

## Tasking Students With Empathy: Field Observations, COVID-19, and Assessing an Anthropological Sensibility

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### Abstract:

In 2019 and 2020 students in an Australian university undertook a short ethnographic exercise; an observation-based ‘journal’, with an attunement to the multiplicity of meanings evident in a single space by a range of interlocutors. We emphasised and assessed ‘empathy’, as a short-hand for the kind of anthropological sensibility we hoped to encourage. By requesting an account that represented an awareness of how ‘others’ encounter and come to ‘know’ the world we promoted their adoption of a modality central to the discipline of anthropology. We wanted them to describe the world—the terrain, the stuff of their surroundings—based on their observations of how these others behaved. To couch it in anthropological terms, we wanted them to be attuned to a multiplicity of ‘tasksapes’, Ingold’s term for the mutual constitution of people and places through culturally, politically, economically, and spiritually informed actions (‘tasks’) (Ingold, 1993). These ‘tasksapes’ were illustrated through the work of McKee (2016), whose account of multiple simultaneous experiences in the Negev desert represented an unexperienced domain for most of the Australian students. Rather than reinforcing the dated notion that anthropology is something that is done ‘elsewhere’, by asking students to focus on anthropology ‘at home’ they embodied their understanding of a transferable concept—introduced via McKee’s example—through a locally embedded experience. This paper describes the delivery of this assignment in 2019 and 2020 and explores in detail the content of five student journals (included in the Special Section) and their evidence of the targeted learning.

**Keywords:** Empathy; Modality; Ethnographic fieldwork; Tasksapes; Anthropology at Home; Environmental Anthropology, Pedagogy

### Introduction

Professor Paige West has argued the importance of going beyond teaching students “*about* culture”, and stressed the need to help them “to think anthropologically” (West, 2021). In this paper we outline an assignment in which we unpack that skill, capacity, and methodological approach by giving students the task of capturing an ethnographic experience with a focus on empathy. We use the term ‘empathy’ as a short-hand for the modality, or way of being in the world, that we ask our undergraduate students to bring to both their research and their writing. By requesting an empathetic account, we ask them to ‘stand in another’s shoes’, to see things from a different point of view and perceive the world through another’s eyes. Along with these ethnographic mainstays of defamiliarisation we wanted them to describe their worlds—the terrain, the environment, the stuff of their surroundings—based on *behaviour* as related to norms, to theory, and to their own relative experience as people inhabiting and ‘doing’ research in particular spaces. To couch it in anthropological terms, we wanted them to be attuned to a multiplicity of ‘tasksapes’, Ingold’s term for the mutual constitution of people and places through culturally politically, economically, and spiritually informed actions (‘tasks’) (Ingold, 1993). We present this assessment as a useful tool to ‘task empathy’ and encourage the kind of anthropological thinking that West promotes.

The assessment was targeted at undergraduate students at Deakin University, in Australia, in 2019 and 2020. While the impact of the global pandemic of Covid-19 is not ignored, the impact of the pandemic is not the focus of the paper. The core components of the paper proceed as follows. We describe the course (subject), *Environmental Anthropology*, including details of the student cohorts, the structure of content delivery and the literature highlighted in relation to the journal assessment. Next, the journal assignment instructions are presented along with supplementary resources, including the marking rubric that rewarded an ‘ethical’ approach to fieldwork and a clear demonstration of an empathetic modality. We also reflect upon the submitted journals, including an account of the overall trends. We then undertake a close examination of five journals which demonstrate insight and nuance in their accounts and which illustrate the success of the teaching activity. The

submitted assignments are reproduced in the Special Section following this paper. This Special Section was developed in dialogue with the editors for a number of reasons. Firstly, to provide concrete examples of the link between assessment instructions and the resulting student pieces. Second, to honour the autonomous integrity of the student papers and the empathetic fieldwork that informed these contributions. Thirdly, while a pedagogy predicated on embodied spatialised practice in anthropology has been theorised (see Morreira, Taru and Truys, 2020) its benefits may be exemplified through student publication. We conclude by reflecting upon the value of this assignment, both to anthropology students and to all those with whom we hope to share a future characterised by empathy.

## **Impacts of Covid-19**

2020 posed a range of difficulties for tertiary students, from illnesses and deaths among friends and family, to job losses, and a general anxiety associated with trying to concentrate on their studies while negotiating a global pandemic. While students in many parts of the world faced challenges at the scale of survival (either of themselves or their family members), the biggest impacts faced by Australian students have tended to be financial, in terms of job losses, and corporeal and mental, in terms of limitations to their movement by a number of government imposed 'lockdowns'.

Deakin University is located in the state of Victoria, which experienced a 'first round' of COVID-19-related closures and lockdowns in March, 2020. A second wave of infections in June, just before the beginning of the relevant teaching period, prompted several months of Stage 4 restrictions in metropolitan Melbourne that impacted 60% of students enrolled in *Environmental Anthropology*<sup>1</sup>. Under Stage 4 lockdown citizens were limited to one hour of outside recreation time per day, and were not permitted to travel more than 5km from their home. An additional 28% of the 2020 cohort were registered as living in rural and regional Victoria where Stage 3 restrictions applied. Although these restrictions were not as severe as those faced by students living in greater Melbourne, limitations were still placed on travel and activity. A further 12% of students were located either interstate or overseas where various restrictions were in place.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly every journal in 2020 made mention of COVID-19 and the physical limitations under which their observations took place. In the case of those subject to a travel limitation (particularly those under Stage 4 restrictions), many noted that they were encountering their chosen observation-space for the first time, and only because they were compelled to take notice of areas within the 5km lockdown radius.

While recognising that Australia has so far not suffered (in terms of infections and deaths) from the COVID-19 pandemic to the extent experienced in countries with comparable tertiary systems, the emotional impact on students and staff during this period was considerable. Deakin University only conducted one week of face-to-face teaching throughout 2020, with the remainder of classes being offered online. The lack of social contact for students was evident in a spike in requests for extensions, withdrawals from study, and a marked increase in the pastoral care required of staff. Many staff, including the authors, were facing their own lockdown anxieties, including home-schooling small children, and being unable to travel to their home country or hometown, while trying to meet increased teaching responsibilities, workplace restructures, and unrelenting research demands.

## **Environmental Anthropology**

*Environmental Anthropology* was first offered in 2007 and ran to 2020. Students who studied *Environmental Anthropology* attended a one-hour lecture plus a one-hour tutorial per week. In 2019 most teaching was conducted on campus. Through its 'Cloud Campus' Deakin offers online learning. Students enrolled through this avenue have access to recordings of live lectures, and opportunity to attend a focused online tutorial. In 2020, very nearly all teaching was delivered via the online platform, Zoom. In addition to these lectures and tutorials students in both 2019 and 2020 were required to read one or two journal articles or book chapters per week, as well as a set of supplementary notes written by the teaching team that contextualised the lectures within the course, made links between sections, and offered intellectual support.

*Environmental Anthropology* was described in the Deakin University handbook as follows:

The unit explores the intersections that occur between philosophy, public policy and the 'natural environment' in different cultural settings. Beginning with an historical account of the development of philosophical attitudes towards the 'natural environment', the course proceeds to consider shifts in cultural and utilitarian relationships to the environment, and concludes with a discussion of contemporary issues in natural resource management and

environmental policy. While an important focus is on current trends in environmental philosophies and policies, close attention is given to the lived experiences of those involved in environmental issues, including indigenous groups, primary producers (farmers, fishers), scientists, natural resource managers and policy makers. This unit thus offers a philosophically informed, yet practically grounded perspective for those studying environmental management, those interested in broad, philosophical debates about the environment, as well as those with a general interest in environmental issues.

As the course had no prerequisites, the students who enrolled in *Environmental Anthropology* came from a range of disciplines, not only those majoring in anthropology. Presumably enticed by the title, the course attracted students seeking an elective subject to complement their environmental science or environmental management degree. In both 2019 and 2020 the majority of students (74% and 80% respectively) were enrolled in Arts degree programmes. 2020 saw 19% of students coming from Environmental Science programmes compared to 10% in 2019. A handful of students in 2020 joined from Teaching, Law, and Health Sciences (16 in total) and in 2020 only one psychology student joined the course from beyond Arts and environmental science.

Introduced in 2019, the observation-focused journal assignment ran for the final two years of the course, and was developed in response to provocations in a new key text: Emily McKee's *Dwelling in Conflict: Negev Landscapes and the Boundaries of Belonging* (2016). The book, and the course as a whole, was informed by several anthropological concepts. Emphasised through the dedication of an entire week of the course, students encountered the work of Mary Douglas and particularly her notion of pollution and 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2003). Through reference to McKee's text, and via emphasis in the supplementary text, students were also encouraged to reflect on Ingold's notion of the taskscape. Although the journal was not due until the end of the teaching period students were directed to the relevance of the taskscape in the second week of class. The concept is introduced as one emergent in dialogue among various scholars who each put their own spin on the concept (e.g. McCay, 2019, p. xvi), just as a 'scape' (see Appadurai 1990) is realised through the tasks of various individuals and groups. In McKee's words (McKee, 2016, p. 12):

The dwelling perspective elaborated by Tim Ingold (2000) focuses on the co-formation of inhabitants and landscapes by viewing landscapes as the products of ongoing 'tasksapes.' Tasks are particular acts of dwelling—whether explicitly work, like plowing or hammering, or simply walking—and an ensemble of tasks constitutes a taskscape. A landscape, then, is never static; it is constantly reshaped through the tasks of dwelling.

We provide students with Ingold's account of the term (Ingold, 1993, p. 154), and explore his influences including Bourdieu (1977), Gell (1992), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Heidegger (1971). In relation to the latter, we pivot again to describe how McKee and others (e.g. Musharbash, 2009, p. 4) have applied Heidegger's ideas directly to an appreciation of their own ethnographic worlds. In this way we stress the dynamic and immediate quality of theory and the way it generates meaning and nuance in particular ethnographic contexts. We lead the students through this exploration gently, and with an awareness that many have never studied anthropology before. For example, a section of the assignment instructions posted online reads like this:

If this all seems a little perplexing, stick with it. This may be a very different way of looking at the world than you've encountered before. Ingold (and McKee, and Bourdieu, and Heidegger) are all talking about the way in which a place can mean different things to different people, and that this is informed by what people *do* in that place.

One of the clearest examples of the way in which different kinds of dwelling—building, thinking—can happen in the same place, is presented in the chapter McKee entitles, 'Bridge'. Here she presents two very different understandings of the same space, as experienced by Sarah and Gil.

McKee's 'Bridge' chapter is one that we came back to repeatedly and emphasised in our discussions of *Dwelling in Conflict*. The chapter is described in a book review written by the lecturer and provided to the students as part of their introduction to the text (King, 2018, p. 934):

In the chapter labelled, 'Bridge', McKee describes her experience in the ambiguous space that lies between the two townships where she lived during her fieldwork: 'Ayn al-'Azim, a Bedouin village, and Moshav Dganim, a Jewish settlement. The abandoned borderland is known as "the wadi", a term that denotes a seasonal riverbed, but which holds various other meanings for Bedouin and Jewish visitors. McKee details her visit to the wadi with Sarah, an Arab culture worker who was leading a group of children on an excursion designed to experience and evoke nature as well as to revitalize memories of Bedouin dwelling. She contrasts this trip with another she took with Gil, a Jewish police officer, who depicts the space as part of a broader structure designed to bound and protect Jewish Israelis from Bedouin Arabs. Though only eleven pages long, the Bridge provides one of the most evocative

contrasting of taskscapes in the book, illustrating how different experiences of the same landscape can be differently realized.

Throughout the trimester, this chapter was suggested to confused students as a model for the kind of comparison they were expected to produce for their journal.

### **Instructions, rubrics and additional resources**

We turn now to the formal journal instructions provided for students, which embedded the assignment thoroughly in the anthropological literature from the beginning<sup>3</sup>:

On page 12, McKee writes:

‘A landscape, then, is never static; it is constantly reshaped through the tasks of dwelling’.

These words are written as part of a discussion about ‘dwelling’ and ‘taskscapes’. Essentially, McKee is talking about an idea that is central to her book: a particular place, or environment, can come to mean something different to those who use it, who act within it, or labour within it, in different ways. Further than that, the point is that these spaces are what they are—they come *to be*, ontologically—something on the basis of what a protagonist does in that space. A landscape is not, therefore, simply a place to be observed objectively by someone (perhaps a scientist with a really big microscope). The notion of ‘landscape’ is not really accurate at all. Rather, the world is made up of a range of ‘taskscapes’, or places that are *performed into being* by the actions of those to whom they are salient, relevant, meaningful. The spaces themselves become salient, relevant, meaningful, through a history of previous actions, both individual and collective, both personally experienced and historically documented.

But surely, you say, ‘landscapes’ *do* exist. We know what landscapes are, at least in theory. We can, after all, point to a ‘landscape painting’.

At this point the students were shown several artworks depicting Palestinian desert locales. The works were created by artists who could be attributed varying identities in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Students were asked to reflect upon the diversity of the images.

Reflect on the relationship between the image and the artist. I can tell you that there are two paintings by artists who identify on their profile websites as Israeli Jews, one by a German Jew, one by a Mizrahi Jew, and one by an Arab Palestinian. Can you match them to their depictions of the landscape? It doesn’t matter if you can’t; and I don’t want to stretch the analogy too far! The point is to note that the same place, the same space, can evoke quite different images for those who experience it differently.

The journal assignment for this course asks you to explore, in an embodied way, the concept that the ‘same’ place can mean—indeed, can *be*—multiple things on account of the diverse tasks that happen in that place; you’re asked to reflect on a single location as a series of ‘taskscapes’.

These instructions employed the use of artistic expressions of the same region in order to emphasise the subjective generation of meaning that occurs when different people interpolate the world. For the more advanced students, the ‘truth’ of these representations may illustrate Heidegger’s rejection of the aesthetic (Shaver, 1973); for those who were exploring this approach to the world for the first time, a more accessible idea is the notion that multiple artists—or perhaps the same artist—can depict the ‘same’ environment with a particular sensibility to produce sometimes starkly different pictures.

The practical instructions were as follows:

The assessment requires a stint of ethnographic fieldwork, or a data-gathering stage. Of course, this stage will need to be planned for in advance, and with considerable thought. It’s not something that is particularly onerous, but it will require careful time-management. It’s not an assignment that can be started the day before it is due! So, get thinking about—and doing—this assignment early!

Here’s what you need to do:

**Please keep in mind that all this must be done while adhering to the prevailing advice about COVID-19!**

- Procure a notebook and a pen or pencil. I prefer the small notepads that have a spiral at the top so that you can easily write on both sides of the paper. They’re also small enough to slip into a pocket or small bag.
- A camera (or your phone!).
- Keep your eye out for a space to observe. Discuss it with your tutor or Unit Chair, and/or your colleagues in this Unit.

- Observe a space being used by two or more groups (or individuals) in a way that makes that space meaningful in different ways according to the particular task being undertaken by each group. Go back over several visits if that seems helpful.
- Take notes for your own reference. Identify the activities being undertaken and how various parts of the space are (or are not) used. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What is the ‘vibe’ you get? Is it a space for transit, play, work, trade, meeting, consumption, reflection? Is it a space that can only be used in one way at a time, or can it simultaneously ‘be’ multiple spaces, invigorated, brought to life, by the different actions of the different groups? What do you think it means for each group? (Note that more than one bout of observation may be necessary to get all the data necessary to write your report).
- Write up your notes on the observation of the space. Be sure to include a description of the space itself, in YOUR own terms (the etic depiction), and include an image if appropriate, before turning to a description of how different groups use the space and generate meaning in and of that space (emic depiction).

Keep in mind that your assumptions about what the space ‘means’ to each group is going to be largely speculative, as you are not permitted to interview people. That’s ok. We’re not asking you to be mind-readers! This activity asks you to sit quietly and observe closely, with an eye to detail and nuance, to **empathise** with the perspective of another, and to try to convey what you’ve learned in a written form.

Students were provided with a copy of the marking rubric used to assess the journals, (see Appendix 1) as is common practice for each assignment given at Deakin. The highest marks under the rubric item, ‘Empathy’ read:

Nuanced description of two (or more) sets of activities in a place, with an insightful reflection on how these *activities* in the *space* coalesced to render that space a particular one for each group. Careful distinctions made between the ways in which the space came into being for each group, and convincing (perhaps evidence-based) speculation about what that space might ‘mean’ to each group.

As the due date for the assignment drew closer, the teaching staff fielded more questions from students. In 2019 many of these discussions took place during on-campus classes in a group setting, while in 2020 discussions about the journal occurred online. Students also emailed for advice (see Appendix 2 for example).

In the second iteration of the assignment, several extra resources were provided for students, including two examples of very good journals from 2019<sup>4</sup>, and a live discussion with Emily McKee herself. Another resource not available to the 2019 students was a mock journal written by the lecturer. The journal was then critiqued in a recorded video-discussion between the lecturer and the tutor, during which the latter explained precisely what they would be looking for when marking the student journals and their interpretation of the marking rubric.

## Student Results

Of the 52 students who completed the course in 2019, 46 journals were submitted and thus available for analysis. Of the 89 students who completed in 2020, 88 were submitted. Students studying in 2020 overall did better than those taking the course in 2019. A two-tailed t-test using  $\alpha = 0.05$  finds that this is a significant difference, with the t-value equalling -4.796. Breaking down the individual assessment items reveals that the essay marks were the only ones that did not show a significant increase from 2019 to 2020<sup>5</sup>, with the t-value equalling 0.0521. The increase in the average journal marks between 2019 and 2020 showed the strongest significance result, with a t-value of -6.04835, with the mean score increasing from 64% to 80%.

**Table 2.** Student overall results for course, as a percentage of total submissions.

Grade	2019	2020
>90%	2	8
80% > 89%	17	43
70% > 79%	44	34
60% > 69%	29	11
50% > 59%	8	4

Individual journals were analysed in NVivo 12 and coded for their location and site type, as well as for their application of theory from the course. It was noted whether or not the concept of the ‘taskscape’ was mentioned.

**Table 3.** Journal focus by topic, and theoretical engagement, as a percentage of total submissions.

2019				2020			
Features		Focus		Features		Focus	
International locations	7	Digital (e.g. Facebook)	2	International locations	2	Digital (e.g. Facebook)	0
Non-human perspective	4	Domestic (e.g. kitchen)	2	Non-human perspective	18	Domestic (e.g. kitchen)	13
Used Unit theory	43	Rural	15	Used Unit theory	69	Rural	14
Referenced 'taskscape'	9	Community space (e.g. library)	4	Referenced 'taskscape'	43	Community space (e.g. library)	2
		Beach	4			Beach	3
		Green space (e.g. park or nature reserve)	7			Green space (e.g. park or nature reserve)	5
		Urban	80			Urban	77
		Café, bar or eatery	7			Café, bar or eatery	1
		Community space	17			Community space	9
		Green space	30			Green space	52
		Road, carpark, public transport	13			Road, carpark, public transport	5
		Shopping precinct or mall	13			Shopping precinct or mall	5

Between 2019 and 2020 student use of course theory in the journals increased from 43% of submissions to 69%. Notably, referencing of the 'taskscape' concept increased from 9% to 43%. This increase in explicit linking of the theory and the ethnography can be linked to the significant rise in assignment results in 2020 via the marking rubric.

It is difficult to say for sure why this increase in theoretical engagement and student performance occurred. No doubt it was due to a number of factors, including additions to the instructions for students (e.g. example journals, mock assessment video), and more explicit verbal instructions in classes to link journal content back to the course theory. For some students, the closure of non-essential places of work due to Covid 19 may have also allowed more time to dedicate to their studies. Certainly, there was a sense that students engaged with the journal task with particular enthusiasm and aptitude in 2020; Truys noted to King in an email on the marking process: 'I'm dishing out firsts [high marks] like Halloween candy. ... A bunch of these deserve wider readership'. With our enthusiasm to share these student success stories we now turn to a close consideration of five student journals which are reproduced in full as an addendum to this article. Not all five journals showcased received high marks. Rather, these student papers demonstrate more than just an engagement with the course, but an articulation of the theoretical tools provided to their own observations. Most of all, these papers all showed an aptitude for empathy, which is so challenging to elicit in the classroom compared to the situated, embodied experience of observational research 'at home'.

### Discussion of five student assignment examples

Of the 134 journals that were submitted in the two years in which this assessment took place we have selected just five to illustrate the ways in which this assessment task elicited what we understand to be an empathetic anthropological sensibility from our students. While there were certainly a lot of green spaces explored and described, students also reported on their ethnographic encounters in a cemetery, a Covid-19 testing-site, a zoo, a building site, a suspension bridge, and a US Wasp class amphibious assault vessel. Though many excellent submissions could have been selected we have chosen a mixture of journals that capture both a variety of lessons from the course and diverse writing styles and competency. While the five papers are reproduced in full as anthropological texts in their own right within this Special Section, the following section explores the insights we saw in the journals while marking.

## **The dead centre of town: tribalism, dark tourism and the quest for belonging in post-earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand – Julius Skiba**

Skiba explores social encounters in the shadow of Christ Church Cathedral, Christchurch, New Zealand. The church was damaged extensively by the earthquakes of 2010–2011 and restoration activities are ongoing. The building and associated safety barriers have altered the flow of people through Cathedral Square and the surrounding businesses. Rather than interpreting the limited foot traffic as a result of the earthquake, Skiba digs deeper to explore the ‘social fault lines of a city with a well-known reputation for insularity’. Drawing a direct comparison to McKee’s description of the *wadi*, Skiba describes Cathedral Square as an ambivalent ‘buffer zone’ for local residents, who prefer to enact their social lives in the suburbs where their belonging is more meaningfully tethered to the high school they attended. He describes his own categorisation as an ‘outsider’ by locals as being based on his not attending high school in New Zealand. Skiba positions himself and other ‘outsiders’ in relation to their use of the Square. One category of ‘outsiders’ are the tourists, who consume the spectacle of destruction purposefully and briefly. Skiba includes himself in the other category of ‘outsiders’, the migrants who have ‘made their home in the city from all over the world’, and who are in a sense (re)building themselves as deliberately and obviously as the Christ Church itself. Skiba’s closing anecdote relates to one of the food truck vendors who seem to be the only permanent fixtures in the Square. He recounts an exchange with a Polish vendor whose ‘ambiguous place within Christchurch society [is reflected by] pierogi and kielbasa being paired with typical Kiwi fare of fish cakes, hamburgers and hot chips’. Their encounter in Cathedral Square is described as befitting and perhaps reinforcing of their betwixt social status as men of Polish heritage trying to make a home in Christchurch.

Like all good ethnography, Skiba’s description left us wanting more. His capacity to see the physical and social scenario and to look again for additional, intersecting and contradicting layers of meaning speaks to a deep capacity for anthropological observation. He takes a small space and single interaction and uses it as an analogy for a much broader social dynamic in which this event has rich meaning.

## **An observation of the street from my house to my workplace (mostly on Lygon Street) - Takeki Tanemura**

This marvellous journal captures the diverse and strategic rhythms of movement, pace and identity as people traverse a retail street in Melbourne. Tanemura describes his own use of Melbourne’s iconic Lygon Street as he rides his bike to work. In his careful attention to the way that his body moves in the space he notices the importance of both pedestrians, on one hand, and the state laws governing movement via the implementation of road rules and signs. The role of the law in shaping spaces and bodies was a key consideration of both the McKee text and the course as a whole, and Tanemura explores the legal structures that curb and enable movement of citizens who are defined as either pedestrians or cyclists. Evidently intrigued by the contrast between his role as a bike-rider and a pedestrian, Tanemura travels the same street on foot, noticing the ways his pedestrian body is shaped by bike-riders, cars and laws. Tanemura explains how people are able to manoeuvre strategically among the range of permissible roles—each permitting particular modes and paces of movement—as called forth by the dynamic streetscape. There is a sense in which this realisation occurred only through the process of the field experiment itself:

From the perspective of the cyclists, I have observed many cyclists who did not obey the law; by “transforming” themselves from being a cyclist to a pedestrian they turn the corner quicker. The “messy” behaviour of cyclists: (sometimes they ride on both pedestrian and car lane), points out their flexibility to be a pedestrian when they get off the bike.

I was waiting on the bike lane, wanting the traffic light to tell me that I could move. But then I realised that I could turn left if I got off the bike!

Tanemura’s deliciously rich description displays a keen attunement to the world. His curiosity and courage to fling together the acts of cycling and walking exploded these simple acts into something deeply generative and insightful. The journal demonstrates an awareness of the dynamic and mutually constituting construction of people and places that we explored in the course through the concept of ‘taskscape’.

## **The Forager's Drop – Matthew Davenport**

Studying in 2019, Davenport was able to choose a site for research that was not restricted by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown measures. He went to the pub. Davenport immerses himself in the site and observes the interactions of patrons over several visits. Through careful attention to the performances, the tasks, of those in The Foragers Drop, Davenport captures a key distinction in the way the site emerges for two groups of users: the 'local' and the 'visitor'.

Davenport immediately qualifies his labels by noting that these categories do not necessarily correlate with where people live relative to the pub. Rather, 'localness' is a marker of those who, through their regular patronage and accumulated experience with the place, staff and other patrons, have a tacit social permission to roam among all the domains of the pub, from the bar to the pool table and even into the professional space behind the bar. This 'permit' is evident not through any explicit marker or characteristic, but in their performance in the space, which Davenport so deftly observes:

'Localness' is like a VIP pass in the bar allowing access to all areas. Through observation it appears there are levels within 'localness', some locals are allowed permission to use the space behind the bar to charge phones or keep belongings such as handbags/shopping bags etc. they can access their belongings behind the bar at any time which gives off a feeling of importance and gives the perception of importance to those who are not granted this access.

The multiple observations, not just of the space but of performances in that space over time, allowed a nuanced and insightful account of how the relevance of 'imaginary barriers' swam in and out of focus. Davenport observes how the progress of the day, of alcohol consumption, and of intensifying gatekeeping by 'locals' as the night progresses, fortifies and brings into sharper view the boundaries and zones of potential conflict that subtly limit the ways in which visitors can exist in the space.

While this journal only refers in passing to the theoretical content of the course, the strength of the observation and the attunement to the dynamism of space itself is illustrated via the shifting 'tasks' and boundaries described.

## **The intersection – Kayla Watterson**

Watterson's journal is one of the five percent that focussed on a site classified in the 'road, carpark, public transport' category. The site – a T-intersection adjacent to a large shopping centre – is less than two kilometres (slightly more than one mile) from the Waurn Ponds campus of Deakin University, and is no doubt very familiar to both staff and students, particularly those who live in on-campus residential accommodation ('on res'). Rather than focussing on any of the salient locations in the shopping centre, or at the nearby aquatic centre, cinema, skate park or library, Watterson focusses on the transitory domain of the intersection itself. Like Tanemura, Watterson reflects on the ways in which state power is evident in the design and use of the space, describing some recent beautification and infrastructure development, noting that:

The financial and political investment into this intersection highlights the influential relationship between local government, big business, commodification and space. Land administrative and zoning laws provide advantage to business and the shopping centre by actively prohibiting alternative organization in this space. These laws and political relationships are actions external to the physicality of the intersection, though directly constructs meaning to its spatiality.

Evident in this passage is Watterson's insightful recognition of the ways in the which the state works to imbue spaces with meanings relevant to its agendas, which are tied up with various political and economic imperatives. Watterson is also one of the few journals that described and addressed how legitimising a space for one purpose delegitimises other uses:

The Wadawurrung peoples of the Kulin nation are the traditional owners and custodians of the land in which the intersection lies. The traditional custodians of this land have and continue to be actively discouraged, excluded and dispossessed of place through [the] political, ideological and legal tasks of state agents.

She goes on to explore how bodies are compelled to move as they traverse the intersection, depending on their role as either service worker, consumer or student. These people adapt their bodies according to the sense they attribute to the intersection. The service worker about to start their shift encounters a boundary between work



and leisure time, while Watterson herself experiences a newly conspicuous location for learning and meaning-making.

### **Lockdown Stage Four: Life in a 5km radius – Kristy Proudlock**

In this journal Proudlock relies heavily on a narrative style to engage the reader as they accompany her and her two Siberian Huskies on a walk to the park. The reader sees the journey from the viewpoint of both Proudlock and her frisky hounds, who, even after months of lockdown, are disappointed to find no children at the park to lavish them with attention. Proudlock confronts her own assumptions as she reaches her local park and spies something ‘glistening gold in the sun’, reflecting that her assumptions about the space as one that is ‘well-kept’ render this sparkling aberration ‘matter out of place’. She draws explicitly on one of the course’s key theorists, Mary Douglas, when she considers that her expectations may need to be adjusted to accommodate changing norms in the use of the park: ‘I remind myself that people have been using spaces differently recently and that maybe it is not pollution but just ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 2003, p.44). Her gradual approach and understanding of the gleaming items are reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s description of one encountering another shining vision, a sunrise (though Merleau-Ponty was not part of the course syllabus):

Each thing can, after the event, appear uncertain, but what is at least certain for us is that there are things, that is to say, a world. To ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is asking, since the world is not a sum of things which might always be called into question, but the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 401).

Proudlock is yanked this way and that by her dogs as they investigate various ‘good smells’, and generally explore the space according to their own imaginations. She reflects on other people she encounters as she journeys to investigate the new ‘thing’ in her world, reminding us how our attention is similarly yanked hither and thither in conversation with the other humans, non-humans and objects around us. She finally arrives, however, and announces her discovery through the act—the ‘task’—of a small child who demonstrates the new truth—meaningful in context—of the glittering, golden things. In the unfolding of this story Proudlock captures the dynamism of the landscape, the taskscape, and the role of context and interlocutors on our experience and understanding of the world.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined the delivery of an ethnographic research assessment item—the ‘journal’—aimed at teaching students how to ‘see’ and recount the world with empathy. The course content included a focus on the work of McKee and Ingold, as descendants of a Heideggerian approach to ‘dwelling’ in the world. Delivery of the assignment occurred both in 2019 and 2020, giving us a comparison between the assignment in both pre- and mid-pandemic contexts. The increase in the journal marks between 2019 and 2020 were strongly significant and informed an overall significant increase in the 2020 cohort. We do not claim to fully comprehend the reasons for this increase but suspect a combination of pandemic related factors (outlined above), greater proficiency by the teaching staff in explaining the assignment following its germinal delivery, and the differences that seem to produce cohorts of varying overall aptitudes from year to year.

We focus, instead, on the assignment itself, the way it was conveyed to students in 2020, and the results of the class. Delving into five of the journals in more detail we illustrate the ways in which students grasped the concepts we were trying to convey, particularly the evasive concept of ‘empathy’. We use ‘empathy’ as a shorthand for an anthropological sensibility, perspective, or orientation, a capacity to approximate experience and understanding from a variety of standpoints in the pursuit of the craft. In using embodied experience in space in teaching anthropology, this task furthers what Morreira, Taru and Truyts (2020) call a pedagogy of emplacement: a teaching practice that centres the embodied life worlds of students themselves. Whilst Morreira et al. speak from a vastly different context of Southern Africa, our praxis also succeeds in deconstructing worldviews so that students can “situate themselves as embodied persons within communities which carry particular social, economic and political histories” (2020, p. 15).

“No one”, Viveiros de Castro reminds us “is born an anthropologist and, as curious as it may seem, even less a native” (Viveiros De Castro, 2013, p. 480). When students arrive in our classrooms they are often deep in the throes of becoming both of these, working out how to be in their own skins, communities, peer groups and political environments, as well as trying to learn the acts, methods, perspectives, orientations and modalities of

anthropology. It was, and perhaps still is, understood that ‘anthropologists’ are not truly so until they have undertaken a lengthy period of participant observation, with all the associated joys and traumas (King, Boarder Giles, Meher, & Gould, 2020). Often these experiences are a trial-by-fire. Our role as undergraduate educators is to show them at least a silhouette of what they may find on their own journey.

Some may indeed go on to complete a PhD and to do their own lengthy fieldwork, graduating and landing a job in a teaching institution where they will face the same task at which we are currently employed. Most will not. The majority will go in different directions and pursue other careers. The rhetoric around ‘job-ready graduates’ in the Australian tertiary sector emphasises that even those with a bachelor’s degree should be able to transition confidently into the adult world of paid work upon conferral of their award. It seems that much of the tertiary sector has responded to the global pandemic with a doubling-down on their already advanced neoliberal agenda and the honing of their identity as a conveyor-belt for tomorrow’s workforce. This makes our responsibility to our students even more weighty. Not only are we training students who may go on to ‘become’ anthropologists (whatever that means), but we are guiding all of our students in their capacity to empathise with other human beings and perspectives. This assignment presents a way to encourage and evaluate this crucial sensibility.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper we define ‘metropolitan’ Melbourne as those areas falling within the Local Government Areas and the Mitchell Shire, which also experienced a second surge in COVID-19 cases and were subject to Stage 4 restrictions during the second half of 2020 (ABC News, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> These figures should be read with some caution, as many students returned to their natal home in response to COVID-19 circumstances such as loss of income.

<sup>3</sup> While the core instructions remained the same, in 2020 we feel that greater emphasis was placed on incorporating theory into ethnography through verbal comments and incidental direction (e.g. via the online message board, or email).

<sup>4</sup> Students in 2019 had no such examples to work from, potentially putting them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the 2020 cohort.

<sup>5</sup> The majority of the marking of the assessment for *Environmental Anthropology* was completed by Faithfull in 2019 and Truys in 2020. Subjective differences in marking style are just one of the differences between the first and second iteration of the assignment. However, we note that there was no significant difference in the marks allocated for the major assignment for the course, the essay, suggesting that the marking approach of Truys and Faithfull were comparable.

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## Appendix 1 – Marking Rubric

Criteria	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
<b>Site Selection</b>	Clear evidence of thoughtful selection of observation site, reflecting an understanding of how spaces can come to 'be' different things for different user groups. Concise explanation of site selection included in journal.	Evidence of thoughtful selection of observation site, reflecting an understanding of how spaces can come to 'be' different things for different user groups.	Effective site selection, showing some understanding of how spaces can come to 'be' different things for different user groups.	Selection of a space used by multiple groups.
<b>Observation</b>	Compelling description of observation process, detailing an ethical approach to the task, an eye for the detail of the activities, and examples of how these activities were captured in researcher notes.	Description of observation process, detailing an ethical approach to the task, an eye for some of the detail of the activities.	Description of observation process, detailing an ethical approach to the task, and an account of what happened.	Description of observation process, reflecting an ethical approach to the task.
<b>Empathy</b>	Nuanced description of two (or more) sets of activities in a place, with an insightful reflection on how these <i>activities</i> in the <i>space</i> coalesced to render that space a particular one for each group. Careful distinctions made between the ways in which the space came into being for each group, and convincing (perhaps evidence-based) speculation about what that space might 'mean' to each group.	Description of two (or more) sets of activities in a place, with a reflection on how these <i>activities</i> in the <i>space</i> coalesced to render that space a particular one for each group. Distinctions made between the ways in which the space came into being for each group, and speculation about what that space might 'mean' to each group.	Description of two (or more) sets of activities in a place, with a reflection on how the groups made use of the space in different ways.	Description of two (or more) sets of activities in a place.
<b>Critical Reflection</b>	Insightful critical reflection on experiences and observations of selected field-site, in light of the examples provided in McKee's text. Is not reduced to a direct comparison of McKee's chapter, <i>Bridge</i> , but draws on the notion of heterogeneous spatial ontology to present student's own fieldwork.	Critical reflection on experiences and observations of selected field-site, in light of the examples provided in McKee's text.	Solid reflection on how the field observations reflect themes explored in McKee's text.	Some reflection on how the field observations reflect themes explored in McKee's text.
<b>Formal Attributes</b>	Beautifully presented, grammatically flawless, impeccable (Australian) spelling, perfect in-text citations and reference list (if relevant).	Very good presentation, meeting most of the goals listed above.	Good presentation, meeting many of the goals listed above.	Fair presentation, meeting some of the goals listed above.

## Appendix 2 – Supplementary student advice

The following is an example of an email response to a (non-Arts) student who sought additional feedback on her choice of a local parkland and creek as her field site:

The park and creek sound great! Remember that the goal of the journal is to reflect on the way that the same space can mean, can come to 'be' (ontologically) something different for different people; indeed, the same space can be different depending on what the same person is *doing* in that space. The key here is to think about taskscapes. It may be that *you* (or a single person) use the space differently, and that it takes on different meaning. E.g. If you're walking your dog you might be attending to the open spaces (for ball throwing), or if you're walking with a small child you may be attending to danger areas where kids might slip into the creek. If you're on a date, you might be aware of the privacy provided by the flora, or the exposure (depends on the date, I guess!!). Maybe you're walking for recreation? On your way to work? Looking for wild mushrooms?

If you're observing other people you have to guess what they're seeing, feeling, observing. Your 'guess' will always be filtered through your personal subjectivity; Roy Wagner calls what anthropologists report, 'relative objectivity'. This means that we rely heavily on what we see and the cues we get as to how people are behaving and why. Of course, we get better at doing this within a particular culture the longer we spend in it and the more familiar (relatable) it becomes. We rely on things like dress (e.g. casual or formal or sporty?), demeanour (e.g. jocular, serious, contemplative), company (e.g. family group, peer group, occupation group), hints about power (e.g. who is leading, who directs the activity, who seems to be in charge – if anyone) and what they say of course. You're not supposed to interview people for this activity so you'll be relying on observation only.

So, for example, if you see a woman in her early 20s wearing sports gear, actively engaging with her dog and trying to wear them out (throwing ball, running, encouraging activity), you might suggest that the space is one of recreation, and somewhat of a compromise between what the woman wants to do in her mandated hour of outside activity, and what the dog needs. It may not be her first choice. Being in her sports gear, maybe she's dressed for the occasion, though maybe she just wears sports gear all the time (as many people do!). Is she focussed on the dog, or keeping one eye on her surroundings? Can you tell if she feels safe? (A young woman, out alone, may not feel safe). What if you see someone just sitting on a bench, or a log, staring at the water, or reading a book? It's still arguably a space of recreation, but a calmer, more tranquil, aesthetically-oriented place. The focus is not on movement *through* the space, but on consumption of the sounds, sights and smells of the creek area.

I'm kind of guessing what you might find at the creek, but does that give you a sense of what you might be looking at/for? Remember, this task is about *empathy*. It's about putting yourself in another's shoes and trying to understand their perception and motivation. Of course, this can only be approximated in this assessment, but it's an important skill to develop for an anthropologist. We've already read about how this activity can be *theorised* (e.g. by Heidegger, Ingold and McKee – particularly 'The Bridge'), so now we're looking at how relevant data might be gathered.