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'Writing Practices' and Writing 'Practices': Observation and struggle in fieldnotes about artisanal work.

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Abstract:

This chapter presents a series of curated fieldnotes as a way to investigate a tension that is implicit in all ethnographic research on craft and other skilled activities: that what one can observe, and therefore what one records in fieldnotes, is not directly or wholly the subject of study. Through excerpts from fieldnotes that I made during twenty-two months of ethnographic research with woodcarvers and painters in San Martín Tilcajete, in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, I show how the attempt to 'get at' artisanal practice through observation not only is a struggle for understanding and analysis but is also a struggle about how and what to write. Although many researchers have avoided the analytical impasse by utilising 'apprenticeship' as a research methodology and technique, the chapter shows that the problems of writing do not necessarily disappear when attention is focused on the researcher's own practices rather than those of her research participants. The chapter concludes that although apprenticeship as a research method does afford an embodied and perceptive understanding of craft practices, the struggle of writing may signal something important about artisanal work that cannot be so easily captured in notes, photographs, film, or other media.

In a *London Review of Books* essay entitled "Is Writing Bad For You?" the late author and English professor Frank Kermode observes: "writer's block must be thought of as a disease even more specific to a particular occupation than housemaid's knee or weaver's bottom. You can have those without being a housemaid or a weaver, but you can't have writer's block without being a writer" (Kermode 1991). Although Kermode limits his discussion to the great women and men of English literature, many academic writers will also recognise that aspects of their own processes can feel as debilitating and destabilising as a physical ailment.

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The emerging academic self-help industry has produced many useful guides that address the lived realities of writing: how we can improve productivity; how we can accept and even enjoy the writing process; and often, how we can overcome writer's block [my favourites include Helen Sword's *Air & Light & Time & Space* (2017) and Kirin Narayan's *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekov* (2012)].[2] Such advice is almost exclusively directed towards particular sorts of texts: dissertations, articles, books, and blogs; pieces of writing that will (one hopes) have an audience. However, many forms of research – especially those dealing with qualitative data – produce other sorts of texts that are not "outputs" but rather the stuff of research itself: interview transcripts, catalogues and descriptions of objects, research notes. Although these types of texts are central to our processes of knowledge production, the ways that we write them have not received the same attention as the practices through which we craft our publications (but see Sanjek, 1990). Most discussion about the writing practices of data collection still tends to be abstract and prescriptive rather than reflective of actual experiences.

One notable exception to this is found in Jeffrey Cohen's thoughtful reflections on his own first ethnographic research with textile artisans in Oaxaca, Mexico (2015). He describes in detail not just what he wrote down, but also the different genres of notes that he kept: daily diaries, including physical descriptions of places, people and objects; anthropological notes, connecting his observations to larger theories and debates in the discipline; and a more personal set of notes in which he recorded his experiences of fieldwork and how it was transforming his sense of self and his place in the world (Cohen 2015, 39-40). Significantly, Cohen identifies the personal dangers inherent in this type of deep fieldnote writing: the

[2] Not surprisingly, the emergence of this industry coincides with the increasing neo-liberalisation of universities and other research institutions, as well as the systems of research and publication themselves.

sheer quantity and diversity of information that it produces inevitably leads to the "hard, exhausting work" of analysis and writing up, which for some can become so overwhelming that they never complete it (Cohen 2015, p. 149-150).

In addition to such dangers posed by the products of ethnographic research, I want to suggest that there is also an inherent struggle in the writing practices of data collection itself, one that is akin to the writer's block described by Kermode above.[3] Although it is not (necessarily) caused by creative exhaustion or psychic distress, it can result in an "authorial agonising" (Leader 1991, cited in Kermode 1991) that is characterised by genuine uncertainty about the content and value of the text that one is producing. The struggle emerges from the basic fact that what one can observe, and therefore what one can record in their fieldnotes, is not directly or wholly the object of study. As I argue below, this struggle is especially difficult for anthropologists and others who research artisanal work and other forms of skilled practice through ethnographic or other forms of experiential research.

Anthropologists have by now long recognised that the ethnographic process is in fact a series of acts of translation and co-production. Although many did not adopt in its entirety the postmodern project that emerged in some areas of the discipline in the 1980s, few working today would deny that the subjectivity, positionality, and even personality of the researcher impacts all stages of ethnographic knowledge production. Many have critically reflected on the issues of power, politics and representation that inevitably emerge when scholars study those who are not like themselves, especially within a discipline that is so closely tied to historical and contemporary processes of colonialism (Daswani 2019; Vargas-

[3] See Clifford (1990) and Warren (2000) on writing practices in fieldnotes more generally.

Cetina, 2018; see also Ghaffar-Kucher, 2014 on the burden of representation in "native anthropology").

These concerns about ethnographic co-production and representation also carry with them deeper questions about epistemology: what sorts of knowledge does ethnography produce, and how can we evaluate and compare our representations of such knowledge (Fabian 2012; Marchand 2010a)? Or to look at it from another angle, what sorts of evidence do we need in order to know something ethnographically and to convince others that what we know is somehow accurate or true (see Csordas 2004; Engelke 2008; Hastrup 2004)? Engelke has argued that one of the main epistemological and methodological challenges that anthropologists face is that although we have no explicit evidentiary protocols (i.e., clear rules about what does and does not count as good evidence), we clearly *do* have implicit standards about what we will accept and what we will not (2008, 6): one common request by anonymous peer reviewers is for more ethnographic detail to "flesh out" a particular argument. By extension, we also therefore have implicit standards about what we need to record in our field notes.

This raises the basic question of how one knows what information will be needed when we come to write up our research, especially when what ethnographers are looking for are not objective facts that can be used to prove hypotheses about the human world (Hastrup 2004, 461). As Johannes Fabian observes, rather than reporting facts, ethnography today aims to provide "reports, stories, and commentaries that are capable of making present the knowledge [of people]" (2012, 443). In recording the data that we will eventually use to make our research participants' experiences, knowledge, and social worlds present and comprehensible to our readers, *we* are ultimately engaging in a creative and skilled

writing practice, a craft that can be highly susceptible to struggles that are equally as testing as writer's block.

This is not the place to review the many strands and entanglements of anthropology's debates about epistemology.[4] However, I do want us to turn our critical gaze to the practices through which we craft our fieldnotes. I suggest that struggles and even failures in the writing of ethnographic fieldnotes reveal something methodologically significant because they mark forms of living and knowing that our methods find hard to capture.[5][6] The problem that they reveal is one that I think is particularly pertinent to researchers of craft and other skilled activities (though not exclusively so). This is because as we try to understand and document the embodied, cognitive, and haptic knowledge and activities of craftwork, we cannot rely on that which can be directly observed, nor on what artisans can verbally communicate to inquisitive researchers; as Trevor Marchand says, these forms of knowledge "exceed language" (2010b, iii; c.f. Makovicky 2010, 80-81; 89-91). Ethnography of craft and skilled practice fundamentally challenges our fieldnote writing practices altogether.

In order to illustrate this, I will follow the example set by Cohen's candid account by offering the details of my lived reality as I was writing fieldnotes during my own first research project. Where I differ from Cohen, however, is that rather than describing my experiences of my general note-taking process, I want to focus, in an autoethnographic sort of way, on moments within my research when I struggled to know what I should be

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[4] For useful critical discussions, see Fabian 2012; Roseberry 1996; and Trencher 2002.

[5] Of course, recognising the struggle in ethnographic research is not new: Clifford Geertz noted in the 1980s the development of an "epistemological hypochondria" amongst ethnographers who were haunted by a feeling that they could not know anything true about other people's lives (1988, 91).

[6] For a discussion on the analytical and productive power of failure more generally, see Carroll, Jeevendrampillai, and Parkhurst (2017).

observing and what I should be writing. I do this through a series of excerpts from my fieldnotes, which I will introduce in the next section by giving some relevant background information about my research site and describing how I have presented them here.

Curating fieldnotes from Oaxacan woodcarving research

I wrote the original fieldnotes from which the excerpts below were drawn during my doctoral research with Mexican artisans and their families in 2008 and 2009. My primary research site in this period was San Martín Tilcajete, a village in the southern state of Oaxaca, about a 30-minute drive south of the state capital. I also accompanied artisans to Oaxaca City, Mexico City, and the United States as they travelled to shops and galleries, craft fairs, meetings, and conferences. San Martín is a small community of about 2,000 people where a majority of households dedicate at least some of their time to the making of Oaxacan woodcarvings, which are also often known as *alebrijes*.

Alebrijes are frequently described as “whimsical” or “fantastic” creatures, and the carvings do most often take the form of animals, both real and imaginary, painted in bright and contrasting hues and patterns. Other common forms of Oaxacan woodcarvings include figures from Mexican popular culture, such as skeletons, devils, angels, and saints. More recently, an “indigenous” aesthetic has emerged within the genre, which I explore extensively elsewhere (Cant, 2016, 2019). They are almost exclusively made from copal, a very soft and lightweight wood native to the arid regions of Mexico and Central America and decorated with acrylic paint in workshops of varying sizes. The vast majority of workshops are family-owned and run, while a couple of larger workshops have emerged as sources of more formal employment in the village (Cant 2019).

My primary intellectual ambition in this research was to build upon the existing comprehensive social, economic, and cultural analyses of Oaxacan woodcarvings and other regional handicrafts (e.g. Brulotte 2012; Cohen 1999; Stephen 1991) by considering what theoretical developments relating to the anthropology of art and materiality might reveal about craft production in southern Mexico. I was particularly inspired by the work of Michael Chibnik (2003) and William W. Wood (2000, 2008), who both argue, in different ways, that the lives of Oaxacan artisans can only be understood from a perspective that takes into account both larger transnational communities that include tourists, tour guides, gallery owners, art collectors, and journalists, and the specificities of the craft objects themselves.

Wood emphasises how the skilled and embodied processes through which weavers learn and make their work sits in a dynamic relationship with the expectations and desires of their audiences and larger historical-social environments (2008). Building on this observation, I wanted to try to understand more about the roles that objects and materials *as social agents in themselves* play within these artisanal processes. Inspired in particular by the work of Alfred Gell (1998) and Tim Ingold (2001; 2007), I arrived in the field with a set of fairly clear (at least to my mind) research questions about how the agency of objects and the affective and tactile processes of making are relevant to the larger political, social, and economic worlds in which Oaxacan woodcarvers work today.

Before I move on to the fieldnotes themselves, I want to give a little space to discussing how I wrote them in the first place, and how I have “curated” them here. As a doctoral student at the London School of Economics – where Bronislaw Malinowski himself worked for much of his career – deep ethnography was certainly in my mind as the gold-standard to strive for. Indeed, I did fill up dozens of notebooks of observations, kinship

diagrams, loose dialogues, travel itineraries, press clippings, and notes from audio-recorded interviews. I typically carried a cheap, smallish notebook with me everywhere. This allowed me to make rough jottings if I was in the middle of some exciting social event or activity, but it was also large enough to make detailed notes when I was working in the workshops. Every evening after I enjoyed a cup of hot chocolate and a little *pan dulce* (sweet, sugary bread) with my host family, I would write up these rougher notes into my "master" notebooks. As I did so, I would cast my mind back to particular moments in the day, filling in the details of the spaces, people, objects animals, sounds, light, and ambience; trying to capture distinctive features of what I saw and my own feelings about these. As I did this, I worked to develop further questions, and I would read over notes from previous days and weeks.

What I present to you below is a curated version of some of what ended up in these master notes. I emphasise their curated status, in order to highlight the acts of selection and translation that I am making in presenting them here. This of course parallels the selective and editorial decisions that we make as we transform our data into published materials, but since I am purporting to provide insight into fieldnote writing practices, it is necessary to highlight these curation practices as well. I want to emphasize that most of these excerpts are *not* representative of my fieldnotes as a whole, since I have chosen them precisely to illustrate when and where I struggled to write something useful.

There are also qualitative differences: my actual fieldnotes from that time are far less orderly than those in this chapter: they are handwritten, include scribbles, rough drawings, many misspellings and my own personal mixture of Spanish and English that could verge on the incomprehensible, had I not frequently re-read and annotated them while I was still conducting my research. They also contain the actual names of my research participants,

whereas here and in my writing more generally, I use pseudonyms.[7] They are presented in a generally chronological order, in order to illustrate how I tried to come to terms with the problem described above: that the ethnography of craft and skill fundamentally challenges our fieldnote writing practices because what we can see, hear, and listen to does not directly tell us what we want to know about the embodied, cognitive and material practices of artisanal work as it is done in particular social, cultural and historical contexts.

'Writing Practices' and Writing 'Practices' in Fieldnotes

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a lot of the details recorded in my master notebooks recount events and activities – moments where people were doing and saying things; moments that were easy to put down in words. I note that in my published works, it is these moments that appear more readily as evidence for my interpretations. Here is a small example, written about something that transpired during large *comida,* the midday meal, which was held for the participants in San Martín's carnival festivities before Lent:

> 3:45 pm, and a lot of the revellers had started to leave the comida. I was sitting with Agustin and his cousin, who was still eating because he arrived later than us but were both quiet and probably exhausted from the morning [drinking since early]. It was hard to hear anything as the band was playing and the music was very loud. Next to us, Roberto Martínez [main street; brother of Fernanda] was with his two sons. Roberto's arms and torso were covered in oily, rust-coloured paint, and his red and black carved mask was pushed up onto his head, tied with twine behind his ears. He showed me where he had to repair it, since it was damaged during carnival last year [laughed when he said this, with a grimace that indicated that some sort of revelerous mishap!]. He carved this mask a few years ago and made a similar one for his older son this year, which he has painted in the same style as he does his woodcarvings. As I was talking to Roberto, his younger son who is maybe 4 years old starting crying: a tourist was

[7] See Cant 2019 (pp. 161-162) and Cant 2020 on ethical issues to do with pseudonyms and data collection.

> leaning over the table with a large camera lens pointed in his face as he was trying to eat [possibly journalist? White. Approx. 50 y/o. Hiking boots and backpack]. The boy's face paint started running as the tears streamed down his face. The man with the camera didn't say anything [maybe doesn't speak Spanish] – but abruptly turned away and then wandered out of the tent. Roberto sighed, comforted his son, and then said "the little ones don't understand what it means to live with tourists, but they will get used to it soon enough. They are our *sustento* [livelihoods/sustenance] now, here." I gave the little boy a sweet that I had in my pocket and he stopped crying.

In this excerpt, we can see a huge amount of cultural and social information that is directly relevant to the everyday lives of artisans in southern Mexico. There is the annual cycle of Roman Catholic *fiestas* that bring together the community despite ongoing tensions to do with competition between neighbours (and the other pressures of small village life). There are the details about the carnival masks that some artisans carve for themselves, although only a few sell them as part of their businesses. The fact that Roberto wanted to talk to me about his mask shows his pride in his work as well as the fact that he knew I would be interested in it. And, of course, there is the incident with the tourist, and Roberto's reaction to it, which portrays some of the tensions and accommodations that must be made when your livelihood depend on fairly intense and intimate attention from outsiders and cultural Others.

If I had written this up as an ethnographic vignette for publication, I probably would have included further information to "flesh out" the significance of the story as evidence for what I wanted it say: the fact that Roberto lives on the main street into the village means that his workshop welcomes many more passing tourists than some of the others in the community. This speaks to the fact that both the burdens and opportunities of touristic attention is unevenly distributed between workshops and families. Or I might have included

the fact that the dramatic costumes, dancing, and drunken behaviour of people – especially men – during carnival in San Martín Tilcajete is increasingly marketed to international tourists as a "must-see" spectacle of local culture. The presence of tourists and journalists at carnival is generally accepted and approved of by villagers, although of course there are some who would rather a more modest and composed image of the community to be promoted – in particular, the few families who are members of conservative Protestant churches, and so do not participate in Catholic *fiestas* nor condone alcohol consumption. So, there really is quite a lot of useful information represented in this short excerpt, which helped me to understand what was going on in my field site in a holistic way. However, this excerpt – and the many other moments like it in my notes – does not directly speak to the questions to do with skills, materials, and objects that I intended to investigate through my research.

The next excerpt begins to illustrate the central problem of trying to both observe and record important information that "exceeds language," as Marchand says (2010b, iii). It comes from my second month of fieldwork in San Martín, when I was already starting to be more acquainted with a couple of families, and they were increasingly used to me spending time in their household workshops. I got to know Rufino Pérez Santiago and his family fairly quickly, as Rufino was the acting president of the village's municipal artisans' association, and he lived around the corner from where I stayed.

On this particular day, Rufino had been expecting me to come to his workshop to observe him and his sons at work. When I arrived, I was invited to eat a small morning meal with the family and chat with Rufino and his wife Rosa over coffee while his sons started painting some carvings in the household's courtyard that served as their workshop.

Eventually, around 9:30 am, Rufino pushed back his chair and said that it was time for the both of us to get to work. This is how I described the morning in my notes:

> Rufino and I were sitting across from one another at the table in the front part of the courtyard, under the overhanging roof. He was seated with his back towards the door so that he could take advantage of the angle of the sunlight to see what he is doing. The radio was on, playing *corridos.* The boys were sitting behind me, painting. No one was talking. Rufino was working on a smallish piece of wood, and he had already peeled the bark off of it with his machete before I arrived. He was using a sharp knife [medium length, single-edged, slightly curved blade; thick wooden handle] to pare out a long, sweeping shape that I think will become the neck of an animal. The wood was soft and sliced away easily. I could smell the sharp tang of the copal sap. His hand was steady, and he used his thumb to guide the long strokes of the knife… I watched Rufino for a while, but I stopped writing notes because I didn't know what else to write down. I started to feel awkward just sitting there, so I doodled on my page a little – scribbling out the shape that Rufino was carving, but eventually I just stopped. After a few minutes, Rufino put down his knife and looked at me. He eyed my paper. "Aren't you going to take any more notes?" he asked. "Uh, yeah sure," I answered. I looked over what I had jotted down in my notebook so far: *steady hand. Uses thumb to guide knife. Uses edge of blade for shallow, wide cuts and then turns the piece to work on the opposite side.* Rufino went back to carving and I started jotting down some impressions of his workshop and the small section of the street that I could just see outside, but I was feeling very self-conscious and aware that I was not doing what I had intended to do. I left soon afterwards.

This entry is accompanied by a scrawled note on the facing page that reads:

> Not sure what to do about this. Maybe look for something online when back in Oaxaca? Email [my supervisors]? For now, will focus on something else.

What is interesting about this entry is the fact that I probably would not have recorded this in the same way, and with the same types of details, had Rufino not paused his own work to ask about why I was not writing anything. This really shows how it is not just ethnographic experiences and knowledge that are co-productions made by us and our research participants, but also in a fundamental way, our notes themselves can be understood as co-authored. Rufino's question also accentuated the fact that what I was trying to do was not working, that I was not *doing* anything. In the absence of any other

purpose for me to be sitting in his workshop, writing things down in my notebook *was* the point of me being there – both for him and for me.

As I became aware that what was happening was some kind of failure in my ability – firstly to connect with the meaningful aspects of Rufino's practice through observation, and secondly to register this meaning in written form – I developed an "authorial agonising" in relation to my field notes. I left Rufino's and that evening decided that until I found a way out of this impasse, I would focus on other research activities: conducting a small household survey and some kinship interviews that had clearly defined tasks associated with them (note that switching tasks is also a common recommendation for those suffering from writer's block). The trouble was, the impasse did not go away, *could not* go away, because it was not caused by any lack of cultural knowledge or even understanding about the practices of woodcarving and painting on my part. Even when I was much more au fait with the everyday rhythms and practices of the artisans' work, I still struggled to document what I knew would be necessary to contribute to the kinds of theoretical discussions that I wanted to enter into.

In the summer months of 2008, I decided to focus my activities almost entirely on the workshop of my host family, who I call Miguel and Catalina García in my published work. This was primarily motivated by the fact that the Garcías were venturing into a newer aesthetic territory with the woodcarvings by drawing inspiration from the work of indigenous artists from other parts of Mexico and the United States (Cant 2016). Their workshop also offered an interesting opportunity to observe artisanal practice in a context that was less awkward than smaller workshops like Rufino's because they employed four to five carvers and up to twenty-five painters at a time, and the workshop spaces were much more public. This meant that I could spend time observing the work rhythms and social dynamics of the workshops

without being quite so conspicuous. It also meant that I would be present when individual tourists or groups with their guides arrived, which allowed me opportunities to observe this aspect of their work too.

I spent the first two weeks sitting among the painters, or near the carver's workbenches just watching, listening, and taking notes – they were, of course, all aware of what I was doing there. To make my presence slightly less awkward, I also carried with me a book to read. My fieldnotes from this time, while useful, also reveal that even this level of more sustained observation and engagement does not result in the rich and effectual kind of ethnography as those of more definitive events and activities, such as the description of the *comida*, above. This is an excerpt from a typical morning:

> I spent the morning sitting next to Rosalinda in the painting workshop. She has been showing the ropes to Maribel [16 years old – just started working two weeks ago] who is learning to paint in the Garcías' style. Rosalinda is currently painting a large lizard. Maribel was painting a small carving of a deer, that has already received a mustard yellow base coat. Rosalinda was explaining quietly that Maribel needs to hold her wrist and brush in a particular way in order to evenly draw out the long lines of paint that make up the decorative borders. Maribel was struggling to hold the piece and her arms at the correct angles, so Rosalinda placed her hand on Maribel's and guided the brushstrokes along the smooth surface a couple of times. After this short interaction, they both went back to painting their own pieces in silence. I watched Rosalinda painting. Smooth strokes over the surface of the prepared wood; alternating between colours; filling up the lizard with the standard designs of the Garcías' style. Same as every other painter in the workshop. Same as every other day. No one in the workshop spoke for the next two hours, when lunch was served.
> […]
> I notice that all of the painters in the workshop do two things in very similar ways: when they rinse their fine paintbrushes in water, they tap out a particular rhythm on the side of the plastic containers, and that they all use their lips to reform the rinsed brush bristles into a fine point. Maribel has already picked both of these habits up. At lunch, I mentioned this to the painters sitting at the table where I was sitting, and they said that sometimes people [visitors/outsiders] tell them that they shouldn't put paintbrushes in their mouths, but the paint is not toxic. They hadn't noticed the rhythm thing and found it funny when I pointed it out, but didn't say anything more, and started talking about football.

What I recall about this time, but did not write into my notes, is that I was feeling anxious about how little data I seemed to be getting from a day's work. Although there are some small insights into artisans' everyday work experiences captured in this excerpt, the amount of observations that I was able to make over a few hours seems very little when compared to those of the few *minutes* that I described about the *comida*. I also was concerned that the observations that I did manage to make were not very meaningful: although it is moderately interesting that the employees at this large workshop would develop particular "techniques of the body" in terms of how they go about doing their work, this in itself did not really allow any further insights.

After two weeks of conducting straightforward participant-observation in the Garcías' workshop, I thought that maybe I needed to take a leaf out of the book of those anthropologists who had approached this challenge through apprenticeship. To think this through, I went to the city to locate literature about apprenticeship as a process and research method (e.g., Marchand, 2008; Sigaut,1993; Wallaert-Pêtre, 2001),[8] and I decided to see what I might learn by learning how to paint in the Garcías' workshop:[9]

> After talking it over with her last night, Catalina [García] has started teaching me to paint in the style of their workshop. This morning, I started at the place in production where the painters in the Garcías' workshop take over after others do the carving and preparation [treating wood for insects/repairing cracks with wood glue filler/ sanding/priming]. I am painting a small carving of a bear that would typically be worth about 350 pesos.[10] After I selected my carving, Catalina asked me to choose two colours from the bottles of acrylic paint that were lined up on a shelf: I chose black for the base and a bright turquoise for the decoration. These were two typical colours in the general repertoire of the workshop. Catalina then selected two further colours: a deep vermillion and golden, mustardy yellow. After I painted the black base coat,

[8] Lave (2011) and Downey, Dalidowicz & Mason (2014) were published after I returned from fieldwork, but they are highly useful resources.
[9] Very few women carve in San Martín and the artisans I knew best were not at all keen to teach me, as a male journalist who had been living in the village some years previously had almost severed two of his fingers while learning.
[10] About 34 USD/17 GBP in 2008.

> Catalina painted three long, smooth guiding lines down the bear's back and sides in turquoise, from nose to tail; this divided it into four sections, and she showed me how to lay out the rest of the geometric framework. At one point, I had to wipe away an area of paint that I had done because it wasn't lining up to the same spot on the bear's head as on the other side; Catalina matched it for me. Then, in the first section, she painted in two designs that I was to copy through the space, alternating the colours to make the contrasts and forms stand out: a 'pinwheel' and a 'mountain' type design, as she describes them. Catalina says I have a steady hand. It is very peaceful painting, and my mind focuses on the task at hand and only occasionally wanders. The day went very quickly, and there is not much else to say about it. I spent the whole rest of the day painting, and I have only finished about a quarter of the bear. Tonight, we are going to get tacos in Ocotlán.

I enjoyed those days painting in the Garcías' workshop quite a bit and ended up painting a few other carvings in the Garcías' style during my time there. However, I was not very convinced that apprenticeship was right for my purposes. This was firstly because unlike many other craft contexts in which anthropologists have apprenticed themselves, there is no clearly defined apprenticeship role or phase in a Oaxacan woodcarver's professional life, so it is not a socially salient category. Of course, artisans must learn their craft, and those who go to work in larger workshops must learn 'house styles', but today, most learning by young people is done informally in their family's workshops after school, as they contribute to the quantity of sales stock that is available for customers to buy. Artisanal knowledge is also not restricted through apprenticeship and it is in no way considered exclusive to certain individuals or even to members of the community, and so it is not locally understood to directly confer onto its holders a distinctive social position or subjectivity than other villagers who do not make crafts (cf. Herzfeld, 2004; Gowlland 2012).

Second, as much of this literature draws on techniques and insights from cognitive psychology, I was uncertain whether it was right for my own research purposes. As a middle-class Canadian, trained only in clothing and coffee retail and social anthropology, I was very aware that my own apprenticeship experiences and craft practices would provide only a

shallow resemblance to those of people from San Martín, who had grown up using machetes, knives, and paintbrushes, in their families' workshops and in their daily lives in rural Mexico more generally (cf. Delamont, 2009). This is reflected in the nature of the descriptions in the excerpt: they are only my own experiences working in a medium with tools that I was not unfamiliar with, but I also was not able to engage with the practice as it was being experienced by the painters seated all around me: we were in our own worlds and going for tacos was the notable event of that day.

What I did not fully appreciate when I was writing these notes, was that spending this time in the Garcías' workshop was actually much more productive than I understood, as it was during this period that I gained real insight into issues of authorship, authority and family connections that ended up becoming an important strand of my research (Cant 2019, 68-84), and which I certainly would not have picked up on through interviews or surveys. However, as much as this lead me into interesting discussions about the politics of stylistic ownership and the distribution of authority and responsibility in collective work, it was still not very useful in terms of getting at anything particular about the practices and experiences of artisanship, other than just the basic steps and divisions of labour in the chaîne opératoire of Oaxacan woodcarving production.

A Final Thought: Why We Should Note Note-writer's Block:

When it came to documenting the skilled practices through which artisans in San Martín Tilcajete transform knotty copal wood into elegant and exciting Oaxacan woodcarvings, the short excerpts from my research fieldnotes that I have presented here illustrate struggles that I had with both observation and the practices of writing. I suggest that these struggles signal the specific point at which standard ethnographic research practice (and even apprenticeship-led research) bumps up against a deeper methodological and epistemological issue about how we can know and how we can represent in writing forms of living and knowing that are not so easily transmitted in language and text.

Like Kermode's description of writer's block with which I opened this chapter, these difficulties are closely associated with particular kinds of work: research that is focused on processes that are ultimately a little beyond the purely social. The cognitive, embodied, subjective, and tactile nature of craft skill and practice means that research into it is more likely to suffer from such maladies: perhaps like a kind of culture-bound illness of craft researchers. Through paying attention to these moments of difficulty, we may ultimately find new research strategies and forms of documentation that will better allow us to deal with the challenges that they represent.

For myself, the way out of the impasse was to shift my analytical ambitions by paying more attention to the specific aspects of the material forms that were socially active and provocative in San Martín Tilcajete. In essence, I allowed myself to be led by my ethnography. This enabled me to pay attention to questions of style, genre, and aesthetics as aspects of object agency in craft, rather remaining focused on questions of material qualities and skill. This is not to say that it is not possible to ask these questions or to

research them through participant observation or apprenticeship methods; just that they were not right for this researcher, conducing this research, in this particular place. In paying greater attention to our emotional experiences of writing while in the field, it may enable us better insight into what is working and what is not in our research methods as they develop in practice.

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