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Field Aporias in Minho (Portugal)

Abstract: Basing itself in the three aspects of the world that Kant proposed (as source, as domain and as limit), this article argues that the ethnographic gesture is correspondingly marked by three registers of encounter: *empathy, company, community*. Taking recourse to an ethnographic vignette about an encounter with a man on a bike, it explores the sense of community that marked my ethnographic presence in Alto Minho (northwest Portugal) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The article proposes that ethnography depends on the determination of a 'field' for fieldwork and that this is aided by the identification of field aporias – that is, challenges to interpretation that both stop the ethnographer in her tracks, engaging the need for further determination, and provide momentum to the ethnographic narrative.

Keywords: aporia, community, company, empathy, fieldwork, Portugal

Babelization does not wait for the multiplicity of languages. (Derrida 1993: 10)

In this article, I mean to illustrate something that I briefly stated in the introduction to this collection: in ethnographic encounters, the first moment is always already a second moment. That is, to the extent that all human encounters are historically overdetermined, no ethnographic encounter is itself pristine. The uncertainty of presence – that is, metaphysical pluralism – is ethnography's abiding condition, not its grave. This means that ethnographic intermediation is both inescapable and embraceable. In order to argue this point, I will revisit a moment of uncertainty that took place when I was carrying out fieldwork long ago in the Alto Minho (NW Portugal) (see Pina-Cabral 1986).

A Misencounter

Picture a young anthropologist riding a small motorbike coming down onto the central valley of the parish he has decided to study in the early winter of 1979. He has just visited a stone sanctuary perched on the wooded highlands above the river – a kind of silent no-man's land, where the bells of the parish church can no longer be heard and where dangerous packs of wolves are said to roam when night falls.

As he rolls down the cobbled streets winding over the central valley, the panorama is increasingly striking. At the bottom, beyond the distant church tower,



one can just see the shine of the slow river waters winding their curvy way westwards. To the east, in the distance, the valleys become increasingly narrow and are eventually closed off by the orange mists of the Gerez Mountain. He experiences a kind of exhilaration moved by two distinct streams: first, the unforgettable beauty of the green pines, the red vine leaves, and the silver columns of smoke rising from houses; second, the pungent sense of timelessness. In those days, this was a land left on the margins of consumer society; where one was not assaulted by polluted gases or motorised noises, but by the acrid smells of fireplaces, stabled cattle or pig manure. It is a habitat of cut-granite covered by red terracotta, where the anthropologist's historical imagination can trace direct material links back to the first Roman occupation (the very street along which I was descending follows a Roman trace and, down below, the present churchyard was the ancient Roman cemetery); then, the long history of medieval warfare against the Umayyads, marking the imaginations and leaving traces in the toponymy; then, the bands of bandits and guerrilla fighters of the Peninsular Wars in the early nineteenth century; finally, the regular crises of abandonment due to migratory surges over the past three centuries.

As the bike descends the bumpy road, the engine is turned off, which locally is considered an absolute must. Soon, the anthropologist realises that another bike is silently shortening the distance. As the two bikes come abreast, the man on the other bike starts a conversation. He wants to know who he is and where he is staying. As they slowly roll down together their interaction feels pleasant. At a particularly stunning viewpoint, they come to a stop.

Has he too been away as a migrant? Yes, he has, to Brazil, but he was not too lucky, there was no money to be made there, so he soon returned. His life is all right now, but it has not been easy as this is a land of poverty. These days, you cannot really see it, but 'in the old days' people suffered a lot from hunger, money-lenders were ruthless, his own childhood was plagued by poverty. He goes on to repeat the so often-heard litany of misery concerning 'the old days' (*antigamente*; see Pina-Cabral 1987).

There is a short silence and then the young anthropologist asks, pointing at a beautiful palatial home visibly built in the seventeenth century, which sits at the bottom of the valley, right above some especially fertile irrigated fields:

'And whose is that house?'

'Oh, nowadays, it belongs to a local man . . . ' but one can immediately sense that, as the questions become specific, his interest wanes.

'But back then, when there was so much poverty, which was the richest house in the parish?'

'Hum . . . '

'And now, which one is the richest house?'

'Well, ours is a parish where almost everyone can manage to get by. Here there are no people without a house; everyone has a roof and at least a small piece of land.'

‘Ok, but surely there must be wealthier and poorer people. For example, the one who owns that house there. Who is he?’

‘No! Here we are all alike!’ He pronounces this emphatically, and immediately switches on the engine of his bike. With a wave of the hand, he speeds away from the anthropologist: an end to the conversation (see Pina-Cabral 2008: 39–51).

Field Aporias

There were many other such puzzling moments that, once recorded in my notebooks, functioned as pointers of perplexity: ‘impossible crossings’ or ‘limits of truth’, as Derrida (1993) would put it. In time, as the ethnography got written up, I came to cherish these troubling occasions, realising that their uncertainty facilitated my work. They had a kind of layered structure. On first approach, they seemed to point to a gap in understanding. In this case, clearly the biker and I had failed to communicate; there was some problem with the exchange, right? Some boundary had revealed itself.¹

But then, on a second take, the event became an affordance for understanding: my interlocutor’s world surely had to make sense broadly speaking, so why could I not make sense of the sense he made of his world – where was I going wrong? Between the first and the second take lies my interpretive charity – my proneness to believe that he was not a fool (see Pina-Cabral 2017). Thus, the event not only helped me define the field – that is, helping me validate my facing an identifiable way of being different – but eventually it also evoked an analytical challenge that I could share with my readers and, thus, it endowed my subsequent ethnographic narrative with a dynamic drive.

To the extent that such situations of puzzlement encountered during fieldwork function as intellectual alerts, they are challenges to one’s interpretive capacities. I have chosen to call them field aporias (see Pina-Cabral 2011). As Derrida explained, ‘aporia means the impossibility of crossing . . . not like negative paralysis, but like the endurance required for decision making . . . it has to do with steps’.² The effect on the researcher of such moments – which inevitably become a large part of what we put down and worry over in our field notes – is that they point the way to what needs further determination. Their role is greater than we are likely to consider, for they point to the limits of the ‘field’, to the point at which autobiography (experiential narrative) becomes ‘fieldwork’.

As they start their research, most young researchers carry with them the conviction that they have (i) a ‘project’ and that they take it to (ii) a previously identifiable ‘field’. Even colleagues who pride themselves in their theoretical clairvoyance are prone to believing that they already knew what they were going to investigate when they started their research, and that they had already identified the field before they even went there (in fact, accepted speech even

confuses ‘project’ with ‘research’ – as in ‘my doctoral project was about Alto Minho’).

Such convictions, however, are the result of the infrastructural work (see Carey and Pedersen 2017) wrought by the positivist background assumptions that are written into our contemporary educational system and, in particular, into our contemporary neoliberal system of research funding. To a certain extent they are likely to be confirmed for, as I stated above, our first moment of ethnographic encounter is always a second (and a third, and fourth, etc.) moment. No one was the first person to go and observe ‘that’ particular ‘there’ – even in the days of Malinowski. Ethnographic intermediation is the norm, not the exception. But, were we to trust the accumulated wisdom of over a century of professional practitioners of ethnography, we would have been alerted to the fact that (i) if the fieldwork was intensive enough, rarely did our initial theme integrally survive it and (ii) it is only in the ‘field’ that the ‘field’ was actually constructed, in the sense of interpretatively determined. In the example given above, ‘Alto Minho’ was a category that I had to produce and that, without the instantiation provided by the events surrounding my ethnography, would hardly make much sense (for a similar argument in a very different urban context, see Grohmann 2020: 55–64). Here, I place the word ‘field’ in inverted commas only in order to highlight that it is a heuristic conceit – both necessary for the carrying out of ethnography and all too easily naturalised, against the interests of ethnographic insight.

The majority of ethnographically inspired essays that have been written over the past century by so many of us, in fact, focus on one or other such field aporia. The vignettes we are routinely told to include in our essays in order to get them published in our journals bear within them one or more such cases of interpretive puzzlement. They seem to possess a capacity to convince the reader concerning the point we are about to make and very often, as most journal reviewers will tell you, the vignette is far more elucidative than the actual analytical explanation.

Why are anthropological readers so readily convinced by them? After all, as Rodney Needham famously demonstrated so long ago (1985: 75–116), it is perfectly possible to invent a vignette and even to invent a research ‘project’ that we did not carry out. There is no ultimate reason why a reader should trust a writer’s word . . . perhaps there never was a young man on a bike on that hillside in Alto Minho in late 1979! This should not trouble us very much as, in fact, it is a condition shared with all scientific (and even legal) accounts. The reader judges the account in terms of its verisimilitude, which involves a set of formal validating procedures, but which also depends on a set of more uncertain standards of trust. The ethnographic vignette works its wonders in terms of making the account verisimilitudinous not only because of the evidence it provides, but primarily because it establishes vicarious presence. It facilitates empathy by placing the ethnographer and her reactions before the eyes of the reader and thus eliciting in the reader the puzzlement that the original situation had caused in the ethnographer. In this way, the ethnographic vignette is the vehicle for an aporia in

that it challenges the reader's imagination, functioning as a spring to the reader's curiosity – it moves the reader from uncertainty to doubt (see Pelkmans 2013: 4). Finally, it validates the 'field' – that is, the place which, because it is 'different', deserves the attention we give it.³

Empathy, Company and Community

As an instance of human encounter, the ethnographic gesture is a layered process involving joint worlding. In this regard, we can be inspired by a distinction that Immanuel Kant proposed in his late lectures on anthropology (Foucault 2008 [1961]: 82). He claimed that the world appears to humans as a structure with three parts: as *source*, as *domain* and as *limit*. This framework allows us to differentiate between three distinct registers of sociality that are permanently present in social interaction but which carry with them divergent implications (see Pina-Cabral 2017). I hope this can help us clarify some of the complexity packed into the vignette I have just presented.

The first of these is the immediate and co-presential encounter, which is the source of the world itself. This is characterised by empathy, that is, affective attunement with others (see Throop and Zahavi 2020). In the vignette above, the biker and myself established co-presence as we came to move in synchrony down the street and eventually as we stopped before a view that I knew struck him as pleasant, as much as he knew it struck me in the same way too. As our encounter developed, however, I could sense his increasing dissatisfaction and, when he suddenly switched on his bike to move away, I had a gut feeling, so to speak, of what he was experiencing. It puzzled me, yes, but I knew he was feeling irritated.

This kind of face-to-face encounter gives way in time to a second register: company, where more than two people interact with a shared set of mundane actualities. Company should be seen as a form of co-habitation, because it is within company that the world emerges as a structured domain of interaction that opposes the self. In our case, from on top of our bikes, we were engaging with each other as companions, as sharing a similar condition before the world. This we did adequately, for there was a certain sense of shared control of our environment, which meant that we interacted in recognisable ways. As others along the road saw us move down the street, we knew they knew we were together and they knew we knew that too.

Finally, company yields to community, that is, publicly recognised entities (the person, the house, the family, the parish, the race, etc.), which appear in the world as boundaries to interaction, that is, as public scaffolds of presence (as 'identity'). These are the objectified 'groups' that twentieth-century social science mostly theorised about. In our case, it was here that it all started to go sour. My presence revealed itself to breach the biker's conceptual boundaries concerning his world. I did not belong, so his 'identity' was jeopardised by me.

We easily recognised our joint interaction in terms of empathy; as company, we related together with the world around us in a perfectly satisfactory manner; but, as community, my curiosity breached our separate belongings in terms of the morally recognised categories that he used to position himself before the world. Already then I was engaging with a more experiential understanding of community as exemplified in the work of Craig Calhoun (1980; Pina-Cabral 1986: 124–125).

In time, I came to know well the owner of the palatial home downhill, which caused our misencounter. Although I do not know that for sure, I strongly suspect that the man on the bike might find it more difficult to interact in a companionable way with that arrogant and authoritarian rich man than I did – for, as a university graduate, I had some prestige before his eyes. Still, for the rich house owner too, I was a *forasteiro* (an outsider) and I should refrain from being too inquisitive about the local world. It was only in time, and only with very few of my neighbours in Paço, that I eventually managed to break through that conceptual boundary of community belonging. I did so only when our engagement as companions had become so intense that they were ready to soften the effects of our difference as members of distinct communities.

I observe, therefore, that Kant's three registers of world function in tandem throughout. But they have distinct implications for how people experience their existence as identifiable beings in the world, that is, as transcendent beings. Human infants are moved by empathy to become part of social contexts where humans who were already persons interact both with them and with each other and the world around them (see Pina-Cabral 2017). In other words, it is in the transformation of empathy into company that the person emerges as a singular being, eventually embodying public categories of interaction – community.

Being in company, therefore, is a prerequisite for being a person, because it is in participation with others and in the world in which they live that people emerge as capable of symbolic, linguistically informed thought (see Pina-Cabral 2018). In turn, by accessing symbolic thought, people reproduce community, that is, the conceptual boundaries that support and regulate our everyday interactions. Company is not only an effect that occurs between people, but between people, other sentient beings and the objects that surround us within our humanised habitats. These objects also keep us company – people develop feelings of coincidence of interests not only with other persons, but also with the most significant aspects of the world around them (i.e. we participate with persons *and* objects – in my case, both with my actual companions in Minho and in the actual physical environment that I tried to evoke in the above description).

Finally, it must be stressed that antipathy is not the opposite of empathy; aggression is not the opposite of companionship; and egoism is not the opposite of community.⁴ Empathy, companionship and community are always prior to, and therefore conditions for, the emergence of antipathy, aggression and egoism. As Julian Pitt-Rivers insists in his historical analysis of systems of personal value

constitution in Europe, gratuity is always prior (2017 [1992]: 69–103): insofar as each of us emerges from co-presence, others are not only there before us, they are also a condition for our being in world.

‘Here We Are All Alike’

There is a binarist quality to the in-group/out-group distinctions that community evokes that are not characteristic either of empathy or of company. By saying ‘Here we are all alike’ (a stock phrase that I went on to hear repeatedly), my local interlocutors were both including everyone who was supposed to be included – people who shared a common position before their world, which implied rights and duties – *and*, at the same time, they were silently excluding those who were present but not valued – the ones whose right to be there was diminished, the ones who fell in between the nodes.

I came to discover that, by emphatically declaring that everyone there was alike, landed farmers were in fact allowing themselves space for not needing to confront in a companionable way the fact that landless people, single mothers, strangers, bastards, beggars, priests, for example, were not at all like them. In this way, the landed farmers, whose prestige allowed them to police the normativeness of parish belonging, were producing the infrastructure for sustaining the inequality that then endowed them with superior moral value. In this way, a landless woman became a morally dubious woman; a stranger had no right to know of internal inequality, and so on (see Pina-Cabral 2008). This double-sidedness of community (both inclusive and exclusive) meant that at a personal level (when humans were seen as ‘Christians’) they could sympathise with other people’s suffering. So, by relation to the past, the biker could freely engage as troubling people’s homelessness, people’s hunger, people’s oppression. He sympathised – much as everyone there sympathises with Christ’s pain on the cross. But, by relation to the present, the question was: ‘If you are not supposed to be here, why are you here?’ In fact, the biker’s response to me was not to go back on what he had said about the old days. Rather, it was to declare ‘What the heck are *you* doing here? Who are *you* to be asking such questions? *You* have nothing to do with that!’

The problem was that feelings of community were a central, cherished and morally comforting aspect of the lives of the people I met in those parishes of the Alto Minho where, eventually (and believe me, it was not easy), I set up home. Even of the ones who, ultimately, did not have full rights of presence. In order to understand such simple things as the local naming system, or the way they used such words as ‘house’ (*casa*), ‘neighbour’ (*vizinho*) or ‘parish’ (*freguesia*), I had to take the assumptions of community into account. If I were to deny that sense of shared fate that the word ‘community’ evokes, I would have remained incapable of understanding my local interlocutors, namely as exemplified by this misencounter on a bike.

The problem is that, once I put my finger in the wound, the aporia redoubled – I missed a step, as Derrida would say. An aporia is a boundary to understanding that calls for a resolution. The strength of their feeling of community established itself as aporic to me, because over and above the emotions of co-responsibility that the people in Alto Minho associated with their feeling of (parish) community, I had to make sense of how it also created ethical blind spots in their world, silencing or blocking off other possible instances of co-responsibility and even validating a moral system that favoured the presence of some and obscured the presence of others.

As it turned out, that was challenging for me when faced with the need to make sense of their narratives. Their own account of the past gave evidence of the ethical blindness that their sense of community promoted in the present. Merely by being there, and being willing to encompass them as reasonable, albeit different, I myself evoked those blind spots. My presence constituted them as ‘them’ (as ‘field’). Thus, those who eventually came to befriend me and did not want to respond to me with the biker’s irritation felt compelled to open up imaginary spaces for including me: for example, ‘Ah, now you are just like one of us here!’ or ‘You have drunk water from our fountain, you will never go away!’ (knowing full well, of course, that I would, and in fact taking practical steps for facilitating my hypothetical return). Their strong sense of company with me led them to inter-mediate the moral pull of their categories of community.

Community Further Afield

As the writing of my *minhoto* ethnography progressed, I realised that the field aporia illustrated by the misencounter with the biker (only one of several such instances where parish and hamlet belonging came to challenge my understanding) was not only in the Alto Minho, my field. I saw clearly that the question echoed more widely in the debates my generation of Iberian ethnographers was producing at the time. In 1978–9, we were living the post-revolutionary years in Spain and Portugal. The Portuguese fascist regime (1930–1974) had finished and my anthropological colleagues were very keen to deride the nationalism of the earlier romantic anthropologists, whose fantasies of ‘community’ (exemplified by aestheticised accounts of isolated communitarian villages – see Dias 1953) had been exploited ideologically by right-wing nationalism. Therefore, the aporia manifested itself beyond rural Minho, it was also part of a much broader academic debate of the period concerning the nature of citizenship and human rights in our newly democratic world.

Portugal’s system of local administration and political representation as it emerged out of the liberal reforms of the mid-nineteenth century is centrally based on the hamlet/parish/market town (borough) concentric model which it inherited from the regions in northern Portugal and Galicia that were never

administered by Islamic powers. So, when the early sociologists started working on their conception of community and transposing it as a model of modern national ideology, they unwittingly reflected that history – to put it again in Carey and Pedersen's terms, it became infrastructural.

The first sociological thinkers in Portugal in the mid-1880s arose in Oporto around J.P. Oliveira Martins (1845–1894). They adopted the primitivist outlook that was so characteristic of their era. For them, the initial human condition was to belong to mutual groups of co-owners: 'in the beginning, the land belonged to nobody', he claimed (cited in Rocha Peixoto 1967 [1908]: 338). A. A. Rocha Peixoto (1866–1909), a disciple of his, carried out the first ethnographic studies in Portugal. According to him, 'primitive communism' consisted in the 'collective ownership of the land, . . . [and in] the equitable distribution of the common good and . . . of the forms according to which it is put to advantage or cultivated' (Rocha Peixoto 1967 [1908]: 330). He believed that 'communism' still survived residually in the mountainous areas of our country, where 'individual, exclusive and hereditary possession of the soil coexists with collective ownership of one or more areas of the territory and, inclusively, with other forms of evolutionary transition from pastoral rule to free and full ownership' (1967 [1908]: 331).

Rocha Peixoto was responsible for identifying some of the more lasting images that Portugal would ever have of itself as a collective. They remain today an important component of touristic promotional fare. Not only did he propose the notion of the 'Portuguese house' (*casa portuguesa*), which influences national architectural culture to this day, but he also carried out the first studies of popular metalwork, pottery, regional costume, popular jewellery, gypsies, tattoos, tales, and so on. But, more than anything, the transcendental vision of belonging to Portugal-as-land that he promoted among his junior colleagues who survived him (Tude de Sousa and the Abade de Baçal, in particular) would remain the hallmark of the national ideological project throughout the twentieth century. He is the main identifier of the classic *loci* of Portuguese communal transcendence: Vilarinho da Furna, Rio de Onor, the Barroso highlands, the *poveiros*, the fishermen of Vila do Conde, the reapers of Alentejo, and so on. Strangely enough, however, the essay where he more clearly formulated his theories on 'popular communism' was written in French to be read in Rio de Janeiro and was only published posthumously, as he met an early death. 'Survivances du Régime Communiste en Portugal (abrégé d'une monographie inédite)' (1967 [1908]) is a perfectly symptomatic example of how bourgeois attempts at giving voice to autochthony were framed in terms of notions of primitivist community to which they themselves (in their identity as 'moderns') did not feel they fully belonged.⁵

Echoes of this conception of groupness were to play an important role in the renewal of the social sciences that took place in the mid-twentieth century, notably by Jorge Dias and Orlando Ribeiro. Only with José Cutileiro (1971) did we witness the emergence of a new critical project and, even so, the classical *loci*

of community continued to play a role to this day as symbols of national transcendence, above all in documentary film (Alves Costa 2009).

Therefore, back then, I soon realised that I was navigating tricky waters. The problem was that, yes, I agreed with my colleagues that we could not reproduce the nationalist accounts of communitarianism; but, no, I did not agree to treat the local people's vivid sense of 'community' as a kind of false consciousness, because the question was: who would my local interlocutors have been without the sense of community belonging that they so readily evinced? Local people did, actually, see their world as being structured by common interests that focused on the primary nodes of their institutional lives: the house, the hamlet, the parish, the municipality, the nation. They would be deeply disturbed and angered if that scaffold of inclusion were challenged. However, in the eyes of my colleagues at the time, by accounting for the *minhotos'* sense of community, I was threatening the wider sense of ecumenical inclusion that should characterise modern democracies. Aporias of this kind, as it happens, have not stopped challenging us to this day – in Europe, we lived through a rather marked surfacing of them in the debates concerning migration that so troubled everyone over the past decade.

The uncertainties concerning making sense of local instances of sense-making – in all of the three distinct registers of worlding that Kant proposed – turned out to challenge centrally not only the local world but also my presence by relation to it, bringing to the fore field aporias that would not have been there if my ethnographic gesture had not provoked them. What concerns us here is that these aporias turned out to be structuring hinges in my subsequent ethnographic account. As Anne-Christine Taylor puts it, 'anthropology kicks in when translation fails' – a memorable statement indeed. When the biker moved away from me, he was not only certain of my stupidity, he was also irritated with me for having forced him to produce a breach in an instance of company that I guess he was enjoying. As an ambiguously placed non-member, I ended up functioning as a kind of switch that turned on ethical trouble because I collapsed moral standards (see Pina-Cabral 2020).

In the case of ethnography, the need for translation is not the result of finding compatibility in the midst of the equivoques that routinely arise in daily life. Rather, it goes beyond the difference between languages; translation between words is merely a trigger that transforms an event into an ethnographic challenge. In ethnography, translation is supposed to fail: if I want to be an ethnographer at any particular conjuncture, I must start by hypothesising a 'them' as 'different', thus turning 'their' daily responses somehow into field aporias which call for analysis. That is why I need to produce a 'field' by reference to which I will then present my ethnography to my readers.

Thus, the dynamic of the encounter brings out the technical or artificial nature of the whole ethnographic enterprise: I first 'went out there' seeking a company that I postulated as being different, that is, as subject to being understood in a mediated fashion; and then I 'returned', seeking to make believable to

my readers the sense I made of the sense those people made of their world. But, in doing that, I doubled and redoubled the perspectival distancing. The point here, of course, is that there is no end to difference – difference proliferates uncontrollably. The ‘difference’ I encountered in the forms of life of rural Alto Minho was ‘actually’ out there, but it was not different from all other kinds of differences – there was nothing special about it *as* a difference. The difference that my ethnographic gesture promoted was a second order difference, a methodological postulate, a technical move aimed at promoting de-ethnocentrification, that is, a broader ecumenical understanding.

As I wrote on, it became clear to me that, in order to make sense of the sense the biker made of his world (including how I fitted into it), I had to measure it by relation to all sorts of other things: rates of illegitimate births, rates of house ownership, rates of landlessness, accounts of people’s sense of their personal value, the history of struggles against the State, how roads got built wiping out the timeless traces of old paths (Pina-Cabral 1987), accounts of feasts, wolves, visits to the oracle, national politics, and so on – this turned out to be the structure of *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve* (1986) as an ethnographic monograph.

In short, in order to make sense of the uncertainty the situation induced, I had to work at it with determination – I had to work at correlating the parts, to measure the structure of relations, to fit things into arguments. My account was wrought out of combining the two moments of ‘going out there’ and of ‘returning’ and both moments were already reflexively reproduced at the time they occurred (the first moment is always already a second moment).

The ethnographer necessarily finds herself politically within the field of forces that shape the ethnographic conjuncture she studies. We have known this for a long time, but we have taken the sociocentric propensity to atomise our collective experience (both at the level of ‘groups’ and at the level of ‘individuals’) as an innocent methodological conceit. Yet, it is far from that. To underplay the problem is to fall into the atomistic trap. The proneness to place the ethnographer beyond the reach of the forces that are operative in the ‘field’ subliminally validates the imperial breach, as de Martino wisely warned us (2016 [1964]). Thus, by adopting the collective adjective *minhoto* as a descriptive for my local interlocutors as collectively conceived, I was artificially determining my field. But there was no alternative, I had to do so in order to sustain the focus on that particular kind of difference as opposed to others, without which my ethnography would not have been possible (there cannot be an ethnography of everyone in the world at all times). It is that sense of permanently shifting inclusions and exclusions that the atomistic account dangerously threatens. I say dangerous because, there being power in society, by promoting a particular form of binarist caesure, one necessarily validates its implications.

The issue here is that there is no neat (all-or-nothing) solution. An ethnographer’s world starts where she is but does not end there, for the history of ethnography – the ever-evolving canon of our discipline – scaffolds the ethnographer’s vision. The history of anthropology helps the ethnographer to exercise critically

an *ethos* of ever-broader ecumenical embracement. This means that ethnographers are bound to redraw the very framework of their analytical dispositions as their ethnography evolves.

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Notes

1. I have been taking recourse to Derrida's concept of 'aporia' in relation to fieldwork for a number of years (e.g. Pina-Cabral 2011, 2017). Note that other colleagues also seem to value it (e.g. Bubandt 2014).
2. Excerpts from 'Du jour au lendemain', interview of Jacques Derrida by Alain Veinstein, in *France Culture*, 19 March 1996 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRCSag_tdKQ) Accessed 29 June 2021. My translation.
3. And again, this 'difference' is itself to be understood as a product of the postulation of the 'field'. Let no objectivistic shadow fallacy trip us here. I apologise for being obliged to insist on this obvious point.
4. A similar error applies to those who think that identity is the contrary of non-identity (e.g. Rees 2018), for identity remains ever an effect within non-identity; there is no symmetry in the categories. This is a lesson that Levinas (1996) has taught us concerning 'alterity' and it is useful to be attentive to it.
5. For an interesting contrast, see Ssorin-Chaikov's (2019) pieces on Russian anthropology.

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Apories de terrain dans le Minho (Portugal)

En se basant sur les trois aspects du monde proposés par Kant (comme source, comme domaine et comme limite), cet essai soutient que le geste ethnographique est marqué de manière correspondante par trois registres de rencontre : empathie, compagnie, communauté. En recourant à une vignette ethnographique sur une rencontre avec un homme à vélo, il explore le sens de la communauté qui a marqué ma présence ethnographique dans l'Alto Minho (nord-ouest du Portugal) à la fin des années 1970 et au début des années 80. L'article propose que l'ethnographie se base sur la détermination d'un « champ » pour le travail de terrain. Cette démarche est facilitée par l'identification d'apories de terrain – c'est-à-dire des défis d'interprétation qui, à la fois, arrêtent les ethnographes dans leur élan, engageant le besoin d'une détermination supplémentaire, et qui donnent une dynamique au récit ethnographique.

Mots clés : aporie, communauté, entreprise, empathie, travail de terrain, Portugal