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The ethnographic case: series conclusion

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By Emily Yates-Doerr

*This entry concludes the series “The Ethnographic Case” which ran every other Monday between June 2015 and July 2016. The book *Case*, which holds 27 cases, can be accessed [here](#).*

One day, early on in the series, we received two submissions. Their similar anatomy was striking. Each featured a medical waiting room. Someone entered the space with a gift for the clinical personnel, the gift was accepted, and something shifted in the resulting care.

In [Aaron Ansell's case](#), set within gardens of an informal clinic in Piauí, Brazil, the gift was a small satchel of milk. [Rima Praspaliauskiene's](#) was set in a Lithuanian public hospital and the gift was a rich chocolate cake. Aaron, who works and teaches on legal orders, analyzed the exchange as a challenge to hospital norms of equalitarianism. He helped us to see how the give-and-take of milk interrupts the requirements of a deracinated liberal democracy, offering instead the warm sociality of personal affinity. Rima, who focuses on medical care and valuing, used the object of the chocolate cake to query the social scientist's impulse to explain why people do what they do. She shows us how this impulse may rest upon the linearity and equivalence of rational calculation, uncomfortably treating sociality as a commodity.

The juxtaposition of these submissions is emblematic – a case, if you will – of something we have seen throughout this series: the art of ethnographic writing resides in a relation between what is there and what is done with it.

Beginnings

We might trace the origin of the series to a business meeting at the AAAs, when we offered the idea of “the ethnographic case” for a Somatosphere series.^[1] The idea was quickly picked up and moved around by the group. Most everyone had something to add. Medical cases, detective cases, legal cases, psychiatric cases: the similarities and differences between how ethnographers think with and in cases and the use of cases in other

fields were intriguing.[\[iii\]](#)

We might also trace the origins to fieldwork. Many of the authors in the series noted, there was *something* – an interaction, encounter, object, or image – from time in the field that had become haunting. Participation in our bookCase offered a chance to flesh out how messy interactions over many months of fieldwork become condensed into ethnographic moments, where the already understood folds together with that which is yet to be tamed ([Strathern 1999](#)).

From the beginning, Christine knew she would write about Judy—a patient she had encountered in her research on vulvar pain. Judy’s presence shaped [Christine’s book](#), although Christine had not yet had a chance to write specifically about their encounter. Christine titled the case [3 millimeters](#)— a reference to a closure as much as an opening, for *Lichen planus*, an autoimmune disease, had fused Judy’s labia to this small size, causing embarrassment and pain. The details of Judy’s story are unique, but taken together they crystallized a problem that Christine had grappled with during her months at the Vulvar Health Clinic: people do not know how to talk about genitals, and an inability to verbalize genitalia contributes to their medical neglect. Silence was not a space of nothingness; it was a space where tissue fused and pus accreted as the vulva, an object erased precisely by its hypersexuality, becomes unthinkable, and thereby untreatable, in preventative practices of care. Writing the vulva, speaking the vulva in her case – as with speaking it in the clinic – would help to develop a new linguistic ecology, making vulvas matter in better ways.

Having participated in the previous [Somatosphere special series](#), I didn’t contribute a case myself. But much of my own work and writing centered upon the problems that arose from making cases. A brief discussion of my interest in editing the series is as follows:

I had become suspicious of the practice of case-making while studying the diagnosis of obesity in a hospital in Guatemala. I wasn’t alone. Health workers everywhere around me were frustrated that treating patients as cases did little to assuage chronic illness. They argued that case-based treatment, no matter how personalized, ignored that obesity was an illness of complex systems, built up over generational time. As its causes were not individual, treating patients as if there was anything that they – personally – could do to prevent being sick saddled them with an impossible responsibility that often made things worse.

Following those around me, I was tempted to point to political or economic structures as the source of the problem and a place to

direct energy for treatment. But I feared that if I was not careful, a focus on structure would distance me from the vital intervention I saw possible in ethnographic methods. To offer a quick observation: people routinely follow up concern for structure with numbers, such that to say obesity is a structural problem is to say that a measurable demographic of people is sick or suffering. The problem I saw with this assertion was that structure, with these metric-based underpinnings, does not just imply an uncomfortable uniformity of ontology. It also risks mobilizing plans for treating people and experiences and afflictions that are not the same, as if this heterogeneity does not matter. Concern for [ontological violence](#) – as well as violence that is structural – made me cautious about constraining anthropologists to the role of illustrating, with our stories, what the economists or epidemiologists already know.

It was as much out of curiosity for ethnographic structures as for ethnographic cases, that I began to wonder what would happen to obesity if I uncased it, following it outside the clinical setting. Listening to this curiosity, I started tracking obesity across ‘structural’ spaces: kitchens, schools, farms, and metabolic science—although tracking is not quite the right word, for it turned out there was no stable object leaving footprints in the sand. Obesity in kitchens, where women struggled to square their expertise in cooking with dietary counseling that treated them as ignorant, was not the same as obesity in grade schools, where children learned not to eat fattening “junk food” but had only candy and soda available at recess. In farms, where people used toxic pesticides to grow healthy vegetables for far-away consumers worried about their weight, obesity was a matter of chemicals and trade. And in scientific centers, where researchers traveled to the same communities where I traveled and then returned to their urban laboratories with swabs of saliva or vials of blood, it became a problem of ancestral deprivation— yet different again.

The intricacies of the structures I was encountering began to turn my understanding of the relation between the particular and the general on its head. I was beginning to see the case not as a part of something larger (a unit to be added together with others). Instead, the very practice of adding things together changed the substance under evaluation, such that there was simply no way to add it up. As it was not possible to be holist, the difficult work in front of me lay not in mapping more layers, adding in more units of complexity— but in making cuts. The challenge, then, became the challenge of not cutting in the style of the clinical folder. [\[iii\]](#) This was not a challenge to be solved by making a thin case-file endlessly thicker; indeed, it was not a challenge to be “solved,”

but to be kept alive: the stories I wanted to tell had no natural beginning or end.

I was drawn to the intrigue of “the ethnographic case,” in part, from conviction gained by living in the mess of anthropological fieldwork that things need not be patterned nor predictable to have efficacy—that particularity was its own form of power. I was also drawn to it because it posed a critical question for a field organized by participant-observation: how does one make an analytic intervention that is situated and still expansive enough to address global violences (an especially troubling question considering that expansion – a colonial practice if there ever was one – so often furthers violence). I wanted, with others, to develop resources capable of showing how “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) need not itself be troubling, but a generative and vital way forward.

And so we wrote [an introduction](#) and began to assemble a group of ethnographers to think about how the practice of telling stories shapes the worlds we study. An important postcolonial critique of anthropology notes that we too-often get our case materials in the peripheries while doing our so-called theory in colonial centers (Oyèrónké Oy?wùmí 1997; Law and Lin 2016). There is a highly gendered dynamic to this division between the particular and the general as well ([Behar and Gordon 1996](#)). We began to wonder if a possible way forward might be found in the assertion that *the case is the theory*. But before making this argument, we thought we’d find out what anthropologists were doing with their cases. ‘What is the ethnographic case?’, we asked in our opening call for contributions. And then, to be more precise about the question, ‘what can it be made to be?’

Design

Every other week, for over a year, our bookcase grew larger by one installation. In fashioning the bookCase, we worked with graphic designers to emphasize texture over pattern. If anthropologists have long sought to make generalities by looking for replications, reproductions, and repetitions of culture, this was a chance to try out something else. If you consider the design we settled upon, the cases are each connected, but they also stand apart. Our cases share a basic shape, but they vary in their thinness or thickness on the screen and are adorned with diverse imagery. The covers were selected by each author to offer a hint at something that would lie within the case, encouraging, from the outset, what Anna Tsing has called an “art of noticing” ([2015](#)). In emphasizing specificity over pattern, we wanted to stress a practice of noticing how we notice: what do we keep in the frame of the stories we tell; what do we set

aside; what travels between cases and what stays put? The push, from the outset, was to think of ethnography as the study of the techniques by which cultures are made to materialize rather than the study of culture as if such a thing could ever stand by itself (see Landecker 2007, 2016).

Casework

We collected 27 ethnographic cases. If our initial interest lay in the question of what the case can be made to be, we quickly learned that the answer was wide and unsteady: with every entry, 'the case' shifted from what it was the week before.

The series began with [Annemarie Mol's case](#), which recounts the story of a country doctor who injected turpentine into the buttock of a dying farmer to activate his immune system, thereby saving his life. She uses the story to suggest that cases, be they medical or ethnographic, serve to evoke and inspire, generating resources in one place that might be used elsewhere— though there are never guarantees about how these resources will travel.

[Anna Harris' case](#) next addressed the condition of autophony, in which patients cannot screen out sounds that most people do not notice, hearing, for example, their eyeballs moving left to right. She counterposes medical cases, which aim to normalize that which is bizarre, with ethnographic cases, which turn something as mundane as a tapping finger into a point of fascination. She asks about the strangely familiar place of the ethnographer's body in the generation of our stories: *"How do we listen in? And when we do, what does it do to our stories of the world when we use our own sensing, moving, living bodies as a case for others?"*

[Nick Copeland](#) also focuses on an atypical condition: that of facial paralysis accompanying an epidemic of Bell's Palsy in highland Guatemala. At least medical doctors might call it Bell's Palsy, and calling it this might stabilize it enough to offer some prescriptive treatments. But whereas clinical understandings and prescriptions of bodily disorder allowed the diagnosis to travel far, he found they also failed to characterize the suffering of people who experienced momentary intensities *and* systematic violences. He reads the case of paralysis through a pattered failure of human and planetary systems. But if the case hints at something larger, there is also something tellingly nervous about the very possibility of 'the system.'

Systems thinking forms the basis of [Atsuro Morita's case](#) which takes up the relation between holist and partial systems through a story of sailing along the Noi River in Thailand with a firm of Japanese engineers who are studying Dutch irrigation canals. If this sounds complex, the point is rather

that the trip has been carefully arranged. Intricate, yes, but not here wild. Although this binary becomes a point of departure for the essay since the nature they are studying has been designed to be transformed. Through a series of deft ethnographic maneuvers that bring together the field and its representation, Morita illustrates (or to turn from visual-based language toward action-based language— he *does*) the fieldsite as an always-experimental space.

Represent-abilities

Questions of representation loomed large throughout the series. While representation may, in some academic corners, still be taken as a reflection of a stable truth, we drew upon numerous cases of political, legal, or activist representation in which representation took a different form. Here representation rather connotes *advocating for* [an idea, a political position, a group of women, and so on] entailing a stance, an engagement, and an assailable commitment.

What's in a name?, [Ruth Goldstein](#) asks, facing us with the long-neglected representational problem of choosing pseudonyms. One solution might be to work with people to select the names they want to use. But in Goldstein's research on mining and sex work in the Peruvian Amazon, she found that in some cases it was not safe to use the names people wanted, and in others, the names they wanted were not theirs to give. Eschewing an ethics based in prefigured rules Goldstein takes naming to be an active, negotiated process of labor, fraught with asymmetry. We may work to perfect it – to express ourselves better – but if we are to fashion a goal for ourselves, it might lie in attending to the labor of naming and not in the ideal of coming up with a perfect name.

[Teresa Velasquez](#) further explores relations of collaboration with and between anthropological interlocutors to address a situation in which the Ecuadorian anti-mining activists refuse to be represented in her writing. They were worried, Velasquez explains, about extractivism in ethnographic practice and wanted to maintain their own words, even as they were learning how to speak from others. Everyone in this case is in drag, referent indistinguishable from sign—and yet claims to the power of 'the real' continue to have efficacy. One ends this essay with a clearer sense than ever of how the powers of spoken word are in awkward (read: productive) relation with the material powers of earth, violence, and gold.

That representation reinforces certain kinds of power is a worry that animates [Anna Wilking's case](#). She entered fieldwork wanting to make a film that would celebrate the motherhood of Ecuadorian sex workers, whom she knew to be using sex work to be *good* mothers in many of motherhood's most romantic terms. But the medium of film, though highly

editable, could not be pre-determined, and the story that found Wilking was a story of a *good father* who filled an absent mother's place. The case was unusual— it was, as Wilking writes – a *misrepresentation* of most sex workers who choose sex work to stay active in their lives. And yet, letting go of the sociological mandate that a case must stand in for a majority allowed Wilking to focus on the vulnerable, nurturing masculinities that are surely there but so often left out of stories of sex workers' lives. She represented the story of fatherhood not because it was broadly *representative* but because it was a future that deserved to be made visible.

[Jenna Grant's case](#) similarly positions representation as a technique for *fixing* things, in a double-meaning of the term that implies giving ontological stability to fluid objects— not because there is but one real underlying truth to the form of these objects, but because this can sometimes help to improve (fix) the matters of concern. Lest you worry that this is difficult to grasp, the argument – as with the arguments in each of the 27 cases – is made accessible through fieldwork. The aunt of Puthea, a woman in Phnom Penh, sees a small cat in her prenatal ultrasound image. The image hints at a porousness between humans, images, animals, and machines while also giving biological shape to the being-in-formation. The ethnographer, she makes clear, is part of the mess and the mix:

“Exceptional stories fix ethnographers, too. I did not hear about another cat-like scan, yet after talking to Puthea and Ming, I listened more closely for image stories. I asked different questions. I worked to make this story into an exemplary ethnographic case. Can it bear this weight? Perhaps. If representations fix—whether with words, images, or as cases—that fixing is a process, impermanent yet consequential. Fixing the image fixes the fate. Fixing the case shifts what is possible.”

Her case ends by shifting what is possible and, indeed, with many of the cases, “the future” is at stake. Yet also apparent in our series is that by writing cases we do not only author other, future, conditions of possibility; in the practice of authoring we make evident “other” conditions that are already t/here.

This point is made clearly in [Sameena Mulla's consideration](#) of different ways prosecutors and defendants depict the skin around the vagina in rape trial testimony. Court outcomes may be swayed by the use of hair scrunchies or timing belts or by the presence of blood or its absence. But regardless of what jurors see and how they see it, there can be violence even when there are no visible wounds. Things can be real (*really*

real) without being apparent— and still the practice of making-evidence through expert intervention must be drawn upon to make them so.

Also taking up the question of laws and borders, [Zoe Todd's case](#) bends established Euro-Western legal statutes to not just recognize – but reciprocate – the implicit Indigenous legal orders “all around.” She draws attention to the micro-sites where human-fish transpecies collaborations are actively resisting and reshaping colonial logics and Inuvialuit territories. Her goal is not simply to raise awareness – produce knowledge – of these sites for Somatosphere’s intellectual community. This is a case that seeks to *change* the ongoing violences of academic “iterations and interpretations of Indigenous philosophy.”

The essay by [Menard and Tizzoni](#) further troubles the role of anthropological knowledge through a comparison between legal and ethnographic case work. Their essay unfolds through the following puzzling situation: A Mapuche defendant is accused of killing his wife. The language of culture is drawn upon for exoneration requires linguistic and cultural sleights of hand that performs the man as insane, and, with this, performs the techniques of anthropology as insane as well. This is a case that questions the very project of ever having a case stand in for – speak for – a totality.

[Carole McGranahan's case](#) also marks the shifting horizons between factual and legal representation. This is the scene she sets: Tashi, a Tibetan man, must prove that he is the father of his children upon moving to Canada as a refugee. A DNA test suggests to Canadian officials that he is not the father, so the anthropologist is called upon to show that kinship – and not genetics – make fatherhood in Tibet. It is clear that this defies Canada’s existing legal parameters of family, which ask that fatherhood fit into a genetic *yes* or *no*. What is less clear is how much ethnography can make courts bend; how much can our differences make a difference?

If you’ve been following along, you’ll know not to expect this question to be answered in general terms. In some of the cases, anthropological interventions seek to show the productivity of human difference when it is recognized and materially integrated with clarity and compassion. Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp’s [No Judgments](#) narrates events that took place during a day of fieldwork with the autism theater initiative, a group that works to make Broadway theater accessible to people with this disability, along with their families and allies. For these performances, the theater space is modified to account for particular sensory issues involving light and sound, “fidget toys,” safe spaces, and a high tolerance for unruly behavior. Their contribution makes a case for the value of upholding the aspirations, rights, and accommodations of people with disabilities, articulating “life with a difference” as an aspect of human variation too

long neglected in anthropology.

[Susan Reynolds Whyte's polygraphic casebook](#) describes a process of collective and transnational authorship to tell stories of unexpectedly living through Uganda's AIDS epidemic. The many authors involved seek to document the individual and diverse experiences of people whose lives were extended by ARVs. In writing ethnography through cases they seek to "capture" readers and not only the lives of the people whose stories they tell. These are representations that aim to grab attention and make an impact.

Meanwhile, [Ken MacLeish's case](#) emphasizes a call to pause over (or perhaps as) a call to action. He focuses on the production of violence through a "non-event" – here, a soldier who might have fired on a harmless vehicle but did not. The tension made material in the account he re-scribes is that the distribution of agency into an *actor network* may impede the very sorts of response-abilities that ANT's critique of the liberal subject sought to encourage.[\[iv\]](#) What emerges is a challenge to both the sovereignty of the individual and the displacement of this sovereignty into the mess of bureaucratic orders. This is a case, as with many of our cases, that raises far more questions than it answers; in doing so, the tactic of relentless questioning emerges as a possible way forward.

Social lives of cases and concepts

That cases have social lives is a truth that emerges from our book. Case. And another truth: it is not simply "the case" for which this is the case, but *all* concepts that we deploy and study—sociality here, being a case in point. A few decades ago Bruno Latour critiqued "the social" for its celebration of the human ([Latour 1992](#)). That argument had its place then and there, but if the sociality that our cases highlight today is human, it is "not only" ([de la Cadena, et al. 2015](#)). Anthropologists have long argued that *nature is social*; complementing this, many of our cases demonstrate that *the social, too, is natural*—an argument sustained by ethnographic consideration of nature as a swamping, smelly, ugly, active, and unpredictable thing.

[Ildikó Zonga Plájás, for example, writes](#) of how life within the Danube Delta Biosphere is infused with fog and rays of light. This swamp-nature, with its incongruous refuse and wonder, *produces* ways of knowing and living. The weight of the camera she holds accompanies the gravity of the documentary task, giving shape to stories that in turn shape this landscape. This is representation that is *after* something in the world. In [Janelle Lamoreaux's case](#) of the DeTox Lab in Nanjing, China the synthetic pesticides and pollutants that settle into earth and bodies have been rendered, by both scientists and activists, as "the environment."

Narrative and statistical accounts alike strategically condense nature into the sociality of industrialization so as to make the case that ugly sperm make ugly futures. Accounting for nature in this way, she shows, may not be a general but inspirational project.

[Christy Spackman's case](#) unpacks the chemistry of sociality through discussion of a sweet, licorice-like smell that permeates the lives of residents of downtown Charleston, USA. A spill of 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol damaged the region's water supply. Instruments designed to measure the ghostly toxin could not detect it; and still the contaminant persisted, if unevenly, in people's sensorial experiences. Spackman describes how nature becomes domesticated in a laboratory while the impurities of domestic activities – cooking, seeing, smelling, tasting – are held at bay. In this case, scientific purification comes with a price, as contingency's mess would yield better knowledge about the presence of chemicals than do lab technologies. Or perhaps we should consider this as *producing* a price, since the inequalities in who bears the burden of toxicity sustain inequalities of industrial production.

In [Jennifer Carlson's discussion](#) of energy transition in Germany, "nature" also pertains as much to financial as to biological futures. Her case, set amid a rapidly transitioning solar panel installation project in the hamlet of Dobbe, examines the psychosomatic afterlives of green energy to illustrate the entanglement of ecology with capitalist speculation. Life that was supposed to be made good is instead filled with fiberglass, rust, and plastic ruins; anxiety and stress emerge from the wreckage of now abandoned glasshouses. As does so much else: compassion, friendship, family meals. Consumers (or are they citizens? or mothers? or lovers? or friends?) struggle to make sense of their condition through the categories of social analysis, but even as they do so, life, like weeds, takes shape outside these bounds.

Plastic Boundaries^[v]

How do you know a case when you see one? [Elizabeth Lewis writes](#) of a single encounter, well before she began extensive fieldwork that would become a "flashpoint" for later analysis of disability care in Texas. At first the encounter seemed to be an outlier. The blind and non-verbal woman, locked in a cage in a Central American institution, was anything but typical. Over time, however, the woman edged ever-closer to the center of Lewis' analysis. The woman may remain enclosed in a wooden box in a far-away place— and not only. Absent made present; what is locked away, leaking out. This is not an arena where cases lie waiting to be known and seen; it is one where they are done through narrative relations.

"Cases set boundaries; cases draw you in," note [Biggs and Bodinger de](#)

[Uriarte](#). They use the constantly mirrored reflections of a Native American casino to make their point. The Casino is a mimetic world: interiors containing a complicated mix of referents, exteriors gesturing outward while embracing their own design as part of the sign. So too, might we understand the halls of anthropology to be mimetic. We *reveal* – but less because there is one possible truth to be known and more because this act of demonstration is part of the performance. A practice of mirrors, whose reflection also changes how we see.

Every other week, we have collectively participated in remaking “the case.” We could not make cases out of nothing – we could not make things that didn’t, matter. And still, the condition of being material in no way suggested that cases could freeze their form. Case by case, to borrow from the [Jason Danely’s entry](#), the case was adjusted and transformed. Stomach tubes are Danely’s entry into this argument. Decisions about whether to use tubes in elderly care homes, fraught with uncertainty by all involved, must be negotiated case-by-case. Cases are specific, unique, grounded in the variable textures of the everyday—what he refers to as a “constellation of contingencies.” Here, however, Danely intervenes to shift the implications of contingency. For if cases are exceptional, *that* they are exceptional is commonplace. It is this connection that serves as a point through which to begin a conversation. Here, becoming a case facilitated processes of sharing, without aspirations of becoming identical. Differently – and similarly – contingent. Mutuality, without replication.

“Are the truths of the case’s contingency and plasticity ontological truths?” you might wonder. “Let’s try out different answers and follow what happens,” we might respond.

Alternatives and Author-ities

Sharing across different sorts of differences turns us toward matters of politics, which is to say, matters of relating. [Through the study of earthworms Berton](#) asks us to consider what happens to relating if we think not through the mode of argumentation but through metabolic pathways of incorporation, digestion, and excretion. What arises from this exploration is that “the purpose of *making a case* may not be to be right, but to offer resources that we can use to metabolize and live with the world in alternative ways.”

It is worth pausing to consider his emphasis on living in *alternative ways* given the suggestions I have made about the plasticity of nature through the cases above. My guess is that most people reading this series have heard recent claims to “alternative facts” made by conservative pundits who reproduce a longstanding tactic of fascist politics by claiming that assumed truths are not what they seem. Some may wonder if this isn’t

somehow uncomfortably similar to what we are doing here, with our unstable ontologies and our futures and actualities that are worlded through representational practices. Let me point to a difference.

Alternative facts – war is peace; freedom is slavery – are still rooted in ontological claims upon a one-world world and claims that there is one and only one correct reflection of that world. These so-called facts are not giving up their singular authority—the authority that comes from locking things up. The science of this series meanwhile asks how things come to be bounded and then sets out to understand the effects of binding things one way or another or another yet again. We ask this not because there is just one answer to be known, but because some questions, and some answers, are better than others— better not in general terms but better in specific cases.

Bertoni notes that through ethnographizing earthworms he learned about how they are already engaged in politics otherwise, which gave him ideas for how he might do this as well.

“The living together of worms can serve as a reminder to Euro-American social scientists that there are no guidelines out there on how to live together well. Instead, politics, when understood as living together, calls for makeshift arrangements that are both radical and specific, as well as for experimenting with alternatives. If composting might work through certain standard passages, composting guides never give any final word, but rather suggest some possible alternatives to tinker with. This is a togetherness that is not constrained by the limits of closed systems and of the categories that Euro-Americans commonly use to think about the world. It is instead a togetherness enlarged by the imaginative openings that worms, like anthropology, can offer us.”

If Bertoni’s case has a lesson for Euro-American sciences, we hope that our series might have a lesson for Euro-American politics. We could respond to the fascist claim of alternative facts by saying that, no, ‘facts are facts,’ thereby initiating a fight over whose facts are right. I worry that replacing the myriad truths of ethnography for the truth of truth is, however, a short-sighted tactic that undermines both scientific and political possibilities. In Bertoni’s case the facts of science are facts that are open to, even welcoming of, alternatives (note the multiplicity). Not just anything can be a fact – methods matter – but a precondition of being fact is being an opening rather than a closure. To be science is to be challengeable, not certain. We might wish something similar for politics, creating systems designed to be both contested and recursively transformed.

Rather than cede that our *alternatives* were misdirected to those who abuse this term, our series has suggested that it becomes especially crucial to stay close to the study of ways in which truth-making proceeds and truth-telling gains power. *That something is*, is merely a starting point for asking *how something is*—a starting point, in other words, for thinking about how we are acting and how we might act otherwise. In the face of toxic lies that intend to close down the project of inquiry, the project of engaging alternatives becomes more necessary than ever.

[Stephanie Krehbiel's](#), case is a good one on which to wrap up. In her entry, case-making facilitated the production of violence. She writes of being transformed into a case, her analytic capacities and professional qualifications stripped from her. This is not an accidental metaphor; producing persons as cases – and cases as woman, as body – can privilege ways of knowing that facilitate abuse—and do so very often in the name of furthering good. The cultivation of intimacy, long taken as a hallmark of anthropological legitimacy, in her site becomes a means for the twisted, suppressed eroticism of power to take hold, subverting what is known in the name of more stable knowledge.

She makes a point about authority and power that has been with us throughout the series. The man she writes about deploys his authority to subvert the power that she holds and does so through terms and ideas that resonate with her own. He speaks to her of examining how knowledge is gained and legitimized; he emphasizes the importance of *discerning* what is good. But he does this, she shows, to bolster his authority over her. He is not interested in a flourishing of possibilities but of using his truth (in the singular) against her. She realizes that she cannot talk back to him because he will take up and twist her words. Eventually, she begins to ignore him, putting her energies elsewhere. He engages power in the name of finding truth; she finds power, making space for her authorities, by cutting the relation.

We started this series not long after some prominent voices in our field [challenged](#) the place of ethnography. Instead of countering this argument directly – giving it more attention by voicing opposition – we've instead taken the tactic of celebrating ethnography by doing it well. In 27 installations, we've shown ethnography to be vibrant, curious, and committed. But this does not mean that ethnography is always vibrant, curious, and committed. For we've also given it space to be none of these: to be focused on mundane details that call into question a need to be vibrant; to ask how curiosity may activate and further the exploitation of capitalism; to consider when we might lessen and not strengthen our commitments.

This, then, is what we've learned from the ethnographic case: its authors

undertake their writing – they practice their authorities – with care for the situation and/of the story. We can neither ask nor answer the question of what “the case” is in stable terms. We can instead take up the challenging truth that it is not only the objects that we study that have social lives—so do our theories about them, as well. This, then, sets us on a path of caring not only for what is inside our cases. It compels us to also care for what their walls are made of and to ask how these structures can be done differently and moved.

[Emily Yates-Doerr](#) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and a member of Somatosphere’s editorial collaborative. Her book, [The Weight of Obesity: Hunger and Global Health in Postwar Guatemala](#), was published by California Press in 2015.

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[i] Somatosphere welcomes additional ideas for curated collections. Be in touch with admin@somatosphere.net with ideas or questions.

[ii] For more on *Thinking In Cases* see [Forrester 1996](#) as well as [a new volume of the same title](#).

[iii] For an excellent discussion of practices of cutting, see a wonderful three-part discussion between Marilyn Strathern and Annemarie Mol in [Common Knowledge](#).

[iv] For rescription see [Jeannette Pols' elaboration of this term](#), which borrows from the thinking of [Hans Harbers](#).

[v] For more on the way I am using plasticity here see Emilia Sanabria's [Plastic Bodies](#). A Somatosphere book forum on Sanabria's work is forthcoming. Stay tuned!

AMA citation

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