Research (Im)possibilities: Reflections from Everyday International Relations[1]

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As a scholar well-versed in critical approaches to International Relations (IR), I have been told many times that my discipline is self-referential and geared towards quantitative research. Learning from the 'margins' of IR, it is easy to grow cynical of the scientific pretensions as well as the close watch gatekeepers like Robert Keohane (2002), Kenneth Waltz (1979) and Alexander Wendt (1999) who keep on defining IR's object of study.

IR's ethnographic turn emerged at the end of the 1980s as one way of easing these disciplinary pressures. By including the voices of other actors and acknowledging a plurality of social processes, the

ethnographical turn allows for a broadening of IR's object of study. The 'international' is more than the processes and actors impacting states and inter-state relations. It is a distance drawn between one's own concerns and those of others like Uighur rioters in China's Xinjiang province or Indian foreign students living in my community. It refers to everything outside of one's political community and familiar concerns, whether this is encountered daily or not (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005).

As recognized by other disciplines, ethnographical work was a way to better legitimize my research to IR. My work focuses on how Singapore and Vancouver are marketed by their respective state authorities as gateways between East and West. I am interested in how Singapore's multiracialism and Vancouver's multiculturalism impose very narrowed representations of the East and the West, and I investigate the direct impacts of these social codes on people living in these locations when it comes to understanding racial, cultural and language differences.

Reconciling ethnography and IR presents many challenges, notably for IR scholars like myself who are not prepared to deal with its implications. For example, racial stereotypes and language asymmetries are part of the fieldwork experience, but can be hard to face. Participants' prejudices along racialized and linguistic lines seemed unproductive at first, even if they were constitutive of the voices and experiences I documented in both Singapore and Vancouver.

In this article, I would like to share my own struggles in reconciling the importance of ethnographical work to IR. In my case, insurmountable research challenges became the source of new forms of findings. Racial stereotypes and language asymmetries may have displaced the process of traditional research into the realm of social expectations and unproblematized clichés. However, I found that by exploring the mechanisms by which these prejudices and asymmetries occur and evolve, I could shed new light on how the 'international' is experienced by people living in gateway locations.

After discussing the use of ethnography by IR scholars, I will briefly present my own approach. I will then introduce my research on gateways to frame how race and language became research challenges. Finally, I will address how I found both racial stereotypes and language asymmetries to be productive sites for IR research.

Ethnographical Struggles

IR's ethnographic turn was deemed favourable for some IR scholars for the launch of an 'emancipatory research agenda' and a lean towards multi-disciplinarity (Vrasti 2008:279). However, IR's timid attempts at ethnography have since been framed in traditional disciplinary ways; making ethnography part of IR's scientific endeavours.

As Wanda Vrasti (2008) points out in *The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations*, IR scholars tend to misappropriate ethnography in three specific ways, as ethno-empiricism, ethnografeel text and ethnographilia. In the first instance, ethnography becomes for IR scholars, such as Carol Cohn (1987), just a "positivist data-gathering machine" (Vrasti 2008:286). Ethno-empiricism glorifies the gathering of more marginal and situated knowledge but frames them in the traditional "knower/known", "expert/participant" divides. Secondly, Vrasti accuses IR scholars like Cynthia Enloe (2000) of sacrificing "fieldwork experience on the altar of literary stylization" (Vrasti 2008:288). In her view, Enloe develops an ethnografeel text which lacks real engagement and personal communications with the people spoken for by the author. Finally, Vrasti targets the constructivist standpoint to remind us that ethnography cannot be reduced to ethnographilia or to any method of writing that can be incorporated into a scientific endeavour. As with the other pitfalls she identifies, Vrasti puts into question the capacity and willingness of IR scholars to problematize their subjective voice and their positionality in the name of the scientific pretensions of the discipline.

Despite being a good general assessment of IR scholars' engagement with ethnography, Vrasti's argument is unfair in two regards. Her critique of IR's appropriations of ethnography is a gatekeeping exercise, implicitly reinforcing disciplinary walls between anthropology and IR. While stating that the ethnographic turn came about in IR to allow for better engagement with other disciplines, her critiques shut down these efforts in the name of retaining ethnography, as it is practiced and debated in anthropology. Any heuristic use of ethnography by IR scholars is deemed not good enough for IR or for anthropology, as Vrasti does not allow for researchers to experiment, combine and use in their own ways ethnographical insights (Bourdieu 1991).

Furthermore, Vrasti's argument does not consider the struggles of many IR scholars in putting forth serious and complex engagements with ethnography. Besides the mild ethnographical engagements of renown scholars like Cohn and Enloe, doctoral dissertations, like Daniel Bousfield's *A Political Economy of Protest: Ethics and Ethnographical Sensibilities of Contemporary Anti-Capitalism* (2009), and published monographs like J. Marshall Beier's *International Relations in Uncommon Places: Indigeneity, Cosmology and the Limits of International Relations* (2005), have been populating IR scholarship since the late 1990s. Vrasti fails to recognize these expressions of struggle from IR scholars in engaging with ethnography, thus contributing to their marginalization. It seems that only big names of the discipline and their use of ethnography are important to consider when trying to illuminate the nature of IR's ethnographic turn. Such a position reduces significantly the image of contemporary IR and IR scholars. Not only does Vrasti reduce the use of ethnography to a very specific anthropological understanding, she also does not recognize how IR scholars struggle (and have expressed their struggle) to reconcile ethnography with IR.

I do not believe that ethnography has been utilized to its full potential by IR scholars and I have no pretensions of seeing my work doing so. Rather, I would like to discuss my experience in engaging with ethnography as my own way to critique how IR scholars deal with this approach but also as a response to Vrasti's clean cut argument.

Methodological *Flânage*

Personally, my struggles in engaging with ethnography as an IR scholar drew me closer to everyday life theory (Certeau 1984, Lefebvre 1968). Like many others, focusing on how people contend with the various ways they are asked to contribute to society, this approach allowed me to problematize not only the actions and opinions of my study participants, but also my own. As Anca Pusca (2009) argues, I found that Walter Benjamin's (1968) image of the *flâneur* represented how I felt as a researcher, struggling to understand and engage with the everyday life of Singapore and Vancouver.

The *flâneur* is an intellectual walking and observing the crowd (Benjamin 1968:169). Like a researcher, the *flâneur* goes to specific places for a specific duration and talks to people, observes various interactions and reactions to specific events and social situations and does archival work. As researchers, we walk through

our case study for a period of time and work/hope that the "right" people will share their insights with us.

The archetype of the *flâneur* is helpful to understand the boundaries in which fieldwork is conducted. It speaks of positionality and the ways in which we determine – to some extent – what is important for research *a priori*. We traverse our case study with our own lens on the world and the arrogance that we have a higher purpose, despite all the limitations linked to using only one lens. Besides the obvious privilege of having the time to observe and investigate social realities, the researcher also has a unique social status giving him or her freedom to participate in various social circles and cut across existing hierarchies in order to gather information (Benjamin 1983:170–171). This archetype captures the unpredictability of fieldwork, depending as it does on cutting across local power relations, social structures and conventions, on the good faith of people, on finding helpful contacts, on being able to attend specific international and local events and, lastly, on sheer luck.

As such, ethnography – to me – was first a privileged method to gather information in an ethno-empiricist way. I thought I could gain insights from social groupings usually not part of the debate and incorporate this information as a first-hand critique of mainstream analyses on my topic. However, ethnography soon became more than a method and the *flâneur* position allowed me to see and struggle with its implications, despite my disciplinary upbringing.

Marketing Gateways

I decided to *flâne* in Singapore and Vancouver, two locations marketed by their state as gateways between East and West. In both cases, governments made this strategic move to profit from the economic rise of Asian markets in the late 1990s, by arguing that these locations – these gateways – could help business and people to transgress civilizational divides between East and West. As such, Singaporean and Canadian authorities reproduced stereotypes of what the East and the West for these two cities to become the perfect connection points between civilizations.

Locally, this meant that state authorities institutionalized a narrow understanding of the East and the West in everyday life. In order to encourage the types of gateway activities they desire, both Canadian and Singaporean authorities played on specific policies like Singapore's multiracialism and Vancouver's multiculturalism to influence activities performed at their gateways. State authorities

constructed how the "international" should be lived locally by institutionalizing what the cultural differences are and articulating how they should be tolerated, notably along racialized and linguistic lines.

Multiracialism in the city-state was used to emphasize that the East (read Chinese) and the West could meet and interact in Singapore. Multiracialism is an official system in which the Chinese, the Malay, the Indian and the Other (read Caucasian) – called the CMIO system – have equal public treatment in terms of official languages, religious holidays and so forth. Racializing everyday life along the CMIO distinctions has created social expectations about, for example, the religion of a Malay and the language an Indian may or may not speak (Bokhorst-Heng 1999, Huat 2007).

Canada's multiculturalism was historically developed as a managerial tool to deal with increasing ethno-cultural differences since the 1960s. The official federal legislative measure enacted in 1971 and 1988 legitimized cultural pluralism and ensured equal opportunities for all. In Vancouver, multiculturalism helped fight rampant racism against the various immigration waves of people of Asian descent, notably since the 1970s (Mitchell 1993:265). By tolerating the existence of different cultures alongside the mainstream Caucasian ideal, multiculturalism has tended to racialize culture and promote, parallel to public equality, private ethnocentric practices (Gilroy 1991).

Gateway Impossibilities

Despite their differences, both multiracialism and multiculturalism impact the carrying-out of qualitative research in similar ways, especially when the aim of the research is to problematize mechanisms constructing dividing lines between East and West. I faced challenges created by the ways in which racial stereotypes and language asymmetries made their way into the everyday life of Singapore and Vancouver. Racial stereotypes and language differences are real obstacles in conversation and interactions with people who see themselves and the researcher through these lenses. I will expand on how race and language became research obstacles to me during interviews and participant observation in both locations.

Race is a social construction with real presence in our everyday life and with concrete influence on the development of our societies (Persaud 2002:62). Even with multiculturalism and multiracialism, perceptions of race inform everyday social expectations on how

best to relate to people of other races. A stereotypical representation is devoid of the various nuances, fluidity, complexities and power relations on which identities and communities are built because it is a simplified categorization of others for our own purpose and benefit (Rosello 1998).

In Singapore's multiracial society, for example, racialized CMIO categories are not only depicted as homogeneous and exclusive. They tend to reproduce eclectic and dangerous assumptions, identifying automatically who should celebrate Christmas and making easy correlations between the Malay race, Islam and the recent terrorist activities of the Muslim Jemaak Islamiyah (JI) in Southeast Asia. Even if multiracialism was created to allow inter-racial dialogue, it instead reproduces racialized anxiety by increasing social expectations and profiling (Chin and Vasu 2006)[2].

While divisions may be less public in Vancouver, they remain significant. More often than not it is the private cultural spaces that are racialized. During my fieldwork, attendance to Chinese events was often received as crossing (in)visible lines. At one specific event, I was told, in an amusing and intrigued fashion, that *you're the first foreigner to participate with us.* Even if everybody can, on paper, participate in such events, it was pretty clear that it was a "Chinese space". Despite the fact that the association promotes multiculturalism, I was perceived as an outsider because of the ways in which morphological markers are enmeshed with other social expectations and cultural boundaries.

In both locations, there were expectations regarding my behaviour, preferences and (un)knowledge, which dictated how people acted in my presence and the depth of our interactions. As many Chinese informants told me in Singapore, Chinese Singaporeans do not expect Caucasians to speak Chinese, to eat Chinese or to know about Chinese culture. The few times I shared my research interests and findings on local Chinese community associations, I was either perceived as someone who did not and could not truly understand their reality, or I was putting my informants to shame by knowing more about their heritage than them (Interview with Marie-Geneviève, Singapore, 27 January 2008; Kelly, Singapore, 6 March 2008). In Vancouver, expectations about Westerners wanting to know more about Eastern cultures are often perceived as a business angle, or as a career advancement strategy. Many informants shared with me marketable insights in the Chinese business

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[2] Multiracialism tends also to reify economic inequalities between races by separating social services and structuring individual opportunities along these lines (Huat 2007).

communities of Vancouver, neither expecting nor understanding that my research focus was on community-based activities including, but not limited to, private sector actors.

Many personal ethical issues arose from being perceived through a local racialized identity which was given to me by the people I met in these locations. Becoming complicit in the racialized hierarchies at play, I repeatedly allowed my status as Other in Singapore to be used by some of my participants to their advantage. For example, I interviewed many representatives of Chinese clan associations in Singapore, which are seen to be somewhat ethnocentric organizations. I ended up being invited to a series of events, notably during Chinese New Year, to help boost their multiracial pool in the VIP section. This was beneficial for their media coverage and for furthering their image as inclusive organizations (Interview with Bella, Singapore, 27 February 2008).

Similarly, my participation in the events of specific community associations in Vancouver was shaped by the spirit of multiculturalism. I was not expected to speak with people and understand Mandarin at the "Chinese" events attended. I was to use English while bolstering the association's ethno-cultural diversity profile. Despite clear and formal introductions of my purposes, many of the people I met during these events thought I was trying to establish business contacts and/or tried to convince me to get involved in these associations' activities or sit on their Board of Directors.

Furthermore, I found that language differences and expectations, often convoluted with racialized processes, created a research challenge of their own. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1997) has demonstrated that languages are manifestations of specific and unique worlds of meaning – or language-games – including both verbal and non-verbal social conventions, shared collective memory components and specific expressions. Language asymmetries happen when we attempt to translate specific ideas into other languages, as no world of meaning can really be reduced to or captured in its linguistic representation.

In locations like Singapore and Vancouver, everyday life is divided along linguistic lines, which became a challenge to me, as I was perceived as linguistically limited to English. My inability to speak specific Chinese dialects and the unwillingness of potential participants to engage with me in English were real obstacles. I witnessed many instances of insecurity from participants attempting to explain to me in English their true feelings and insights, endlessly trying to find the "right" English word to express

how they felt in their own world of meaning. In Singapore, willing participants to my research censored their thoughts as they felt their English was not up to par with what they would convey in Cantonese, Hokkien or Teochew. In many cases, it resulted in broad references to what can be found in books and the web, to the detriment of personal insights and in-depth conversations (Interviews with representatives of Ngee Ann Kongsi, Singapore, 7 March 2008; Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, Singapore, 25 January 2008)[3].

During interviews in Vancouver, some participants of Chinese origin decided to answer specific questions by writing down Chinese characters on a sheet of paper. Expecting me not to understand Mandarin, they decided not to engage with me in English on specific topics. They wanted me to look up and investigate their answers in Chinese characters, as there was no answer in English would have adequately expressed what they wanted to say (Interview with Jenny, Singapore, 25 February 2008; Mike, Vancouver, 19 June 2008). In the mind of these participants, their understanding and practice of ideas like 'giving back/responsibility' are inherently Chinese, with no sufficient equivalent in English. No discussion in English could be carried out and their decision to disengage, based on linguistic differences and expectations, shut down conversation.

Moreover, language differences can be used to reinforce racialized expectations and thriving ethnocentrism (Pascale 2006:90–110). I met with Martin in Singapore, a young Chinese professional. When asked about the linguistic divides in the city-state, he shared with me how the schism between Chinese-educated and English-educated Chinese Singaporeans constitutes one of the major and unspoken divides; communities who do not really relate because they do not see the world the same way. In his case, as someone English-educated, he watches specific TV programs, hangs out at specific coffee houses and has specific Westernized dreams and desires, to which Chinese-educated people cannot refer to. He expressed to me that his interest in my research and my personal lack of contact with Chinese-educated people were probably anchored in common linguistic ground and social expectations from potential participants of becoming friends based on what we both know, experience and understand (Interview with Martin, Singapore, 19 February 2008).

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[3] Language differences are a serious problem for Singapore's social cohesion, as the 1960s language policies have imposed specific languages over others. To this day, some grandparents are unable to speak to their grandchildren as they do not share a common language (Bokhorst-Heng 1999, Huat 2007).

In Vancouver, I interviewed Alice, a local news director who came from Hong Kong in the early 1990s to study journalism. She shared with me how she is always perceived as an expert on Chinese news but has never been appreciated as a 'real' journalist in the mainstream media because of the Western and Eastern languages she speaks. She expressed that, as a Hong Kongese, she has the same problem with people less versed and integrated to mainstream Vancouver. (In)visible lines based on which language people are or are not speaking create hermetic social circles in which it is harder for Caucasian researchers like myself and news directors such as Alice to fit in and engage with people who identified with one language only (Interview with Alice, Richmond, 14 May 2008).

Reflecting on Possibilities

After struggling to understand how these research challenges could allow me to speak to IR and further our understanding of gateway locations between East and West, I realized that racial stereotypes and language asymmetries are not just insurmountable obstacles: They are interesting sites to understand how the various borders and distances we create through our social expectations and daily actions structure what we see as the "international".

In the case of racial stereotypes, I decided to stop trying to get rid of them, either performed by me or by the people I met. As Alina Sajed (2008) indicates, racial stereotypes will always come back under new forms. It is better to ask: What can I do with a stereotype? How can I make the stereotype productive to me? Even if racial stereotypes are used in everyday life to disregard someone else's reality, people depicted by these crude categories utilize them as well. Stereotypical expectations about racialized identities become more than a limiting factor for people to frame their ideas and actions in their everyday lives. They become starting points along which we can appropriate racialized divisions and transgress them (Velayutham 2007).

In Singapore I witnessed how racial stereotypes were used as common ground to have an open conversation on the city-state. During an academic conference, two Chinese Singaporean scholars decided to share their everyday experiences as a starting point to a discussion on multiracialism. The first argued that if he were a Malay citizen and saw one of his neighbours practicing some "Falun Gong nonsense" on the grass, he would not approach the Chinese person directly. He would ask a Chinese friend of his to intervene on his behalf. The second scholar, taking the role of the Chinese friend,

answered that he would not like to deal with this "Falun Gong nonsense" either. He argued it would be unjust for him to be expected to intervene and be responsible because of his race. Starting with racial stereotypes and their shared common senses, a deeper discussion about social life in Singapore was launched regarding freedom of religion, the loss of social cohesion along racialized lines, communitarian social responsibility and public/private divides .

In Vancouver one can witness the Gung Haggis Fat Chow Dinner during Chinese New Year, an event which celebrates on the surface all the racial stereotypes of both Scottish and Hong Kong cultures, as a starting point. Alongside the interesting outfits mixing kilts with traditional Chinese clothes, this event speaks to two very specific historical connections; the first that Scottish banks were among the first Western banks in Hong Kong and the second that many Hong Kongese businesspeople moved to Vancouver during the 1990s fearing the impending annexation to China. As such, Vancouver has become a new ground for hybrid cultures to foster. Gung Haggis Fat Choy is more than a dinner, as it represents a renowned networking event and can be directly connected to the diverse and growing trans-pacific alumni relations starting from Simon Fraser University (Gung Haggis Fat Choy 2008). Enacting what the gateway is as a bridging location, this dinner represents the appropriation of racialized cultural symbols to express and thrive on personal connections. Therefore, racial stereotypes give clues of how people in locations like Singapore and Vancouver experience the "international". If they are the lenses through which people see the world, their importance should be acknowledged not only as blindfolds, but as sources of possibilities as well.

Furthermore, the language asymmetries I faced when trying to understand distinct language-games can also become productive sites for investigating the "international". Miscommunication and approximation of meaning are very difficult obstacles to surmount. However, in coming to realize which language would have been preferable to be familiar with before conducting fieldwork, I discovered the usefulness of language asymmetries to me. There are many worlds of meaning one can identify as a starting point to "better" engage with people living at the gateway including Chinese dialects, English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. But what about Singlish and the hybrids between Mandarin and Chinese dialects many people speak? We cannot assume that pure forms of language are better reflections of everyday life. This is a shared reality of Singapore and Vancouver where people are brought up to speak many languages. Whereas Singlish is a particular mix of

English and Chinese with Malay intonations, linguistic developments in Vancouver include an increasing incorporation of French to English and Eastern languages. In fact, I observed the popularity of French immersion schools for newcomers from Asian countries, who desire their children to develop skills in both Canadian official languages in order to be able to work for the Canadian federal government (Interview with Julie, Vancouver 29 April 2008). No matter the context, there is no pure form of language that relates closer to a specific language-game than others. The combination and evolution of mixed languages becomes interesting to map the historical configurations and social developments of locations where people live between languages, between East and West.

Moreover, through language asymmetries, it is also possible to find productive sites of comparison. In some interviews with Chinese international students studying in both Singapore and Vancouver, participants answered several questions about their choices of activities by saying, "because it is more happy". This answer sounds awkward, as something seems to be lost in translation (Interview with Linda, Singapore, 22 February 2008; Collective interview with 4 international Chinese students, Vancouver, 24 April 2008). As Benjamin (1968) indicates, there are ideas like happiness that we all relate to in all languages, even if we experience them differently. For example, happiness is a concept J. L. Austin (1975) privileges over truth to express the positive connotation of performative statements. Happiness relates to a direct state of being which seems to be shared by Chinese international students interviewed in both Singapore and Vancouver. This idea of the positive performative is in line with the interesting shared world of meaning I tapped into with these students. Their common happiness and how it is lived differently are fruitful grounds to investigate further the structural lines shaping their international experience of East-West realities in gateway locations.

Conclusion

My personal struggle in engaging with ethnography as an IR scholar is not unique, as it reflects the difficult disciplinary position adepts of IR's ethnographic turn are facing. I wanted to present my research challenges and the ways in which I integrated them into my work as a way to critique what my discipline imposes on IR scholars and to respond to analyses glorifying ethnography as an anthropological endeavour only. Having ethnographical sensibilities helped me to re-locate IR research and findings within my personal struggles with racial stereotypes and language asymmetries. Even if my intent was more to share my personal struggles rather than

conveying how my participants construed the "international" in gateway locations, it is interesting to note how I became part of my participants' own experiences of the "international". The ways in which they perceived me and interacted with me in this regard allowed me to investigate their struggles with social codes like multiracialism and multiculturalism.

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Résumé/Abstract

Bien que certains chercheurs en relations internationales aient utilisé l'ethnographie depuis la fin des années 1980, cette approche demeure marginale au sein de la discipline. Plusieurs adeptes de cette approche la réconcilient difficilement avec les préceptes disciplinaires des relations internationales. Je soutiens que l'utilisation de l'ethnographie redéfinit le type de recherches et de résultats possibles pour les relations internationales. Pour ce faire, j'explore les stéréotypes raciaux et les asymétries linguistiques observés dans le contexte de mes recherches de terrain à Singapour et Vancouver. Ces stéréotypes et asymétries ne sont pas que des obstacles, car ils révèlent comment « l'international » est vécu par tous, dans leur quotidien. En problématisant ces frontières raciales et linguistiques, les chercheurs en relations internationales peuvent mieux comprendre comment « l'international » se construit dans la vie de tous les jours.

Mots clés : Relations Internationales, Ethnographie, Vie quotidienne, *Flâneur*, Race, Langue

Even if some scholars in international relations (IR) have engaged with ethnography since the 1980s, it remains a marginal approach in the discipline. Adepts of ethnography in IR struggle with reconciling this approach with disciplinary pressures to draw out of their fieldwork a broader significance for international politics. I argue that IR's engagement with ethnography re-shapes what research and findings are for this discipline. To illustrate this, I explore racial stereotypes and language asymmetries in the context of my own fieldwork on gateway locations like Singapore and Vancouver. I show that these research challenges reveal how people in their daily lives experience the "international". By problematizing these racial and linguistic borders, IR researchers may develop a better understanding of how the "international" is structured, hence re-locating IR research and findings within their own research struggles.

Key words: International Relations, Ethnography, Everyday Life, *Flâneur*, Race, Language.

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