

Mapping Narratives and Fieldwork Reflected Through Ethnographic Lenses

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Essay for Paivi Korvajarvi, Dept. of Woman Studies, Tampere University, 12/04/04

Abstract

The following essay focuses upon my experience of fieldwork within the context of a creative-cultural media project called 'Mapping and Sewing Together Mythologies'. This reflective text applies a series of lenses to elaborate aspects of the ethnographic 'self' and researcher in the field; to consider the documentation and representation which was produced during and after the fieldwork.

The ethnographic lenses that will form the thematic sections of this text are explicitly guided and relate to fieldwork: biography, physical and emotional, situated, relational and conversational work, and the recognition of issues of representation, memory and commitment. As a reflective exercise on the practice undertaken in field, cross-reference is made to 'consequences and commitments' themes concluded in *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity* (Coffey, 1999).

Project Introduction

'Mapping and Sewing Together Mythologies' is a collaboration between myself and Signe Pucena (LV) that began in Karosta -Latvia, July 2003, and is inspired by specific local ethno-acoustic landscapes, with aims to map and link 'locative' media - recorded with mobile media-capture devices: image, sound, GPS-trace, movie - from a person-centred position of narrative and experience.

Locative media is a term which has emerged in media art discourse that may be understood to mean media which pertains to location, but also - by inference - to a certain time, and so experienced in a certain context. Beyond the contextual signifier, it also has been associated with mobility, collaborative mapping, social networks, and relativity.

As suggested, the project is situated not within formal ethnographic research study, but from a stance of cultural media and socially-engaged art practice. However as hopefully will be elaborated, the focus of study covers similar issues: In two physical locations, the collaboration explores cross-cultural (Sami-Finnish-Russian at Inari and Ivalo, Lapland & Russian-Latvian at Karosta, Latvia) and mono-culture (deeply local) experiences. In-other-words, through the stories, personal narratives, mythologies and songs that people use to

describe or show a sense of shared, common and collective memory to others, in relation to the environment in which they are situated.

The mixed media representation is documented online as static HTML web-pages [1], but is currently in the process of reconstruction as collaborative open publishing web-pages.

Fieldwork as Situated Work

Before discussing the biographical aspects of the fieldwork, it is worthy to mention the self-researcher's presence in each location was situated within certain social contexts:

Karosta, a suburb of Liepaja that was a sealed naval city during Soviet Latvia, was rapidly abandoned by 80% of its population when the Russian army withdrew in 1994. Signe and I were present there during a hot summer, July 2003, as part of a 10 day workshop gathering of artists and researchers, hosted by a local organisation - K@2 Culture and Information Centre - which organizes cultural activities in this socially and economically marginalized community. Signe was familiar to the place and had been a couple of times before in the capacity of a cultural coordinator, while for myself it was new and interesting.

The common subjective, aesthetic and ethnographic attraction that acted as a catalyst for collaboration between myself and Signe, was the rejuvenated Orthodox Church which had a significant presence among the inhabitants of the Soviet-era apartments that surrounded it. Signe was interested to elaborate this interest by listening to personal stories related to the Church. As she could communicate well in Russian language, she arranged an interview in the home of a 77 year-old Russian woman called Baba Dusja, who lived in the same building where we were based, and was well known to the coordinators of the Centre. Both the K@2 Cultural Centre and the Orthodox Church were the strong social contexts which determined this communication.

Inari village is a small community in Finnish Lapland, but has many visitors and tourists who pass through regularly due its position as a significant Sami cultural and political centre with museum and parliament, and as a base for outdoor leisure activities. As the situation for 1 week of fieldwork in December 2003, it offered different challenges to our presence there. Unlike Karosta, there was no familiar organizational support to make contact with local persons, and although the museum did help with some institutional contacts we relied on the informal contacts with local people. Also I was already familiar, visiting this village before in 1998 for 1 week so there was a mix of nostalgic return, but for Signe new and interesting.

Once a temporal threshold of days has been crossed, beyond the usual couple as a visitor, locals began to be curious in what we were doing there, and would start asking questions and start conversations rather than with our prompt or arrangement. Personal stories shared with locals emerged in the social setting of the bar of Hotelli Inari - where we stayed, eat and drank - only *after* a couple of days. As we had no ability between us to speak the native language of Finnish or Sami, we managed conversation in English language to a greater or lesser effect. Within this informal environment, and possibly due to this language issue, we began speaking on an almost daily basis to Pekka, who frequented the hotel bar/restaurant. He worked within the tourist industry about 40km away as a wilderness guide, and was used to contact with visitors to the area, and was happy speaking English to us. So in this case the bar frequented by tourists, and Kaamos season - where social meetings withdraw as it is dark outside at 2pm - was the social context for communication during our field-visit to Inari.

Fieldwork as Emotional, Embodied and Physical Work

Coffey with recurring mention in *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity* recognises that both the physical and emotional aspects of ethnographic fieldwork should never be taken for granted, and be seen as strengths rather than burdens in the research practice (:158). One of the commitments of engagement, at least to the researcher-self, is to acknowledge the emotional and physical connectedness between the research context and processes, people, places and experiences.

The 'Mapping and Sewing together Mythologies' project (henceforth referred to as Map-Myths) - in comparison to more conventional ethnographic research - embraces the emotional, embodied and physical fieldwork within the representational outcomes of the work. As already noted above between both of us as researcher-selves there was varying levels of expectations, familiarity, strangeness, knowledge, experience and memory already of the situated context, which each of us brought different emotive histories.

Fieldwork in the two locations happened at two contrasting seasons: hot, bright summer in Latvia and dark cold winter in Lapland, with differing physical and psychological conditions. For example, summer sunshine, ferocious insect bites, multiple peer company, high personal energy levels; And in contrast no sun at all, mild but still arctic winter weather, low energy levels with each other as constant peer company.

As both fieldwork experiences were intensive periods of time of almost constant and daily company for us who had only really shared email contact previous, there was an increased development of personal friendship and trust during the collaboration between Signe and myself. The collaborative work also became a medium for getting to know each other as

individuals, and our extended personal histories and relationships that existed outside the field.

Parallel, the fieldwork process evolved without much *expressed* pre-consideration: aims, roles or decisions were negotiated in the ongoing process. To elaborate, the thematic interests of the project are defined by the subjective interests of either person - myself or Signe - negotiated with mutual respect to 'follow' the other's objectives. Regarding the emerging practice of the work and interactions with others, Signe wrote on reflection:

"The whole process is based on deep intuitive feelings and naturally has situated content. I think that it is very important to find the right way to particular situations and people... To feel this border where we can't step.. How far we can go with our questions (with the people, in situation) etc." [2].

A further feature of the process, relating intuition with regards to representation, is that it utilizes some 'artistic license', leaving ambiguous actual personal realities of both the informant and the researcher. If not explicitly referring to emotions and feelings on the surface, foundations for such may be traced underlying within the aesthetic and poetics presented in the documentation.

Intuitions formed actual interfaces between patches of experience, 'weaving' linked paths that may lead in documentation to narrative constructions. The situated nature of 'crossing borders' conceptually, culturally and physically is a recurring theme in the project. Indeed both fieldwork 'chapters' may be interpreted as the conventional ethnographic negotiation and transition from the 'strange' to the 'familiar' through participation and interaction.

Fieldwork as Biographical Work

The Map-Myths project as noted in the introduction above is interested in stories and personal narratives encountered in the field, including the self-researcher's experiential stories. This thematic has some parallel to an ethnographic research practice that relies upon qualitative methods, where personal narratives are valued due to the "widespread assumption that they offer uniquely privileged data, grounded in biographical experiences and social contexts" and is "concerned with observing, reconstructing and retelling people's lives" (:115).

Already aspects of the social contexts have been touched upon, the workshop or tourist social contexts that we as researcher-selves started from in the field, to gain "privileged" insight into local perspectives. To continue, in both locations the activity of collating biographical

experiences from other people not surprising involved intuition feeling of what may be given, and listening gently (without push) when it was.

The focal conversation with Baba Dusja, and her sharing of life story 'draws' together connections between the different activities we experience and engage in during the Karosta fieldwork - visits to the Church, the Navy camp, the abandoned apartment blocks - into narrative relations. Less focused conversations in Hotelli Inari, either at eating time or with tea and alcoholic drinks, involved sharing local experiences (ours - Signe and my own, but also Pekka's) that day, leads towards also facilitation of experiential narrative - Pekka helps arrange our car driver on the Saturday morning to attend the Orthodox service in Ivalo.

Coffey states that within fieldwork whether explicitly acknowledged or not, the ethnographer is also engaged in biographical work of their own - their feelings, emotions and experiences - while in the site of research. Often private field journals are used to record personal experiences, within the trope of a 'confessional tale', with specific examples of sustained and conscious efforts to "document the self in the process of documenting the field" (:116). These accounts are referred to as reflections, rewriting the self into the texts of the field, including personal reflections of participating, analyzing and documenting.

The Map-myths project has strong autobiographical elements but it is hard to describe it as a 'confessional tale', because there is the transparent presence of the researcher as an active participant and author in the field of interest. As is suggested earlier, this is not what is hidden to confess. Autobiographical elements of the fieldwork, i.e. experiences and perspectives documented and mediated, including the elaboration of narrative attached to them, are gathered with the potential of incorporation as equivalent to the stories of others in the field. Our *researcher-selves* perform actions which relate to fictional 'recovered' stories, that relate to the real social context, but from another time past: In Karosta, the 'ghost congregation' walk between empty apartments and the Orthodox Church, we re-enact imagined journeys for the congregation who no longer lived there. In Inari, during another walk following a tourist trail to a wilderness church, I construct a subject in role of attending a wedding in another season. Indeed if there is anything that needs to be confessed in a journal, then it should be occasions where experienced reality blends with mythopoetic realities.

Recognizing the Relational

Emphasis is made by Coffey that fieldwork is undertaken as a process of interacting and forming relations with significant others, both epistemologically and personally. She continues to write that "everyday life is enacted through social interaction" and that ethnographers

"should be prepared to enter into, as well as documenting, social interaction in the field" (: 159).

The Map-Myths project clearly recognizes this importance by documenting within text significant personal interactions, both formal, real and - maybe more problematically - imagined interactions. However, our project documentation extends the idea of 'recognizing the relational' beyond only interpersonal relations as conceived by Coffey, as will be elaborated.

Relations between social gathering places - architectural 'centre-points' - and persons who frequent the social gathering places - personal 'centre-points' in the narrative construction is a notable feature of the documentation. The narratives and fieldwork emerged from the personal relations to places as a subject of the research: We arranged a conversation with Baba Dusja about what was important to her at an everyday level, knowing her relation to the Orthodox Church. While in converse, but no less relative, our contact with Pekka in Inari was based more upon our repeated mutual presence over time and shared conversations in the Hotel bar, than any organized interview.

Material (objects) culture and their relations to stories were also important and were made significant, documented as digital images or sound recordings. Choices were based on subjective and aesthetic value, as well as their ability to support emerging themes in the fieldwork. This was particularly the case when the element of interest was not a person or a place but a theme, for example: The 'artificial' Northern Lights of streetlights, bar lights and so on, or the representations of bears in the Hotelli Inari corridor and the St. Trifon Icon, when no bears were present in reality.

Experienced events and research activity was also relational: In the interview with Baba Dusja when we asked what was important to her in her room, and not surprisingly she showed us her iconostasis in the corner, with an icon of her favorite saint Olga, and we asked if she could show us how she did her sewing, sitting at the window. The next day we went to visit the Church again during St. Olga's ceremony, and tried to guess which icon was Baba Dusja's favourite.

Further, the project recognises that there are potential significant relations not only within one field location, but also between more than one location (i.e. Karosta and Inari). This of course is no accident. Coffey remarks that:

"Fieldwork involves the enactment of social roles and relationships, which places the self at the heart of the enterprise. A field, a people and a self are crafted through

personal engagements and interactions among and between researcher and researched" (:23)

The quote refers to the crafting of an ethnographic 'selfhood', a field identity or field role. In this case the field identity manifests its influence in the subjective and artistic interests of the self in the field, crafting personal engagements and experiences. Or to say another way, a field role is formed which 'burnishes' emerging social and material relations that exist in both field locations, due to the researcher-selves at the 'heart of the enterprise'. So due to the shared and negotiated field identities of myself and Signe, the following relations were made significant and recognized at both sites: Presence within the Orthodox communities of each location, with an emphasis on songs and icons; radio studios became the sites of opportunity; empty congregations emphasized by the activity of a walk; a poetic phrase - "clear as tears" - describes two powerful aesthetic and emotionally-affecting experiences; tangible representations of person-place relation as handicrafts emerge (as weaves and stitches to the tune of Baba Dusja's sewing machine).

Representation matters

As a commitment in fieldwork practice, Coffey advocates an awareness that ethnographic researchers are "responsible for the reconstruction and telling of the field"; an activity of authorship that makes issues of representation pertinent as it is noted that "there is no neutral medium for representing the social worlds we seek to understand" (:160).

This last point appears especially true if there are privileged positions in representing social worlds. Language is an appropriate example illustration: To begin, even at the basic level of interaction, our collaboration is communicated in English language. However English is my native tongue, but not for Signe. Likewise conversations with for example Baba Dusja were held in Russian, knowledge of what was spoken was fully understood by Signe, but I had only a partial translation of what was said. English, although the only shared language between us, also represents the partiality of communication and unequal contribution to the consequent textual outcomes. Seeking multi-lingual representations would help address and highlight the managed and partial nature of the work. This comment applies both to the collaborative work, but also the disparity of language understanding in expressing social worlds within cross-cultural interactions.

An aim of the project is to also consider issues of the researchers' responsibility in advocacy, to include other possibilities for 'telling'. The stance is sympathetic to acknowledged issues noted by Coffey within feminist scholarship, that encourage a concern with voices, power relations, experiences, and the challenge to conventional ethnographic discourse that "renders

the 'observed' mute.. Deprived of a culturally legitimized means of expression; visible and audible only through the eye, voices and consequent texts of a dominant group (the observers)". Coffey continues to state that:

"The dynamic nature of power relationships in field research and ethnographic production has been explored through a specific focus on the writing of fieldwork. In placing the observable into recognizable textual formats, the ethnographer's opportunity to make the social world readable has been re-evaluated, and located alongside issues of authorship, authenticity and responsibility" (:144).

'Alternative visions' of textual representation have attempted to accommodate the complexities of the voices of multiple selves in the field, including fragmentary essays adopting anecdote, vignettes, or creative textual approaches such as drama scripting and poetry. However, it is noted that such forms often do not resolve issues of power relations in ethnographic production or documentation:

"Texts are still authored - and selected, collected, edited, presented, written, crafted and read. As such, alternative forms of writing ethnography may blur or question boundaries but do not remove the issues. Indeed the very artfulness of many.. actually draws attention to the craft work of authorship.. [B]y overtly manipulating the appearance and ordering of words and text. By foregrounding the ethnographer as author, they could be conceptualized as a means of increasing, rather than diminishing, the distance between ethnographer and the Other" (:151-152).

The Map-Myths project is a mixed-media project, extending beyond text, but fits with what Coffey may term as 'unconventional/experimental' in the context of ethnographic research convention. I can relate to the continued complexities of representation with the following illustrations:

In Karosta, I could not understand the interview held in Russian, between Signe and Baba Dusja, I observed in a different way the conversation, feeling and absorbing the mood and absorbing the space-time. After-words, I asked if they might take a photograph of each other, as a visual record of conversation not including myself; During the Christmas party of the gold panners in Hotelli Inari, I got a mobile movie-capture of Signe dancing with one of the party, and then Signe also made sure I was photographed dancing later with another.

Placing the self as also an equal object of observation in the field, however, does not completely address all of the concerns mentioned above. By allowing ourselves to be included

in the representation is ample proof of the control we have in authorship. Unless, that is, the material was contributed by someone else in the field other than our researcher-selves.

Continued 'on-the-ground' activity would be necessary to achieve any of the aims for a more inclusive and collaborative documentation of the field with local people. Awareness of the importance of (self) representation and storytelling across different media may have to be developed. Encouraging people to include their own pictures, write their own texts, speak and record their own testimonies or stories as part of social and collaborative representation of their social world takes time ,and involves trust and perceived value for those involved.

To help such a process, inspiration may be gained from what Coffey refers to as: "A dialogical approach to ethnographic representation [that] exploits the conventions of naturalistic theatre or conversation, to make real, social events and interactions." (:150). Drawing upon the poetic and theatrical qualities in everyday experience and social life, it promotes a self-conscious auto/biographical approach to sharing situated knowledge in representations and media. I claim that the Map-Myths objectives fit closest to this approach.

Recognising the Importance of Memory

An emphasis is made between fieldwork and memory: "Our memories inform our data collection, analyses and reconstruction of the field" (:160). The data medium mostly referred to in ethnographic practice to assist memory is textual, the writing of field-notes. Field-notes are mostly written individually and so are personal records and link to places, people and events. Although often sectioned separately, they may also record emotions and private experiences or thoughts. It is here that the researcher-self narrates, acknowledges their presence and conscience. Coffey states that production of field-notes is a core activity of ethnographic work:

"Field-notes provide a structure and a purpose to day-to-day field experiences. They are a step along the way to a published account of the field.. They provide a temporal and tangible reality.. as textual memories of fieldwork" (:121).

To relate to the Map-Myths project, the production of textual field-notes is not a core activity within the fieldwork. Instead media content (or 'data' in ethnographic terms) - in the form of image, sound sample or short-movie - as captured by mobile devices - digital camera, media-phone, mini-disc or DAT sound recorder - takes the role of written notes. The process of gathering media is just as much a purpose in the day-to-day field activity and was an ongoing and parallel to engagement in the field. Using digital media devices, personal experience was mediated, and given temporal or location-based context (or both) to guide, structure and

assist memory recall. Like field-notes, media was also gathered that was personal and private documentation, which did not become part of the constructed representations of the field.

At the end of each fieldwork period, the media went through a process of subjective - rather than objective - selection and analysis. For example, while gathering media in field, the time-date context of each was the principle order. However, at this stage of the process this became of less importance, allowing cross-relations between different experiences to emerge into different elements for representation [3]: Personal 'informant' narratives, for example, 'Baba Dusja', 'Pekka'; places such as 'Hotelli Inari', 'Sami Radio'; events, for example, Orthodox Mass', 'Hand Bells'; performative journeys such as 'Military training', 'Wilderness Church', 'Ghost Congregation'; ethnographic themes relating to the project, for example, 'Orientation', 'Duodji'. The 'Karhunpesäkivi' element pushed most the storytelling aspects of re-organising and re-presenting the field.

This mix of "humility and deference to subject's view" (:126), including embodied and situated presence with subjective and aesthetic interest, invited a more 'gregarious' nature of authorship to accompany the ethnographic context. As 'media field-notes' the organized elements acted as stimulus for memory and reminiscence in the writing of an accompanying text or narrative. Digital-mediated memory, documenting personal and embodied experience - and especially in the case of visual media - situated perspective, is a link in the Map-myths project between autobiographical field experiences and the consequent text.

Documenting Decisions, Reflections and the Self

"The process of fieldwork can be understood as a series of real and virtual conversations and interactions with informants and significant others; particular places; ideas; family and friends; lovers; memories; and self. All of these dialogues enable us to navigate pathways and understandings through the research."

(:159)

In such a context, the merging of researcher-self and the Other's personal experience as narrative is motivated by research questions towards collaborative and multiple-perspective documentation: Who is such documentations for? And if it is to benefit local dialogues, what tangible representations and appropriate means of feedback interfaces within the community are needed to encourage poly-vocality and present the project back in the local contexts where the media was gathered?

Pekka, once online, maintained email contact with Signe, sending other pictures from his work environment, and extending the field beyond the period of time and shared space in Inari,

informing from afar. The coordinator of the K@2 Cultural Centre in Karosta sends us anecdotes about Baba Dusja months later, and pictures from her recent Birthday party.

Such continued dialogues, post-presence in the field, raises notice of research pathways and the questions that may emerge due to our project aims:

What form of documentation would allow these persons to contribute to the narratives presented, with their own perspectives? Would some-one in the field be interested to continue to document what is part of their own lived environment after reading our gathered stories within it? If the project, as audio/visual media and translated text, was (re)presented in the field, for example as an exhibition in Hotelli Inari, or broadcast on the local radio station, how might it be understood and who is it for? As a media art project? As ethnographic research? Or an opportunity to continue to make stories and gossip about the visit one December by a Scots man and a Latvian woman? These questions presume that people are interested or care about the personal narratives - not only of people in the community but also those of the researchers - collected, told and celebrated within the local community (:115).

As a nod towards this suggested shared contributory space.. The Map-myths documentation appeals to subjectivities and lived experiences of the fieldwork, but the text is written occasionally as 3rd person narrative as if a story told by some-one else. The Northern Lights text section in the Inari chapter meanwhile is written in the 2nd person narrative form, placing the reader within the situated context, inviting presence, based upon the researcher-self's lived experience. The only first person reference - 'I' - in the textual documentation is the external narrator who is clearly not the researcher-self or the informant in ethnographic research. Indeed the narrator is even not human - it is suggested to be a black cat who watches both!

The transfer of authorship clearly emphasizes the hybrid and creative work that challenges core aspects of the ethnographic fieldwork practice, where the placing of the "biographical and the narrated self at the heart of analysis can be viewed as a mechanism for establishing authenticity" (:117). It is not qualitative research which relies upon observations that are accurately recorded and documented. In-fact it encourages a blurring of reality and an extended or suspended understanding of it.

Conclusion

In parallel to conventional ethnographic representation processes, the Map-myths project explores how the production of the text draws upon socially shared contexts as experiential 'resources', cultural meanings, language and mediation to "shape our memories and provides a framework for remembering" (:127). Instead of field-notes, the practice is supported by

situated media-capture, emphasizing the sense of 'being-there', mediating and sharing experiences with the stories of other people in the field. In this degree the project compares well with ethnographic fieldwork without much problem.

However, performative actions in the fieldwork - the walks related to the Churches in both locations - tended towards mythopoeic narratives, increase the significance of small details creatively forming other imagined realities of 'being-there': The package lying on the floor of Baba Dusja's floor became the imagined item delivered between no-longer-present friends in the congregation. A 'bear marriage' story evolves from an unusual art photography postcard bought at the SIIDA Cultural Centre in the village, and of course this bear 'appeared' in the bar later in the week to talk with us. Here and there, in the juxtaposition of small details and an imagined 'bigger picture', story-making instead of ethnography becomes an influential resource for shaping memories, constructing, rather than documenting.

Mythologies are a collection of myths belonging to a people and addressing their origin, history, deities, ancestors, and heroes. The full project title - Mapping and Sewing Together Mythologies - suggests the construction, representation, acceptance and sharing of mythologies - stories with veiled meanings, fabulous, commonly-held beliefs that may or may not have foundation in truth; stories where aspects of reality and experience attain a significant meaning and importance, and are incorporated into a larger belief system. One of which is an everyday belief-system where people and things become known to represent places.

References

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[2] Signe Pucena, unpublished email correspondence, October 2003.

[3] Organisation of media gathered during Inari field-work can be viewed here: <http://mlab.uiah.fi/~apaterso/projects/mm/inari/elements.pdf>

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