# Arbitrary locations: in defence of the bounded field-site

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The article offers a sympathetic critique of the original formulations of multi-local/multi-sited ethnography. The 'multi-sited imaginary' values unboundedness and promotes methodological freedom, but it also implies a problematic reconfiguration of holism (on a grander scale). Whereas these formulations were extremely productive in straining against certain methodological rigidities, their very success in breaking down 'boundaries' has given rise to new problems in the doing and writing of ethnography. Written from the perspective of a recent Ph.D. graduate and first-time fieldworker, the article suggests we reconsider the value of self-imposed limitations, of boundedness as a methodological tool. What role did the bounded field-site play for its so-called 'traditional' practitioners in social/cultural anthropology? What role could it play for anthropologists who have taken on board the precepts of multi-sitedness? Based on a case study from my own fieldwork in Corsica, I argue that we could think of boundedness (paradoxically) as a productive way of challenging holisms and deferring closure. The bounded field-site, rethought as an 'arbitrary location', becomes an explicitly 'partial' and incomplete window onto complexity.

## Introduction: 1995

In 1995, the filmmaker Peter Jackson embarked upon an adaptation of Tolkien's fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings*. In the many interviews which followed the international success of the ensuing trilogy, Jackson reminisced on the roots of his project. He had been encouraged, he often stated, by a realization about the level of complexity reached by computer animation and special effects technology. Following these advances, Jackson realized it was now possible to put *anything* on screen, or as the director once put it, to *do* anything. Suddenly, all technological limitations having been removed, Jackson felt he was in a position to create a believable *Lord of the Rings*. And indeed, the director's explicit policy throughout filming was to shoot with the realism of a historical reconstruction, and he enjoined all those involved in the project to consider it as such.

Back in 1995, two other filmmakers reacted in a rather different way to similar understandings of their growing technological freedom. The Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg together agreed upon a manifesto, entitled *Dogme 95*, laying down strict limits on what, to use Jackson's terminology, a filmmaker should *do*. In order to qualify for the *Dogme* seal of approval, a director had to forsake the use not only of visual effects, but also of lighting, props, overlaid musical soundtracks, or even

*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* **13**, *167-184*

professional make-up. All shooting had to be done on location, using a handheld camera, and the plot was to forsake superficial action and 'temporal or geographic alienation'. Von Trier and Vinterberg entitled their charter 'the vow of Chastity', and it closed with the following pledge: 'My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations' (von Trier & Vinterberg 1995).

In diametrical opposition to Jackson's heady emancipation from all constraints, the *Dogme* filmmakers imposed upon themselves an iron rule of methodological minimalism. Such an assessment, however, obscures two major similarities between the two approaches. Firstly, reliant as they are on handheld digital cameras, the 'bare bones' of *Dogme* filmmaking are just as much a product of the latest technological advances as is Peter Jackson's extravaganza. Secondly, and more importantly, both approaches are centrally premised on a concern with truth and realism.[1]

This is where I would like to open my account, in this space between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dogme*, between sensibilities based on limitless narrative possibilities and sensibilities based on self-imposed restriction.[2] But this article is not about film, it is about anthropological methodology, about the way in which it has been shaped by a sense that the world was increasingly connected and seamless. More specifically, I will examine calls for multi-sited research which have urged us to expand the possibilities and vistas of ethnography in order to deal with a complex world. Drawing on my own recent fieldwork on the French island of Corsica, this article asks what ethnography would look like if we took the other path, the path of self-limitation rather than the path of expansion.

In 1995, George Marcus coined a phrase which was to achieve resounding fame in and beyond anthropological circles, namely 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1995). Less a programmatic piece than a review of already existing research strategies, Marcus's article nevertheless framed and concretized a methodological trend, by providing it with historical contextualization, a range of practical suggestions, and a defence against potential critiques and anxieties. This is a trend which the author and Michael Fischer had called for a decade earlier in their book *Anthropology as cultural critique*, under the designation of 'multi-locale ethnography' (Marcus & Fischer 1986: 90-5). Multi-locale/multi-sited ethnography was an attempt to adapt anthropology to the changing realities of what had been known since the 1970s as the 'world-system', and in the 1990s became increasingly glossed as 'globalization'. This implied a reconfiguration of the 'traditional' anthropological method of intensive participant observation in a single bounded location, what Marcus and Fischer refer to as 'the convention of restricting ethnographic description to a delimited fieldsite, or locale, and set of subjects' (1986: 90). This meant going further even than studies in which a local setting is related to a global system, since these 'still very much frame their research and writing in terms of knowable communities, to use Raymond Williams's phrase, the kind of setting in which, by definition, ethnographers have always worked' (1986: 90). Although this was perhaps debatable as a characterization of actual anthropological practice, it was at the time an accurate representation of what Marcus later termed the 'research imaginary' of the discipline, namely 'a sense of the changing presuppositions, or sensibilities ... that informs the way research ideas are formulated and actual fieldwork projects are conceived' (1999: 10).

The single-sited methodology, its sensibility and epistemological presuppositions, were no longer felt to be adequate to the realities of an increasingly mobile, shifting, and

interconnected world. Even lay readers of anthropological texts, Marcus and Fischer pointed out, were increasingly aware of the fallacy of localized holistic studies of 'a culture' (1986: 95). If anthropology was to remain convincing and meaningful, it would have to adapt its methods to 'cultures in fragments increasingly held together by their resistance and accommodation to penetrating impersonal systems of political economy' (1986: 95). This involved freeing ethnographers from the conceptual boundaries of the delimited site, and allowing them to follow movements of people, ideas, and objects, to trace and map complex networks. By the time 'multi-sitedness' was coined in print in 1995, the practice and the idea were in communication with a wider literature on the anthropology of globalization (see, e.g., Appadurai 1991; 1995; 1996) and networks (Latour 1991; Mol & Law 1994), which signalled a broader dissatisfaction with the perceived rigidities of social scientific method.

The first part of this article attempts to characterize this new 'research imaginary' (to use George Marcus's phrase), an imaginary which is centrally concerned with freedom, complexity, and expansion. To return to my earlier analogy, in the past decade anthropological theorists of the field have been Peter Jacksons rather than Lars von Triers: the main drive has been to transcend boundaries, spatial, intellectual, and disciplinary, to weave together accounts of ever-increasing complexity, in multiple spaces, times, and languages. I will argue that there is, however, a problematic reconfiguration of holism implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the multi-sited research sensibility – a suggestion that bursting out of our field-sites will enable us to provide an account of a totality 'out there'.

This leads me to a reconsideration of the value of delimited field-sites as what I will call 'arbitrary locations', methodological instruments for deferring closure and challenging totality. The sub-title of this article is thus to be understood as anything but a call for a return to 'traditional practice': the bounded field-site I am suggesting here is a development on the same dissatisfactions with previous practice which gave birth to multi-sitedness itself. To illustrate the notion of an arbitrary location, I will give a brief account of my own 'field-site' in Corsica, and of the implications of considering it a 'bounded' unit of analysis.

This somewhat abstract theoretical discussion is flanked by a more tentative and experiential one. In the introduction to *Ethnography through thick and thin*, George Marcus notes that his conception of multi-sited ethnography was developed partly in response to the predicament of his and other graduate students, 'anthropologists-in-the-making' struggling with the difficult interplay between convention and invention in the production of dissertation research projects (Marcus 1999: 11). This article emerges from a similar dynamic: it reflects the predicament of an anthropologist-in-the-making trained at a time when Marcus's multi-sited ethnography has already to a great extent become part of conventional practice. Drawing on the ethnographic and theoretical problems I encountered in my work on inclusion and exclusion in Corsica (Candea 2005), I will suggest that whereas the strength of the multi-sited imaginary lies in its enabling anthropologists to expand their horizons in an unprecedented way, its weakness lies in its lack of attention to processes of bounding, selection, and choice – processes which any ethnographer has to undergo to reduce the initial indeterminacy of field experience into a meaningful account.

It would of course be a serious mistake to conflate a 'research imaginary' with the actual research it produces, enables, or inspires. Just as a so-called 'traditional' ethnographic imaginary gave rise in practice to works which were as mobile and, in some

senses, 'multi-sited' as the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1992) or those arising from the Manchester School's 'extended case method' (Gluckman 1958; cf. Burawoy 1998), recent ethnographies inspired by the 'multi-sited imaginary' necessarily deal, in practice, with the issues of bounding and limitation which theoretical proposals for multi-sitedness do not explicitly address. Drawing on various non-anthropological sources of potential inspiration, the article ends with a call to make such processes of bounding and self-limitation more intentional and explicit.

## The multi-sited imaginary 1: seamless reality

> Such is the unity of all history that anyone who endeavors to tell a piece of it must feel that his first sentence tears a seamless web.
>
> Pollock & Maitland, quoted in Thornton 1988: 299

Since the early 1990s, two major tropes in anthropological musings on the field-site have been unboundedness and complexity. Pushing ever further the boundaries of so-called 'proper anthropology', theorists have suggested and ethnographers have proved that anthropology could talk about anything, anywhere, and in any way. There are now anthropologies of the past, anthropologies of the future, anthropologies of the 'world-system' and anthropologies of the individual life-history, anthropologies of the metro and of the pipe-line, of the bizarre and of the banal, of scallops and virtual reality (Callon 1986; Fortun 2001; Latour 1993; Linger 2001; Wilson & Peterson 2002).

This multiplicity of objects is indissociable from a multiplicity of method, and George Marcus (1995) provided a key trope for this new anthropological wave when he wrote, over a decade ago now, of 'multi-sited ethnography':

> For me the development of multi-sited strategies for doing ethnography so as to discover and define *more complex and surprising objects of study* is literally one important way at present *to expand the significance and power*, while at the same time changing the form, of ethnographic knowledge (Marcus 1999: 13-14; my emphasis).

In other words, one might suggest somewhat mischievously, multi-sited ethnography is to anthropology what Computer Generated Imaging is to *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a methodological bonanza which removes limitations and allows us, like Peter Jackson, to 'do' anything (including, for instance, an ethnography of *The Lord of the Rings* in the many sites of its production, consumption, and imagination – if we so wished).[3]

In his famous 1995 article, Marcus suggests a number of possible strategies for multi-sited ethnography, all but one of which are premised on 'following' (following the people, the thing, the metaphor, the conflict, etc.; Marcus 1995: 105 ff.). 'Following' takes us through various sites, each of which is understood to be not a self-contained local instance in communication with a global system, but an ethnographic location for the direct study of this system itself.

This is because, as these authors and others have made clear, their model of reality is *seamless*. Moving away from the contrast between the local and the global, George Marcus, together with other theorists such as Arjun Appadurai and Bruno Latour, has emphasized the fact that any 'global' entity is – must be, can only be – local in all its points. It follows that each 'localized', sited study is – must be, can only be – simultaneously a study of the 'world-system' (Appadurai 1995; Latour 1991; Marcus 1995).[4]

In describing their model of reality as 'seamless', I am not suggesting that these theorists necessarily disregard the blockages, confinements, and boundaries evident in their material – although this accusation has indeed been levelled at some theorists of globalization (Navaro-Yashin 2003: 108). I will examine below the status which such boundaries hold in their accounts. Here, I am referring to the epistemological ground of their descriptions: contrary to previous notions of a world composed of discrete 'cultural gardens' (Fabian 1983: 44 ff.), naturally bounded and eminently comparable, the world of multi-sitedness is woven of a single, many-stranded cloth (albeit with its knots, rips, and tears). By implication, therefore, a field-site is a contingent framing cut out of this seamless reality. This contingent nature of the field-site is expressed most clearly by Vered Amit: '[I]n a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, *awaiting discovery*. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualisation to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred' (2000*b*: 6, my emphasis).

## The multi-sited imaginary 2: the site as ethnographic object

So far, so good. But if 'the field' is a framing cut out of a seamless reality, how does one make the cut? In his 1995 article, Marcus does not address this point, and the 'site' part of 'multi-*sited* ethnography' remains unelaborated.

This is no mere oversight; it is indicative of the fact that the explicit delimitation of the field-site is increasingly out of the ethnographer's hands. Sites are understood as the products of often conflicting political and epistemological processes 'on the ground', processes which should themselves be the object of anthropological study.

In his work on locality, Arjun Appadurai goes so far as to read this back in time: the main object of ethnography is discovered to have *always* been, not in fact localities, but processes of 'localization' (1995: 207). Even when they thought they were studying geographically bounded sites, anthropologists were in fact studying and contributing to processes of siting. Appadurai argues that ethnography has always misrecognized the fact that it was dealing with locality as process, because it tended to take for granted the stories of permanence which localization tells about itself (1995: 207).

In other words, locality, but also stoppages, blocks, confinements, and divides, are not forgotten in this reconfiguration of the ethnographic method. But their status has changed: the locality, the site itself, has become an object rather than a tool of ethnographic inquiry. That is to say, the ethnographer is increasingly understood to be working 'in' (and 'on') the sites which are meaningful to the people he or she works with. The relevant boundaries to the analysis are not fixed *a priori*, they are 'discovered' on the ground. Thus Marcus notes approvingly that

> [t]he intellectual environment surrounding contemporary ethnographic study makes it seem incomplete or even trivial if it does not encompass *within its own research design* a full mapping of a cultural formation, the contours of which cannot be presumed but are themselves a key *discovery* of ethnographic enquiry (Marcus 1999: 117, original emphasis).[5]

Paradoxically, therefore, the 'research design' must be a *result* of 'the ethnographic enquiry'. The research – beyond the broadest initial orientations – is thus 'designed' *a posteriori*. This is a fairly accurate reflection of the actual state of the art in many cases, but it does suggest that 'sites' are no longer the preliminary limits set by the researcher,

they are discovered in the course of an initially open-ended research. This accords well both with a long-standing and justified valorization of anthropological open-endedness (see below), and with an emergent conception of sites as 'found objects', artefacts of the 'informants' making, rather than of the 'ethnographer's.

In this sense, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's later deconstruction of the anthropological field could be seen as the culmination of both Appadurai's and Marcus's arguments (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). These authors ask anthropologists to abandon 'bounded fields' altogether, while looking out for the ways in which locations are constituted politically and epistemologically (1997: 38). In this way, they are drawing to its logical conclusion the methodological project of a 'multi-sited' fieldwork which was always more concerned with the multi (the connection, the movement, the 'following') than with the 'site'. The bounded site, the locality itself, becomes an object of study, and the ethnographer is now free to follow others as *they* do the bounding, the localization, and the delimitation. The site, as an anthropological heuristic device, an analytical framework, is concomitantly dissolved.

There is something of a discrepancy, however, between this and the previous point: on the one hand, as we have seen, multi-sitedness highlights the construction and contingency of sites in a seamless world; on the other, the desire to leave 'siting' to others, and to study 'their' sites, seems to revive earlier notions of a site as a really existing entity out there, something to be *discovered*.

An example of this paradox can be found in the introductory pages of a recent self-definedly multi-sited ethnography, Kim Fortun's stylistically innovative account of advocacy after the Bhopal disaster:

> I traveled to Bhopal to collect material illustrative of the background from which concern about chemical pollution had emerged. Immediately, it was clear that Bhopal could not be conceived as a 'case study,' a bounded unit of analysis easily organized for comparative ends. To the contrary, Bhopal showed no evidence of boundaries of time, space or concept (Fortun 2001: 1).

But boundedness is a methodological issue, as Fortun herself notes a few pages later;[6] that is to say, Bhopal in and of itself is neither bounded nor unbound. Surely, one could very well 'conceive' of Bhopal as a case study (and then trace all its 'connections to' and 'parallels with' other cases); equally, one could – and Fortun does it masterfully – analyse it as 'a whirlwind – a maelstrom produced by opposing currents, sucking everything into an upwards spiral – with gas victims at the storm center' (2001: 1). This is, however, an analytical (and in this case, political/ethical[7]) *decision*.

The problem is that when it presents (un)boundedness as a real feature of the world out there (Bhopal 'showed no evidence of boundaries'), rather than a methodological issue, the multi-sited approach forgets the possibility, indeed the necessity of *bounding as an anthropological practice*. This raises issues both for the epistemology of the discipline and for the experience of the fieldworker. Let us begin with the latter.

## The multi-sited imaginary 3: freedom

The master metaphors of multi-sitedness in anthropology have been liberation and 'the changing times': in order to cope with and participate in a world which has either suddenly become, or has suddenly been identified as, seamless, 'fluid', and interconnected, the ethnographer needs to be freed from the limitations of the bounded field-site.[8]

In this vein, Vered Amit's collection *Constructing the field* is dedicated to 'opening up ... the scope of anthropological enquiry' (2000*b*: 2), and the contributors, in various ways, probe the limits of 'archetypal' fieldwork. Amit's plea for methodological freedom is based on her understanding of ethnography as a powerfully unfettered generative practice:

> To overdetermine fieldwork practices is therefore to undermine the very strength of ethnography, the way in which it deliberately leaves openings for unanticipated discoveries and directions. If in cleaving to a methodological orthodoxy, anthropologists a priori limit rather than leave open the scope of circumstances to be studied, they will be operating at epistemological cross purposes with their own disciplinary objectives (2000*b*: 17).

This is very much the spirit in which I approached my own first attempt at ethnography, which I have recently exorcized into a thesis on exclusion and inclusion in Corsica (Candea 2005). Although my work and residence centred on what may appear to be, on the face of it, a most 'traditional' context, namely a village in the north of Corsica, my own experience was a powerful embodiment of the point made by Marcus that *any fieldwork* is initially and potentially multi-sited, as the ethnographer is faced with the teeming multiplicity of an unfamiliar context. According to Marcus, however, this initial state does not last: '[A]s research evolves, principles of selection operate to bound the effective field in line with long-standing disciplinary perceptions about what the object of study should be' (1995: 100). Marcus, prefiguring Amit, seems to deplore these fetters on the generative multiplicity of the field experience. But as far as I was concerned, ten years on, these 'long-standing disciplinary perceptions' were nowhere to be found. It is a tribute to the success of Marcus and others that I found myself in a village in Corsica without any sense of 'what the object of study should be'. This is far from an ironic comment: the multi-sited imaginary has played a crucial role in expanding the possibilities of anthropology and the range of topics which could be considered suitable for 'fieldwork'. A look at the contents page of a volume such as Collier and Ong's *Global assemblages* (2005), for instance, is sufficient to show the benefits of this recent expansion of anthropological vistas.[9]

But this success has contributed to erode the guidelines and rigidities against which critics of 'traditional methods' so productively strained. And the resulting freedom has its drawbacks. As a novice ethnographer and Ph.D. student I had of course the detailed text of my research proposal, but I had been informed in no uncertain terms that this was anything but a binding document, and that 'no one ends up working on what they set out to work on in the first place'. On the contrary, I was told that I should be interested in everything, and I was.

This initial indeterminacy persisted throughout fieldwork. The 'principles of selection' which were supposed to come in and shackle me to a boring single object of study never materialized. In the spirit of multi-sited ethnography, I followed people, stories, metaphors, and debates through multiple spaces both within 'the village' and without, with a constant attention to the way such spaces were constituted. But this in practice led to a constant indeterminacy: how many leads to follow? How much context to seek? How much information is enough information?

Not being a ubiquitous being, I had to make choices: should I go to the sheep-shearing or accept an invitation to meet my neighbours' family? 'Do' participant observation in a bilingual classroom, or follow the teachers to a training course on

the other side of the island? 'Hang out' in the village centre, surf the weblogs and forums dedicated to Corsican nationalism, or go and peruse the village or regional archives – or perhaps the national ones in Paris? Go for dinner with a neighbour, stay in the bar, or go out clubbing in a nearby town with co-workers? Fieldwork involved constant choices, and there was often no good reason to prioritize one over the other.

As a result, thirteen months went by with a constant sense of incompleteness and arbitrariness, the obsessive feeling of missing out, of vagueness and unjustifiable indeterminacy, of never being in the right place at the right time. These anxieties and obsessions, which many of my colleagues shared, turned out to be productive aspects of the fieldwork experience: in time, they forced me to think critically about the kind of imaginary completeness and totality against which my own efforts seemed so unsatisfactory. But this experience also brought home to me that what I suffered under was certainly not the tyranny of boundedness and disciplinary rigidities – on the contrary, it was very clearly the 'tyranny of choice' (Salecl 2004).

Of course, both in Corsica and later, during 'writing-up', I made choices, delineated topics, subjects and areas of interest, limited the extent or the depth of my research in various directions. In the second half of this article, I will describe, through the notion of the 'arbitrary location', the conceptual underpinnings of the writing-up part of this process. But as for the fieldwork part, the imaginary of freedom and unboundedness made any choice, boundary, or restriction feel like an illicit practice, just as the thought that 'fieldwork' included every possible interaction, practice, or observation left me with the uneasy sense that any moment spent alone was evidence of 'shirking' – nothing was out of bounds, and no time was off-duty.

One might object that the feelings described above are in no way attributable solely to the multi-sited imaginary. Indeed they are not – I gather from discussions with more senior colleagues that these are fairly ubiquitous features of the fieldwork process – but they are problems which the multi-sited imaginary does not address, and in fact exacerbates. I hasten to add that I am not naively suggesting that to 'bound' the field-site could provide us with a finite amount of collectable information. No geographical or theoretical bounding will eliminate the possibility of finding ever more complexity 'within' (Strathern 1991). But to be explicit about the necessity of leaving certain things 'out of bounds' would alleviate this predicament, by turning what feels like an illict incompleteness into an actual methodological decision, one which the ethnographer reflects upon and takes responsibility for. An example of this attention to self-restriction can be found in Liisa Malkki's excellent discussion of the implications of accepting not to know certain things, and her concomitant critique of the figure of the ethnographer as 'investigator', probing into the hidden (1995: 51).

Such explicit consideration of self-restriction is at odds with the multi-sited research imaginary as I have sketched it above, and this raises a number of important issues: is it really the case that freedom is what we need to match the complexity of the world? Does the suggestion that the traditional field-site is too limiting not carry the seed of a totalizing claim to somehow represent 'everything'? Is there not, lurking in the shadows of multi-sitedness, a strange hope that once we have burst out of our field-sites, we can conquer the seamless world?

What if, like the *Dogme* filmmakers, we decided that the best way to think about and participate in a complex world was precisely to define self-imposed limitations, to look for some methodological asceticism, to create arbitrary boundaries to what we allow

ourselves to do? One aspect of this might involve framing field-sites for the delimitation of which we ourselves are responsible and accountable.

This is not a call to turn back the clock. On the contrary, the kind of bounded field-site I am proposing is premised on the realization that any local context is always intrinsically multi-sited. Even in a small village in the north of Corsica, it is not multi-sitedness that is the problem, but sitedness. The problem, as I hope to show in the next section, is not finding a diversity of leads to follow, but rather finding a way to contain this multiplicity.[10]

## A village ethnography?

Given the high symbolic value of 'the village' in debates over anthropological methodology, it is with calculated irony that I present as my own case study of what I will call an 'arbitrary location', the village in which I did my fieldwork. The point of the exercise is to challenge two ideas: firstly, that even 'in a village', ethnography could ever be anything other than 'multi-sited'; and, secondly, that this dispenses us from bounding our own sites.

The village of Crucetta[11] in the northwest of Corsica is usually understood to encompass three main hamlets, clusters of tall stone-walled houses, tightly packed around narrow winding streets. Starting at the periphery of the hamlets and trailing off to dot the landscape of a large part of the *commune* (the French administrative division which uneasily parallels the commonplace designation '*village*'[12]), many villas began appearing around the late 1960s. One of the first belonged to the current headmaster's uncle, who built a lone house nearly a mile from the centre of the largest hamlet. The headmaster recounted that when his uncle first built his lone 'villa' outside the village, many in Crucetta 'said he was mad'. Soon enough, however, other Crucettacci followed his example, including in time the headmaster himself. To me, he explained his decision in terms of his need for 'freedom' and 'independence', the desire to get away from the close neighbourhood of the village centre, where everyone knew everyone's business, and one's neighbours were constantly breathing down one's neck (cf. Jaffe 1999: 43).

Since the 1960s, many more villas have been built around the old hamlets, introducing a dramatic change in the landscape, common to most Corsican villages, and which is sometimes referred to disdainfully as '*mitage*', 'moth-eating': the image is of the green fabric of the countryside being slowly filled with tiny white villa-shaped holes – an image which resonates more widely with metaphors of decay from an original state of completeness and unity.

Over time, the fact of building a house on the outskirts of the village shifted from being an eccentricity to being a fairly conventional sign of social success, referred to positively as 'making one's house' (in Corsican *fà a so casa*).

In an official report on the school and its environment, written in 1999, the schoolmaster of Crucetta gave the following assessment of the village:

> *I. 1) Geographic, cultural and social data*
> ...
> The population of [Crucetta] is spread over 3 types of habitat:
> *A) Old traditional habitat* (centre of the village) Relatively sparsely populated. Many empty houses during the winter (little or no modern amenities). These houses are often inhabited by Maghrebi immigrants.

> B) *Social housing, HLM type*, located near the school. ... Inhabited by many families, often with a large number of children, but economically weak: high level of unemployment or temporary work. These people are often coming from outside to seek work in Corsica ...
> C) *Around the village: many individual villas*, comfortable, inhabited in the great majority by people of [Crucetta] origin.
>
> If one considers the Maghrebian population more specifically (around 25% of the schoolchildren in these last few years) one may note that they inhabit either the old village (rented houses), or the council flats. This population, due to the precarious nature of work, is highly unstable: many 5-6 children families only stay for a few years, or even a few months before leaving the village
> ...
> Only the autochthonous population, living in type C housing, is really stable.

The headmaster's tripartite sociology was reflective of local discourses, in which the centre of the village stood for comparative poverty, old age, emptiness, and, paradoxically, a certain form of 'marginality'. And although the progressive 'emptying out' of this marginal centre was collectively deplored by many who considered themselves 'locals' (whether they in fact lived there or not), the movement had its own momentum: the 'marginality' of the centre was in itself an incentive for people to move out to the periphery, and 'make their house'.

People who lived in the villas usually commuted to the nearby town for work, tended to socialize there as well, and thus were rarely if ever seen in the old village centre. As the teacher's report suggests, however, *they*, rather than the inhabitants of the centre, were usually identified as the 'autochtonous', 'stable' population of Crucetta. Of course, the aged (Corsican: *I vechji*) were considered keepers of a form of super-autochthony, as it were, and were identified as the living embodiments of 'tradition'. But however central that made them to certain imaginations of Corsica and villageness, this centering was in itself a form of marginalization, in which they became the distanced objects of admiration and ethnography (McKechnie 1993). Other 'marginals', such as Maghrebians and other non-Corsicans who lived in the centre, complexified these issues to a great extent (Candea 2005).

These complex attitudes towards the old centre were interestingly brought out in relation to my own presence in the village. Educated middle-class inhabitants of Crucetta thought it particularly fitting that I should be renting a flat in the 'old village'. It was obviously the right place for a social scientist, both *qua* 'anthropologist' concerned with 'tradition', and in a different sense, *qua* 'sociologist' concerned with marginality and 'social problems'. I was not expected to do much research in the villas, on the other hand, and my incursion into those spaces was, I came to realize, tacitly treated as an indication of my taking a break from 'the field' and retreating into 'real life'. On a few occasions, in fact, I myself became a mediator between the marginal centre and its central periphery, such as when the schoolteacher asked me to enquire whether my neighbour the shepherd would allow his pupils to come witness the milking of the ewes, or when his wife asked me to make sure that he would set aside a lamb for her this Christmas.

Many middle-class inhabitants of Crucetta identified in these figures of disconnection between centre and periphery a breakdown of the 'social fabric' (*le tissu social*) of the village. Other markers of this breakdown were considered to be the 'rise in violence and incivility', the 'ageing of the population', the 'poor integration of immigrants', all themes which were common throughout French public debate. Thus J.-M. Andreani, editor of the French journal *Le Monde* and author of a book on Corsica, writes: 'No one ... has been able to check the slow and inexorable drift of Corsican society, gangrened

as it is by endemic violence, confused by the loss of any opening or perspective, of its traditional landmarks and frameworks' (1999: vii). These concerns are grounded in an understanding of society as an organic, holistic, and yet threatened and disaggregating entity, an unravelling tapestry. Mentions of 'the local social fabric' suggest both this sense of completeness and the threat of potential disaggregation – in fact, the two are inseparable. Maryon McDonald has suggested that the figures of 'majority and minority were born together, and the minority born as disappearing' (1993: 227). Similarly, 'the social fabric', one might say, was born unravelling.

Indeed, although the 'problem' of the unravelling of society carries with it a sense of urgency and recent loss, together with a suggestion of a complete, whole social fabric 'not so long ago', we soon find that society has been 'unravelling' in the same way and for the same reasons for a very long time. Take for instance the following passage from a 1914 French schoolbook:

> The consequences of [the rural exodus] are saddening. Everywhere, abandoned farms, deserted hamlets, partly ruined villages, fields left untended. Foreign immigration is always on the increase: because of the works (roads, canals, train tracks), a number of Italians and Spaniards settle in the country, but few of them choose to be naturalized (Eisenmenger & Cauvin, quoted in Thiesse 1997: 87).

As Anne-Marie Thiesse has shown in her study of the exaltation of 'the regions' in French Third Republic school manuals, part of the response to these 'issues' in the early twentieth century had been a valorization of local 'heritage', an injunction to 'reconnect' people to their roots, conceptualized in the then eminently scientific terms of folklore and ethnotype (Thiesse 1997: 38 ff., 103 ff.). Society as 'unravelling fabric' was born.

There is a striking continuity between these early conceptualizations of the school's role and recent projects to expand the teaching of 'Corsican Language and Culture' in French public schools such as that of Crucetta (cf. Candea 2005). The schoolmaster himself was a committed proponent of this regionalization of education, and his depiction of the village was one aspect of a complex negotiated process whereby he came to implement his vision of bilingual (Corsican/French) schooling within the frameworks made available by the French national education system.

By its very nature, this problematic of the unravelling society is premised upon completeness, holism, and integration as figures of normality. In Corsica, the generic imaginations of completeness in which European rurality is so often framed (Holmes 1989; Williams 1975) finds a particularly strong centrepiece in the classic image of the high-perched mountain village (*u paese*), both warm, intimate community and forbidding rocky stronghold (Candea 2005; Jaffe 1999). In Crucetta, such expectations of completeness were the background against which intergenerational disconnection, architectural proliferation, unstable foreigners, and the derelict village centre became visible.

How, in this context, is one to conceptualize 'the field-site'? The above account of the entity 'Crucetta' could already be described as 'multi-sited', both through the many heterogeneous spaces of 'the village' as a physical location, and through the many historical, institutional, and conceptual spaces which an account of 'a Corsican village' deploys.

There is no lack of leads to follow here. Some spaces, like my own neighbourhood in the old village during high tourist season, could be thought of fondly as 'human

communities of face-to-face interaction' (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 15); others, such as the villas taken together with the nearby town, might perhaps be imagined to form 'socio-economic aggregates'; the networks and traces left across the island by Corsican language activists, or by the dwindling number of active shepherds, or indeed the steely web of French educational administration, could be prime candidates for a mobile analysis. In fact, of all these potential sites, 'the village of Crucetta' is perhaps one of the least obvious choices, since it seems to be held together by very little beyond an administrative boundary and a romanticized imaginary of an originally unitary state. But that, I will argue, is precisely its value as an arbitrary location.

By contrast, the multi-sited imaginary would prompt me to forgo Crucetta, and follow the traces which leave the village, to discover the contours of some wider translocal 'cultural formation'. What this points to is the paradoxical reconfiguration of holism implicit in the multi-sited imaginary.

## The new holism

In their earliest description of 'multi-locale ethnography', Marcus and Fischer already noted:

> *Pushed by the holism goal of ethnography* beyond the conventional community setting of research, these ideal experiments would try to devise texts that combine ethnography and other analytic techniques *to grasp whole systems*, usually represented in impersonal terms, and the quality of lives caught up in them (1986: 91, my emphasis).

An exemplary text in this regard is Adriana Petryna's account of life after Chernobyl (Petryna 2002). Petryna connects sensitive ethnographic vignettes of intimate settings with informed accounts of transnational medical debates and sharply delineated life-histories, weaving together with consummate skill the multiple languages of a context 'where individual accounts of suffering, if they are able to be heard at all, must transmogrify into numbers and codes fitting standard categories' (2002: 20). Petryna's research design follows the pattern described by Marcus – from what was originally a localized study of Chernobyl 'sufferers', the author discovered that she had to leave the bounded site: 'It became apparent that in order to do a fair analysis of the lived experience of Chernobyl, I had to do multisited work' (2002: 17). This (as Marcus's quote makes plain) is an implicitly holistic project, in which the 'whole', in this case the reality which accounts for 'the lived experience of Chernobyl', is taken to exist *de facto* beyond the contrived boundaries of any single geographic location. In itself, the desire to break out of bounded sites presupposes a totality 'out there' (perhaps what Marcus, above, refers to as a 'cultural formation') which the bounded site prevents us from investigating fully.

The new holism of multi-sitedness is also a rhetorical matter. Thus Marcus quotes Robert Thornton's claim that '[the] imagination of wholes is a rhetorical imperative for ethnography since it is the image of wholeness that gives ethnography a sense of fulfilling closure that other genres accomplish by different means' (Thornton 1988, in Marcus 1999: 35). Elsewhere, the author asks (rhetorically):

> The question is whether anthropological ethnography can, or should be satisfied with 'partial knowledge' thus ceding its context of holism, significance, and argument to given frameworks and narratives of theory in history and political economy that limit the scope of what ethnography can discover on its own, in terms of its own practices and the sensibilities that these encourage (Marcus 1999: 5).

Of course Marcus' new holism is of a very different kind, but it might seem to break with earlier calls for the fragmentary and the partial as the specific province of 'post-modern ethnography' (Tyler 1986; cf. Strathern 1991: 22). In fact, it brings to its logical conclusion a paradox present in 'post-modern ethnography' itself, one identified by Marilyn Strathern, when she notes:

> The realization that wholeness is rhetoric itself is relentlessly exemplified in collage, or collections that do not collect but display the intractability of the disparate elements. Yet such techniques of showing that things do not add up paradoxically often include not less cutting but **more** – a kind of hyper-cutting of perceived events, moments, impressions. And *if elements are presented as so many cut-outs, they are inevitably presented as parts coming from other whole cloths, larger pieces, somewhere* (Strathern 1991: 110, my italic emphasis, original bold).

If post-modern ethnography posited wholes by showing their fragments, multi-sited ethnography, then, tries to follow and encompass these wholes themselves.

But could we not, *pace* Thornton, imagine an ethnography whose strength is not in *fulfilling*, but rather in perpetually *deferring* closure – whether it be the closure of holism, or that of a 'fragmentary' collage for a 'fragmentary' world?[13]

At any rate, the 'multi-sited imagination', as Marcus terms it, leaves us no position from which to imagine such an ethnography. By breaking down boundaries and removing limitations, it reconfigures partial knowledge as no more than an unsatisfactory or incomplete account, something which can be eliminated through good research design, through more unbound and fearless acts of following.

It is against this new holism, this reinstatement of completeness, that I am suggesting the value of the bounded site. To bound off 'Crucetta' as my field-site, to hold it together for the purpose of analysis, is precisely to highlight its fractures and incompleteness; it is to resist dissolving and resolving it into parts of wider holistic entities, be it of the old holism ('Corsicans', 'Maghrebians', 'Corsica', 'France', etc.) or the new ('global capitalism', 'activist networks', 'transnational flows of illegal labour', etc.). To hold on to Crucetta as an arbitrary location, one with no overarching 'meaning' or 'consistency', is to remember that all these heterogeneous people, things, and processes are 'thrown' together, and to question, in the evidence of their uneasy overlap in one geographical space, the completeness of the 'cultural formations' to which one might be tempted to think they 'belong'. Crucetta in this sense is not an object to be explained, but a contingent window into complexity.

## Arbitrary locations

I am saying nothing new. The kind of 'traditional anthropological field-site' of which proponents of multi-sitedness are suspicious could be described as a double entity. On the one hand, it was understood as 'a found object': a 'really existing feature of the world out there', a discrete spatial or human entity which was supposed to have its own consistency and meaning - the village, the neighbourhood, the tribe, the kind of entity which could become the subject of an exhaustive and comprehensive monograph. On the other hand, it was also to some extent an *arbitrary location* defined by the researcher as a framework for a study of something else. Thus Evans-Pritchard remade political theory in Nuerland, and Malinowski challenged Freud in the Trobriands.[14]

Let me briefly tease out what I mean by an 'arbitrary location'. As a heuristic device, the arbitrary location is perhaps best understood as the symmetrical inversion of the

'ideal type'. Weber's ideal type was an abstracted notion, nowhere existing and for that very reason easily definable, a notion which served as a 'control' for comparative analysis of actually existing instances (Weber 1948: 59 ff.). The arbitrary location, by contrast, is the actually existing instance, whose messiness, contingency, and lack of an overarching coherence or meaning serve as a 'control' for a broader abstract object of study. It is 'arbitrary' insofar as it bears no *necessary* relation to the wider object of study ('Nuerland' to 'politics', the Trobriand islands to the Oedipus complex). While the ideal type allows one to connect and compare separate instances, the arbitrary location allows one to reflect on and rethink conceptual entities, to challenge their coherence and their totalizing aspirations. If the ideal type is meaning which cuts through space, the arbitrary location is space which cuts through meaning.[15]

The demise, with multi-sitedness, of the first aspect of fieldwork (the field-site as a naturally bounded entity) is to be celebrated unreservedly, and I am far from urging a return to former conceptualizations of fieldwork. On the contrary, my plea is for more consistency in their critique. For, as we have seen, far from challenging the totality of the object of study, with multi-sitedness we have eschewed the contrived totality of a geographically bounded space for the ineffable totality of a protean, multi-sited 'cultural formation'.

This is what makes the loss of the second aspect of fieldwork (the field-site as arbitrary location) so problematic. The *decision* to bound off a site for the study of 'something else', with all the blind-spots and limitations which this implies, is a productive form of methodological asceticism. To limit ourselves to arbitrary locations, geographic or otherwise (I will return to this point in the conclusion), gives us something to strive against, a locus whose incompleteness and contingency provide a counterpoint from which to challenge the imagined totality of 'cultural formations'.

## Conclusion: a new experimental moment?

> The motivating spirit of experimentation is thus antigenre, to avoid the reinstatement of a restricted canon like that of the recent past.
>
> Marcus & Fischer 1986: 42

In the above, I have chosen to illustrate the use of self-imposed limitations through a spatial example, revisiting the hackneyed image of the 'village ethnography'. But the wider point about the necessity, both epistemological and practical, of recognizing the value of limitation amidst the calls for freedom could find many other, including non-spatial, expressions.

In 1968, the French writer Georges Perec wrote what he termed a 'lipogrammatic novel in E', meaning a novel written without the letter E (Perec 1968). What would a 'lipogrammatic' ethnography (as a written work) look like? What would 'lipogrammatic' ethnography (as field practice) look like? In other words, what would it mean to knowingly and arbitrarily exclude certain elements, moments, people, factors, words, concepts, from our analysis? If that seems a flippant or 'unscientific' suggestion, it may be worth reflecting on the extent to which we already do this, in an unacknowledged or broadly unproblematized fashion, every step of the way, from the ethnographic encounter itself to the production of the ethnographic text. It may serve to think on the

number of ethnographies, or chapters, or paragraphs, or sentences, from which ideas and topics are (of necessity) excluded, while the promise or threat of some form of holism (old or new) looms in the background.

I have mentioned film and literature, but another source from which anthropologists might tentatively draw figures of productive self-limitation is archaeology.[16] One might evoke, for instance, the figure of developer-funded archaeology, in which a physical site for archaeological research is delimited by concerns which are totally arbitrary from a research point of view (the future layout of a motorway or parking-lot, for instance). The site in developer-funded archaeology is perhaps the most obvious metaphor for what I have called an arbitrary location: devoid of its own intrinsic meaning from an archaeological point of view (although of course not from the developer's), such a site can only ever be a window into complexity, and never a holistic entity to be explained.

None of the parallels or *rapprochements* suggested in this article are to be taken mechanically or literally. I am not here advocating the kind of direct borrowing of method suggested for instance by Phillip Salzman (1986) in his call for 'team research' in anthropology. It merely seems that sidelong glances at other modes of knowledge production might help us experiment with our fieldwork and writing practices, in order to recapture the value of *not* knowing certain things.

## NOTES

The themes and concerns of this article were inspired by conversations with Tom Yarrow, without whose relentless encouragement it would not have been written. I am grateful to Marilyn Strathern for motivating me to expand on what was originally a brief conference paper. Harri Englund, Maryon McDonald, Morten Pedersen, Victor I. Stoichita, and Soumhya Venkatesan provided close reading and insightful comments on various draft versions. I also wish to thank the four reviewers for *JRAI* for their thorough and extremely productive critical engagement with a first version of this article. All shortcomings and misconceptions, of course, are mine.

[1] In effect, *Dogme* and *The Lord of the Rings* are two stark embodiments of the instability of the 'realism' concept, as illuminated by Frederic Jameson (1990: 158; Weiner 2001: 154-5, n. 13). As Jameson points out, 'realism' partakes of a constitutive incommensurability embodied in the two terms of the slogan 'representation of reality'. If *The Lord of the Rings* courts one extreme (glorifying perfect illusion for a 'reality-effect'), *Dogme* courts the other (eschewing aesthetics in order to flee from representation into 'reality' itself). By this token, the limitations of the *Dogme* project are as obvious as those of Peter Jackson's. If I playfully set up *Dogme* as a model for anthropological practice in this article, it is for their methodological asceticism, not their somewhat naive assumptions about truth.

[2] The juxtaposition between ethnography and cinema is presented here rather in the spirit of a surrealist collage. This is not to assert any direct equivalence between the two fields, but rather to operationalize both the parallels and the incommensurabilities, both the familiar and the uncanny aspects of such a comparison.

[3] As has been done by Steven Caton (1999) with the film *Lawrence of Arabia*.

[4] It is clear that for all the occasional cross-borrowing, Latour's, Appadurai's, and Marcus's projects are profoundly different in scope, orientation, and sensibility. I bring them together only insofar as all three posit versions of a 'seamless world' which challenge macro/micro distinctions. In this, of course, they are part of a wider and older intellectual tradition (see, e.g., McDonald 1989).

[5] Although it is not necessarily evident from the quotation, this is something Marcus approves of. The passage continues: 'The sense of the object of study being "here and there" has begun to wreak productive havoc on the "being there" of classic ethnographic authority' (Marcus 1999: 117). More generally, the methodological literature examined here is poised between claims to represent an already existing and broadly accepted 'new' way of doing ethnography, and attacks on an 'old', fettering, academic consensus. Marcus weighs rather on the former side, while Gupta and Ferguson or Amit weigh more on the latter. My own position is closer to Marcus's, and I consider that, to a great extent, the battle against 'proper anthropology' has been won.

[6] 'The question is not whether interpretations exclude, but how and to what effect' (Fortun 2001: 6). 'My goal was to avoid isolating Bhopal in space and time by continually seeking new connections – connections that drew out the complex systems that continue to bind me to Bhopal' (2001: 5-6).

[7] 'The settlement of the Bhopal case invokes a need for accounts of the disaster that show how it continues. Across time. Across space. At the intersection of crosscutting forces' (Fortun 2001: 9).

[8] This sense of 'the field' and 'the world' as objects brought out of joint by the forces of history, and which need to be re-aligned, was already suggested in the title of Marcus's article ('Ethnography in/of the world system', Marcus 1995); it reappears in the subtitle of Vered Amit's collection on the same subject (*Constructing the field: ethnographic fieldwork in the contemporary world*, Amit 2000*a*). In the introduction to this volume, Amit reiterates Gupta and Ferguson's point about the increasing gap between the experience and archetype of fieldwork, and argues that the archetype '*no longer* suffices even as a serviceable fiction for many *contemporary* ethnographers' (Amit 2000*b*: 2, my emphasis; cf. Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Similarly, Marcus presents multi-sited ethnography as a way of 'adapting ethnographic practices of fieldwork and writing to *new conditions of work*' (Marcus 1999: 3, my emphasis).

[9] It could be objected with some justice that I am being overly enthusiastic about the success of multi-sitedness: the persistence of concerns about certain areas, topics, or methods 'not being anthropological enough' fully justifies the continuing deconstruction of taken-for-granted notions of the field (Amit 2000*a*; Gupta & Ferguson 1997). On the other hand, one might ask why a decade of highly acclaimed critique has not really (not yet?) unseated taken-for-granted assumptions about what is and is not 'anthropological'. I have neither the competence nor the space to answer this question here. However, this state of affairs suggests that we might need to rethink the form and effect of methodological critique.

[10] James Weiner, coming down a different theoretical path in the company of Martin Heidegger and the Foi of Papua New Guinea, has recently formulated the same concern: 'What would a literary or anthropological "fire break" look like? It might be a mode of ethnographic inquiry, or a manner of ethnographic writing, designed to *cut-off* rather than extend or produce a flow of cultural and semantic associations' (2001: xi, original emphasis). Weiner's problematic dovetails with an older Derridean concern with curbing the proliferation of interpretation (cf. Strathern 1996: 522).

[11] A pseudonym.

[12] *La commune* is the smallest unit in French political geography; while it is centred on a town or village, its territory encompasses the surrounding land. The entire French territory is currently subdivided into 36,772 communes. The political representatives of the commune are the mayor, his deputy (*le premier adjoint*), and the council, often referred to collectively as '*la municipalité*'. In Crucetta, *la commune* was used contextually to refer to the village, to its population, to the entire territory or to the *municipalité*. Thus one might say 'Crucetta is a commune of 850 inhabitants', but also 'The supermarket isn't on our commune, it's on the commune of Lumio', or 'The commune has built a covered bus stop which is really popular with the elderly inhabitants'.

[13] 'A postmodern ethnography, says Tyler (1986: 131), is fragmentary because life in the field is fragmentary! Yet perhaps what is imagined as fragmentation may be no more derived from a world of fragments than what is imagined as integration comes from a world already a totality' (Strathern 1991: 22).

[14] And neither of them, writing in a world in which 'ethnic identity' had not yet entered the scene, gave much thought to the definitional status of these entities (Maryon McDonald, pers. comm.).

[15] I am using 'cutting' here in the sense given to it by Marilyn Strathern, 'as a metaphor [...] for the way one phenomenon stops the flow of others' (Strathern 1996: 522). In the introduction to his Ph.D. thesis, Tom Yarrow similarly considers the feeling of excess and overwhelming freedom experienced by the ethnographer. The distinction I am drawing here between 'arbitrary locations' and 'ideal types' (and its loss in recent formulations of ethnography) in a sense rejoins Yarrow's observation that our common predicament lies partly in the erosion of the distinction between 'ethnography' and 'theory': insofar as these were conceptualized as different orders of knowledge, they worked to extend, but also to curtail and control, one another; by contrast, when theory and ethnography are set on the same plane the ethnographer appears to confront limitless possibilities (Yarrow 2006: 10). Crucially, however, Yarrow's arguments do not, any more than mine, involve a call to return to the traditional comparative framework in which a *general* theory is confronted with a *specific* field (2006: 10-11). For my part, in recalling the figure of the comparative, the distinction I wish to recapture is that between the coherence of a model and the contingency of a location.

[16] In fact, archaeology seems a particularly promising candidate, for three reasons: the historical proximity and communication between the archaeological and anthropological projects; the complex relationship between the two disciplines' concepts of the field-site, which has shifted continually between the poles of

homology and mere homonymy; and, finally, their divergent historical engagement with methodological issues of freedom and limitation.

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## Localisations arbitraire : pour une défense du terrain délimité

*Résumé*

L'article se veut une critique sans acrimonie des formulations originales de l'ethnographie multilocale et multisite. « L'imaginaire multisite » privilégie l'absence de limites et encourage la liberté méthodologique, mais il implique aussi une reconfiguration de l'approche holistique (à plus grande échelle) qui pose problème. Bien que ces formulations aient été extrêmement utiles pour faire éclater certaines rigidités méthodologiques, le succès même de l'abolition des « limites » a engendré de nouveaux problèmes pour la pratique et l'écriture de l'ethnographie. Écrit du point de vue d'un jeune docteur réalisant son premier travail de terrain, cet article propose que l'on reconsidère la valeur des limites auto-imposées, de la limitation comme outil méthodologique. Quel rôle le terrain délimité jouait-il pour les praticiens « traditionnels » de l'anthropologie sociale et culturelle ? Quel rôle pourrait-il jouer pour les anthropologues qui ont accepté les préceptes de l'approche multisite ? Sur la base d'une étude de cas de son propre travail en Corse, l'auteur avance que l'on pourrait (paradoxalement) concevoir les limites comme un moyen fructueux de remettre en question les généralisations et de différer la fermeture. Le terrain délimité, repensé comme une « localisation arbitraire », devient explicitement une fenêtre explicitement « partielle » et incomplète sur la complexité.

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