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Matei Candea, *Corsican Fragments. Difference, Knowledge, and Fieldwork*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. viii + 202 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-253-35474-7; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-253-22193-3.

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Matei Candea's *Corsican Fragments* is a highly original ethnography that considers themes of great interest to scholars of France. Dense at times, at others beautifully wrought, this work considers the construction of difference in this distant region of the Republic and touches on such themes as the tension between republicanism and the expression of ethnic difference, and the relationship of place and language to difference-making. That said, where this book may make its biggest impact is in its contribution to anthropology. Throughout the text, Candea engages with contemporary ideas about epistemology, the fieldwork process, and ethnographic writing. The book itself represents a daring experiment in the ethnographic form, as I address below, while making a convincing case for the unique ability of ethnographic research to tackle questions of interest to scholars and research subjects alike.

In the first substantive chapter, "Arbitrary Locations," Candea discusses his decision to locate his project in the village of "Crucetta." [1] With recent challenges to the discipline's tradition of emphasizing the local over the global and assumptions of homology between peoples, places, and cultures, field location has become a problem for contemporary anthropologists. [2] Candea had intended to address this problem by carrying out a "multi-sited" project, but soon discovered that "the hard thing here was not to break out of the village but to keep it in view" (p. 16). His lucid description of the fieldwork site (pp. 16-22) reveals with devastating clarity that the notion of a "village center" is an illusion and he proposes instead the "arbitrary location" as a heuristic device akin to a Weberian ideal-type that serves as a "control for a broader abstract object of study" (p. 34). The village is not the object of study here, but the site for his study, and an arbitrary one at that. A major contribution of this book, then, is its resolution of the global/local conundrum, and his demonstration that engaging ethnographically at any one locality can be challenge enough (p. 36).

Candea's second chapter, "Mystery" commences with images of Corsica developed in French reports from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that persist to this day. He argues we should view the representation of Corsica as mystery and essence (p. 41) as a "framing device" that accompanies Corsica as it "careens through the French (and Corsican) public imagination" (p. 66). His most significant contribution here is in his exploration of the ways these images of Corsica are deployed in everyday interactions, informing local understandings as well as Continental *préjugés* (prejudices), and hence play a role in local "definitions of Corsican/Continental difference" (p. 55).

Part of the "mystery" of Corsica is the ineffable connection locals supposedly have to the land, which is the focus of chapter three, "Places." In the scholarly literature on emplacement, discussion often revolves around questions of authenticity. Are the attachments people have to the land real? Or are they a construction, motivated perhaps by nationalism? In a brilliant move, Candea takes a wholly different tack, one informed by work in cognitive science on distributed

knowledge and the writings of Bruno Latour emphasizing a society's people-to-thing connections as he explores people's reactions to a wildfire, a common Corsican problem in summer months (p. 75). As Candea writes, "from the first moment a fire is sighted, chains of mobile telephone calls are initiated...people relay their own tracking of the smoke and flames, putting together a composite image of the fire as a single entity" (p. 78). He explores the ways people are helped in "this distributed process" by "a range of nonhuman entities: mobile phones, planes, helicopters, but also fields, hills, houses" (p. 81). The reactions of the tourists he encountered were not different in kind, for they too were engaged in ostensibly the same activity (watching a fire), but enlisted "a far more limited number of entities, a far smaller range of connections" (p. 81). Candea demonstrates that although the people present should not be reduced to a binary (outsiders versus insiders; Continentals versus Corsicans) and each individual—local, tourist, anthropologist, researcher—"has her own way of being local," that is exactly how people interpret each other's activities (p. 83). How "clear-cut differences can emerge from an ambiguous field of shifting connections" is the focus of the rest of the book (p. 84).

In the next three chapters ("Things," "People," and "Language"), Candea considers how these various connections to the land get reduced into fixed binaries. These richly descriptive chapters reveal Candea's eye for subtle details that help us understand how people engage in a continuous process of interpretation and difference-making in this multi-ethnic setting. Candea commences with a discussion of "things"—Corsican knives, telephone books, gates and so forth—as a way to bring out the "paradoxical ways in which identity is both set apart and banal, both profound and contrived" (p. 87). While people talk as if it is fully accepted that there is "Corsicanness" out there—a Corsican house style, Corsican bread, "real" Corsicanness always seems to be just around the corner: "People were...constantly making distinctions between really Corsican things and the rest of reality, and the former were often cast in the recognizable terms of costume, food, music, myth, and legend. And yet the more one tried to pin this distinction down, the more it tended to slip away" (p. 92).

This fractal quality extends to the social domain, the focus of Candea's fifth chapter, and Candea's discussion here of the everyday management of tensions between the French republicanist tradition—that there are no sub-categories of French people—and France's multicultural make-up is among the best I have seen. The question of Corsican identity and difference from the French is of course a major local concern of ongoing public debate (p. 98), and yet the people we meet over the course of this book rarely "fit" neatly into any one category. How might we categorize someone of Corsican extraction married to a Parisian who has returned to the island after a life's career in France? What do we call the anthropologist who is fluent in Corsican and has lived and worked there for over twenty-five years? What about the "Continentals" who have chosen to raise their children in Corsica? Moreover, an individual's Corsicanness or Continentalness is rarely articulated explicitly and instead inferred from a myriad of clues (clothing, hair, accents, occupations, car type), and his discussion of the process of "telling" is masterful and reminiscent of work on this question conducted elsewhere in Europe.<sup>[3]</sup> Although Corsican/Continental distinctions emerge and matter, these distinctions do not always trump other dimensions of identity, and Candea notes how Corsicanness can also fade out of view. Yet some differences are "not so easily disposed of" (p. 108), and he turns his attention here to local North Africans (*Arabes* or *Maghrébins*). While sensitive to the plight of the ubiquitous, yet sometimes invisible, North African population in France, this discussion, in my view, was one of the weaker sections of the book, a weakness the author admits stems from limitations inherent in his particular fieldwork method.

Candea's chapter "Language" builds on the excellent research already conducted on Corsican language politics, and here he considers the deployment of local language ideologies and

presents a fine-grained look at how people actually speak.[4] In an interesting contrast to what is often expected (that the Corsican language question should be seen as part of a long struggle against the teaching of French), and in contrast to other explorations of resistance in local French schools, we find here Corsican parents who want the official language at school to be French, while teachers try to not only increase bilingualism, but also to use Corsican for such subjects as science and math.[5] Although speaking Corsican is an indication of being Corsican, many people “self-defined as Corsican” couldn’t speak the language (p. 142), and instead, engage in an array of interlinguistic practices. Candea is multilingual, and his facility with language really shines through here. While speakers often consider these local interlinguistic practices as arising from the mixing of two distinct languages, he argues instead that it is the distinct languages that are produced out of the “indeterminacy of a contingent and shifting field of ways of speaking...a field of ways of speaking whose characteristics are not exhausted by the designations Corsican, French or romance” (p. 143). One wonders how our understanding of language might shift if social scientists working in multilingual settings were as gifted linguistically as this scholar.

In chapter seven, he uses the unpacking of a well-used expression, *connaître*, (knowing, also the chapter title), to consider local notions of Corsican society. An ethnographic vignette about a car crash and his need to hitchhike in a town in which he isn’t known leads him to a death-defying trip home with a woman delighted to meet someone she doesn’t know, to whom she can confess any number of frustrations with her friends and relations. This vignette reveals two opposing “worries” about society in Corsica: either there is too little society because it is thinning out or disintegrating, or too much—it is a place where people know each other all too well. These discussions “draw their power from...an embodied and situated relationality which enmeshes persons in connections with other persons, places, stories, and things in powerful and ambivalent ways” (p. 148).

He approaches this connectedness through a meditation on the special, intransitive usage of the verb *connaître* and a wonderful description of the way concern with connectedness can overwhelm conversation as people interrupt others’ stories to ask about the individual it concerns (“Which Jean? Jean the shepherd or Catherine’s Jean?”). These interruptions can connect the narrative’s protagonist into other stories and relationships *ad infinitum* to the point of completely overwhelming the original topic of conversation (pp. 153-154). And yet barriers remain. As Candea writes, “Although ‘we all know each other’ could effortlessly and silently stretch to include Continentals, ‘we are all related’ usually did not,” and he concludes the chapter with a contemplation of the impenetrable “inside” (pp. 160-161).

Local emphasis on connectedness is addressed again in the last chapter, “Anonymous Introductions.” This is the term he uses for a particular local practice. When first meeting a “stranger,” an individual often exchanges names not at the start of the encounter but at its end, if at all. This practice has been interpreted by some as an indication of local hostility to outsiders, but Candea suggests that it has a different end result. By delaying the sharing of names until the individual is “looped into Corsican society” through a chain of connections to other Corsicans, the individual is already “linked in” by the time the names are shared (p. 169); the outsider has already started to become an insider (p. 173). It is at this stage of the book that we learn that Candea has been engaging in a similar strategy with his readers by modeling this text on the anonymous introduction. Typically, ethnographers identify a population of concern and specific theoretical questions, and deploy this theory and the discussion of some subset of the ethnographic encounter in a targeted way that ties up somehow by the end. Candea wants to disrupt this process to “let other connections proliferate” first (p. 174). Of course, he admits, an account that refuses to specify its context in terms of a named population “will almost

necessarily appear incomplete or inconclusive" (p. 177), and much of the last few pages are spent defending this unique ethnographic form.

Does it work? In many ways, yes. Early on he tells us that he wanted to write a book that takes into account "difference" and "sameness," but that he wanted to do so in a way that "difference does not come before sameness, nor sameness before difference" (p. 5). Had the reader known right off that his focus was on one side of an equation, the X population, with all other discussions measured in relation to that group, the reader's attention and empathies may indeed have been on one side of this equation, rather than focusing on the processes at work that help to create these social divisions to begin with and which are the main focus of Candea's attentions. Readers seeking a feeling of closure at the end of the text may be disappointed, however, and indeed this was one of the oddest ethnographies this reader has ever encountered. However, in staying with the book to the end, anthropologists will become aware of just how "pat" and "closed" most of the other ethnographies they have read have been, no matter how nuanced, dialogical, or theoretically sophisticated. It is hard to let go of this book, if only because its structure will lead many readers from the very last page back to the beginning again to contemplate anew what they have just read.

#### NOTES

[1] An anthropological convention, the location of a study is usually hidden to protect the identities of the people depicted in an ethnography. On p. 11, Candea discusses his reasons for choosing this particular pseudonym for the village under study.

[2] Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1992):6-23. See also Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[3] Rosanne Cecil, "The Marching Season in Northern Ireland: An Expression of Politico-Religious Identity," in Sharon MacDonald (ed.), *Inside European Identities: Ethnography in Western Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 146-166; Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way. Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Gerd Baumann, *Contesting Culture. Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[4] Alexandra Jaffe, *Ideologies in Action: Language Politics on Corsica* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999). See also Rosanne McKechnie, "Becoming Celtic in Corsica," in Sharon MacDonald (ed.), *Inside European Identities: Ethnography in Western Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 118-145.

[5] Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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