

# Working the aporia: ethnography, embodiment and the ethnographic self

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## Abstract

A more considered sense of the embodied nature of encounter is called for in the scholarship of ethnography. This paper argues for an ethnographic practice that accordingly moves beyond simplistic recounts of ‘highly personalised styles and their self-absorbed mandates’ (Van Maanen, 2011: 73), to more fully position an understanding of the ethnographer’s Self as an also encountered ‘site’. Taking cues from Heidegger’s (2008/1927) formulation of *Dasein* and the realisation of the Self through the encountered Other, this paper argues that attempts to make sense of the Other in ethnography – ultimately the *raison d’être* of ethnographic practice – concomitantly require an accounting-for of the Self. This paper takes aim at the nature of embodiment as central to the experience of encounter, but will argue that this encounter of the Self functions as an *aporia*: a site of unknowing, but equally, of generative possibility. It is with the effects that embodiment has and the inflections it provides for the ethnography that particular attention is given.

## Keywords

Aporia, encounter, embodiment, Dasein, ethnographic self, emplaced ethnography

*Let us ask: what takes place, what comes to pass with the aporia? Is it possible to undergo or to experience the aporia, ‘the’ aporia as such? (Derrida, 1993: 32–33)*

## Introduction

This paper presents as an outcome of a series of conversations between the authors framed by the consideration of what it means to *do* ethnography in terms of the Self. Acutely aware of the complexities that confront the contemporary ethnographer, our realisations drew attention to the positioning of the Self in relation to the Other and the shadow this casts over what can be represented in the writing of ethnographic tales. In light of recent methodological debates (Coffey, 1999; Pink, 2009; Robertson, 2002; Vannini, 2016) around the place of the ethnographer and the ethnographer's corporeal presence – a presence discernible via the ethnographer's *embodiment* – we set out to consider how this realisation of the Self configures ethnographic practice. In particular, we sought within our reflections to draw attention back to what has been termed the 'crisis of representation' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 18; Marcus and Fischer, 1986) and the implications that this has for declarations of the Self within ethnographic writing.

To do this, and to provide a point of reference for this consideration of the centrality of embodiment in the production of ethnography, we will work through our own speculative reflections on a site that is common to both authors: *the hospital*. We note that the literature on ethnography within hospitals, and broadly, the experience of ethnographers within institutionalised settings of medicine and health-care, is extensive and includes seminal works by Roth (1963), Beynon (1987), Davis and Horobin (1977), Delamont (1987) and Lather and Smithies (1997). In amongst setting out considerations for how ethnography might be done in such settings, these works also outline the politics of ethnographic practice within the hospital-as-site and the nature of hospitals as 'complex' settings; settings infused with highly structured modes of interaction and interpersonal dynamics.

Our intention in this paper is not, however, to extend these considerations of the politics and poetics of ethnography on (and *in*) systems of health and health-care, but to instead position this site (*viz.* 'the hospital') as a site of intense emotional, physical, psychic and cultural investment – a site that 'draws out' the ethnographer as a setting that 'requires' something from those situated within it. Accordingly, our focus is to extend considerations of how the ethnographer comes to realise a sense of her/his own positioning in terms of what sites like the hospital provoke as complex locations of research.

After posing some reflections on how it is we have each come to understand ethnography in light of conceptual prompts offered by Martin Heidegger (2008/1927), Jacques Derrida (1993) and (prominently) Patti Lather (1997, 2001), we turn to consider how our own emotive experiences with hospitals come to inflect what is done in our practice. Accounts from each author, written in the form of a 'free writing'

vignette, provide the basis for considering **how this realisation** of the embodied Self of the ethnographer inflects the ethnography and implicates ethnographic practice with the legacies of previous encounter, experience and memory. In making sense of what these reflections suggest about our practice, we extend Lather's considerations of the 'aporia' of ethnography – those moments of uncertainty that open for view the 'distance' that exists between ethnographer and Other and ethnographer and field – to make a case for what we cast here as an 'aporia of embodiment'.

A particular focus of the discussions that inform this paper centred on the place we each assumed in the production of our own ethnographies and the nature of ethnography as a necessarily situated and embodied method. By this, we refer to ethnography as a method practised and produced in-situ by ethnographers who come to share the space/s of the field *with* Others. These two aspects of ethnographic practice – its situatedness and the embodied positioning of the ethnographer – emerged as central to our considerations. On this, we align with Sarah Pink's (2009) arguments regarding the position(ing) of the ethnographer as an 'emplaced' being, undertaking ethnography that 'attends to questions of experience by accounting for relationships between bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensorality of the environment' (p. 25). In short, we consider ethnography as an embodied pursuit practiced in *conjunction with* Others and in doing so, seek to problematise the methodological assumptions that come with writing from the position of the Self.

Although acknowledging the continuing effects of what have come to be called the 'writing culture debates' that permeated ethnography through the 1980s and 1990s, Borneman and Hamoudi (2009), following a similar argument made by Fine (2003), contend that 'being there' still holds significance and presents as a fundamental aspect of ethnographic practice; a position we share. As Borneman and Hamoudi (2009) argue:

...recent theoretical discussions of fieldwork have largely undermined belief in the *necessity of experiential encounters* and consequently have limited researchers' ethnographic curiosity. (p. 8; emphasis added)

In taking this cue, we suggest that ethnography is marked by the *encounter* as its principle methodological feature, with the mediation of the ethnographic encounter then standing as fundamental to the formulation of those representations that come to be made of (and from) the field. In seeking an encounter with the Other and in recording the experience of the field (an encounter also), the definitive feature of ethnographic practice is found. The approach we outline here suggests that the encounter *is* ethnography; that is to say that without the association to an Other and place, ethnography has no foundation.

Concomitant with these assertions however is the realisation that the encounter also extends to the embodied Self. Indeed, we note that the literature of ethnography is peculiarly silent on this point,<sup>1</sup> and that more should be made of the effects that physical embodiment has on the ethnographer and the subsequent influence this exerts on the production of ethnographic writing. The corporeality of the ethnographer is particularly significant in the formation and telling of ethnographic tales, with representations from the field filtered through the researcher's embodied experience of having 'been there'. Just as the sense of the field is mediated through the emplacement of the ethnographer *in* the field, so too are the researcher's encounters with the embodied Self as the field is negotiated and as an emergent sense-of-Self is experienced. As Vannini (2016) asserts, 'we have a body that serves as a fundamental corporeal anchor in the world... meaning is comprised *in* embodied action'; (p. 9), with these realisations of a Self emplaced – an embodied being corporeally experienced – providing an important prompt for both the conduct of the ethnography and the claims the ethnographer might assert.

A sense of the embodied nature of the encounter is hence called for in ethnographic writing, and we argue for an ethnographic practice that accordingly moves beyond simplistic recounts of 'highly personalised styles and their self-absorbed mandates' (Van Maanen, 2011: 73), to more fully position an understanding of the ethnographer's Self as an (also) encountered site. What we suggest by this is that the ethnographer's accounting for Self should do more than produce, as Van Maanen (2011) argues, 'confessional tales' alone. Such reflexive tales, reconstituted after the encounter has passed and focussed typically on the externalities of methodological choice and the dispositional self-awareness of the ethnographer, do little to account for how ethnography comes to be practised *in-the-moment* and *in-the-flesh* as an embodied act. Instead, we seek here to enrich these reflexive tales by uncovering what it means for practical decisions to be made according to this corporeality. This represents what Herzfeld (2009) identifies as the turn away from an 'anthropology of embodiment' to an 'embodied anthropology' – a conceptual and physical shift in the positioning of the body within ethnography that considers the function of embodiment as central to the production of ethnographic tales. The physical situatedness of the Self is essential to the conduct of ethnography with the effects of this corporeality prescribing certain responses and reactions as these are encountered in the field.

On the surface, the considerations for the sort of practice we have in mind might appear superficial: *What does it mean to have one's legs ache after a day of walking with participants? What does it mean to not fully concentrate on a participant's dialogue because of a distracted gaze to gain one's bearings? What does it mean to be focussed on feelings of vulnerability when unsure about one's place in a setting?* But when considered according to how these realisations shape the conduct of an ethnography and the performance of the ethnographer, it

emerges that the embodied nature of ethnography must be given attention as fundamental to ethnographic practice. Our inquiry is hence premised on what Van Maanen (2011) refers to as the ‘hauntingly *personal*’ (p. ix; emphasis added) aspects of ethnography – an ethnography that prefaces the embodied experience of practising ethnography in order to produce *meaningful* insights into the effects of emplacement.

### **The physical self**

‘Embodied ethnography’ as it has been termed by Monaghan (2006) has emerged in recent years as a response to ‘bring the body back in’ (Monaghan, 2006: 225) for ethnographic consideration. Although of significance in problematising otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions around the ethnographer’s physicality in the field and positionality in conjunction with the encountered Other, this consideration of the ‘obdurate reality of flesh and blood bodies’ (Monaghan, 2006: 225) does however position the body as a further object of inquiry or observation in itself. We seek, alternatively, to draw a distinction between the positioning of the corporeal materiality of the body – its physicality *per se* – as a focus of study to instead consider the *effects* that this physicality has on what can be known from the ethnographic encounter. This is a concern that seeks to listen to the corporeality of the ethnographer’s Self, but in doing so also seeks to question the effects that this has on the practice of ethnography and the subsequent production of ethnographic tales.

An illustration of this distinction is offered with Nilan’s (2002) accounts of her fieldwork and the vulnerability she experienced of being ‘intensely engaged’ (p. 366) within the fieldwork encounter. In relaying her experience of being present during the Singaraja ‘Black Thursday’ riots directly following the first open democratic elections in Indonesia in 1999, Nilan relays the experience of coming to recognise the positionality she held:

On the morning of the 21st October I was scheduled to give a lecture commencing at 7.00 am at the teachers’ college. The campus was curiously deserted when I arrived, and only about 20 students came for the lecture. About 15 minutes after I began speaking I received a call on my cellular phone from one of my co-researchers, warning of violent riots up near the *kantor bupati* (mayoral office), about three kilometres away. He told me to go home as quickly as possible and stay inside. Having warned and dismissed the students I ran outside to the street but all public transport had vanished and I had to walk and run with several of my female students, up the long street to our houses. As we ran past the closed and shuttered, silent houses and government offices, a series of loud explosions shook the ground and two large plumes of smoke streamed up a hundred metres into the sky from the direction of the mayoral office. The roar of a thousand voices could be heard. All three of the students with me began to cry. *I felt an intense sense of foreboding, but asked the students what they were feeling*

(*researcher in control and getting field data*). 'Takut!' (*frightened*) they whispered, as they ran into their houses. Obvious really. (Nilan, 2002: 372; emphasis added)

Nilan's *feeling* of the moment inflected the accounts she could make of that moment – in this case, these were feelings of fear and trepidation combined with the necessity to maintain some sense of control. This was a moment that brought with it a necessity to recognise the physical, embodied Self, as the experience dictated:

The mob occupied the central business district, throwing fire-bombs, cutting down trees, throwing rocks, bottles, shouting slogans and beating on fences with sticks and iron bars. The smoke and noise were intense, especially during the two-hour period when my street was under attack. For most of this time I was lying on the floor of my house with a wet handkerchief over my mouth and nose, eyes streaming from the toxic smoke, in momentary expectation of a fire-bomb coming through the front window, since mine was a typical government resident's house. There was nothing to do but endure. (Nilan, 2002: 373)

The significance of the moment centred on the stark realisation that this extraordinary situation gave to Nilan's physicality. In this dangerous moment, attention was drawn to Nilan's practice *through her physicality* and the encounters it provoked. These encounters then worked to frame in deliberate ways the nature of her conduct, but equally, caused her to reflexively account for her physical emplacement. As Nilan highlights, this declaration of her physicality worked to 'remind, and clarify for the researcher, exactly what kind of subject position he or she occupies' (Nilan, 2002: 369).

In finding herself lying on the floor, her gaze jaundiced by the physical constraints she experienced within that room and the very real threat posed by the riots outside, the nature of Nilan's ethnographic observation was cast. The vantage point she held (or didn't, as it appeared) physically constrained what could be made of the moment, the stark reality of possessing an expatriate body situated in this foreign place dictating what could be witnessed according to the nature of *this* emplacement. The encounter in this regard was markedly corporeal to the point that her own embodiment held the threat to her safety. The encountered Other, known via the noise and disruption of the street below and the toxic smoke that billowed around her building, caused the realisation of the precarity of her presence as this moment unfolded. The insights she was able to gain were not just of the setting and its local inhabitants, but also of her positionality as a researcher, an expatriate, a woman, and the desire she felt to maintain the persona of the emotionally detached 'researcher in control' (p. 372). She was at one and the same time constrained by the physicality of her embodiment but drawn to read the situation through this presence and the feelings of fear and foreboding that this extraordinary encounter provoked.

## The physicality of presence

Ethnography requires something from the ethnographer and it is through the physical engagement with a site and its participants that the ethnographer enacts her/his practice. What this experience of being situated *means*, and how the encounter with the sensations of the embodied Self orients the ethnography, are borne from the position of the emplaced body: the physically situated and corporeally 'present' ethnographer. Allen-Collinson and Owton's (2015) suggestions are resonant here:

While the investigation of cultural (and subcultural) constructions of the body and its inscription by discourse are of course worthy research endeavours... such focus may result in an *under-theorization of the materiality of the lived body*. (p. 246; emphasis added)

We extend this to suggest that the encounters of ethnography are in fact mediated by the physicality of the experience, realised as these are *through* the body as *corporeal* encounters. It is with the limitations of the body, situated according to its physical presence, that the ethnographer's gaze comes to be cast and the interpretative lens mediated. The physicality of the body dictates the terms of the ethnography in that it is from the perspective of emplacement that the ethnography is written.

## Aporias of self

In making this case for the embodied nature of the ethnographic encounter, we draw attention to the fact that ethnography is produced within an *aporia*. The aporia proceeds as a lacuna, a moment of uncertainty and speculation in which the suspension of a 'certain viability' (Derrida, 1993: 33) causes a search beyond the moment of the impasse. The aporia stands as a space of un-knowing, represented by the imperative that ethnography has to make sense of this unknown through the discovery of the Other. The separations that mark the aporia prefigure the distance between the ethnographic Self and Other and the Self and field, but also, significantly (and as the focus of this paper suggests), those 'distances' *within* the Self. It is the encounter with the Other and the unfamiliarity of the field that provokes the aporia, and it is at the point of the aporia – at the moment of realisation of the separation between Self and Other, Self and field – that ethnographic interpretation is formulated from the position of the emplaced Self.

The speculation of this moment is relayed in the interpretivist nature of ethnography. The interpretations offered to resolve the aporia only ever stand as approximations of a knowledge of the Other and of the field, with the speculation of the encounter providing the invitation for interpretation to proceed – a moment to give sense to the unknown and unfamiliar. We suggest that a core feature of ethnography can be characterised as this search to resolve the aporia of encounter

between the Self and Other, but in extending this claim, also suggest that ethnography takes its cues from a desire to resolve the encounter with the ethnographic Self. The aporia is hence experienced simultaneously upon the encounter with the Other and the emergent cognition the ethnographer has of being emplaced, but simultaneously *out-of-place*.

Taking further cues from Nilan (2002), we suggest that this moment of ethnographic encounter is *bewildering*. At the superficial level, ethnography is about exposure with the unknown, but further to this, in coming to the realisation of being out-of-place and not knowing *exactly* what to do, how to act or how to inhabit the frame of the body in the moment of encounter, an uncertainty with Self also emerges. How this uncertainty comes to be resolved stands at the very core of ethnographic practice. Whether pushed back and subjugated according to a persona of the researcher 'in control', as per Nilan's (2002) accounts, or embraced rhetorically as the locus of the 'personally haunting' aspects of ethnography (Van Maanen, 2011), this impasse of the realisation of the Self in the moment of encounter is significant to the production of the ethnographic tale.

But far from being a location of impossibility, the aporia of the ethnographic Self presents as an opportunity for creative sense-making, as a moment of possibility (Lather, 1997). Who the ethnographer is in this moment of ethnographic encounter is a product of this emplacement, mediated as an outcome of the experience of the moment and the physicality of being in-the-field at that time. What is claimed, ethnographically, is shaped by the encounter and the attempted resolutions of the aporias of Self-to-Other and of Self-as-embodied. In other words, it is with the encounter and with what this encounter provokes that the embodied, corporeally present ethnographic Self is exposed for scrutiny and creative resolution.

### **Encounter and the ethnographic self**

It follows that a sense of 'being' and of 'being-situated' are crucial for the realisation of the ethnographic encounter (Coffey, 1999). The nature of the ethnographic encounter is one that is necessarily embodied, in that it is between bodies that ethnographies progress. But extending this, it is through the sense of embodiment that arises from emplacement in the field that the central contention of this paper emerges: *what does it mean to encounter the Self within ethnography?* We realise that this question is not entirely new, but suggest that it is one that remains as not yet fully answered.<sup>2</sup> While we agree with Pink's (2009) assertion that 'it is now frequently recognised that...we need to investigate the ethnographers' own emplacement as individuals in and as part of specific research contexts' (p. 25), we also suggest that how this coming-to-awareness of Self might proceed is fundamental to what emerges from the ethnography.



In order to provide theoretical markers for how this account of the Self might be considered, we conjure Heidegger's (2008/1927) conceptualisation of *Dasein* as a point for contemplating ethnographic emplacement. For Heidegger (2008/1927), 'being there' corresponds as the capacity the human subject has to consider one's Self in conjunction with (or indeed, according to) a world of Others. In Heidegger's terms, this 'being-with' (p. 155) points towards a sense of commonality that a cognisance of shared emplacement prescribes: *Dasein*. As Heidegger (2008/1927) puts it, "'being-in-the-world"...is always the one that I share with Others' (p. 155). Being together, in place, provides the first point of connection, a moment of potential recognition of the aporia between Self and Other.

Heidegger's (2008/1927) positioning of the Self as only knowable in conjunction with the Other hence offers a useful parallel for understanding the place of the ethnographer in-the-world of the field.<sup>3</sup> We argue that a corollary for ethnography is found in these assertions, and take a cue from Heidegger's (2008/1927) accounts of what it might mean to make sense of the Self, both in terms *of* and *through* the Other. We argue that this attempt to make sense of the Other concomitantly provokes an accounting of the Self, and in doing so strikes at the very core of what it means to position one's Self as 'ethnographer'.

The encounter, then, stands as the point of focus for the ethnography not only in terms of what this encounter provides for the subject of the ethnographic inquiry, but also in its provocation for an insight into the ethnographic Self. Importantly, the encounter offers the possibility for accounting for the Self *as* embodied – as a physically material being, emplaced within the site of the field, simultaneously shaping and shaped-by the encounter. Considering ethnography as an amalgam of encounters – as a 'peopled' undertaking as Fine (2003) suggests – both in terms of the encounters that occur between Self and Other but also in terms of the realisations the cognisant ethnographer has as Self-as-embodied, opens the possibility for a more fully explicated ethnography. By approaching the Other with this ethic of encounter, the ethnographer seeks:

...inquiry... a cognizant seeking for an entity both with regard to the fact that it is and with regard to its Being as it is. This cognizant seeking can then take the form of 'investigating', in which one lays bare that which the question is about and ascertains its character. (Heidegger, 2008/1927: 24)

Following Borneman and Hammoudi's (2009) suggestion that 'given the diversity of predicaments in fieldwork, the notion of encounter may offer a useful conceptual angle for analysis' (p. 270), we argue that the further theorisation of the *embodied* nature of the ethnographic encounter must be central to ethnographic practice. As a primary site of encounter, accounting for the embodied Self as realised through emplacement *in* the field of the ethnography stands as a fundamental point of orientation for the writing of ethnographic tales.

## **Ethnographies of self**

The 'reflexive turn' (Foley, 2002; May, 2002: 12) constitutes the predominant response to the dilemmas posed by this attempt to account for the Self in ethnographic practice, with the turn 'inward' characterising the '4<sup>th</sup> moment' of ethnographic practice in Denzin and Lincoln's terms (2005: 18). Ethnography under these conditions draws attention to the self-awareness of the ethnographer, usually under the guise of the 'confessional tale' (Van Maanen, 2011).

A feature of ethnographies that attempt this recount of the place of the ethnographer is the exposure of 'the intimate relations between the field, significant others and the private self' along with 'processes of self-presentation and identity construction' (Coffey, 1999: 1). We draw attention to Amanda Coffey's (1999) observation however that it has 'become fashionable for individual researchers to "personalize" their accounts of fieldwork' (p. 1) as a response to this inward turn.

Significant contributions already exist within the literature that point to the possibilities of reflexive ethnographies (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1996; Coffey, 1999; Collins and Gallinat, 2010; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Lather, 1997, 2001), but we seek here to identify some of the more problematic aspects of looking *too* far inward and the risk that over-emphasising the represented Self has on the production of ethnographic tales. Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2016), for instance, identify concerns for the over-investment in personalised accounts that come at the expense of 'peopled' ethnographies, drawing as they do on Fine's (2003) earlier conceptualisations of an ethnography that takes its cues from the interactions that ethnographies should preface.

The focus of such 'evocative personal narratives' (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1996: 286) is typically with the self-articulation of the influence exerted by the ethnographer over what is witnessed and what is then represented in the ethnographic tale. Of specific attention in such accounts is the questioning of the personal nature of fieldwork, the particularity (and partiality) of singular points-of-view (as drawn into focus by the cognisant and reflexive ethnographer-in-action) and the nature of ethnography as representational. Such reflexive self-awareness attempts to account for what happens in, and what comes to be reported from, the ethnography through the lens of the Self.

However, problems also emerge from this centring of the ethnographer's reflexivity. Jennifer Robertson (2002) makes the point that 'egocentrism is one of the pitfalls to avoid in exercising reflexivity' (p. 785). Nash and Bradley (2011) extend this when noting that such narratives place scholars:

... at the center of their research design. Everything else, although of pivotal significance, evolves from and revolves around the self-exploration of the author. Data collection, literature reviews, and the analysis and interpretation of data

(whether empirical or theoretical) emanate from the central themes and the *self-narration of the writer*. (p. 87; emphasis added)

The risk inherent in the production of self-reflexive tales corresponds with the indulgence of delving too far into the accounts of the Self, something Van Maanen (2011) refers to as ‘the blackhole of introspection’, a ‘confessional tale obsessed with method’ (p. 92).

We argue that reflexivity in ethnography must clearly do more than appease a ‘tendency to dwell reflexively on the self’ (Collins and Gallinat, 2010: 3). Instead, the possibilities that reflexive considerations of Self might offer beyond the confessional tale should take as their cue the *embodied* placement of the ethnographer in-the-field – accounts of the ethnographer situated in-conjunction with and known-through those Others encountered. This is a concern that places the realisation of the ethnographer as *Dasein* – as embodied and as set in-relation-to the field and its inhabitants – at the point of this aporia.

When considered according to *Dasein* and the physicality of being in-the-field, reflection on the Self as embodied and corporeally realised provides a useful prompt for determining *how* the ethnography comes to be inflected in ways that are directly implicated by the physicality of the emplaced Self. This is more than the retelling of an ‘acute political and epistemological self consciousness’ (Clifford and Marcus, 1986: 7), and seeks to avoid the risks of ‘egocentrism’ (Robertson, 2002: 785). Instead this approach to the consideration of embodiment moves to detail an active account of the *implications* of this ethnographic presence and how the ethnography comes to be shaped accordingly.

We sought to think through our own practice in these terms, via the encounters we had each experienced and according to what these said about the ethnographies we could produce. Instead of casting reflections of the Self as an extension to the representational corpus of the ethnography – a narrativising of the Self as part of the tale – we argue that considering the corporeality of emplacement in the field and the encounter of Self as a moment of aporia offers the opportunity to more fully realise (and account for) the physicality of being. In taking this approach, we shift the focus from *who* we are as ethnographers, to *how* we are placed in the field. We suggest then that the ethnographer is drawn to confront the effects of the emplaced Self, not only in terms of the aporia that sits between the Self and Other as the ethnographic encounter externally mediates, but also in terms of the aporia of Self and the coming to awareness of the physical body, situated and active in terms of this positionality in the production of ethnographic tales.

Such accounts of emplacement are hence *corporeally realist* in their attempts to chart a case for how the ethnographer’s presence comes to be felt through the body and physically enacted. These sit as ‘carnal sociologies’ in the sense that Loic Wacquant (2003) sees them, providing ‘a demonstration in action of the

fruitfulness of an approach that takes seriously, at the theoretical, methodological, and rhetorical levels, the fact that the social agent is before anything else a being of flesh, nerves, and senses' (vii).

But equally, these disclosures of the physical Self also attempt to account for the ways decisions come to be made through the body, as the encountered Self is experienced according to its unfamiliarity. In broaching this exposure of the aporia of the Self as a site from which an account of the Self (and ultimately the claims to legitimacy that tales from the field) might be made, we seek not to reify the embodied Self as an object of superficial representational scrutiny (the subject of a further 'anthropology of embodiment'), but instead position the emplaced physical body within the context of the field and as knowable through the encounter with Other, with field and, consequently, with the emergent realisations of the Self that follow (viz., an 'embodied anthropology'). The embodied Self functions as the point from which the ethnography is enacted. It follows that it should be through the body that a sense of how the ethnography proceeded should also be exposed.

### **An explication: sites of the self**

To extend this theorisation of the effects of embodiment on the conduct of ethnography, we set about reflecting on how we each came to the ethnographies we had undertaken. In particular, we started to consider how life experiences were taken with us *into* the field, and what effects these exerted on our ethnographic interpretations and representations. After 'trading notes' on specific sites and practices, we commenced by recounting our respective impressions from a field to which we had both been exposed but had not yet (formally) undertaken ethnography: *the hospital*. We had each had traumatic life experiences in hospitals that carry profound effects on who we are *as individuals*. Consequently, the sorts of memories that are invoked by hospitals are raw and visceral. Hospitals therefore offered a useful example for examining what effects a site might yield, prior to the undertaking of an ethnography.

With this point of commonality identified, and as a prompt for further consideration of the effects our embodiment might have, we set about recording, individually, a short narrative reflection on the site of the hospital and the relationships we had with it. We each sought to capture how our individual bodies reacted in our encounters with the hospital, the associations we drew and the ways in which our emplaced Selves influenced our perceptions of this 'field'. The impressions recorded were formed in separate moments and according to our own personal experiences, yet significantly in their own ways carry a common core. We drew on these recollections to prompt our consideration of the embodied and situated nature of ethnography.

These weren't highly considered recounts; we literally gave ourselves the task of free-writing, in the way that Belanoff et al. (1991) would suggest. Here was a first foray into the Self, an effort to capture reflections as representations-in-writing of deeper considerations for how the encounter with this field proceeded and how our respective physicality within it came to affect our reception of this place and its accompanying encounters. These accounts offered an insight into what we came to know about our Selves, and how this site exerted a mediating effect on who we are.

These accounts of experience from the hospital-as-site weren't expected to be 'shown...to anyone' nor necessarily expected to 'make sense or be understandable' (Belanoff et al., 1991: ix). Equally, our reflections were not centred around a specific hospital, but related to a conflation of hospitals-as-institutions *in general*, formed as they were by experiences, broadly, with several hospitals. Our intent was not to be overly descriptive of this site itself, but to capture our physical-emotional responses to our encounters with these spaces. Importantly, these reflections were not specifically ethnographic by intent, with this significant consideration highlighting the effects that these spaces had on us beyond the identities we had each assumed as 'ethnographers'. This itself was an important consideration in terms of how we might come to enter *this* field, carrying as we do the legacies of lives lived.

In setting ourselves this task, we recorded the following impressions:

Carly *Even today, when my losses are less raw, I get very anxious*  
says: *in hospitals. I'm acutely aware that this is a rather serious place and that I should act with suitable deference. Restraint. Detachment. I associate hospitals with sickness, death and loss, even though I know, of course, that hospitals can also be places of great relief, courage and even joy. This may be a remnant of my own experiences of hospitals, but still... My sense of being me is subsumed by this space, and I retreat. I continue to be reduced to playing the role of grieving daughter-granddaughter-friend, "handling it all so well". But what is it—exactly—about hospitals themselves that continue to cause such trepidation? Is it the largeness of these buildings? The incongruent smells of antiseptic, prison food and shit? The hardness of those flouro lights and squeaky floors? The emotional coldness of this atmosphere seems at odds with the intensely personal stories unfolding here. I want to rant-scream-run-punch-cry... but I remain stiff and stony-faced in this place of 'healing'.*

Andrew *My relationship with the hospital is one of extremes. Both*  
says: *my boys were born in hospitals. I also witnessed the slow*

*decline of my brother and father-in-law in various oncology and palliative care wards. These were moments of negotiation; of the self, of the prevailing sense of being public in these moments of intense intimacy and of confronting appropriate forms of joy and grief as public demonstrations of these emotions require. Confronting others who were in similar moments, but unable to negotiate how to feel and 'be' according to the dimensions of the hospital heightened the loneliness of these places. I couldn't know these experiences of others or do anything when confronting their grief or joy. It wasn't appropriate to express congratulations and joy on the birth of a new life when encountering unknown proud new parents in a corridor. It wasn't appropriate to be sorry for the ending of another person's life. These moments—these profound moments of lives commenced and ended—couldn't be shared outside of a close circle of intimate others. The hospital hadn't quite caught-on to social conventions in this sense. The site itself provided an acute realisation that this public space wasn't so public at all. This wasn't the space to connect with others. The hospital provided all the metaphors of this distance. Cold hallways, decaying paint and worn edges. Uncomfortable chairs in sterile rooms where moments of consolation could be stolen before encounters in the hallways provoked further speculation. Comfort was scarce. This space was not one in which these moments of extremes should have been spent.*

In the hospital, our experiences were carried with us. Previous trauma associated with the hospital became apparent in how we came to see and engage with these spaces. Already a view was cast. The feelings attached to this space ceded immediate reactions; the sensoria induced by the hospital carried legacies in memory in the sorts of ways that Pink (2009) suggests when noting that 'sensory memory is an inextricable element of how we know in practice, and indeed part of the processes through which ways of knowing are constituted' (p. 38). The place of the hospital provoked reactions from memory, so that 'moving in or through a given place...imports its own emplaced past into its present experience' (Casey, 1987: 194).

To be in this place meant to invoke this past, sensorally – the path through the geriatric ward and its overwhelming smell of urine and disinfectant. The stark coldness of the connecting hallway between the old and new wings and the sense of loneliness this carried. The startling glare of fluorescent lighting in the oncology reception as the entrance from the dark hallway was made and the

momentary disorientation that followed. All of these things were corporeally realised but drawn into the memory at the faintest hint. We had, through the process of engaging this dialogue of our respective experiences, come to realise that our relationship with the site of the hospital was framed already. The legacy of these earlier experiences had set the scene. Any future involvement with these spaces would be inflected with the memories we carried. But more importantly, a realisation of who we were was also activated. How we reacted to the hospital and the feelings that it invoked provided an insight into the sorts of views we could produce of this site. We *felt* our way through the hospital as a deeply emplaced practice of encounter.

Although these considerations begged questions about what counts as ethnography, where the ethnography ends and what constitutes the nature of the ethnographic tale (could *any* reflections be considered as ethnographic in this regard?), moments such as these (and similar experiences with other sites and settings) were ‘made’ ethnographic when they were conjured in memory, invoking responses in our later work. The legacies of these moments inflected the present and brought with them the memories of previous encounters. However well concealed these may have been, the effects of these encounters lingered on.

#### **A fourth aporia: embodiment**

In an attempt to provide a sense of how this formulation of the aporia of the embodied Self might be conceptualised, we seek to provide an extension of Lather’s (1997) typology of the aporias of ethnography by also considering an *aporia of embodiment*. As Lather (1997) identifies, the aporia emerges in three forms: within *ethics*, *representation* and *interpretation*. The first, *ethics*, deals with the fundamental nature of the encounter, or as Lather (1997) notes ‘I want to trouble the romance of empowerment in the face of the invasive stretch of surveillance’ (pp. 482–483) invoked by ethnography as a practice. The aporia present within this dynamic is one that questions the capacity of ethnography to *give voice*:

Given the dangers of research to the researched, ethnographic traditions of romantic aspirations about giving voice to the voiceless are much troubled in the face of manipulation, violation and betrayal inherent in ethnographic representation. (Lather, 1997: 483)

This aporia draws attention to the distance between Self and Other, and the assumption of the role of the ethnographer to speak *for* (or, at least, *on behalf of*).

Lather moves to position the nature of *representation: authenticity* and *voice* as the second aporia of ethnography. What does it mean to report authentically? What is an *authentic* ethnography? This aporia speaks to authority of voice and the trust that might be placed in ethnographers’ accounts. As Lather (1997) notes, ‘in contemporary regimes of

disciplinary truth-telling, authenticity and voice are at the heart of claims to the “real” in ethnography’ (p. 483). A typical response to this aporia has been the declaration of the ethnographer’s viewpoint as partial, incomplete and subjective in an effort to frame the nature of representations of the field. Via the exposé that the ‘confessional tale, authorial self-revelation, multivoicedness and personal narrative’ (Lather, 1997: 483) provide, a sense of authenticity around the positionality of voice is inferred. The problem remains, however, that these self-avowals stand as partial claims in themselves:

Whatever it means for a writer to speak as a this or a that, authenticity is much more complicated than singular, transparent, static identity categories assumed to give the writer a particular view. (Lather, 1997: 484)

Extending from this concern, the third aporia for Lather (1997) surfaces in acts of *interpretation* and the complicities from which these are drawn. The question of this aporia centres on the authority by which interpretations might be made and the nature of ‘misrepresentation [as] part of telling stories about people’s lives, our own included’ (Lather, 1997: 485). As with the second aporia, the risk inherent in the declaration of the authorial point of interpretation as partial lies in the ‘recentering of the angst of the researcher’ (Lather, 1997: 484) in the production of what Van Maanen (2011) calls ‘vanity ethnography’ (93).

To offer something of a resolution to these surfacings of the aporia,<sup>4</sup> Lather (1997) notes that her intention is not the easy resolution of these tensions, but the awareness that they are indeed present: ‘my interest is more in getting us lost: reader, writer and written about’ (p. 485). This is a realisation that ethnography does derive from ‘messy, uncertain, multivoiced’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 26) accounts of lives lived, and that reportings of these will always be incomplete and partial.

However, we argue that something more is missing in these configurations of the aporias of ethnography. The acknowledgment of the emplacement of the ethnographer and the aporia that rests with the ethnographer’s own accounting of a Self as embodied *and* emplaced is, as we have argued throughout this paper, also central to ethnography. Moving beyond the limitations of the confessional tale, we suggest that there are important revelations about the ethnographer’s Self that should be acknowledged in the production of ethnographies, but that these revelations should derive from the cognisance of the ethnographer’s corporeality – the ethnographer’s physical emplacement.

Extending from Lather’s (1997) categorisations, then, we suggest that a fourth aporia, presented in the form of an *aporia of embodiment*, might also be considered as core to ethnographic practice. Realising one’s Self to be both physically situated and embodied draws with it the cognisance that *to know* derives from ‘the body’s awareness and motility’ (Parviainen, 2002: 13). We seek to situate the ethnographer as the site of this aporia and as a ‘Cartesian



cogito [that] has been replaced by something capable of kinaesthesia' (Parviainen, 2002: 16). The confessional, self-reflexive declaration of the ethnographer's place in the field is not enough in the accounting of Self required in ethnography. Instead, we suggest that an *aporia* of embodiment situates the emplacement of the ethnographer as central to the ethnographic tale, but in ways that consider the effects of this emplacement on what can be said in the ethnography.

The question that emerges from this consideration asks: *what is it that our corporeality provokes when engaged in ethnography?* Our provocation for this paper commenced with this point, and in asking what might emerge from an *aporia* of embodiment we sought to move on from questions of *representation, authenticity* and *interpretation* (Lather, 1997) alone, to consider what this realisation of a Self emplaced might mean for ethnographic practice. This also included the realisation of the Self beyond ethnography to consider how being situated draws on far wider influences than those of the ethnographic moment itself – in our case, how the effects of previous experiences of the hospital exert themselves in the present. This is an approach to ethnography invested in embracing the *aporia* of the embodied Self not as a means for lamenting the 'ruins' of ethnography through some disavowal of the meaningful (and valuable) reportings of which ethnography is capable, but to open new opportunities for the production of emplaced and corporeally realist knowledge.

As researchers, if we can work this *aporia of embodiment* – that is, if we can embrace this in-between place of the ethnographic Self by asking what effects our presence has on the production of understandings of Self and the field – then our practices as ethnographers can only be enriched. Drawn as it is through the consideration of the effects that a life-lived has on the emplaced ethnographer, we assert that what this engagement of the emplaced and embodied ethnographer offers is the opportunity for questioning not only who we are as ethnographers, but *how* we come to enact our practice.

What might it then mean to confront the *aporia* of embodiment as a generative space for questioning the effects of corporeality and emplacement? This *aporia*<sup>2</sup> sits as that which 'stops us in our tracks' (Foucault, 1998: xxiii), but equally as one that works as a point of recognition of being 'out of our depth...to be resourceful' (Lather, 1997: 482). This *aporia* of embodiment asks how the effects of a life-lived carry into the field, and how responses to the field come to be mediated accordingly. In taking stock of who we are as beings and how the relationships we have with Others stand as the outcome of a lifetime of being-in-the-world, this *aporia* of embodiment provokes a richer accounting of the field: one that is necessarily reflexive, but one that resists self-absorbed introspection in favour of a corporeally realist accounting of the effects of emplacement.

We stress this latter point to argue that possibility rests with the uncertainty of the aporia. By embracing emplacement and the embodied experience of ethnography, writ-through as this is with the legacies of a life-lived, the opportunity for the scrutiny of the effects of the emplaced ethnographer emerge. This accounting of an emplaced Self provokes an opportunity to be ‘resourceful’ in understanding how the encounters experienced by the ethnographer – encounters with the Other, with the field, but equally, with the Self – come to inflect the ethnography with meaning. The aporia of embodiment is at once a place of confusion and unknowing too often skimmed over for the purpose of the cohesive ethnographic tale. It is also, however, an important place of generative possibility. An aporia of embodiment hence provokes the consideration of the emplaced Self: in coming to a realisation of the Self in-the-moment, attention is drawn to not only what is possible in ethnography but also what the ethnography will become, enacted as an embodied, historied and emplaced practice.

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## **Notes**

1. On this point, we agree with Schilling's (1993) assessment that ‘the body has been something of an “absent presence”’ (p. 17). Herzfeld (2009) too, notes this lacuna, suggesting that ‘there are very few studies that examine, except in passing, the political dimensions of meaning-making through gesture as a theme that also holds implications for the ethnographer’s own participation in social life’ (132).

2. Some useful considerations of this point are provided by Schilling (1993), Naess (1995), Turner (2000) and Dombroski (2011). Sarah Pink's (2009) ‘emplaced ethnography’ also resonates here.

3. Madison's (2012) suggestion that the ‘paradox [for ethnography] is that Being can only know itself through the Other’ (p. 71) extends this point. This paradox, we assert, provides an insight into the driving objective of contemporary ethnography. In other words, in seeking to tell the story of the Other through ‘empathetic’ (Tedlock, 1991: 69) encounter and participation, the ethnographer is obligated as much to the telling of Self and the accounting of the ethnographer as being-in-the-world.

4. Especially this third aporia and its concerns with interpretations made of the ethnographer's own emplacement.

5. As do those identified by Lather (1997).

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