to other constructions, if anthropology is to be responsible for its own contexts of meaning and the forging of its own arguments from inside the ethnographic process of research itself. This reclamation of the social context of ethnography is for me the most important stake for the current reconstruction of anthropology through multi-sited ethnographic projects.

The emerging norms of multi-sited fieldwork are the means of growing a renewed attention to the social out of the cultural turn's revolution in thinking about what goes on in the site of ethnography while still preserving the intensity and complexity of that revolution. Different paradigms of doing multi-sited work — and there are many detectable — would develop the social in different ways, but they all would move from the site of initial fieldwork into a contextualising consideration of what Douglas Holmes in his study of the circulation of European right wing discourse (in press) has called 'the social within reach', the social which, in a Heideggerian sense, is in the 'vicinity' of human concern, as an integral dimension of the design of any multi-sited fieldwork project.

Is this kind of always limited probing of the social in multi-sited ethnography enough? Certainly not. But this constitution of the social through the strategised movement of ethnography among different sites is always at least implicitly, and should end up explicitly, in dialogue or tension with non-ethnographically composed constructions, narratives, and representations of the social in the work of historians, social theorists, and cultural geographers. The critical point, though, is that multi-sited research hesitates to work immediately with these constructions as the ground of ethnography.

Finally, there may be the fear that deriving the social from what the informant thinks (especially when the ethnographer starts with the situated imaginary within an empowered space of elite or expert practice) will just be native sociology, so to speak, albeit of natives who are in a sense counterparts of

the anthropologist. And this, too, is not enough. Just as grasping the native point of view was never the sole point of ethnography, so ethnographic knowledge cannot be only native knowledge. The growing of a perspective on the social from intensive ethnography in multiple sites cannot be synonymous with elaborated native models of the social. As always, understanding native knowledge holds the key to how anthropologists achieve an independence of perspective. In multi-sited work, the anthropologist does take the native construction of the social seriously, as something to absorb, critique, and extend, but in moving beyond an initial site where situated knowledge is very literally probed in relationship to its referent elsewhere, the anthropologist produces his or her own construction of the social within reach. This construction based on fieldwork in other sites is played back eventually within an initial one, often as a critical challenge or intervention to so-called native sociology found there. A critical engagement with particular elite or expert representations of the social, understood itself through acts of ethnographic fieldwork, by the anthropologist who eventually returns to elite sites with the experience of grounded ethnography among referents that are only imagined or abstractly constructed in elite visions of the social, is the most fulfilling end of multi-sited ethnographic projects.

In a sense, this is what anthropologists have always done in their traditional terrain — undermining the West's view of primitives, exotic others, through bringing back detailed, empirical knowledge of such referent peoples. Only now the terrain and geography of this traditional task have changed considerably, reconfiguring and fragmenting the communities among whom anthropologists move and define their work.

So, on the one hand multi-sited ethnography faces macro-theoretical and historical narrative efforts to represent what it develops in complicity with social actors — the social within reach of ethnographic projects — and on the other hand, builds its knowledge through strategies of work with these actors that has its moments of complex interdependence with as well as independence from them. All the social will ever be again for anthropologists most affected by the cultural turn is in these productive gaps, dialogues, and engagements, on two fronts. This is by no means an unfavourable place for anthropologists to be after the cultural turn.

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