

## PLAYING WITH ENCOUNTER

I was invited to comment on this essay in my position as an anthropologist who has, in my own work, engaged in walking projects which had a distinctive performative element to them. The brief I was given was to consider the ways in which Malla, Kholina, and Jäntti's project intersects, informs, and is related to ethnographic practice found in anthropology.

Before relating it to my own work I first want to focus on, and unpack, the sign which Malla, Kholina, and Jäntti eventually settled on using during their Urban Hitching practice. 'May I walk with you for a while?' is not as simple a wording as it initially appears. The phrase took a while to manifest as *the* phrase through which the practice of Urban Hitchhiking would work. Previous signals of intent took the form of requests to find love, a thumb—the traditional sign of a hitcher—and other hitcher specific signs. What is interesting about 'May I walk with you for a while?' is firstly the politeness, 'may I' is an invitation to the other to host the hitcher. Secondly, 'walk with you' suggests that you have no purpose other than to follow the intent of the host. Thirdly 'a while' is a timeless suggestion that does not offer an end, thereby allowing the encounter to develop and get deeper or be relatively fleeting. This sign is, in many ways, indicative of the ethnographic encounter.

To conduct ethnography, one must seek permission and then align one's movements, daily rhythms, and experiences with those with whom you are conducting ethnography. Participant observation requires that you seek permission of your interlocutors and synchronise as much as possible with their rhythms. Both acts are an immersion into someone else's world.

This is where Malla, Kholina, and Jäntti's work is distinct from a situationist *dérive*. They are correct to note that the original *dérive* was a group activity, but the practice was a distinct form of interaction with the city. The aim, achieved by using maps of other cities or taking directions based on nonsensical rules, was to disrupt the ideologically ordered manoeuvring of one's body around the urban realm. The relationship between one's body and the city was, according to situationists, overtly directed by the demands of capital economy on the subject. One must go to work, return, have a particular kind of purpose. In drifting, getting lost, and wandering, the relation between the city and the body can change, the factory becomes a playground, 'beneath the street, a beach', and so on.

Malla, Kholina, and Jäntti, however, do not drift unpurposefully; rather, they tune into another's purpose. Here they did not find capitalist monads but people with, at times, a purpose directed by work, at other times directed by love; sometimes they would be drifting themselves, whilst other people would respond to their desires. I was struck by Malla's gendered experiences of the patriarchal and misogynistic gaze. Here, further to the obvious, troubling power dynamics and vulnerability of the female subject in the city, the encounters raise another interesting point for ethnography. The encounter is never quite a direct link into someone else's rhythms, routines, and experiences of the city. Rather, the encounter is exactly that, an encounter as a two-way process. Malla's experiences were affected by the person with whom she hitched a ride. The issue of the dialectic—that is, that encounter, either

in performance art or ethnography, is always experienced as the output of an ongoing, two-way process of encounter in which you are a key part—is often undertheorised in both art and ethnography.

To extrapolate how Malla, Kholina, and Jäntti's work might be useful in exploring this issue I will briefly turn to my own work in Surbiton, a suburb of London. My PhD was sponsored by the Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL. The Adaptable Suburbs Project (ASP) had created my research position in order to gain a deeper understanding of how suburban residents felt about the built environment in the suburbs. They wanted to know what spaces they valued and felt emotional links with. The idea was that this information would supplement architectural data on traffic flow, building use, and settlement history to show the social value of place. The ASP created an interactive online map to which locals could add data, with the goal that eventually these maps would be used in urban planning to preserve and enhance urban spaces of importance to locals.

However, the locals had their own specific form of community building. The 'Seething Villagers' were a local community group that used play, tell mythical histories, and have fun in order to develop community (see State of Seething n.d.). Through regular gatherings in the public spaces of the suburb 'Villagers' would eat, sing, and dance together. They would interrupt the urban rhythms of daily life by dancing in parks and parading around streets. The events were all themed around a series of mythical stories which, whilst playing with local place names, were open to interpretation and alteration. The idea was that when suburbs are understood to have no history they would simply make one up (Jeevendrampillai 2015). Doing so was an affront to any one person claiming that they were more local because they

had lived there longer or knew more history. The locals added to the ASP map a tale of how a giant had destroyed an ancient mountain in the area. The ASP responding by refusing the data because it was not historical fact. The Villagers then claimed it was fact, and stated that an archaeological dig on the site had proved that there was no mountain there and as such it must have been destroyed. The assertion of fact was an affront to the forms of authority that members of the ASP were trying to deploy in their positions as urban planning experts. Locals were asserting very different forms of engagement with place that were distinctly local, performative, and immersive.

This position of refusing expertise posed an issue for me as ethnographer: how could I possibly conduct observation and then claim to be an expert (Jeevendrampillai 2017)? This is the claim of the anthropologist. The answer was found through play. By participating in the mythical stories my ethnography took on a richness and a form that started to talk back to anthropology. The Villagers established the Free University of Seething where I, with other locals, gave lectures. They handed me a PhD before my university did and even came to UCL to give a talk on being 'ethnographied' during which they handed my PhD supervisor an honorary fellowship; they went on to pass fellowships to my PhD examiners and even held their own examination for me. Through play, the Villagers disrupted the forms of relations that had become normalised in ethnographic practice. They inverted the gaze and questioned the traditional positions of authority in how one wrote about their lives. As such I was left with no other option but to adapt a slightly satirical academic writing style.

I learnt about people's love of their local area through going on community walks that blended fact and fiction and used play to

disrupt normal ways of associating place, such as the suburbs, with meanings (for video of the walk see Jeevendrampillai 2013). With this a vitality was created, a space for newness. This is what good ethnography, and art, should do. It should disrupt existing conceptual language and provide new frameworks for being by exposing how others make their way in the world. It should show us what other social worlds there are and demand a relationality to them so that the future can take other trajectories. I see performance experimentation, not as a replacement for ethnography, but rather as a key part of ethnography that we often do not talk about explicitly. Anthropologists are often shy of the dialectical nature of their relation to their informants, and discussions of representation can often become complicated by the assumption of authority. Malla, Kholina, and Jäntti have committed to the task of exploring with others through their practice. The dialectical, playful, and disruptive nature of the encounter can teach us a lot about how

others live and, as an anthropologist, that is what my work is committed to.

## REFERENCES

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