I was at Home

Friday 28th October 2011
Flight London-Bandar Seri Begawan

This photo of the wing looks like the photo of a road. As I watch it, I feel like it's telling me something: "Don't be afraid, even if this jump to the other side of the world makes your head whirl. Stay focused. It is your destiny! You just need to keep going."

RODOLFO MAGGIO

"I was at Home!"
The Dream of Representation in the Representation of a Dream   RODOLFO MAGGIO

This creative essay uses a dream the author had during fieldwork as the starting point for a discussion of the conundrums of representation. The dream epitomises the alterations that observation causes on the portions of reality that the ethnographer selects and concentrates upon. The rest of the essay tells of how the author attempted to find his own personal solution to the problem of representation thanks to inspiration found in a photo exhibition and the letter of a friend and mentor. Such interpenetration of oneiric, photographic, and epistolary materials works as a pretext to discuss the importance of remaining faithful to the anthropological mission of making people visible and not being hindered by the methodological impossibility of representation.

When I leaf through my diaries, trying to revive the memories of my fieldwork, there is a page that always reminds me of how easily we are fooled by our way of representing human life. It is the narration of a dream I had about three months after my arrival in Solomon Islands. That early morning, I suddenly woke up like a soldier after the reveille, and mechanically searched for a pen and my notebook. The air was thin, and cool, very rare in the South Pacific. I scribbled frantically. The marks of my pen look as if they were left by a minuscule hurricane. I wanted to mark all I could recall from that dream before it was too late, before the sirens of hindsight self-narration could turn that oneiric experience into yet another fable. I had the feeling that there was something important that that dream was trying to tell me.

> Field diary
> Honiara, January 11, 2012
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> *This morning I woke up in the middle of a very special dream. I was in the company of Gordon and Helen, in their timber cabin. The woman was sticking coloured cards against the walls of the room. On each of those coloured cards I could clearly read the names of some relatives. In particular, I remember the name of Reubenson Ramonia, which is one of Clement's brothers. Reubenson is not a blood relative of Gordon and Helen. Indeed, the card on which his name was written had been stuck on the area of the wall that bore the inscription "Affines". On the adjacent wall, more coloured pages had been posted, with names on them, but also with sums due, and with specifications such as 'gift', 'debt', 'offer', and so on. Seeing such a curious composition, I was amazed. I thought, "Just watch how funny accounting is in this country! I can really see that a household is held up by a network of mutual dependencies, as affective as economic!" And as I was meditating on that, I searched my camera to document what I was observing. But in framing the scene, I realised that taking the photo presented some complications: the light through the window was too strong on the wall, whereas not enough light shed on the coloured cards. Also, only some of them would fit into the photo, because the area over which they were fixed was too broad. So, I decided to rearrange them, in order to include them all in one picture. As I believed I understood the logic underpinning their arrangement, I grouped those relating to collateral relatives in a corner, and those concerning blood relatives in the corner of the adjoining wall. But the problem of light was still unresolved, and so I pulled a curtain to cover the brightest side of the window. But, in so doing, I noticed that the room had changed shape. I froze, and looked at the tissue. Its texture seemed somehow familiar. Suddenly, I realised that what I had in my hand was in fact the thick, brown curtain in my grandparents' bedroom, in Milan, Italy. I looked around, and found myself in that very same room. I was at Home! On the walls, however, the coloured cards were still there, with the names, with the amounts due, arranged as I had reordered them. At that point, since everything looked ideal for taking the perfect picture, I adjusted the camera and framed. But then I stopped, for a thought crossed my mind. What was the point of taking a photograph of those cards for research purposes, if in the meantime I had changed the whole context of their use? And in conceiving this last thought, I woke up.*

Re-shuffling coloured cards, just like creating a "multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets" (Foucault 2002 [1966]). Attempting to illuminate dark areas, for "there is no darkness but ignorance" (Shakespeare, 1998[1623]: 194). And the burning power of light, the "most glaring daylight, rationality at all costs" (Nietzsche 1997 [1989]: 17). All this seems to remind "that in absolute light one sees just as much and just as little as in absolute darkness" (Hegel, 2010[1816]: 69).

Picture 1 *Left to right*: Ralph, Freddie, Tony, and Gordon waiting for transit at the Border Line bus stop, Honiara, Solomon Islands.

Picture 2 *Left to right*: Clement, Joshua, Robin, and Iro posing in their residence in Gwaunaoa, Malaita, Solomon Islands.

Today I like to think that my dream was trying to draw my attention to the risk we run as we try to familiarize the unfamiliar, and the ensuing dilemma between the urge to represent and the constraints of representation. Anti-representational post-modernists and deconstructivists subjected this methodological discourse to such highly severe criticisms that, nowadays, establishing some degree of similarity between reality and representation is not just a matter of accuracy. Not any more. It is often perceived as a shallow act of arrogance. It is shallow, because of the naïve assumption that there be no alteration of content in the process of transforming experience into knowledge. It is arrogant, because social scientists 'ought not' to present their perception of reality as if it was objective. Indeed, it can only be "epistemologically arbitrary" (Rosenau 1992: 94-95).

This critical perspective does not concede that different degrees of accuracy correspond to more or less faithful representational attempts. As a matter of fact, it subverts the epistemological discourse *in toto,* by negating any relation of equivalence between reality and representation. It proposes instead an endless and discontinuous "play of different representations" (Schwandt, 2007: 263).

Confusing and multi-vocal as it might sound, such an intellectual turn was very timely and beneficial in certain respects. Anthropologists who grew up professionally in the last 40 years or so could not avoid the injection of theoretical unpretentiousness that the post-modern critique opposed to the modernist faith in the liberating force of rationality. Furthermore, the so-called crisis of representation forced anthropologists to develop a sort of critical self-awareness, a much-needed implement in their professional toolkit.

However, since by definition deconstructivism promotes the contemplation of the ruins it leaves behind, rather than the construction of novel edifices of thought, the inadequacy of the social sciences to represent reality soon ceased to be a specific methodological problem and became a sort of "epistemological hypochondria" (Geertz 1988: 71). Under such an influence, many anthropological texts turned to be of a "hesitant, stuttering quality (what can I say? how can I say it? with what right do I do so?)" (Eriksen, 2006: 26). In this way, as Thomas Eriksen put it, "Postmodernism taught a generation of anthropologists to dissect the menu without bothering to look at the food" (*ibid.*). Coincidentally, that is the generation in which I grew up. That might explain my hesitation in taking the picture…

In brief, the benefits of theoretical humility came at the cost of a hesitant prose, and the inward turn to introspective self-criticism resulted in a closure to the outside world. Nevertheless, these are the trends that set the standard for the ethnographic writing of the latest decades. As the narrative of my dream suggested, with these standards I had to come to terms. In this sense, my dream was imagining my future, because it foreshadowed a challenge that I was to confront. If I was to propose my own contribution to the panorama of ethnographic writing, I had to find my own middle way between the Scylla of theoretical restraint and the Charybdis of critical self-awareness.

Upon my return to the United Kingdom, the challenge of representation presented itself in the most concrete way. The more I was getting acquainted with my new old life, the more I felt I was losing a grip with the context of my fieldwork. Classic. As I was re-learning to interact with my family, colleagues, supervisors, and fellow citizens, I was feeling increasingly influenced by their categories and relationships between categories (Sahlins, 1985). In the process, I was once again familiarising the unfamiliar and, once again, I was running the risk of understanding a culture in the terms of another one.

I needed something to keep myself close to my fieldwork, something that would remind me of the ways of thinking and behaving of my Solomon Islands families and friends, something that would help me to write with a voice they would find familiar.

However, I was not searching for a solution. It was rather by chance that I realised that my fieldwork photos could be of help. This happened as I was visiting a photo exhibition organised at the Royal Anthropological Institute.

On May 31st 2013, in a medium-sized room at the first floor of 50 Fitzroy Street, I examined about 32 photos exhibited on four walls along with short captions. Some showed people, others presented their skeletons and remains, one displayed an owl monkey, and one a PhD student filming a group of women. The people who populated the majority of these pictures were either working, resting, celebrating, smoking, waiting in transit, washing their children, listening to ethnographic audio recordings with a professional headset, or simply posing for the photographer. The captions bore a brief description of the context in which each photo was taken, and a quick reference to the scope of the research.

As I was looking at the photos and reading the accompanying text, I had the impression that all of the pairs had something in common. It seemed as if the interplay between each pair of text and picture was meant to tell a particular story. The subject of that story was 'fieldwork', which was indeed the theme of the exhibition. The characters were the people, whereas anthropologists oscillated constantly between self-representation as participants, observers, and participant observers.

Nafisa, the curator of the exhibition, kindly explained to me that her aim was to present anthropological fieldwork in its full diversity in terms of location and methodological toolkits. However, she selected those 32 photos (out of more than 400 submissions) not only because they aptly exemplified a variety of settings and the methodological diversity of anthropology. She also wanted the photos to be "visually striking", and by that she meant that they had to make the visitor willing to come closer, to become interested, fascinated enough to read the short text attached. In order to be striking, the photo needed to satisfy at least two requirements. Firstly, it had to be "good" in terms of photographic quality. Secondly, it had to "tell a story".

As I was talking with her about these selection criteria, I became interested in the second aspect. I felt as if that expression provided me with an opportunity to meditate upon the choices that we all have to make when we want to represent our fieldwork experience, the people we lived with, and their culture. That is why I tried to ask questions that surreptitiously moved towards that topic. What are the ingredients of story-telling photography? How should they be organized and presented? Is there a specific way to tailor these elements in order to target a particular kind of public?

> Nafisa: There has not been enough public engagement in terms of being able to really show the world of anthropology in an accessible way.[1] But it is very important to be able to do that without taking away the depth and the complexity. That is the trick, and it is a very difficult one to do, I think…

"That is why some anthropologists give up", I must have thought. "Most of the time people are invisible", she added. She was referring to that form of complexity in anthropological writing that conceals the presence of actual human beings to the point that it is not possible to tell whether there are any, the kind of complexity that often makes academics themselves lose their way as they proceed towards the understanding of an argument. The image that her sentence brought to my mind was that of a photograph with nobody in it.

It is not possible to present a theoretical text in the form of a picture. How can you take a photo of a theory, theoretical perspective, or overarching theme? You simply cannot. What you can do, with the help of a text, is guide the reader towards an understanding of how the subject of a photo might represent a particular concept. To do so, a photographer can use rhetorical figures such as metaphor, allegory, or allusion. For instance, she can represent anthropology's task of challenging conventional understandings of difference and similarity with an allegorical picture showing a dark-skinned, body-painted child holding a giant Japanese photo camera, like in the textbook entitled, indeed, *What is Anthropology?* (Eriksen 2004). She can allude to the economic transformation of non-Western societies with a picture of commuters and migrants packed inside and outside an overloaded train, like in Hann and Hart's *Economic Anthropology* (2011). But she cannot take a photo of anti-essentialism, the culturalist turn, or the incest taboo. And that is not because of obvious practical problems such as those one might have in taking a picture of, say, an act of incest. It is actually easier to photograph an act of incest than it is to take a picture of incest taboo. That is why a text can explain the concept[2] to which a picture can only give an arbitrary visual hint.

The exhibition's interplay between photo and text, and my meditation upon the presence or absence of a subject, brought me to think that, while people can disappear under the mesh of textual intricacies, the same cannot happen in a photo as long as the photo is a photo of people.[3] Otherwise stated, the author of a text can claim to be writing about people without necessarily making those people visible in the text. The reader looks for them as she ventures in the understanding of the argument. She believes they must be there, hidden some-

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1. Cf. Eriksen, 2006. Ghodsee (2013) made a similar point when she wrote: "Ethnographic monographs once enjoyed popular audiences because earlier generations of scholars were committed to writing ethnographic texts that were as beautifully written as they were analytically incisive."

2. In contrast, photographer Robert Adams once wrote: "For photographers, the ideal book of photographs would contain just pictures – no text at all" (Adams 1994: 34). Cf. Berger & Mohr 2011.

3. That does not mean, however, that the subject is always visible, for the visibility of subjects ultimately depends on the eye of the beholder. That a subject is more or less visible depends also on the intentions of the photographer, as well as the context in which the picture is viewed.

where under the surface of text, for she was told that anthropology is a discipline that investigates *people*. She might not be aware that people have been increasingly absent from ethnographies, notwithstanding that the very etymology of the word contains the term 'people'.

I would not go so far as to say that there are no original human lives, words, and feelings as ultimate referents of much contemporary ethnography. But the reader never gets to see them because she is too busy disentangling the intricate prose in which authors wave the strings of their introverted rumination. That is not by chance: complexity became a value in itself, a moral idea, an aim rather than a mean, as if its usefulness as a concept has been forgotten and replaced with a unanimous praise of its similarity with the world. Countering this intellectual trend, one of my lecturers in anthropology once told me "The world is complex, and your job is to make it as simple as possible, not to add complexity to it". I tried to apply this lesson, but I struggled to find a good model to imitate, so many contemporary ethnographers being so reluctant to make people visible.
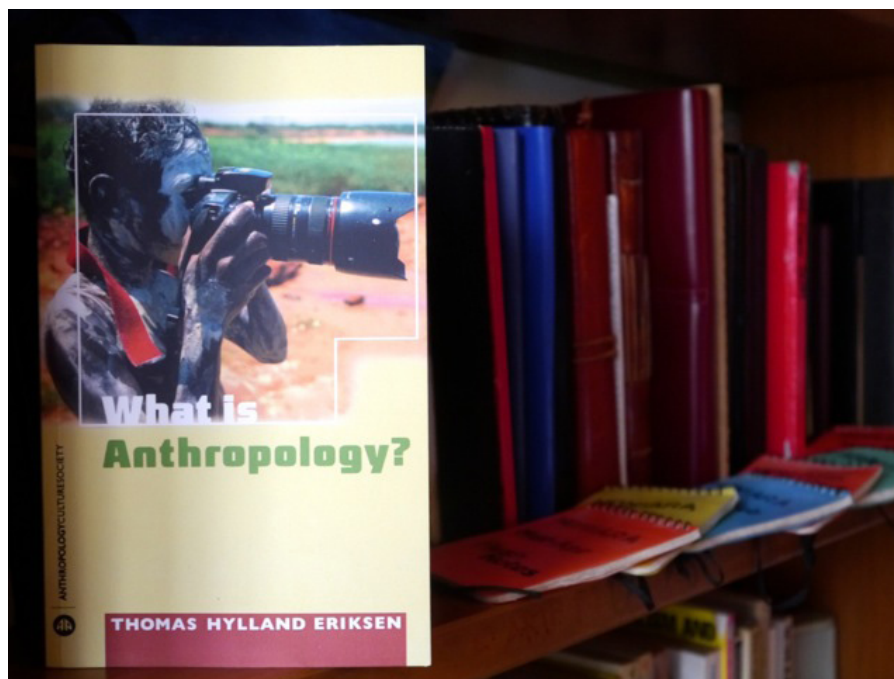
Picture 3 Thomas Eriksen's *What is Anthropology.* [Book image reproduced with the permission of Pluto Books]

Many titles float in my head now; anthropology books in which I struggled to see actual people doing actual things. At the same time, I do not feel in the right to criticise ethnographies that I found, so to say, uninhabited. I am not in the position to do that, to point my finger at this sort of ethnographic holocaust, for this very same hand that writes these words has not even produced a single complete ethnography so far.[4] Nevertheless, I know I am not alone in my 'search for the lost people' in the anthropology bookshelf.

Some years ago, an anthropologist with more than 40 years of experience wrote me a letter that made me feel in good company:

> I think that the principal problem with much anthropology today is that so-called 'theory' has more status in the academy than concrete ethnographic analysis. This is a post 1970s problem. Read any prominent anthropologist in the decades before 1970 and you will find work that is remarkable for its clarity of thought, clarity of prose, and engagement with original ethnographic material. After that things go haywire. Obscure, hyper abstract, badly written books become fashionable. [...] They are ahistorical and asocial and barriers to ethnographic understanding. Students try to 'apply' these categories to their field data, which, to me, turns things upside down. [...] Fieldwork should be the basis of a critique of the dominant orthodoxy not the affirmation of it. Good ethnographic documentation is crucial to the development of human understanding.

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4. If that does not sound fair, the reader can find several examples in "The Impenetrable Rhetoric of Interpretive Anthropologists" (Lett 1997:105-112).

Picture 4 Roswell and his son resting on a hammock under their house in Gilbert Camp, Solomon Islands.

Picture 5 Frida posing in Bita'ama, Malaita, Solomon Islands.

Upon my return from Solomon Islands, I wanted to put this advice into practice. However, as I mentioned above, I was losing my familiarity with my fieldwork. But then, rambling around the exhibition I felt that the interplay between photography and writing could help me think about a way in which I could finally let my anxieties go and concentrate on my ethnography. I left the exhibition, this time with the resolute intention to puzzle all these pieces together.

Each and every ethnographer is confronted with the task of representing while at the same time abstracting categories to make people and their culture intelligible. The risk of misrepresentation is inherent in the process of recursive familiarisations and de-familiarisations that constitute the ethnographic practice. My dream was a presage of the time when I would have had to find my own way to cope with this challenge. Once I was back, I had the opportunity to think about possible, though partial, solutions through the lens of a photographic exhibition, a page of my dairy, the voice of a lecturer, and the letter of a friend and mentor. I began to wonder whether the visual presence of people in photos could help me to stay focused on them. So, I started to look at them more often.

Surrounding myself with pictures, I recently realised, helps me not only to write and think in the company of familiar faces. It reminds me that each picture includes what I included and excludes what I excluded when I pressed the button; that what I photographed was necessarily influenced by aspects that are not explicit in the picture; and that the eyes of the subjects were looking at me as much as my eyes were looking at them. The point, thus, is that these pictures remind me constantly that it is not possible to write about other people without writing about myself, that every ethnography is to a certain extent an autobiography as much as each portrait represents the point of view of the viewed from the point of view of the viewer. Actually, neither, but both together, interweaved in a single object: a relationship.

The two extremes of the relationship –the 'who' and the 'what'– are either exalted or undervalued, depending on the inclinations of the author. 'Objectivists' concentrate on the 'what' and tend to neglect the 'who', thereby failing to grasp the fugacity of objects. Reflexive thinkers do the opposite: they overemphasise the subjective perspective and understate the object of knowledge (often, to the point of losing sight of it). If the objectivist mission seems to be the eradication of the knowing subject to leave nothing but the bare 'facts', the 'subjectivists' dedicate their lives to the dematerialisation of objects. In ethnographic terms, that corresponds to the disappearance of people.

In order to go beyond the stall of representation resulting from two tendencies pulling in opposite directions, several ethnographic strategies have been experimented. Some try to 'reduce' the presence of the ethnographer and 'increase' that of the people, like in the life history method.[5] As Carolyn Morris wrote, "individual life histories compensate for the absence of the people upon whose lives their ethnographies are based" (Morris 1998: 405). However, as Rosenau wrote, this rhetorical strategy "may not resolve the crisis of representation so much as shift the burden of representing from the researcher to 'the people'" (Rosenau 1992: 108). The opposite strategy ('reduce' the object, 'increase' the subject) has some drawbacks too. Ethnographies become evocations of the fieldwork experience (Marcus and Fischer 1986), thereby suspending expectations (and/or pretentions) of objectivity.

Michael Jackson proposes a dialectical solution to the subject-object opposition. He looks at the relationship between knowing subject and object of knowledge as 'interplay' (Jackson 2002: 293). The two extremes, thus, are seen as inseparable entities rather than exclusive alternatives. That is, they can be isolated in analytical processes, during acts of reference such as verbalisation or categorisation. But in reality they are not. They are mutually constitutive as "moments and modalities of experience" (*Ibid.*).

The extreme consequences of 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism' correspond to two forms of reductionism: either regarding "subjectivity as little more than a cultural, historical, or social construction" or "reducing empirical observations to the psychology of the observer." It follows that the preliminary condition for the construction of "the truth of what is known", as Jackson put it (*Ibid*: 292), cannot be found in either. Thus, they must be somewhere halfway between objects and subjects, *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, 'representation' of what is seen and 'confession' by the one who sees.

Somewhere, at some point, object and subject interact, like a particle and a physician who observes it

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5. See, for example, Kwa'ioloa & Burt 1997; Crapanzano 1980; 'Elota & Keesing 1983.

and tries to describe what it does. They will never be the same again, because who they are is the outcome of that interplay. Such inter-subjective interpenetration between subject of knowledge and knowing subject corresponds to the anthropological version of Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, in that it symbolises the methodological impossibility of observing a point of view without altering it as a consequence of observation.

Attempting to do something impossible and pretending to succeed is folly. But refusing to try is uninteresting. The existential solution to the methodological impossibility of ethnographic representation consists of being aware of the inter-subjective dimension of knowledge production. In other words, ethnography should be an autobiography about the other, the confession of a representation, the story written by an 'auther', i.e. the story of a relationship.

My PhD thesis, the cards stuck against the oneiric room, and the photos surrounding me as I write, tell the story of a relationship, of my point of view about someone else's point of view. This concept is epitomised in my silhouette holding a camera, reflected in the pupil of young Frida. Like mirrors facing each other, our eyes produce infinitely deep dimensions. It is impossible to tell where they end, let alone write about it. But Frida would be very disappointed if I failed to write a book about her people. Even more, if I were to tell her that the reason why I gave up writing was that I was not able to wake up from my dream of representation.

The author of a text can claim to be writing about people without necessarily making those people visible in the text. A photographer, in contrast, cannot hide the people she took in a photo, by definition. That is why the photos we take during our fieldwork can help us to remain closer to the people we aim to write about.[6] Their facial expressions might be obfuscated by layers of memory, confused in the hindsight of our metropolitan crowd, and altered by the constantly changing narratives of our past. However, surrounding ourselves with the faces of our families and friends from the field can help us to maintain that feeling of embeddedness, that relationship that ultimately produces the knowledge that we painstakingly try to convey in our ethnographies, in the forever imperfect attempt to distinguish the other from ourselves.

Picture 6 *Left to right*: Gordon, Freddie, Toni and Ralph looking at the sea in front of the Kakabona Beach, Honiara, Solomon Islands.

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6. Here I am not using photographs with any pretention of realism. Rather, if I were to isolate the element that helped me to remain closer to my fieldwork families and friends, I would make use of what Roland Bathes called 'punctum' (Barthes 1981).

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Acknowledgements