The Shadow Side of Fieldwork

*Exploring the Blurred Borders between Ethnography and Life*

Edited by Athena McLean and Annette Leibing

Blackwell Publishing
The Shadow Side of Fieldwork
Athena McLean dedicates this book to Thea Helen McLean and Trevor Jakob McLean, who have been ongoing sources of inspiration and support.

Annette Leibing dedicates it to Valesca von Usslar and Nellie Leibing.
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## Contents

List of Contributors vii

*Foreword: In the Shadows: Anthropological Encounters with Modernity* xi
  *Gillian Goslinga and Gelya Frank*

Acknowledgments xix

“Learn to Value Your Shadow!” An Introduction to the Margins of Fieldwork 1
  *Annette Leibing and Athena McLean*

### Part I  Secrecy and Silence in the Ethnographic Encounter 29

1 Out of the Shadows of History and Memory: Personal Family Narratives as Intimate Ethnography 31
  *Alisse Waterston and Barbara Rylko-Bauer*

2 When Things Get Personal: Secrecy, Intimacy, and the Production of Experience in Fieldwork 56
  *Anne M. Lovell*

### Part II  Transmutations of Experience: Approaching the Reality of Shadows 81

3 The Scene: Shadowing the Real 83
  *Vincent Crapanzano*

4 Transmutation of Sensibilities: Empathy, Intuition, Revelation 106
  *Thomas J. Csordas*
Contents

Part III  Epistemic Shadows

5  Shining a Light into the Shadow of Death: Terminal Care Discourse and Practice in the Late 20th Century
Jason Szabo

6  The Hidden Side of the Moon, or, “Lifting Out” in Ethnographies
Annette Leibing

Part IV  The Politics of Ethnographic Encounter: Negotiating Power in the Shadow

7  The Gray Zone: Small Wars, Peacetime Crimes, and Invisible Genocides
Nancy Scheper-Hughes

8  Others within Us: Collective Identity, Positioning, and Displacement
Meira Weiss

9  Falling into Fieldwork: Lessons from a Desperate Search for Survival
Rose-Marie Chierici

Part V  Blurred Borders in the Ethnographic Encounter of Self and Other

10  Field Research on the Run: One More (from) for the Road
Dimitris Papageorgiou

11  Personal Travels through Otherness
Ellen Corin

12  When the Borders of Research and Personal Life Become Blurred: Thorny Issues in Conducting Dementia Research
Athena McLean

Index
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Foreword
In the Shadows: Anthropological Encounters with Modernity

Gillian Goslinga and Gelya Frank

In this path-breaking volume, editors Athena McLean and Annette Leibing turn our attention to the shadowy areas that anthropologists sometimes unexpectedly enter when performing ethnographic fieldwork. They issued a call for colleagues to write about “situations where the borders of personal life and formal ethnography begin to blur and the research field loses its boundedness.” Interestingly, McLean and Leibing did not provide much more in the way of defining these shadows, nor did they need to. The theme drew an immediate and resounding response, first in a panel of papers at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2003, and now with the publication of this book. Some of contemporary anthropology’s most prominent figures are included here alongside scholars less well known outside their specialized research areas. The challenge to explore the “shadow side of fieldwork” has proven to be a great leveler, however.

Each essay displays unique authority as it draws us into territories where conventional professional comportment and methodological truisms fail as guides to action. We are faced with vivid ethnographic-style accounts of encounters that were disturbing for the fieldworker and that presented an intellectual and, almost as often, a moral challenge. The accounts are, at first glance, disarmingly singular and incommensurable. We might fear that taken together they have little to say to core issues in anthropology because what the authors find in the shadows is specific to each situation. Yet something important must be at stake here, where intuitively the authors converge so readily on this elusive shadow phenomenon. What is this
phenomenon? And what is at stake for the discipline? These essays, in our view, address the very foundations of the production of knowledge under conditions of modernity. Readers should not be fooled, then, into thinking that this volume is simply a collection of “personal accounts” of fieldwork. Much more is going on here.

Our foreword aims to lay out some of the most salient theoretical and historical conditions that, we think, produce the shadows that the essays address. It should surprise no one familiar with anthropology that tensions between professional and personal dimensions of experience arise in fieldwork. Fieldwork, after all, has been defined precisely as the use of a person as the research instrument. Consequently, we can view this volume in contemporary methodological terms as a “multi-sited ethnography” of the shadows that emerge when the personal fails to fit within the framework of professionalism. The shadows can then be examined as locations where the sensory, imaginary, emotional, moral, and intellectual dimensions of actual experience provide knowledge that is incompatible with public knowledge. The residue, which these essays attempt to restore to public consideration, the editors and authors insist, is not merely private. The question the volume raises is: Must we accept the dichotomy of “life” and “work” that constitutes, yet also confounds, the experience of fieldwork? This question is important to answer because the split between “life” and “work” is precisely where public knowledge and private knowledge have been ripped apart.

A Brief Genealogy: Splits in the Modern Subject

... And, Thereby, in the Anthropologist

By the 19th century, specific historical forces under capitalism effectively split “work” (remunerative occupations in the public sphere) from the rest of “life” (non-remunerative occupations in the domestic or private sphere). This split in European history was gendered, with the consequence that reparation has also been often gendered and stigmatized as “female.” Most forms of feminist critique have tried to re-engage private worlds and the domestic domain with knowledge in the public sphere, but even its greatest victories cannot effectively challenge the positivist bent of knowledge production at large. McLean and Leibing, and the authors of the essays, push up against this stigma and marginalization when they examine the shadows in fieldwork. This is because the shadows described in this volume present problems that are never strictly public or intellectual. These shadows arise when, paradoxically, “work” and “life” come together as they do, for example, in fieldwork. The contributors show that this coming together of “life” and “work” belongs not just to a feminist critique
(e.g., “the personal is political”) or to the specific province of a sub-method or subgenre within anthropology (e.g., reflexivity or “auto-ethnography”), but instead carries possibilities for anthropology at large. As their point of departure, the essays present the lives of professional researchers in ways that recognize the person as agent across personal and professional sites of activity, challenging what has been this false and counterproductive wall between “life” and “work.” That wall has remained standing, despite anthropology’s reflexive turn. These essays open novel routes and passages, and invite us to explore the long shadows this split has cast in two directions: on the privatized experience of fieldwork and on the published text.

The separation of “work” and “life” marks a politicized and disciplined border in the very constitution of the modern subject, his relationship to the living world, and what he can know about it. We deliberately gender this modern subject as male (“he”) because this split mode of being emerged among male elites of Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, later becoming generalized and hegemonic by the 19th century through the expansion of disciplinary institutions, including the academy. Philosopher Michel Foucault’s work began to richly document the modern episteme in *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*) and postcolonial scholars have further detailed and historicized modernity as well. Ironically, the impulses of 20th-century anthropology, with its craftsman-like ideal of knowledge production based on prolonged face-to-face experience in pre-capitalist, non-literate, and non-Western communities, ran counter to this Western European episteme, which solicits universal classifications and theoretizations that can be captured – and exchanged as commodities – through text. But even though we anthropologists are trained to pay close attention to local particularities, and to avoid seemingly old-fashioned generalizations about Western (or non-Western) cultures, the modern episteme nevertheless compromises our profession’s ways of encountering reality.

Why are we still steeped in this way of knowing? In Foucault’s terms, the character of the modern episteme is distinctively “anthropological,” presupposing that all things be classified and categorized by means of representation, and calling forth a space for Man to do the naming and ordering. These acts of representation depend on writing, if they are to be known to all, an idea that has been elaborated by Michel De Certeau. The episteme also demands that knowledge conform to a shared public standard that contrasts with and reinforces the existence of Man’s private interiority (“the self,” “experience”). This configuration naturalizes in our thinking an ontology of exteriorities and interiorities, of public and private realms, and of general, ubiquitous categories of experience presumed to be shared by all. Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty has called this last feature “the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination.”
Foreword: In the Shadows

Concepts such as “culture,” “the social,” “history,” “nature,” become so theoretically persuasive as to behave in our texts as a universal ontology, and not the historical intellectual constructs that they are. Consequently, a manner of categorizing and relating to the living world that emerged historically has doubled back to appear as literal maps of life; the manner is distinctly “anthropological” in so far as these maps are Man-made and yet, they mark off Man as merely their scribe.

These “doubling” processes clarify why, in our epoch, and in this volume, blurring the sharp distinction between “life” and “work” can seem at once transgressive and threatening. These essays will dislodge our categories: Do they convey real generalizable knowledge or merely personal reflections on methodology? Are they more than footnotes or asides to the discipline’s agenda? The dilemma signals precisely why we must push on, and be careful not to dismiss these accounts from the frontlines.

The subject that knows

Foucault arrived at his characterization of modern knowledge as “anthropological” by tracing the history of representation from the Middle Ages to the near-contemporary period. The transformation was profound. In the epistemology of the Middle Ages, signification and representation were not securely fixed in the hands of men. Meanings of things emerged according to principles of “resemblance” among propinquities, analogies, and associations of visible and salient marks of the surfaces of things. To know meant to divine the “signatures” of the “prose of the world”; wherein the meaning of things was ordered and reordered apart from human control and had to be read constantly anew. To know was to practice a hermeneutic in which the terms were not textual but close to the living world, and the world’s own teeming manner of unfolding.

To this order of things, the Classical period from the 16th century to the close of the 18th introduced a profound break that coincided with the start of the colonial expansion, a public culture of print and graphics, and the enclosure of the commons – coincidences that were no accident since one could say that knowledge also was “privatized” during this period. As anthropologist Marilyn Strathern elaborates in her most recent work, texts began to be treated legally and conceptually as the “children” and “intellectual property” of authors. Representation was no longer a play of signs in the living world, hinting at meanings established by Divine intention or natural history since the beginning of time, but instead a heuristic that increasingly began to dominate encounters with the world. Classical representation – such as the ambitious projects of the Taxinomia
or the *Mathesis* tables – called forth what Foucault describes as “a subject that knows.” This subject was endowed with “the power to present himself with representations” and thus could stand as sovereign in his own right – as “author.” The subject’s power drew from his separate interiority in the Classical Age, a process for which Descartes’s famous Cogito (“I think, therefore I am”) has become an emblem.

By the 19th century, Man would appear to himself and to others as both an object of knowledge and a subject that knows – or, in Foucault’s words, “an enslaved sovereign, observed spectator.” The relationship between words and things had radically altered: Things no longer manifested their identity in representation, but instead, as Foucault explains, in their external relation to the human being. This method of encountering the world inscribed a set of public and standardized categories onto the nature of things – thereby also differentiating the sovereignty of the knowers with respect to the things themselves. The “subject that knows” now thinks of himself as separate from the world and its manifold possibilities. Glimpses of pre-modern epistemes are pushed to the margins of private experience. Some scholars have tried to redirect our attention toward the living world – “the blooming, buzzing confusion” of the infant’s mind (William James), surprising encounters with the “bumptious, non-literal world” for which our texts fail to prepare us (Donna Haraway), and even the floating signifier of Derridean deconstruction. Our habits of textual representation from the Classical and Modern periods make it extremely difficult to deal with these breakthroughs except by reinscribing familiar categories, thus sustaining the sovereignty and authority of “the subject that knows.” Anthropology’s recent embrace of narrative theory, interpretative approaches (“thick description”), and the “poetics and politics of representation” may be seen as a rearguard struggle to illuminate but also to control unsettling encounters with an unruly and all-too-material world.

An awareness of the historical artifice of our knowledge-making practices opens to inquiry both “representation” and the “subject that knows.” While “representation” has been the focus of analysis in anthropology in recent years, the “subject that knows” remains somewhat shadowed still. Because our very methods require that we use our experiences, our encounters, our one-on-one relationships with informants as our primary research instruments, we anthropologists during fieldwork are confronted almost daily with the ambiguities and limitations of the public/private split in the “subject that knows.” Our trademark method of “participant observation” captures in its name this tension and the contradiction. On the one hand, we are called to maintain critical distance and, on the other, to plunge again and again into the living world. It is no wonder then that the “crisis of
representation” has been so acute for anthropologists and the discipline, or so productive of enlightening critiques of modern knowledge and its metaphysical conceits at large. It is no wonder, either, that perplexity, excitement, and tentativeness characterize many of the essays in this volume, as they make public these tensions. For, generally speaking, in the rift between “life” and “work,” all forms of embodied and living knowledges are policed in order to uphold the purity of the representation and the sovereignty of the “subject that knows”: emotions, aesthetics, affinities, moral feelings and urges, and, when contrary to national and institutional regimes, political commitments and actions.

Toward New Ethical Epistemomentologies

The crises, desires, explorations, and risk-takings of the authors speak, then, to a specifically European knot of culture, history, and power – a knot that, as Bruno Latour put it (We Have Never Been Modern), has gripped “all critical positions” of knowledge. The most salient consequences for our experiences as anthropologists have been that, despite our seemingly prolonged engagement in the field, we may have been forced too quickly to judge the meaning of things, obligated as we are to produce texts in conversation with ongoing intellectual debates and literature. We may have treated our representations as all too definite and literally real. As a result, we may become impatient for knowledge and generally resistant to the unfolding of the living world. Possible dimensions of understanding that do not conform to existing categories or that expediently result in them thus might have eluded us. Anthropologists such as Michael Jackson, Paul Stoller, Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, and Edith Turner have suggested as much, and we feel, like them, that there is a great deal at stake. The “shadows” the writers speak of here concern these elided dimensions.

Finally, our knowledge risks remaining anthropocentric in the sense that all order is imposed from a modern human point of view. This is a point that critics from a number of directions have been making, including indigenous peoples, environmentalists, and, more recently, animal studies scholars. Often, these distinctly non-modern or even nonhuman experiences are passed over in public accounts of fieldwork and the writing of knowledge precisely because they do not conform but in fact sometimes outright defy existing categories. Though there may be outlets in “alternative” culture to represent these nonhuman-centered dimensions, they are rarely objects of serious critical inquiry. Rather they are dismissed as fringe or private matters. These essays powerfully, if cautiously, challenge us to make public knowledge out of those experiences.
New approaches that might be called “epistemontologies” following Karen Barad will be needed if subjects are to be respectful of what they do not know, what they cannot fully and clearly name, and what exists in relationships beyond a certain narrow range of anthropocentric experience. Anthropology has perhaps never been challenged more to fulfill its radical promise to apprehend other ways of being. The bringing together of life with work is imperative. Without even having to abandon the subject’s centrality in Western tradition, it is possible to found knowledge on premises other than modern epistemology. As Emmanuel Levinas proposes (Otherwise than Being (Autrement qu’être)), the world is quite different if founded ethically face-to-face with Others as living beings. Several of the writers articulate fieldwork challenges that echo Levinas’s call for ethics first in our manner of relating with the living world. These writers disclose unsettling moral rumblings in the act of conducting research, as well as experiences outside conventional ontology that provoke different knowledges. These writers’ very embodiment – feelings, intuitions, gut reactions – becomes a moral and intellectual compass.

When the “subjects that know” are not tethered to a particular manner of making knowledge, or to a particular professional public persona in a disciplinary context, or to a particular body of knowledge, the production of knowledge then becomes dynamic, tentative, relational. This is why the editors readily acknowledge that they find it premature to theorize the shadows definitively. Perhaps our own theorization of the split between “life” and “work” as an adequate explanation of the shadows in fieldwork may require amendment. To theorize these shadows prematurely would be to force narrative closure on a mode of encountering the world that is necessarily embodied and therefore complex, emergent, and heterogeneous. To allow for the world to unfold requires time and respect for things as they show themselves to be, not necessarily as they are represented to be.

To achieve this manner of encounter, however, the “subject that knows” must risk giving up his or her sovereignty. When the need is to be sovereign, other voices and sources of signification have to be repressed or, if not repressed, then muted or “inappropriate/d” for other ends, as feminist Donna Haraway has suggested (Ecce Homo). The authors in this volume begin methodologically with an “I” that does not claim to be in textual possession of the living world. This more humble “I” troubles the border of privacy that guarantees the professional authority of the public representation, and allows other voices and sources of signification into the production of knowledge. The willingness of each author to describe moments of perceived failure or dissonance, or of intense identification and gut reaction, or of uncomfortable feedback or silence from their subjects, enables them to engage with something beyond the representational...
veneer of the “successful” ethnography. Such choices are not just methodo-
logical and political, but also theoretical. They counter “the generalizing
impulse of the sociological imagination” by resisting it. Resisting this impulse
means slowing down and becoming comfortable with ambiguity, contradic-
tions, heterogeneity, and the real consequences, in James Clifford’s terms,
of knowing that we have only “partial knowledges.”

To venture out invites a predictable backlash: a loss of authority because
of the imputation of a loss of objectivity. Some readers may take away an
impression that the knowledge produced here is too small in scope or
too concrete, that is under-theorized or, worse, plainly untheoretical. The
authors, each in his or her own way, do in fact wrestle with the problem
of preserving professional integrity. And they ask us to seek with them
the theoretical value of the knowledges they acquired in their field
experiences. We have tried in this Foreword to suggest something of the
theoretical value of their efforts to bring together “life” and “work.” This
important volume helps to clear a path through shadows that our discipline
cannot afford to leave unexplored.
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“Learn to Value Your Shadow!” An Introduction to the Margins of Fieldwork

Annette Leibing and Athena McLean

The advice “learn to value your shadow” is the moral of “The Wonderful History of Peter Schlemihl” (von Chamisso 1814), a story about a man who, like Goethe’s Faust, sold his shadow to the devil. The Shadow Side of Fieldwork follows Schlemihl’s advice, since its aim is to value and increase awareness of what generally remains hidden in fieldwork productions: that which is unspoken or unspeakable, invisible, mysterious, or not immediately perceivable to the ethnographer, the interlocutor, or the reader. These deal with the twilight of the obvious, the backgrounded (cf. Douglas 1999:3–5), the taken for granted, the allowed, and the imposed. These issues are most apparent in situations where the borders of personal life and formal ethnography begin to blur and the research “field” loses its boundedness. However, shadows are present in all fieldwork.

In the Jewish tradition, Schlemihl (Schlemiel in Yiddish) is a clumsy and unfortunate figure, but in von Chamisso’s story Schlemihl became unfortunate because he did not take his shadow seriously. In contrast to von Chamisso’s unlucky character who never received his shadow back, the authors of this volume point to different ways of at least getting closer to what is being overshadowed in fieldwork.

As the chapters in this volume illustrate, shadow and light exist in relation to each other. The question we ask is, “How can we approach and describe this relation of light and shadow?” – while keeping in mind that some issues should perhaps be kept in the dark (cf. Strathern 2000; Star and Strauss 1999:23). There may be manifold reasons why something may be hidden and we do not pretend to cover the full range of possibilities. However, it is worth challenging the borders and the margins of the commonly perceivable and observable in research not only because
new knowledge and understandings may be revealed, but also because the shadow might directly trouble or “overshadow” what lies in the light.

We do not suggest that by doing this we will be able to achieve wholeness or transparency (Latour 2005), or presume that this would be desirable or even possible (cf. Frankenberg 2005). Our aim is rather to initiate a discussion about the different levels and layers of fieldwork processes and of social and cultural phenomena, which are overshadowed and sometimes completely out of sight in our research and texts. In doing so, we call attention to the possibility of play of light and shadow in order to achieve a fuller, more critical, and nuanced picture (cf. Strathern 2004). However, we do not intend to offer an ultimate theory regarding the shadow. Our theoretical discussion will be more tentative, framing, than providing a final conception or recipe. In the most general terms, paying attention to the shadow means “seeing what frames our seeing” (Davies et al. 2004:364).

There are many motivations for exploring the shadow. The researcher may be driven by a curiosity about the mysterious, hidden, or uncanny side of reality. The exploration may be provoked by the need to engage the painful, protected, or secretive elements that, to some extent, are part of all fieldwork. The researcher may also seek to examine a troubling, perhaps unequal relationship (e.g., Lambek 1997), or bring attention to the power differentials under which prior knowledge was constructed. Writing about such shadows, however, should not be mistaken for common voyeuristic revelations. In fact, as many of the chapters show, the shadows confronted by the writers often extend beyond observable phenomena to sensory, affective, and experiential perceptions and reflections.

The chapters in this volume examine the research experiences and dilemmas as well as personal and political challenges of scholars who have questioned the source, or acknowledged the hidden or paradoxical nature of their ethnographic findings and insights. They ask, for example, about their ongoing positioning and repositioning in the field in relation to their interlocutors. Some wonder as well how a researcher who is part of, or involved with, a research setting, an organization, a reference group, or even a relationship can legitimately study it (Labaree 2002). The contributors, however, go beyond postmodern assertions of “locating” themselves (cf. Simpson 2002) or getting “involved with the field” – shifting the focus of analysis from only Schlemihl’s soul to the devil itself.

**Dia-Ethnography of the Shadow**

By describing and theorizing the “beyondness” of anthropological research, we do not use “the shadow” only as a metaphor; but as an approximation
of the very real, though less perceivable relations, practices, and field experiences dealt with by the authors. Nevertheless, the shadow is rich in its imagery, its degrees of revealing and hiding – *umbra* and *penumbra* – and its polyvocality in relation to various levels of anthropological theorizing. Technically, a shadow is caused by the interception of radiation by an opaque object (Jenkins and White 2001). The position of the source of radiation, its angle to the object, plays an important role in the shaping of the shadow and, more importantly, in one’s capacity to notice it. As all the articles of this volume show, changing position is an important tool for throwing additional light on the object under study.

But there is rarely only one source of radiation, and often multiple sources of obfuscation produce many shadows over the course of fieldwork. Confronting them requires moving back and forth between areas of light and shade during research – before, during, and after being “in the field.” This kind of movement is captured in ethnographic practices that Paul Rabinow (1996) calls “dia-ethnography”: “In Greek, *dia* . . . denotes relation and/or motion” (p. ix). Rabinow emphasizes that ethnographies are active, processural, and made up of “situated curiosity.”

Every ethnographer’s relation with hidden, mysterious, evasive, or forbidden phenomena in fieldwork (whether at the intrapsychic, intersubjective, or more broadly social and political levels) is unique, varying with the nature of the shadows and the intersection(s) among them. Although some of the authors in this volume emphasize the processural, diachronic aspects of ethnographies, many pay attention more to the relational elements of fieldwork, privileged somewhat by the title of our book. Nevertheless, the processural is implicit in most texts (e.g., the historical situatedness of the category “Holocaust survivor” in Waterston and Rylko-Bauer’s article).

Some of the writers in this volume focus mainly on their personal struggles (the self of the ethnographer in relation to her *internal* shadows) as a means for understanding their social world. Others focus more on *external* phenomena or shadows they encounter in the field and their relation to them. Most of the essays address both to some extent, at least implicitly in their work.

Taking a closer look at the relational aspects of dia-ethnographies – which cannot be perceived independently from the processural – we might tentatively frame the different approaches to the shadow in this volume as relying on a continuum between two poles. One pole focuses on the author herself (and her personal shadows) as a means of better understanding social phenomena. The other pole focuses toward social phenomena and the ethnographer’s negotiations with the social world and the shadows encountered there. These may range from immediate intersubjective relations
to more globally remote social and political phenomena. The elements, which occupy these two poles, or lie between them, are combined and juxtaposed in a different way by each author, as she confronts various shadows, or formulates her specific approaches to them.

The dynamic quality of dia-ethnography captures each writer’s movement back and forth between the two poles (or points along it) both during the process of conducting research and in subsequent reflections on it. Although such movement between the ethnographer and her or his data is part of any reflexive process of ethnography, it is even more vital in the critical reflexive work that occurs when examining shadows. This is because when working in these elusive, typically neglected, and possibly unsanctioned areas, the researcher is likely to feel especially vulnerable: this realm of the ambiguous would be safer left alone.

These dia-ethnographies are necessarily processural, with the researcher actively engaging with points present, past, and future over the course of research and later reflection. Movement in time cannot be separated from movement between the two poles, however, as each researcher uniquely juxtaposes memories and past data, present experiences and observations, and vision for future praxis. The processural, when approaching the shadow, involves two different, though complementary, approaches for the editors. One editor (McLean) emphasizes the impact of the researcher (and her personal shadows) on the research and the interpenetration between research and private life. The second editor (Leibing) stresses more the historical embeddedness of research data (and the researcher herself) and its concomitant shadows.

Carl Gustav Jung was among the earliest to relate the concept “shadow” to the self, exploring intra-psychic aspects as related to the social world. Writing early last century, he discussed personal shadows as the ignored and troublesome parts of a person, in direct opposition to the conscious ego: “Taking it in its deepest sense, the shadow is the invisible saurian tail that man still drags behind him. Carefully amputated, it becomes the healing serpent of the mysteries. Only monkeys parade with it” (Jung 1973 [1939]:217).

For Jung, integrating the shadows of the intra-psychic world into one’s consciousness was a moral obligation of the person, because failing to do so would result in their negative projection into the social world, as with xenophobia or wars (cf. Kast 2001): “Such a man knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in himself, and if he only learns to deal with his own shadow he has done something real for the world . . . shoudering . . . part of the gigantic, unsolved social problems of our day” (Jung 1938:140).

Identifying intra-psychic ills as the direct cause of social ailments is no longer theoretically or political supportable. Still, the importance Jung
gave to first resolving the *situatedness of the personal* in order to be able to come to terms with social phenomena is an important insight relevant to the ethnographic encounter. Furthermore, not doing so may cast additional shadows on the researcher, the research process, and the findings.

The second pole, which approaches shadow phenomena as primarily social, may be illustrated by Mary Douglas’s (1999; see also Douglas 1995) efforts to “examine the implicit” (which approximates what we would call “the shadow”). The implicit is information “pushed out of sight” (p. 3), or “backgrounded” when, for example, something is being called untrue or even “too true” to be questioned. She recommends, for example, studying “the classifications by which people decide if an action has been done well or badly, whether it is right or wrong” (p. vi) in order to get closer to implicit meaning.

Douglas, without doubt, perceives these (implicit) shadows as linked to the researcher. In one of her essays, for example, she writes about the role of animals in the daily life of the Lele, a group she studied at the end of the 1940s. Looking back, she laments her initial, superficial gaze when doing fieldwork: “If my fieldwork had been more thorough I would have been able to understand better the meaning this scaly ant-eater had for them. *Their knowledge was not explicit; it was based on shared, unspoken assumptions*” (p. xi; emphasis added). Thus, while dealing primarily with manifestations in the social world, Douglas acknowledges the importance of the researcher in helping to unearth that which is implicit. But she does so not by looking at her personal or intrapsychic shadows, but rather by confronting how cultural institutions work to mark what they value.

By drawing attention to processes of “backgrounding” social phenomena into the shadows – as invisible or forgotten – she echoes work in other critical studies that confront or “make visible” the self-evident (see Rabinow 2003:41). This becomes important for addressing the political dimension of “backgrounding” that determines which phenomena will be made visible or invisible and which voices will be heard or silenced (cf. Achino-Loeb 2006:2–3).

Other contemporary ethnographers have also used the shadow – as an image (e.g., Stoller and Olkes 1987; Liu 2000; Bluebond-Langner 2000) or tool (e.g., Das and Poole 2004:30; Frank 2000; Behar 1993; Crapanzano 1992) – to write about less perceivable issues. Like most of them, we use the shadow to trouble the topic under study, and not necessarily to dig out something to be found under the surface of appearances.

The notion of the shadow brings attention to field experiences and sometimes troubling field relationships of which the author and researcher is an important part. These may involve the ethnographer herself as a source of illumination, or unwittingly, of obstruction to knowledge. They may
address the partial or complete “blindness” of the observer, as many of the articles in this volume do. Like Schlemihl with his shadow, ethnographers of this volume are inextricably tied to their research, their own shadows inevitably infusing the subjects they study. This delicate matter of bringing the author/observer into the analysis – as a source of light but not as the light itself (as sometimes happens in autoethnographies), as directly related to the object under study but not the object itself – forms the blurred borders between ethnography and life.

The Blurred Borders between Ethnography and the Ethnographer’s Life

This volume was inspired by the quandary one of us (Athena McLean) faced when studying a topic (nursing home care) that mirrored events in her own life with her mother. She found it increasingly difficult to separate personal sentiments and experiences from her research, and gradually came to value not doing so. Her personal involvement gave her privileged access to some data, while simultaneously blinding her to other data – and inflected her findings, questions, and interpretations. Delicate matters such as shame, fear, or mourning had to be dealt with as “rationalized emotions” (cf. Miceli 2004).

McLean invited Annette Leibing to join her in exploring similar epistemological challenges in the work of other scholars. Leibing suggested extending our scope to yet broader shadows. Together we invited several anthropologists and one historian of medicine to consider examining the shadow sides of their own research. We were surprised by the enthusiastic answers we received, although some colleagues showed hesitation, fearing implications on their professional lives: the margins of fieldwork seem to trouble a number of people, but for very different reasons, as the essays in this volume show. As Michel Foucault (2000) observed:

> Every time I have tried to do a piece of theoretical work it has been on the basis of elements of my own experience: always in connection with processes I saw unfolding around me. It was always because I thought I identified cracks, silent tremors, and dysfunctions in things I saw, institutions I was dealing with, of my relations with others, that I set out to do a piece of work, and each time was partly a fragment of autobiography. [p. 458; quoted in Davies et al. 2004]

Why not, we wondered, address these “cracks” and “dysfunctions” directly? The resulting contributions, though varied in subject matter and theoretical focus, bring the personal to bear on epistemological and ethical
challenges in fieldwork. Many of the writers recognize the elusive character of some of their field encounters. Several admit uncertainties about the phenomena they encounter, or acknowledge possible distortions or misrepresentations in their interpretations. All the writers appreciate the complexity of the world as a source of potentially renewable understanding that their shadows may hold, as well as the “partial nature” of what can be known (Achino-Loeb 2006:14). Part of what we have called “relational” in fieldwork is the product of dialogue and intersubjective encounters. Various degrees of intimacy, empathy, intuition, reflexivity, and self-disclosure are at stake, problematizing the researcher in relation to her ethnographic data. These issues, faced by the contributors of this volume, have a long history in anthropology. Before discussing the articles, let’s turn to that history.

**Anthropologists’ Selves in the Field**

British social anthropology was fashioned as a social science that sought generalizable truth. Anthropologists sorted through their collected data to find regularities and cohesion in the confusion wrought by colonialism, and reported these in finished texts, undisturbed by personal sentiment. By the early part of the 20th century in the United States, however, anthropology had borne a distinctively Boasian appreciation for uniqueness and historical complexity. Drawing from his training in German romantic idealism and materialism (Stocking 1974), Boas’s science had antipositivist leanings that permitted, even sometimes encouraged, personal reflection in his students (Frank 2000:95).^5^ However, after World War II, and especially after the 1950s, demands for a neutral, value-free research in the social sciences had strengthened (Callaway 1992:38) also in the United States. It was now incumbent upon the anthropologist to remain a neutral detached observer, all while coming to terms with the very sentient, intersubjective demands of her or his practice. Renegade outlets for creative expressions, such as Laura Bohannan’s legendary novel, *Return to Laughter* (1954, *nom de plume*, Eleanor S. Bowen), conveyed suppressed sentiments and personal anecdotes that were disallowed as messy, too soft and “feminine” (Bruner 1993:5), or ambiguous (Callaway 1992:39) for the largely male-fashioned, acceptable, academic venue. It was no wonder that only toward the end of her career did Hortense Powdermaker (1967) venture to incorporate autobiographical material in her writing. The strictures were such that even a deeply reflective researcher like Barbara Myerhoff (1974, 1979) believed her works were not fully anthropological (Callaway 1992:32–33). During this resolutely modernist
period, the subjective voice of the researcher was generally confined to nontraditional literary forms (e.g., poetry) or to journalism (e.g., Herskovitz and Victor Turner) (Poewe 1996:195; Asad 1973), or remained part of the writer’s memoirs or private writing, as earlier with Malinowski.

The same period, however, wrought an abundance of “self-reflexive” (Clifford 1986:14), confessional field accounts, produced as separate entities from the finished scientific ethnography (Marcus and Fischer 1986:33–34). Many of these personal accounts were written by women (often themselves professionally trained) like Edith Turner or Marjorie Shostak, whose anthropologist husbands wrote the traditional ethnography (Callaway 1992:31; Bruner 1993:5). The recognition of a gendered differentiation of labor in the field, however, may have led some women to reflect on what it means to be a woman in the field (e.g., Golde 1986 [1970]).

**Ethnography’s reflexive turn**

This reflection about field experiences was further bolstered by a growing crisis in anthropology. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, critics of postcolonial anthropology began to question anthropology’s involvement as a neutral bystander in colonialism. Disenchanted with the discipline’s continued reliance on objectivist approaches to studying politically disadvantaged “others” (Asad 1973), they turned anthropology’s gaze onto itself. These critics challenged anthropology’s claims as an objective value-free social science and critically examined the political and personal consequences (e.g., Hymes 1974[1972]; Diamond 1974[1972]) of such a stance. By calling for a corrective “reflexive and critical anthropology,” one critic, Bob Scholte (1974[1972]), turned attention to the subjectivities of both the ethnographer and the “native” as inseparable from the processes of knowledge production.

Scholte urged that ethnographic descriptions could no longer be accepted as givens, captured by “objective” trained observers but, drawing on hermeneutics, argued that they must be seen as the products of “interpretive” activities that rest in “communicative interaction” (pp. 440–441) and “empathetic appreciation” (p. 449). This required a kind of self-understanding (see also Diamond 1974[1972]:409–413) that could only be produced in relation to others. But for this group of critics, reflexivity was a “necessary, though not sufficient” part of a larger political and, given the period, “emancipatory” (pp. 446–449) anthropological praxis.

A few years later, reflexive ethnographies (e.g., Rabinow 1977; Dumont 1978; Crapanzano 1980) ushered in an “experimental” moment (cf. Marcus and Fischer 1986) with postmodern texts that accommodated the ethnographer’s personal reflections as well as his or her dialogue with interlocutors.