

ESSAYS

## Unfamiliar Edinburgh: Being and Becoming in the City

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# Unfamiliar Edinburgh: Being and Becoming in the City

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How do we learn ethnography? How do we teach ethnography? What is the process of becoming an ethnographer like – and what might it tell us about the places in which we become ethnographers? In this special issue of *The Unfamiliar*, we explore these questions through a range of creative and critical ethnographic pieces generated by the students of the University of Edinburgh's second-year Social Anthropology course, *Ethnography: Theory and Practice*.

The course was conceived as an opportunity for undergraduate students in disciplines across the social sciences and beyond to explore what ethnography *is* – and specifically, how one *does* it (a puzzlement familiar to many a student of anthropology; Shryock 2016). In groups of three to four, students are invited to identify a space in Edinburgh in which to conduct a short-term ethnographic research project. After submitting a brief proposal and gaining ethics clearance, they spend several hours each week for the bulk of the semester hanging out, participating, observing, listening, asking questions, soliciting conversations, conducting interviews, taking photos or making maps. In short, they are spending time getting to know the space and the people who produce it in any way they can.

This special issue brings together samples of student work from the course for the first time. In it, we find student ethnographers spending time with people living in narrow boats on the Union Canal; joining walking tours and pole-dancing classes; letting themselves be transformed by drag queens; performing at poetry slam events, or having a go at ceilidh dancing and the ecstatic release of the five-rhythms; talking with men drinking quietly in an Irish bar, or with the elderly congregants of the Augustine United Church; joining in on the work of charity shops and cafes, or engaged in the 'creative reuse' of discarded material. Students were invited to submit pieces based on any aspect of their fieldwork, and were encouraged to experiment with form and style as they saw fit. An editorial committee, consisting of five students from the course supported by its teaching staff, supplied the creative vision and structure of the issue; and submissions were conscientiously peer reviewed by a select group of Edinburgh's MA Social Anthropology cohort, who helped to draw out and clarify the authors' perspectives. Together, the students who have driven this special issue have created opportunities to extend their course-based learning into hands-on experience with the process of publishing. What follows is a collection of fieldnotes, sketches, reflections, poems, profiles, and photos, as well as some longer ethnographic pieces, which give a rare insight into their learning trajectories, and into the city that shaped them.

## Teaching Ethnography

In the course *Ethnography: Theory and Practice*, we work from the premise that ethnography is more than a method, or even an array of methods, but is an orientation to the world – a particular type of inquisitive sensibility that allows us to question taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world is. The main focus of the course is on cultivating this ethnographic sensibility, through actively mentored and peer-supported fieldwork. Inspiration and provocative research possibilities are suggested in weekly lectures. The course as a

whole, however, is predominantly tutorial-driven and practice-based, with class time divided between opportunities to practice key research skills, and guided group reflection on the perplexities of the research process. In hands-on, practical activities – often conducted in public spaces around the city – students learn how to take fieldnotes and how to conduct interviews, how to identify appropriate literature, analyse their findings, and build their work into fully-fledged ethnographic pieces. These tasks are oriented primarily towards learning to think like an ethnographer, and towards creating a different relationship with the world. Harry Wolcott has described ethnography as “a way of seeing”, explaining that it is “more than method” and that “it is the mindwork...that goes with it that is most critical” (Wolcott 1999: 66). In reflecting on and discussing their unfolding fieldwork with one another, in sharing and comparing experiences with their tutors, and in producing fieldnotes, interview transcripts, book reviews, and projects for assessment, students are given informal and formal opportunities to practice this “mindwork” collaboratively.

In particular, tutors on the course seek to foster ethnographic sensibility by encouraging an openness to “serendipity and the unexpected” (Konopinski 2014: 2) as a source of unique insight; and by challenging students to acknowledge and defamiliarise their own positionalities and assumptions, thereby cultivating reflexivity. In role-played interviews or the discussion of scenarios presenting ethical conundrums, we aim to show that both research and ethics are more a matter of sensitive, humane engagement than of following rules – more about attending, taking seriously, and improvising than about following scripts. While allowing the field to lead them and shape their investigations is often an unsettling, confusing, and frustrating experience for the students, over time, they learn the value of the accidental and unscripted, and find ways to turn these moments into unusual perspectives on their fieldsites. Similarly, students are often intrigued, perplexed, and unsettled by the notion of reflexivity, and attendant ideas about the appropriate place of the self in social sciences research – making for sharp learning curves. The results are evident in a number of the contributions to this volume, perhaps most strikingly in the piece on drag queens by Hannah Diry and Gaia Duberti; most innovatively in the piece by Isabelle Introna and Alexandra Dunn on what happened when they shared their final course project with two of their art school interlocutors; and most honestly and openly in the final article of the collection by Tannith Matthew. In these pieces and others across the issue, students ably demonstrate the ways they have made room for both the “unruly and systematic” dimensions of social sciences research (Konopinski 2014: 2).

### **Being and Becoming in the City**

There is no straightforward narrative logic or single, coherent theme to this ethnographic collection. The editorial committee explicitly chose to forego a specific analytic perspective, opting instead to preserve the multiplicities and mess of their learning trajectories – and of Edinburgh itself. At the same time, similar ethnographic notes are struck across the work of our contributors, sounding common preoccupations with and experiences of the city: preoccupations with self-making and becoming, reflected in the issue’s subtitle; with movement and stasis; with performance, conflict, and social responsibility, among others. The result is a gathering of arguments, descriptions and reflections, which may – or may not – find resonance with each other, which sometimes speak to similar issues but equally pull in different directions. We juxtapose pieces that share certain qualities, but are also sharply contrasting, discontinuous, and divergent. In this irresolution, we hope to have retained something of the feeling of being and becoming an ethnographer that our authors evoke so well.

Above all, what binds these pieces together – like any good ethnography – is an intense but partial intimacy, a kind of provisional closeness with people going about the creative, sometimes quiet, sometimes flamboyant business of living in the city of Edinburgh. Through these writings, photographs and drawings we get to know, fleetingly but vividly, people like Jen – who leads tours through the Grassmarket, telling tales of Edinburgh’s unseemly past; or Stephen, with his “background in logistics”, who now talks with passion about working for a café dedicated to helping the homeless; or the nameless group of travellers on a city bus to Clovenstone, who briefly find common cause in reprimanding an illicit smoker.

Perhaps this ethnography is a bit like the experience of being in Edinburgh, or indeed, any city: a cosmopolitan experience of fleeting impressions, strange associations, minor incidents; of people passing by, resting, doing, moving on, each with their own trajectory, their own narrative, all temporarily and inextricably entangled. And as we engage with this seemingly disordered but – as de Certeau reminds us – coherent movement, our attention is drawn from the “concept of the city” towards an appreciation of “urban practices” (de Certeau 1984: 93). This city is, notoriously, a place of surfaces and secrets, configured even in its curious topography, its streets built over and above other streets. There is a familiar Edinburgh, the Edinburgh that Jen presents to tourists, the Edinburgh known to students in the course of their everyday life; there are, in fact, many different familiar Edinburghs, depending on who you are and how you inhabit this place. Running beneath and alongside, often close by, is the unfamiliar Edinburgh, the pole-dancing Edinburgh, poetry-slam Edinburgh, canal-side Edinburgh, of which we are aware but in which we rarely pause or dwell. In their work, the authors of this special issue do just that: they seek out an Edinburgh unfamiliar to them, spend some time there, come to know a few people, and to know the city differently in their company. And they explore the ways their informants make the city familiar and unfamiliar to themselves as well, carving out community and anonymity, following routines while engaging actively in the creative, performative work of self-fashioning. This is a city of arts students, drag queens, solitary drinkers, kindly churchgoers and ‘ceilidh consultants’, as well as those on the bus to Clovenstone.

This is also a city of student-ethnographers who, through their research, are encouraged to self-reflexively consider the transformations wrought by doing ethnography. These are transformations in our understanding of other people and places, in which the strange is made familiar and the familiar strange, as the popular turn of phrase goes. But these are also processes of self-exploration and self-discovery. In the encounters with unfamiliar Edinburgh, the authors also describe encounters with an unfamiliar self, disclosed and revealed as they join in, participate and get to know ways of doing and being previously unknown to them. In reading this collection, we may come away knowing something more of this city; but in the company of the authors, to quote the concluding piece of this special issue, we also “come away from this project [having] learned something about humanity, something about [ourselves] and something about doing research”, which leaves us “inspired and excited about what else [we] can learn.” If ethnography is, at bottom, a willingness to learn by seeking out the unfamiliar and dwelling within it – even for just a few hours a week – then, as more and less experienced students of ethnography, we can hope for no better outcome than that.

## References

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