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ENCOUNTER: A BASIC CONCEPT FOR ANTHROPOLOGY

This essay belongs to the essay series “The Anthropologist’s Toolkit: Reflections on ethnographic methodology”. In this series, authors peer into the anthropologist’s toolkit to reflect on what ethnographic methodology constitutes in all its multimodal forms.

ABSTRACT

Anthropologists often talk about ‘encounters,’ but what do they actually mean? This term—‘encounter’—shows up everywhere across ethnographic writing and practice, but is itself rarely defined or discussed. ‘Ethnographies of encounters,’ too, are increasingly common, but are rarely treated as a distinct type of ethnography. In this short essay, I recommend approaching the concept of encountering more consciously, but also defining it in a relatively basic and expansive way. Encounters across difference are open-ended: they can lead to collaboration, conflict, negotiation or an awkward disconnect, to name a few. Encounters are many-sided: much beyond a single studied group of people, beyond the ethnographer’s home society, and more than human. Assuming that encounters are very open-ended and many-sided brings new methodological and ethical challenges. Yet, it helps expand our attention and care in fieldwork and analysis, while postponing our judgements.

Keywords: ethnographies of encounter, alterity, relationality, world-making, definitions

‘Encounters’ are both a classic theme and a universal metaphor in social-cultural anthropology. Anthropologists have long emphasised that groups of people live in unique and disparate social worlds and, thus, can meet each other only across differences. Meeting a cultural ‘Other’ or a way of being ‘otherwise’ has remained at the heart of the discipline—as a topic of study, as an ideological proposition, and as the very method of ethnographic fieldwork. Alongside cross-cultural encounters, anthropologists have investigated colonial encounters, ‘first contacts,’ missionary encounters, knowledge encounters, medical

encounters, development encounters, urban encounters, and anthropological or ethnographic encounters, amongst many more. Unsurprisingly, countless anthropological books, theses, articles, films, and research projects feature titles with variations of ‘encounter’ and ‘encountering.’ A colleague told me that this word—‘encounter’—is attractive exactly because it is not tied to any particular theoretical literature; it feels somehow neutral, but also so familiar.

Yet, what do anthropologists actually mean by ‘encounters’? What goes into an ‘ethnography of encounters’? This short essay contributes to the anthropological discussion by exploring

a concept that is everywhere in ethnographic writing and practice, but is itself rarely discussed or explicitly theorised. In this essay, I make the case for using this concept more consciously and for defining it in a relatively basic and expansive way. Encounters across differences are *open-ended* and *many-sided*. Approaching encounters as highly open-ended and many-sided helps expand our attention and care in fieldwork and analysis.

What might be called ‘ethnographies of encounter’ are dispersed across social-cultural anthropology, human geography, and related fields of research, yet are usually not viewed as a distinct type of ethnography. Reviewing such literature in anthropology, Faier and Rofel (2014) found a few disparate clusters of ethnographies that have emerged in the last few decades. They also found that, because these disparate ethnographies all emphasise how cultural worlds emerge from interactions—rather than existing as autonomous bounded units—one can trace their shared roots to Boasian cultural diffusionism and to Barthian approaches to ethnicity as relational.

Faier and Rofel build their literature review in a way that shows how earlier studies of colonial encounters inspired the more recent ethnographies of encounter. Those earlier studies—often literary and historical studies of European colonialism—helped anthropologists think about power, culture-making, and inequality ‘as involving processes of negotiation, resistance, awkward resonance, misunderstanding, and unexpected convergence’ (Faier and Rofel 2014: 365). Faier and Rofel noted that several now-classic studies introduced a range of concepts—such as transculturation, contact zone, middle ground, mirror of production, and colonial

intimacy—that ‘paved the way for growing attention in anthropology to how contemporary cultural forms are the outcome of encounter’. For example, one influential study has been Pratt’s (1992: 4) book on the ‘contact zone’, that is, ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’, where subordinated people not only adapt to, but also actively shape the dominant metropolitan cultures.

The rise of encounters as a frame across disparate fields of study resonates with recent anthropological debates, which have revived the discipline’s foundational questions about culture and cultural difference—or, about radical alterity or different ontologies. As a foundational characteristic of the discipline, anthropologists have often been exploring, showing the internal logic of, defending, and promoting ‘other’ cultures. They have specifically done so in relation to the nonmodern or the traditional, such as indigenous animism, including in its encounters with governments, the natural sciences, and industrial economies.

West (2016: 111) summarises the return to themes of alterity—and, consequently, of encounter—as follows:

An old and fundamental anthropological question has been challenged of late. That question has three parts. The first part asks, *How do people live their world?* How do they see, smell, taste, hear, feel, sense, move through, make meaning out of, find meaning in, represent, narrate, know, perceive, think about, remember, imagine, desire, and empathize with all that they experience as surrounding them? The second part asks, *How do different ways of living-in-their-world affect how people understand, engage with, and act toward*

others? The third, What happens to people's modes of living their worlds when people living their worlds in radically different ways interact?

This question of encounter—what happens when people who live their worlds in very different ways meet each other—is *open-ended*, thus making it a helpful starting point for ethnography. This is especially so if one approaches ethnography as a method of learning about people, while actively postponing judgment.

So, it remains: What is an 'encounter'? For Faier and Rofel (2014: 363–364), cited above, 'encounter' refers to 'everyday engagements across difference': 'a chance meeting, a sensory exchange, an extended confrontation, a passionate tryst'. This is a fine, yet limiting definition. It highlights everyday and affective engagements, but also limits itself by excluding the overtly political or instances of rupture. It also limits itself to actual engagements, thereby excluding encounters that result in an awkward disconnect, acts of ignoring or passing-by. For the purposes of this essay, Wilson's (2017: 464) simpler definition suits us better, because it keeps the notion of encounters at a more broad, open-ended, and basic level: 'encounters are meetings where difference is somehow noteworthy'.

What are ethnographies of encounters? Faier and Rofel (2014: 365) offer a helpful, specific framing when outlining the criteria for how they selected ethnographies for their literature review:

[W]e have selected (...) studies that (a) explicitly and consistently move between the voices and perspectives of members of different groups of people or things

and (b) demonstrate how new cultural meanings and worlds emerge through their encounter.

Again, I suggest defining 'encounters'—and ethnographies of encounters—in a more open-ended and expansive way: ethnographies can also show how encounters happen, but new meanings and worlds do *not* emerge. Encounters can lead to historic precedents, yet may not change much amid a more generally disconnected or distrustful co-presence of groups of people.

This open-endedness is why 'encounter' differs from concepts such as clash, dialogue, exchange, mutual imaginary, translation, cosmopolitics, relationship, and convergence, amongst others. While all these other concepts have their own strengths, the more elementary term of 'encounter' offers the greatest level of openness—it can encompass the most diverse pathways and the largest diversity of participants. It brings attention to how something unfolded, rather than focusing on why an outcome might be important, good or bad. It can highlight the role played by indirect, fleeting, and vague connections, extending beyond clashes and collaborations. Even if an ethnography of encounters takes a public controversy as the starting point for storytelling, it can then move from clash or collaboration to the ambiguous, disconnected, non-climatic, messy, parallel, awkward, and less noticed.

Such an approach to encounters prevents assuming that a place's various actors, with their cosmoeses or world-makings, will actively engage with each other, especially in conscious political discourse. The notion of encounter also allows us to refrain from assuming that interactions between disparate world-making projects must always produce conflict, contestation or oppression. We can, thus, remain open to

noticing how encounters may result in alliance, symbiosis, collaboration, and negotiation—or in lasting disconnect, disjuncture, and awkward co-existence, for instance. Relations may be not made at all; interaction may remain minimal. The ‘contact zone’ may remain quiet; histories run parallel without intertwining. We, then, remain open to fundamental questions about, for example, how disparate world-makings fit alongside each other, scrape at each other’s edges without going to war, and build worlds on the same landscapes in a long-standing disconnect.

This approach resonates with how Haraway (2007) and Tsing (2005) emphasise that encounters are not predestined to lead to conflict, to good or bad, but only to involve ‘grappling’. Discussing the encounters and companionship between humans and other animal species, Haraway (2007: 15) writes:

A great deal is at stake in such meetings, and outcomes are not guaranteed. There is no assured happy or unhappy ending—socially, ecologically, or scientifically. There is only the chance for getting on together with some grace.

Thus, encounters sometimes lead to clash and oppression, sometimes to cooperation, sometimes to productive ‘friction’ (Tsing 2005), and, as I have found in my own field research, sometimes to awkward gaps and silent co-presence. Faier and Rofel (2014: 364) note that encounters ‘prompt unexpected responses and improvised actions, as well as long-term negotiations with unforeseen outcomes, including both violence and love’. An ethnography of encounters could attend not only to interaction, but also to disconnect and ignoring; not only love or hate, but also apathy and not caring; not only knowledge, but also ignorance.

In my research—focusing on encounters between people from diverse ethnic groups and from diverse foreign countries in the Asian highlands of Burma (Myanmar)—I have seen people from disparate social worlds ignore each other, even when living side-by-side on the same street or in the same village. They do physically or socially ‘meet’ each other—by living in the same place—yet no major transformation happens, ideas are not exchanged, concepts are not grappled with. Indeed, sometimes people meet new ideas and conclude, ‘There is nothing that I can do with that.’ One could argue that this is not a real ‘encounter’, but merely brushing up against each other; it is merely a possibility of an encounter. In my view, such continuous disconnect is a possible pathway of encounters.

Finally, encounters seem open-ended not only in terms of their pathways but also of time: When does an encounter begin and end? When does it stop being an encounter? This all remains undefined and rather loose. Encounters could be brief or constant, forced or voluntary, peaceful or violent, planned or unnoticed, mind-changing or forgettable.

Having defined encounters as open-ended, let us now consider encounters as *many-sided*. Ethnographers, historians, and other researchers usually frame encounters as happening between just two broad groups of people, but encounters tend to involve more participants, sides, and levels. In my own field research—amidst an ethnopolitical war and vast natural-resource grabbing—interethnic encounters have continuously appeared many-sided, for example, in the sense of involving several ethnic groups or nationalist movements, and—if we move beyond humans alone—also wild animals, forests, rivers, landscapes, and minerals and so on.

Because many-sided encounters evoke boundless comparisons, they help reassert that *everyone* is particular—and that no one is the default. For example, both in everyday speaking and in academic writing, certain actors tend to be represented as if they are ‘non-ethnic’ or beyond cultural identity politics, such as a country’s ethnic majority, a transnational company or urban professionals. All the larger established traditions of social-cultural anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography in the world have tended to refer to their own-language intellectual circles and countries or regions as the default ‘we’—in the West, including in the English-speaking countries (Chua and Mathur 2018), as well as in China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and many other contexts. Thinking of encounters as happening among many sides can help us move beyond two-sided narratives of ‘us’ meeting ‘them’. Indeed, showing the many-sidedness of encounters helps measure the role of the ethnographer’s home society or world region more accurately, perhaps as less central or less influential in the studied encounters.

In terms of species, the term ‘encounter’—as in a cultural, ontological, material, and inter-species encounter—underscores the roles of wildlife, nonhuman nature, physical space, and things. This framing of encounters allows for wilder and more-than-human ethnography. Yet, it comes with a methodological challenge, as Wilson (2017: 454) puts it, of ‘how we might better grasp encounters that might be “elusive” to the social researcher’—beyond researching ‘warm-blooded animals in “airy spaces” where animals are easily encountered’. This leads Wilson (2017: 459) to more broadly discuss ethnographies that move beyond face-to-face physical contacts and toward ‘non-proximal encounters’.

Attempting an ethnography of such many-sided, sometimes indirect, and

more-than-human encounters brings along analytical and ethical dilemmas regarding how to represent complex conflicts, many damning accusations, and ecological destruction. My response has been to try not to merely present ‘competing discourses’ or ‘incommensurable worlds’, but to put contradictory voices into dialogue, and both to contextualise and to evaluate their claims. In the case of nature and nonhumans, no ‘voices’ or nonhuman interviewees can be quoted. Thus, for both analytical and ethical reasons, ethnographic writing would need to assess more-than-human realities, such as a human activity’s environmental impacts or the decline of local wildlife. To better express nature’s value and ‘voices’, ethnographies of encounters might draw upon diverse natural sciences, descriptive natural history, the environmental humanities, ethnobiology, multispecies ethnography, and/or interdisciplinary nature conservation science (Kiik 2018).

Focusing on many-sided encounters has both pluses and minuses. One minus is that, when telling stories of encounters—especially of many-sided, indirect or ambiguous encounters—the exploration of any particular side might lose some depth and immersion. As a plus, the ethnography may gain in dynamism, diversity of voices, and relationality. Another benefit is that encounters tend to reveal unexpected contrasts, comparisons, and parallels, which then reflect back upon and help better understand the involved people. Yet, each story, perspective, and claim that someone provides about someone else raises challenges when trying to represent disparate actors and their contradictory perspectives truthfully, contextually, and fairly.

Foregrounding many-sided and more-than-human encounters leads to the challenge of expanding ethnographic attention—for diverse humans and others. Attention—both

in fieldwork and in writing—needs to move beyond a single studied group of people, toward disparate and perhaps conflicting sides of encounters. Such a task can find guidance and example from certain persons who themselves are connecting the different sides in the encounters studied. Namely, at the heart of intergroup encounters tend to lie key mediating persons who connect otherwise mutually distrustful or warring people or nonhuman worlds. For example, in my research, I found that just a few persons were key to creating encounters between ethnic Bamar (Burmese) and ethnic Kachin people who—amid and despite decades of war—fought together against a widely opposed mega-project (Kiiik 2020).

Ethnographies of encounters foreground relationality. Everything becomes ‘inter-’. Worlds are never made alone; opposition and clashes, too, are relational; nonhumans participate; landscapes connect and separate. Different groups of people may envision creating secure, autonomous worlds, yet their world-makings depend on and are impacted by what and whom they meet.

Starting stories from the very basic notion of ‘encounter’ can help ethnographers postpone judgments beyond a few of social-cultural anthropology’s deepest original assumptions. Namely, groups of people live their worlds differently. When they meet each other, they always cross mutual difference. Such meetings unfold in countless ways.

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