

A RESPONSE TO DARA IVANOVA'S

LOSING AND FINDING: ON THE CURIOUS LIFE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECTS

It is not often that a researcher who has been asked to comment on a piece by a colleague has had the pleasure of conversing with the author some months before commenting on the work, as well as between versions of the piece to be commented upon. Nor is it often that authors have the freedom to choose the format with which they would like to work. For her contribution, Ivanova chose to write an essay that "is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the case of the foundling room," as this has been done elsewhere, "but a personal reflection on working with objects ethnographically." Contemporary researchers are trained and encouraged to do scientific work in a largely de-personalized fashion. In some cases, therefore, we are likely to forget how – or even why – we should write a personal reflection on our work for people other than our supervisors or ourselves. Nevertheless, Dara Ivanova's style and wit do not reflect any such struggle.

Ivanova's self-acclaimed field of interest is attuned to "odd places that defy expectations, infrastructural assemblages and caring as (a) way(s) of doing." It is not difficult to see how the object of her work in this essay fits that defined field of interest. "There is a room in the Netherlands, where one may anonymously abandon a baby and walk away." Even in the opening sentence, the reader is pulled into an odd place that calls into question moralities and judgments. Ivanova also does not shun the recall of such moral struggle throughout the remainder of her essay. In her writing, there is an explicit tension between judgments of the room as "good" and as "bad." This tension is also present in her own characterization of the observations. In the first half of the essay, Ivanova refers to the process of child abandonment as "simply leaving a baby (...) and walking away" and to the abandoned babies as "unwanted children." In an earlier comment to the author, I communicated the uneasiness that I felt with this wording upon first reading the essay:

Be careful with the stance you take toward abandonment of the child, (...) sometimes these children are not unwanted, but the circumstances make parents feel that they can't raise a baby, and I expect them to consider the options for a long time and cry their eyes out before they even really consider the option of completely losing it. Because when the mother/father gives up the child in the foundling room, not only does the baby lose his/her right to know his/her origins, but the parents too lose their right to know their offspring. This is just a warning to take caution in such wordings.

In her reply, Ivanova noted that this was precisely the intent of the characterization. It represented the way in which the room had been presented to her, and she wished to capture the morality, using her writing to make the reader think about the matter.

Part of what I find so interesting about Ivanova's contribution to this volume is the same as what I would intuitively say is lacking in it. As I have communicated with the author, it is interesting for me "to see how we ask similar methodological questions with almost opposite answers." In general, ethnographers and other qualitative social scientists are advised to let the data inform their analysis, instead of proceeding from "heavy" theorizing. Whereas Ivanova follows this tendency, my own contribution to the volume does exactly the opposite. As eloquently illustrated in Ivanova's piece, however, it would be a mistake to reprimand ethnographers for relying 'solely' on their gut feelings. As Ivanova demonstrates, although making sense of one's object is a struggle, it is one that can be faced through constant reflection, introspective criticism, and observational sensitivity. Regardless of one's gut feeling, it is hard work (some profanity can be mentally added here in order to reinforce this assertion). Furthermore, regardless of whether it is through theoretical or *open* sensitivity, the aim of an ethnography of an object is always the same, as beautifully captured in Ivanova's essay:

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.

As becomes obvious toward the end of the essay, the lenses that we use in making sense of our objects are not that different. Nevertheless, we take different turns at the start of our respective journeys toward our conclusions.

As a final remark, I would like to congratulate Dara Ivanova for her contribution and thank her for allowing me the opportunity to comment on it. As she mentions in the section bearing the heading "A room of curiosity," she found in her object of the foundling room, "a delightful idea of 'oddity contained.'" In this essay, she manages to bring to life that oddity, making it interesting to a public of ethnographic researchers, who may recognize these situations from their own research and find inspiration from the ways she dealt with this, as well as to a general audience, who can effectively go along with the tensions portrayed and the struggles experienced in dealing with them.