

Book Review: Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power by Timothy Pachirat

In Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power, Timothy Pachirat offers an experimental contribution to scholarship on social science methodology. Written in the form of a play, the book unfolds over seven acts which reflect on different aspects of ethnographic research, including the role of the researcher, the issue of power and questions of accountability. This is a rich, accessible and entertaining text that pushes the boundaries of standard academic writing practices and will resonate with anyone who has ever felt 'among wolves', recommends Kristin Eggeling.

Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power. Timothy Pachirat. Routledge. 2018.

Find this book: 

Academic books are seldom playful; and I am especially unaware of many academic books on social science methodology that could be described with this word. Rather, most are written in a detached voice that tries to create an objective distance between subject, researcher and reader. This, of course, applies more to some methodology books than to others, but many [older](#) and [newer guides](#) on 'how to' do academic research still appear as big books set in small fonts that read like uninvolved instruction manuals.

Timothy Pachirat's *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power*, published in [Routledge's Series on Interpretive Methods](#) in 2018, is a remarkable and very welcome exception to this rule. Written in the form of a play, *Among Wolves* pushes the standard of academic writing practices across the humanities and social sciences, and provides an unusual example of a methodology book that is not only accessible but also hard to put down.

The book unfolds over seven chapters, or acts, that offer both practical advice and critical commentary on the methods and depths of ethnography: an approach to empirical research that has recently attracted much interest beyond its anthropological origins, especially among scholars of [politics](#) and [power](#). Broadly speaking, the acts speak to at least five major issues in ethnographic research: the role of the researcher; the issue of power; the practicality of carrying out an ethnographic project; the issue of accountability; and, finally, what happens when the field-site 'speaks back' or comes to haunt the researcher.

Like any good play, *Among Wolves* circles around a core group of individuals and their interactions. At the end, it is the play's focus on individual humans and the stories they bring with them that achieves what Pachirat calls a 'homology' between form and content (xiv), and brings ethnography as the 'most human of all methods' (xii) to life. As the play proceeds, we follow its protagonists around a lake, listen to their conversations and hold our breath as we observe them being prosecuted in trial. Adding another layer of academic wit, the 'dramatis personae' in Pachirat's play are five fictional – but real-life inspired – characters (especially noteworthy here is 'Dr Popper Will Falsify'); ten actual, contemporary ethnographers; and, as introduced on the cover of the book, a one-eyed wolf-dog.

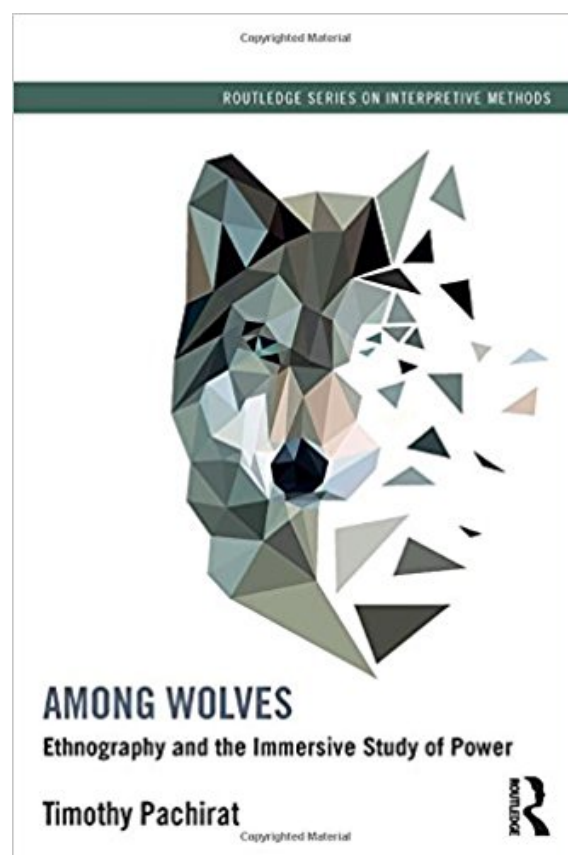




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Summoned by an anonymous Prosecutor, the latter eleven meet in 'predawn summer' in upstate New York (1) to attend an 'ethnographic trial' 'in the name of the public interest and the integrity of science' of Alice Goffman's controversial study *On the Run: Fugitive Life in the American City* (23). Importantly, Pachirat introduces the appearing ethnographers as chosen 'by conscription rather than as eager volunteers' (xvi). Yet, they are all scholars at the core of their disciplines, whose interdisciplinary work has attracted much popular and academic attention over the last quarter century. They include Pachirat himself (author of *Every Twelve Seconds*, 2011); the anthropologists Karen Ho (author of *Liquidated*, 2009), Anna Tsing (author of *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015) and Piers Vitebsky (*The Reindeer People*, 2005); political scientists James Scott (*Weapons of the Weak*, 1985) and Séverine Autesserre (*Peaceland*, 2014); journalist Katherine Boo (*Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, 2012); and the sociologists Mitchell Duneier (*Sidewalk*, 1999), Loïc Wacquant (*Body & Soul*, 2007), and finally, Goffman herself.

According to Pachirat's preface to the play, Acts One through Three provide a useful introduction to the 'embodied quality of ethnographic research' (xv). What first sounds like abstract 'methodology talk' becomes perfectly clear through an equally relatable and genius thought experiment. This focuses on the issue of whether ethnography could become a 'rigorous scientific approach' if the ethnographer could swallow a new 'fieldwork invisibility potion' (invented by Dr Popper Will Falsify) to overcome 'the bias introduced by the messy, embodied presence of the ethnographer' in the field (10). This is a clever move by Pachirat to discuss otherwise abstract notions of reflexivity, positionality and the role and influence of the researcher's personal characteristics in accessing and evaluating empirical data.

Building on this debate, which eventually suggests that ethnography cannot function as an approach to social science research without 'being there', Act Four looks in detail at the issue of 'power' in ethnographic research. Over 52 pages, the second longest act of the play, Act Four in astonishing detail covers the questions of *what* it means to study the world using ethnographic methods, and *who* it is that ethnographers are writing for.

Act Five, the longest of the play, will be most useful for readers searching for hands-on recommendations on 'how to' use and apply ethnographic methods. In the form of a heated conversation between Vitebsky, Ho and Pachirat's dramatic alter ego, Pachirat talks the reader through the practical considerations of designing and carrying out an 'ethnographic life cycle', which will include 'negotiating a research question; defining "the field"; reflecting on the project's ethical considerations [...]; gaining access; building relationships; navigating the field [...] writing fieldnotes; and leaving the field' (79). Yet at all times, he urges, the researcher needs to be 'as aware and reflexive as possible' to understand that any notion of neutrality is illusory as 'the ethnographer is inevitably caught up in webs of power and cannot be neutral' (101-102).

This rich discussion is followed by two short, final Acts that leave the reader with a restless feeling that no methodology book – not even this one – can capture the full range of issues one faces when choosing to go down the road of ‘the immersive study of power’. More specifically, Act Six deals with the difficult question of what happens when ethnographers are asked to justify their work and explain their ethnographic procedures to ‘non-believers’. In other words, what happens when they are ‘among the wolves’ of the modern academy that still upholds the holy grail of [causal, valid and replicable inference](#).

Finally, Act Seven, which is little longer than an average article abstract, lets the curtains fall and sends readers on their way. Definite interpretation of the final scene, in which one of the protagonists physically attacks another, remains elusive. Yet, if we read between the lines, accepting the play’s lack of (happy) ending is a metaphor for accepting the ‘value of improvisation, serendipity and ambiguity’ that comes with using ethnography to study – and for that matter, live in – the ‘real world’ (109).

Beyond the deep – though surprisingly entertaining – conversations among the ethnographers, the most outstanding part of the play for me is Act Three. Under the heading ‘Science Fantastic’, it features a radio interview between two (note: female!) social scientists, who debate the usefulness of Dr Popper Will Falsify’s fieldwork invisibility potion. While one is introduced to us as a ‘leading proponent of a more scientific approach to social knowledge’, the other is presented as the convenor of an academic collective that seeks to challenge ‘an unproductive emphasis on scientism in the social sciences’ (14). In their conversation, they debate the basic distinction between positivist and interpretivist social science. While the discussion is heavily aided by Frederic Schaffer’s work in a [previous publication](#) in the Routledge Interpretive Methods series, this radio interview is one of the clearest formulations of this complex debate that I have read in any methodology book over the *longue durée* of my doctoral studies.

But the attentive reader should not only pay attention to the depths and kinds of conversations that Pachirat plays out for us, but also to his self-commentaries. In this sense, one of the most valuable aspects of *Among Wolves* are the ‘Endnotes’ after each act, in which Pachirat comments on his character’s conversations, shows how their words are taken verbatim from their ethnographies and lists resources for further reading. Another one of Pachirat’s interesting ideas, which will hopefully be ‘acted out’ by some brave social science departments in the future, is the suggestion to take *Among Wolves* as the skeleton of a syllabus for a class on ethnographic method/ologies with its protagonists’ works as required readings.

Long story short, *Among Wolves* is excellent, both as an academic book on social science methodology and a self-contained work of (academic) literature. Just to add a few more honest words of appreciation to the praise on the book’s cover: *Among Wolves* is a book that I wish I had read much earlier in my time as a doctoral student, and in my life as a human. In this sense, it is a book for anyone who has ever felt that life, at least from time to time, takes place ‘among wolves’. The only word of caution that I must include is one already noted in its blurb: *Among Wolves* is ‘deceptively slim’ – so do not underestimate the weight it carries in relation to the small space it will occupy on your book shelf.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.