# Stumbling on the Shoulders of Giants:
A Reflection on Ethnographic Fieldwork

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# **Abstract:**

This thesis is the outcome of three months of ethnographic fieldwork in the towns of Isle de Jean Charles and Jean Lafitte situated in the southern part of the state of Louisiana. This fieldwork by most would be considered to have been a failure because I was not able to gain a level of access sufficient enough to write my ethnography. Instead of looking the other way, I attempt to conceptualize the areas in which my fieldwork was unsuccessful. In terms of understanding these processes and factors, I borrow from various authors whose backgrounds range from cultural anthropology to psychoanalysis to highlight the issues found in the ethnographic present, the line between fiction and ethnography, ethnography as translation, and last but certainly not least, empathy as a means of understanding.

# **Introduction:**

I would like to start off by making clear that I do not have an answer to the issues I present, nor do I intend to be a whistleblower to the integrity of the discipline of anthropology. Many of the issues I encountered could be unique to my experience and I by no means am attempting to belittle any of my colleagues' ethnographic efforts or those of the anthropological community as a whole. If at points a linear argument is difficult to perceive, please know that I have done my best in attempting to keep these concepts at a level that can be associated with my experience conducting fieldwork. Please forgive the paradoxical nature of the process of writing an ethnography that simultaneously criticizes the process of ethnographic writing.

During my fieldwork I lived in the city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My intention was to move to one of the communities I was studying but logistically this was not feasible so I had to settle with short but frequent visits to the towns of Isle de Jean Charles and Jean Lafitte.

On paper the Isle de Jean Charles is a very desirable location for anthropologists and other researchers alike which is why I chose it as my research subject. The island faces a host of environmental problems; coastal erosion, salt-water intrusion, and land sinking caused by the construction of levees. These problems have resulted in a fragile ecosystem and increased the vulnerability of the residents towards hurricanes. Despite the drastic loss of land experienced by the Isle de Jean Charles, "the Island has, for the most part, been left out of state-led coastal restoration and storm protection efforts. With no options left for in situ adaptation, and recognizing the need to be proactive to maintain their cultural sovereignty and bring their community members—many of whom relocated following persistent flood damage and storm impacts—back together, the Isle de Jean Charles Tribal Council has been working on community led resettlement since 2002, but has faced many policy obstacles and funding challenges along the way. In January 2016, the Tribe and the Lowlander Center (a local nonprofit working in partnership with the Tribe) were awarded a $52 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development toward resettlement, to become "a living model of community cultural resilience, disaster and climate change mitigation, green building practices, environmental stewardship, and sustainable economic development" (Isle de Jean Charles Band of Bilox-Chitimacha-Choctaw and the Lowlander Center 2016).

My initial interest was in the claims that the relocation of these communities need to be 'culturally sensitive'. My questions was what does cultural sensitivity mean and can anthropology contribute to it? With these interests in mind I spent three months in southern Louisiana attempting (emphasis on attempting) to connect with and learn from communities affected by coastal erosion. What I found was that the present situation of the Isle de Jean Charles cannot simply be labeled as a result of coastal erosion, climate change, or any single factor for that matter. Because of Louisiana's unique relationship with the rest of the country, "the destruction of forest, soil, and wetlands have been consequences of that role and have increased the vulnerability of the state's environment, economy, and society to disaster" (Austin 2006, 673). Places like Isle de Jean Charles and Jean Lafitte are acutely experiencing these consequences at a rapid and uncontrollable pace not simply because of climate change but because of fluid and powerful political and social inequalities that date back hundreds of years. These multiple-chronic disasters and injustices need to be looked at critically to even attempt to understand the situation of the residents of the island. Unfortunately I was not able to do this.

I attribute my difficulty with connecting and gaining access to these communities to the fact that their reality is constructed by multiple realities so deeply interwoven and engrained in their daily lives that it cannot be separated and addressed as such. The problem is that while members of these communities can list hurricanes by name and date as easily as they can name their children, I believe they lack the ethnographic prowess (as do I) to dissect how coastal erosion specifically affects their everyday lives. This is problematic because I do not possess the imaginative capacity or arrogance to speak for them. Constrained by a period of only twelve weeks and lacking resources, my fieldwork would be considered by most to have been a failure. I disagree, I feel that my failure is actually emblematic of some of the shortcomings of fieldwork and ethnography, and for that reason it is worthwhile to explore as a reflection on ethnographic fieldwork as a practice, and more specifically the process through which ethnographers obtain data and their synthesis of that material.

My purpose in writing this reflection is that I feel at a masters level, while anthropologists are given methodological training and preparation, we ignore many of what I consider to be the biggest obstacles to understanding people and their contexts. At one point during my fieldwork I felt uncomfortable, not because of the logistical issues fieldwork presents, but

because I did not feel comfortable writing about real people and real places. Unfortunately, this sentiment plagued every step of my ethnographic fieldwork. When I turned to anthropology for help, I was left with suggestions to be 'iterative-inductive' or to focus on 'participant observation' which in principle make sense but in application, I simply do not know where to start. While there are plenty of anthropological texts that seem to do an excellent job of writing about real people and real places, it is unclear to me how exactly they achieve this. The fact of the matter is that:

> "Anthropology has no central text, though there have been frequent attempts to put forward some texts. Those of Boas, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown, for example. There is, in fact, little agreement on the subject matter of the discipline. Anthropological practice is restricted at least symbolically to fieldwork, and despite numerous accounts of the field experience and several methodological treatises on the subject, the nature of fieldwork is still conventionally described by the all but meaningless phrase "participant observation." Without a central, authoritative text, interpretation is always uncertain" (Crapanzano 1992, 138-139).

While I attempted to apply what I learned from reading about Malinowski and his reflections on the importance of participant observation, and I attempted to consider individuals and their social groups as Boas would, I was always left with the same problem. When I was sitting in a chair interviewing someone, or watching people fish, or engaged in informal conversations, I did not feel that I was receiving the anthropological stimuli that I thought I would. Since there is no "one-size-fits" approach to ethnographic fieldwork it was presumptuous of me to think that I could approach my field in the same way I read about in other ethnographies but that did not stop be from trying.

After many attempts of connecting with my research participants in a significant way and many failed attempts of gaining access to the communities that interested me, my argument is that fieldwork and ethnographic writing (in my experience) rely heavily on the processes that I have identified as the ethnographic present, description in the narrative form, interpretation, and empathy. These processes are what ultimately allow ethnographers to frame their study, understand their participants, and eventually write something based on their fieldwork. The importance of exploring these processes is put into perspective when considering that, "Although our results cannot be measured against the requirements of scientific verification,

we have no choice: anthropology is interpretation and cannot, therefore, be wertfrei (cf. Taylor 1979:71). It can be science, however, and one of radical implications for the world" (Hastrup 1990, 47). If this claim bothers you then I invite you to read further and reflect on the ideas I present.

## Research Argument and structure:

This thesis will explore ethnographic fieldwork in four chapters as follow:

**(1) Framing Realities – The Ethnographic Present**

The aim of the first chapter is to present the ethnographic present as a necessary evil for framing ethnographic study. The ethnographic present demonstrates both the temporal and spatial qualities of ethnography that should always be given special attention.

**(2) Describing Reality Using the Narrative Form**

In the second chapter I explore the process through which ethnographers describe the field to the reader. In this process I posit that using the narrative form creates a situation where the line between ethnography and fiction becomes blurred. Furthermore, similar to the ethnographic present, our interests in our field by way of our research argument make certain aspects of the field we are studying more pronounced in our descriptions than others. This chapter serves to evidence that our imaginations are powerful and always find a way to dramatize our experiences.

**(3) Translation and Interpretation: Making Sense of it All**

The third chapter's purpose is to move from ethnography as fiction and understand it as being more of a process of translation in which through interpretation certain aspects of the field gain meaning and become salient in our fieldwork using the overarching research argument and questions as a backdrop.

**(4) Empathy and the Worn Down Armchair:**

The fourth and final chapter looked at empathy as a currency of sorts that is used to understand others. This chapter understands ethnography as an intersubjective creation in that the information acquired by ethnographers is created by the ethnographer in consultation with the research participant.

# Methodology:

In my research proposal I expressed concern regarding my ability to truly understand the situation of the communities I wanted to study. I wrote that "I find my desire to research this situation to be a little troubling and uncomfortable as a fellow human being however as an academic, I am very interested in the experience of the residents of the island" (Van Damme 2017). It is interesting here that I made a difference between that of being a fellow human and an academic. I was worried about the objective stance that I would have to assume to conduct ethnography. I was worried that I would let too many facets of my human self get in the way of the objective, stern, and didactical academic version of myself that I pictured in my head.

In regards to these concerns. Ruth Behr provides a much needed breath of fresh air through her book, *The Vulnerable Observer*. She explains that ethnography does not need to be written from a completely objective stance. She acknowledges that ethnographers are complicated beings in of themselves and we should not ignore our own histories and the subjectivity they introduce in our perspectives. Instead we should include them in our reflections with careful attention to always make clear where and how these qualities affect our findings. She describes fieldwork as being an "irreversible voyage"(Behar 1996) where the emotions and imagination of the anthropologist should not be ignored but presented so as to frame their perspective appropriately.

Following the initiative of Behar I will use my irreversible three month voyage of fieldwork as structure through which I look at various issues proposed by various authors. In this process I reflect on the fact that while I was able to interview multiple members of the communities of Jean Lafitte and Isle de Jean Charles, as well as conduct participant observation, I did not achieve the level of access that I had hoped for. Looking at circumstances and issues I experienced during fieldwork, this thesis will read as more of a memoir or reflection on my experience.

<u>Some Background Information:</u>

After long string of emails I was able to call and speak with Pat Forbes who is the executive director of the Louisiana Office for Community Development. He had been featured in many articles and journals about coastal erosion and I was very excited to talk with him. Our conversation was short, his first comment was warning me that people might not want to talk to me or more crudely as he put it, "I have 45 million dollars of funding in my pockets to help them but they still don't want to talk to me" (Patrick Forbes interview, February). During our conversation, Pat talked about the difficulties associated with relocating a community. He spoke in a monotone voice about property taxes, land ownership, land distribution, and riddled off adjectives to describe the process such as: arduous, difficult, complicated, and never-ending. Towards the end of the conversation I asked if he could put me in touch with someone that works more closely with the island community, he assured me that he would pass my info on and I would hear from someone in the next few days. Despite follow up emails I sent him weeks after our talk, I never heard back from Pat, and I never heard from the people he supposedly passed my contacts along to.

While (im)patiently waiting for an answer from Pat or anyone affiliated with his office, over dinner a friend mentioned that they knew someone that used to live on the island and that I should contact her. Because she spoke cajun french, I thought it might be easier to have my friend who is from Louisiana and also speaks cajun french to call her. Ron called her on my behalf. The next day coming back from my morning run, Ron was quite excited, he said that he had spoken with a man named Harold who would love to meet with me, "he even has old photographs and articles that he can show you!" - Ron said with a grin on his face. Ron said that we would be able to meet Harold on Saturday and that he sounded like a pleasant man eager to meet with me and talk about the island community. Being nearly a month into fieldwork I was relieved to finally have an opportunity to interview and learn from a former resident of the island. A few hours later Ron's phone rang and it was Harold calling to cancel the meeting because he had a "prior commitment" that he had forgotten about. Ron asked him if we could reschedule to which Harold answered "I'll call you if I can meet ok?" and then hung up. Ron was quite surprised, this cold conversation was nothing like the first time they spoke, he was left confused. We spent the next days wondering what could have possibly

happened. Did he really forget about a commitment or was he making an excuse to cancel the meeting? And would he ever call back?

On another occasion, Ron was able connect with the secretary of a local organization that actively supports the Isle de Jean Charles. Ron wrote "A friend of mine is doing his master's thesis on your island and your people. Would it be possible for you to allow him to contact you to get information and to talk to some of the community so he can write about your community, your customs, your culture and your daily life?" to which she answered, "Sure, please have him send me his contact information my email is **********@gmail.com." The next morning I wrote the following email:

> Dear ******,
>
> My name is Henry Van Damme, my friend reached out to you on my behalf. I am a master's student studying Anthropology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.
>
> I am studying coastal erosion in Louisiana and I have read a lot about the Isle de Jean Charles. I understand that the community has received a lot of attention from the news and others so I don't want to be annoying but I would really appreciate the opportunity to talk about the relocation, how the community is being represented as "climate refugees", and many other topics with anyone that would be willing to meet with me.
>
> If you think you could help me out at all with contacts it would be greatly appreciated!
>
> You can reach me through this email address or by phone at +1 (202) 285-2438.
>
> Thank you,
>
> Henry

As you can probably guess by now, she never answered my email. I'm not suggesting conspiracy is what kept me from gaining access to the Isle de Jean Charles. However I do have a feeling that coastal erosion, climate change, or relocation are negative triggers that point to the fact that people simply have little interest in talking about these topics. This resistance eventually led me to reducing my efforts to contact people of the Isle de Jean Charles out of respect. The reason I included these failed attempts of gaining access is to hopefully be transparent in the ways in which I approached people so you as a reader can determine for yourself if my approaches were flawed or if there is a bigger issue at hand.

# Chapter 1: Framing Realities – The Ethnographic Present

"After we've flooded, everyone comes running to interview us. But they couldn't give a damn about how our lives are on a normal day - you know, when we are just living"

- Mayor of Jean Lafitte

This quote impacted me on an academic and personal level. In this chapter I explore the quote through introducing literature that presents the ethnographic present as a literary device in the sense that it is used to write about cultures and people. I will also explore its ramifications on ethnography and anthropology as a whole.

## Visiting Jean Lafitte:

Frustrated by the rejection I had encountered trying to gain access to the Isle de Jean Charles, I decided to visit another community that also had problems with flooding and erosion - albeit, not to the extent of the island community. I went to visit the town of Jean Lafitte, a community south of New Orleans. I had no contacts, no plan, just my rental car equipped with a blanket and a pillow. Driving down the road, I stopped at the town office and impulsively decided to try to make an appointment to speak with the mayor. Walking into the building I was stopped by a kind lady who asked if she could help me. I explained that I was looking for a receptionist to make an appointment with the mayor. I followed her into her office which had two other ladies wearing the same unflattering red polo shirts and sat down. "When is your appointment?" she asked me, to which I insisted that I did not have an appointment and clarified that I *wanted* an appointment to see him at a later date. She asked me to sit and wait. To spark some conversation to fill the quiet of the room I asked the second receptionist if she knew of any cheap places to stay in the area, her answer in short was - no. "I guess I'll just sleep in my car again," I joked (I wasn't joking).

Down the hallway a harsh voice clamored "send him in!", it was the Mayor. Within fifteen minutes of entering the town of Jean Lafitte there I was walking into the Mayor's office to speak with him. My initial excitement of interviewing this man quickly dissipated when he looked at me, running his eyes from my shoes up to my hat, and asked "how are you any different from everyone else, why should I speak with you?" Stunned, I swallowed my

tongue and explained that I really have a desire to understand the 'reality' of the communities threatened by coastal erosion and flooding. Saying this out loud felt ridiculous and despite how harsh and direct the mayor was in questioning me, I understand his fatigue of researchers like myself that come and bother him every few weeks with the same questions. He then explained that if I wanted to learn about the community I could just read about it, "it's all there, everything you need to know, just look around." Leaving his office he left me with a very powerful comment: *"After we've flooded, everyone comes running to interview us. But they couldn't give a damn about how our lives are on a normal day - you know, when we are just living."* This comment was hard to process. I truly had a desire to understand the reality of these communities facing coastal erosion and from what I understood, anthropology was the way to do that. Why was I getting the impression that in this equation; anthropologist, plus interesting topic, plus research participants, did not equal reality?

I had the choice of who to study and what to study, but I was oblivious to the fact that I was also responsible for choosing *when* to study them. The Mayor's criticism of the fact that researchers swarm the island more frequently when disaster strikes highlights the freedom in temporal and situational framing of ethnography where "despite its frequent ahistorical-synchronic-pretense, ethnography is historically determined by the moment of the ethnographer's encounter with whomever he is studying" (Crapanzano 1992, 43). The Mayor feels that his community is wrongly represented when they are only approached and studied after flooding. He fears that the reality perceived by researchers is not accurate, and that it misses the larger picture. I agree with the Mayor and I will attempt to explore these issues by looking at what is referred to as the ethnographic present.

## The Ethnographic Present:

While the ethnographic present is ambiguous and used in many different connotations my interest lies in the framing of realities and perspectives that are achieved by means of the ethnographic present. For the sake of my sanity I will not talk too much about the deep philosophical implications of this argument but rather look at the ethnographic present as a literary device in the sense that it is used to write about cultures. We can understand the ethnographic present as a "mode of doing or acting and creating" (Fabian 1986) in which

ethnography is made possible through linking the processes of fieldwork and writing. In not so simple terms, "The ethnographic present is a logical corollary of the peculiar nature of the anthropological practice (...) it is a necessary construction of time, because only the ethnographic present preserves the reality of anthropological knowledge" (Hastrup 1990, 45). Ethnography is only possible if you share a space and time with your research participants, which allows for dialogue between the researcher and the research participants creating the foreground for data collection. Without this space, research is simply not possible.

One quality that all ethnographers share, from Malinowski to myself, is the fact that we in some shape or form participate in fieldwork from which we collect our data. This encounter with those we are studying in the field, which Fabian(1983) refers to as the "other," is where through diverse methodologies ranging from participant observation to structured interviews we engage in this so called ethnographic present. The temporal component of the ethnographic present is more than just the amount of weeks, months or years that fieldwork spans; it is an understanding of the position of time from which an ethnographer writes. This is not to say that the duration of fieldwork is also an important component. On the other hand, the spatial component of ethnography is more straightforward as it refers to the literal presence of the ethnographer situated in the field. This physical presence has even become a rite of passage of sorts in the process of becoming an anthropologist.

The ethnographic present as both a construction of time and a presence in a physical sense emerges when as an anthropologist you are able to break the boundary between subject and object and become part of the field. Once a part of the field the anthropologists' "presence is the occasion, the pretext, and the locus of the drama that is the source of anthropological reflection" (Dumont 1978, 12). Essentially, in the eyes of the anthropologist, the world he is describing revolves around him. I do not mean this in a sarcastic way, quite simply everything he reports needs to have occurred close enough for him to witness otherwise he obviously will not include it in his reflections. Therefore, "By her presence in the field, the ethnographer is actively engaging in the construction of the ethnographic reality or, one might say, of the ethnographic present" (Hastrup 1990, 46). Even when we have arrived at our field of study, we continue to influence what reality we witness and what reality we will ultimately describe and simultaneously define.

It is important to note that the ethnographic reality however, is not constructed solely by the ethnographer. I am not trying to paint a picture of an ethnographer as having complete control over what reality he perceives. While I agree that the reality is constructed largely by the ethnographer through his freedom to choose a field site and research subject to begin with, many of the building blocks of this reality are assembled without the ethnographers' knowledge. The community he is studying holds the responsibility of choosing what stories to tell, how to tell these stories, and many other factors that in the end determine the data the ethnographer acquires. In this way, the access given to the ethnographer also shapes the ethnographic present that frames the study. The effect that my interviews with the Mayor had on my research direction are a testament to this, had I spoken to another person first I could have very different data at my disposal.

The questions to ask here are to what degree does the anthropologist create and influence this reality? And to what degree do those we interview have control over what the ethnographer witnesses? Do ethnographers merely witness, or is there more to it? In the case of my research, the Mayor's comment illustrates that researchers are quick to create a reality where his community is a 'flood community,' or 'climate refugees,' or 'victims' but they have no interest in studying what the community is like "on a normal day - you know when we're just living." This came as a bit of a shock to me because I always described anthropology to friends and family as a way to look at people's everyday lives and learn from them, but the Mayor was making feel that anthropologists in the past have been more interested in certain aspects of his community, rather than its entirety, which led them to create an ethnographic reality that encompassed the community through that aspect often neglecting the bigger picture. His legitimate frustration with my presence and that of all the researches before me evidences this sentiment. The reason I am trying to stay away from the philosophical implications of the ethnographic present is that when the Mayor comments that researchers are not interested in a "a normal day" of his community, there really is no way of knowing if there is such a thing or if his understanding is even shared by his community, but that is a debate for another time.

These perceived and arguably partial realities or constructed representations of the communities that anthropologists study shine light on yet another temporal component of ethnography. Fabian (1983) agrees that to conduct fieldwork the ethnographer and the

research participant which he calls "interlocutor" must exist in the same era (the ethnographic present). However, once the fieldwork stage of ethnography is complete, Fabian argues that we enter a second construction of time characterized by othering our research participants. In this stage of anthropological writing, "anthropologists and interlocutors do not appear as partners in dialogue, or even in the same time. Instead of acting as interlocutors, the people of the other culture become the *Other* of the anthropologist, *spatially* and *temporally* different from him/her" (Daniel 2011). This separation gives way to a vantage point from which the anthropologist can observe his research participants and their behavior. The issue with this vantage point is that it tends to relegate the Others to other times such as: "primitive," "savage," or in the case of my research as "climate refugees" or "coastal erosion victims."

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate that while at points I adopt a fairly critical approach towards ethnography, I am not writing from a vantage point of immunity to the issues highlighted in this thesis. This is especially true when discussing the ethnographic present. In my research proposal I outlined that I was interested in researching this community so I could foreshadow the climate related issues we might be dealing with in the not so far future. If Fabian had read my research proposal he probably would have slapped me across the forehead and  explained that my efforts "function to take the society so described out of the time stream of history in which ethnographers and their own societies exist" (Sanjek 1991, 612). I am guilty of approaching this community as if they lived in a different time than "we", and that "we" could use "their" situation to learn how climate change might affect "us" in the near future. Before even arriving in the field, I had already begun to characterize my research participants as climate change victims and created the "them" vs "us" dichotomy which is ironic given that climate change is a global issue. While coastal communities will undoubtedly experience sea level rise and other ocean related disasters more acutely than the rest of the world, I should not have classified them as I did with relatively little knowledge of their present situation. In retrospect, after learning that the situation of these communities is affected more by wetland destruction at the hand of the oil companies than it is by sea level rise, I feel slightly ashamed of myself.

While I stress that labels and preconceptions should be avoided, just as many rules of anthropology, this is more of an idealist suggestion than it is a rule. I am guilty of grouping

these communities under the label of "coastal communities" and wrongly identifying climate change as the most significant stressor in their lives. Fabian would explain my actions as "treating the studied culture as a stable, and more importantly static, object, which is thus available to be studied as it is and always will be" (Daniel 2011). Fabian's comment is also applicable to a comment that Pat Forbes, the executive director of the Louisiana Office for Community Development made about the coastal communities: "We're unfortunately the perfect laboratory for experimenting with what to do when a coastal community no longer can survive erosion and sea-level rise" (Sutter 2016). While coastal communities are similar in that they live on the coast, I have an issue with using the metaphor 'perfect laboratory' because of the simplicity it implies. The Isle de Jean Charles (and Jean Lafitte for that matter) is not a facility that provides controlled conditions in which scientific or technological research, experiments, and measurements may be performed. It is quite the opposite; it is a constantly evolving, complex, and confusing reality and it should not be "experimented" with. Any effort that reduces these communities to "climate refugees" or something to that effect is neglecting the multiple situations and realities of communities of southern Louisiana given the political and social injustices which make the cultural context fluid and evolving.

Take the 'reality' of culture for example, given the temporal and spatial qualities of the ethnographic present, how can we describe or substantiate culture in the communities of Jean Lafitte and Isle de Jean Charles? Maldonado (2016) provides this lengthy description of culture to illustrate its adaptability, fluidity, and complexities:

> "Culture is tangible and intangible; it is a dynamic process always in an evolving state of change (Hoffman 1999); alternatively explicit and tacit, as some concepts and practices have names and others do not; internally differentiated, with unequal power relations, layers of subalternity, and situated meanings and perceptions; subject to contestation and amenable to improvisation; and ever shifting, as people have adapted to disaster events and environmental changes for millennia. Understanding the complexity and dynamics by which we experience and understand the world is much more challenging than at first glance. Culture is fluid, evolving, and intertwined with a host of economic, political, and social relations and tensions that are constantly altering seemingly stable processes. Culture can be considered in terms of tangible

heritage assets, but anthropologists frequently explore culture as it is revealed in oral traditions, practices, customs, rituals, beliefs, and worldviews rooted in particular times and places that are shaped by frameworks at multiple scales; in turn, culture shapes these frameworks" (Maldonado 2016, 1)

While an anthropologist can navigate the culture through exploring how it is revealed in oral traditions, assets, and everyday life; therefore exposing the "multitude of ways in which we accomplish community life and values," (Hufford 2016) they can never understand the culture as it is experienced by a member of the community itself. They can most definitely talk to members of the community and acquire knowledge using other methodological approaches that could potentially approximate a local understanding of culture. However this understanding is vulnerable to the temporal and spatial qualities of the ethnographic present. On these premises the validity of ethnography is brought into question considering that "the process of fieldwork eliminates both subjectivism and objectivism and posits truth as an intersubjective creation" (Hastrup 1990, 46). We need to understand these truths as being created, not discovered.

In summary, the fact that I was attracted to this island population because of their situation in retrospect might have been a poor decision on my part. Unknowingly, in doing this I started my research with many preconceptions and developed an approach that was both narrow minded and inconsiderate of the complex historical political and social realities of these communities that I so carelessly grouped under the label of "coastal communities".

## **Chapter 2: Describing Reality Using the Narrative Form**

This second chapter navigates the difficulty I had in using the narrative form to describe the field and the experiences and observations accumulated through fieldwork. To do this I borrow from literature that attempts to identify where the line between fiction and ethnography falls. Throughout this chapter I will try to understand how ethnographers fill the gaps, and connect the dots between the reality they witness and what their overarching research argument posits.

After leaving the Mayor's office I decided to drive further south to eat some delicious seafood Gumbo that I had read about. About halfway down the road, my phone rang, it was the receptionist who asked me how far down the road I was. "A few minutes", I answered, and she asked me to come back to the office so I turned around and made my way back. I parked the car and she met me at the door and said that the Mayor said I could stay at the "safe house" if I wanted to. "The Mayor says you shouldn't sleep in your car, that's dangerous! Go over there down the road and ask for Chuck, he'll let you in." Surprised by the Mayor's kind gesture I felt bad for judging him earlier and I made my way over to Chuck. I shook his hand, I still remember how stiff and rough his palms were. Chuck was lively and started the conversation off asking me if I was the researcher that the Mayor was talking about. I nodded and when he asked me what I was researching I explained that I wanted to understand the social effects of coastal erosion in communities like Jean Lafitte. Chuck without being prompted said, "yeah the land here has changed, my father lived off the land - well technically the water - but those days are long gone." Again I thought I had hit the anthropological jackpot but quickly after opening up Chuck said "oh well I guess that's the way it goes" and he walked me up the steel stairs of the safehouse.

The building was surrounded by sandbags and looked like a giant cinder block with just a few narrow windows sparsely situated, a large generator, stilted high above the ground, and a heavy metal door. When the door swung in I caught a glimpse in the dark space filled with bunk beds that were lined with 'American Red Cross' blankets and sheets. After seeing the bunkbeds and the various boxes with emergency supplies I understood that the 'safe house' was actually a hurricane shelter, not temporary housing for victims of domestic violence as I previously had thought. Chuck showed me around, recommended to watch the television if it pleased me, and then quickly made his way out down the stairs to his big truck and puttered away down the road leaving a puff of smoke and dust in his trace. As the dust settled I looked back at the shelter, knowing the specifics of its contents changed the way it looked to me. I started visualizing a storm; water thrashing under the building, wind whistling through the structure as it makes its way through the hardened steel that holds the house fourteen feet above the ground, and I pictured families huddling indoors as the generator engine hummed to give them electricity. I had to stop myself, my imagination was getting the best of me.

When the sun set, I rushed to the grocery store to buy some vegetables for dinner but there was no fresh produce so I compromised and bought a ready-made meal. Sitting in this blank room with the television on and eating my watery microwave meal I felt like I was part of a witness protection program hiding from the outdoors and wondering where every sound was coming from. Tired, I made my way to the bedroom where I had my choice of 15 bunk beds. I chose the one closest to the window, rolled back the American Red Cross sheets, climbed in, and fell asleep. That night my imagination kicked back in to overdrive giving me dreams of tidal waves, floods, and plots full of survival, loss, and heroes. My dreams were oddly reminiscent of the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* where a six year old named Hushpuppy lives with her father in a remote Delta community. Her father is preparing her for the end of the world that he fears is coming very soon. However at one point in the movie, her father falls ill, and simultaneously nature also falls ill with him. With the rise of temperatures and the melting of icecaps, fearsome prehistoric beasts called 'aurochs' run loose. The movie is a fantasy film following Hushpuppy's search for her long-lost mother amidst the rising tides of the island she lives on which goes by the name of bathtub. The island bathtub is based on the Isle de Jean Charles and much of the filming also took place on the island. Although the film is loosely based on the reality (which some people label as climate change) of the Isle de Jean Charles I find it interesting to see how critically it was received by some anthropologists.

<u>Beasts of the Southern Wild</u>

A New Yorker article sparked a debate by joking about the movie as "being mildly ethnographic, like an anthropologist describing a strange culture in a remote land" (Shapiro 2013). Shapiro argues that the movie actually is very much ethnographic in nature however, "The film is a wildly accurate ethnographic portrait—not of the communities portrayed in the film, but rather of the confused reveries of well-meaning transplants to post-Katrina New Orleans. The fantasized menagerie of Deep South Louisiana culture it depicts reveals the southern dreamscapes of its northern filmmaker" (ibid). Shapiro notes that the film "draws upon the charge of southern black struggles while anesthetizing the racial politics from which that charge derives" (ibid). He critiques that "The film depicts the two black protagonists living in dilapidated but harmonic relations with whites and, presumably, Native Americans" which becomes problematic

because "Erasure of the perception of race or class is seemingly predicated not on disaster, but rather on societal abandonment. In this setup, Beasts reaps the sympathetic pull of black main characters who have endured the exploitive southern race relations of the past but does so within a guilt-free present, one that is marked as a racial utopia" (ibid). Introducing a film's subjectivity is far from novel however Shapiro pushes his claims even further explaining that the fact that "the film is couched as a fantasy, or takes the viewpoint of a child, is no alibi" (ibid). I understand why Shapiro is troubled by the arguably negative images of "Mobile homes on stilts, boats made of truckbeds, and dirt caked onto actors, props, and sets alike" (ibid) portrayed in the film. However, I feel that if we are going to tear apart a film where the protagonist is a six year old and there are wild pigs the size of buildings for its subjectivity, issues of agency, and cultural sensitivity; then we should also shed a critical light on the anthropological work I attempted to conduct on the community that the movie was based on.

The parallels of subjectivity I felt trying to conduct fieldwork on the same island where this movie was filmed made me uncomfortable. I asked myself the same questions as I did after meeting with the Mayor; what was the reality I wanted to witness and to what degree was I responsible for creating it? I was well aware of my timeframe and was starting to feel the stress of not having enough data, not having enough access, I was worried. A called a friend to vent and he jokingly said, "Just make something up, no one will ever know". With this comment, Flashbacks from my 'intro to Anthropology' course of my bachelor's degree flickered to life in my head where Clifford Geertz reflected on the unclear border between ethnography and fiction explaining that, "It is not clear just what 'faction,' imaginative writing about real people in real places, exactly comes to beyond a clever coinage; but anthropology is going to have to find out if it is to continue as an intellectual force in contemporary culture" (Geertz 1988:141). Geertz' concerns were not unfounded as this topic has been elaborated on for decades now - and rightfully so. Because ethnographies emerge from "systematic and contestable exclusions" filtered through the ethnographer's methodology this creates a situation where "ethnographic truths are partial - committed and incomplete" (Clifford 1986, 6-7). So in this sense, ethnography is not factual, but does that make it fiction? Obviously there will always be a certain degree of narration associated with writing an ethnography because we are tasked with essentially connecting the dots between what we observe and whatever theory we link it to. However, the question is to what degree do we do this and what the dangers

associated are. With these concerns in mind, I borrow from Kirin Narayan(1999) who looks at the border between ethnography and fiction.

## Line between fiction and ethnography:

For the purposes of understanding the supposed line between ethnography and fiction it is helpful to look at four practices that can be used as points of orientation: (1) disclosure of process, (2) generalization, (3) the uses of subjectivity, and (4) accountability (Narayan 1999, 139).

(1) Disclosure of process

Disclosure of process is the only point of orientation where I perceive a clear difference between ethnography and fiction. Narayan explains that in ethnography "arguments are set forth, often on the opening page, that provide the key to all that follows" (1999, 139). Ethnography's format is essentially designed to ensure the reader can follow the action and understand the theoretical and methodological arguments that have been identified as salient through fieldwork. The disclosure of process is stressed time and time again during our research proposals, in our methodologies sections, in our introduction, and many other sections that lead to our final product. Disclosure of process in fiction however, is usually withheld, "rather than giving away the author's intentions, these are slipped into the narrative line ... and are often driven by ambiguities and secrets, some of which remain unresolved, reverberating on in a reader's imagination even when the story is over" (1999, 139).

This practice is what makes ethnography scientific in nature. While we do not approach the field using a deductive research approach (or so we claim), the disclosure of process is what helps readers understand our research questions, the methods we used to collect data, and the conclusions we have arrived at. However, in this regard I find it dangerous that "we judge ethnographies partly on the basis of the explicit clarity of their arguments" (Narayan 1999, 140) because this leads to many details, ambiguities, and stories being left out because they lack an inherent theoretical or methodological argument. What information we include and highlight for the sake of our argument can oftentimes be the

result of tunnel vision, especially when working under strict deadlines and experiencing discomfort during fieldwork.

(2) Generalization

Narayan argues that "ethnography and fiction rely on a combination of particularity and generalization. But where ethnography makes explicit links between what Malinowski so memorably calls "*the imponderabilia*" (1961: 18) and wider generalizations, fiction tends to implicitly evoke generalities to enliven particulars" (140) My fieldwork exposed the dangerous tension that exists between description and generalization or as Geertz more eloquently puts it, ethnography "demands both the Olympianism of the unauthorial physicist and the sovereign consciousness of the hyperautorial novelist while not in fact permitting either" (1988, 10). This unlikely balance between description and theoretical salience or application becomes further complicated when considering that "There are multiple orders of generalization in ethnography. For example, particular occurrences — say, a ritual an anthropologist has seen—often blur with how it usually happens—that is, how in the abstract it is performed. Generalizations might be made about the content of the ritual in terms of wider backdrops of culture, society, psychology, history, and so on. Finally, as the widest order of generalization, the particular event is lifted from the dense particularity of its surroundings to make cross-cultural theoretical statements, for example, about the category "ritual" (Narayan 1999, 140).

Generalization is where the meat of anthropology is created. Without it, an ethnography would read as a simple description of events with no purpose. Generalization is responsible for giving significance to happenings that the ethnographer observed. Simple actions such as a handshake, or the act of sitting outside every day after dinner to smoke a cigarette, become more than actions or happenings; they emerge as events. Hastrup touches upon this when she explains that, "Events are happenings of social significance, that is how they are singled out as 'events' from the continuous field of happenings and murmurings in our environment" (Hastrup 1990, 49). As an ethnographer it is our responsibility to distinguish happenings from events and essentially judge which happenings are significant enough to become events worth mentioning and which ones are to be left out.

(3) Representations of Subjectivity

Representations of subjectivity refers to the all too familiar "native's point of view" perspective that anthropology strives to achieve. Narayan borrows from Geertz (1976) to explain that, "the way this is accomplished is not by getting into the heads of the people being studied but by carefully examining what they say and do" (1999, 140). She contrasts this idea with the liberty fiction authors have to speak from within the subjective minds of their characters and their respective thought processes and even emotions. Here, I am confused by Narayan's use of the word 'subjective'. I understand subjectivity as the quality of existing in someone's mind rather than in the external world. In this sense I agree that ethnography and fiction differ however, the moment that a character is introduced - whether based on true events or not - a degree of fiction, imagination, and plot is deployed. The fact that anthropologists interact with their 'characters' and have observations, interviews, and other fieldwork data to support their choice of words to describe their characters does not cleanse them of the anthropological imagination used to situate the character within their argument.

(4) Accountability

Narayan stresses that "the most important difference between fiction and ethnography resides in forms of accountability to the world outside the text" (1999, 142). While in ethnography, the people, places, and times of fieldwork are made clear, novels usually clarify that "Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental" (ibid). Ironically, in ethnography, "in order to respect and protect the subjects of the ethnography, anthropologists routinely disguise locales and persons through pseudonyms or composites in their ethnographies." One responsibility that both fiction and ethnography share is not just the people they are writing about but also the audience that is reading their work "and to the horizon of expectations generated by genre" (Narayan 1999, 143).

On a broadly theoretical level these points of orientation help me understand the line between ethnography and fiction. I acknowledge that the movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is undoubtedly different from ethnography when concerning the disclosure of process, generalization, representation of subjectivity, and accountability that are

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characteristic to ethnography and not fantasy films. Furthermore, I do agree that a border needs to exist between the two disciplines as "for ethnography to become too much like fiction is to lose clarity … It is to lose the power of disciplinary shorthand for situating lives with broad contextual strokes. It is to confuse whether anthropology's mission is to write about other people or oneself and to take potentially dangerous liabilities in attempting to speak from within others minds" (Narayan 1999, 143).

While conducting my research I overwhelmingly felt that I was walking a fine line between ethnography and fiction. Due to my lack of concrete data, I was skeptical of the impressions, ideas, and conclusions that were floating around in my head with no empirical trace back to this 'reality' that I was witnessing. Thinking back to Chuck, the kind man that let me into the safe house, why did he leave such an impression on me given that we only spoke for maybe five minutes? My encounter with him was memorable, I can't quite explain why but I remember his handshake, the way he walked up the stairs, and his grin. Thinking of the border between fiction and ethnography, Chuck is without a doubt a real person and at no point do I claim to speak from within his mind but the fact that as an ethnographer I get to choose what details about him to include, which characteristics to highlight, and what qualities to make salient create a situation where the reader is understanding Chuck as I did. So when we talk about subjectivity as the quality of existing in someone's mind and not the external world, the people I present are arguably not real. They can be understood as the 'Other', as a research participant, or any other interpretation for that matter but the fact of the matter is that people like Chuck are presented from within the confines of a particular place, at a particular time, and from our own particular subjective vantage point.

My intention is not to undermine what I consider the strength of anthropology. I respect that fieldwork is characterized by close, respectful attention to the lives of other actual people that many other disciplines will never approximate. There are plenty of ethnographies written even at a Masters level that were able to bridge many of the issues I have presented. My argument is simply that anthropology is paradoxical in nature, it opens your eyes to a multitude of life stories but to actually to look at one and produce ethnography we need to close our eyes to a degree. In doing this we rely on the ethnographic present as a way to capture the reality we want to express through narrative form. The bottom line is that "both ethnography and fiction are representations of reality,

and both frequently draw on narrative forms, this border is clearly not sudden and fixed but, rather, gradual, and shifting; a matter of orienting landmarks rather than electrified barbed wire" (Narayan 1999, 143). This is problematic because this gradual and shifting line between ethnography and fiction is also what separates what some consider truth and fantasy.

Many of the features in the safehouse affected my perception of it. Seeing the American Red Cross blankets, the canned goods in cupboards, the pile of toothbrushes next to the sink, and even the smell of the air in the rooms influenced me and the way I experienced the space. The week that I spent in the safe house I could not stop my imagination from running wild. I wondered how many families might have taken shelter in this house and how scared they must have been. Overcome by curiosity I spent hours exploring the different rooms. The cabinets full of canned goods gave the kitchen a bunker like vibe where I imagined a mother cooking a meal trying to calm her worried children. The stash of beer I found under one of the beds I decided belonged to a small group of older men to drink after a long day of boarding up their windows and storm preparing. As an anthropologist interested in coastal erosion and climate change, you would think that staying in the safe house would bring me closer to the truth however this experience evidences that "There is no privileged position, or no absolute perspective from where we can eliminate our own consciousness from our object" (Rabinow 1977, 151). How can I, with a clean conscious, claim any degree of objectivity when something as simple as a blanket influences my perspective on my research?

While as an ethnographer I am "guided by certain rules of evidence" (Narayan 1999, 142), this is somewhat misleading because "Reading ethnography, readers assume they are being given facts. Though we now all accept that the facts are selective, shaped by anthropologists personal proclivities and theoretical positions, it is an article of disciplinary faith that responsible anthropologists do not make up data" (ibid). I am not accusing ethnography of making up data, however I am interested in the "certain rules of evidence" that somehow legitimate the ethnographic data that we as anthropologists produce. Why did I feel a need to describe the safe house in the way I did? Why did the fact that the blankets were from the American Red Cross matter? Would another anthropologist have mentioned this detail? The blanket *was* from the Red Cross however as an ethnographer it was my decision whether or not to include this fact. If I was

researching dental hygiene in these communities maybe I would have put a greater emphasis on the brands of the toothbrushes. Or if my research subject had to do with safety I would have further described the way the doors lock and the security cameras that were everywhere.

To this point, my issue with anthropology is that although we receive methodological training, "anthropologists have done a better job of using it than of articulating it" (Sanjek 1991, 617). This creates a situation where anthropologists "have transmitted the ethnographic method chiefly informally and anecdotally, or merely by pointing to exemplary works" (ibid). I understand that description is an essential part of ethnography however I am at a loss when trying to understand what facts and truths to include and which ones to leave out or dim down.   If the *Beasts of the Southern Wild* director is accused of portraying his "southern dreamscapes" (Shapiro 2013) through a fantasy film then how can I as an anthropologist avoid doing this when I am talking about real people, about real issues, and attempting to draw real conclusions? This is especially worrisome because "as readers of book reviews in anthropology know all too well, criticism often returns to unchallengeable 'I-was-there' Truth - the crusty, field-wise reviewer who knows 'what is really going on because I was really there', or nearby" (Sanjek 1991, 621). While there have been many suggestions for the purposes of 'data quality-control', that push for more transparency and evidence based data, as a Masters student of anthropology these methods are foreign to me or they simply fall under the 'fieldnotes' category of fieldwork.

I acknowledge that In an ideal world, anthropologists would approach all ethnography using what O'Reilly(2012) calls Iterative-inductive research, "in which data collection, analysis and writing are not discrete phases but inextricably linked" (29-30). O'Reilly explains that Iterative and inductive are the best words to describe ethnography because "they are the best way to capture the sense that ethnography moves steadily forward, yet forward and back at the same time" (30). She elaborates that "Iterative implies both a spiral and straight line, a loop and a tail; inductive implies as open a mind as possible, allowing the data to speak for themselves as far as possible" (30). Because it is impossible to conduct fieldwork without at least an idea of what interests you, "it is far easier to decide what you want to study and aim to do that, but allow yourself the freedom to move

focus - that is, to be both iterative and inductive" (31). While I understand the research approach that O'Reilly is suggesting, I find its practice quite difficult.

Tim Ingold takes this iterative-inductive research a few steps further and argues that as anthropologists we should approach the field (and all spaces for that matter) in a way that leads to astonishment. He highlights that:

> "there is a difference, here, between being surprised by things, and being astonished by them. Surprise is the currency of experts who trade in plans and predictions. We are surprised when things do not turn out as predicted, or when their values - as experts are inclined to say - depart from 'what was previously thought'. Only when a result is surprising, or perhaps counterintuitive, are we supposed to take note. What is not surprising is considered of no interest or historical significance. Thus history itself becomes a record of predictive failures. In a world of becoming, however, even the ordinary, the mundane comes from treasuring every moment, as if, in that moment, we were encountering the world for the first time, sensing its pulse, marveling at its beauty, and wondering how such a world is possible. Reanimating the western tradition of thought, I argue, means recovering the sense of astonishment banished from official science" (Ingold 2011, 63-64)

As an anthropologist I wish that I could develop this approach to research but can you imagine what my methodology section would have looked like in my research proposal? No matter how lenient of a supervisor you have, you cannot say that your research approach will be to ;treasure every moment', 'sense the pulse of the world', and 'marvel at its beauty'. As an anthropologist, even more so at a Masters level, we are bound to certain rules and guidelines to make sure that we do not fall on the fiction side of the border between fiction and ethnography. While I understand the purpose of these rules and guidelines we are recommended to follow, I think Ingold would agree with me that they are counterproductive to anthropology in that they eliminate the possibility of ever being astonished.

# Chapter 3: Translation and Interpretation: Making Sense of it All

After discussing the ethnographic present and the line between fiction and ethnography, I am at a loss of describing the process of ethnographic writing. At this point, looking at the border between fiction and ethnography I think we can agree that ethnography - while overlapping frequently - is not fiction. That begs the question however, how does ethnography create data?

O'Reilly explains that "During fieldwork things are collected: we take notes of what people have said to us; we note down conversations we have overheard; we record certain events, stories, formulae; we collect news items or advertisements or anything of interest that tells us more about our topic; and we do interviews which we transcribe from notes" (2012, 179). From this stance, ethnographers do not create data; we collect it. Ethnographers harvest data from the field that already exists however, because the data collected is linked to the space and time that only the ethnographer who was present can recall, his job essentially is to translate the data to others in a way that they can understand it. Following this rationale, ethnographic writing becomes a process of translation of sorts. In turn, translation appears to be an attempt to interpret the field which creates a situation where ethnography simultaneously both defines the space as they are describing it.

The concept of ethnography as a means of translating culture and foreignness is not revolutionary, however Crapanzano's contribution lies in his ability to simplify the process of ethnographic data collection and highlight it's dangers, complications, and limitations. Crapanzano(1992) explores the parallels between ethnography and translation. He explains that similar to translation, "ethnography is a provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of language - cultures and societies "(43). Crapanzano cleverly uses the metaphor of Hermes to explain the relationship that the ethnographer has with truth and representation. Crapanzano writes, "The ethnographer is a little like Hermes; a messenger who, given methodologies for uncovering the masked, the latent, the unconscious, may even obtain his message through stealth. He presents languages, cultures, and societies in all their opacity, their foreignness, their meaningless; then, like the magician, the hermeneut, Hermes himself, he clarifies the opaque, renders the foreign familiar, and gives meaning to the meaningless. He decodes the message. He interprets" (43). As an

ethnographer you are translating the unknown into something known which in essence is the same process of translating a text from one language to another. However, ethnographers do not translate texts the way the translator does. He must first produce them because the ethnographer has no primary and independent writing that can be read and translated by others. Therefore, "No text survives him other than his own" (43). This creation of text should not be understood as fiction but rather an interpretation of the lived space of those he is studying, which differs from simply inventing data as the lived space "is not solely an ideational space, but one which is also made up of people and actions" (Hastrup 1990, 47).

If I am understanding Crapanzano correctly, he does believe that ethnography shares the role of translation in the sense that it can be used to understand the unknown, however the issue he highlights is that ethnography must first create the text of the unknown. In other words, "Before fieldwork becomes science, it has to be transformed into text" (Hastrup 1990, 47). The ethnographer must create an account in writing of the foreignness, of the 'other' that he experienced during fieldwork and once that is complete, only then can he translate that account into text that can be understood by his readers. This transformation emerges more clearly when, "from the mass of data we have collected we want to summarize some points to tell a story about what we have heard and seen. But often we want to go a bit further than the descriptive, analyzing the data we have collected, trying to make sense of how certain occurrences, phrases, phenomena fit together" (Crapanzano 1992, 180). In this process, the ethnographer applies a critical perspective on the data where actions gain meaning, where words and context matter, and where something as small as a gesture can become a statement.

The way I see it, ethnographers create a descriptive account of fieldwork. This text is factual, the observations happened, the people are real, words uttered came from peoples' mouths, and as far as I am concerned everything described is completely accurate. Interpretation emerges when the anthropologist starts adding commas, periods, exclamation points, questions marks, and other punctuation marks that structure the text in a way that can be read by outsiders. Throughout this process of introducing the ethnographers experience through a structured text, he assigns beginnings and ends to certain events, he highlights experiences as more significant than others, or as Crapanzano puts it, "he interprets" (1992, 180). This interpretation can be dismissed as subjective, but

the people and actions witnessed are undeniably real. As stated earlier, this process should not be understood as fiction. However "because it is not about replacing one discourse by another, or about representation or translation, we may return to a consideration of the anthropological process as a creative process" (Hastrup 1990, 55). Eliminating fiction from ethnography does not mean that the narrative form is not employed to create ethnography.

## Encounter with a 'Fellow' Anthropologist

Towards the end of my fieldwork I was able to schedule a follow up meeting with the Mayor of Jean Lafitte. After my first encounter with him I could not stop thinking about his comments and was excited at the prospect to dive deeper into his perspective. I arrived over half an hour early because I knew he was a busy man and I wanted to as accommodating as possible. Walking into the waiting room, I recognized the assistants who were wearing the same unflattering polos but they were blue this time. After inquiring I understood that they have multiple pairs of the polos and each day corresponds to a different color, "blue is for Tuesday, red Wednesday, green Thursday" the first assistant explained until she was stopped by the second assistant who joked that "this young man does not need to hear all of this!". We laughed and smiled giving the room a nice calm feeling which was quickly interrupted by the shuffling of feet and jingling of keys coming from down the hallway. Across from me were three chars where two men and a woman sat down and politely smiled in my general direction. The two men had a video camera sitting on the floor between them. Their tan arms and scruffy faces made them look like they were part of a wilderness documentary crew or something that involved the outdoors at least. The woman had a small bag with her and nothing about her particularly stuck out to me. I was curious about their purposes for being in the same room as me but before I got my chance to ask the Mayor had arrived and I was ushered into his room.

Much like the first meeting, he was preoccupied with a phone call so for the first seven or eight minutes I sat patiently and stared at different points in his office trying not to listen to the conversation he was having. When he finally did get off the phone, the next five minutes we spent summarizing the phone call he had just finished. He explained that he was dealing with the election of a new sheriff and that there were all kinds of drama

unfolding. He sighed, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and asked me "so, how can I help you?" I reminded him of my research and we spoke for about forty five seconds before he received another call, this time it was his wife calling. Then for about two minutes before he received yet another call. This cycle repeated itself for the duration of my meeting time with him until the assistant came in to let him know that his other appointments were ready to meet with him. He asked her who they were and she said. "The film crew and the researcher". I took this as my cue to leave so I thanked him again for his time, shook his hand and was on my way.

This time instead of driving south for some seafood, I decided to linger in the parking lot hoping to catch either the film crew or the researcher. After about thirty minutes the two men with the camera walked out and I intercepted them as they walked to their car. I introduced myself and asked them what they were filming. They were part of a documentary crew that is featuring different coastal communities around the United States and they explained that they were in Jean Lafitte to film the levees, dams, and canals and interview a few local community members. I could not help but ask if I could tag along, insisting that I would be quiet and drive myself. They kindly refused because they were on a tight schedule which they were already behind on. One of them mentioned that maybe I should speak to the woman who was also in the waiting room because she was an anthropologist. I didn't think much of their refusal at the time, it felt reasonable.

The anthropologist's response on the other hand has left me with many thoughts echoing in my head. I acknowledge that it might not be the best approach to wait for someone in the parking lot but her response to my inquiries were quite harsh. She walked out of the building and I introduced myself and asked her about her research and I explained that I was researching coastal erosion. She made a few comments along the lines of "So you're just here for three months?", and "that's quite a big topic for three months of fieldwork". I understand her frustration, really I do, and I do not blame her for feeling this way. But I was particularly interested in a comment that she made in response to access to the community: "No, Sorry, I'm not sharing my research participants with you, it was hard enough gaining access for myself, and I can't have a masters student interfering with them." What did she mean by *her* research participants? Where did this sense of ownership over the interactions between her and her participants come from? Did she claim

ownership over her interpretation of the interactions with her participants, or does she feel that she is entitled to the access she has garnered?

With this sense of ownership, "fieldwork is almost like a "possession," which by itself is nothing but a collapse of the subject-object relation" (Fernandez 1986:247). I was left with the impression that the researcher felt a degree of investment that extended beyond her fieldwork which is a curious thought. Thinking back, my understanding is that her ownership was not of the access to the research participants themselves but of the interpretation that she held of the ethnographic present that she created through intersubjective interaction with people of these communities. Her ownership was over the reality she both perceived and simultaneously created. This perspective of ownership over a field and research participants is a frightening stance. If she truly felt that my interaction with her research participants, her interlocutors, would affect the outcome of her research then I really hope she acknowledged the impact she herself is having on her research. If she has decided that she somehow holds a vantage point, a privileged perspective, and invisible presence like Hermes then she represents everything that troubles me with anthropology.

Her attitude towards me highlighted that unlike Hermes, there are many anthropologists in the world and every one of them thinks their findings will be different from those before him. Take my choice of a research location for example, for the past two decades reporters and researchers alike have all come to study the coastal communities expecting to uncover a new angle, or a revealing truth that those before them missed. This becomes problematic because "The ethnographer conventionally acknowledges the provisional nature of his interpretations. Yet he assumes a final interpretation - a definitive reading" (Crapanzano 1992, 43). Although we all follow the same rules and guidelines of ethnography the inherent subjective undertones of interpretation leads to a situation where two anthropologists can leave the same field with differing and often contradicting conclusions. If you understand these conclusions as nothing more than opinion then you can simply look the other way. If you look at these conclusions as scientific then we have a problem.

Crapanzano further frames this issue by explaining that the anthropologist "does not accept as a paradox that his "provisional interpretations" support his "definitive presentation"

(1992, 43). The threatened fellow researcher made it clear that my presence would ruin the careful balance she presumably spent months securing. The idea of the presence of a second researcher drastically impacting your fieldwork, illustrates the fragility of ethnography. An even more troubling statement is made by Crapanzano, "It is even possible that the more general theories the ethnologist generates from ethnography are only refractions, distorted repetitions in another register of the provisional interpretations that support the presentation of data, The possibility must be entertained. Hermes was the tutelary god of speech and writing, and these, we know, are themselves interpretations" (Crapanzano 1992, 44).

## **Chapter 4: Empathy and the Worn Down Armchair**:

On the last week of my fieldwork, I got a call back from a man that I had attempted to make contact with the first few weeks of my research. The reason I reached out to him was his position as a priest would have been an ideal way to gain access to the community of the Isle de Jean Charles. Over the phone he explained that he was very sorry for not getting back to me. With a heavy voice he said that so many people have been asking to interview him that he has not even been able to go about his daily activities, but that if I wanted to meet with him I could stop by the next day. My gut response was to refuse his invitation because at this point in my fieldwork I had less than a week left. On second thought however, I thought it could be useful so I let him know that I would be happy to see him the next day. My visit with this man, similar to the visits with the mayor of Jean Lafitte, was a bit unsettling. This chapter will use my visit with this man as a segway into the discussion of empathy and its role in understanding others.

## Isle de Jean Charles:

Driving to the Isle de Jean Charles I remember turning off my GPS navigation, not because I knew where I was going, but because there was only one road to follow with the ocean on either side. I followed this road until I arrived at the island and my instructions were to then look for a stilted house with off-white siding, and that if "God was willing" the house would be flying an American flag outside. Although I first thought these instructions were not specific enough, after driving halfway down the island I noticed that

many of the houses were abandoned, battered by the weather, the sun shining right through them where the roof and floors once were. The houses still occupied can't be described as welcoming, as they had signs reading "no trespassing," "private property," and "keep away" scattered around. Ignoring these signs I made my way down the island and saw the house I was looking for where the 85 year old man was waiting for me at the top of his steps. I walked up the fourteen steps and was greeted kindly into his living room. I sat in a chair facing him that might be as old as he, my body didn't fit the imprints left on its cushions from years of wear.

The next hour was a bizarre experience. I asked very few questions and just sat there listening to this man explain the situation of the island in a very rehearsed and articulate manor. He first started by explaining what life was like when he was younger. He recalled stories of fishing, shrimping, cutting down trees, and other fond memories he obviously held close. He pointed to where the tree line once was and assisted me in visualizing how far out the land had once been. Then, he gave me a complete rundown of how the oil industry and how their dredging of canals has affected the wetlands, the process of salinization, coastal erosion, and the modifications made to the Mississippi river that all contribute to the loss of land that the Isle de Jean Charles is experiencing. Once the history lesson was complete, he gave me a complete review of the political and lobbying issues his community has faced in trying to secure funding to build a levee system that could help save the island.

With this rehearsed interview I quickly became aware that I was not the first person to interview him, many other researchers and reporters have probably sat in this same uncomfortable chair and asked the same questions I did. Troubled by this thought I asked him how many people have interviewed him over the years. He explained that he had lost count. Walking back down the fourteen steps I wondered if like the chair, this man too was worn down from interviews, fieldwork, researchers, and reporters over the years. This thought made me quite uncomfortable an unfortunately was a motif in my fieldwork - maybe I should have payed attention to the scattered signs on the island that recommended that I stay away.

## Empathy:

People have always characterized me as having a keen ability to empathize with others. I mean empathy as "a type of emotional reasoning in which a person emotionally resonates with the experience of another while simultaneously attempting to imaginatively view a situation from that other person's perspective" (Halpern 2001:85). Empathy is important to anthropology because "it enhances our ability to discern what is salient or otherwise difficult to recognize in another person's emotional communication" (Hollan 2008, 475). Unfortunately, "The empathic work of understanding is often written about as if it depended solely on the emotional, imaginative, or mind reading capabilities of the empathizer. But if it is embedded in an intersubjective encounter that necessitates ongoing dialog for its accuracy, then it implicates the imaginative and emotional capacities of the person to be understood as well" (487). In simple terms, you cannot understand someone who does not want to be understood. Similarly, the degree to which a person allows themselves to be understood factors into the comprehension we as ethnographers can attain.

This might seem a pretty straightforward claim however, Hollan (2008), Halpern(2001), and Geertz(1976, 1983) would beg us to look at it critically. It is important to note that empathy is more than just understanding that someone is sad, or being able to laugh when others laugh. It is an ability to understand "what is salient for the person from within that emotional state" or in other words, "what that emotional state might feel like from a first-person-like perspective" (Hollan 2008, 476). Achieving this necessitates an ongoing intersubjective process as Hollan explains: "One thing implied is that empathic understanding unfolds over time. One cannot empathize with another until one's imaginings about the other's emotional states and perspectives can be confirmed or disconfirmed in ongoing interaction" (476). Although history and knowledge about the situation can help the process, no empathy can be present without the feedback of the person actually in that situation. Despite the fact that I spent months researching the situation of communities facing coastal erosion, meant very little because I was not able to interact with people in a way that fostered true empathy.

Due to this lack of significant empathetic interaction with community members, I do not feel comfortable discussing the participant observation and informal interviews that I did conduct. This makes me wonder, is empathy a skill that can be taught or are there "innate, panhuman

aspects to this ability" (476). Did I lack the imagination and affective attunement that Halpern argues is necessary to "begin to imagine how and why the other acts or feels the way he does" (476)? Or did people simply not want to talk about the issues I was interested in? Throughout my fieldwork, I spoke to many people and had many opportunities for participant observation, however the issue was that those I interviewed were more interested in talking about food, or my background, or what I thought about President Donald Trump. As for participant observation, without really connecting to those I was observing, it feels wrong and misleading to attempt any degree of interpretation of their actions or their silence.

For example, I spent a considerable amount of time trying to talk to many of the locals that would regularly fish all afternoon until the sunset. While these men were always cordial and happy to start a conversation, and even joke about my lack of fishing knowledge, a situation never emerged where I felt comfortable asking the questions relevant to my research. This opened my eyes to the fact that "Insight is obtained through a degree of violence; the ethnographer must keep up a pressure in order to elicit any information" (Griaule 1957, 14). This violence is not physical, I would prefer to use the word 'friction' or 'pressure' but that is an issue of semantics. And I guess in this sense, no - I did not feel comfortable eliciting any degree of violence for that matter and as a result I am left with relatively little data. I would prefer this situation to that of being obnoxious and forcing research questions into conversation.

As a contrast to the hours of small talk that the fishermen offered to me, there were also situations during my fieldwork where people were overly excited to talk about my research topic. One such instance was one night at a bar. Laughter and beer permeated the clouds of smoke that filled this bar on "1$ hamburger night". I made my way to the bar pointed at a pilsner beer and ordered my 1$ hamburger then made my way back to my table where I was introduced to Zach. With his arm extended to shake mine, his sleeve retreated up his arm and revealed the outline of the state of Louisiana tattooed on his upper arm. He noticed my eyes look down at his tattoo and laughed that he will probably need to have the lower part of the tattoo altered because the coast was disappearing at such a rapid pace.

Sitting in this bar, I had no intention of being an anthropologist, I wasn't trying to be patient or hyper aware of my surroundings. In fact as you can imagine on 1$ hamburger night I was doing quite the opposite; I was drinking beers, relaxing, and ignoring what was happening

around me. Why is it that in this scenario where ethics, sensitivity, and all research methods were for all intents and purposes set to airplane mode, that someone wanted to talk about my research topic. Bear in mind that the bar where I met Zach is over one hundred and fifty kilometers from the coast, and he is not personally affected by the coastal erosion. Why is it that Zach was so open to talk about these issues?

Somewhat reluctantly I engaged in conversation with Zach, where he talked about Louisiana and how the oil companies should be responsible for subsidizing the restoration projects and the relocation of communities. He talked about the solidarity he felt with the "indians" living down on the coast and how proud he was to be from Louisiana. Meeting Zach that night at the bar contextualized why Hollan urges us to ask the questions: "When and how do people allow themselves to be understood? When and how do they resist understanding by others? How does the need or desire for understanding vary by culture, socioeconomic status, gender, age, and so on?" (Hollan 2008, 487). I cannot answer these questions for Zach but for whatever reason, in that situation without any insisting on my behalf, he opened up more than any research participant I spoke with during my three months of fieldwork. If members of the communities I visited were this open, I would be writing a very different piece.

Ignoring these questions Hollan urges us to ask, can lead to hovering dangerously between the border that separates empathy - "as a process that requires ongoing dialogue for its accuracy" (Halpern) - from projection - which is "the attribution of one's own emotional reactions and perspectives to another" (cf. Margulies 1989). What distinguishes empathy from simple projection is a "concern with accuracy, the willingness, indeed the necessity, to alter one's impression of another's emotional state as one engages with the other and learns more about his or her perspective" (Hollan 2008, 476). Projections are dangerous because while they "may sometimes coincide with the other's emotional state and therefore resemble empathy in certain respects" the majority of the time "they will not coincide and may themselves become a major source of misunderstanding among people and evidence of the lack of empathy" (Hollan 2008, 476). My lack of empathetic interaction and ongoing dialogue with my research participants put me in a situation where any conclusions I deduced would have undoubtedly fallen in the category of projection.

Projection is perhaps most clearly seen through examples of media coverage of these communities. While I acknowledge that journalism and anthropology are two entirely

different disciplines, their mutual desire to describe issues and realities in detail make them vulnerable to the type of projection that Hollan(2008) distinguishes from empathy. For this reason it is worthwhile to look at how media portrays these communities. Karen Maldonado (2016) notes that, "Media reports have over and over splayed the headline, America's first 'climate refugees'" (2016, 54). This introduces the label of "Climate refugees" as an issue in the sense that, "the labeling process can create a dichotomy between citizen/foreigner and insider/outsider," and by labeling the residents of the island as climate refugees a certain degree of 'othering' is created (Maldonado 2016, 55). The label of 'climate refugee' seems to fall short because "while the majority of people displaced by climate change impacts will be internally displaced, the refugee definition is based on a person being persecuted and forced outside their country of origin" (55). The residents of the island are not being displaced in that sense of the definition. If the author of the article that described the residents of the Isle de Jean Charles had engaged with them empathetically I am curious if he would still describe them as climate refugees.

A few months before my visit to Jean Lafitte, the New York Times released a front page report titled *Left to Louisiana's Tides, A Village Fights for Time*, featuring the communities of Jean Lafitte and Isle de Jean Charles. In this report, Jean Lafitte is presented as a community threatened by the lack of action to protect coastal Louisiana. The town is painted as a village against the backdrop of the ever so looming "climate change." This characterization of the communities has not been well received - as the Mayor illustrated in his comment: "My father has been putting his boat in the water in the same water for 70 years now and the water was, is, and always will be up to his knees so why are we talking about climate change? Where is the sea level rising?" (Mayor interview, April). It is important to note that most of this report is informed through conversations with the Mayor himself. If the primary informant for your report disagrees with what is written then you have one of two situations. Either the report is misguided (for whatever reason), or the writer feels that he has enough convincing information and the authority to essentially ignore or trump what his sources are telling him. In this situation I feel that projection is to blame on the part of the New York Times, which is known to have a more liberal reader base and tends to produce articles that are considerate to that representation.

Throughout this report, coastal erosion, climate change, and sea level rise became buzzwords. These buzzwords have echoed in hundreds of articles, documentaries, and other efforts to

document the "reality" of these communities. When I later learned through a friend that Zach was an avid reader of these articles, and that his tattoo and sense of unity he felt stemmed from reading these articles I could not help but feel that the empathy he felt was actually more characteristic of projection. Similar to the line between fiction and ethnography, what separates projection from empathy is hard to identify. Placing examples of empathy on one extreme and examples of projection on the other they are easily differentiated, however most empathetic work I would argue falls somewhere on the continuum between the two. While Zach might emotionally resonate with the members of these communities, the source of this resonance comes from news articles. For this reason, his empathy is an example what someone like the Mayor of Jean Lafitte would likely dismiss as wrongly identifying and resonating with his community as climate refugees. Zach, like many researchers the Mayor criticized, is experiencing an empathetic response to the construction of a reality of these communities as climate refugees, and not the community as it is on a normal day as we saw in the chapter talking about the ethnographic present.

This evokes various questions for those who eventually end up reading ethnographies: "Can the empathic imagination be purely imaginary, in the sense that the empathizer need not have undergone what the other experiences to understand it? Is it enough just to ''know about'' how life is experienced by others? Does a person who shares a number of experiences with another necessarily empathize with that person more accurately than someone who does not" (Hollan 2008, 477)? While an ethnographer who conducts fieldwork has a greater chance of creating discussion and participating in activities that foster an empathic understanding of those around him, where does that leave the readers of ethnography? After all, if empathy cannot be experienced by our readers, what is the point of ethnography to begin with?

To close this chapter I borrow from Hollan (2008) one last time to reminds us that "empathy as process precludes the idea that complete, error-free understanding of another's perspectives can ever be achieved, because people's emotional states and perspectives will fluctuate and change over time - sometimes as a direct result of having been empathically understood. Moreover, what the other experiences as an empathic response in real-time interaction may later come to be remembered as nonempathic and, conversely, what is remembered as an empathic response may originally have been experienced as nonempathic. The empathizer can try to keep up with fluctuations in the other's emotional states, but can never claim to know or capture them once and for all" (476). With this in mind, as an

anthropologist I am not jaded by my experience doing fieldwork. I have gained valuable first-hand experience and insight to many of the difficulties of fieldwork and although I don't think I will ever accept ethnography as truth, it certainly is one of the best - if not only - ways of attempting to understand people and their contexts.

## Discussion & Concluding Remarks:

Instead of a traditional discussion I would like to try something different. As an exercise to illustrate my motivation to write about my experience, I would like you to look back at the picture I have on the cover page, I have not mentioned its significance until this point because I hoped that in doing so the reader might think about it more. I saw this man on various occasions always fishing in the same spot on the road that connects the Isle de Jean Charles to the mainland. Always wearing the same outfit and he never waved or smiled, it was as if nothing mattered to him but his fishing and the water before his eyes. I want you to try and imagine what some of the biggest names in anthropology would make of this image. Then try to give this man a life story, why is he fishing? Why is he dressed the way he is?

This may be an unfair way to study this man, because we are making assumptions based on one single photograph. My argument is that fieldwork, just like the photograph, is no more than one small snapshot of a community and their complex histories. All the uncertainties of this photograph, just like fieldwork, are connected and filled through our own doing. The ethnographer acts of a photographer of sorts in the sense that we choose when, how, and where to take the picture with control over the lighting, contrast, exposure, and many more filters and strategies that ultimately affect the end product. This does not imply that the object being photographed is fake but simply that as an ethnographer, like the photographer, we play a large part in the representation of the reality we witness through the instruments and methods we use to capture our field of study. This reality is what made me uncomfortable during fieldwork, and it is this reality that I hope everyone doing ethnography faces and confronts at one point in their lives.

Throughout this reflection I rely on various authors for their theories and conceptualizations that help me understand my experience. Relying on these authors reminds me of when Isaac Newton so famously once quoted John of Salisbury's claims that, "We are like dwarfs sitting

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on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours" (John of Salisbury 1159). My question to Isaac Newton is at what expense are we able to see further by standing on the shoulders of giants? For the sake of the metaphor, what is hidden in the shadow of the giant? I argue that while standing on the shoulders of giants can help you see further, in ethnographic fieldwork where the emphasis is on person to person interaction, standing on the shoulders of these giants might not be the best way to interact with people down on the ground.

As a cultural anthropologist, I stand on the shoulders of Clifford Geertz and his work on interpretive anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski and his emphasis on the importance of fieldwork and participant observation, Claude Lévi-Strauss' work on structuralism, Margaret Mead' style of writing, Franz Boas for being the father of modern cultural anthropology, and many other giants of anthropology. While I enjoy writing from the perspective the giants of anthropology have developed over time, I feel that in the shadow hide many of the pitfalls and inherent issues of ethnographic fieldwork. While the giants of anthropology have figured out ways to bridge the gaps between my failure in fieldwork and their success, I feel that all too often anthropologists do not reflect on these issues and quickly climb to the top of the giants shoulders so to speak oblivious to all the struggles and effort it took the giants to achieve such a stature. This thesis has been my humble attempt at trying to address these issue head on.

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