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## Among Wolves, Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power – Book Review of a Play

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## Among Wolves, Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power – Book Review of a Play

### Abstract

Timothy Pachirat's (2018) *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power* is an atypical book about doing and thinking about ethnography, presented in play format. I reviewed the book as a doctoral student and novice qualitative researcher as a part of a process to explore a developing interest in ethnography. The book's conversational format intertwined with perspective from acclaimed contemporary ethnographers' work helps both the novice ethnographer with a worldview of what doing ethnography entails and the seasoned ethnographer in thinking about reflexivity. The academic rigor and extensive coverage of issues about power, subjectivity and fieldwork, makes it an essential read for ethnographers and those working in interpretive traditions – irrespective of their experience in respective domains.

### Keywords

Ethnography, Fieldwork, Theatre, Play, Power, Interpretivism

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## Among Wolves, Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power

### Book Review of a Play

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*Timothy Pachirat's (2018) Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power is an atypical book about doing and thinking about ethnography, presented in play format. I reviewed the book as a doctoral student and novice qualitative researcher as a part of a process to explore a developing interest in ethnography. The book's conversational format intertwined with perspective from acclaimed contemporary ethnographers' work helps both the novice ethnographer with a worldview of what doing ethnography entails and the seasoned ethnographer in thinking about reflexivity. The academic rigor and extensive coverage of issues about power, subjectivity and fieldwork, makes it an essential read for ethnographers and those working in interpretive traditions — irrespective of their experience in respective domains. Keywords: Ethnography, Fieldwork, Theatre, Play, Power, Interpretivism*

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*Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power* by Timothy Pachirat (2018) is a title in the Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods, a series of books about issues encountered in interpretive methods. Titles in the series specifically discuss three areas: methodological issues, approaches and methods, and disciplinary and subfield areas. *Among Wolves* is a discussion on how power and subjectivity may impact doing ethnography in the field. In the preface to the book, Pachirat mentions having accepted the invitation to write a book about ethnography on three conditions –

First, I did not want to create yet another dry methods book that fails to evoke and provoke, the sense of excitement and uncertainty that ought to accompany our choices about how we ask and attempt to answer questions about the social world. Second, I wanted to engage as interlocutors the ethnographers whose books I feature in my graduate seminars in political ethnography, ... And third, I wanted to experiment with writing in a non-traditional genre for the social sciences: specifically, with writing the book as a play that would bring many of the ethnographers featured in those seminars out of the footnotes and into direct dialogue with one another. (Pachirat, 2018, p. xiii)

These are the exact things that make the book an engaging read. Readers are dealing with a seven act play with familiar characters (if you have been reading about ethnography, and sometimes – the sciences), locked in conversation around something an ethnographer might call an alluring prospect –turning invisible in the field. The play brings together prolific contemporary ethnographers Karen Ho, Anna Tsing, Mitchell Duneier, James C. Scott, Katherine Boo, Loïc Wacquant, Séverine Autesserre, Alice Goffman and Piers Vitebsky along with Pachirat himself as characters in the play. The terrific ensemble is forced to gather in a barn — the workplace of Pachirat, when sent summons by a mysterious prosecutor to appear at a trial of Alice Goffman's much discussed ethnography – *On the Run*. Before the trial starts, however, an equally mysterious one-eyed wolfdog appears at the barn with a secret formula and a potion that claims to have the ability to render the ethnographer invisible while in the

field. Faced with this, the ethnographers are forced to deliberate on implications of the trial and the potion while discussing each other's work, and rediscovering and reconciling with what happened during their individual landmark ethnographic studies.

The book is divided into seven acts, each of which is uncompromising in its endeavor to be true to the format of a play. It is necessary to mention here by Pachirat's admission in the preface that the dialogue between the characters is comprised of his own interpretation and representation of the scholars' work (p. xiv). Having been involved in theatre to some capacity, I could appreciate how Pachirat never concedes the format to pivoting a chapter around a specific discussion in ethnography. The plot is extremely lively with all the elements of a light-hearted thriller which are augmented by addition of relevant and interesting characters like Dr. Popper Will Falsify, Anonymous graduate student, and Michio Kaku among others. These are not only great plot points, but also work by providing every potential reader a stake in the story. Apart from that, as is a requirement of the genre of writing, Pachirat is successful in creating just the right amount of humor, suspense, curiosity and tension as and when the plot demands.

The content of the book is an imagined, conversational discourse between the scholars on all imaginable aspects of conducting ethnographies. In the dialogue leading to the trial of Goffman's book and events that transpire alongside, the characters discuss the largely western and colonial origins of ethnography and debate their own stands in their respective work. Here Pachirat discusses questions about epistemology and methodology of concepts in ethnography. These include discussions like perception and nature of a setting, being a researcher in the field, philosophical assumptions around how ethnographies are conducted, and methodological challenges, issues and conflicts. Pachirat brings in challenges posed by politics, power and the predominantly colonial disposition of ethnography. He also makes his characters discuss how ethnographic endeavors might be variably perceived in the public eye given the nature of and relationships between the subject, setting and the researcher. These are familiar discussions for someone who has been initiated in the tradition of ethnography; however, they are rather impulsive, unstructured and dialogic – the longer you spend reading, Pachirat's book feels increasingly like the informal discussions (and often, honest admissions) you have with colleagues, students, professors or advisors on what you really feel about a subject of interest.

The script format forces the characters to communicate rather than theorize. Pachirat uses opinions voiced by his cast in their work and manages to convert that into seamless dialogue without making them seem like typical academic arguments. Ordinarily, one would assemble, organize and try to understand literature by scholars in a discipline and try to find connections in their work to hypothesize whether their work is connected. The book achieves this effortlessly, without making it look like the author forced his interpretations of the scholars upon the reader. At the same time, I would urge the reader to realize that this book is a far cry from being an oversimplification of ethnography. Intimate knowledge of terms and concepts from the vocabulary of social sciences (and natural sciences) is necessary to be able to fully appreciate *Among Wolves*. The only thing I would have liked more of in the book is some conversation on the characters' experiences of using ethnographic methods at the respective sites referenced in the book, but concurrently, the book provides enough motivation (and choice) to pick up the ethnographies discussed herein for learning more on methods.

I read the book as a novice qualitative researcher with a developing interest in ethnography. *Among Wolves*, from my perspective, would work well for novice as well as experienced ethnographers. For a novice researcher, it provides an excellent scrutiny of what engaging in ethnography might entail. Additionally, considering the range of disciplines and areas of work which the characters represent, it provides the requisite repertoire of experiences for the beginner to draw from in terms of considerations, assumptions and potential obstacles that need to be accounted for (and often, ways in which they may be overcome). On the other

hand, for the experienced ethnographer, the book should serve as an exercise in reflexivity similar to that discussed by the characters in the book.

While reading the preface, I looked at Pachirat's conditions quoted above as promises he makes to the reader who is looking for literature where subject matter can be engaged with in a new way. I confess being a reader who has been yearning to break out of the monotony of structured content that deals with one aspect of a subject at a time – something I find necessary because questions stemming from reflexivity do not necessarily follow structures, patterns and sections like a traditional text, often restricting the reader to adhere to the flow of the book. And this is where *Among Wolves* hits the bull's eye – the reader, the content, the questions and the reflexivity flow together.

### Reference

Pachirat, T. (2018). *Among wolves: Ethnography and the immersive study of power*. New York: Routledge

### Author Note

Ameya Sawadkar holds a master's degree in Media and Communications Management from India. He is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methodologies in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. His research interests include semi-structured interviews, pedagogy of qualitative research and communication in online gaming spaces. Ameya can be contacted at [ameya.sawadkar@uga.edu](mailto:ameya.sawadkar@uga.edu).

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