

# Towards a non-human ethnographic encounter?

Mialet, H el ene. 2012. *Hawking Incorporated: Stephen Hawking and the Anthropology of the Knowing Subject*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press [272 pp.].

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In this review I pay special attention to the construction of ethnographic encounters in Mialet’s book. By ethnographic encounter, I mean how the knowing subject of this particular book is constructed, and of course how the knowing subject whom Stephen Hawking represents figures in it. However, to read it with this focus is to betray in some way the book’s main arguments, so I will first try to summarize some of Mialet’s main ideas.

Mialet attempts to demystify the Western modern notion that it is only an individual brilliant mind (or brain) in itself that produces science. In the first page of her acknowledgments she succinctly states her main argument: “an individual is always a collective,” (p. vii) and from the very beginning, she is skeptical of the myth of the almost incorporeal genius who creates theories and science in radical isolation. She is interested in the collective that hides behind the figure of the genius. Perhaps there is no better “subject of research” than Hawking, a man who has been constructed by many actors and networks as a unique genius, and as an indisputable

example of the triumph of immaterial mind over material body.

Contrary to any easy assumption by the readers (appealing to the title or the deceiving cover of the book, in which we see an isolated, frozen statue of Hawking floating in space), this is not a biography of Hawking, or at least not a common one. This is because the notion of biography supposes that no matter how complex a person’s life is, it can be wrapped up in a book, and especially because it presupposes that it is about one coherent unity (called the subject or individual), without acknowledging how that apparent coherence or unity is produced. For Mialet the knowing subject, of which Hawking is an ideal type, is essentially an extended body.

The knowing subject does not simply have an extended body, but is an extended body. Hawking’s extended body is the ever-changing collective or assemblage of assistants, machines, physicists, PhD students, diagrammers, journalists, nurses, archivists, family members, the ethnographer herself and his own flesh-and-blood body, who

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produce, reproduce and stabilize the identity of both Hawking and HAWKING (with capital letters), but which also allow for a place to disrupt it. Just for clarification: Hawking stands for the individual and bodily materiality that this man is, while HAWKING is the idealized figure of the genius that tends to eclipse both his singularity and his sociality. Interestingly, the book does not explore these poles exclusively, but also what is in-between them. That is, it looks at the production of HAWKING through the erasure of Hawking and many other networks of the (labor of) animate and inanimate subjects.

Mialet sometimes speaks of Hawking as a (sociological) ideal type, and this is very counterintuitive from the start not only because the man is considered a genius, but also because his different disabilities have made it impossible for him to move, speak and perform many other physical activities. Consequently, he cannot write and needs several machines and people to do what common sense tells us most people do on their own (including his own survival). According to Mialet, it is these disabilities and the evident vulnerability of his body that illustrate the disavowed dependencies of flesh-and-blood bodies, as well as the fact that “Hawking has to delegate more than anyone else,” (p. 77) thus making visible the fact that scientists delegate (in the process of) the production of knowledge.

While arguably Mialet’s ideas may seem to erase the individuality of Hawking at first, she also (partially) resists this reading or movement. Mialet attempts to respect Hawking’s opacities, while providing a space for his agency, singularity and individuality. But this is not an easy task. While, Mialet repeatedly says that her book does not attempt to answer who Hawking really is, it is very concerned with the question of where Hawking is. She raises this question explicitly in several parts of her book and ends her monograph by once again asking about the location of Hawking in time and space.

If we continue to explore Mialet’s concern with asking where Mr. Hawking is, it would lead us to a discussion of several interconnected topics: about the place of the ethnographer in this book as well as the relations of power implied in it and, more generally, about the (innovative) methods of this ethnography. Even though Mialet describes her monograph as one of empirical philosophy, she reserves an important place for ethnography and, in a way, there is nothing exceptional in the fact that a person like Hawking is the leading character of an ethnography. In some senses, he is exceptionally vulnerable, or his flesh-and-blood body is extremely vulnerable.

I don’t think it is necessary to say much about the tradition of exploring the vulnerability of others in sociology and anthropology, but perhaps it will help to mention briefly that both these disciplines (especially anthropology) have constructed themselves by constructing natives, victims and savages to illuminate, rescue or simply discard. What is paradoxical is that it is not so much the native who seems to need an ethnographer, but vice versa. That being said, it is important to raise the caveat that some of the most brilliant and courageous works in these two fields explore different dynamics in, for lack of a better term, “vulnerable” communities. But it is precisely in relation to said tradition within the social sciences that this ethnography is also very exceptional, “because Hawking is not just his own vulnerable flesh-and-blood body, but even more importantly, because he is at the very top in the hierarchy of scientific knowledge. The place of philosophers and especially of ethnographers in that hierarchy is a dubious one at best, and at worst, it is at the very bottom. Thus, Mialet’s relationship to Hawking cannot be framed in the typical scenario of the ethnographer and the native surrounded by colonial phantoms. Furthermore, Hawking himself cannot be interviewed the way mere natives are. Here, he upsets one of the cornerstones of ethnography: the interview encounter. His flesh-and-blood body can neither speak nor write, but with the support of his extended body (including his computer, the robotic voice that emanates from his body, his eyebrows, etc.), he is able to communicate.

Mialet’s interview of Hawking is not one of oral speech, but rather of writing, a delayed and slow writing that occupies an important place. This is of course ironic because in the typical ethnographic scenario, it is the ethnographer who takes notes in a field notebook, and also because in a typical ethnographic encounter, the ethnographer is the one who transcribes and summarizes the words of the informant. In this case, however, Hawking himself has to synthesize his answers, several of which are based on recycling practices.

Another aspect that the Mialet-Hawking ethnographic encounter disrupts is the commonsensical notion that proximity guarantees a better grasp of, or a deeper insight into the lives of others, of their subjectivities and social positionalities. The proximity-distance dichotomy is disrupted, and its implicit engagement with claims to originality and authenticity is rejected. These issues lead Mialet to raise a question of pivotal importance for the social (and many other) sciences: “What

difference does it make when one deals with texts as opposed to dealing with a person? With Hawking, this question becomes even more complicated, for in his presence, one is dealing with a kind of transcription" (p. 119). I think it becomes clearer here why Mialet seems to struggle with this "collective individual." Her notion of individuality is so radically de-humanized and de-individualized that it seems to clash with the most pervasive and extended accounts of (Western human) individuality. So, while she struggles exploring these landscapes, we (as readers) also struggle because of the counter-intuitiveness of her "individual." Like Mialet, when we (as readers) get closer to (some of) Hawking's identity affiliations in isolation, we simultaneously distance ourselves from him. Indeed, we seem to get lost because of the non-individuality of this notion of an individual (non-) human knowing subject. But perhaps "getting lost" is not such a bad idea after all.

Another aspect of this ethnography is (its) accountability (or lack thereof). How can this monograph be accountable to the subject/transcript Stephen Hawking? How can Hawking give an account of this explanation of his extended body? Here it is also important to remember that Hawking has a persistent "desire to intervene in the writing of himself" (p. 116). Furthermore, to make things even more complicated, Hawking himself is a network of other people. So how can we be accountable to them? I will mention Mialet's response in a personal communication when she told me that Hawking could not be less interested in what she (the ethnographer, or marginal scientist?) had to say about him. She understood that since there are so many people behind him producing accounts of him, he thought of her project as just one more journalistic account of him, or treated it that way. This is somewhat disappointing for me, and I am sure that it was disappointing for Mialet as well. Why? Because the modern notion of the knowing subject is also constructed on the basis of another dichotomy, that of science versus common sense. Journalism is usually constructed as common sense, perhaps as a bit better informed than common sense usually is, but common sense nonetheless. Thus, the fact that an ethnographic (and long and engaged) project is constructed as interchangeable with an everyday journalist's brief account disrupts many of the

certainties of the social sciences. Perhaps this is yet another instance of Mr. Hawking's agency. Neither he (nor his network) allows any monumentalizing in this particular ethnography.

There is a radical criticism implied in Hawking's refusal to differentiate anthropology from journalism. In the most optimistic view, it could counter some of the most elitist implications of how scientific knowledge is produced in the "West." That would be an exciting approach taking into consideration Mialet's insights (such as how individuals are always collective) that can be of pivotal importance in the most-needed project of decolonizing and provincializing the (Western-centered) social sciences. At the same time, however, Hawking's refusal is based, at least at a certain level, on his own positioning in the field of the "real sciences," for which anthropology, philosophy and journalism are apparently equally trivial and inexact. This is a move that needs to be countered, although I am not sure that the task is to be done by the ethnographer herself.

The Mialet-Hawking ethnographic encounter is even more disrupted by and disrupting because of the fact that the ethnographer herself is part of Hawking's extended body, or of some of Hawking's extended bodies. The typical ethnographic encounter is based on the established boundaries between ethnographers and natives. But what happens when a boundary cannot be clearly established? When one is not totally sure who is the "native" and who the "ethnographer," or when this ethnographic economy and its traditional epistemologies are displaced? Can this kind of "new" ethnographic encounter be considered ethnographic at all? What kind of social landscapes are opened up by this new economy? Which are foreclosed? I don't have any answers to these questions, but Mialet's argument certainly forces us to reconsider some of the most treasured humanistic principles that lie behind the Western, human-centered ethnographic encounter and the idea of an individual with a monopoly on knowledge. Perhaps the idea of a non-human ethnographic encounter is a worthy project that will allow us to recognize the non-humanity at the heart of the notion of humanity, which sounds like something worthy of almost any (scholarly) risk. ✱