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**HARVESTING FAILURE IN THE FIELD:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPRENTICESHIP IN COPING  
WITH THE UNEXPECTED**

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In January 2008, five graduate students of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge responded to an email from the Student Asylum Campaign<sup>1</sup> calling for volunteers to visit detainees at Southdown, an immigration detention and removal centre. We had been searching for a research topic that would satisfy the requirements of the 'ethnographic research methods case study' task we had been set as part of our methodological training, and felt that immigration was broad enough to engage our various intellectual concerns; a focus on this detention centre promised to support exploration of multiple methodological and theoretical avenues. Our plans for our forthcoming doctoral projects foreground the study of architecture, affect, transnational migration, Foucauldian ethics, and the narration of painful experience, and it seemed possible that we would each find something in Southdown of relevance to our broader analytical concerns. In addition, we were attracted by the very real prospect of meeting detainees from the areas in which our own research will be conducted: Russia, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Latin America and Southern Africa; the notion that we might be able to discuss their motivations for migration and consider their very different experiences of our 'home' environment was irresistible. Importantly, immigration was also an issue that we had each followed in the press in recent years, and the heated political discourse surrounding 'illegal immigrants' and 'asylum seekers' was something we found at once intriguing and alarming. This project seemed to offer a rare opportunity to get 'beneath the headlines' and gain an understanding of what the various policy announcements and public debates meant for people on the receiving end.

<sup>1</sup> All names of individuals and organisations are pseudonyms.

Our remit was to 'conduct ethnographic research focusing on an event, site or situation' of our choosing, with the aim of the 'reflexive collection and presentation of ethnographic material'; the five discrete reports we would eventually submit for assessment, however, were to focus on the 'case study itself – the selection and execution of research methods and the presentation of data'. The Student Asylum Campaign explained that all visitors to Southdown were first required to attend two training sessions. They invited us to attend a one-day training session run by Friends of Southdown, to be followed by a further session at Southdown itself a week later. We approached the first training session as an ethnographic 'supplement' to our future visit(s) to what we took to be our 'principal' field site, the detention centre. We were also mindful, however, of the possibility that it might hold its own intrinsic ethnographic interest, and were aware that anything might turn out to be relevant to our project. This wide scope, so promising at first, was to prove problematic as it allowed us to postpone examination of our interests in the detention centre, leaving us ill equipped to deal with those managing access to the centre. At the training session, we discovered that the primary activity of Friends of Southdown was the co-ordination of visits by its members to individual detainees at the centre. We also quickly realised that the group was unaware that we were treating the session and the following visit as 'fieldwork' for our methodology project; they had not been informed beforehand by our contact at the Student Asylum Campaign of our plans for research. A course of events unfolded: our inclusion in the visiting party was withdrawn; an email communication ensued in which the positions of both parties were clarified; and, finally, we took part in the visit.

What follows is a discussion of an arbitrary project which started out as a methodological exercise but which ended up raising an overlapping set of challenging questions about the anthropological endeavour, and in particular about the ethical, practical and methodological dilemmas the anthropologist-ethnographer (whether observer or analyst) encounters at all stages of constructing 'the field'. This account discusses processes of grappling with the competing 'agencies' of data, theory, the practical possibilities and limitations of fieldwork, and the ethnographer's relationships with and ethical responsibilities toward her or his interlocutors. It foregrounds the homology between the practices of anthropologists and their informants and traces the epistemological and ethical effects of this parallelism. It concludes by reflecting on the 'generative' potential immanent in ethical 'constraints' and in 'failure' itself.

This paper also charts a collaboration that has oscillated between periods of intense partnership, conversation and co-authorship and of solitary reflection; it is a story written both together and apart, across three continents. We gathered together a collection of extracts from our separate essays – scraps and splinters that touched on the convergent and divergent themes of the five pieces – and circulated them as a fragmentary assemblage. We then worked independently to respond to each others' additions, comments and contributions, in an attempt to mould the present work into something more or less coherent. The text below thus contains juxtaposed excerpts from the five reports, as well as boxed 'asides' (which are either more explicitly ethnographic or more explicitly 'theoretical'), that draw out some of the themes that thread through our individual submissions; but some edges are smoother than others and some we have left purposely uneven. By experimenting with the layout of this story, we hope that we have maintained for the reader a sense of ongoing debate and multiple voices, a window onto the collaborative process, as well as onto our fieldwork and its implications.

#### Methodological Openness

Marilyn Strathern (1999) argues persuasively that the relationship between observation and analysis in ethnography is 'complex' in that they are engaged together in any ethnographic moment: fieldwork always anticipates writing up; analysis always attempts a re-enactment of the effects of fieldwork. Fieldwork, then, is an anticipatory exercise in which the fieldworker looks forward to and actively engages in the creation of a second 'field' to which it is possible to return during analysis. Paradoxically, fieldwork is conceptualized as the collection and formulation of inputs for an operation (analysis) whose outputs *cannot be known in advance*. This invites a dilemma: how to balance a commitment to openness, to uncertainty, to the unpredictability of social life, with academic and analytical requirements for focus and argument, and the practical implications and limitations of the social milieu in which research is to be conducted. As illustrated below, we also negotiated this dilemma of balance, a negotiation that had both analytical and, importantly, ethical implications. An analytical desire to remain open to the possibilities of the unforeseen must be considered not only with regard to pragmatic effects (how does such a desire materialize in the ethnographic encounter), but also in light of ethical commitments and responsibilities – indeed, the cogently felt yet contingent obligations – arising from one's ethnographic relationships.

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In the early stages of this project, our determination to incorporate the training sessions within our ethnographic 'field' as open-mindedly as possible was taken as cause not to discuss in any detail our expectations of what they, or our subsequent access to Southdown, would entail.

'It must be stressed that as a group we had not discussed at length how we each imagined this project, what particular focus we wanted to take, or what we hoped to find out.'	'We told ourselves that we were attending the training sessions to observe and to participate, that we should not foreclose analytical possibilities by determining our research questions or lines of investigation in advance – those things would come, later, when the work of analysis began.'	'I formulated my own research question in terms of the spatial relationships between the detention centre buildings, detainees from different ethnic and national backgrounds, the centre staff and the visitors [...] I kept my research questions deliberately vague, not wanting to foreclose the content of my project in advance.'
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Our decision to keep fieldwork as open as possible deferred the moment at which we would 'bound' the project. We refused (to recognise), in effect, the interpenetration of ethnography's double fields, and attempted to hold the two apart in the service of the methodological imperative: 'Prevent analytical foreclosure!' Of course, as Strathern would no doubt have predicted, the spectre of writing did not obey our conceptual separation: an awareness of the five reports we would be writing, and other possible projects that might result from our field research, informed our thinking and fieldwork practices throughout. Moreover, this anticipation itself produced particular ethnographic effects that shaped, practically and theoretically, our future project.

With hindsight, it became clear that our five 'open minds' had held quite different ideas about what visiting Southdown would entail; when we eventually reflected upon our earlier cross-understandings, we found that while some had envisioned a single guided tour of Southdown, others had imagined fewer restrictions upon our movement and varying degrees of access to detainees. By entertaining the pretence that we could hold observation and analysis apart, and that this somehow made us 'better' anthropologists – more receptive to unpredictable, although expected, diversions – we entered 'the field' as an ostensibly harmonious group but were, in fact, vulnerable to the misinterpretation of those who sought to understand our project.

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At 9.30am, in a room containing about 30 people, the five social anthropology students sat on the front row, all with pen and notebook in hand. The ground rules of the day were written on the whiteboard: 'no interrupting'; 'time-keeping'; 'confidentiality'; 'remain relevant'; 'OK to disagree'. Harriet, the coordinator of Friends of Southdown, took charge of the training session. The session consisted of a presentation by a member of a national immigration advocacy group (the British Immigration Visitors' Association or BIVA), as well as several question-and-answer forums with experienced visitors from Friends of Southdown. It was intended to prepare volunteers to visit asylum-seekers and immigrants held in government removal or detention centres around the country and to get each prospective visitor to ask him/herself the rhetorical question: 'Are your reasons for visiting valid?'

Throughout the training, we were treated to a heterogeneous performance of expert knowledge, during which members of Friends of Southdown and of BIVA described their experiences of detainees and recounted their own stories of visiting the centre. Information about the legal appeals process, mental health warning signs, the 'daily life' of detainees, and the visiting experience followed one after the other, and the conversation was peppered with personal testimony, activist protestations, functional advice, cultural observations, political sentiments, and terse evaluative asides about Southdown and its staff. As participant observers in the front row, we contributed to discussions while taking copious notes and recording our observations. Discussions consisted of a mixture of questions and explanations about detention, as well as more politically-inflected critiques of detention with some expressing frustration with the 'system'. Many of the trainees (ourselves included) were surprised by the intimacy of the visiting arrangement: a one-to-one meeting for an hour with a stranger, about whom one would be given no information in advance, guards in close proximity. Harriet remarked that visitors would need to be sensitive to the (all-male) detainees' situations; this meant listening with a clear, open mind such that one's amiable intentions would be plain. The intimacy of the visiting environment meant that positive body language and comportment were of key importance, especially since these men were foreign nationals, many of whom practiced different religions. Indeed, issues of cultural difference were foregrounded throughout.

The particular kinds of knowledge performed during this training session would be familiar to most anthropologists. As many anthropologists working with producers of expert knowledge have noted (e.g., Ferguson 2005; Jean Klein and Riles 2005; Maurer 2005), ethnographic knowledge is mirrored by the kinds of knowledge that mark Friends of Southdown's expertise. Cognizance of this homology developed for

us into a visceral apprehension that anthropology is on the same level as the phenomena it studies. Indeed, as Holmes and Marcus (2005) have shown, it is becoming more and more common to confront expert ethnographic informants (bankers, bureaucrats, scientists, or activists) who mirror the representational discourses of anthropologists in their own 'quasi-ethnographic analytic practices' (Miyazaki and Riles 2005: 327). These self-reflexive informants offer up a near-replication of anthropological knowledge practices – termed 'para-ethnographic' by Holmes and Marcus (2005; 2006) – 'subtly but forcefully insisting on their equal place in the process of knowledge production' (Riles n.d.).

The 'para-ethnographic' practices exhibited in the training session included a reliance upon case studies; detailed attention to the experiences and expressions of individual detainees as they are revealed over time through the development of close personal relationships; an interpretative expert knowledge about legal procedure, mental health, migration, etc.; and a liberal-humanistic stance and openness toward the other. As the personal narratives and vignettes began to pile up, it became clear that the evidentiary basis for such expert theorizing was found in experiential knowledge, gained through personal encounters and relationships, codified in narrative, and relayed via the colloquial or the common-sensical. Story-telling – or the anecdotal – was the primary mode of description/analysis.

We each noted in our personal reflections and in our conversations with one another the uncanny sensation of *déjà vu* elicited by participation in the training. Expert discourses such as that of the Friends of Southdown appear to do anthropologists' work for them. In this near-replication, an apparent 'failure' emerges: anthropological explanation 'is reduced to restatement, to repetition, to generating reflexive modernity's "doubles"' (Riles 2000: 5). In fact, the formal resemblance between a visitor's relationship and the ethnographic encounter – both dialogic, discursive, and marked by an exchange of information across a boundary (of difference) – could be seen as opening up each of these relational practices to one another, allowing further correspondences to be made. We had made Southdown and its 'Friends' metonymically stand for anthropology by encompassing it as a subject of study. Thus, on the one hand, their knowledge practices, held up like a mirror, appear to make the work of the anthropologist superfluous, even irrelevant. On the other hand, however, the insights arrived at about the choices (ethical and otherwise) of Friends of Southdown members could potentially corroborate, critique, or reformat anthropology itself.

### Critique and Response

Our response to this display of expertise during the training session was also a familiar one: in the face of the homologies and replications evident between 'our' analytical frame and the Friends of Southdown's own discourse, the analytical convention of *critique* became a way of re-asserting epistemological or interpretative supremacy, and of reversing the failure identified by Riles (2000) (cf. Miyazaki and Riles 2005). Indeed, dedicated not to any investigative programme or research question, and not immediately recognising the potential for self-reflexivity embedded in this parallelism, it was all too easy for us to slip into critical revelation. This reversion to the critical is apparent in some of our original field jottings from the training session, which betray an inclination to treat every ambiguous statement that the organisers made to *suspicion* and summary critical analysis. As in a seminar (and the training environment closely resembled a seminar), our scholastic selves compelled us when something unfamiliar or puzzling was said to think, 'But ...'.

#### Suspicion and Critique: Catching the Ethnographic Imagination

'Such ostensibly contradictory remarks as "As a group, we have no religious views, even if we do", automatically activated my critical antennae. In my scholastic distance and learned ignorance (Bourdieu 2000), I scribbled at one point during the course of the training session as a note-to-self: "Perhaps they have a half-way morality: they keep saying that asylum seekers aren't criminals; would they visit a criminal? I don't think so.'

'A visitor talked about the time she saw a Ghanaian woman sitting on her husband's lap with her eyes cast away from him, which to the visitor's mind meant that the Ghanaian woman was "subservient" to her husband. Such simplistic statements made during the session about "Ghanaians" or "Muslims", jarred against our own experiences as anthropologists attempting to deconstruct and rethink such sweeping cultural typifications in our intellectual and ethnographic encounters.'

'"Cultural differences" were mentioned several times, largely as a factor of which visitors should be aware when interacting with detainees. The volunteers were advised "not to cross any cultural boundaries". One of the organisers of the session remarked that when visiting "young Muslims", she always took care not to touch them. A member of the audience suggested that it might be worth taking care not to look in the eyes of detainees "who appear to be Muslim". These aspects of the training session dominated my first impressions of it, and contributed to the initial judgments I made. Deploying a composite of vices from my armoury of critical theory, I began to represent the session participants as fascinated by a conception of Islam straight out of the pages of *Orientalism* (Said 1979), motivated by a missionary, Christian ethos and a simplistic mistrust of "the system", in any case rendered

ineffectual by their need to make compromises with the centre staff and Home Office. Furthermore, the extensive emphasis on the detainees' depression as the primary determinant of their discontent, and something to be identified and treated, reminded me of Nikolas Rose's (2004) work on 'neurochemical selfhood' as a contemporary form of governmentality.'

Many of our judgements were illustrative of Bruno Latour's presentation of the 'critical sociologist', for whom actors are only 'informants' who have to 'be taught what is the context "in which" they are situated and "of which" they see only a tiny part, while the social scientist, floating above, sees the "whole thing"' (Latour 2005:32) This 'critical function' may indeed have been 'embedded' in anthropology (and especially in the ethnographic method), 'from the very beginning' (Marcus and Fischer 1986:136). Since the 1970s and 1980s, however, this recourse to critical thinking has been consciously harnessed and cultivated. Following Paul Ricoeur (1970), Matei Candea (2007b) has commented on the anthropological propensity towards a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', an increasingly relentless tendency within the discipline to link *everything* to politics, power and a diversity of 'interests' and 'biases': 'critique', it would seem, has been elevated to an axiom of contemporary anthropology.

The instantaneity with which we sprang into 'critique mode' made for an interesting exemplar of the power of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' As Candea argues (2007b: 5), the extent to which the critical faculty is inherent to anthropology may work against 'ethnographic sensitivity' if it causes the researcher to disregard people's categories and observations as mere products of something like a 'false consciousness', the epiphenomena of a deeper, often malevolent determinant. Indeed, such *irresponsible* claims were a consequence of an initial scholastic detachment and have been purged only through personal reflexive processes, through discussions with one another, and especially through the assembly of our various accounts (the present article included). Only by 'following the actors themselves' (Latour 2005) in our interactions as well as our attempts at textualisation were we able to circumvent a regression into theoretical platitudes (though these are perhaps not entirely avoidable). We believe that a more faithful and accurate analytical stance emerged in conjunction with a deepening awareness of our continuing (ethical, political, practical...) commitments to Friends of Southdown; certainly this continued engagement served to inhibit our initial tendency to make critical comments without responsibility.

We quickly realized during the training session that the representatives of Friends of Southdown were unaware of the fact that

we were anthropologists; we were wading into the ethical conundrum sometimes referred to as 'complete participation' (Burgess 1984: 80) or 'unobtrusive observation' (Bernard 1994: 332), namely, data-collection where informants do not know they are being studied. We each felt a need to introduce ourselves as anthropologists, to 'reveal' ourselves as soon as possible.

It dawned on me all of a sudden that the organizers of the training session did not know we were anthropologists. I felt a lump form in my chest, an immediately embodied moral imperative. It came over me powerfully and viscerally; I sensed I needed to *tell someone* right away. At first, I thought I was feeling a desire for *transparency*; looking back, I am tempted, instead, to turn to Levinas (cf. Benson and O'Neill 2007) for an understanding of the self's *responsibility* to the other. In presenting themselves to us, in facing us as fellow persons (committed, moreover, to a political project with which I was and am sympathetic), and in the formation of this simple social relationship, I felt a compulsion to act justly, fairly, and honestly towards the others in the session.

It became clear that nobody in the room knew that we were there as 'anthropologists'. It had not occurred to me when I walked into the training session that morning that this might be the case – I assumed that they knew. As we sat taking notes furiously, listening to the stories told by the participants of the training session, I could not help but feel nervous, self-conscious, even guilty. As people shared their very personal experiences and concerns about visiting detainees with other strangers in the room, it felt uncomfortable, dishonest, to be there covertly. Why *not* tell them that we were anthropologists? I imagined that we could discuss this openly with them; that perhaps they could offer us advice. We cared about the issues raised during the session and I could sense that our relationship with Friends of Southdown was going to extend far beyond this 'project'.

When the break came, we turned to each other and realised that several of us felt similarly uncomfortable: Friends of Southdown were unaware that we were there as anthropologists, and we were well aware of our responsibility to inform them. To observe, to record and to critique without their consent was unethical, it went against all that we had been taught in our seminars on anthropological methods. But, more than my knowledge of accepted good practice, it was the fact that I was developing a genuine admiration for the energy the people instructing me dedicated towards improving conditions for immigrant detainees that made me feel distinctly uneasy about being there under even unintentionally false pretences. It was immediately apparent that the rest of the group was in agreement, we had a duty, both disciplinary and personal, to 'reveal' ourselves to the group.

Yet being caught off guard by our sudden 'undercover' presence meant that our moment of revelation during the coffee break was hurried, our aims and intentions only vaguely articulated. It is reasonable to suppose that the rushed, awkward manner in which we outlined our interest in the detention centre may have suggested to the leaders of Friends of Southdown that we were being slightly underhand.

The training session ended without incident, but we soon received an email from Harriet explaining that she and the other directors of Friends of Southdown thought it would be best if we did not attend the tour of the centre or pursue any further contact with detainees.

<p>'Harriet's e-mail emphasized the "wellbeing" and "vulnerability" of the detainees and said they should not be burdened with anything other than a "peaceful, disinterested visitor." Harriet then thanked us for our interest and suggested that we find other ways of finding out what we needed to know.'</p>	<p>'Several days after the training, we received an official email from the head of Friends of Southdown (a woman named Harriet) explaining that Friends of Southdown did not want to jeopardize the wellbeing of the detainees by including visitors with other "interests" – self-interests – that might interfere with their capacity to help the detainees.'</p>	<p>'We received an email from Harriet two days after the training session stating that the Friends of Southdown steering committee and the centre chaplains had together decided not to invite us to visit the detention centre. The refusal was put down to the possibility that our "research interests" might "interfere with" our "visiting and talking to the detainees." Harriet explained that only visitors "exclusively motivated by a concern for the wellbeing of the men concerned" should be visitors.'</p>
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While it is clear that anthropology has lost its innocence, that we no longer perceive ourselves as unmediated producers of knowledge about 'other cultures', this experience revealed how others may cast our lack of innocence in a different light; for as Harriet's e-mail response suggested, in the eyes of Friends of Southdown, our enterprise lacked 'innocence' quite literally – it had the potential to cause harm (Kahn 2003). That is, 'anthropologist' turned out to have certain connotations attached to it which we had failed to adequately consider in advance. The negative connotations ascribed to our discipline, positing it as merely extractive or even interrogative, were provocative.

We were surprised by Harriet's response for during the training session she had appeared supportive of our research. We did not know how to react as we were taken aback and disappointed by the apparent finality of the email. We began to wonder, fleetingly, whether we ought to pursue an alternative research project but felt the pull of obligation to address her concerns, to rethink and clarify our intentions. Only on reflection were we able to diagnose the situation, to locate our haphazard 'revelation' as a potential source of confusion, and work through a careful, considered response. At the time the group embodied a range of reactions: we felt shocked, some a little wounded, and more than a little offended, and we experienced varying degrees of anger and indignation. We did not expect *this*. But what, exactly, *was this*? As we gathered the next day to address the e-mail from Harriet, our discussions returned repeatedly to the words 'disinterested', 'interest', 'interests'. We turned to unpacking the particular meanings, histories and uses of these words. It was clear that in our engagement with Friends of Southdown, the critical stance we had been so quick to assume had been returned upon us; the supplementary (ideological) 'interests' we had ascribed to members of Friends of Southdown by virtue of our analytical position as detached observers, fully attentive to the importance of the hermeneutics of suspicion, were in turn attributed to us. As an explanatory concept, 'interest' can be used just as easily by 'subjects' of research to 'reveal' the (self-) interests of the researchers as by the researchers themselves.

A.O. Hirschman (1997) offers a history of the evolution of the concept of 'interest' from its origins in political philosophy as a powerful Machiavellian explanatory tool associated with checking the unpredictable and dangerous passions to its more contemporary manifestation as a simple desire for profit, the motivations of *homo oeconomicus*. Today 'interest' is freighted with the assumption 'that we are all rational actors whose behaviour can be attributed to efforts to calculate and maximize our own gain' (Hayden 2003:20). Cori Hayden (2003) and Jenny Reardon (2005) both outline scientific projects whose failure is related to criticisms by activists and rights groups that other kinds of 'interest' might lie behind scientists' efforts to collect, in Hayden's case, pharmaceutical material from local plants or, in Reardon's, biogenetic material from local indigenous populations. In the cases offered by Hayden and Reardon, the (dis-)interested' analytical gaze is turned back onto the analyst, restoring to the term some of the lust-for-gain's original qualities – the dangerous, inherently self-serving, even asocial character of the passions – and causing the failure of the research projects.

To be 'interested' for Harriet and Friends of Southdown means being self-interested. Their critique revolves around revealing (the

anthropologist's) ulterior motives or hidden agenda (or simply suggesting they exist). Opposed to this is the disinterestedness of Friends of Southdown itself, understood as a freedom from personal bias, a lack of (self-)interest. Harriet's concern that our 'interests' would threaten the well-being of the detainees reflects the negative undertones of usury, the dangerous passion of self-love or desire for wealth. Her worry was that a future *gain* would result from our interaction with the detainees, and specifically that this gain would accrue to us and not to the detainees. Indeed, generalized interest is not problematic in and of itself (it is reconfigured as a kind of disinterest), but the advantage one might gain as a consequence of interest is. In sum, the detainees must have priority; the men and their wellbeing were ends in themselves, not a means to (research-oriented) ends.

In short, where we had ascribed 'ideological motivations' to them, they attached 'research interests' to us. This felt, initially, like a kind of failure: an end to reflection and analysis. Our absence of data, brought about by our exclusion from the centre, would prevent further study. Failure in this sense is a negation. It seemed to deny our very capacity to produce knowledge. Not merely a gap or a barrier, methodological failure might be a kind of 'failure as an endpoint', as Miyazaki and Riles (2005) put it, in that it is an apprehension of the limits of the anthropological endeavour. Moreover, as these authors suggest, the failure we faced in our project – this terminal awareness of the limits of investigative possibility – could be seen as a consequence of the 'epistemological sameness' of Friends of Southdown's and our own (anthropological) discourses and knowledge practices – a parallelism that began, as we have noted, from the moment we sat down in the Friends of Southdown training session.

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After reading Harriet's email, we felt the burden of (what we took to be) Friends of Southdown's accusations. Our initial response passed the accusation of 'interests' or 'impure motivations' back the other way. In an email exchange within the group, we asked each other whether the response from Friends of Southdown was 'part of the group's covert religiously-inflected subjectivity?' We took issue with Friends of Southdown's 'exclusive right to decide what is in the interests of these men and upon what our motives are and should be based?' We later thought that perhaps 'disinterestedness' was appropriated as a trope to uphold the reputation of the group in the eyes of Southdown authorities since a group of 'apolitical', 'altruistic' volunteers is less threatening to institutional authority than a group of activists seeking to challenge it (in

other words, that Friends of Southdown might have an 'interest' in 'disinterest'). In short, the appearance of parallelism was reversed: now, evidently, it was the anthropologists mirroring the critical stance of their interlocutors

We eventually began to reconsider the situation. Provoked by the pragmatic realisation that we might *lose access* to the centre itself ('failure as an endpoint'), we began to rethink how we might respond to Harriet's email. 'Losing access' was a concern not merely because it would mean 'losing information'; we were also all keen to visit detainees at Southdown after our work on this project had ended, but it was made clear that we would not be permitted to visit detainees without first attending the mandatory tour of Southdown with Friends of Southdown. In the end, this ethnographic crisis or failure proved a turning point, redirecting our analytical attention from Friends of Southdown itself (and whatever motivations its members might have) to our relationship with it. The process of planning our communication with Friends of Southdown helped to develop our insight into how it operates as an organisation, making us more sensitive to the group's complexity, its multiple possible missions, motivations, and limitations. It allowed us to develop a more appropriate understanding of the factors that may have led Friends of Southdown to their decision and how to *productively* engage with their concerns.

Friends of Southdown's concern with the wellbeing and sheer life of the men signaled to us the *biopolitical* function of the organisation. This was clearly evidenced in their strict separation of 'biowelfare' issues from any juridical legal-statutory ones throughout the training session. Anthropological literature on NGOs (especially Ong 2006) discusses their position at the interstices of different modes of power, embedded within (inter)nationally-bounded moral economies. Friends of Southdown's work, therefore, is not simply an extension of a dominating truth regime; it rather carries out a very important function that, though shaped by its position within power relations, should not be analytically traduced. Power is not a zero-game: good actions are not executed in an anarchistic vacuum free from extraneous determination. These people are doing good work in difficult circumstance, we came to appreciate, without which the provision for individual welfare in the asylum system would be significantly reduced.

Given the epistemological proximity of the practices of anthropology and those of Friends of Southdown, in our subsequent engagements with Friends of Southdown we half-consciously began to reflect their procedures in our own. We emulated their language ('peaceful', 'disinterested'), and our course of action reflected the scaling and boundaries that they imposed upon themselves: we too could effect a

separation between our obligations as anthropology students and our ethical responsibilities to the men themselves. That is, we assured Harriet that we would effect a separation between our research interests and our shared concern for the well-being of the men, and that therefore we too could be 'disinterested'. Our anthropological interest lay, we reassured her, 'in the networks of organisations and people involved in trying to help' the detainees, and our work 'would fall within the anthropology of organisations rather than any kind of anthropology of the asylum experience'. In our reply to Friends of Southdown, we conveyed a bifurcation between our anthropological 'persons' and our ethical 'selves' (which though artificially separated on this occasion remain, of course, intrinsically connected). Practically speaking, we suggested that we would write about the training session and our interactions with Friends of Southdown and leave out any contact we had with detainees, if we chose to continue as visitors (without any research interests). This constituted a *third* parallel exchange between us and Friends of Southdown, a final homology between anthropology and Southdown.

'Although we could have chosen just about anything for this exercise, we decided that we would like to focus on the organisations involved in immigration and asylum volunteer work [...] because of our own *personal* desire to better inform ourselves of the present situation and to help in some way. [...] We wish to be disinterested, peaceful visitors concerned with the well being of the men [...] We hope, in other words, that even if you feel unable to allow us to continue as *anthropologists* you will recognize our potential to help as *young people*' (email correspondence, emphasis added).

(We effected a similar bounding of our project in the document we submitted to the Department of Anthropology Ethics Committee. In this 'Ethics Report', we outlined our 'ethical responsibilities', specifically promising, among other obligations, to clearly demarcate '*what is and is not available to us to discuss as anthropologists*' (emphasis in original). The delineation of appropriate objects of analytical attention was thus effected *from within* our relationship with Friends of Southdown, wholly determined by the bounds and grounds of that interaction. Of course, we executed these activities not only with Friends of Southdown but with each other as well; indeed, the project as a whole should be seen as an exercise in collaboration, the possibilities it opens, and the difficulties it entails.)

#### On Collaboration

'In the period after the first training session, tensions became evident as we began to discuss which elements of what we had seen, heard, and participated in would be available to us to analyse in an ethnographic account. While disparities in interpretations and expectations may have been reduced by the necessity to formulate an explicit agreement with Friends of Southdown, "friction" was not eliminated; rather it was brought to our attention and, to an extent, worked out through discussion. It is difficult to judge the impact that this revelation of differences might have had upon a longer-term project. For our short-term purposes it enabled us to probe more extensively the likely ethical ramifications of exclusion from the second session, and debate eventually led to a rough consensus on our ongoing obligations to Friends of Southdown. We continued, however, with an enhanced awareness that this project was holding together a less harmonious group of research students than we had earlier imagined.'

'It was striking, when we got together immediately after the second session to discuss what we had seen and heard, that different aspects of the day had commanded the attention of each of us. Over time, as we described the session to one member who had been unable to attend and to our supervisors, it seemed that a coherent collective account was challenging to produce and often strayed from our own particular memories and notes.'

'While collaboration amongst ourselves was a central part of the process, we also had to collaborate with other groups – activists, voluntary groups, institutions – who do not call themselves anthropologists but who are nonetheless very much involved, in different ways, in the "business of anthropology" (Kahn 2003: 411). These collaborations are marked by a sense of ambiguity as our respective interests overlap and sometimes conflict (Tsing 2005: 13). Interestingly, the ambiguity of our ethnographic practice mirrored one of our own potential subjects of investigation: the ambiguity of borders, of statecraft, of (il)legality and of liminal spaces of detention; uncertainty in ethnography has uncanny echoes in the discourses surrounding detention itself.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Harriet's swift and friendly reply to our emailed response suggested that her fears were dispelled by our proposal. We were able to overturn our 'failure'. Four of us were, in fact, able to visit the centre. But the (in the end, ethical) distinction we made, or rather, negotiated with Friends of Southdown, between interested research and disinterested visitor-volunteers was translated into a highly consequential bounding of our 'field', a bounding which had its own implications, evident in excerpts from our reports below. (This bounding has extended to the composition of this document: we have decided not to include any notes from our tour of the centre – an ethico-analytical choice meant to reciprocate the good faith and confidence that Friends of Southdown have shown us.)



## Notes on the Field

'Strathern's (1999) notion of immersion – in which a researcher relinquishes her individual preoccupations and engages in relationships with her interlocutors on their terms, allowing her field to be carved out by her informants' concerns – might be viewed as an alternative to the method of constructing 'arbitrary locations' as espoused by Candea (2007a) in which self-imposed spatial demarcations limit the ethnographer's "field". Both are methods of navigating a finite course through endless ethnographic possibilities. But neither seems to provide a way in which to conceptualise "Southdown" as a satisfying "field". Our project was neither temporally nor spatially defined, and involved neither long-term engagement, nor the establishment of any meaningful relationships. I am consequently left with the feeling that I have neither entirely entered nor entirely left "the field".'

'In reflecting upon the experience of this project, we have found Matei Candea's (2007a) notion of an "arbitrary location" useful to think with. Southdown may not initially have been an arbitrary location, but it quickly lost the capacity to represent a social formation with holistic ambitions, becoming instead a "contingent window into complexity" with no necessary relation to the wider object(s) of study (179). However, our "arbitrary location" isn't really a "location" at all: "Southdown" is a gaping hole at the centre of our "field", the one place in which we absolutely cannot conduct fieldwork.' Moreover, while 'Southdown' as ethnographic field may have been arbitrarily defined through a process of negotiation with our research subjects, and while the process of bounding our field is something we have taken ethical responsibility for, that cannot be equated with a sense of control over its definition or a liberating sense of having deployed a 'methodological instrument' to make explicit bounding decisions that would otherwise have felt 'illicit' (174). We have been cast in the role of respondent rather than initiator.'

Our field thus shifted according to the demands of unplanned circumstances which intruded into the research design encouraging a more careful, sensitive engagement with ethnographic data, in this case represented by the concerns of Friends of Southdown. As a result, we had come a long way from our initial imaginings of the project which were primarily concerned with the 'exotic'. From faraway continents, through Europe (locations that featured in our early ideas for this project), via a penitentiary facility in the English countryside and a local training session, we finally arrived at email exchanges and access negotiations. The shift was unidirectional, from the exotic to the mundane, steadily plunging down what Gupta and Ferguson have called the 'hierarchy of the purity of field sites' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 13). Ethnographic research of this kind constitutes an example of the kind of partial, ephemeral and context-dependent fields of consociation that must characterise the ethnographer's social experience as much as those of the subjects of his/her analysis.

'Our focus moved to Friends of Southdown (or our role within Friends of Southdown and the network of organisations surrounding detention), while the centre itself moved to the periphery. Our combined effort to secure access to the field and to ensure that our conduct and writing was ethical has meant that we have had to "knowingly and arbitrarily exclude certain elements, moments, people, factors, words, concepts, from our analysis" (Candea 2007a: 180). Instead of concentrating on interactions with the centre staff and detainees during the tour, our attention was drawn to areas that might otherwise have been considered tangential. Those of us in the group who mentioned the visit in our individual reports concentrated on the political discourses surrounding detention, making observations about the centre's public presentation and supplementing these observations through on-line research of media reports and government documents. Some of us chose not to mention the centre at all in our individual reports.'

'We attended the second session acutely aware of the precarious nature of our inclusion within the group. Throughout, we were anxious not to behave in a way that would set us apart from the other visitors.'

'I was conscious for the entire session of not wanting to aggravate the possibly tenuous trust which had been established between us and Friends of Southdown, of wanting to demonstrate that my involvement in the detention centre was direct and genuine.'

'After the email exchange with Harriet, we were self-conscious about our behaviour: about the way we moved through space, about the kinds of questions we asked, for we had been definitively labeled as "anthropologists", with stars marked next to our names on the list of attendees'

'In comparison with the training session and subsequent email exchanges with Friends of Southdown, I had found the visit to the detention centre gripping, exotic in its detachment from our everyday experiences, and clearly abundant in ethnographic potential. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to orient my observations from the centre around a specific point, or to isolate a particular theme which I could use to structure my fieldwork report. In Strathern's expression, I had been "dazzled" by a particular "ethnographic moment", the process of deploying and subsequently suspending my critical faculties, which took place during the period between the two training sessions. This 'moment' continued to influence me during my visit to the centre. Moreover, while reflecting on and writing up my experiences, the ostensibly dull process of attending the training session, writing emails and deciding how to phrase sentences emerged as the most 'revealing' moment of the ethnographic encounter. In Strathern's words, "the dazzle effect for me endured in the analytical work that was done afterwards. The ethnographic moment, then, was also necessarily an artefact of analysis and of writing" (Strathern 1999: 12). The detention centre itself became a footnote to what unexpectedly, overriding my own intentions, took over as the central focus of my project.'

'It would have been possible to follow the connections further into other organisations, politically active campaigning, and government and policy circles, but the interesting insights provided in this case study came by virtue of Friends of Southdown dictating the scale and parameters of our project.'

**Conclusion: 'The case has, in some respects, been not entirely devoid of interest'**

Strathern's emphasis on the 'complex' relation between ethnography's double field – that is, on the forces analysis ('writing') and fieldwork ('observation') exercise upon each other – has helped us frame our experience with Friends of Southdown. In the process of this negotiation, from the moment we decided to investigate Southdown to the collaborative and imaginative reconstruction of events afterwards, we have perceived a recurring tension in the need to balance openness with rigour, serendipity with planning, the agency of the data with the agency of theory and methodology.

On the one hand, we feel that an initial formulation of our expectations and intentions and a carefully thought-through account of our proposed project would have better prepared us to deal with the concerns of our 'gatekeepers'; indeed, it appears in retrospect that such explicit planning might have averted the ethical dilemmas of our introduction or 'revelation', and (potentially) our rash and cursory jump to critique. It is thus possible that our ethnographic 'crisis', apparent failure, and subsequent retreat to the safety of a chiefly methodological engagement with Friends of Southdown and the centre might have been avoided.

On the other hand, this very 'crisis' also enabled us to shift our analytical attention to the relationship we were in the midst of negotiating with our ethnographic interlocutors and then to the anthropological endeavour itself. Our interests were, as Strathern might have predicted, re-moulded according to the demands of unanticipated circumstances. Our early tendency towards a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was tempered by a more careful, sensitive engagement with ethnographic data, in this case represented by the concerns of Friends of Southdown. Thus, the saliency of our research was enhanced not through theoretical or analytical refinement, but by allowing our agency as researchers to be made subject to some extent to the agency of the data to which we were exposed and that of the relationships into which we had entered *and to which we remained responsible*. That is, the ethical, political, and practical considerations of our *immersion* with Friends of Southdown profoundly structured our analytical choices and conclusions. We were forced to re-negotiate, intersubjectively, (and collaboratively) the bounds of our 'field'.

It is, of course, worth considering what happens if one takes data *too* seriously, if one follows the argument against the hermeneutics of suspicion to its logical conclusion. The result is a de-problematized empiricism, the certitude that if researchers were to strip away their

theoretical baggage, they would be able to develop some form of unmediated understanding. It should be pointed out that in order to prevent a commitment to 'letting the data (or the interlocutors) speak for themselves' from slipping into a reductionist empiricist *theory*, it must be recognised as *critique* itself, the employment of critical faculties towards (the unchecked use of) critical faculties. We must merely ensure that data is taken *seriously enough*, with the right balance of suspicion and credulity.

The methodological manoeuvres which we undertook during this short period of fieldwork suggest that for an anthropology of ethics to be possible, anthropologists must suspend their own judgment of social phenomena, lest they misrepresent or even occlude ethical choices in virtue of their own moral blinkers. Anthropologists must 'separate', albeit artificially, description from evaluation to ensure that our own ethico-moral commitments do not presume or pre-decide the potentially problematic issues that might arise during fieldwork (cf. Laidlaw 2002). The realisation, however, of the need for this 'separation' germinated only through the process of grappling with the dilemmas presented to us in the midst of the field, through a period of reflection and as we pieced the narrative together in writing. And only by realizing the suspension of moral judgment and critique *in practice* were we able to formulate it on the page. Moreover, this realisation was shaped by the moral imperatives we already carried with us and sparked our desire to 'reveal' ourselves, to respond to Harriet, to re-draw the boundaries of our field. Thus, the *ethics of anthropology informs the anthropology of ethics, and vice versa*.

\* \* \* \* \*

What does it mean for an ethnography to fail? After the first training session, our 'interests' as researchers were invoked to deny us entrance to Southdown; what is usually described as a kind of 'disinterest' (an academic interest in the pursuit of knowledge) was transformed into a kind of *self-interest*. The problem, of course, was that we might profit at the expense of the detainees or Friends of Southdown, and in the face of this possibility the Friends of Southdown apparently decided to limit our access. Thus, halfway through the project, a methodological failure appeared as an endpoint; that is, this critical imputation of interests appeared as a limit to anthropology's capacity to analyse. By the end, however, it became clear that methodological failure does not immediately translate into analytical failure, that frustration of an ethnography stopped short, foiled in its labour, can be useful, constructive, or interesting. That is, an ethnography, barred from filling

out its frame, can say something about the frame itself. Of course, we may have 'failed' methodologically, and felt, at least temporarily, the burden of 'failure as an endpoint'. But out of this endpoint, out of an absence of data, emerged new questions about the relationships of interest that defined our failure and the capacity of anthropological forms of knowledge to respond to para-ethnographic practices, not to mention forceful, mirroring critiques like those of Friends of Southdown. Instead of allowing our methodological failure to become an analytical one, we reconfigure failure as interest (interesting and interested), and failure, like interest, becomes generative. Or, as Sherlock Holmes (Doyle 2004) so nicely put it: 'The case has, in some respects, been not entirely devoid of interest.' Failure must be made to bear such interest.

### Afterword

Several of us took on the role of 'disinterested visitors' after this research project had 'ended', thus continuing our relationship with Friends of Southdown and the centre. Well aware of the ethical obligations we had cultivated with Friends of Southdown, we no longer had any intentions of 'doing research' in the centre. It has certainly been challenging to effect a separation between our 'anthropological' and 'volunteer' selves. As Marcus (1998: 122) suggests, 'the anthropologist [...] is always on the verge of activism, of negotiating some kind of involvement beyond the distanced role of ethnographer, according to personal commitments that may or may not predate the project.' Perhaps a sense of anthropological curiosity can never be entirely shed. Without a doubt, 'former' identities can return to haunt the researcher: we were reminded of our anthropological associations upon encountering two other students at the centre (students we had met at the initial Friends of Southdown training session), who immediately declared, 'Oh yes, you're the anthropologists!' No 'research', however, was conducted while interacting with the staff at the centre nor with the detainee we visited. Our continued involvement with Friends of Southdown and the centre has encouraged us to accept this (albeit limited) form of activism as compatible with our own personal and professional ethical projects of self-formation and knowledge production. Moreover, this sustained engagement has led to a different kind of intuitive grasp of the ethics and politics (not to mention pragmatics) of the ethnographic encounter: we came to Southdown to figure it as an object of knowledge; we came away from this project with a better sense of the deep entanglements of ethics and methods, critique and analysis, self and other.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Murray Li, Tania. 2007. *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Duke University Press.

Tania Murray Li's *The Will to Improve* is a breathtakingly ambitious project that seeks to chart the rationale *and* effects of programs aimed at improving the condition of populations in Indonesia over the past two centuries. In doing so, her work brings together two kinds of studies that are often kept apart, for it is an 'analysis of governmental interventions (their genealogy, their diagnoses and prescriptions, their constitutive exclusions) and an analysis of what happens when those interventions become entangled with the processes they would regulate and improve' (27). Initially made skeptical by the grand premises of this study, by the end of the (almost) three hundred page tome I was completely won over by the sheer brilliance of her research strategy as well as the richness of the ethnographic and historical detail that informs her analysis.

What, precisely, is this will to improve? Li understands this 'will' not as a singular intention emanating from a locatable source, but rather believes it to be drawn from and situated within heterogeneous assemblages or *dispositifs*. She breaks down this will and makes it an object of study by analysing what it attempts to do, its accomplishments, and the all too obvious chasm between the two. The irony of improvement programs is, she notes, that they have contributed greatly to the many problems that exist in Indonesia today. Li's focus on the failure of the will to improve to, well, *improve* as it had sought to do should not lead us to see this as yet another post-modern anthropological critique of the project of development *per se*. Rather, Li is careful to establish that while she is positioning herself in the role of a 'critic' of improvement programs, a role that is vital and which has a lot to offer "real world" problems, she takes the will to improve at its word. Her analysis of the texts of programs, their underlying premises, the conditions that have formed them, and the manifestation of the will to improve in varying guises at different points of Indonesia's history in its colonial and national periods alike, all testify to this intention.

Li posits two key practices that serve to convert the will to improve into active programs: the identification of deficiencies that need to be rectified or 'problematization', and the rendering technical of these very problems through the devising of corrective measures by experts. This latter act draws up a boundary between trustees who help improve and the ones that are in need of being improved/helped. Repeatedly, Li