Say Why You Say It: On Ethnographic Companionship, Scale, and Effect

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Abstract

This paper explores "how ethnographic collaboration configures its data" via examination of three relations: between ethnography as method and writing, between leaky empirical and conceptual sets, and between ethnographic and rhetorical effects. I suggest that writing entails keeping the research imagination alive to two simultaneous processes of scaling—of the empirical within the text, and of diverse sets of literature in mutual relation—always with a specific focus and orientation. What emerges is an image of both 'ethnographer' and 'data' as hybrid and transformable companions.

I illustrate with reference to two quite different texts about emerging Mekong realities. Both are elicited as experimental additions to worlds. In that capacity, they are capable of generating reality effects but those effects cannot be preordained. I conclude that ethnographic collaborations find no other grounds than dic cur hic—why, here, now—or as Isabelle Stengers has formulated it "say why you say it."

Keywords: Ethnographic companions, ethnographic effect, research imagination, rhetorical effect, processes of scaling

> "All the persons in this book are real and none is fictitious even in part"
> Flann O'Brien, epigraph to *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor*

A central question motivating this special issue is "how ethnographic collaboration configures its data" (Lippert and Mewes, 2021:). The formulation combines several elements. There is ethnography in the dual capacity of a method of inquiry and a writing (-graphy) of people (ethnos). There is collaboration, a term made to encompass both humans and non-humans. Then there is 'data,' which usually designates the empirically observed, recorded, and collected stuff to be writ-ten about. But this conventional understanding is destabilized by the description of data as variably 'configured' through contingent collaborations within a 'research assemblage.' In this juxtaposition, the meanings of ethnography, collaboration, data, and their relations, all become uncertain. I highlight these uncertainties because the following reflections will *modify and intensify* them in a particular way.

The editorial introduction suggests that a 'methodographic' interest in social science research methods in practice might shape a new 'reflexive moment' within STS.[1] It would do so by facilitating examination and problematization of "what methods are performative of" (Lippert and

Mewes, 2021; see also Lippert and Douglas-Jones, 2019). The emphasis of the present contribution, in contrast, is on the porous relations between field and writing (see also Grommé and Ruppert, this issue). The focus is on how potentially interesting *problems* are given shape and scale in movements between them. What matters most, from this vantage point, is specificity about the partial connections (Jensen and Lauritsen, 2005) that make up the problem space.

If the actor-network theory premise of generalized symmetry between human and nonhuman actors is recursively applied to the scene of inquiry, both ethnographer and 'data' appear as hybrid actors. This facilitates an image of nonhuman companionship, which I specify, via Marilyn Strathern's (1999) discussion of the ethnographic effect, as heterogeneous sets established 'in the field,' 'at the desk,' and in movements between the two. Along this route, I am led to suggest that writing entails keeping the research imagination alive to two processes of scaling: of the empirical within the text, and of diverse sets of literature in relation to each other. At issue is articulating relations between heterogeneous companions populating the different sets. The effect is to give proportion to, or scale, worlds, a point I illustrate with reference to two quite different texts about emerging Mekong realities. Writing is elicited as experimental additions to, or inventive augmentations of, those realities (Jensen, 2012). But while texts generate reality effects in this manner, those effects are unpredictable and uncontrolled from the point of view of the writer.

I reach the endpoint that ethnographic configurations find no better grounds than *dic cur hic*—why, here, now—or as Isabelle Stengers (2008: 29) has formulated it "say why you say it," just in this way, on just this occasion.

The ethnographic effect

Marilyn Strathern's (1999) depiction of the ethnographic effect takes us to the heart of the matter. Ethnographic practice, she writes, has always had a "double" location in what "the tradition" distinguishes as "the field" and "the desk" (Strathern, 1999: 1). Crucially, each offers a perspective on the other. Since it can't be predicted what "infor-mation" will later turn out to be relevant, the ethnographer must in principle be open to collect anything. This turns fieldwork into an anticipatory endeavor. It generates a "'field' of information" (Strathern, 1999: 9), which will be reactivated later, in the very different context of the 'desk.' It is at this point that one seeks to produce an ethnographic effect by recreating scenes from the field in writing.

Despite fieldwork references, Strathern's discussion of the ethnographic effect is characteristically impersonal. She mentions being "dazzled" by mounted displays of pearlshells in Mt. Hagen (Strathern, 1999: 8), for example, but that experience is separate from the question of ethnographic effects that might be induced in readers. After all, they will engage the text in an indefinite future and different contexts.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems safe to say that many who read Strathern today do so not out of a deep interest in Melanesia but rather because they have come across some of her influential traveling concepts, like partial connections, post-plural societies, or dividual agents (as creatively put to use by e.g. Corsín-Jiménez, 2013; de la Cadena, 2015). Come to think of it, her observation about the acquisition and display of wealth in Mt. Hagen that "relations wither or flourish according to the properties seen to flow alongside them" so that "the *effectiveness* of relations … depends on the form in which certain objects appears" (Strathern, 1999: 16) might also be taken for a description of the fortunes of ethnographic descriptions in the hands of later users (Latour, 1987).

If the effects of writing are relationally specified by such 'later users,' authorial declarations can never be more than aspirational. Proclamations of ambition—to make nuanced descriptions, to be politically relevant or conceptually inventive, or to create generative outcomes—are of course free of charge. But they must be taken with a good pinch of salt since others will decide whether they were actually achieved. And such evaluations might be based on totally discrepant views of what is at stake.

Some provocative remarks written by the anthropologist Alfred Gell (2006) towards the end of his life provide illustration of what such incon-

gruence can look like. As part of a self-introduction, Gell (2006: xiii) observed that the increasingly prevalent critiques of colonialism appeared to him "futile in the absence of some practical activity," which rarely follows. He described his own writing as entirely oriented to the seminar culture of elite English universities; as a form of ethnographic "comedy" that did not shy away from finding "in the Other a source of amusement."

It is quite likely that many readers today will find this problematic. That would mean we are faced with discrepancy or incongruence as regards the motives for writing ethnography, the possible effects, or both. But it is worth slowing down.

If the question is whether Gell's viewpoint was elitist, the answer appears to be "yes." However, he is hardly arrogant or condescending. To the contrary, a quick inspection of the reasons he gives for sidestepping critique brings to light a sense of humility: "I have never understood how bourgeois like myself can consider themselves the class allies of third world peasants, since it seems to me we are all just walking, breathing examples of their exploitation" (Gell, 2006: 7). Against this background, 'comedic anthropology' appears as a strategy for avoiding what Gilles Deleuze (2004: 208) called *the indignity of speaking for others*.[2]

As it happened, Gell's (2006: 9) sense of "amusement" extended outwards, encompassing not only himself and "the Other" but also his esteemed colleague Marilyn Strathern, whose mind, he wrote, "works very differently from mine." "I do not think," he added, "that I have ever written anything which demanded more intellectual effort on my part" (Gell, 2006: 9). Characterizing these efforts at comprehension as "doing fieldwork all over again, but fieldwork on a text" (Gell, 2006: 9), he effectively collapsed the dichotomy between reality and writing, field and desk. And this collapse is highly significant because it facilitates exploration of the relation between ethnographic and rhetorical effects in another key. Texts appear as sites where bits of the world are *given scale* in descriptions and arguments.

Scaling arguments

It is well-known that actor-network theory depicts heterogeneous actors negotiating relations and thereby giving shape to their worlds. Some networks and interests grow stronger and bigger, while others weaken or disappear (e.g. Callon and Latour, 1981). Relatedly, Marilyn Strathern (1991) argued that actors are scaled by their relations with others.

Far from coincidental, the vagueness of these formulations as regards to who or what does the scaling—and what is thereby scaled—is deliberate and indeed pivotal (Jensen, 2007). The premise is the impossibility of mapping and matching a phenomenon to its scale in advance of examining the relations that constitute it and the effects they create. Thus, instead of pre-identifying a topic as 'macro' and assigning 'neoliberalism' or 'settler-colonialism' as the relevant explanatory rubrics, say, or as 'micro' and therefore primarily centered on 'lived experience' or 'situated interactions,' it becomes necessary to explore how phenomena, situations, or problems are *given scale*—inscribed with size and importance—by the relations actors make in various practices and situations.

In one situation, a designer inscribes a door-opener with the capacity to scale the subject, since it allows only those of sufficient size and strength to enter the room. In others, domestic lives are rescaled by changing ideas about gender. In yet others, geopolitics is rescaled by everything from 'Russian online bots' to Chinese infrastructure development. But texts and concepts also give scale to phenomena. Thus, ethnographers find themselves in a dual position. They write about how others scale the world (Tsing, 2005) and, doing so, and [they] contribute scaling it more or less similarly or differently.

To speak of a collapse of field and desk, text and world, then, is not to say that there are no differences. It means that the boundary is permeable and that whatever those differences are, they are *of the same order* as what distinguishes other actors. In terms of scaling capacities, the difference between an STS monograph ('text') and a dredging machine ('field'), say, is neither more fundamental nor inherently more significant than that between a climate policy and a weather station (both 'field').

Now this collapse might seem to loosen all constraint and undermine the very idea of serious ethnographic writing. Aren't we perilously close

to "extreme relativism"? Doesn't it follow that "anything goes"? In practice, however, constraints multiply. It will be very difficult to convince people about a great many things. Among other things, writing is kept in line by a range of genre and disciplinary conventions that delimit what it is possible to say, and how—at least if one wants to be heard.

It should be clear that this re-description conforms neither to the expectation that texts must *explain* empirical materials with theory nor to the inverse idea that they ought to *present* unadorned bits of lived reality. Instead, the double process of scaling works through lateral movements across empirical and conceptual elements, both of which are frequently found in places where they are not supposed to be (the empirical inside theory and the conceptual in the field) (Jensen, 2014).

In later sections, I offer two brief illustrations from my own writing—not because they are privileged (they are not), or particularly successful (I am not sure), or even because I *want to* (being much more disposed to a Strathernian kind of impersonality)—but because, unable to access anybody else's research and writing process, there is no choice. These examples will elicit two simultaneous scaling processes: of the empirical within the text, and of diverse sets of literature in relation to each other. In this movement, ethnographic writing morph into experimental additions to, or augmentations of, worlds.

Leaky sets and transformable relations

In *The Relation*, Marilyn Strathern (1995) made the uncontroversial observation that social anthropologists gather materials pertaining to "social" or "cultural" relations, which they subsequently seek to analyze. However, she added that the act of aligning materials and concepts was itself performative. In writing ethnography, the anthropologist uses all available sets of materials (some "data," some "theory") to produce, through re-description, an image of a world.

As already noted, there is no absolute difference in kind between these sets: they do not have a predefined scale. Accordingly, it is not

a matter of social theories and concepts being pulled out of the hat to *explain* reality, but also not one in which ethnographic data is more or less self-explanatory. Instead, the image is relational through and through. The 'ethnographic effect' emerges from creatively interrelating the sets, allowing them mutual expression *through each other* with reference to a gradually emerging field of topics and problems. As "empirical" relations exchange properties with "analytical constructs" both become blended products. The conventional dual relation between theory and data changes, the former unable to explain the latter, since it also lives within it.

If 'the field' has no inherent scale, it might be thought that the task of the ethnographer is to scale it through writing. As I have already hinted at, however, this is not quite precise. Because the problem is not that the field (or world) has *no* scale of its own but rather that it has *too many*. It has too many scales, because all the actors are constantly modifying it in a thousand different ways. As actors among everyone else, STS ethnographers are *also* scaling the world, modifying and performing it.[3] And so, their writings are added to the world.[4]

The situation can be elucidated with Bruno Latour's (1988a: 158) term 'irreductions,' which describes a situation where "nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else." But anything is *potentially* connectible with anything else. Note that Latour did not write that everything *is* always connected with everything else. He also did not say that everything *will be*, or *should be*, or *must be* connected. He simply observed that it is impossible *to know in advance* what will become related and to which effect. Today, nobody can say with much precision through which relational arrangements like 'artificial intelligence,' the 'alt-right,' or the 'Anthropocene' will continue to affect the world.

Reality is the generic name for relations that have managed to take hold and maintain stability over time. But most things are not linked to most other things, and making relations in the first place is often very difficult. Making them stick – thereby inscribing them with reality—is even harder. Indeed, the more distant, apparently unrelated, or unusual, those relations are from the point of view

of present realities, the harder it is, and the more difficult it will be to make them hold. This goes for bridges, which might be built from many strange materials, but usually are not, but it also goes for texts and arguments.

Sitting before the screen, one is thus always situated within a field shaped by previous conversations and established conventions. If you set out to write laboratory studies today, you will need good reasons to blankly refuse engagement with previous seminal contributions (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Traweek, 1988; Knorr-Cetina, 1999). At issue is not simply the empirical materials brought to light by earlier scholarship but "how disciplining operates, how we perform the role of theories, of methods, of concepts" (Lippert, 2020: 302, see also Jensen, 2014; Law, 2004; Lury and Wakeford, 2012). As Jean-François Lyotard (1988: xii) observed, one always writes into a genre of discourse that supplies its own "rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases." Refusal to adhere to those rules means will often mean failure to make one's case.

But this somewhat conservative image can thankfully be rendered more dynamic. For after all genres of discourse *are* open to change. Strathern and Latour are both good examples of scholars who, dissatisfied with existing conventions, took risks that eventually paid off. Thus, Latour (e.g. 1991) and colleagues effectively disrupted the long-lasting and powerful dichotomy between humans and nonhumans, while Strathern (1995) and others changed dominant understandings of 'the relation' itself. Among other things, that is why I am able to write these words today.

But while empirical demonstrations were crucial for these disciplinary translations (Jensen, 2020a), they did not accomplish them single-handedly. The changes were consequent upon the formidable rhetorical skills of these scholars in equal measure.

This raises the question of the relation between giving internal scale to an argument and achieving indeterminate future effects.

Making room for surprising companions

We can call what enables interesting ways of giving scale to arguments and worlds in texts—with

a view to producing ethnographic effects—*the research imagination*. This imagination is actively constructed through a process of *moving between sets of materials* in the course of doing research. Empirical inquiry is obviously central to STS, yet it does not guarantee a great contribution to the field. But it is also rare that a great research imagination emerges exclusively from reading theory in a library. Minimally, then, we can talk of empirical or field-data sets and sets of readings.

As Strathern emphasized, there is a two- or many-way relation between such sets. As Latour pointed out, no general rules will tell you what, from a given set, might be related to what, from another. Making these relations, in fact, *is* what it means to write (STS) ethnography, and the way one does so is always informed, one way or another, by some problem, concern, or interest. At the same time, as Lyotard (1988) noted, there are established discourses and genre conventions, conformance to which makes one's arguments more readily acceptable within a discipline.

Close encounters with the varied companions that populate these sets is a way to tickle the research imagination. Placing them side-by-side, and repeatedly going over them, can induce a gradually awakening perception of relations and possible patterns of argument. This sounds quite abstract, so let me be more specific. I offer brief illustration from a study of various scientists and organizations developing hydrological and other models to predict what will happen with the Mekong river basin due to dam development and climate change (Jensen, 2020b).

Now this topic is massive and the relevant empirical and conceptual contexts are numerous. Many kinds of research could be carried out in all kinds of settings, and a variety of fields of knowledge, theories and questions are potentially relevant.

What first caught my attention was that many of the Mekong models seemed somehow related. They appeared to have a comparative dimension, since scientists would often argue that their new models responded to gaps in existing knowledge. So, isn't this an empirical observation, as clear as they come? Well, not quite. The fact is that I had previously read Tim Choy's (2011) *Ecologies of Comparison*, and it is quite possible that my

ability to see what was happening as a comparative ecology of models was first triggered by memories of this book. Moreover, there was an apparent connection with Isabelle Stengers' (2005) 'Ecologies of Practice,' which has long influenced my thinking.

In any case, the general idea of an ecology of models transformed by processes of comparison seemed a *sufficiently* good starting point. I used it to create sets of readings to enhance my research imagination. The sets included background materials on the geography and socio-political situation of the Mekong, descriptions of the models themselves, and discussions of models among philosophers and STS scholars. Obviously, empirical materials comprised of interviews and field notes comprised yet another set. All are populated by heterogeneous ethnographic companions.

In my own experience, the size and composition of such sets can vary significantly but they must be substantial and internally varied (for exploration of some different compositions see Bleumink et al., this issue and Endaltseva and Jerak-Zuiderent, this issue). In preparation for writing, I read and take copious notes, which I organize thematically. I usually go over them many times prior to writing a single word. Such notes contain all sorts of things: stuff I already know very well as well as bits of information and kinds of argumentation I am just getting acquainted with. But the most important point is that reading the sets *alongside one another* is a way to stimulate the research imagination, and make it possible to see emerging questions, pressing problems, interesting possibilities, or curious relations in the materials. It is a matter of allowing one's ethnographic companions to speak back to you in a surprising manner.

Crucially, again, this entails no hierarchy. I mention this because of the occasional tendency of STS researchers (and others) to be quite reverent with respect to their 'empirical data,' but somewhat looser in their engagements with 'theory' (sometimes, of course, *vice versa*). But to draw out what is interesting in each set, and to allow those interesting companions to mutually inflect each other, they must be given *the same degree of attentiveness*. This is why Alfred Gell's (2006) description of his attempt to understand

Marilyn Strathern is so much on point: reading her *is like doing fieldwork on a written text*. The 'literature' is simply part of the 'empirical materials.' Conversely, those materials are equally part of the 'conceptual resources.' All are companions.

This may sound quite experimental[5] but of little consequence if one aims to write more conventional STS. However, this line does not let you off the hook. Because a bit of attentiveness shows actors and elements that *are supposed to belong* to one set popping up within another with somewhat alarming frequency. Ignoring such surprise appearances or refusing to deal with their implications can be described as a form of deliberate neglect of your ethnographic companions.

To exemplify what such appearances can look like, my loose, initial sense that everyone seemed to be modeling the Mekong was corroborated by reading hydrology papers that described the river basin as *flooded with models* (Johnston and Kummu, 2012; Wild and Loucks, 2014). In turn, this (empirical) characterization turned out to resonate with Ian Hacking's (1983: 219) (philosophical) depiction of models as a "Library of Babel." And that image tied in with the modelers' own (theoretical) intuition that the many hydrological and hydrodynamic models, rather than leading to chaos, created strength in diversity.

With a view to sharpening my analysis of the problematic relations between modeling and policy in the Mekong context, I recalled and dug up Paul Edwards' (1996) discussion of similar difficulties in another context. Among his examples was the systems dynamics modeling conducted by Jay Forrester at MIT in the late 1950s. It then dawned upon me that an ecological modeler I had recently interviewed used an updated version of this exact approach. In other words, while I had looked to Edwards for analytical resources about one kind of problem (models and policy) his text ended up as part of the empirical materials that helped to elucidate another (systems dynamics modeling and its practical uses in Cambodia). Once again, the overarching point is that whatever differences there may be between sets of materials, they will *not map onto* a clean distinction between the empirical and the conceptual, or between theory and data.

As a final illustration of the emergence of a research imagination from reading across sets, let me touch upon my 'empirical' topics, models and modeling. The philosopher Max Black (1962: 241) famously argued that models work by analogical extension of a repertoire of ideas from one domain to another. Without mentioning either Black, the philosopher, or models, the anthropologist Roy Wagner later characterized the invention of culture in practically identical terms. The fieldworker, he wrote, creates analogies that are "extensions of his own notions and those of his culture, transformed by his experiences of the field situation. He uses the latter as a kind of 'lever,' the way a pole vaulter uses his pole, to catapult his comprehension beyond the limitations imposed by earlier viewpoints" (Wagner, 1975: 18).

And if we fast forward another two decades and step into STS, we come across Andrew Pickering's (1995: 19) description of cultural change as an open-ended process of modeling. While modeling is something "empirical" modelers do, in the hands of these diverse scholars it becomes a concept-model for cultural transformation and invention. In which case the practical work of modeling the Mekong recursively instantiates Pickering and Wagner's tantalizing argument that culture extension and reinvention are forms of modeling. As philosophers, social scientists, and modelers provide *mutual illustration of each other's points*, it ceases to be at all clear where the empirical begins and the conceptual starts—or *vice versa*.

Articulating relations across sets, then, is a way of enriching the research imagination. With the help of your diverse companions you (hope to) gradually construct better, more interesting, questions and problems. This happens differently every time, but it almost always involves continuous comparisons to draw out those virtual relations. Some will eventually be actualized in writing, and others can be kept for another occasion. But the majority are simply discarded.

We are not done yet, however. Because, as I will now discuss, writing also entails various process of scaling in its own right. There is a scaling of empirical materials within the argument and, simultaneously, a scaling of diverse literatures both in relation to each other and to those materials.

The world and the text

Writing ethnography entails giving scale to arguments and worlds, and this elicits the difficulties of keeping rhetorical and ethnographic effects apart. Still, STS scholars and anthropologists will understandably feel that something crucial is lost if the two are *simply* collapsed. Since ethnography 'writes people,' it must contain them somewhere. Those who write must, so to speak, find ways to "load" something (people-ish) from the world into the text. And they do find many different ways. But again, this is poorly understood in terms of correct representation. Instead, it is a matter of scaling and re-scaling gestures, words, and acts into different media (here, the text, but it might also be video, say, or anime) for different reasons than what motivated their occurrence in the first place. Since ethnographers hope to create their own effects in the process, we are in a realm of recursion and performativity. But if the ethnographic text does not represent the world, in which way can it be said to relate to it?

Here there is a tension between ethnographic and rhetorical effects, because inseparability notwithstanding, their coexistence tends to generate systems in disequilibrium. Marilyn Strathern's "Binary License" (2011) explores how instability—in consequence of the text pointing in several directions at once—requires running commentary on what is significant at any given moment: an aspect of methodology, an empirical detail, a fine theoretical nuance, a political implication, or something else. At the same time, as previously noted, such commentary confers no ultimate control upon the writer.

Another text, not coincidentally titled "Mekong Scales" (Jensen, 2017) can be used to illustrate some of the resulting instabilities.[6] This piece was originally written for a symposium on the "Uncommons," organized by Marisol de la Cadena at University of California, Davis and later published as a special issue of *Anthropologica* on the same topic (Blaser and de la Cadena, 2017). In it, I aimed to figure out how various 'domains' of the Mekong—community-forestry, climate change, dam development and ecotourism— were incongruously scaled by various more or less incommensurable practices. For example, international policy makers tend to view communities

along the river as small-scale and insignificant relative to their own highly significant and large-scale climate interventions. But from the point of view *of* those communities, global policy barely even registers. The presence of adjacent logging companies or river spirits is far more consequential.

As it happened, I also elaborated on these dynamics as an effect of two kinds of scaling—one generated from within domains and another imposed on them from without—happening at once. Thus, I described community forestry as simultaneously defined by "intra-relations" occurring as villagers plant saplings, patrol forest borders or debate whether these activities are worth their time and effort, and by "inter-relations" between these internal activities and external ones relating to streams of money and discourse from environmental NGOs (cf. Green, 2005). These interwoven relations, I argued (then as now) *generate* the scale of community forestry.

Now this is an exceedingly complex situation because there are multiple domains, very many actors, and heterogeneity both within and across them. Empirically, it is difficult to know exactly what is going on, and the need to reduce complexity in writing makes things look simpler than they are. To tackle this issue, I switched between perspectives and activities internal and external to different domains. I discussed NGOs attempt to scale the domain of community forestry from the outside. Then I considered how conflicting scales are produced internally, by describing bits of what the situation looks like for people living in the village. And then I examined how regional politics interfered with both of these domains.

Textually, the effect was more or less kaleidoscopic. And, in *one sense*, this was simply a consequence of ethnographic encounters with many different practices, perspectives, and attempts to scale the Mekong during fieldwork. But it was *also* kaleidoscopic because it was specifically written to explore the 'uncommons' as an empirical and conceptual alternative to 'the commons'. In this context, ethnographic materials could be activated to suggest that no fixed, common ground exist behind or underneath divergent efforts to scale domains. The Mekong, I concluded,

neither adds up to, nor presumes, any whole entity.

"Mekong Scales" drew on various ethnographic materials to describe various "domains" and the effects of their interrelations. In contrast with the present text, it contained little meta-commentary on its own strategies of scaling. However, the relevant difference is not really that the former is more 'empirical' compared with the latter, which is more 'rhetorical,' 'theoretical,' or 'reflexive.' Because both are all of those things at the same time. They simply focus on different elements, which they proportion differently, for different purposes.

This means, as I will now suggest, that the one thing that truly matters—because it remains in the hands of the writer—is to articulate why you put things together in just this way, scale relations just like this, for this particular occasion. That simple dictum is more demanding than it might appear.

Say why you say it

I have discussed how varied ethnographic collaborations and performative engagements come together to scale relations between words and worlds. The text turns into a collaborative "machine for making elements cohere as an event" (Brown, 1997: 165).

There is no escape from this condition. If one writes a down-to-earth ethnography of users caring for their technologies that *will* involve textually scaling of the elements to exhibit care as a crucial feature of the situation. If one writes a critique of how the radical activist potentials of STS have been hollowed out by an in-group of theory bros, the force of that argument too, *will* depend on rhetorically proportioning relations. But if writing—like carpentry, nursing, or electrical engineering—simply names some ways of inhabiting and scaling worlds—then perhaps there is nothing very scandalous about that.

In fact, I will argue that recognizing writing as a subset of collective patterns being woven from diverse sets of materials with diverse companions is *central* to a nonhumanist STS sensitivity. By nourishing an experimental disposition to try out different approaches, styles, and forms of argumentation with an unpredictable range

of companions, it opens pathways to, as they say, 'free your mind.' For the same reason, it has potential implications well beyond the home field. There is little need to worry that realities dissolve in such experiments, since they are given scale and *added* to the world by the text itself. But it is safe to say that some motives for writing find themselves on unstable grounds.

According to a conventional imagination, ethnography writes peoples' lives by making descriptions, by contextualization, and, finally, by analysis guided by theory. Once the dichotomy between the conceptual and the empirical is replaced with a lateral movement of relations (Gad and Jensen, 2016) and a collaborative image of writing ("a machine for making elements cohere as an event"), this scheme ceases to function. But what replaces it? What, according to non-humanist STS, is the *point*?

More than three decades ago, Latour's (1988) "Politics of Explanation" offered a lucid discussion of that issue. There, he argued that all sciences from physics to art history are "defined by the elements they extract from the settings, recombine and display" (Latour, 1988: 159). Only some sciences, however, strive to make *a few* theoretical elements stand in for many empirical ones. They are the ones about which we say that they provide "strong explanations." But for other fields, like STS and anthropology, the aim is rather to *simultaneously* display the empirical elements and the effort by the researcher to "extract" and enliven them (Latour, 1998: 163). This generates "a space that is neither above nor inside those networks" (Latour, 1998: 165): the textual space of rhetorical and ethnographic effects. Latour (1988: 174) concluded that *any* style of writing is fine as long as it exhibits "local and provisional variations of scale" rather than imposing a fixed framework.

We can note, once again, the proximity between Latour's (1988: 165-166) specification of the problem of writing as "how to be at once here and there" and Strathern's (1999) elicitation of the ethnographic effect in movements between field and desk. But their reluctance to provide much more specification is also striking.

As I see it, this shared disinclination speaks to two separate but interrelated issues. The first is *unwillingness*: to represent others, but also to

tell other researchers what they must do or why. It is the indignity of speaking for others evoked by Deleuze (2004). As Bartleby famously said: "I would prefer not to." But at the same time, we can recognize acknowledgment of an *inability*. It means: *I can't tell you*, because there is no general rule for how to proceed or why. *It depends*.

Hence, as Ingmar Lippert (2020: 303) notes, we can in practice always expect to encounter "a multiplicity of methods and concepts." But since this is a consequence of the concrete, practical variability of circumstances, contexts, and problems, reflexivity can offer but tenuous handles on the situation. It will simply be added to the mix and stirred. This is why, back in 1988, when Latour (1988b: 176) was quizzed about the "grounds" for his advocacy on behalf of textual spaces "neither above nor inside the networks," he responded by simply turning the tables. "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign?" he quoted from the gospel of Mark (8:12) "I tell you the truth, *no sign will be given to it*."

The lack of general advice and bulletproof methods does not mean that one might as well give up and go home. Instead, the point—and it is, again, crucial to a non-humanist STS sensitivity—is just about the opposite: Nothing is lost with the disappearance of generalities (except, obviously, those generalities themselves). In place of *the* point (which is indeed missing) there *any number of excellent reasons* for experimenting with collaborations, textual companionship, and the scaling of ethnographic and rhetorical effects.

Some are driven by insatiable empirical curiosity and others by keen theoretical interests. In STS, many write due to a sense of technology and science-based injustices. A few are seduced by dimly detectable world-historical transformable which they alone feel able to give expression. More broadly, others write for the love of a people, a city, or a place. But in each case, writing is an adventure that scales and rescales relations in order to evoke what matters about *just these things*. Even at their most abstract, the reasons why texts matter are always *relationally concrete*.

Somewhat paradoxically, 'methodography' appears from this perspective simultaneously too narrow and too general. The focus on social research methods in practice is limiting because

ethnographic companionship is far more encompassing and diffuse than what can be elicited as method in specific field encounters (see also Gad and Jensen, 2014). Conversely, the notion that methodography offers a way forward for STS is vague and non-committal as long as the motivating problems, agendas, context, and issues for which it is intended to be generative are not articulated. My bet is that any specific attempt to articulate them would immediately open many divergent paths.

Definitively letting go of the 'god's eye view,'[7] the view of writing and its effects I have presented here can be described as a-critical, which is not at all the same as neutral, or uncritical. Abandoning safeguards and protections—epistemological, methodological, and political—to operate in a minor key, a-critical writing simply designates a pragmatic and experimental orientation to whatever particular problems and situations motivates it. At issue, as Isabelle Stengers (2008: 29) says, is nothing more or less than the demand to clearly articulate why you "choose to say, or do, 'this,' on 'this' precise occasion" without resorting to general reasons or hiding behind abstract justifications.

The effects remain to be seen.

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Notes

1   The original reflexive moment is performed in Woolgar (1988).

2   By acknowledging his relative privilege while also insisting on relative powerlessness, it can be said that Gell made a virtue of circumstance. But one might also hear a quiet reply to virtual critics. Is a comedic stance really more problematic than the pretense that stinging peer-reviewed rebukes and scathing workshop interventions make any significant difference?

3   This can be taken as part of an ontological argument but need not be. As Stanley Fish (1980: 490) points out, at the end of J. L. Austin's (1975) *How to Do Things with Words* the group of constative terms, which was supposed to be assessable with respect to truth—in contradistinction to performatives, which produced a state of affairs by being said—was "discovered to be a subset of performatives, and with this discovery the formal core of language disappears entirely and is replaced by a world of utterances vulnerable to the sea change of every circumstance, the world, in short, of rhetorical (situated) man."

4   "But writing does not change the reality of what is written about" sounds the inevitable objection. Or, it is so inconsequential that it hardly makes sense to call it performative. But most other things also don't change the world *very much*. Conversely, some texts (Karl Marx, Milton Friedman) have generated quite disproportionate effects. Like everything else, writing *turns out to be* powerful or not.

5   It is one of the key motives in Bill Maurer's (2005) fascinating lateral anthropology.

6   The following paraphrases bits from (Jensen, 2017), rescaling them, as it were, for the present context.

7   Of course, everybody in STS and feminist technoscience abandoned the god's eye view long ago. In principle. In practice, it continues to show whenever situated knowledges, infra-action, cosmopolitics—or methodography—are evoked as *general categories that make the same demands everywhere*. Para-doxically, god's eye view 2.0 reappear in the surprise guise of universal principle for tackling specificity.