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Participant Observation Examples

Embedded Theory

Participant observation, as outlined in the previous chapter, means more than co-residence. It entails sharing space, events and day-to-day living. The incoming anthropologist is repeatedly positioned in unexpected ways. This chapter allows the voices and examples of the many anthropologists to unfurl. Narratives carry important and varied experiences. Theory is embedded if the readers and listeners are open to finding it. Nancy Lindisfarne volunteered the core of anthropological practice:

> The importance of the ethnographic method is *this intimacy of detail* [my emphasis]. Which, even if it doesn't make it into the writing, is informing. Even the most banal or the most cold, distant description is still informed by having been there.

In so many examples, the anthropologists learn to go with the flow, not only through intellectual knowledge, but also through the body, moving through space. In the first example, Sue Wright, among settled nomads in Iran, reveals how frequent interaction brings trust and unique contextualized knowledge such as kinship allegiances, rivalries and conflicts in social relations. The only way to learn fully about the social interaction was through the kinship structures. She was invited to view the physical layout of the houses as kinship interests and to watch for social manoeuvering, as expressions of kinship rivalries or allegiances (Wright 1981). She could only understand the politics through genealogies and could be trusted only when she learned them:

> There'd be all these different interpretations of what had been going on, nobody was quite sure, because every single interpretation of these little tiny events was a question as to whether that person was going to go onto that side, or this person was going to go on that side, and whether they were going to fight.
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> So that became learning; how to use space; learning what movement I could be allowed without incurring danger for myself, which really was a danger for my hosts. Little boys would take me.
>
> We stood on a rooftop, looking over the houses. I was trying to understand the kinship relations, how they worked spatially. Someone said: 'It's all my kin.' He started giving me genealogies. We spent hours in the evenings. He would give me all the kinship relations—I ended up with everybody in this village of a couple of thousand people.

> I had to learn it all. So when I met somebody, I would know who they were. I had to have a spider-map. You had to find the innocuous issues to be pleasant about and to know what the danger signals were. I never got as versatile as any of them.
>
> The schoolteacher said: 'There are bad houses there.' I'd got this contradiction between his telling me that things worked according to genealogies, reflected in the literature, and yet obviously didn't work in that a lot of his closest kin, he was calling 'bad houses'. Until I had that genealogical knowledge I wouldn't know which could be a 'bad house'.
>
> When I'd been to a house, talking with the women, and maybe the man would come in and we'd talk too. I had to treat whatever they said, however seemingly innocuous, as confidential. I was absolutely watertight. I would go back. People would ask me questions. There was no way I was ever saying anything about anyone. I got a reputation for being completely discreet.
>
> Eventually I stayed with different families, and lived the other side of the village that was in conflict with the side that I'd started off on—so managed to move over all these boundaries.

When visitors from the Ministry of Health arrived, Wright helped the women wash the tea glasses in the yard, then was invited to join the meeting as a respected, though junior, visitor sitting as honorary male in male space.

Participation as shared labour also brings trust and insights, sometimes across gender boundaries, as Wright discovered:

> There were certain things I wasn't very good at. No one would let me cook rice on an open fire. But manual women's labour, I could do. I was always gendered as a woman, but I was moving through different tasks they were doing.
>
> I was able to go to the fields and I went with the young men up to the mountains, to collect firewood. That was very dangerous. The forests had been nationalized. You weren't allowed to cut green wood. They used to patrol the mountains, and anyone collecting even dead firewood could be imprisoned. They let me go with them one day.

Extended co-residence in limited space may have its relative constraints. Movement provides another perspective. When Wright went up to the mountains with her companions she found:

> Just the freedom to walk out of that tense atmosphere of the village—to walk in the mountains—the first time after six months. When they were harvesting, I spent a day working with the men threshing wheat. They had donkeys and horses going round in a circle crushing the grains, to separate from the straw. You had to rake the untrampled wheat back in the path of the animals. They gave me that job which was backbreaking in this intense heat. Male labour was hard to come by. That I could do men's jobs gave me a different access to the men. I was working with both the men and the women in the rice harvest. That I had experienced it meant they talked about things in a completely different way.

As confirmed in many examples, thanks to participant labour, the anthropologist found that information flowed easily. Wright was given massive detail about

agricultural arrangements. Where previously there had been mistrust, now information was forthcoming. This contrasts with 'data gatherers' who stand back from bodily participation in the name of 'objectivity'. Wright was given all the information, and indeed more, through shared context:

> Once I'd worked on the threshing-fields and passed all the different threshing-fields, it became a very detailed knowledge—a much more open knowledge. Previously they'd been worried about what kind of information to give. Once I'd been part of the harvest, it totally changed.

There are no blueprints in fieldwork. It also depends on individual inclinations and potential. When working with Gypsies at scrap metal, calling at doors or attempting to hand-milk cows in Normandy, I could not match their skills. I learned also that it did not matter. My efforts were appreciated, indeed exaggerated. Before long, I was introduced to new Gypsies as: 'She can break up scrap metal like the rest of us,' This eased new contact.

Participation as a skilled worker is rarely achieved by the stranger anthropologist. The anthropologist through his or her very incompetence learns about others' skills by living the contrast. In Afghanistan, confronted with her own clumsiness, Lindisfarne, among Pashtun nomads of Afghanistan in the early 1970s, appreciated their manual skill. She decided not to attempt activities where she remained incompetent, so prioritized others:

> There was a way in which being there, because of the intimacy, the visibility of a domestic setting, you were always a participant. At the same time, I was more observer than participant. I used to be the standing joke. I could not roll yoghurt balls! I was cackhanded at rolling felt. I tried a lot of things and was a failure, which rather annoyed them because women's physical workload was considerable.
>
> I wasn't going to be a Pashtun woman because I could not churn butter. I decided that if I had a sense of how arduous a job was that was enough. I didn't even try my hand at weaving, but I spent a lot of time talking to them about weaving.

A different knowledge emerges through shared movement with nomads seated on animals. Such lived physical experience is very different from that dependent solely on interrogation torn from context. While horse or camel riding, Lindisfarne experienced the integration of bodily movement and the people's lives. The full implication was only recognized retrospectively when watching her filmed footage:

> Women could ride. But I was the only one that was regularly riding a horse. It puts you in the middle of the dust. On the steep passes, you have to get off and lead the animal. I was very conscious of feeding it, because there was so little fodder. It's unthinkable not to have had that intimacy.

> We have a short piece of movie. It was spectacular, so evocative. If you're watching the camels, and this amazing back and forth movement, and you're in a line of camels, and everybody's going back and forth. I was overwhelmed the first time I saw the movie, because it was bringing back everything. How could you know that, if you didn't do it? What it means is something about the impact of the migration, the loss as they settled, in terms of the stunning movement through unbelievable scenery, that they had to face when they also became refugees. It's also an aesthetic thing.

I asked:

> Supposing you went to those refugee camps, if you were trying to write an ethnography of their way of life, and you depended entirely on interviews and you hadn't been on the migration, what would you have lost by depending on so-called discourse analysis?

Lindisfarne responded:

> You might as well forget it. You might have some documentary records of people who called themselves the Ishaqzai, lived in an area called Saripul until 1979. 'Some of them had lots of sheep. Some didn't. They grew some crops. They went on migration'—but it would be as flat as that.

Attempts at skilled labouring or craft may reverse stereotypes of the foreign incomer. Just as Hilary Rose (1983) emphasized the dimension of craft as scientific practice, so the anthropologist can, through conveying some knowledge of craftsmanship, however basic, challenge stereotypes of the ignorant outsider. Malcolm McLeod, through a seemingly simple gesture, revealed some expertise in pottery:

> I've always found making things—in Ghana, that people are extraordinarily surprised that any European would want to do that and that they have any technical skill whatsoever. In a small area market, I walked round one day picking up pots and just pinging them with my knuckle. If you ping a well-fired pot, it makes a nice sound. If it's cracked it gives a *thunk* noise. I heard people say: 'My God! He knows how to hit pots!' This is a realm of knowledge which Europeans are incompetent to have!

McLeod also learned, through the making of pottery, aspects which other material culture specialists might never understand:

> The Asante make terracotta figures for putting as memorials. I found a potter who still made these figures and I made one. Again, people were fascinated. I just followed what she was doing; that's real participant observation. 'You do this thing. I'll try and copy it and you can correct me.' When you're making things, you learn all the things you can and can't do, which are not obvious from examining the finished specimen. There's an awful lot of theorizing by material culture specialists, about how things were done. If they'd only try themselves, they'd realize you can't get it to do that.

> The terra cotta figure I left to be fired, saying I would go back in two or three months, when it had dried out, to collect it. I was prevented from going back as soon as I'd wanted and discovered that a European dealer had turned up in the village, and had bought it, claiming that he'd been sent by me! So somewhere in some museum or private collection, preferably in North America, is this really appalling terracotta that I made in 1968.

Commensality and Reciprocity

Michael Herzfeld reveals in a different context the value of going with the flow of the local culture. His gender was crucial as to where he could gain access, namely the Crete coffee house culture. He spent hours, days in shared commensality, gradually alert to the customs of hospitality when visiting another village with his companions. He was sufficiently confident, after extended participation, to take the initiative in adopting the customs of 'his' village and outdoing their rivals. This public statement would further legitimate him among those in the village he had come to know. An act of 'joining in', however small or infrequent, has long-term effects in becoming an appreciated participant. Herzfeld explained:

> I spent an awful lot of time in coffee houses because you could sit there. As a man, I had no difficulty in legitimizing my presence. They would treat me, sometimes, as a way of putting me in my place. I would then treat them, as a way of claiming a quasi-local identity. Once I insisted on that right, they became very friendly, because I had shown that I'd learned their ways.
>
> There was a very funny moment, quite late in the fieldwork when my wife and I went with the son of our landlord to get firewood from another village that was notorious for its lack of hospitality. Somebody rather grudgingly treated us. We raised our glasses and toasted that man. Then I did what in my village would have been normative. I said to the coffee house provider: 'Treat everyone! Treat the shop.' He looked surprised and said: 'Everyone?' I said: 'Yes, go ahead!' This got back to our people: 'You've learnt our customs . . . showed those people what's what!' One does make contacts in all sorts of ways, but the coffee house was very important, because it is a place for male sociability.

Whereas Herzfeld could take the initiative in being generous, he could not adopt other very different practices:

> The least successful thing to do with anyone, almost always, is to confront them. That's tough in Greece, because Greeks tend to be rather confrontational.

Joanna Overing regretted the pressure to obtain sufficient material for her doctorate. Her publications confirm her depth of material, but she had not been encouraged to go with the flow of events in the way she later wished:

> I would do things very differently nowadays. One of the worst things is to be thrown into a situation like that. All these years are for naught if you don't end up with what you need to

> write a PhD. Imagine, if you're in a place: you don't understand a word of the language—how completely useless you feel—this horrible stress. I would take much more time playing with the children. I didn't work with the women. That's what I wanted to do. That's what I was planning to do (later) in 1977. That's when we weren't allowed to go into the jungle (permit refused).

Acting Native

The anthropologist adopts or retains the practices with which she or he feels most at ease. It may depend both on the people's expectations and the anthropologist's personality. Overing decided to keep her Western clothes:

> I thought it would be pretentious to run around in a loincloth. Besides, they are very expensive. They have to be made. I never would have 'gone native', in that sense.

Whyte (1943/1955), in his 1955 appendix, described how he tried to integrate so well as to adopt the swear words of the Chicago street gangs, but he was reprimanded. They wanted him to retain his middle-class WASP image. By contrast, a Gypsy woman advised me to adapt by not wearing trousers, exposing hips. I had to wear a long tunic, certainly not my usual mini skirt and tight tops. I was also congratulated for adjusting my middle-class accent (Okely 1983: 43).

Overing adjusted to other practices, while sensitive to scarcity:

> We were brought into the distribution system, for things from the jungle. You'd wake up and find a pineapple from old gardens and other fruits from the jungle. Everybody would have their share. I didn't want to impose us on their eating. So I brought in a lot of pasta and sardines and did my own cooking. We would send in big boxes of sardines as our share. During the rainy season, they didn't like to hunt, so we'd give that to the chief to distribute.

Anthropologists Christine and Stephen Hugh-Jones, who did fieldwork among tropical forest peoples in South America, were forced by necessity to earn their keep by offering their labour and submitting to the peoples' orders. I recalled:

> I remember Stephen Hugh-Jones describing how he and Christine travelled with a boat with all these beads and things as gifts. Then the boat turned over. They arrived with nothing. They had to pay with their labour. The Indians had this wonderful experience of telling the white man: 'Go there. Sit there. Do that.' That's partly why they got involved in the pounding of the manioc and hunting. They hadn't planned it. That was an accident.
>
> [Overing:] I never knew that story.
>
> [Okely:] I asked Stephen to give a talk at Durham in the late 1970s. They adjusted. But it was hard work. They had to learn to hunt a monkey to get their food! Thus they had a completely different perspective. Those hours and hours of pounding, Christine learned through doing that.

Felicia Hughes-Freeland did indeed take seriously adjusting her attire. This quickly alienated fellow Westerners:

> A friend came to see me from my VSO [Voluntary Service Overseas] days. He was going to take me out to lunch—a very glamorous Canadian. I was wearing what I knew to be a nightdress, probably the same one I'd worn to see the Prince. I'd mended the tear in the back because I didn't have enough money. I had my hair tied up in a rag and was washing the bedroom floor. He came unexpectedly, took one look and left. It looked so funny. That was my high point of being a participant observational anthropologist who had irredeemably moved beyond the pale for her previous Western friends. I didn't get on so well with my former teacher colleagues. They all thought I was too much going native.

Hughes-Freeland had a later experience on the same theme:

> During postdoc fieldwork a year after the ninth Sultan of Yogya's death, I was invited by court friends to join them in a ritual visit to his tomb in the royal hillside mausoleum. Waiting our turn, all the women sat together on the steps wearing the required court attire of *gelung tekuk* [a type of chignon], breast cloth and batik sarong, when a group of Australian tourists who'd got in despite the mausoleum being closed, came up and jeered at me: 'You'll never be mistaken for a Javanese.' That wasn't the point: to participate I had no choice but to dress like that. Afterwards in my field notes I wrote that 'I felt my sense of me as Felicia slipping.'

In some cases the anthropologist in a highly stratified society may be expected to conform to the attributes of the high-status group. Here respectable non-manual attire and demeanour may be valued, along with a full grasp of linguistic nuances. Parry, in caste-structured India, faced this:

> In Banaras, the idea of visiting scholars is not peculiar. That I could speak Hindi and knew how to handle myself quite rapidly distinguished me. I always made a point of dressing conservatively and respectably, clean shirts, whereas a large proportion of the tourists visit the cremation grounds dressed in ragged Indian clothes.
>
> One is participating, simply by being around. In Bhilai this guy Somvaru (as I've called him in publications)—I'd go off with him to his fields. I'd do some reaping and ploughing the odd furrow, to everybody's amusement. But I didn't spend whole days in the field cutting the paddy.
>
> One of Somvaru's great problems, particularly with his youngest son, is that they all now want to be industrial workers. His youngest son wanders around, boozing and playing cards, and never goes to the fields—completely despises agricultural labour. He thinks it's for hicks. The fact that this long-trousered, white-collared professor came and reaped in his fields was something that he could reproach his son with. 'If he's not too proud to do it, why the hell can't you?' I remember trying my hand at ploughing in Kangra, and this causing great consternation because 'People like you—respectable people—don't plough.' They were Brahmins.

Parry found other ways of helping in Bhilai:

> Writing letters, petitions—I tried my hand at a machine for fun. But nobody was going to have me buggering up their machinery! Employment law wouldn't allow it. So what I was able to do in the steel plant was to shadow workers.
>
> One lives as near as possible to the same kind of life. I think that even untouchables in India, if you were studying sweepers and you went out sweeping, the sweepers would be as scandalized as anybody else. The most successful method is consistently hanging around with the same people. People produce more and more. Having a certain number of informants that you personally get on well with, you like being with, who begin to trust you, and who begin to have some vague empathy. That it's fun to talk to you and will say: 'Ah! That would interest you!'

Risks in Participation

Helena Wulff (1988), among South London teenagers, had to adjust in multiple ways. Her main arenas were the youth club or the street corner 'where on a low wall you could sit with legs hanging, flirting, gossiping. This was the only arena without adults.' The mixed-gender club was 'tougher. Things happened with drugs and knives. Boys threw smoke bombs into the basement.'

Taking participant observation seriously brings risks, whether in Europe or beyond:

> In the summer we were meeting at a street corner. We were walking across the Common. There was this wall. We climbed over and some took off their clothes and went into the public swimming pool (then officially closed). Some boys threw in a bench. Someone shouted: 'Police!' There was panic. Everyone ran. I found myself running away from the British police. I could see the car. While I'm running, I'm thinking: 'If I'm caught, I'm allowed one phone call.' They got one of the boys. You don't know what the police do to black boys. I realize I could be thrown out. For my visa I never said what I was going to do. I was an alien and never said I was doing research. This incident helped. Someone said: 'Helena has guts.'

This example, where the anthropologist flees with the transgressing individuals from the law-making authorities, can be compared to that of Geertz observing an illegal cockfight in Bali. He and his wife ran away with the Balinese participants when the police arrived. His instinctive response earned him acceptance:

> The next morning the village was a completely different world for us. Not only were we no longer invisible, we were suddenly the center of all attention, the object of warmth, interest, and most especially, amusement. Everyone in the village knew we had fled. (Geertz 1975: 416)

Shared Pain through Barefoot Pilgrimage

Kenna took seriously full participation when undertaking a pilgrimage in Greece. While Turner (1969) has written imaginatively on the symbolism of the practice, Kenna studied it through individual action:

> The first time I walked barefoot to the shrine of the island's patron saint I did it with no Greeks around. There was just the shepherd family who looked after the monastery. It took me about an hour to walk barefoot up this track because my feet were very tender. It should have been silent but I was making remarks because it was so painful. Having presented my votive offering to the icon, when I came out of the church I burst into tears. It was a very powerful experience, almost like Wordsworth: 'Thoughts that lie too deep for tears.' I don't know why I cried. All I can say is a Greek expression which is 'A burden was lifted from me.' I'd discharged my vow. I felt as much like a Greek as I could ever feel. On other occasions I was one of many, but people were saying: 'Look, the foreigner is doing it,' but I never again experienced that activity with the same degree of intensity that I did the first time. That was a totally physical experience.

Routine Adjustments

Participant observation may entail adjusting to very different rhythms and a different sense of time, as McLeod articulated from fieldwork in Ghana:

> You never learn in fieldwork preparation to be patient. All these inexplicable things are happening: people don't turn up, or it takes three days to do something which should only take half an hour. Instruction on fieldwork should concentrate much more on giving people a sense of time. So they're not trying to impose their own rhythms. One is always taught to try and understand local society through its own language and behaviour. One of the critical things in our own society is the fact that we've got watches, schedules and events, whereas in other societies, to a greater degree, time is invented, or created by events themselves.

Co-residence leads ideally to showing shared enjoyment and acquiring empathy. McLeod, emphasized that, again in contrast to intrusive interrogation, quiet and respectful observation was rewarding:

> You have to enjoy being there. One of the keys to getting good information and understanding is, just to be able to show that you're enjoying it—that you respect the people. That you're willing to sit quietly for long periods, without interrupting, and just let things happen in front of you. Patience and quiet observation are highly valued in that society. For outsiders to show even the rudiments of that does make it easier to find things out.

McLeod also elaborated on the necessary limitations for participation when confronted by local micro politics. Here, being perceived as and remaining an outsider can indeed bring added dimensions:

> If you're operating in another political system, you can't really participate in any major way. I would not want to get involved in Asante politics. Being an outsider is very useful. You can move from side to side, and find out things from different groups, without participating fully in their activities and stance.

Participation through Dance

Mutual recognition through bodily participation is especially succinct when studying dance. Again there are different aspects and unique potential for mutual recognition when contrasted with cerebral exchanges. Hélène Neveu, in Senegal, found as such:

> The main way I used participant observation was by dancing with the people I was doing research with. That made a big difference. I did dance with the professional groups. One day I'd come to see one of the troupes rehearse. They were improvising, trying out new things in neo-traditional style. There was drumming, all having great fun trying various steps and dances. The choreographer shouted: 'Take your shoes off.' I didn't understand and sat down as I usually did. He said: 'No, don't sit, take your shoes off. Come over, just follow' and I started dancing with them. They really appreciated that.
>
> The next time I did it, they asked if I could help them warm up, so I gave them some ballet warming up exercises, which were new to some of the company. Initially I didn't take it very seriously. I thought: 'OK, let's warm up together.' I showed them a few things. The next time they were waiting for me to arrive. It changed the way they perceived me. They realized I had a body and I was able to move as well. That I was able to understand some of the things they were doing technically.

There are parallels with Wulff (1998) when she studied several Western ballet companies. She had a welcoming entrée, having trained as a ballet dancer. She shared a technical eye, which the dancers recognized.

While Neveu and Wulff restricted past expertise to back stage, there can be limits to total participation. Hughes-Freeland was confronted by exclusion from public performance, partly because of her visibly foreign status and self-acknowledged lack of skill:

> I participated in dance classes incessantly in a group at the beginning. Then I had private teachers when I got fed up with being the idiot in the back row who couldn't do it properly. The dance teacher wouldn't even let me do the exams. I had the costume. I had a little top made to do the exams. When I turned up, all dressed, he said: 'What do you think you're dressed like that for?' I said: 'For the exams'. He said: 'You're not going to do the exams.' I'd memorized everything. But I was never going to perform.

From Disco Dancing to Danger

The anthropologist must be *disponible* to what is out there. Forget the initial research plan, if exposed as inappropriate. Anthropologists must trust their inner judgement.

Thus Zulaika, choosing to study terrorism in his own village and country, found the most productive access to be through helping initiate a discothèque. Then, faced with few customers, he had to convey confidence and act the star turn night after night. Zulaika makes a strong argument against any bureaucratic call for advance accountability in anthropological research.

> I decided to carry on a normal life in my village as I had done when I was a student. I would stay home for a period, read and then go out when there were things happening, particularly with my youth group that were friends. There was this cultural activist group raising money for the local Basque school that was still private, not state-funded, so it needed to get organized festivals and music events. They decided to turn an old stable for cows and animals, into a discothèque. They thought I was the guy with more free time, so they put me in charge. A good part of my fieldwork was turning that stable into a discothèque; putting in the electricity, finding the carpenters, the music system, the lights.
>
> Every day I was in hours of conversation with these guys who had been in ETA [Euskadi Ta Askatasuna; Basque Homeland and Freedom]. I could hear all their stories. They trusted me. They had no secrets from me. I knew exactly, mentally, the painful experience they had among themselves after ETA. They diverged politically. That became terribly painful. Finding how they had gotten in to ETA, how they had lived, what it had meant when they had murdered somebody—the torture in prison—their splitting politically. This is what made me know these ETA events there.
>
> [Okely:] This is serendipity. They needed the disco and you seized the chance.
>
> [Zulaika:] I was pretty much doing research on political terrorism and 90 per cent of all I did was organize this disco, which I added as an epilogue, dancing in an empty discothèque. I learnt through these guys, through this more than in any other way. I felt I needed to take more field notes. But in the long run probably it was the right thing.

For Zulaika, this was perfect reciprocity, giving his labour and skills proved to be thoroughly ethnographically productive: 'The real content of information I got was by just working on this discothèque and the hundreds of hours we spent together building that and then promoting it.'

His insider status and active engagement ensured integration:

> The fact that I acted as a villager and took part in all the activities as somebody who had to take responsibility for what they were doing. I was just one more villager taking part and responsibility for it. I was, on the other hand, taking notes at the same time. It entailed a massive near full-time commitment in terms of time and energy.

Faced with possible failure, Zulaika found himself obliged to act as promoter:

> We made the disco. Then nobody would come. So I had to become entertainer. There's nobody dancing. Many times I had to be there. There was another massive disco 100 yards away that was full of people and nobody would come to our disco. It was like we had done social work. It was indecent to create a disco. People preferred to go to this capitalist guy

> who was making tons of money. But to come to this socially minded type of discothèque, something funny was happening. Initially, we had problems in filling the place, so I had to be there, drinking and dancing until three or four in the morning most weekends. I think nobody did more than me for that year.
>
> We were ten people. Somebody had to give the impression there was something going on. Many times, I was the disc jockey, the dancer, and the bartender. We had huge debts. Instead of making money it was losing money.
>
> When we said to the hell with it and we didn't care any more, people started to come in droves. It became very successful after I went back to Princeton, after a year or so.

With his in-depth 'native' or local knowledge as member, rather than outsider, Zulaika then helped initiate cultural transformation, synthesizing specific Basque ethnicity with contemporary music beyond:

> We followed the musical scene. These are former ETA members. In that year rock 'n' roll music was all in English, so we created a competition for young Basque rock 'n' roll music groups singing in Basque, which became a fashion. It became corrupted by the Basque radical youth, very much politically in ETA's way. So we were on the one hand bombed by ETA and on the other, we created a new musical form. This Basque rock 'n' roll, we created, we contributed to. Until then, rock 'n' roll had been seen as a foreign invasion, as American. It suddenly became Basque radical rock. So it contributed, this small village, significantly to the creation of this new musical form that then became a significant phenomenon in the late 1980s, as an expression of political protest, with musical forms that you could find in London.

As anthropologists have risked elsewhere, intervention, however well intentioned, may provoke controversy, sometimes violence. Zulaika described:

> This disco was obviously a centre of fun, diversion, and a place for all sorts of young punks. So ETA put a bomb in this disco. The youth of the village, we got together, and we made a statement.

Thus participation as political intervention could also be extreme engagement as opposed to distancing observation, as Zulaika discovered:

> Somebody from the village was kidnapped by ETA. It was a Basque family who had established the first nationalist locale. I am a villager so I thought it was totally inappropriate, unwarranted. It had no justification. I wrote a leaflet, made copies put in all the bars (saying) that I thought that had no sense. This was a family who was Basque nationalist. That ETA should do this was against all logic. This was an act that I, as ethnographer, was condemning what part of the village approved of, that whatever ETA was doing was alright. I knew I was going to anger, as I did, some villagers. So even if the fieldwork was a distancing, neutral device, there were situations where my being a native took the upper hand. I showed I wouldn't go along with everything that was ETA doing.

In contrast to McLeod, who convincingly recognized it was inappropriate to engage in micro politics as an outsider, Zulaika, as a local Basque, was in the thick of political disputes, engaging with his fellow villagers:

> I remember writing for the media that, with the youth of the village, we had built this disco, all of us together. We were shocked that ETA would go against our project. We as a group were very much in the orbit of ex-ETA, or still pro. Yet ETA was bombing something that we did from inside the nationalist community. We were subverting from inside ETA's regime from a village that was very much ETA. In that regard ethnography's activities were subversive. I was caught in these dilemmas in which, on the one hand, my writing task was not being the policeman, nor being a counter-terrorist. Yet from inside the village I found that the village's political rationale should be critical of things. I acted by myself or as we, the community—critical from inside.

In a far more timid context in England, I found it necessary to intervene when I was set up as a means of shaming a Gypsy involved in a conflict, resulting in murder. Here I, the outsider, in contrast to Zulaika as insider, was the non-Gypsy 'stalking horse' for punishing a Gypsy for past misdemeanours. I had to take imaginative action through playful charade (Okely 2005: 707–8).

Exchange and Mutual Interdependence in Crisis

In some cases, as with Hugh-Jones, the anthropologist is especially vulnerable and dependent on not only acceptance but also basic needs. Akira Okazaki, among the Gamk in Sudan, found himself and his family in a period of famine, something he had not anticipated when arriving from Japan. He had returned with his wife and three children who posed added problems of access to food. Thus, participation became a necessity:

> Without participation I can't survive. It's not a matter of whether anthropologists should share food or not, we have to share, otherwise there is no way. There's no proper car there. Even if you have a car, there's no petrol—so the people were just walking. Even to keep a donkey is very difficult because I have to look for food for the donkey. All that means that participation is different according to which kind of place where you are doing fieldwork.

Active Involvement in Charitable Distribution

An example of direct intervention is found in Talib's active involvement in an organization distributing bread among stone-breaking workers near Delhi. Paradoxically, in the early 1980s, fellow academics queried this as being insufficiently politically interventionist:

I spoke to this person: 'Could I be your helping hand?' he said: 'Yes'. Some of my friends raised issues of ethics here saying: 'Clearly your politics did not allow you to be part of that venture and you legitimized, in the eyes of the workers, a very non-political intervention.' I said: 'Yes of course'.

But the only consolation was that I'm not going to harm these workers and something useful is going to come out. I was not part of any sponsored research. This data is going to remain with me or with the workers. That was my only face saving. I became part of this organization distributing bread among the workers. This used to happen every Tuesday and in the process I made a lot of friends.

I befriended Raja Ram who was a student of social work. He knew the situation. He had the vocabulary to explain. I was also a kind of a social worker. I had tried this kind of participant observation that you suggest but it was not very easy, because the site of stone breaking had the worst air pollution.

Co-Residence as Health Risk

As chapter 6 will elaborate, participant observation may expose bodily vulnerability. Confronted with the health risks of co-residence, Talib chose to commute:

I didn't live in that community. I wanted to. There were two things which scared me—one, the mosquito. There was rampant malaria and there were ways of protecting oneself. The other was this silica dust pollution. My colleagues used to tease me, some of my radical friends, saying: 'What is this? You've got scared of these little things.' I felt that since I was just thirty miles away, it was possible to return to my field as and when I wanted.

It would work out thrice, four times a week. I would meet workers, not in their work time, but when they were out of it or when they were idle, when the work was not available, or not well, just lying on the bed. They would be available for some conversation, some chatting. Thursday was their off day, it was a forced, unwaged Sabbath. It was declared a holiday. But they were not paid for it.

I couldn't use participant observation in the sense Whyte uses the term. I assumed a role that came very close to that context but it was not really part of them. I was still seen as an outsider. Of course I befriended some of them and that was very useful.

Questions Emerge in the Process

Like so many anthropologists, Talib found advance questionnaires inappropriate:

The use of questionnaires was very limited and some of the questions emerged from the conversation, from the field. The questionnaire is a very unilateral tool. It was never feasible. If I would imagine a questionnaire I prepared and the fate of it in the field there was an interactive relationship between that tool that I carried in the field and what came out of it. It was a completely transformed tool towards the end of the exercise.

Carol Silverman confirmed emergent knowledge through participation:

> I got some analytical categories very early on. Not from a fieldwork manual, not from the Bulgarian literature, not from the American folklore or anthropology literature either, but from the practice of being a field worker. Then I was able to reformulate many things on a grander level.

Specific Interpretations of Participant Observation

Roy Gigengack, as Dutch 'gringo' in Mexico City, mingling with street children, had of necessity flexible roles. Participant observation he interpreted as hanging around. But his other forms of participation are also consistent with roles which a variety of anthropologists may adopt when appropriate:

> I used three roles. These all had to do with a degree of intervention of myself. In Plaze Giribaldi with a lot of youth delinquents, they didn't need any intervention from my side. I was busy keeping them off my side. I also had to protect myself. This was more what anthropologists call participant observation.
>
> With another group, called the Booker Boys, quite young boys from eight to twelve to sixteen years old, they wanted me to act like a street educator; bringing them to a shelter or saying that they should not use drugs. It is the things that they like to hear from an adult who cares about them. They wanted to hear that taking drugs wasn't good for them, that it was wrong. Of course they wouldn't listen.
>
> There were also kids who asked me to be their father, which I could not do, but they do look for a father figure. Another thing that street educators do is play football at night. We were there playing football with them or me acting as a referee.
>
> Then a third role was that of human rights activist; one who arranges a priest when children have to be baptized or who talks on behalf of them to the policeman. They would say: 'Roy, it's better that you talk to the police because you are a foreigner and they will listen to you.' It is these three roles: doing nothing—participant observation, street educator and the activist, all dependent upon the group.

Gigengack elaborated the complexity of the children's status and his own family links:

> Many street children are not homeless. It's complicated. Many do have a mother. They see their mother frequently, it means a lot to them. Once my mother came to visit us. I brought her to the street children to see my *compadre* when he was shot. That was something they appreciated because they didn't do that. You don't bring your mother to the street children. But I did it. They remembered afterwards: 'Yes, I even know his mother. Can you imagine that, remember that you brought your mother here and that she had to see this?' Something they really appreciated.

Gigengack linked this appreciation with his self-revelation:

> It's through participant observation that you show that you are a human being, that you have family members too, that you have a mother too, that you also have your own problems that you can talk about.

Routines and Nearby Residence

Gigengack and his partner Raquel Alonso Lopèz described their daily practice:

> We were living in an apartment quite near the places where we did our fieldwork. We could walk to the wastelands and to the *plaze*. It also has a lot to do with serendipity because when we did fieldwork in the Plaze Giribaldi we walked down to it. We had to walk around and see what was happening. Very often there were no street children there. You had to wait, then come back and finally find somebody who wanted to talk with us for a while. But they had lots of things to do. They have to go after what they called their business.
>
> They were always busy. They wanted to talk with us and have fun. But often after ten minutes they made it clear: 'You have to go now.' That was one of the good things, that we were doing it together, because when you're doing it on your own, it can be quite lonely. Then we walked to another group. Actually we were travelling the whole day. That was one of the reasons we did research among twenty groups. You also had the obsession: 'When I go home I have to have information. These guys are not there, so let me go to another street corner where perhaps a gang is hanging out.'

Outsider Participation beyond Expectations

Louise de la Gorgendière, in an Asante Ghanaian village, was so fully active as participant, that a neighbouring villager came to check this out:

> I chopped firewood. I husked corn, went to the field and planted maize. I collected water. I ate with people, had conversations while they were braiding each other's hair, went for walks with people, just sat around and drank white palm wine.
>
> When I first got there, I was a novelty. After a period of months, I was just there. I was Akwiya. They went about their ordinary business. One day there was a man from another village, the son of the old chief. He had left the village a number of years ago, supposed to have been very intelligent, nicknamed Socrates. After about six months, he sat down beside me, and said that he had been hearing about this white woman who had come to the village, and was asking people all sorts of questions. That she wasn't just any ordinary white woman because she was just like them. There were no pretensions. I could actually communicate with people. There was no distinction in status. I was sitting eating their food, talking with them, going to farm with them. He didn't believe the stories. He wanted to see for himself. For a morning he observed me, and at the end came up and told me what he was doing: 'People were right. You are very down-to-earth. You can engage with these people. I didn't think you'd be able to. I thought that they were lying. But they weren't.'

Participation Reveals Superior Local Knowledge

Paul Clough in Nigeria expounded in graphic detail the inappropriateness of World Bank recommendations. He learned this only after being encouraged to farm by the local hamlet head. This confirmed the relevance of practice over interrogation which interrupted the farmers, and proved uninformative:

> There was pain in being seen as rubber handed when it came to doing local things. When I look back, I see how much they guided my research. I regarded, from a Marxist perspective, my Zaria friend as being exploitative because he was the hamlet head. He was the local representative of a hereditary ruling class. When I think back I realize how solicitous he was. He came to my mud room in the warehouse: 'Paul, we're all farming, why aren't you?' There I was, trying to follow them around. I'd interrupt their farming by asking questions or just observing. He said: 'You must farm.'
>
> Belatedly, I began to farm and made a cock-up of it. I had to qualify my original classical Marxist thesis. They were hiring out their labour to each other according to their particular family cycle needs. Like others, I hired labourers. I hired my friend to help me plant things. I hired oxen and plough. I rented the farm, as they did, on a yearly basis. They moved from one farm to another. I farmed late. Stupidly, I didn't realize this. Because I began a month late, my ultimate harvest yield was going to be much poorer.
>
> It's a silly little story. I had a very scientific plan. In this part of northern Nigeria, food crops were cash crops. Although they sold a lot of cotton, their main crops were sorghum, known in West Africa as guinea corn, which is a wonderful grain crop, and maize. It was a modern, high-yielding maize, introduced by the World Bank Agricultural Project. I sectioned my slightly more than an acre into four sections: one section of maize with fertilizer, one section without—one section of guinea corn with fertilizer and one section without. I told the various villagers I was going to test the difference. I was careful with the amount of fertilizer I used, along World Bank recommendations. I would show the villagers how they could compare the use of fertilizer with the non-use. I ended up with the most miserable yield because I started too late.
>
> Then there were the local circumstances. The farm I rented was free. The farmer was happy because it had a huge tree in the middle. It was only at harvest that I realized monkeys had been in the tree and eaten my maize. When I took my crop to market I couldn't sell it. It was small enough to be carried on the back of my motorcycle. When I got back, one of the villagers wouldn't stop laughing, seeing me come back from the market eight miles away with unsold grain. So I began to learn in all kinds of ways just how expert they were and how little I helped.

External Expertise Inappropriate

Participant observation, for Clough, as learning or attempting to farm in a supposedly systematic way, exposed the value and superiority of local knowledge and practice:

> I learnt because I used to ask a lot of questions and talk within a growing circle of friends. That's another aspect of fieldwork—the branching method. As you make friends, you're

branching out from the small group of friends to more and more people. When I started to ask about the fertilizer, I had another theory, which again related to the ideal amount of rice. They said: 'You don't realize that fertilizer is too hot for rice. Use fertilizer very sparingly.' They had been told about the recommendations, but had learnt from many decades, centuries, that you don't talk back to representatives of the government or the indigenous ruling class. You listen and make up your own mind. So they were experimenting with this fertilizer and trying to come up with solutions. They were learning a great deal about how much fertilizer to use. This was all beyond me. I thought all you had to do was follow the recommendations which had come from the Institute of Agricultural Research.

Ignacy-Marek Kaminski, of Polish nationality, who did fieldwork among Gypsies in Eastern Europe and later as refugee in Sweden, described his variety of methods, depending on context. This included illegal activity as refugee:

In Sweden my entire research, my entire PhD was based on participant observation, while in Poland it was a questionnaire at the beginning. In Slovakia I was always that external participant who could return to the same (privileged) status. In Sweden I was a part of the refugee community, and the difference between me and the Gypsy refugees was that they had strong bonds within the community. I was by myself. They could survive as a group, supported for political reasons by Swedish immigration. They were modern Gypsies taken from Italian refugee camps by chartered aeroplane to Sweden, given the entire welfare access with monthly payments; very high compared to what they had. Everyone had rights to a single room, plus one living room.

So I found myself suddenly not as a privileged non-Gypsy, like in Poland and in Slovakia, but in the welfare state; a refugee, under-privileged, doing illegal work and financing, from illegal work, my doctoral studies of Gypsies.

Now I can talk about it openly. When I arrived in Sweden, my Polish passport was not extended. I became a stateless refugee, but suddenly I could get a work permit as a student, *only* for three months holidays. It took three years to get residence. For three years I could only pay for my research among Gypsies, and even go to Greenland, by working for those months. It was obviously not enough. Sweden had the highest cost of living in Europe.

The only way to survive was to do an illegal job. I was working with three illegal immigrants; as the fourth person in a pyramid, with one legal immigrant, with a work permit, at the top, by delivering newspapers from 3:30 am to early morning, then studying language. I had no rights. The Gypsies realized that I was struggling. When they found that I didn't have enough food, they started helping me. There was humanity which was linking us, and ethnic differences not dividing us. I was working for an illegal immigrant who organized one person who was legal. We were four working and everybody in the pyramid was getting money. As I was a fresh immigrant, I was working most and getting the least. The Gypsies realized. During one of my visits to the community, they said: 'Marek today you are Pakistani,' I said: 'What do you mean? I am not Pakistani, I don't look Pakistani. I have green, sometimes blue eyes and blonde hair.' My best Gypsy associate thought: 'Does it matter?—The way you speak Swedish, you could be Pakistani or Turk.'

So we were going in his car. They already had complex territories divided between different Gypsy groups. We had in that Swedish town a good territory of around twenty

> square kilometres where he was selling carpets and I was his assistant. Then we were selling lamps and going from door to door; lamps like an aquarium with plastic fish. Usually everything was kitsch. He was playing the Pakistani role. Sometimes he was from India then Turkey. But we were losing time. He said: 'If we keep together, I will lose money. You take two blocks. I take two. You have the carpets and the lamps you have to sell.' Out of all the people I sold to, most were immigrants. I believe they already realized—how can I be a Pakistani or a Turk? They were trying to help me by buying those things.
>
> My Gypsy friend said: 'Marek, if you want to study Gypsies, you have to learn how to pay for your bread and your rent.' The Gypsies were helping me later. He was buying from a retailer, with exotic goods. Then we are going to different Swedish towns, over which his clan had control. It was divided. Some flats were occupied by immigrants from Yugoslavia and Finland. He was telling them that we're both from Pakistan. He was moving between Romany, a number of languages, and mixing Swedish. We were selling door to door. It was illegal.

When I asked why it was good for the Polish Gypsy to say he was from Pakistan, Kaminski explained the strategy:

> He doesn't look Swedish. He looks different. When we were selling carpets, and he was usually asking like 800 per cent more for what he paid, it was always the same story: 'We just came from Pakistan. The car broke and we are going to a wedding. We have to repair that car, so that gift for the wedding we have to sell.' Always there was a story related to particular goods. He was doing the talk. Finally he told me: 'You have to do the talk. You have to save us time.' They were creating added value.

I suggested that a Pakistani identity would be useful, because carpets would presumably be exotic. Kaminski confirmed the emphasis on the hand made. I found similarities with the English Gypsies who improved sales when claiming objects were handmade by themselves (Okely 2010c). Kaminski had retained contact with the same Gypsy salesman over thirty-eight years. In 2010 the salesman left the door-to-door carpet business for secondhand restaurant/pizzeria equipment transported from Sweden to Poland. Through informal networks, he exploited empty lorries returning to Poland. Thus, in contrast to past border problems, EU expansion has brought new Roma economic strategies.

Signe Howell was initially confronted by the advice of an anthropologist before fieldwork. She would not identify the person but soon ignored most of his advice:

> In my first fieldwork I did it the way I thought everybody should. Before I went off, I talked to an anthropologist who had done his work in a similar region. He said that I had to get myself a tent which I then bought. Although that wasn't the way that I thought it should be. He said: 'Buy a tent.' I thought: 'But I'm going to live with them, aren't I?' But I bought a tent. Then he said: 'Don't go native. Some anthropologists think that they can really become like the people they study, but that's highly inadvisable.'

And I should always wear a halter neck: 'Don't throw away your T-shirt and your blouse and walk about with bare breasts just because the women are bare-breasted.' I thought I'll leave that. Then the last thing he said was: 'Buy a lot of provisions. Tinned food. Go out every month or so, and make a long list for a big Chinese store, and get people to carry for you, and you *can't* share it. Then there won't be enough for you. Pay people to carry stuff for you.'

This was not my interpretation of Malinowski! I bought the tent and some food. When I first came obviously I had to have something. But I was very keen to abandon all that. I never, ever bought anything just for myself again.

Whenever I went out, I bought masses of food and rice, because I knew they liked that. I didn't pay anybody to carry it. I said: 'You carry it, and we all share it.' We shared it. I never ate anything in private. I shared everything I had, and they shared everything with me.

[Okely:] So there was some nice reciprocity, in that you did bring some food in, but that was what they wanted. It wasn't you sitting like Colin Turnbull [1972] in his Landrover, eating with the curtains drawn.

[Howell:] No, not at all. I threw away my T-shirt after a while. I worked with them quite hard. They have this manioc bread which I made as well. Once a week, we would spend two days making that for the whole community. I worked as hard as anybody.

I learned a lot by it! It was through doing it that I got all those little rules about correct practice that I call cosmo-rules because they link mundane life with cosmological consideration. It's in action that those rules become expressed. It's in the way you dig up the manioc. The way you treat game. It's not the straightforward way. The way you cut the rattan strips in order to make string, to tie everything—you've got to cut it in a certain way. Nobody would think of telling you unless you are doing it. This is why my book ended up called *Society and Cosmos* [Howell 1984] because these very mundane activities are actually bringing in the spirit world in the environment.

[Okely:] If you cut the rattan the wrong way or the manioc, then they corrected you.

[Howell:] They corrected me because you are a part of it. You've got to do it right. If I do it wrong, it's not that *I* have to suffer as a consequence. It's the whole community. You activate certain forces to cause illness, or some catastrophe by doing it wrong. That is what I learned, through all this.

The minutiae of these varied examples across space and time reveal the profundity of knowledge learned through participation, not by interrogation alone. *Never* voyeurism, shared activities inspire and transform theorization.