DARA IVANOVA

LOSING AND FINDING: ON THE CURIOUS LIFE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECTS
AN ESSAY[1]

A ROOM FOR ABANDONMENT

There is a room in the Netherlands, where one may anonymously abandon a baby and walk away. According to Dutch law, anonymous abandonment is illegal and punishable, yet the room exists as an attempt by the NGO 'Beschermde Wieg'[2] to prevent the few (see NIDAA), but devastating deaths of unsafely abandoned infants. Facilities for child abandonment have long existed all over the world in one form or another. In the middle ages in Europe unwanted babies were left in public spaces, such as the steps of a church, where they would be easily found (Boswell, 1988). A modern version of child abandonment is the baby hatch. In Germany it is called Babyklappe and it is a place inside of a wall (usually that of a hospital) with a warm bed and an alarm system. In South Africa, such a hatch is called a "door of hope". In the U.S.A. some states have laws permitting the legal abandonment of infants in the so-called "safe havens" – places like fire stations or hospitals. The peculiarity of the Dutch case is the fact that the abandonment place is a room, which one may enter, as opposed to simply leaving a baby inside an object and walking away. According to the room's creators, this spatial adjustment to the traditional abandonment site is a game-changer, because it provides the possibility for exchange, yet it does not insist on it. Once having entered the room, one is directed by a pictogram on the wall that they may decide to press a button on the wall, which would result in a volunteer joining them in the room within 10 minutes. The volunteer will then speak with the abandoner, trying to help them and discourage them from anonymously abandoning a child. Yet, if they do not wish to speak to a volunteer, they may leave the baby in the crib, where a camera will quickly alert the volunteers. I learned about the existence of this room through an interview with the NGO's founder in the morning paper. After reading the interview, I tore the page out and hurried to work.

A ROOM OF CURIOSITY

I shove the plate with cake away excitedly and hold the torn newspaper article up for my supervisor to see. "This is what I want to do!" It is the group's usual Monday lunch meeting. Through knives, forks and

---

[1] This essay is based on ethnographic work (observations, interviews, document analysis) between December 2015 and October 2016. It is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the case of the foundling room – such analysis is done elsewhere – but a personal reflection on working with objects ethnographically.

[2] From Dutch: literally 'protected cradle'.

the buzzing sound of voices, I hold the paper higher, stealing his attention. He looks at the interview with the 'Beschermde Wieg' distractedly. I am asked to forward some napkins, but manage to say in a breath what the room is about. After mentioning 'dead babies' and 'illegal', a couple of colleagues seem to have overheard and are interested in learning more. "A room for abandoning babies, really?"

My first reaction was similar. There was surprise and a strong curiosity. I wanted to find out more: how does this work, who does it, where are the babies placed, why is it il/legal? Yet more importantly, this story was about a room – a place – which made it a matter of scientific interest for me as well. Having started work on a PhD project on the importance of place for the governance of healthcare, I thought this to be a perfect fit, an interesting case, a great story for me to write about. Why is that? Thinking of places and the governance of healthcare, one may imagine hospitals, clinics, dentist practices, health policy, etc. A foundling room for anonymous abandonment is not the first thing that comes to mind, but I chose it exactly for this reason. I wanted to write about weird, odd, strange, out-of-the-box cases that would challenge the idea of what a place is and what it does. To some extent, the nature of my object had been delineated even before I read that newspaper article. In the broad contours of 'odd' and 'weird', the room's confusing existence started to settle well, the more I read about it. Not only that, but my own admiration (born, no doubt, of the room's controversial 'being') was amplified by others, whom I told about it. Everyone I shared my curiosity with, admired how oddly intriguing it is. This peculiar circle gained speed, the more I went on and on about working with this case and after less than a week I had convinced everyone involved that this was a perfect case for my PhD, that I would do excellent research on it and that it would result in very good work. All of this happened on the basis of the room's peculiarity and controversy and had little to do with actual facts and/or observations. My object at that point consisted of a delightful idea of 'oddity contained'. Armed with this abstract idea and much enthusiasm, I began working on framing the object's ontology. I had to find out what this room *is*. The best way to do that is, of course, by working with it ethnographically. So I wrote down the address on a piece of paper, took the bus and a recorder, and went to meet my object.

A ROOM OF NORMATIVITIES

Ringing the doorbell of the volunteer's home, walking in and finding myself inside the foundling room was all rather underwhelming. The place was stifling and small, clean and orderly, with stuffed animals curiously looking at me from the chairs and crib. I felt as though I was missing something, yet could not pinpoint what that was. Then the volunteer came in – the two of us barely fitting inside the space – and walked me though all the features of the room: the camera, connected to her phone; the black button, which 'women' could press if they wanted to speak to somebody and receive help and advice about

their situation; the always unlocked door; the white envelope, which contained a letter to 'Dear Mommy' and a puzzle piece, which fits perfectly with one that the organization would gift to the abandoned baby (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Bed in fundling – equipped with stuffed animals and a letter addressed to the mother.

While she spoke, I started to admire the way the room had been conceived and implemented. A baby would be safe here, I thought. What is more, I regarded the volunteer warmly; she had put so much time and effort into helping strangers. Her house showed that very clearly. In addition to being a volunteer for 'Beschermde Wieg', she and her husband were a foster family for children, who had to be taken away from their parents for safety reasons. In her living room, a special shelf held framed photographs of all the children she had welcomed into her home. Many smiling faces looked back at me, as I sat down with a cup of warm tea. I had a wonderful conversation with a kind woman, who was willing to be responsible for the room and answering her phone 24/7, in order to help unwanted children live. My feelings of admiration had turned into vaguely formulated thoughts about the room being good. Yet, after saying our goodbyes, and as I was walking toward the bus station, I felt uneasy. I suddenly imagined a man inside the small room, pressing the black button, and I wondered where the baby's mother was. Next, the image of the envelope, entitled 'Dear Mommy' added to that strange feeling. Perhaps the woman does not want to be a mother or it is the baby's father who is abandoning it? The way the room is scripted – all the objects that plead for a woman to press the button (including a poster on the wall; see figure 2), so that the volunteers can help her and turn her away from the decision to abandon her baby anonymously, contribute to the room's goodness, yet they can also feel wrong. What if a newborn is indeed abandoned here? The room is actually an old garage adjacent to the house and converted into a nursery. There, a baby's life might take a decisive turn toward anonymity if it is abandoned without any information about its origins. The enormity of that possibility felt pressing and uncomfortable. The words of the volunteer I had just spoken with, were quickly colored in a new light: the people who make this room possible have their agendas and beliefs about mothers, babies, and

what is good. "It is better for a child to be abandoned anonymously and adopted than to live in very bad conditions", she had said.

Figure 2: A poster on the wall in the room appeals to the mothers to ask and wait for help.

Once an object becomes real, in the sense that it is not an idea anymore, but a concrete reality, we as researchers must find a way to relate to it. In the case of the foundling room, the emotions ran high and I struggled with relating, because the room was so rife with normativities. What was the 'right' way to relate? The normativities I was introduced to in that first visit to the room were widely mirrored in Dutch society and press, as most people were either for or against the room's existence; it was either good or bad. Struggling with this, I found a way out in reading Pols' (2006) paper on accounting as a variety of goodness and badness. She analyzes washing of patients with dementia, saying that what is sometimes considered 'good' care may be 'bad' contextually and depends on a number of elements. Pols then argues for "contextual reflexivity as practice" (2006, p. 426), where judgment is reserved and many possible goodness and badness are assumed to co-exist. This way of thinking helped me go beyond the normativities by becoming open and accepting. It was not that I did not know that staying open is paramount in ethnographic research, but it was the fact that I was *unaware* of the effect the case's normativities had on me and more importantly – on the constitution of my object. I had become lost in relating to the room and had to move further. Relating, then, is both necessary and dangerous, because, as has been the rule in ethnographic research, proximity and distance are both needed, in

order to be able to understand an analyze. Yet, here I mean something more: in relating to my object, I struggled to feel comfortable with it, especially because of the normative judgments I was expected to have. When I finally let go of that struggle, the object somehow became truly *mine*.

A ROOM OF INFRASTRUCTURES

As I sit down, I immediately regret my choice of seat, realizing I would have my back to the view. Tall buildings are not the norm in the Netherlands, so the Ministry of Justice's 146,5 meters high offices are a visitor's treat. My interviewee, having worked here for some time, seems oblivious to the view of The Hague, spreading spectacularly around us. She carries a big red folder, with metal rings on the side and erupting with plastic pockets. This folder, I am told, is about the foundling room. She opens it to reveal a host of well-organized documents, some with notes on the margins, some sections highlighted with different color markers. Then there were newspaper clippings, just as the one I had torn from my morning paper and brought to work. The Ministry of Justice official patiently explained that the room is not technically illegal, but that there was simply no provision for it in the law. "It does not exist" – she said. Changing the law would be cumbersome and require a lot of work, which is why there were no plans for such a change currently. "However, we follow the case carefully", she said, pointing to the red folder in front of her. "It is a politically sensitive issue." That was definitely true. The conversation about the foundling room mostly happened through the media, as advisory bodies (among them The Netherlands Council of the Rights of the Child; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, FIOM[3], The International Reference Center for the rights of the children deprived of their family, UNICEF and the UN) urged against the existence of the room, arguing for safer and legal ways for abandonment that did not deprive children of their right to know their origins.

On the other hand, the organization 'Beschermde Wieg' and some politicians argued for the room, as a way to save those, who would otherwise fall through the cracks of the system[4]. The position of the government was therefore tricky, because they could not go against the advice of national and supranational organizations, yet they did not want to seem unfeeling in this emotion-ridden debate. The 'political hot-potato' was best being avoided and delegated to a red folder-status. If or when the topic became an issue, the Ministry would take a stand, but not a minute too early. Until then, the clippings would fill more plastic pockets and the folder will swell. It was then I realized that the room was much more than the garage I had visited. Outside of the room, there was more of it, and possibly the really important parts. The object I was describing was both a room and, crucially, its infrastructures (Star &

---

[3] FIOM is The Netherlands Organization Specialized in Unwanted Pregnancy and Lineage; see www.fiom.nl

[4] The intricacies of the foundling room's (legal) existence are too complex to describe here and are not the focus of this essay. I do this in detail elsewhere.

Ruhleder, 1996; Bowker & Star, 1998; Star, 1999; Bowker, 1994 & Larkin, 2003). Those parts of it that are hidden, but crucial to how it works. The fact that the room is accessible and I could go there and visit it, is a direct result of the Ministry of Justice *not* declaring it illegal or at least delaying judgement on the matter. It is also a result of the advice given by many national and supranational bodies, which link the issue of child abandonment in the Netherlands to this issue in the rest of Europe and the world. Further, the room is imagined and adjudicated in the media, through the infrastructures not only of journalists and the logic of the news cycle, but through the transmission of aerial and radio waves and the emotional response of the public. To describe an object ethnographically means to follow it and leave behind the contours one had imagined it might fit in; letting it swell and diminish, go back and forth and lead to new objects, which are then devoured and incorporated into it. To do an ethnography of an object, then, is to constantly search for its boundaries and yet always be prepared to go beyond them.

A ROOM OF RESISTANCE[5] (LOSING)

If an object is always changing, how do we grasp it? Where/when does an object/a description end? Following descriptions is uncomfortable, because they can be endless, because their temporalities are fluid and because an object is always part of other objects, links are everywhere and there is nothing natural about an object's boundaries. When a baby was abandoned in the room in May 2016, the room became more than a delightful case, a stifling garage or a red folder: it became too big to grasp. I had been working on an analysis of the room as a place of possibilities, where many futures are made possible, yet curiously - none happen (see Ivanova et al., 2017 for detailed analysis). This analysis, which drew on the room as a place that works by *not working,* became futile when I got a text message from a friend: "Your baby-room finally got a baby!" and a link to a news site. As I felt my analysis tumbling down, I realized I had no thought of the anonymously abandoned newborn that begins a life in a painful and difficult way. This made my object even muddier, forcing me to wonder how to combine all the different objects I had encountered and produced during my ethnography – the imaginary, the 'real', the normative, the infrastructural – into one relatively stable account, which could be gripped, written down and presented to others. I had framed the room in absolute terms – it was legal or illegal, it was good or bad, it was in my imagination and it was real, it worked through its materialities or through its infrastructures. Yet, such an account draws the contours of the object too sharply and defines what goes into the account and what goes out. Pursuing a definitive ontology of an object that one is working with is natural, because by fixing objects, we appropriate them, make them ours and, most importantly, make them knowable. As a result of searching for *what it is*, the foundling room had slipped away. At

---

[5] The idea of the room as an object of resistance was brought up by Prof. Dr. Estrid Sørensen.

every turn, it had resisted characterization and pinning down; it had resisted my efforts to *place* it and I was left with a feeling of unease, because this object felt familiar – in many ways, it was *I* who had made it. Yet, it also felt vaguely uncomfortable and distant. Not only was it ontologically unfixed, but it had – all of a sudden – become un-relatable.

A ROOM OF ABSENCE (FINDING)

A resisting object is still a workable object and perhaps even more so, because in resisting classification, it leaves clues to a new/different/unfamiliar make-up. Why is my object so difficult to pin down; what part(s) of it have I been missing? The foundling room had become fluid and then it had dissolved into too many parts. At the core of this dissolution, however, was a solid sense of absence. There was an absence of clarity (legal, normative, ontological, etc.), an absence of purpose (what is this room *for*?), an absence of boundaries (where does the room begin/end?) and an absence of existence (the law does not 'see' the room, because it does not yet exist as a legal object). Callon and Law (2004) encourage us to look at processes and multiply concepts – what if presence is absence and absence is presence? Presence and absence are not opposites, but ways of seeing and not seeing. Hetherington's (2004) analysis of consumption and disposal is pertinent here as what he calls *the agency of the absent* (p. 168). If absence can be presence, then what does an object's absence *do* to an ethnographic description? When we write about an object that is present through its absence, we make absence the core of that object's description; we make absent present by putting it into words, giving examples, arguing points. The object, of course, is and is not present/absent as such – it is many things that we (fail to) articulate and work with. Yet, working with objects ethnographically often means working with fluidities that are hard to grasp. When feeling an object is slipping away, it becomes absent – not as such, but as *my* object – and this absence is a hook, a rock, and a stable point, which can lead me back to when the object was familiar. The foundling room had become too big and too abstract, too fluid and indeterminate, yet it was also very concretely absent. It was now a room of absence-presence, which is a place that allows for more paths to be drawn – it is a starting point for more possibilities. This does not mean that every object must be absent, in order to be found and 'captured'. Yet, it does chart a (possible) route through uncertainties. An object's *being* is always a discovery and a process. In analyzing a curious room, I tried to embrace all the ways in which it was absent. Other objects might require a different type of leap. But losing and finding, it seems to me, is what makes an object happen; it is a way of reconciling and accepting its deep complexity and taming it. The ways in which an object is lost and found, struggled with and accepted may differ dramatically, yet the process – one of clash and discord – must always be there.

THE LIFE OUR OBJECTS LEAD

What does it mean to work with an object ethnographically? I have shown above that following an object might mean to find it (within yourself) by choosing and imagining it (curiosity); to accept it and relate to it (normativity); to let it lead you elsewhere (infrastructures); to see it change and slip away (resistance) and to embrace it as anew (finding). Finding an object, then, is not about finding a fixed ontology, but about letting it be. In that sense finding (and in order to find, one must first lose it) is the same as making. Ethnographic data is alive and working with it is like working with a rolling ball. The stability of written words cannot compare with that and so we must make choices and categories and omissions, which makes capturing our object a difficult task. Instead, we may choose to let our objects lead lives of their own and be at ease with the process of discovery being a process of making, un-making and re-making an object.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Boswell, J. (1988). *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. New York: Random House.

Bowker, G.-C. (1994). *Science on the Run: Information Management and Industrial Geophysics at Schlumberger*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bowker, G.-C. & Star, S.-L. (1998). Building Information Infrastructures for Social Worlds: The Role of Classifications and Standards. In Ishida, T. (Ed.), *Community Computing and Support Systems* (pp. 231-148). Berlin: Springer.

Callon, M. & Law, J. (2004). Introduction: Absence - Presence, Circulation, and Encountering in Complex Space. *Environment and Planning D*, 22(1), 3–11.

Ivanova, D., Wallenburg, I. & Bal, R. (2017*). In/visible places: Infrastructures of Liminality in a Baby-Foundling Room*. Under Review.

Hetherington, K. (2004). Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal, and Absent Presence. *Environment and Planning D*, 22(1), 157–173.

Larkin, B. (2013). The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42(1), 327-43.

Pols, J. (2006). Accounting and Washing: Good Care in Long-term Psychiatry. *Science, Technology & Human Values*, *31*(4), 409- 430.

Star. S.- L. & Ruhleder, K. (1996). Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and Access for Large Information Spaces. *Information Systems Research*, *7*(1), 111–134.