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## Thematic Section

# New Directions in Experimental and Engaged Ethnography

## Introduction

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What's left to do, then, is to follow events, to engage ethnographically with history unfolding in the present, or to anticipate what is emerging.

—George Marcus 2008

*25 January 2011*

*I set my cup of espresso down next to my computer, turn off my phone, block out chunks of time on my calendar, and push aside piles of books and papers to clear a space on my desk. I've lost track of how far behind deadline I am on the introduction for this thematic section on "New Directions in Experimental and Engaged Ethnography" that I've guest edited for Anthropologica. I glance at the list of other deadlines passed and pending tacked onto my bulletin board. I feel an all too familiar sense of sinking, deep in my belly, and my heart races.*

*Panic and genuine enthusiasm for the task notwithstanding, like millions of other people around the world this week in early 2011, I cannot NOT interrupt my work to check the news every hour or so.*

*On 20 January 2011 "We Are All Khaled Said," an Egyptian Facebook group named in memory of an activist beaten to death by police in Alexandria in June 2010, had issued a call for protesters to rally in opposition to the regime of President Hosni Mubarak.*

*Beginning today, 25 January, hundreds, and then thousands, and then hundreds of thousands of Egyptians begin gathering in Tahrir Square in the centre of Cairo, demanding that Mubarak resign. The government bans demonstrations.*

*Egyptians—women, children and men – fill the streets singing, dancing, marching, texting, talking on cell phones, praying. The government blocks Internet and mobile phone networks.*

*28 January 2011*

*Wael Ghomni, a Google marketing manager accused of being an instigator behind the initial rallying call*

broadcast through Facebook, is arrested. He will be detained for ten days.

A man in Tahrir Square tells a CNN reporter: "We want work, food, education, medicine...to raise our families in peace. We want what all people all around the world want. We are not terrorists. We are proud Egyptians." Mubarak orders fighter jets to fly over Cairo. His supporters go on rampages attacking demonstrators.

31 January 2011

Mubarak announces that he will make a public appearance tomorrow, 1 February. CIA Director, Leon Panetta, tells the U.S. Congress that there is "a strong likelihood Mubarak may step down." News agencies and tweeters report, "Panetta says Mubarak will step down."

1 February 2011

Everyone, from the Egyptians in Tahrir Square to the President of the United States, to the Prime Ministers of Canada and the United Kingdom, to the leaders of the European Union, to the millions of people like me glued to television screens and online news programs around the world, tunes in for Mubarak's speech. Our shared news sources tell us that we all expect him to resign.

He doesn't. He refuses to step down as president, promising only that he will not seek re-election. Shock waves reverberate from the street corners through to the Oval Office.

2-4 February 2011

The occupation of public spaces by people in Egypt continues. Demonstrators have set up security checkpoints, first aid clinics, kitchens and makeshift homes: an alternative social world is emerging in Tahrir Square. Women—some wearing headscarves and others not—are among the leaders of this revolt. Some demonstrators go on about other business while others kneel to pray at appointed times. News cameras zoom in on Coptic Christians and Muslims walking arm and arm, holding crucifixes and copies of the Koran together in front of the lenses.

5 February 2011

British Prime Minister Donald Cameron, echoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel, declares, "multiculturalism has failed" in Britain. Islam is the difference that can't be assimilated. Like Merkel, Cameron threatens to enforce regimes based on "shared values." Neo-Nazis take to the streets of England to celebrate his announcement.

6-7 February 2011

Barak Obama tells the media that Egyptians want "democracy," and he sympathizes with their aspirations. Western leaders and media repeat Obama's message over and over again: traditional, non-Western dictatorship was the problem; neoliberal Western democracy is the answer. That the people in Tahrir Square are also calling for "work, food, homes, education, medicine and peace" is lost in the relentless rhetorical juxtaposition of "dictatorship" and "democracy." What if millions of unemployed, hungry and homeless Westerners identify similarities rather than differences between themselves and the non-Westerners engaged in toppling their corrupt governments?

8 February 2011

Wael Ghonim is released from custody. At the end of an interview with the private Egyptian network, Dream TV, he is shown images of the protesters killed by pro-Mubarak forces. Ghonim bursts into tears. More people go to Tahrir Square. Many tell reporters that watching Ghonim's interview moved them to join the protest.

10 February 2011

The Vancouver Sun announces a four part series on the Chez Soi/At Home Study, a research project whose first objective is to discover what the effect of homelessness is on mental health, and second, to test two models for housing people with mental illness who are currently homeless. The study was launched in October 2009 and will terminate in March 2013. Funded by the Canadian federal government, the \$110 million study is divided among five cities. Vancouver's share is \$30 million and the research here targets people who are diagnosed as mentally ill and are also designated "addicts."

There are 500 participants: 200 are housed in apartments and are directed to, but not provided directly with, support services; 100 are housed in the Bosman Hotel and given "wrap around services" that include medical care, counselling, yoga, acupuncture, and sessions with Aboriginal Elders. By conservative estimates, 500 persons represent about 25% of the "officially homeless" population of the City of Vancouver. A control group of 200 are monitored by researchers but are not provided with housing or services.

I have been hearing about the Chez Soi/At Home Study since planning for it began at least three years ago. The study is controversial and has raised a lot of serious questions. Is the study's key objective really a significant research question or do we already know enough to say with sufficient certainty that homeless-

ness has negative effects on mental health? Would \$110 million in public funds be better spent on housing and health care than on research? Is withholding housing and services from a "control group" really the only valid research design legitimated by the academy? Is this ethical research? Tuskegee and El Dorado are mentioned frequently in discussions about Chez Soi/At Home.

11 February 2011

Mubarak resigns. Egyptians are jubilant. Celebrations erupt everywhere. Doubtless much public, private, semi-public and semi-private debate, intrigue, conflict and strife has been taking place beyond the purview of international news agencies and Facebook exchanges, and will continue. Predictions and speculations abound. Plots thicken. What is clear, though, is that what has been must come to an end. There are possibilities now for something new to emerge.

I wean myself from the multiple news sources I've been following, and catch up with reading the theses, papers, notices about deadlines for course outlines and book orders for the coming term, and various and sundry emails. I discuss the Chez Soi/At Home Study with a friend who is a mental health advocate. "I agree with all your criticisms," she says. "It's gross. But I'm trying to get my clients into the Bosman. For the people that get in there, it's really a chance, you know?"

16 February 2011

Testifying before a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing, CIA Director Leon Panetta admits that his "intelligence sources" on developments in Egypt were newscasts and the Internet. He wasn't able to predict when or if Mubarak would resign, or what would happen next. "There is a massive amount of data out there to follow—600 million Facebook accounts, 190 million Twitter accounts and 35,000 hours of YouTube videos." The frustrated director of the world's most powerful nation's intelligence agency, historically famous for engineering coup d'états, revolutions and counter-revolutions, is defensive.

Today's Vancouver Sun article on the Chez Soi/At Home Study proclaims that housing mentally ill people saves taxpayers money. Journalist, Lori Culbert, quotes Michael Kirby, Director of the Canadian Mental Health Commission, who describes the study as "an amazing situation in which the right thing to do in human terms is also the most effective thing to do in economic terms." (Culbert 2011) Dr. Michael Krausz, University of British Columbia Professor of Psychiatry and Co-

Principal Investigator for Chez Soi/At Home, responds to questions about whether withholding housing and health services from a control group might be unethical. "A control group was necessary at an academic level to show the advantages of the interventions being offered to the other participants. At a human level, it is very difficult not to be able to offer this group any help," he says (Culbert 2011).

Culbert concludes:

And while the academic findings must wait until all data are collected, experts are drawing preliminary conclusions that probably won't surprise most people: if you give the homeless a home and support services, they will stand a better chance of stabilizing their mental illness and addictions. [2011]

Researchers are confident, she reports, that the results of the Chez Soi/At Home Study will provide governments with the evidence they need to implement long-term solutions.

18 February 2011

I write a critical response and send it to SFU Media Relations for the weekly "Issues and Experts" column. They decline to publish it. I should write an Op-Ed piece or a letter to the editor setting out scholarly critiques of the Chez Soi/At Home Study, given that the "window" of public interest has been opened by the Vancouver Sun series, but I have so many other deadlines and demands; demands and deadlines. I tell myself I'll get back to it, as soon as my desk is clear. Now, I have to prepare to leave on a research trip to Ireland on 1 March. I still haven't finished the Anthropologica introduction. Ethics? Responsibility?

Wael Ghomim tells CBS news that he has no desire to take on political leadership. "I trust 80 million Egyptians," he says, "the giant is awake now and no one is going to put him to sleep again."

6-8 March 2011

Despite both appearances and experiences of spontaneity that characterize the current uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, millions of people around the world have been talking, writing, texting, facebooking, singing, dancing, filming, painting, performing, dreaming of at least the beginnings of such great shifts—such giants awakening—for a long, long time. No one knows exactly where this will lead, what directions these movements will take, what repressions and manipulations, coercions and co-optations will insidiously and invidiously play out, alongside and in

*between radical change, revolutionary breakthroughs, and yet to be imagined possibilities. But something has shifted; whatever happens, nothing will ever be quite the same again.*

**H**ow can anthropologists participate in this world we live in? What contributions can we make? What are our ethical responsibilities? Our political commitments? Our professional obligations? The ties that bind the authors in this thematic section are commitments to ethical, experimental and engaged scholarship that pursues these questions, and challenges separations between the “economic level,” the “academic level” and the “human level.”

The anthropologist most centrally associated with the term “experimental ethnography” is George Marcus, co-editor and co-author, respectively, of two texts that sought to consolidate a radical break from the scientism that had dominated much 20th-century anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). For those who followed Marcus et al., fieldwork was not a practice of detached scientific observation, and relationships between ethnographer and informant were not those between active subject and passive object, but were dialogic exchanges between collaborators. The production of ethnographic monographs was therefore a communicative process from which texts emerged that included at least two voices and made use of literary and rhetorical strategies to represent “partial truths.”

In his article “Two Decades After Writing Culture,” Marcus (2007) writes that the “experimental moment” has failed to realize its potential, not having moved beyond individual anthropologists exploring diverse textual forms of ethnographic writing. It is time now, he argues, that experimentation move into the practice of fieldwork itself, rather than only its representation.

However, as the contributors to *Women Writing Culture* pointed out to the contributors of *Writing Culture*, interesting and provocative experiments in both fieldwork and its representation are not “new,” but have in fact been underway in the margins and fringes of anthropology, in interdisciplinary collaborations, and in non-academic sites for quite some time (Behar and Gordon 1995). The papers in this thematic section take as foundational points of departure feminist, queer, anti-colonial and activist critique, and the radical experimentations that have infused the strategies of contemporary political movements. While carrying forward an interest in literary and artistic forms of expression and communication, we focus intensely on ethnographic fieldwork, and the potential and perils of

experimenting with articulating creative practices and conventional ethnographic methods.

There is much interest in the implications of dismantling Cartesian mind-body dualism, deconstructing the philosophical and political edifices built on binary oppositions between nature and culture, and the potentialities opened up by paying close attention to embodiment and affect in anthropology and throughout the arts, humanities and social sciences these days. We are called on to engage in critiques of secularism, to value indigenous epistemologies, to admit “spirit” into our analyses, and to explore perspectivism in a project of constructing “world anthropologies” (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). How are we to research these dimensions of human experience and the political possibilities they present when our methods and training remain, for the most part, “dead from the neck down”? Magnat offers provocative possibilities for the adaptation of Grotowskian physical theatre to ethnography, pointing out potential alliances with indigenous methodologies. She argues forcefully for academic recognition of such interdisciplinary scholarship. Kazubowski-Houston’s work draws on shared traditions in theatre anthropology, and presents us with the persistent ethnographic challenge and unanticipated consequences of putting theory into practice.

The papers here are centrally concerned, in diverse ways, with questions of politics and ethics. At the heart of these concerns are not the fears of legal liability that overdetermine university ethics review boards, nor the invidious censorship and regimes of knowledge control they have come to stand for. Rather, the authors in this collection address the questions that initially gave rise to demands by, particularly, indigenous peoples, for codes of research ethics that would protect the rights and respect the integrity of research subjects and interrupt exploitation. It is the political moralities of everyday and extraordinary human relationships, necessarily embedded in power relations and always specific to time and place, that concern the authors.

How can we honour, in practice, both a commitment to collaboration and to being led by participants and demands to articulate hypotheses and set out predictable outcomes for an Institutional Review Board? Given inevitable contingencies and unpredictability how do we answer a granting agency that asks for guarantees in advance that our “findings” will provide “evidence” upon which “policy” can be soundly based? Recognizing local political and social inequalities and conflicts, how can we work with the most marginalized and excluded members and respond to “community”-controlled research committees demanding guarantees of research-generated

“community” benefit? How do we do critical work in relation to something like, say, the *Chez Soi/At Home Study* that does not jeopardize the immediate support for beneficiaries, given that the difference between a roof over their heads even for a night might be the difference between life and death for one precious, individual human being? There are no perfect answers, of course. How do we continue to ask these questions and not become paralyzed?

Is the critical reflexivity practised by the authors—most admirably and courageously in this collection by Kazubowski-Houston—a “grotesque expression of a liberal moral conscience”? (Marcus 2008:12). Should our work be dismissed with what seems to have become the epithet of the day in some circles of anthropology: “moralism”? Will our commitments be read as individualistic, “narcissistic navel-gazing”? I argue, rather, that what the authors—myself included—are imperfectly struggling towards is what Veena Das (2006) describes as ethical and political “response-ability.”

It is towards this goal that we analyze our missteps, misunderstandings, mistakes, failures and regrets in an effort to make public, and therefore subject to challenge, debate and change, that which every ethnographer experiences and most discuss privately. We intentionally transgress the still militantly patrolled border between “corridor talk” and “journal publication.” We offer readers examples of an “experimental” ethnography as defined by Quetzil E. Castañeda (2006) that reflects the etymology of the word “experiment” as “putting into peril.” We take risks, in good faith, not knowing where our work will lead, or what the consequences of publication will be, but hoping to create spaces for something new to emerge.

“Engaged anthropology”—the second term in our title—has conventionally been associated with applied anthropology that is conducted in the service of providing policy recommendations to governments, or supporting organized social or political reform movements, or providing programmatic advice to community development organizations. The papers here, however, reflect the more comprehensive vision of engagement articulated by the editors of an October 2010 supplement of *Current Anthropology*. Setha Low and Sally Engle Merry (2010:S204) argue that “there are a number of forms of engagement: (1) sharing and support, (2) teaching and public education, (3) social critique, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, and (6) activism.” The papers that follow hope to contribute to these discussions on emerging forms and conceptual reformulations of “publicly engaged experimental anthropology.”

This thematic section emerged from a session at the 2009 CASCA conference in Vancouver. The presentations addressed complicated, contradictory, contested engagements that complicate, contradict and contest each other. What was exciting about the session was the way the papers ricocheted off each other, how sparks flew. Presenters agreed with and supported each other sometimes on some points, and challenged and debated each other on other points. The discussions with audience members that followed were lively; criticisms were challenging and at times merciless. It has been impossible to maintain the energy of a face-to-face gathering of embodied beings through the necessarily tendentious process of peer review and into a textualized form for publication. You will not find here a new synthesis, a neatly packaged programmatic formula for a *New, Improved, Purer* Discipline of Anthropology. You will read no triumphant progress narratives celebrating movement from bad old days riddled with errors to seamlessly enlightened new days, no centre being forced to hold. I hope, in your reading of the papers, you will imagine them in conversation and sometimes in dispute with each other, and yourself as a composer arranging when the four distinct voices sing together, when they interrupt each other, and when a solo performance is warranted.

I will conclude by borrowing some words from Cristina Moretti who shares an excerpt from her fieldnotes about her reflections on sending ethnographic work out into the world, knowing it will necessarily get “lost.” “The question here,” Moretti writes, “is not what we have lost, but what we seek to find in its place.”

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