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essay on the complex ethnographic balance between proximity and distance (Elias, 1993) thus allows us to better understand the stakes and shapes of the fieldwork relationships in which ethnographers navigate both as participants and observers.

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(Auto)ethnography and the Access to Others' Experiences: Positioning, Moving, Surpassing yourself

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“More than the analysis of oppression or the sense of duty toward the oppressed the core political experience of our generation may well have been to go on such a voyage, discovering for ourselves this recognizable foreignness, this shimmering of life” (Rancière, 2003, p. 2). While the voyage mentioned by Rancière could be likened to ethnographic work, several questions are hard to figure out regarding what the voyager can do with this ‘political experience’ once back home, and how (s)he could produce knowledge from it. Beyond the journey itself, ‘hearing someone else’s voice’ undoubtedly embodies “one of the main purposes and one of the main issues of writing or of qualitative description” (Moriceau, 2018, p. 109). A voyage in itself. Accordingly, it seems that trying to ‘understand man by all of his experiences and achievements’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1984) cannot be limited to having *been there* (Watson, 1999).

This paper proposes to return to the ethnographic study I carried out during my PhD thesis, which dealt with the

manufacture of powerlessness in the mining industry and, more particularly, to the steps and difficulties that have punctuated my own accession to others’ experiences – in this case, the Indonesian communities living in the vicinity of the mine studied. Ethnography enabled me to relate “the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred” (Watson, 2011, pp. 205–206). It paved the way to my understanding the “how and why” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 219) of the domination mechanisms at play between the representatives of Western transnational companies and indigenous communities. However, it was also autoethnography – challenging, tough, and rather unflattering (Jones, 2005) – and an exploration of the “reflexive connection between the researcher’s and participants’ lives” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30) that, in the end, allowed me to necessary and salutary surpassing of myself in aid of the translation of the words and pains collected on the way of my fieldwork.

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This contribution therefore takes the form of a personal narrative, one of the autoethnographic types highlighted by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and which Alexander (2005, p. 431) defines as the “critical autobiographical stories of lived experience.” Blending a personal journey and academic analysis (Burnier, 2006), I narrate the work required to access others’ experiences, as well as to consent to understand it. In addition, submitting myself to “personal criticism” (Miller, 1991, p. 1), I have tried to transcribe the “multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis, 1999, p. 673) that helped me to construct the knowledge project on powerlessness, and enabled me to shake the story up and “put meanings in motion” (Bochner, 2012, p. 157). More particularly, I highlight the necessarily tumultuous and uncomfortable nature of the relationship between how the positioning I had *vis-à-vis* my fieldwork was transformed and how my interpretation of the situation, once placed under scrutiny, evolved accordingly. First, I focus on the inception of my research work, characterized by my determination to *position myself* in what I believed was *neutrality*. I thus opted, at the time, to study how indigenous communities, whose living environment was greatly threatened by the creation of the mine, came to accept it (1). Second, I relate how my immersion in my field of studying a mining community in Indonesia led me to engage my body and emotions in the situation. This allowed me to gradually *move myself* and, unwittingly, *project* my own singular experience on the case under scrutiny. Immersed in this field and living through a turbulent and emotionally intense time, my body prevented me from understanding the voices of others. My own sense-making process obliged me to think that, given their precarious living conditions, the local community had no other choice but to accept the mining project (2). Third, I describe the state of grace that allowed me to *surpass myself*. Thanks to work on *translation*, which later proved to have been of paramount importance, I was able to take a distance and access the words and hardships of the people I studied. It paved the way for me to access the other’s experience, others’ experiences. I had been able to accept the storyline that I had been told from the beginning, that is, a story of lies and violence, a story of oppression and suppression, a story of anger of multiple contestations and manufactured powerlessness, and a myriad of stories, but not a story of acceptance: certainly not (3)!

Positioning myself on ‘neutral’ ground: ‘They accepted’

When I decided to study the corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices deployed by a French multinational for its project to mine a tract of Indonesian tropical forest inhabited by indigenous communities since time immemorial, I already knew that my research would not end up as an ode to the company’s management tools. Although presented as exemplary, the Weda Bay Nickel project (WBN) was part a mining industry

that depletes natural resources and marks miners’ bodies for life, generating occupational accidents, illnesses, and multiple conflicts. So, I wondered what these CSR practices looked like to the eyes of the local communities. What were the textures of the corporate representatives’ discourses promoting win-win development schemes for the Weda Bay inhabitants living on the frontline of WBN. I used to introduce myself as a ‘critical management scholar’ wanting to integrate the stakeholders’ largely marginalized voices into my analysis, that is, the “demand side of sustainability” (Banerjee, 2011, p. 722). However, despite my declaration of intent for a critical and political research agenda, I was largely imbued with the idea that I had to comply with Bloor (1976)’s argument for symmetry and, above all, to remain neutral. I decided therefore to study a contemporary mining project, admittedly contested by environmental NGOs, but also presented as ‘exemplary’ and backed by ‘concrete’ and ‘substantive’ CSR actions. This choice was almost conscious, inasmuch as I was certainly trying to soften the radical side of my knowledge project by sheltering behind a quest for ‘complexity’ so as to counter reductionism and Manichaeism and comply with Weber (1965, p. 399)’s ‘axiological neutrality’ – tenets that I had then only partly understood. As a researcher, I felt like a free spirit whose purpose was to collect the broadest set of standpoints to transcribe them as accurately as possible. I wanted to explore them all. To give them the same space and the same benefit of the doubt. At this stage of my research, my initial aim to voice the voiceless involved figuring out why *they* accepted the WBN project.

As I was preparing my trip to Weda Bay, I interviewed numerous people and collected large amounts of secondary data. The discourses of both the company and NGO networks helped me to discover an environmental protest involving Paris, Jakarta, and Washington. The protests were from national and international NGOs and a grassroots social movement triggered by local activist networks. Yet, the local communities’ acceptance of the WBN project reduced these protests to nothing. Seen from here, from my office in France, the information I was collecting in French and English signaled: “they had accepted.” I thus decided to try and understand how and why the local communities had accepted the mining project, marking the beginning of a disaster that local and international NGOs announced as inevitable. How and why were they surrendering to what the NGOs presented as the worst-case scenario – bartering their ancestors legacy and their children’s future? Just for money? Because of greed, ignorance, and stupidity, as some would have thought? Really? I decided to move myself to this distant Indonesia so as to apprehend their words in the same way as those of NGOs and MNC representatives or CSR reports. Also voice the voiceless. Comprehend the means and causes of the success of so-called ‘development.’ Grasp this implacable process whereby ancestral cultures and endemic ecosystems were to be swallowed up. Establish

access to the members of the Sawai community, who inhabit the coastal villages coveted by WBN and live off small farming and fishing. My move to this far-off Indonesia aimed to collect their words and inform the enormous paradoxes of the situation when it was viewed from afar:

Moving myself into the mining field at the risk of projecting: 'They had no choice'

Through my immersion in the environment of Weda Bay, located on Halmahera Island in the remote Indonesian province of North-Maluku, I discovered a territory left behind by development. On contact with the indigenous communities affected by the launch of the mine, I began to enter the frame. I went up and down their dangerous roads, shared their meals, experienced their precarious living conditions, saw how vulnerable they were to unexplained illness, wildfires, and the natural elements. Be it in their rudimentary homes, on their small motorcycles or pirogues, I met the members of this community and their universe of meaning through different lenses. In the course of my fieldwork, my person and body, along with their limits, became engaged in the situation. My search for observations, field notes, records, and verbatim accounts gradually turned into thrills and conflicting feelings. During the first days, my encounters and interviews were still colored by my determination to remain 'neutral.' I did my best to monitor Subhan, my guide and translator; trying by any means to pressure him into complying with what I believed to be the right position. In a context where I did not know or understand anything, I was prescribing. When he interfered in interviewees' comments – for example, talking too much for my liking and possibly influencing the respondents – or when he selected which replies he would translate or not, I silently fumed against him, cursing, explicitly citing the replies that I expected him to translate. I did my best to pressure him into complying with the ideal image of the researcher who, during interviews, is able to marshal qualities such as neutrality, cleverness and relevance, self-effacement, and a firm but discreet hand. Subhan listened to me patiently, with smiling eyes, and continued as if nothing had happened. These first moments allowed us to build up a common grammar; a mutual understanding about our differences and our respective expectations. We soon became friends and as I shared the fieldwork with him and exposed my emotions and my corporeality to his reality, this compelled me to change and move forward.

I have fond memories of a situation that happened 9 days after my arrival in Weda Bay. It allowed me to gauge the intensity of the fieldwork I was experiencing and the changes I was subject to because of it. I was about to meet the manager of the only resort on Halmahera Island, where the WBN project was setting up. A single night in the resort cost €100, equivalent to 1.5 million Indonesian rupees or 1 month of a good local salary; almost a fortune. The Western clients who arrived

there straight from the airport in an impressive 4 × 4 were there for the diving and had no interaction with the local community. The friendship I was nurturing with Subhan, his wife, and family meant that I could spend no time there, be it only one night. It would have created too wide a gap between us. Nevertheless, we were both interested in going there to interview the manager of the resort.

We had already visited several villages and islands mostly by motorcycle driving along submersible and almost impracticable roads right in the middle of a tropical forest, a vast lush jungle. More than 10 h of riding were needed to go around all the villages affected by the mining project to meet the whole range of stakeholders, and each of our trips had proved difficult. The day before our meeting at Weda Bay resort was rainy and our motorbike skidded dragging us down on the ground – Subhan, my 20 kg backpacks and myself. We lost our balance when Subhan accelerated to jump over a stony, slippery mound covered with piles of fallen rocks that served as a road. My foot was twisted and stuck in the spokes of the rear wheel and the motorcycle had fallen on top of me. I remained on the ground for quite some time, and my foot stuck and squashed under the weight of my two backpacks. I was scared that something was broken. We were 2 h from Weda, in the jungle, night was falling and it was pouring with rain. The nearest hospital was at least 8 h away. Subhan tried to pull me out forcefully before realizing my foot was still stuck between the spokes. Though 3 years later my leg still has a small scar, my wound was superficial and we rode on quickly. I got a grip on myself. I was physically affected for the first time. Over the 8 days I had already spent in Weda Bay, my body had felt different from the one I was used to. It had seemed totally indifferent to stiffness, my stomach had easily digested the food I ate, I was never ill, never tired, not eating too much of the spicy food, drinking the same water as everyone else, smoking a lot, as everyone else. My body had never betrayed me. It had had no choice – we had supported each other from the start.

This fall was the first sign of my weakness and I could not hide it: I had to sit down to overcome my fear. It was the most serious injury I had ever known and I was ashamed that I could not cope with it. The exhaust pipe of the motorbike had also burnt Subhan, but we did not even allude to it – his legs were already entirely criss-crossed with scars from a previous much more serious fall. The next day we were to interview the manager of the resort but the road was too risky for the motorcycle, so Subhan decided to take a pirogue. This was a small motorized boat that he rented, a kind of dugout tree trunk that did not inspire me with great confidence. We travelled in the company of the boat owner's two teenage sons. We made a halt to fish for our lunch. I did not catch anything, but we grilled and shared their meager catches in a cave before continuing to the resort. Unfortunately, the manager was absent and we returned empty-handed. But in the meantime, I had

been suddenly extracted from the situation and forced to distance myself.

The resort comprised several independent wooden bungalows close to the jungle and the water's edge. Hammocks were hanging in front of the bungalows we passed. After walking down a well-kept path, we arrived in a wide open room looking out onto the bay. The view was splendid. This room was the resort's dining room, sober, and grand at the same time, exuding a Zen atmosphere and comfort. A young woman, seemingly barely younger than me, welcomed us. She was elegant, in a lovely skirt and beige blouse, and spoke English fluently. She took care of me with deference, making me feel that she regarded me as a 'white' guest. But I was struck by her questioning eyes. She asked a waitress to serve us something to drink and eat. In my Bermuda shorts and a stained, quite unbecoming tee shirt, I realized that I was starving, soaked, and that my leg was bandaged with a dirty plaster. She insisted on seating me on a huge sofa that I was afraid of dirtying. Subhan was looking at me, smiling and inviting me to make the most of the free feast they were giving. I stood there, frozen, and slightly ashamed. They were all eating and chatting. They came from very different backgrounds. She was from another province and had graduated in vocational hospitality. Subhan kindly teased her about the fact she, like its clients, had never been to the villages adjoining the resort. 'You must pay us a visit!', he jokingly concluded. The trouble and embarrassment I felt, like after my motorbike fall, brought me closer to the bay's inhabitants, some of them at least. To return from the resort, we had to row for hours under rain and lightning as the boat's small engine had broken down. Sharing these experiences with them drew me closer to them and I became their 'sista buleh' (foreign sister). My small injuries and big fears were both subjects of the stories that made me accepted.

As a result, I was moving away from my original position of neutrality, getting closer, siding with the inhabitants of the bay. Even so, moving myself involved a pitfall that was probably necessary to confront. My physical and emotional experiences in this situation acted as a catalyst for me to *project* my own feelings onto how I interpreted the situation and the actors' behaviors. The ethnographic experience had a strong impact on my personal feelings, encouraging me to analyze the pain and words I encountered in the field through my body and my experiences of this otherworldliness. I threw myself into the role of righter-of-wrongs. While I came to understand the 'how' of their acceptance of the mining project, I then tried to explain the 'why' of this acceptance. In fact, it was impossible to conceive that they had sold their lands for a crust of bread without understanding the precarity of their living conditions. Generally speaking, my reasoning relied on the assumption that this precarity left them no other choice but to accept the meager crumbs of so-called 'development' and that everyone would have done the same in their shoes. Like causes

having like effects, I felt it necessary to differentiate between acceptance and evil, the easy option and absolute necessity, or the aspiration to a better life. My anger was sincere, my feeling of powerlessness at a peak, and I was unaware of the condescension I was showing. I now realize, with astonishment, that the belief that 'they had no choice' was imbued with a kind of ethnocentrism, and that this belief was certainly one of the most powerful allies of the so-called 'development' that was eroding ancestral cultures and tropical forests through a violence that I needed time to think about.

Surpassing myself thanks to translation: 'They had never accepted'

A sense-making process of several months, bringing its share of troubles, extended the field of ethnography I was exploring. I returned confused, my only truth being the impenetrable veil that had thus far covered my taken-for-granted certitudes. Several months after my return home, comfortably seated at my desk and looking through my field notes, interview records, and photos, the contradictory emotions I had felt in the field surged up intact and intensely disturbing. I had gone there to voice the voiceless but discovered that a huge gulf exists between claiming to receive otherness and being able to comprehend or decipher it. I was reaching my intellectual limits. I became aware of my unexpected preconceptions and was totally shaken up. Making sense of the rupture that the ethnographic experience had caused in my research, challenging body and mind, meant that I needed to deconstruct the things I was taking for granted to gain access to the meanings that the inhabitants of the bay had tried to pass on. I had to surpass myself and to put myself outside the situation so that I could, more than voicing the voiceless, accept their participation in the sense-making process and remain open to their experience.

I then decided to start a collaboration of several months with a qualified translator, Fanny. This aimed to translate some of the interviews recorded in distant Indonesia – initially roughly interpreted from Indonesian to English by Subhan – and the written documents I had laid hands on while I was there. More than 1 year after my return from the field, I was finally grasping what the locals had said and explained to me. Their reasoning, logics, and pain were reaching me. Going there and understanding what they allowed me to see finally turned out to be two entirely different steps, separated by more than 1 year. The language played an obvious but incomplete role. If I had spoken Indonesian, I would have understood words, even sentences, but not all the sentences, given that Indonesia encompasses thousands of regional languages. Fanny did much more than translate words and sentences. She helped me to reduce the distance: listening to the stories I was telling her; crying with me, explaining to me what she understood of my experience, discussing some of my misunderstandings, some of my discomfort

in certain situations. She told me that she herself had done research in Indonesia and expressed her amazement at the quality and depth of the data I had been able to collect. She helped me to understand the codes that existed in the rooms where I had been, totally unaware of their presence. Subhan had helped me to open the doors and had accompanied me to the Weda bay, while Fanny helped me to surpass the role of righter-of-wrongs and distance myself in order to enter an understanding of others' experiences. This very gradual surpassing of what I had lived, which took a whole year, allowed me to challenge most of my preconceptions and accept that understanding the unfamiliar, even incompletely, takes time.

A group interview I realized in Weda Bay haunted me for a long time. I was interviewing several inhabitants who had agreed to sell their lands. The tension was palpable. My attention had been utterly absorbed by the interviewees' conflicting views: one woman felt cheated at the sale of her land and was crying her eyes out because her subsistence farming had disappeared leaving her unable to feed her children; one man had also sold his land, he had been paid, but the amount received did not allow him to finish building a house, he had no land left to sell and the job he was waiting for might never come; another had also agreed to sell his land, he had seen his land disappear and had been waiting for over a year for the promised compensation; two men had agreed to sell and were outraged that they still had land and still no money. After leaving this group interview with Subhan, we reached the troubling conclusion that if these people listened to one another, they would realize that their positions – especially their acceptance of selling their lands – made no sense. It took me more than 1 year to understand that I was the one who had not listened to them, despite my desire to comprehend them and what lay underneath their words. I had failed to take into account the unity of their respective accounts and the cement allowing their coexistence: anger, powerlessness, and a strong feeling of injustice. Finally, my sophisticated analysis had been my best shield against the violence of clearly assessing how the local inhabitants' needs had been crushed, against the demonstration that nothing was or could have been expressed, discussed, or able to change. They had never accepted. My fieldwork narrated a story of violence, of forced destructions, of fierce social protests crushed by a juggernaut MNC armed with paramilitary groups, supported by local authorities, some of them corrupt, all of them committed to the cause of the so-called development. I discovered a mining project that did not provide many jobs for local communities, which was destroying their 'life spaces' despite local protests, billboards, official complaints, and accounts of a 6-year struggle. I met people who had accepted nothing save the idea of future prosperity. People who, on unequal terms, had struggled, surpassed, and transformed themselves to denounce injustice and claim their right to a different and better life, to more. People

who had purely and simply been crushed by the cogs of the WBN machine, its multifaceted power, and the panoply of means it had at its disposal.

To conclude, I discovered that the ethnographic experience revolves around a process of positioning, moving, surpassing one's self – which is a prerequisite – taking into account the troubles and discomforts that mark the passage from one step to another. All of this is vital if the researcher wishes to be capable of "making the personal political" (Jones, 2005, p. 783), that is, being able to access others' experiences and make 'words matter' inasmuch as they might 'change the world'.

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