

Doing Interventions: Experiments and Collaborations in Contemporary Ethnography

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Abstract

In this introduction to the 83rd issue of Kulturanthropologie Notizen we focus on the concept of intervention and highlight the impact of researchers' relatedness to their fields of study. While acknowledging that ethnographic studies have always had the capacity to be interventionist per se, we consider 'doing interventions' as a specific ethnographic methodological approach and, congruently, we reflect on experiments and collaborations and their epistemic effects. In this vein, interventions with/in ethnography hint at ethnographic knowledge that 'does' something in the field while the practice of intervening also alters ethnographic knowledge production. The authors who contributed to this issue of Kulturanthropologie Notizen provide a variety of examples to discuss how interventions with and in ethnography play out in practice and illustrate thereby how these modes are intertwined. Case studies range from ethnographic work in the global food sector to extractive industries; from field-work in and with social psychiatry to new forms of collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic; and last but not least, anthropology is discussed as a science in/of transformation. What unites all texts is the supposition that interventions with/in ethnography question what is established and taken for granted, transform normative and dominant perceptions of knowledge production, irritate discourse, and promote the re-imagination and re-conceptualization of the ethnographic practice at the same time.

Keywords: Intervention, method, ethnographic research, epistemic practices, knowledge production.

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Interventions, introduced

For more than a century, intervention was anathema in anthropology. From its inception, while often serving political interests, anthropological fieldwork was conceptualized as non-interventionist. Achieving a non-intrusive presence of the ethnographer in the field and in monographic texts was considered the hallmark of serious academic achievement. Yet in participant observation, to remain neutral and to refrain from getting involved proved to be difficult and often only possible at grave moral cost. “Anthropological practice is”, as Beck (2009: 5) argued, “by its very nature involved.” In the 1970s social movements and political critique were on the rise which have also left a mark on international cultural and social anthropology. New forms of anthropological activism emerged, and new objectives – beyond the advancement of scholarly knowledge – were formulated for research: Anthropological findings were to serve the needs of researched communities and research participants, anthropologists were called on to protect vulnerable populations, and their research was increasingly considered as a contribution to societal change. The ethical responsibilities of fieldworker were codified by professional associations, and the application of anthropological findings outside of academic settings – such as public health, the school system, urban planning or social integration of immigrants – became part of anthropological syllabi.

The 1980s saw another shift in how anthropology was re-conceptualized as cultural critique (Marcus & Fischer 1986), resulting in a redefinition of the significance of ethnography, both in terms of anthropology’s signature research method and in terms of the discipline’s textual genre. Several issues which have now become commonplace in the anthropological enterprise, such as the impetus of “being there” (Hannerz 2003; Hammoudi & Borneman 2009), of immersion in the field, of listening to interlocutors, and remaining aware of the impact of “writing culture” (Marcus & Cushman 1982; Abu Lughod 1991), were generated by radical critiques of earlier notions of anthropological knowledge production. Demands for critical distance from research subjects as well as attempts to objectify anthropological research were rejected. This resulted in intensified theoretical debates and inquiries into what constitutes anthropological knowledge, whether there is a specifically anthropological mode of knowledge production, and how the researcher’s positionality shape anthropological findings. Among other developments, this also led to an emphasis on experimental approaches at the interface between Science and Technology Studies and ethnography. These endeavors are based on the fundamental assumption that ethnographic methods do not simply represent worlds, but that methods are always inventive and thus world-making (Lury & Wakeford 2012). That this assertion plays a crucial role in anthropological debates as well as in Science and Technology Studies is highlighted by the evolving interest in methodological reflections and ethnographic experiments.

Intervention, then, became one of the terms used in these debates to draw attention to the epistemic and ethical challenges which are inherent to ethnographic research.¹ Etymologically the term ‘intervention’ characterizes an interposing, something that comes in between, derived from the Latin verb *intervenire*. As such, it marks a moment of interruption. Sometimes this interruption implies a deliberate act carried out with the intention to stop a flow and to create irritations. At other times intervention is caused by conflicts, crises or impositions from outside which provoke temporary breakdowns and generate re-orderings of taken-for-granted routines and practices. Overall, the term intervention cannot be elaborated

¹ For a discussion of related terms – coordination, collaboration and curation – see Faust & Hauer 2021.

uniformly as Paula Hildebrandt (2012) argues², and the term has been used in manifold – and sometimes inflationary (Gantner et al. 2015: 34) – ways (Binder & Hess 2013; Faust & Hauer 2021).

In anthropological research, intervention purportedly often refers to anthropology's potential to generate critiques of social developments as well as the relevance of ethnographic research to foster change and societal transformation. For many years, as we elaborate below, intervention was charged with the connotation of political and ethical involvement beyond academia, referring to different forms of engaged research. Other, more recent uses of the term have focused on interventions as "situated" methodological experiments (Wildner 2015; Zuiderent-Jerak 2015) and as part of new forms of collaborations in fieldwork (Estalella & Criado 2018; Boyer & Marcus 2020). These more recent approaches have pointed out the epistemic effects of intervention in particular – both *within* the research fields we investigate as well as *on* ethnographic research practices themselves. Intervention thus touches upon several central aspects of anthropological research: To whom are researchers committed and who is addressed with the publication of their findings? What are the goals of anthropological research and how are research findings authorized and legitimated? And how does intervention challenge taken-for-granted research practices and methodological assumptions? With this 83rd volume of *Kulturanthropologie Notizen* we wish to take up these questions, foregrounding intervention with and in ethnography as an epistemic stance *and* research practice. We discuss interventions with/in ethnography and their potential epistemic impact on both our research fields and the collaborations we engage in as well as on our ethnographic knowledge production and how this allows us to experiment with interventions during fieldwork.

Our conviction is that intervention responds to new and fundamental challenges for the discipline, its knowledge production and its methodologies. We thereby connect current debates in anthropology to the idea of anthropology as a critical force in societal crisis as proposed initially by Ina-Maria Greverus (1990), the founder and chair of the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main and initiator of the publication series *Kulturanthropologie Notizen*. Greverus understood intervention as an integral part of doing anthropology and argued for "a contemporary and practice-oriented cultural anthropology that makes its contribution to a humanization of our world in an interdisciplinary network" (Greverus 1982: 217, translated by authors).

Adopting this understanding of ethnography as an interventionist practice, we ask: How does ethnographic research intervene in the fields we investigate? And how does intervention alter anthropological research practices? Our focus on experiments with intervention, new forms of collaborations, and the emerging epistemic effects thereof, does not imply a distinction between the epistemic on the one hand and the ethical or political on the other. Rather, it offers accounts that draw particular attention to actual practices of 'doing intervention'.

² As Friedrich von Borries et al. (2012: preface) pinpoint in their 'Glossary of Interventions', the term is 'overused and at the same time underdefined'. Based on a research project on 'Urban Interventions', the authors list over 100 different definitions of intervention, referring to its broad use for activism, art in urban spheres, and as artistic methods (Laister et al. 2014).

Getting Involved: From Public and Engaged Anthropology Towards Experimental Collaborations

In search of addressing problems which extend beyond the discipline and in attempts of fostering societal and/or political change, two recent ways of framing anthropology and its knowledge-production as forms of intervention have emerged: Public Anthropology on the one hand and Engaged Anthropology on the other. While the former can be understood as an attempt to address audiences outside of the confines of academic disciplines which themselves rely on communication outside of scholarly publishing (Beck 2009; De Lauri 2018; Borofsky & De Lauri 2019), the latter resumes earlier attempts at activist, change-oriented anthropological involvement (for instance, Farmer 1999 or Scheper-Hughes 2005).

Public Anthropology is, at its core, about “messaging” (Besteman 2013: 4). The indented audiences are generally non-anthropologists, and research results are often directed at either the general public or specific political decision-making fora. Its goal is to make anthropological findings better known and more accessible to a broader public. These efforts are sometimes contested. Criticisms frequently center around the claim that public anthropologists’ writings are too journalistic and tend to simplify complex issues (Hale 2008), yet Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2009) argues the opposite and suggests that anthropologists should cooperate with journalists to make their findings more accessible. Dilger and Falge (2019) also argue that the supposition that Public Anthropology lacks intellectual persuasiveness is unjustified. Instead, they propose transcending the dichotomy between theory-generating ethnography on the one hand and applied anthropology on the other, suggesting a “continuum of theory-informed practice” (Dilger & Falge 2019: 481, with reference to Rylko-Bauer & Singer 2006, own translation) in which the tension between reducing or intensifying complexity must constantly be renegotiated. In addition, these authors emphasize that anthropology – and other disciplines – are by no means value-free, neutral or objective; rather, as Hahn and Inhorn (2008: 9) also argue, some anthropologists “regard the application of anthropology to the solution of real-world problems as tainting the discipline with politics and values (as if their own studies were apolitical and value free)”.

If anthropology, however, aims at having an impact on public perceptions and in political fora, monographs and journal articles are usually not particularly suffice as a means of communication and other forms of communication, such as blogs, films or podcasts, are currently being experimented with among public anthropologists. Yet it is not entirely clear to what extent these forms of ‘messaging’ actually lead to real transformations (Dilger & Falge 2019). Despite this ambiguity, Shaw and Agro (2017) argue stridently to seek dialogue with the public and to reach audiences on a global scale. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2005), a renowned advocate of Public Anthropology, considers this to be the responsibility of anthropologists and attests that while anthropologists are perfectly capable of analyzing current cultures and societies, they should urgently involve themselves more in socio-political debates. According to Eriksen, anthropology is not only engaged but it must also be more engaging.

A further approach to actively employ one’s anthropological expertise in terms of intervention consists of calls for an Engaged Anthropology, which focuses on the impact of ethnographic knowledge for the communities studied during fieldwork. Following the ‘engaged turn’ ethnographic projects are constructed according to their relevance for the world, wherein ethnographers are critically engaged actors with/in the research field, thereby illus-

trating their research challenges to a wider public. In this sense, Engaged Anthropology incorporates parts of what has been described above under the term Public Anthropology. Catherine Besteman (2013: 3) notes that Engaged Anthropology is also collaborative, critical, reflexive, and practical; at its core, it is about societal transformation, and thus frequently “values-driven”. While this often implies that the anthropologist adopts the research community’s problematizations and offers assistance in overcoming exclusion and marginalization, this can also mean that the researcher imposes her normativity and understandings of how the world should (not) be. At the same time, if the researcher conducts engaged research with one particular group, it may mean no longer having access to another. Thus, an Engaged Anthropology not only transforms but also confronts, which is especially true when anthropology and activism merge (Binder et al. 2013). And while cooperation with activists has been recognized in anthropology (and in related disciplines) as a legitimate mode of research, assessments are altogether different when ethnographers suddenly find themselves in research relationships with people who are opposed to activist agendas and ideas.

Public and Engaged Anthropology both intervene by introducing ethnographic findings into contexts where they had no agency before – i.e. the researched communities, political fora, or the general public. Following this framing, intervention is usually considered as a strategic insertion of anthropological knowledge to interrupt taken-for-granted worldviews, power relations, and judgements of norms and values in fields of investigation, based on a specific political or ethical stance. This active and intentional intervention has the potential to shape new tropes and narratives and to alter epistemic categories (Eitel & Meurer 2021). More recent interventionist approaches, however, emphasize the tactical and improvisational character of research engagements and discuss the actual epistemic practices and methods of anthropological knowledge-production. In such approaches, ethnographic knowledge-production is often enhanced by the simultaneous (co-)presence of researchers sharing their analytical and interpretative insights *during* fieldwork. Such a collaborative approach (Lassiter 2005; Boyer & Marcus 2020) fundamentally changes established roles, partnerships and procedures in ethnographic research, thereby offering “the potential for new, intermediate forms of knowledge-making” (Boyer & Marcus 2020: 2).

That intervention can effectively be used as a method during fieldwork to involve audiences outside of academia is reflected by anthropologists Tomás Sánchez Criado and Adolfo Estallega (2018: 2). They argue in favor of cooperating with social actors in the field to reflect jointly on ethnographic findings and to translate them for audiences outside of anthropology. Their concept of experimental collaboration implies “joint anthropological problematizations” that transform informants into “epistemic partners” (ibid.: 10) who thereby enter a companionship to share “the endeavor of problematizing the world” (ibid.: 20). As Criado and Estallega and the contributors to their edited volume also highlight, experimental collaborations are usually not intentionally designed or set-up by researchers in a strategic way prior to fieldwork. Rather, they evolve during fieldwork in response to forms of engagement or expectations of the actors involved. Often, they are catalyzed by “fieldwork devices”, such as when jointly organizing an event, developing a platform, or co-editing a publication. Criado and Estallega emphasize that such interventions trigger a dual learning process and generate new epistemic practices, both among members of the researched community and for anthropologists. While anthropologists are of course reliant on learning from their interlocutors (which is crucial for any form of ethnographic research), to enter into experimental collaboration with other actors in the field often constitutes an interruption of one’s planned

fieldwork. When one understands these joint anthropological problematizations as interventionist endeavors, it becomes clear that interventions are neither merely carried out by ethnographers nor only 'side effects' of ethnographic research. Intervention, then, becomes methodologically productive in that it creates moments of irritations to unveil seemingly opaque, hidden or muted dimensions of and in the field. These become visible through collaborative modes of producing knowledge, potentially enabling a distribution of reflexivity among those participating in "co-laborative ethnographic research" (Bieler et al. 2021).

The effects of such interventionist practice on anthropological knowledge-production and what they imply for anthropologists' epistemic work are issues the discipline is currently grappling with and which serve as a source of motivation to publish this volume. If intervention constitutes an innovative method in anthropology, we can pose – much like Zuidereit-Jerak (2016) did for Science and Technology Studies – the following questions: If intervention is a method, what do we and our research partners learn? How does intervention make a difference? What are its intended and unintended effects? And what are the conditions under which learning process triggered by interventions are enabled?

Interventions with/in Ethnography: Experiments and Collaborations in Practice

In this volume, we examine two distinct modes of intervention: *Intervention with ethnography*, on the one hand, draws attention to the potential impact of ethnographic knowledge in (but also beyond) our fields of research, often resulting from an intentionally staged act of intervention by the anthropologist. *Intervention in ethnography*, on the other hand, unveils the productive – and often unintended – interruption of our own epistemic practices, resulting in experimentation, reflection and ultimately in ways of rethinking ethnographic practices. These two specific modes, however, are intertwined and they cannot be clearly distinguished. As such, we reflect on *interventions with/in ethnography* whereby we focus on an integration of these different ways of doing intervention.

While we agree that intervention is inevitably part of ethnographic research – whether by taking sides (as with Engaged or Action Anthropology), working with our research partners (as with Collaborative Anthropology), or by sensitizing/mobilizing the public (as with Public Anthropology) – we are particularly interested in "doing intervention" as a methodological question to explore the potential epistemic impact of intervention both within our research fields and on our research practice. Such "reflexive examination" (Criado & Estallela 2018: 1) of one's own research practices is congruent with the emerging literature in anthropology and the social sciences which emphasizes the critical examination of knowledge production and highlights the epistemic practices of one's own discipline. This is demonstrated, for example, in approaches which scrutinize the practical act of doing comparisons in the social sciences (Deville et al. 2016), which examine the potentials and limits of a co-laborative distribution of reflexivity (Bieler et al. 2021), or by discussing the analytic practice and devices through "experimenting with ethnography" (Ballesterro & Winthereik 2021). In a similar way, this issue invites readers to look behind the scenes of ethnographic research and discover 'the backstage' where lesser known or hidden aspects of ethnographic intervention come to the fore. Far from providing easy to follow recipes or 'how-to' guidelines, the authors in this volume depict and reflect on their own research practices and provide a variety of examples of intervention in practice. While some research projects presented here were

intentionally designed as a form of intervention, others turned ‘interventionist’ in rather happenstance ways, thereby leading to surprising encounters, generating frictions and unintended consequences. The articles in this volume all share that they do not conceptualize intervention either as a clear-cut format, a specific research strategy which follows clear political or ethical intentions, nor as an outcome which critiques particular societal problems. While this might have been part of some of the projects, the authors highlight the manifold challenges and unforeseen developments they faced while carrying out ethnographic work, reflect on the unintended detours and unexpected engagements they encountered, and highlight their practices of ‘doing intervention’.

Intervening with Ethnography...

The first set of three chapters of this volume offer insights into the generative use of ethnography – both as a research practice and as analytical output – within the fields studied by the authors. All three chapters discuss examples of interventions that move beyond the typical – or at least more expected – forms of engagement with research partners. When thinking about ethnographic interventions, cooperation and collaboration with minorities, activists or marginalized actors frequently come to mind. And, indeed, the question of with whom one engages, whom to give a voice, with whom (not) to collaborate, and where the boundaries of epistemic partnerships are situated are inherent to ethnographic studies. Yet ethnographers also encounter actors in more powerful positions, and questions arising therefrom surround the (im-)possibility of collaborating with these actors. The following chapters illustrate what experimental ethnography can look like when researchers collaborate with more powerful actors – either in an intended or unintended manner.

Ruzana Liburkina questions anthropology’s striking absence in fields that are usually framed as hegemonic configurations of capitalism, namely among companies and entrepreneurs in the private sector. In “Ethnographic Encounters in Extraordinary Times. A Plea for Experimental Interventions in More-than-Business Relations”, she draws on her extensive ethnographic research on global supply-chains in the food sector, looking at the practices that constitute their “connectedness” and proposing to view them as forms of knowledge production rather than as economic activities. Such a shift in the conceptualization of the field as more-than-business networks allows for situated experimental interventions with powerful economic stakeholders as well as the generation of critique from within the field. Reflecting on what is needed to intervene in such settings, she suggests refraining from conventional framings of collaboration and intervention as dyadic, but rather to attend to the manifold – sometimes conflicting – relations between knowledge practices, market operations, and value arguments.

In her contribution “Fuzzy Embeddedness: The Ethnography of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Extractive Industries”, **Susana Carmona** also reflects on ethnographic research in the private sector and provides insights into her research in Cerrejón, a mining area in Colombia. With her research focus on the enactment of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) she adds to a growing body of literature on methodological questions surrounding ethnography in corporations by focusing on an underdiscussed issue: the reflection of how the anthropologist immersed in corporate logics thereby becomes part of the hierarchies and power relations that corporations enact in extractive territories. The author illustrates that collaborations must by no means always be intentional; on the contrary, they are often fuzzy. While these unintended and fuzzy collaborations reproduce ethically questionable practices

and forms of legitimization in natural resource extraction, Carmona concludes that they nevertheless aid the analysis of how CSR works.

While in Carmona's case unintended forms of collaborating emerged and posed a challenge for the ethnographer, creating forms of intended collaboration with actors in the field is also far from simple. It is often, as **Patrick Bieler** reflects, a rather messy process. He entered his field of research partly as an academic co-laborator and partly as a co-worker for a mental health care service provider. In "Situated Witnessing in/as Intervention: Co-Laborative, Ethnographic Long-Term Research with Social Psychiatry", Bieler demonstrates the generative force of becoming embedded within the mental health care infrastructure of a German metropolis. He understands intervention as a method to disrupt routine situations, making previously invisible issues and dynamics visible, and purposefully provoking moments that can be of usage for ethnographic knowledge production on purpose. In his contribution, Bieler grasps these moments as "moments of interferences" which can unveil the constitution, construction and coming into being of new realities. At the same time, and this emphasizes the overlap of both intervening with and intervening in ethnography, Bieler discusses the effects of this form of engagement on his own process of analysis and theorizing.

... and Intervening in Ethnography

In addition to interventions *with* ethnography, we can also identify modes of interventions *in* ethnography which can bring about inadvertent interruptions of our epistemic practices which result in experimenting with and reflecting on ethnographic practice. We found this aspect to be underdiscussed in the examined literature, even if it has received greater attention in debates on experimental collaboration and co-laboration (Boyer & Marcus 2020; Bieler et al. 2021; Faust & Hauer 2021). These contributions demonstrate, for example, how situated interventions (Zuiderent-Jerak 2015) can generate irritations both within ethnographic knowledge-production and within the – often taken-for-granted – methods of ethnographic fieldwork.

In their article "Wenn eine Pandemie interveniert. Überlegungen zur ethnographischen Praxis seit COVID-19", **Laura K. Otto** and **Nicole Philipp-Jahnke** discuss the global Covid pandemic as an intervention in ethnography. This intervention of a public health crisis in the epistemic and methodological practice of ethnographic field research demonstrates that familiar questions of field access, (im)possibilities of collaborating, and research ethics, take on new urgency. Against the backdrop of qualitative interviews with ethnographers and blog posts, the authors illustrate how ethnographers experiment with the ethnographic toolkit in a situation in which physically co-present research becomes nearly impossible. The authors thereby highlight a field of tension ethnography currently experiences: While the intervention by the pandemic allows for experimentation with digital methods through which new and unexpected collaborations with actors in the field emerge, other research participants can no longer be reached and their perspectives and practices are more likely to be overlooked. Yet the authors conclude that these current and far-reaching disruptions demonstrate the strength of ethnography, namely its ability to be reconfigured in the wake of enduring social change.

That the pandemic not only has significant consequences for collaboration with research partners, but also for collaboration among scientists, is demonstrated by **Andreas Streinzer**, **Anna Wanka**, **Almut Poppinga**, **Carolin Zieringer** and **Georg Marx**. During the pandemic, the authors experimented with unconventional forms of collaborating as an interdisciplinary

team of researchers with the goal to study how household provisioning was reconfigured in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland during the pandemic. In their contribution “Near Co-Laborations. The VERSUS Project as Relational Epistemic Practice to Analyse the Covid-19 Pandemic”, the team of researchers discusses different forms of working together, thereby reflecting on challenges of what it means to collaborate among disciplines. On the one hand, referring to shared epistemic orientations for creating knowledge in specific fields, they discuss their joint project as co-laboration. On the other hand, they consider collaboration as the everyday practice of working together during the unfolding pandemic. The authors acknowledge that collaborating and experimenting with methods in a team is a complex undertaking inherent to many research projects. The VERSUS team thus argues that these frictions and challenges should not be repressed and taken out of sight, but rather that they should be engaged, reflected upon, and talked about as a matter of care in epistemic relations.

In “Kulturanthropologie als Veränderungswissenschaft”, **Manfred Faßler** paints a complex picture of worldwide transformations through large-scale digital infrastructures, the rise of data economies, the automation of decision-making processes, and the resulting impact on forms of sociality and governance. He reviews discourses that either condemn or celebrate such transformations, noting that neither are conducive to understanding the complex co-evolution of humans and machines. Responding to what he considers a gap in anthropological theorizing, he calls for a new anthropology (and sociology) which is able to develop new concepts and a new vocabulary in order to analyze and describe the fundamental impact of the above-mentioned developments on forms of knowledge, sociality, and culture. To address such a transformation, he emphatically calls on us to become ‘scientists in/of transformation’. While his contribution is not directly connected to the issues of intervention with/in *ethnography*, Manfred Faßler nevertheless reminds us of the potential anthropology has to intervene epistemologically in global processes of transformation as well as to reconsider our own theoretical conventions and foundational concepts such as *Anthropos* and *Logos*. He passed away suddenly and unexpectedly on 27 April 2021 before this volume was completed. In publishing this – his final – article as part of this collection, we wish to honor a lifetime of inspiring academic work. We dedicate this volume to Manfred Faßler’s memory.

All contributions in this volume demonstrate that anthropology is always transformative and changing: Be it the set of methods, be it practices of actors in the field, but also the ideas and actions of actors beyond the field. Yet a few caveats are necessary: Researchers do not and cannot know how and where the ethnographic knowledge they have produced is employed, and which consequences the ethnographers’ footprint has in its aftermath. Ethnographic findings can thus take on a life of their own beyond the anthropologist’s control (Brettel 1993), thereby advancing in undirected and unintended manners (Binder & Hess 2013). Nevertheless, the power of anthropological interventions certainly lies in de-naturalizing the-taken-for-granted and “rupturing the status quo”, which can, eventually, “offer alternative ways of thinking” (Besteman 2013: 5) – both in ‘our’ fields and in our own epistemic and methodological practices. While the strength of interventions with/in ethnography certainly lies in its potential to widen horizons, to make seen what is initially unseen, and to challenge and change fixed categories, it remains an often messy, uncontrollable and spontaneous endeavor. It is, however, within this very messiness that interventions can be made fruitful. As an outcome, interventions with/in ethnography have the potential to change prevailing perceptions of knowledge production, and they can foster the re-imagination and re-

conceptualization of the ethnographic practice. Therein, it can enable 'new ways of doing' anthropology.

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