Ex-siting and insighting: 
ethnographic engagements with place and community 

Sharon Macdonald

Questions of space and place have always been fundamental to – and increasingly rather problematic for – social and cultural anthropology and ethnology. They arise from two, interlinked, concerns. One is with what place and space mean to those whose lives we seek to understand. How do they use space and make place? What do places mean to people – and why? Do certain forms of spatial organisation or place-attachment foster particular kinds of social relations – or vice-versa? And does place really matter all that much, does it make such a difference – especially today, in the midst of the whirlwind of technologies that help us to defy distance?

The other concern is with the scale and “placed-ness” or “sited-ness” of our anthropological or ethnological study. At what “levels” should we direct our gaze? How should we define our sites of investigation? What should the “field” of our fieldwork be? Should place come into it at all? Are concepts such as “boundary” or “community” still useful? Do we need radically different methods from our former ethnographic staple of in-depth fieldwork in particular locales?

These questions are ones which have worried anthropologists and ethnologists a lot over the past fifteen years especially (see, for example, Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Coleman and Collins 2007). Researchers have tried to find ways to get ex-sited: to get out of place – perhaps by studying mobility and movement, users of on-line services and networks, by the various forms of “following” – of objects, actors or ideas – as advocated by George Marcus (Marcus 1998). But while we might have got excited for a while about being ex-sited or multi-sited – some of us have, perhaps, also increasingly found ourselves a little bit dissatisfied or even bored by it. I suspect that I am not the only one to have to stifle a weary sigh when I read PhD and other research proposals which claim that the research is to be multi-sited. This is partly because this approach has become such a standardised claim, no longer a novelty. It is also because it has become so loosely used that pretty much anything is manipulated into counting as multi-sited – “I’ll speak to people in the
village post-office and the call centre”. Even those of us who carried out fieldwork before multi-sitedness was de rigeur can reconfigure our fieldworks as having in fact been multi-sited all along; making me sometimes wonder whether any research is ever not multi-sited. Of course, I over-state the case here, and would not want to deny that there have been many excellent multi-sited studies that have allowed us to look at phenomena that we could not have grasped by staying put. But equally there is a question to be asked over whether spending time in lots of sites, rather than concentrating on one, is necessarily or inevitably more insightful? Might we lose depth and understanding by losing our foothold in place?

This was a question asked by a group who met in Frankfurt in 2000. This question and the meeting became the prompt for a volume of AJEC – the Anthropological Journal on European Cultures (as it was then) published in 2002. The title of that issue was Shifting Grounds: Experiments in Doing Ethnography. My co-editors were Ina-Maria Greverus, Regina Römhild, Gisela Weiz and Helena Wulff. We each contributed an essay and so too did Elisabeth Katsching-Fasch, Karl Kaser, George Marcus and Ulf Hannerz. The fact that that meeting and the workshop on which the current volume is based both happened in Frankfurt is not coincidental. Concern with the interaction between space, place and anthropological knowing have long been fostered in the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology, and addressed in insightful and innovative ways, pursued and fostered by Ina-Maria Greverus and other colleagues (e.g. Greverus 2002a; Welz 1986).

In Shifting Grounds we were, on the one hand, concerned to try to highlight some of what we saw as challenges for fieldwork that were facing us at that time and to explore ways of tackling these. So, for example, we described examples of, say, moving between places and times in our fieldwork. Ina-Maria Greverus set out a compelling case for a mobile anthropology in which travel offers up encounters and juxtapositions, providing “clues” to be followed – perhaps to elsewhere in the field or out of it, into libraries and other places (Greverus 2002 b; see also Greverus 2002a). Helena Wulff (2002) described what she has called “yo-yo fieldwork”, where she shuttles between Sweden and Ireland, conducting many short spells of fieldwork over a long time-period. Regina Römhild (2002) followed people on their Crete-linked transnational networks – networks that literally spanned space, as people moved between, say, Germany and Crete, but that also did so imaginatively – as people oriented themselves and organised their lives in relation to visions of other places that they held in their heads.
So, on the one hand, we embraced and set out novel versions of methodologies for grasping and exploring mobility, and the consequences of mobility. At the same time, however, all of the work showed that place still mattered deeply – both to those we studied and as part of our own anthropological engagement. Ina-Maria Greverus reminded us that even reporters or foreign correspondents – seemingly the most footloose and mobile of world-travellers – still send their reports back from somewhere, and that these take the form of “concrete observations” (Greverus 2002b, 20), in which location clearly matters. To this we might add – in an observation that links to Regina Römhild’s argument – that travel, and especially travel writing, produces and accentuates rather than dilutes place. All kinds of ideas, and experiences, of what is involved in “Crete” play a part in drawing people to it. She tells us of a couple from Frankfurt who have created their own “place” in Crete – doing up a house and tending a garden. In doing so, the specificity of place – that this is Crete – matters; but so too do more general ideas about being placed, being part of a particular kind of place, a place which seems to offer up an alternative to the displacements of modernity.

Those displacements – themselves largely consequences of capitalist hyper-mobility – are, of course, also concrete realities affecting individuals’ lived and placed experience. This was powerfully shown in our volume by Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch, in her Bourdieuan Misère du Monde type study in Graz (2002; see also Katschnig-Fasch and Malli 2003). While the experiences that she recounts – the desperation of a social worker who no longer knows what he can do to help himself, never mind others; an artist’s fears at having sold out; a cleaner’s struggle for respect – are ones that we would find in many cities around the world, she also shows their particular realisation in Graz; including the peculiar ironies of the city’s self-promotion as a city for artists and for human rights. The disjuncture between the image produced for global circulation and the lived realities is one that her in-depth engagement with people at an everyday level is able to highlight – and to do so very graphically.

In Helena Wulff’s work too, we see Ireland – or a particular vision of Ireland – being actively produced and lived through Irish dance – not only in Ireland but also in other parts of the world; she describes, for example, Riverdance performing in Stockholm. What we see in these cases, then, is a transportation and mobility of “places” themselves. We also see, however, that understanding these processes of circulation – who is responsible for them and their relationship to what we might call the “origin place” or the “source place” – still requires in-depth on-the-ground fieldwork. Spending time in Ireland, Graz or Crete, gets to a part of the
story – part of the trail of clues as Ina-Maria Greverus would have it – that we wouldn’t get to otherwise; and that is, perhaps, easily overlooked by researchers those whose methods don’t trouble themselves to engage in this way.

Overall, then, while those of us involved in Shifting Grounds embraced the idea of some kind of reinvigorated attention to method, we also wanted to make sure that we didn’t throw away some of what can be gained by in-depth attention to particular places and sites. As Gisela Welz wisely pointed out in her contribution – which prompted us to reconsider the idea of the village ethnography, drawing on her own long-term and in-depth research in Cyprus: “The growing awareness, indeed the conviction, that no local social formation exists in isolation, re-configures the single-sited community study approach” (Welz 2002, 153).

In other words, even if we study in a single locale, we don’t do so in the same way any more, precisely because none of us believes (if we ever did) that old fiction of places as islands unto themselves. By living in a particular community, we do not necessarily preclude ourselves from examining mobility or its consequences, or the wider networks and political-economies in which people are entangled. Moreover, we in effect claimed, a more in-sited study can offer more potential for insight. Getting “in there”, being vor Ort, helps us to get at things that are some of the most important of what an ethnographer has to offer, precisely because the located and long-term ethnographic engagement requires, as Gisela Welz pointed out, “the bodily presence of the fieldworker in the places that she or he studies, the attention given to the quotidian rather than the exceptional, the focus on life as it is lived” (ibid.). Banal as they might appear to some, these are the basis for some of our most significant insights and challenges to accepted views. They are the basis on which ethnographers can provide a distinctive voice, motivated by direct experience of the lives of others.

It does make a difference if we know, for example, the effort that it takes to try to hack back the temporary residents’ Cretan garden that has returned to wilderness – we know because we have helped in that work and witnessed their mixed sense of frustration and achievement, and their embodied commitment to this way of life. It does make a difference to have felt the buzz of excitement back-stage among the Riverdance-performers before they perform, to have been in that tangle of mixed emotions during their preparations. It does make a difference that we have heard the tone of voice, and the particular choice of words, of the cleaner as she tells us how she feels about some of the people that she works for.
All these make a difference not just to our claims for the right to be heard in the academy – all those reasons of authority, “being there” and “I-witnessing”, highlighted by James Clifford and others in the Writing Culture and related commentaries (Clifford and Marcus 1985; Geertz 1988). It also, and in my view more importantly, makes a difference to the kinds of knowledge that we gain. In part, it means that we are less likely to have to just accept that which has been pre-packaged for us; or to have to work within that which has been pre-framed by more “controlled” or “systematic” research methods and itineraries. In other words, it leaves space for serendipity – as Ina-Maria Greverus has emphasised so well (Greverus 2002a and b; 2009). Fieldwork and being “in place” means that we are “in a haptic space in the middle of things”, as Kathleen Stewart puts it (Stewart 2008, 71). We can be caught out, surprised, have our preconceptions undermined, our senses pricked and our bodies shaken up. In addition, being in place means that our knowledge does not just rely on one source – it comes through an untidy mix of what we observe, what people say, how they say it, what they do next, what we experience. As much as through gathered “facts”, it comes in the form of hunches and suspicions, gut feelings and convictions that we can’t quite articulate. It is sort of inherently multi-pronged. And this leaves space for forms of knowledge that may sometimes not seem to quite fit with one another, that prompt us to think or hunt further, that may enable us to give more weight to some things that we learn and less to others. Just like the experience itself, however, all of this is hard to codify – and sometimes hard to justify.

Yet, despite these difficulties, ethnographic methods have widespread respect in the academy and have been embraced – at least in some form – by a wide range of disciplines, and increasingly by commercial companies, out to try to get at things that other methods don’t seem to reach. While a large number of different actual methods get labelled as ethnography, and we might be reluctant to share in this naming for all of them, this turn to ethnography is also often part of an attempt to grasp the kinds of specificities of particular places or communities. Studies by Intel’s Digital Health Group, for example, have been concerned with how older people living in rural Ireland use new technologies, and the possibilities that these might open up for new forms of working and living (Drazin and Roberts 2009). The company Unilever has supported ethnographic research in domestic settings to investigate such matters as the experience and practices of washing clothes (e.g. Pink 2005). These kinds of research pretty much take for granted that it makes sense to do
in-depth placed studies; and, moreover, that we are going to be able to identify some kinds of shared “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998).

Community

In the remaining part of this article, I turn to the closely related matter of community. Once a mainstay of anthropological and ethnological study, it then fell out of fashion, shifting from being a framing concept to a target for attack; usable by anthropological and ethnological researchers only in the padded protection of inverted commas (Macdonald 1993; Rapport/Amit-Talai 2002). It came to be seen as too romanticised – naively assuming nice warm social relations; too functionalist – naively assuming everything working neatly together; and too tidily opposed to “society” – a naïve nostalgic regression to the non- or pre-modern. Terms like “site”, “location” and “locality” and “network” became the preferred vocabulary. Unlike “community”, these seemed to not to make a presupposition of the kind of social relations that might follow from the designation. They seemed to have less value-judgement built in.

Certainly, there were important rear-guard actions. Anthony Cohen, in particular, articulated a powerful account of the importance of understanding the “symbolic construction of community”, stressing its valence “in people’s experience” (Cohen 1982, 13). In doing so, he was responding too to the widespread popular use of the term. This has continued and perhaps even increased; and has been a further reason for other anthropologists returning more recently to resurrect attention to it again (e.g. Amit 2002).

In popular usage, “community” is frequently evoked by politicians and is in the title of all kinds of government initiatives: community cohesion, community care, community strategies, community education, community advocacy and so forth. It is often used as an alternative – a kind of euphemism – for ethnic groups. “The Muslim community” is a typical phrase – and one that is a standard expression in the media, despite arguments by some Muslim commentators that it is offensive in its assumption of a single mind-set and unanimous point of view (see Alibhai-Brown 2001).

From all of the existing critique of “community”, it is easy to see what is going on in much of this popular usage. With its connotations of a functioning unit, a group with some kind of shared values and cultural practices, “community” is quite a warm and friendly sort of term. Its political use to indicate ethnic minorities – one which is also widely used
by spokespeople of such "communities" themselves – is in some respects rather admirable. It suggests that they have something of worth to offer in terms of social relations, that they function as some kind of pockets of more old-fashioned, connected behaviour in our wider fragmented and socially alienated societies. The rise in the use of the term has clearly been bound up with the rise of identity politics – with groups demanding recognition of their specific situations, rather than have their differences elided into a common, mass citizenship. These identity claims are almost always articulated in terms of community – “the gay community”, “the black community”, “the Polish community”, for example. This can certainly have advantages: not least, economic and social resources are often available for “community” enterprises of various sorts.

Community in local practice

This was the case in my own first fieldwork in the Scottish Hebrides back in the 1980s – a time buzzing with discourses of identity, of saving or preserving minority languages (in this case Scottish Gaelic) and identities, and of numerous government and other initiatives directed at recognising and accommodating difference of at least some sorts (Macdonald 1997). Looking back at how this operated highlights some of the complexities of different ideas and practices coalescing around the idea of community. One very noticeable thing going on at the time was how local people could make use of the idea of being “a community” to gain resources. There was government money around for setting up things called “community cooperatives”, for example; and so, not surprisingly, enterprising individuals cooperated to present themselves as the voices of “the community” for this purpose.

In doing so, however, they aggravated various other people in the locality – some of whom saw themselves, and were regarded as such by various others, as more longstanding or authoritative voices of the place. So while on the one hand there was a performance of community for the outside world, especially for those in charge of money for community developments; within what stood for the community, divisions and arguments erupted precisely in relation to the supposed community developments.

One particularly heated example concerned a shop established by the new community cooperative. This was set up like a supermarket – where people would take a basket or trolley, go around, load it up and then pay. Before the community cooperative shop opened, the only other shops in
the area all worked on a principle of waiting at a counter while the proprietor or serving staff fetched each item individually from shelves behind the counter or from a room behind that. This meant that you would often have to wait quite a long time to be served. Typically, there was lots of chat between the shop-keeper and people being served, and between people queuing. You needed to expect to spend a lot of time waiting, and chatting, especially at busy times like Saturday morning. (It was quite a useful hang-out for an ethnographer.)

The co-op shop, by contrast, allowed people to quickly race around and pile up what they needed into their baskets, and then have their selections swiftly checked out with the electronic scanner. In practice, this could also involve chatting – to whoever was on the checkout or to people in the shop – and it might even take just as long as at a smaller, “more traditional” shop. But nevertheless, some local people saw the community cooperative shop as a symptom of a kind of the sort of modern, speeded-up behaviour that was destructive of community as a quality of life. The co-op shop was typical of the ways of “away” – as the local expression had it; that is, it was seen as part of a foreign way of doing things that threatened local temporalities and life-styles.

It was not just the shop that got cast in this way. Stories also circulated, for example, about how young men would be drawn to the community centre – also set up as part of the community co-op – as a place that was open to all (and so, as they should have been). But instead of this encouraging friendly communal participation, the centre became the site for vandalism and anti-social behaviour. In fact, this was pretty minor – some graffiti and broken bottles, some hanging around and the odd brawl. But in accounts told, by some who lived in the area, the destruction – or petty acts of a few bored teenagers (depending on your point of view) – in the community centre somehow showed up the lie of the community imposed. Perversely, community developments were charged with destroying community.

**Community matters**

But did this mean that there was no “sense of community” and that the whole notion was just used cynically, to get resources? Does the fact that people disagree or argue with their neighbours mean that “community” is a fairly hopeless fiction and more or less useless for any kind of analysis?

In some ways, it seems to me that what was shown by the arguments about community that I witnessed during my fieldwork – and the rather
exaggerated stories about the perils of the community cooperative – was that community was, in fact, a concept that mattered to people, and that mattered quite deeply. They weren’t saying that “community” was irrelevant or not worth striving for; they weren’t saying that it was something that had never existed or could never do so. Rather, they were contesting the form in which it was currently being performed – and what they felt was a kind of co-opting of it (the term being all too appropriate in this particular instance).

None of this makes it easy to use “community” analytically, of course. The obvious anthropological approach – and the one that I used myself – is to track its uses, see how it is deployed in practice, what work it is made to do and what contests erupt over it. In many ways, this is the approach that I would still advocate. And it is one that we do see being used by various researchers, especially anthropologists, who seem to be returning to an interest in “community” partly as a consequence of its widespread popular use and enactment through government initiatives and the like (e.g. articles in Amit 2002).

But is this all there is to it? And is there anything else involved in what seems to be an increased interest in “community” in various areas of social and cultural studies in recent years?

An apparent revival of interest in community-type studies was partly what inspired me and my colleagues Jeanette Edwards (in Social Anthropology) and Mike Savage (in Sociology), both at Manchester University, to put together a set of essays on the topic of community, continuity and change in the study of Britain (Edwards et al 2005). Looking back at some of the classic work done on this in Britain, and gathering together more recent studies and commentaries, it was clear that it was possible to do community study without assuming that communities would, necessarily, be without friction or social differences. On the contrary, community studies – precisely because of their in-depth approach – were often supremely good at spotting sources of conflict, sometimes simmering beneath the surface; and at understanding how social differences, such as class, might be expressed through other idioms and everyday practices (Macdonald et al 2005). Equally, longitudinal community studies could be good ways of studying change over time; and, as we had also discussed in Shifting Grounds, they could form the basis for discussion of networks and mobility.

But was there more to it still? What some of the studies showed – as I had a bit belatedly come to realise of my work in the Scottish Hebrides – was just how compelling the notion of community could be; and just how
much people were, sometimes at least, willing to invest in it. Several of the studies that we gathered together in the volume, of former mining and pottery towns, for example, described an ongoing discourse among inhabitants about community – its loss, degradation, persistence or renewal (Degnen 2005; Hart 2005; Charles and Davies 2005; Pahl 2005). Rather than seeing this as part of a misguided romance, those writing about it took it on its own terms and investigated some of the practices – the telling of stories or collecting and preservation of certain artefacts – that surrounded it. Cathrine Degnen, for example, wrote eloquently of older people’s stories about their local mining community, its loss and partial persistence, in relation to the commemorative plates that so many of them had been given when the coal pits, which had been the rationale for the villages in which they lived, were closed down. Community was something that they valued, that they tried to recreate through popping round to each other’s houses for tea when they could – and through enlisting the ethnographer as a kind of go-between, a conduit for information between people who had themselves become less mobile, and also as a ready listener to their narrated memories of how things used to be.

Some of those who wrote in the volume were also interested in just what kinds of qualities might constitute, or be seen to constitute, community. In a classic work, Communities in Britain, published in 1966, Ronald Frankenberg (for whom our volume was also a Festschrift) had devised what he called “morphological continuum” of communities, based on the degree of face-to-face contact that people living in different kinds of settings might have with one another. Where there was the most face-to-face interaction, this did not necessarily mean a lack of conflict, but it did mean that people would not be indifferent towards one another. Scale – while not to be interpreted simply in terms of the size of population – had consequences; the human relations afforded by certain kinds of places and ways of living made a difference to how people felt about it. And this, in turn, linked to other matters of their sense of well-being.

And it is concerned with well-being – with senses of belonging or dislocation – that motivate in large part a wider, and often politicised, renewed attention to community. The growth of the political philosophy of Communitarianism, which challenges individualism and emphasises the need to engage with what matters to communities, and at local levels, is just one manifestation of this. More widely, almost all political parties, in the UK at least, seem to be busy stressing the importance of the local and community (see Bunting 2009). This is often bound up with environmental concerns. A high-profile project in the UK called “Transition Town”, for
example, seeks to make the lowering of carbon footprints a matter for tackling at community level, arguing that this helps strengthen communities in the process.[1] In a newspaper article about this, political commentator Madeleine Bunting described the project as about a “re-engagement with place”. She went on to quote Gary Snyder – American poet and environmental activist, whose ideas have been taken up in movements such as bio-regionalism:

“people who can agree that they share a commitment to the landscape/cityscape – even if they are otherwise locked in struggle with each other – have at least one deep thing to share”. [And she continues] “Place can be a rallying point, a way to share commitment, a form of identity.” (Bunting 2009, xx)

Precisely because of mobility and displacement, in other words, place re-emerges as a, and perhaps even the, most powerful way of linking people. The massive amounts of time and energy dedicated to establishing local “heritage” of one sort or another – museums of everyday life, restoring workers’ cottages or old mills – is another manifestation of this.

In anthropology, there has, of course, been longstanding – though sometimes marginalised – interest in the relationship between place, community and well-being. The tradition of research in the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology in Frankfurt is one of the most notable examples. Influenced by US cultural ecology, Ina-Maria Greverus and colleagues retained a focus on communities – on entities such as villages or village-like urban enclaves – in ways that sometimes seemed to run against the grain of other research approaches, or that might even be cast as old-fashioned by some, as Gisela Welz has described well in an overview of this work (Welz 1992). Yet by looking at, say, the village as a kind of ecosystem, the cultural ecology theoretical framework and methodologies employed did allow for an analysis of what kinds of needs were being met by the particular environment. And, perhaps even more importantly, which were not.

I would not want to call for a revival of this approach in all its full extent – I am wary of its incipient biologism and how close it comes to environmental determinism – and Frankfurt research on these topics has subsequently become much more culturally inflected. Nevertheless, I think that its attempts to interrogate the relationships of people with place, and to unravel something of why community remains so compelling, and
to understand why some kinds of places work for people and some do not, are definitely worth continuing with, or returning to.

**Final remarks**

I was once discussing with a friend – an academic psychologist and psychotherapist – why it was that so many people that we knew had this idea that they wanted to go and live in some less populated place, perhaps a village up in the Scottish Highlands. He and I both sort of wanted to do it – but were also rather ambivalent, partly because of our own experiences of having lived in such places. What was this idea of *community* that they seemed to be seeking, we asked. “It’s hard to say”, he agreed, “but if you haven’t experienced it, it’s like never having experienced being in love”.

Perhaps that is where this article should end. But let me add a couple of other remarks.

The conference that this article was written for might never have taken place. Those of us who met in Frankfurt might never have all been brought to encounter each other face-to-face. We could have remained grounded somewhere else. But, as anthropology and ethnology show us so forcefully – and as Frankfurt has been showing us especially well – place and encounter do matter. Something happens in places. *Everything* happens somewhere. But just where it is, all its multiple particularities, makes a difference. Grasping some of that – recognizing and articulating it – remains one of the tasks, and accomplishments, of our rather gloriously undisciplined disciplines.

**Acknowledgment**

An earlier version of this article was presented as a keynote lecture, under the title “Crossing borders and disciplines: the contemporary resurgence of community studies, in the workshop Raumbezüge der Forschung - Plausibilisierung von Wissen”, documented in this volume. I thank Tonia Davidovic-Walther and Gisela Welz for the invitation and the prompt that this gave to think more about these matters, and Gisela also for some very helpful references and discussion. I also thank the workshop participants for so many interesting things to think further about; and Ina-Maria Greverus for whose 80th birthday the workshop was also held.
References

Greverus, Ina-Maria (2002a) Anthropologisch Reisen, LIT, Münster.


Notes