

# Messy Ethnographies in Action

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Foreword by

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Series in Anthropology



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# Foreword: The Politics of Ethnography

John Law

No one methodological size fits all. The present volume argues this. Better, it demonstrates it by offering an engaging and challenging series of methodological and topical reflections in, on and through ethnography. These move us from Mexican martial arts, via the multiplicity of parks and park-practices in the north of England to the messy and power-saturated jungles of hotel and nursing work, foodscapes, and community punishment. It draws us into issues of ethics in the form of university policies and the study of criminal activities, into the struggles and rewards of collaborative ethnography, and to action research with redundant workers, and digital democracy networks. And a whole lot more besides. As we read the chapters that make up this book, we learn again, that ethnography is messy. To be sure, it is not the only messy form of research – all social science methods, indeed all methods, have this in common. But ethnography is nevertheless a felicitous location to think about methodological non-coherence and excess. This is because, as a crowd, ethnographers are probably a little less coy about the uncertainties of their methods than those who prefer pre-coded ways of studying the social world. All of which is fine, though it brings its own risks and in particular the tendency to cast ethnography as an unruly outlier to the real and serious world of precision social science (as if such a beast ever existed).

If the chapters in the book wrestle with a whole series of critical issues, then some of these turn up again and again. So, for instance, in the Introduction Alex Plows touches on Howard Becker's long-standing (1970) but utterly pertinent question, 'whose side are we on?', an issue that runs as a *leitmotif* through most of the chapters. The recognition of methodological performativity, that research *does* things, means that those who practice social science have learned – or should have learned – that they can never safely say that they are 'simply describing,' even if that is what they are (also) doing. Of course, as social researchers we shouldn't allow ourselves to get too big-headed. Most of the time the differences we make are not large. (Would that this were also true for neoclassical economics.) But even so, the performativity of our own small learning practices is real, both directly and indirectly. Directly, many of the book's chapters seek to make particular differences. At the same time, we are also irreducibly in the business of indirect performativity. Here's the problem. Whenever we practise research, we also enact an

endless series of what we might think of *collateral realities* (Law, 2011) – that is, realities and normativities which we barely think of or know about. This is no reason for self-castigation: it could not be otherwise: this is what performativity implies. And, in any case, in practice, the realities that come with our research activities tend to become clear only in the contingent interferences of debate. Examples. Are nation states done in the practices of European survey research? Or ethnicities? The answer is: yes, they are; and in very particular ways (Law, 2011). Is the power of biomedicine re-enacted in the practices of care for dementia? Yes, it is (Moser, 2008). But such implicit realities and normativities only become clear if we can find ways of looking at methods (surveys, ethnographies, this applies to any method), to pick apart some of the work that they are doing along the way, as it were incidentally. This tells us that the way Plows revisits Becker is all the more to the point. Even if our manifest politics are relatively clear, the implications of what we are doing as we conduct and report on our research are likely to be messy and obscure. This tells us that any answer to the question ‘whose side are we on,’ is likely to be a muddle. Or better, non-coherent. Which, to be sure, is no reason for quietism, but does suggest the wisdom of a degree of caution – or perhaps better modesty. For, to put it simply, we cannot know everything that we are enacting as we do our research. The best we can hope for is to make a difference in particular ways whilst simultaneously keeping an open mind about all other reality-effects of our research.

So how might we think about political and ethical performativity? Again, in their empirical, theoretical and political complexity, the chapters that make up this book remind us that there are no straightforward answers. Even so, I have come to think that it might be useful to think about the politics of the practices that we study – and our own too – in three distinct albeit overlapping registers. The first is familiar. This is *the politics of who*. Here we are in Becker territory, and the focus takes us to capital P Politics, which is well-represented in this book. So, a politics of who is one that is likely to attend to inequalities, systematic injustices, mal-distributions, repressions and forms of violence. It looks, for instance, at colonial and post-colonial relations, to political economy and class, and/or to gender and ethnic relations, or the asymmetrical enactments of sexuality or dis/ability. It hardly needs to be said that such attention to the politics of who remains crucial.

At the same time, the focus on performativity suggests the importance of a well-rehearsed second register, which Annemarie Mol (1999) has called *the politics of what*. Again, well-represented in this book, the politics of what explores what there is in the world, what *kinds* of things are being done. The natural environment. Human-animal relations (Singleton, 2010). Bodies. Sexed bodies. Postcolonial relations (Green, 2013). Or, and more reflexively,

the sometimes jarring embodiments of ethnographer (a number of the chapters in this book attend the creative and sometimes disturbing effect (s) of research). Importantly, it also attends to what there could be – what might be enacted into reality. To say it quickly, in this way of thinking ‘the natural’ is not necessarily natural. So, for instance, and to take just one example, the distinction between (somewhat fixed) sex and (socially constructed) gender is not necessarily productive (Mol, 1991). The politics of what therefore folds back into the politics of who and makes it possible to consider the balance between different (more or less real-ised) reals, asking which might be better where, when, why and for whom or what. These, then, are questions that belong to the domain of ontological politics (Mol) or cosmopolitics (Stengers, 2005), and offer ways of doing social science in which it is possible to insist that even though realities cannot be trivially wished into being (there is no succour here for ‘alternative facts’), nonetheless reality is not destiny.

But I also want to suggest that it might be useful to attend to a third register. Perhaps we might think of this as the *politics of how* (Dányi 2016; Joks & Law, 2017). This would focus on performativity itself, on how the practices of enacting go about their work. It would consider how social and natural realities get done in the practices that perform them, and how they intersect with the alternative social and natural realities being enacted in alternative practices. Again, with their attention to the conduct of ethnographic research, a number of contributors have brought this concern straight back into the research process. This third register of political performativity suggests its own kinds of questions. For instance, it might ask whether the practices that we are looking at (or indeed caught up in) are tolerant, or whether they are (inappropriately?) imperialist or hegemonic in their ambitions (Law *et al.* 2014). It might ask whether they work on the assumption that there is only one reality or a single natural world (which would be widespread in many ‘Western’ practices (Blaser & de la Cadena, 2017)), or whether they find space for multiplicity. Or, perhaps, creativity, which is the focus of attention for some of the chapters in this book. In this politics of how I do not want to argue that tolerance is necessarily a good. Again, no general rules apply. Nevertheless, there is interesting participant ethnographic work on just this topic. So, for instance, it is sometimes possible to ‘soften’ powerful practices (for instance those of environmental biology) if they are put into appropriate contact with the practices and expertises of lay practitioners (Waterton & Tsouvalis, 2015), softenings that then have the potential to fold back into the politics of what and the politics of who. The devil, as always, lies in the specificities of practice.

I have said this already, but it runs like a golden thread through the weave of chapters that make up this book: a virtue of ethnography is that it rarely pretends to be clean. Instead, it mercilessly obliges those who practise and read

it to attend, up front, to messy and excessive realities, politics and ethics, including those of its own research. It opens up the webby and uncertain character of whos and whats and hows. Those who practise ethnography know this well because they live daily with this confusion. And this book works with the living challenges of messy ethnography. It works to provoke the reader. For, let's say this too, ethnography is difficult, but it is enriching. It is hard work, but it is also a thrilling privilege to be allowed to enter other worlds. Ethnography is often – indeed usually – transforming for the ethnographer. Well-written, it changes its readers too.

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# Introduction: Coming Clean About Messy Ethnography

Alexandra Plows

## Engaging with ethnographic “mess”

Research, perhaps particularly ethnographic research, is a messy process. Negotiating access, developing relationships with research participants, navigating the research dynamic, and what ‘counts’ as the research site, is inevitably a messy business. Our research fieldwork sites have very blurred boundaries, not least those of space and time. For example, how can we effectively conduct ethnographies of ‘the workplace’ in the age of the gig economy- where and when is ‘the workplace’ for a zero-hours contract worker? When are we “out” of the research site, especially in an era of online communication and interaction? And when social reality is *itself* understood as fluid, dynamic and complex- “messy”- (Law, 2004) how can we hope to represent it coherently?

The end results of research- our findings and recommendations, and our accounts of our methodological practice-, can often be quite sanitized accounts, with little acknowledgement of the messy social dynamics experienced and negotiated and, indeed, continuously co-constructed between the researcher, his/her participants and through the research process (Law, 2004). Retrospectively constructed accounts of our fieldwork, dictated by academic conventions (and the need to justify grant funding) often have a suspiciously smooth, linear narrative; yet our ethnographic encounters as they develop in the field<sup>1</sup> can be serendipitous, often unexpected, generally demand some quite difficult conversations and negotiations (including negotiating ethical conundrums), often have unintended consequences and are often hard to make sense of. There appears to be, often, a mismatch between what we *encounter* and our subsequent *accounts* of it. Something important gets ‘lost in translation.’ We need to engage more honestly with the process of research and with the challenges of what gets left out, what gets included, in our accounts of what we researched, how and why we researched it, what we’ve found out, and the impact our research has had.

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<sup>1</sup>It is, of course, difficult to pin down when and where our ethnography ‘starts’...

As ethnographers, then, we encounter, engage with and indeed co-create, complex dynamics and complex situations which shift and blur. Ethnography as methodological practice is perhaps uniquely placed for adapting to and accounting for the mess of 'real life':

[O]ne of the most basic values of ethnography ... is that it can deal with complex, fluid contexts and their emergent and unanticipated issues  
(Lewis & Russell, 2011: 409).

As John Law puts it:

Ethnography lets us see the relative messiness of practice. It looks behind the official accounts of method (which are often clean and reassuring) to try to understand the often ragged ways in which knowledge is produced in research

(Law, 2004: 18-9).

Coming out of the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), a discipline which has developed our understanding of the construction of scientific knowledge (Latour & Woolgar, 1986), John Law's seminal book 'After Method' (2004) has been an invaluable handbook for ethnographers and others struggling to come to terms with the mess they find themselves in when they engage in the field.<sup>2</sup> Law asks us to think more robustly about what it is that we are trying to see, to 'know', to do; and to acknowledge complexity (and complicity), to provide *context*; or rather, to give some sense of a multiplicity of contexts, the "slipperiness" of "things", the multiplicity of relationships between things, contexts and people. One of Law's core points (inspired by, amongst others, Latour and Woolgar's work) is that our ontological and epistemological frameworks (our "Euro-American metaphysical certainties" (Law, 2004: 143)) assume that there is an external 'reality out there' which exists and simply waits to be discovered, to be known. Refuting this, he argues that reality is multiple; that it avoids ultimate know-ability; that it shifts and comes into focus, into *being*, in a multiplicity of ways depending on the practises and methods used to explore it. To give one grounded example from many which Law provides to situate what he means; in one chapter, Law gives an account of how he and a colleague, Vicky Singleton, attempted a study of the treatment of what initially seemed to be a specific "thing," namely "alcoholic liver disease." Over time, they came to realise that:

our own object of study and its contexts were continually moving about... we were dealing with an object that wasn't fixed, an object that slipped and moved between different practices in different sites

(Law, 2004: 78-9).

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<sup>2</sup>And indeed, for anyone with interests in knowledge construction and methods.

They found that “alcoholic liver disease” and hence the “treatment of alcoholic liver disease” meant, and thus *became*, different things to different people; in particular to different experts in different contexts. Grappling honestly with the “slipperiness”, the messiness, of what “the thing is” provided Law and his colleague with insights which could potentially help with a more holistic understanding and hence more effective treatment of “alcoholic liver disease”:

The issue, then, is about the relations between different objects and their different contexts. A graphic way of making the point would be to say that the consultants and others caught up in the narrowly medical assemblage ‘ought’ to be much more interested in the broader medical-psychiatric-social reality of alcoholism- and the assemblage that crafts this- than they actually are

(Law, 2004: 81).

Jennings (this volume) echoes the wider point about ‘slippery’ objects and ‘reality out there’ which Law is making, in his discussion of the Mexican martial art Xilam:

To think of a singular object fixed in time would to be go against the fundamental ontological assumptions of constant change, evolution and rebirth that are both part of the Aztec philosophy that guides Xilam as a project and also the very tentative nature of martial arts themselves...

(Jennings, this volume).

Bearing all this ‘messiness’ in mind, Law argues that the challenge for the researcher is, therefore:

to open space for the indefinite...to imagine what research methods might be if they were adapted to a world that included and knew itself as tide, flux and general unpredictability...

(Law, 2004: 6-7).

Law advocates the production of a specific research practice- ‘method assemblage’- as a means of grappling with the ‘messiness,’ the ‘slipperiness,’ of multiple realities. Over the course of the book he provides a layered, contextualised series of definitions of method assemblage; explored, teased out and refracted back through accounts of his own fieldwork and that of colleagues. Method assemblage as research practice involves:

...enactments of relations that make some things (representations, objects, apprehensions) present 'in-here', whilst making others absent 'out-there'. The 'out-there' comes in two forms: as manifest absence (for instance, as what is represented); or, and more problematically, as a hinterland of indefinite, necessary, but hidden Otherness...Method assemblage works in and 'knows' multiplicity, indefiniteness and flux...it is a combination of reality detector and reality amplifier...method assemblage may be seen as the crafting of a hinterland of ramifying relations...

(Law, 2004: 14-42).

This is not at all easy to grasp head-on, although it is perhaps more easily intuited, especially through analogy, metaphor, and (Law's favoured approach to grasping indefiniteness), allegory.<sup>3</sup> Like the multiple, shifting realities 'out there', the hidden 'Otherness' just beyond our reach, for me the whole *idea* of what method assemblage "is" slips in and out of focus, of knowability; a ridge half-seen through a fog.<sup>4</sup> It is hardly surprising that negotiating this 'hinterland' is hard work. I find myself clinging on to some key navigational pointers; specifically, that method assemblage as Law defines it explicitly draws attention to the part we as researchers play in the social construction of reality and of knowledge. Method assemblage is about owning, and foregrounding, the 'raggedness' of (our own) knowledge production; we are being encouraged to 'show our workings- out'.<sup>5</sup> Law argues that:

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<sup>3</sup>It is also perhaps best understood as Law himself explains it; in and through grounded, contextualised accounts from the field.

<sup>4</sup>The foggy ridge analogy reminds me of translating parts of Beowulf as an English Literature student (or, more likely, this is where I have dredged the analogy from); "then from under the mist-hills Grendel came walking...." In the Anglo- Saxon original, the compound noun 'mistlethothum' could mean 'misty hills' or 'hills made from mist' or something in the space between. Compound nouns (word assemblages?) are a feature of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic poetry of the period. There's an otherworldly vibe inherent in 'mistlethothum'; something gets 'lost in translation' which is only grasped at by my creation of a new composite noun; 'mist-hills'. As C.L. Wren puts it in his introductory essay to the original text, "Doubtless the poet and his audience got connotations, associations, and subtle suggestions or memories from such compounds which we cannot recapture" (Wren, 1958: 81). These composite nouns and their subtle associations, especially relating to place, are also integral aspects of Celtic languages such as Welsh and Gaelic.

<sup>5</sup>I was never very good at maths at school and as a result was always grateful for the fact that even if you got the answer wrong, you could gain some marks just by 'showing your workings out'; showing the processes you had used to arrive at your answer.

social...science investigations interfere with the world...things change as a result. The issue, then, is not to seek disengagement but rather with how to engage

(Law, 2004: 14).

Feminist writers have argued that the important thing is to be reflexive about this process. Reflexivity means explicitly situating oneself in the research process (Roseneil, 1993), enabling the production of “accountable knowledge” (Stanley, 1991: 209). Identifying ‘where we are coming from’ as researchers is not self-indulgent introspection. It is intrinsic to developing our understanding of the ways in which meanings are made, how things become known, and accounting for our role as researchers in this process; identifying how the methods we use produce the realities we see and narrate.

Law is asking us to think about – and acknowledge – *how* we engage; this implies that we also need to think through the “why” of our engagement; “to think about which realities it might be best to bring into being” (2004: 39); “method assemblage...does politics, and it is not innocent” (2004: 149). In this, there are echoes of Becker’s (1974) classic argument against academic ‘value neutrality’; Becker argues that the issue is not whether we should take sides, but rather “whose side are we on” (Becker, 1974: 107). This is not straightforward. Whilst there is certainly no such thing as an academically value-neutral position, what it actually *means* to engage or be engaged, politically, as researchers is not such a simple matter. Is it actually about ‘taking a side’? Reality is messy and nuanced; for example, bioethical issues such as prenatal genetic testing are highly complex and layered, and not necessarily best served by being framed in terms of ‘for and against.’ At the same time, we might acknowledge that highly polarised positions do exist and are often brought into conflict with each other, such as pro-life “versus” pro-choice (Plows, 2010). Sometimes clear lines of engagement are relatively straightforward (opposition to Nazism being perhaps an obvious example) but, when ‘reality’ is understood as being multiple, fluid, ephemeral, and when issues are multi-layered and multi-faceted – when there are no easy or ‘right’ answers<sup>6</sup> - then the whole *concept* of ‘whose side we are on’ becomes harder to understand at all. We are navigating some choppy waters here.

This is not to duck the important issue of owning ‘where we (as researchers) are coming from’ and the need explicitly to identify the implications of how and why we engage in the field, to what ends and with what impact. What Law is saying is that the reflexive practice and production of method assem-

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<sup>6</sup>And more importantly, what is ‘the question’ and who is asking it? I am indebted to Helen Wallace for this insight, and her 1999 paper “*If cloning is the answer, what was the question?*”

blage - “accountable knowledge” (Stanley, 1991) *is in and of itself a politically engaged practice*; an “ontological politics” (Mol, 1999 cited in Law, 2004: 67). Using a concept from social movement theory, Law’s concept of ‘method assemblage’ can also perhaps be understood as a consciously enacted process of “tilting the frame” (Steinberg, 1998); identifying that there are different ways of looking at the same issue, different ways of ‘knowing reality’, which enrol different frames of reference, and different knowledge bases. When we tilt the frame as ethnographers, we help to develop, to co-construct, the ‘discursive field’ through the foregrounding, the enactment, the embodiment, of alternative ‘discursive repertoires’ (Steinberg, 1998) and “ways of doing things” (Doherty et al., 2003).<sup>7</sup> We tilt the frame to include different positions, perspectives, practices; to identify the complexity of different situations, artefacts and so-called ‘single issues.’ We might struggle to identify and represent even a fraction of these perspectives, and to try to cover everything would be impossible and, even if it wasn’t, it would render our accounts incoherent. So, we must acknowledge the silences and spaces; that as we produce our accounts we are (to re-cite the earlier Law quote) “making some things present ‘in here’ whilst making others absent ‘out there’”; picking out, amplifying, certain patterns in the flux, the noise, the “dazzle” (Law, 2004: 110). Again, reflexivity as a means of producing accountable knowledge, flagging up the limits of any methodological approach, serves as a crucial ‘reality check’ for our pattern making here.

Method assemblage understood as politically engaged research – tilting the frame – might also entail identifying how particular hegemonic or otherwise powerful positions, discourses, ways of doing things, dominate (often in implicit, taken for granted ways) and how these discourses and actions are created and maintained. How is an issue being ‘framed’ and by whom? In what circumstances<sup>8</sup> and with what impacts?<sup>9</sup> What and who is being ‘framed out,’ and with what consequences (Plows, 2010)?<sup>10</sup> We may, then, find ourselves quite firmly ‘on a side’ after all, having pulled out some narrative threads from the tangled bundle and woven them into a specific storyline; and particularly so when we reflexively understand *ourselves* as part of the collective co-

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<sup>7</sup> Doherty et al. discuss how direct action is the “*preferred way of doing things*” for environmental activists.

<sup>8</sup> For example, capitalism framed as a ‘law of nature’ (McMurtry, 1999)

<sup>9</sup> For example, the environmental and social justice impacts of e-waste as a result of ‘planned obsolescence’.

<sup>10</sup> STS has made significant, empirically-informed contributions to these debates, highlighting the importance (and often the under-valuing) of ‘lay expertise’, such as the ‘local knowledge’ (Wynne, 1996) held by farmers and the ‘embodied expertise’ (Kerr et al., 1998) of patients.

production of 'different ways of seeing and doing things.' It is important that the concept of 'tilting the frame' comes out of a theoretical appreciation of the role of *collective action* in meaning-making.<sup>11</sup> As researchers we are an integral part of this process of tilting the frame. Arguably, when this is done reflexively, it can be understood as a form of 'action research' (Maxey, 1999).

We need to be bolder and more creative with the stories we tell about what we experience in the field and through the research process, including the writing up process.<sup>12</sup> Law makes a case for *creative* academic writing. I agree; academic/ ethnographic writing should be an enjoyable read because of, not in spite of, the need to grapple more honestly with messy reality, and to reflexively and creatively explore different ways of representing that reality. It is quite telling that two of my favourite authors who write about people, places, ideas, and artefacts are the author and travel writer Geoff Dyer, and the late David Foster Wallace, fiction writer and 'gonzo journalist.' Both produce effortlessly elegant and beautifully crafted essays, bundles of 'faction,' blurring the boundaries between fact, fiction, reportage, socio-cultural analysis, autobiographical meanderings, theoretical /philosophical meditation, aesthetic appreciation, and often a wittily, bitchily clever, self-deprecating moan about the people and places they encounter. They are up to their necks in their messy material and it is through these highly personal, often painfully self-aware accounts of their own experiences and responses, that we glean an understanding of 'something beyond'; snapshots of the "bundled hinterland" (Law, 2004: 45) through a blurry lens which suddenly comes sharply into focus. This is 'method assemblage' in action; insightful, intelligent, grasping something of the slipperiness of multi-faceted experience, and often shriek-

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<sup>11</sup> Along similar lines, Melucci (1996) argues that social movements 'challenge codes'.

<sup>12</sup> 31.1. 2018. Footnote as conscious homage to David Foster Wallace. I am currently writing this using my (typically) recently broken-down laptop, with the help of an external keypad plugged in so that I can actually type. I am hunched over with the external keyboard is balanced on my knees, and my laptop perched on a couple of old text books so I can see the screen better. My back hurts. My USB drive ports are now being used for the keyboard and a mouse, meaning that I can't actually plug in my USB datastick and am precariously saving text on my dodgy laptop's C drive. I am using the nice smooth cover of Law's 'Methods for Mess' book as a makeshift mousemat. My Microsoft Word document (possibly or possibly not as a result of this bodging-together of technological artefacts), is having a consistent hissy fit; 'not responding' and buffering when I try to save it. I am grimly ploughing on in case this is as good as it gets for me today, ideas-wise and tech-wise. This all feels like an apposite metaphor for writing about bundled, messy assemblage; in this case in, through and despite a hybrid human/non-human interface (Latour, 1993; Callon, 2004). This may even be helping me conceptually navigate some tricky epistemological waters, through some sort of embodied osmosis process (let's hope so).

ingly funny. Geoff Dyer's account of his failed attempts, with his wife, to see the Northern Lights in northern Norway captures this essence perfectly:

...in a weird Nordic way, we had become the *source* of disappointment to our hosts. The implication was clear; not seeing the Northern Lights was a result not of their non-appearance but a failure on our part, a failure of perception and attitude

(Dyer, 2016: 115 emphasis in the original).

### **Messy ethnographies in action: tales from the field**

So, then, how are we to actually operationalise and narrate our messy ethnographies?<sup>13</sup> This question sets up the premise for this book, which is all about telling stories; providing short, colourful “tales from the field” (Van Maanen, 2011). In 2017 a session at the International Ethnography Conference *Politics and Ethnography in an Age of Uncertainty*<sup>14</sup> brought together over twenty researchers in a session organised around the theme of conducting ‘messy’ ethnography; a session directly inspired by Law’s 2004 ‘After Method’ book. This edited collection is the result of the papers and group discussions from this session. Perhaps the most important thing all the contributors to this volume have in common is the desire not to “write out” the messy dynamics of the research process, but rather to reflexively identify and explore them and their implications. Drawing on Law, they come clean about their messy ethnography, reflecting on the process of undertaking research, and their role in the research process as they negotiate their own position in the field. Common themes and questions they raise include; what is ethnography ‘for’? What impact should, or do, we have in the field and after we leave the research site? What about unintended consequences? When (if ever) are we off duty? What does informed consent mean in a constantly shifting, dynamic ethnographic context?

By providing a wide range of situated explorations of messy ethnographies, this book provides a unique, hands-on guide to the challenges of negotiating ethnography in practice and an empirically- informed contribution to a grounded understanding of the social construction of knowledge and the role that ethnography can and does play in this process. Drawing on original and interdisciplinary ethnographic fieldwork in a wide range of international settings, including pubs in North East England, Finnish hotels, Australian legal centres and the Ecuadorian rainforest, it provides a range of colourful

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<sup>13</sup>John Law is candid on this subject. “What does this mean in practice? The answer is that I do not know” (2004: 156)

<sup>14</sup><http://www.conferece.manchester.ac.uk/events/ethnography/> [Accessed 5.3.18]

snapshots from the field. These snapshots show how different researchers from multiple research environments and disciplines are negotiating the practicalities, and epistemological and ethical implications, of messy ethnographic practice as a means of researching and making sense of messy social realities.

It has been difficult to neatly carve up subsections for the book, as all chapters blur across multiple thematic categories. But for the sake of some narrative coherence, choices have been made to organise the material. Thus, the book is divided into four main sections: *Reflecting on Messy Research Practice*; *Messy Ethics*; *Messy Participation*; and *Messy Research Sites and Spaces*. Thus, while all the book's contributors reflect on the challenges and opportunities of conducting messy ethnographic research, the contributors in Section 1 focus specifically on the process of meaning making and knowledge construction, exploring the implications of how and why the ethnographer adapts to and makes sense of fluid conditions and connections; and with what consequences. In her ethnographic study of older environmental activists in South East England, Mary Gearey shows how her own presence affected the power dynamics within the ethnographic site in unforeseen and unpredictable ways; "I had opened a Pandora's box of anxiety and worry..." Gearey makes the case that "the mud dragged into the carpet" by the researcher is ultimately "...entirely creative for both researcher and respondent." Sue Lewis, Martyn Hudson, and Joe Painter discuss how they 'serendipitously' combined separate ethnographies of the same research site; *Hidden Civil War*, a month-long arts led community activism initiative in North East England created by the NewBridge Arts Project. They show how their ethnographic 'assemblage' enables a "'nuanced understanding' of [the] motivations [of NewBridge] ...to engage with the public in imagining alternatives to the precarious, exclusionary realities that many are currently living." George Jennings reflects on the "creative manoeuvring" of his shifting epistemological and methodological approach to the study of Xilam, a Mexican martial art, as the practice and its participants themselves also changed over time. In her account of ethnographic research in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Nina Moeller makes a case for the value of "spontaneous sense-making" and the "haphazard knowledge" co-created in the field, arguing that "[u]sually disregarded, this kind of knowledge ought instead to be emphasised, valued and explored as integral to social research".

Section 2 focuses on contributors who explicitly focus on messy ethical conundrums encountered and indeed created through their research practice, reflecting on how they negotiated them and the consequences of doing so. Several contributors explicitly 'talk to' the challenges of conducting research within [university, academic] ethical codes of practice. Lisa Potter explores

the ethical and practical challenges of undertaking ethnography of ‘criminal activity’ in North East England, making the case that such “insider” ethnographies “provide vital insight into those engaged in criminal activity,” despite the difficulties of ethical compliance. Drawing on his ethnography of volunteering at a community legal centre in Sydney, Australia, Rafi Alam argues that university ethical assessments reflect a neoliberal approach to risk management which closes down valuable research approaches and rigidly regulates the behaviour of researchers. This ‘risk management’ “lead[s] to outcomes that necessarily shape our research and subjects in neoliberal logics.” Informed by feminist reflexive approaches, Lauren Crabb takes a ‘confessional’ approach to her “international and cross-cultural fieldwork” in West Brazil. She honestly discusses how she encountered and negotiated a number of challenging ethical and indeed moral dilemmas, relating to her interaction with specific people, situations, and cultural dynamics.

Ethnographers are inevitably messily engaged with their research site(s) as participants and all of the book’s contributors provide reflexive accounts of this process. Section 3 brings the issue of researcher participation very much to the fore, with contributions from ethnographers whose participation is self-identified as particularly messy due to their own biographical connections with their research sites and subjects. Gabriel Popham provides an account of his own participation in a new digital democracy network catalysed in the UK as a response to Brexit, drawing on his own experience to reflect on the process of a messily emergent social movement. Nicola Harding gives an autobiographical account of participant action research with women undergoing community punishment in North West England. She explores the pros and cons of explicitly drawing on her own biography and experiences as an ex-offender as an intrinsic part of her methodological approach; facilitating the co-production of “emotionally sensed knowledge.” Alex Plows provides an autobiographical narrative of her “messily embedded” action research supporting redundant workers in the nuclear industry in Anglesey, North Wales, exploring the implications of her status as both a self-employed worker and a precarious academic; a ‘messy method assemblage.’ Continuing this theme of ‘research-as work and work-as-research’, Ville Savolainen delivers an auto-ethnographical account of his own journey as an unemployed academic working as a cleaner in different contexts; producing a “materially sensitive and processual approach” to understanding the work of housekeepers through his own experience of working as a hotel housekeeper in a 4-star hotel in Helsinki, Finland. Explicitly referencing, and embodying, Law’s suggestion that ethnographers ‘get their hands dirty’ (Law, 2004), Savolainen’s contribution explores the materiality of mess; it “deals with mess in a more concrete level. That is, it orients the ethnographic gaze towards the mess created by human life and how it is managed”.

Finally, Section 4 focuses on ethnographies in and of messy research sites and spaces. Of course, all research sites and spaces are messy and all of the book's contributors situate themselves in relation to a reflexive understanding of the negotiation of messy research sites; so again, there is something of an artificial 'carving up' of contributions here. Nevertheless, there are certain contributors who are focusing more directly on the fact that their research sites are not 'neat,' but consist of messy 'bundles' of relationships. A common factor is what I might call the '*Dr Who* dimension'; the sense of travel across space and time. Methods which aim specifically to capture a multiplicity of perspectives are another feature of several contributions. Trudy Rudge and her colleagues' ethnography of nurses' 'night work' show how this night work stretches across different sites and timeframes, mediated in and through computerised processes. Andréa Bruno de Sousa narrates her ethnographic journey, researching parental perspectives of managing a child's chronic kidney condition (CKD) in Portugal. She adapted her approach, identifying that "to move outside the hospital and conduct multi-sited ethnography was essential" in order to engage with and understand, parents' complex experiences.

Wayne Medford undertakes a specific methodological technique- "deep mapping" -of a public park (Saltwell Park) in Gateshead, North East England. Understanding the park "as a space within which multiple sub-spaces could be imagined as locations to produce health and well-being effects," he reflects on the experience of delivering this immersive, layered "suite of ethnographic methods to capture and represent multiple individual experiences" across multiple, overlapping timeframes. Paola Jirón and Walter Imilan discuss how they "operationalised collective and multidisciplinary data production"- "collective ethnographies"- in order to explore everyday living and mobility practices in Chilean cities. Finally, in their ethnography of urban food-sharing practices in Singapore, Monika Rut, and Anna Davies explore the messy interface of social media, social networks and hands-on production, understood as 'foodscapes.' Food-sharing is "a diverse range of practices and participants that ebb and flow over time and space connected through both physical spaces and virtual platforms."

These chapters 'talk to' each other in many ways; as Law identifies in the foreword of this volume, there are themes which run as a 'leitmotif' through the book; a set, an assemblage in fact, of practical/ methodological, ethical and political issues which are explored, reflected and refracted, through different ethnographic 'lenses' in specific contexts. In essence; the contributors 'bounce off' each other. There is a 'deliberative dynamic' at play here, born out of the creatively interactive experience of the 2017 messy ethnographies conference session which was the catalyst for this collection. It has been a

privilege to bring together this ‘messy assemblage of messy ethnographies.’ I hope that the reader will enjoy and be inspired by these accounts and look forward to further iterations of these ongoing conversations.

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# Author Biographies

## **Rafi Alam**

Rafi Alam is a PhD candidate from the University of Sydney in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy, where he also graduated with a Bachelor of International & Global Studies (Hons). His research interests include access to legal justice, organisational theory, social movements, and everyday life. Other research interests include unpacking the relationship between ethics and ethnographic methodologies, and the role of technologies in shaping the social consciousness of urban citizens.

## **Lauren Crabb**

Lauren Crabb is a senior lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour at Coventry University London. Lauren obtained her PhD in Management Studies from the University of Essex in 2016. Her research interests are primarily in environmental governance in Latin America. Her PhD research focused on the environmental and social impacts of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. Lauren is now part of a research group who are investigating the social and environmental impacts of small hydro-electric dams in the Pantanal region of Brazil.

## **Anna Davies**

Anna Davies is Professor of Geography, Environment, and Society at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, where she directs the Environmental Governance Research Group. A member of the Royal Irish Academy (RIA), Anna is also Chair of Future Earth Ireland. She has advised the Irish Government as an independent member of its National Economic and Social Council and National Climate Change Advisory Council. Anna is a Board Member of the European Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production and The Rediscovery Centre in Dublin and a founding member of Future Earth's Knowledge Action Network (KAN) on Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production, where she co-chairs the working group on social change beyond consumption. Her research interests combine environmental governance and sustainability and she currently holds a European Research Council grant entitled SHARECITY, which is examining the practice and sustainability potential of urban ICT-mediated food sharing initiatives.

**Andréa Bruno de Sousa**

Andréa Bruno de Sousa is a PhD candidate in the PhoenixJDP Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctoral Program Dynamics of Health and Welfare at Linköping University and at the Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública – Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Andréa holds an MSc in Psychology and Health and has a fellowship in Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disorder. She has a special interest in carrying out research contributing to an understanding of complicated health issues and lay people's perspectives. Her ongoing project is about families with children who suffer from chronic kidney disease. The fieldwork for her doctorate was carried out in Portugal employing ethnographic methodology. For six months Andréa did observations and interviews at the major paediatric hospital and also visited families in their home environments. Theoretically, her contribution involves knowledge about people's daily life and concrete experiences of managing a chronic disease and the challenges, intricacies, and possibilities involved.

**Martyn Hudson**

Martyn Hudson is a Critical Theorist and Ethnographer and currently teaches Art and Design History at Northumbria University. He works with arts organisations, galleries and museums to develop ideas of co-production and social impacts. He is the author of the books: 'The Slave Ship, Memory and the Origin of Modernity', 'Ghosts, Landscapes and Social Memory', 'Species and Machines: The Human Subjugation of Nature' and the forthcoming 'Critical Theory and the Classical World' (all Routledge) as well as 'Centauris, Rioting in Thessaly: Memory and the Classical World (Punctum)'. His research interests lie in developing ideas around art practice, social utopias, and avant-garde art but also in ethnographies of performance and artistic practice. This takes in the contemporary art practice of students to the work of twentieth-century modernists like Kurt Schwitters.

**Walter A. Imilan**

Walter works at the Faculty of Architecture, Urbanism, and Landscape at Universidad Central de Chile. An anthropologist, he holds a Doctoral degree in Urban and Regional Planning (Technische Universität Berlin). Currently, he conducts research with the project "Inhabiting the intermediate-city" (FONDECYT) in which he develops the focus of his work on relations between space and identity, stressing mobility as a central dimension. During the last two years, he has explored everyday dwelling practices as a strategy for understanding ways of life in the urban context using innovative ethnographic tools.

**George Jennings**

Dr. George Jennings is a Lecturer in Sport Sociology/Physical Culture at Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK. He has been researching martial arts cultures, pedagogies, and philosophies since 2004, when he first embarked upon an ethnography of a Wing Chun Kung Fu association as an exercise and sport sciences student. His doctoral work in sport and health sciences studied Chinese martial arts from a life history and narrative perspective. In 2011, he moved to Mexico and encountered a Mexican martial art, which he investigated using a hybrid, 'messy' ethnography design. Since 2014, he has been involved in a study on -thermoception and 'weather work' in martial arts and physical culture from a collaborative, automethodological approach alongside colleagues in the Health Advancement Research Team. A keen qualitative methodologist, George is the co-founder of the Documents Research Network (DRN) and was co-founder and co-editor of the *Journal of the International Coalition of YMCA Universities*.

**Paola Jirón**

Paola is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism (FAU), Universidad de Chile. She is currently the Director of the Housing Institute (INVI) and Coordinator for the PhD programme on Territory, Space and Society (D\_TES) at Universidad de Chile. She holds a PhD in Urban and Regional Planning from The School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her main areas of research involve urban studies from an everyday dwelling experience including mobility practices, gender issues and diversity, and through qualitative research methods. She is currently the Main Researcher for FONDECYT funded research on "Urban intervention and dwelling practices: unveiling urban situated knowledge" which seeks to understand how urban knowledge is produced in Chile.

**Sue Lewis**

Sue Lewis is a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Geography, Durham University, UK. A social anthropologist by background (PhD, St Andrews), she has over 20 years' experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a variety of settings and by experimenting with a diversity of approaches: examples include more "traditional" immersion-style anthropological studies in the Isle of Man, "embedded" and collaborative projects with community health interventions and on innovative forms in public health (including collaborative outputs), and ethnographic input into an interdisciplinary project – co-produced with patients – that sought solutions for the eating difficulties experienced by head and neck cancer survivors. She is currently working with Joe Painter and colleagues (Geography, Durham) on an

ESRC-funded project exploring the urban politics of social innovation in Newcastle upon Tyne, Berlin, and Athens – and, with *Culture Vannin*, on a longstanding interest in the production and performance of political satire in the Isle of Man.

### **Wayne Medford**

Wayne Medford is a postdoctoral researcher at Durham University with experience on a number of projects in North-East England and northern Scotland. Working in the public and the Voluntary and Community sectors, he has gained an extensive background in health education, knowledge transfer, community engagement and participatory mapping.

His PhD looked at the everyday therapeutic qualities found in Saltwell Park in Gateshead, Tyne & Wear. His doctoral research considered how individuals and groups interact with the Park, and how those interactions aid health and well-being. Empirical data was gathered through a unique mixed methodology that gathered perspectives and experiences from park users; he used (participation) observation, interview and textual analysis, using participatory mapping and photovoice. He has also worked on research in healthcare settings, and education within healthcare settings; most notably, co-production projects within NHS Scotland encompassed health-promoting changes to hospital environments. He is also a tutor at Durham University's International Study Centre.

### **Nina Isabella Moeller**

Nina studied philosophy, sociology, and anthropology at Lancaster and Edinburgh. She completed her doctoral thesis 'The Protection of Traditional Knowledge in the Ecuadorian Amazon: A Critical Ethnography of Capital Expansion' in 2010. Having worked in Latin America and Europe – amongst other things as a consultant to indigenous federations, NGOs and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization – Nina is now Marie Curie Research Fellow at the University of Manchester's School of Environment, Education and Development, as well as an Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University. Her contribution to this book is based on work undertaken during her Independent Social Research Foundation fellowship at the Oxford Department of International Development (2016-2017).

### **Joe Painter**

Joe Painter is Professor of Geography at Durham University, where he has taught urban and political geography since 1993. He holds a BA degree from the University of Cambridge and a PhD from the Open University. His re-

search interests include geographies of the state and citizenship, urban and regional politics and governance and the politics of social innovation. He is the co-author of *Practising Human Geography* (Sage, 2004), which offers a theoretically informed discussion of geographical methodologies, and of *Political Geography* (Sage, 2009) and *New Borders* (Pluto Press, 2018).

### **Alexandra Plows**

Alex is a Research Fellow at Bangor University. Her PhD and early research work focused on the UK environmental direct-action movement from an “insider” perspective, informed by feminist research practices. She then spent several years undertaking qualitative research, including ethnography, exploring emergent public engagement with human genetic technologies. Alex has also researched the dynamics of regional labour markets, through an ethnography of stakeholder organisations seeking to mitigate the impacts of de-industrialisation and redundancy in North Wales. Alex’s research approach can be summarised as reflexive and participatory ‘action research’ informed by environmental and social justice frameworks. Many of her current research projects are focused on interdisciplinary, participatory research and knowledge exchange. She works with a wide range of disciplines and ‘communities of place and interest.’

### **Gabriel Popham**

Gabriel Popham was awarded a Master’s degree in cultural anthropology from Utrecht University in 2017 with an ethnographic thesis on citizenship and political participation in London following the Brexit referendum. He previously studied social anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where he first began exploring ethnographic writing. His interest in online political organisations began to grow during a period spent working as a writer for the online media outlet The Canary and developed into a professional and academic interest following the Brexit referendum in 2016. Gabriel spent most of his formative years living in Italy, and his interest in politics remains underpinned by this European perspective. He is a member of Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) and currently lives in Amsterdam.

### **Lisa Potter**

Lisa Potter is a PhD researcher in the Social Sciences Department at Northumbria University. Her thesis is an ethnographic study with buyers and sellers of illegal DVDs and illegal android boxes in the North-East of England. Her project has two overlapping themes. Firstly, in providing an understanding of a broadly neglected area of research of how and why the pirated DVD market

has declined in recent years. Secondly, to provide a detailed analysis and understanding of why the pirated android box market has emerged and rapidly expanded in the UK.

### **Trudy Rudge**

Trudy Rudge is a Professor of Nursing associated with the Susan Wakil Nursing School at Sydney University. She has both anthropology and nursing degrees. She has worked clinically in general and psychiatric care services. Her research interests include nursing and body care; safety and pharmaceutical issues in mental health care; and workplace relations for nurses. She has published in 2016, *On the Politics of Ignorance in Nursing and Health Care: knowing ignorance*, Routledge, London (with Dr Amélie Perron, University of Ottawa); in 2012, *(Re)thinking Violence in Health Care Settings: A critical approach*, Ashgate Publishing, Farnham (with co-editors Dave Holmes & Amélie Perron, University of Ottawa). Professor Rudge is Advisory Editor for *Nursing Inquiry* (Wiley) and on the Editorial Board of *Organizational Ethnography* (Emerald).

### **Monika Rut**

Monika Rut is a PhD student at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. She is also part of European Research Council funded research project SHARECITY, which is examining the practice and sustainability potential of urban ICT-mediated food sharing initiatives. Her research is focused on urban food sharing practices in the context of smart city Singapore. Monika is also co-founder of Virtuale Switzerland, an interdisciplinary festival for digital arts in public space.

### **Luisa Toffoli**

Luisa Toffoli is a Registered Nurse and Senior Lecturer, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of South Australia, teaching in both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Her research interests include the use of theoretical approaches to nursing work, workforce, health system governance and aged care. Her research focuses on topics, such as 'missed care', also referred to as unfinished or rationalised care and teaching compassion to undergraduate nursing students. She has written extensively in the area of missed care, in journals such as *Nursing Inquiry*, *Health Sociology Review* and *Journal of Industrial Relations* and contributed to the textbook for nursing, health science, and allied health students, entitled *Understanding the Australian Healthcare System*. This text draws upon theoretical frameworks to introduce students to the issues and concepts to explain the Australian healthcare

system. She has diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary research collaborations in Australia, New Zealand, United States of America and Europe.

**Sandra West**

Sandra West is Associate Professor of Clinical Nursing at the Susan Wakil School of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Medicine and Health University of Sydney, Australia. She is a registered nurse with a clinical background in acute and critical care practice. Her research initially focussed on the physiological and psychological effects on women of common Australian nursing shift work schedules. These initial studies underpin a more recent re-thinking of the existing problematisations of shift work to move the focus from the “shift worker” (nurse) as subject to the worker’s experience of working and the work performed during each shift to identify how workers (nurses) are thought of, and about, within particular contexts. She uses qualitative methods (in association with Professor Trudy Rudge) and quantitative methods to investigate shift and night work and the workplaces within which the work occurs. She is also deeply interested in the doctoral supervision process and has managed the School’s Postgraduate Research (Doctoral) programme for many years.



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