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The Network Inside Out
Annelise Riles (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

As an ethnographer who has spent over a decade doing fieldwork among NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) engaged in transnational organizing, I found *The Network Inside Out* by Annelise Riles both uncannily familiar and filled with novel insights. These are the hallmarks of a great ethnography.

Riles's analysis of Fijian-based NGOs that participated in the 1995 United Nations Beijing Conference on Women exhibits a skepticism that I recognize from my own fieldwork experiences. Are organizations created to advance particular issues? Or is advancing issues the means to another end: namely, the creation of a new organization (or "network")? What is meant by the claim to be "grassroots" or "community based"? What are the entities ("Women," "refugees," "the environment") on whose behalf advocates claim to act? How does funding shape organizational priorities? Why are funding and job opportunities advertised as though awards are granted and people are hired on an impartial and anonymous basis? Why do criticisms of former "network" members take the form of accusations that they have absconded with funds? Do diagrams of institutional networks bear any relation to actual communication and decision-making? What is accomplished through certain all-too-ubiquitous institutional practices, such as: listing "goals," "strategies," and "actions" on butcher paper; producing posters and pamphlets; establishing email lists; and distributing "information"? How do "forms"—such as newsletters, matrices, diagrams, and the conventions of producing "texts"—call entities into being?

In Riles's account, these and other questions arise not through a critique of power relations within community organizations, but rather through attention to the aesthetics of form within NGO networks and informational systems (including anthropology) more generally. This fresh approach leads her to examine the forms of sociality implicit in "networking"; the relationship between the outside and the inside of network diagrams; alternatives to the assumption that more "information" can always be acquired by shifting scale or perspective; the laborious process of producing the "text" of international agreements; the ways that images and texts circulate with the production of new documents; matrices as forms that configure the "Real"; and more. The way that Riles weaves her account, continually taking up different artifacts of "networking" only to reveal that these unexpectedly are another form or facet of the artifacts previously discussed, makes *The Network Inside Out* a treat to read!

Riles's central analytical problem concerns how to do ethnography when there is no "outside" to the practices being studied, when these are "familiar" ones in which the ethnographer, to a certain degree, participates. In her words, "How is one to study the points not of difference but of commonality, of universality even?" (18). As "the field" of informational practices that Riles analyzes is in some ways integral to academic institutions as well as to NGO networks,

this problem is not the same as that posed by "writing about one's own society" instead of about "the other." Rather Riles locates this analytical dilemma within anthropological anxiety over the seeming loss of "the local" in the face of "the global," as well as within legal scholarship that laments the loss of a ground from which to situate critique. Her solution to this dilemma is to examine the informational forms that create differences of scale and that distinguish "ground" from "figure" (or critique). In so doing, she argues, she advances interdisciplinarity by taking up a subject of interest to both anthropologists and legal scholars. This subject is "the Network," which Riles defines as "a set of institutions, knowledge practices, and artifacts thereof that internally generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves" (3). This definition contrasts with the more common understanding of a network as a web of social relations or lines of communication. In fact, Riles demonstrates, such understandings (some of which appear in graphic form in the images that accompany her text) are those generated within networks themselves. Therefore, the only possible approach in her ethnography is to forego the possibility of a "ground" and to instead turn the network inside out.

In order to analyze the Network, Riles conducted fifteen months of fieldwork between 1994 and 1996 within networks of Fijian NGOs dedicated to women's issues. These groups formed, for the most part, during the 1980s, as international donor agencies identified "women in development" as a funding priority. The members of these groups tended to be "educated professionals and persons with institutional experience in fields unrelated to women and activism, much more skilled in interfacing with aid agencies on these organizations' terms, accustomed to travel and life overseas, knowledgeable about the procedures of the UN and other international institutions, and less interested in the overt politicization of causes" (32). A number of these groups and individuals had been designated "focal points" within regional networks. As part of her fieldwork within these networks, Riles participated in meetings and conferences, prepared newsletters and reports, provided what networkers defined as "technical" assistance, and even represented organizations at international meetings. During fieldwork, she encountered numerous puzzles. NGO members devoted seemingly endless energy to collecting "information," but when she asked for copies of reports, she was sometimes told that they were unavailable. Reports, which were meant to disseminate knowledge, tended to circulate within rather than beyond NGO networks. Networking was supposed to be a means of "connecting" with others and with "sharing information." Yet networks were relatively closed and formalized entities. Therefore, instead of adopting the modernist view that networks are a means of solving another problem, such as the subordination of women, she realized that networks, conferences, newsletters, and documents *were* the "problem," an end themselves, rather than solely a means to an end.

Given her interest in form, Riles gives careful consideration to the aesthetics of her own text. Rather than attempting "thick description," she draws on her experience designing newsletters, meetings, and other network artifacts. She notes that "design, a networked craft of visual manipulations of the aesthetics of communication, does not purport to describe fully but rather to channel attention" (20). To enact this form, she devotes each chapter to a particular network element as well as to an analytical problem. The text is replete with images—charts, diagrams, matrices, figures, documents—that she collected and reproduced, practices that are also utilized in the production of international documents. Another strategy that she employs is the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated phenomena: uses of Fijian mats and of documents; family trees and divisions of land; the production of information within anthropology and within

NGO networks. The effect of these strategies is a text that *moves*, taking up and examining first one artifact, then another, rather than somehow creating a "holistic" account. The details are fascinating, even if the overall picture is at moments elusive. That, however, is a goal, given networkers' contentions about the relationship between their practices and "the Real" (see below).

The layering of interpretation within Riles's analysis is deliciously rich. For example, she turns her attention to the ways that delegates produce international agreements. One might assume that careful attention is paid to the meaning of words used in texts, that through examining these texts, one could discern an emergent international discourse about gender, violence, the family, or other topics. To the negotiators themselves, however, the production of these texts is an art. A phrase is chosen because it "sounds right" and there is a "collective recognition of the strength or appropriateness of the verbal formulation" (80). Participants actually count the number of times that particular words (such as "indigenous") appear in a text in order to assess the impact of their issues on the final document. Negotiators also draw on other agreements produced at prior conferences, reproducing fragments of text without marking these as quotations. As they negotiate, delegates "bracket" text, producing "drafts" interrupted by all possible alternative phrasings suggested. "Agreement" then consists of reducing the amount of bracketed text, and a conference official actually keeps a running tally of this percentage as a measure of delegates' progress. There are, she claims, moments when negotiators are "drawn into the bracket" (86), experiencing "awe" at the endless layering of texts and the monumental effort of construction, but also feeling bewildered, as the meaning of the words is lost and as their potential failure to reach agreement is contemplated. Quoting and bracketing produce a patterning of text within documents, much like the weave within a Fijian mat: "In counting paragraphs or sections or brackets, one moved through the text vertically, from top to bottom. Language, in contrast, was a horizontal weave" (87). Despite the tremendous effort involved in creating documents, Riles notes, completed international agreements are not to be read from start to finish. Rather, they are to be decomposed, quoted in "strategic plans," excerpted in newsletters and bulletins, and deployed within future conference as new documents are produced.

Throughout *The Network Inside Out*, Riles returns to a metaphor of a figure "seen twice" in order to describe how phenomena turn out to be multidimensional. Such "seeings" do not involve a shift in perspective to generate new information, but rather a recognition of sameness despite seeming differentiation. For example, she analyzes a distinction that NGO members make between "networks" and "personal relations." The network is supposed to be about extending personal connections, but in fact, to participants, it is a formal structure whose practices belie the ideology through which it is justified. Similarly, personal relations are not supposed to enter into the formal network, but in fact, that is how business gets conducted, awards are made, and people are excluded. In essence, Riles concludes, "personal relations" and the "network" are the same thing, but when one is highlighted, the other disappears. In this sense, they are the same form seen twice, generating, as Riles puts it, "a sense of reality or dimensionality, each serves as the inside or outside of the other" (69).

This notion of multidimensionality helps to explain both NGO members' concern that their work not lose touch with reality and the fear that certain anthropological analyses fail to address the "real" dimensions of people's lives. To explain the relationship between "analysis" and "the Real," Riles examines the matrix, a form used widely within both networks and

academia. Matrices were used by NGOs as an empowerment strategy, a means of ensuring that "grassroots" views were reflected in organization plans. For example, during meetings, NGO members (who presumably represented "the grassroots") were asked to fill in a grid identifying ways that different "levels" (government, NGO, private sector) could address various "issues" (political, health, social, legal). Matrices were also used to transform international agreements into "action." Thus, text from international agreements was excerpted and placed against "actions" that had been taken to implement these agreements. Riles explains, "The difficulty, shared by international aid agencies, negotiators, and NGOs alike, concerns how to turn funds into documents, documents into action, or action into further funds—in other words, how to manage the distance between inside and outside that is internal to the design. . . . It is this problem of design . . . that constitutes the 'real,' the substance, the politics, and the 'meaning' for those encountered here" (143). As an analytical form, the matrix pointed to gaps, the empty spaces that presumably would be filled in with "actions," which would be "real," leading Riles to conclude "that the Real was the Matrix inside out" (165). This conclusion has implications for the ways that anthropologists as well as NGO members envision their work. As Riles explains, "If the anthropologist's analysis fails to appeal to a reality 'outside,' the lack is imagined to inhere in the analysis, not in the reality. . . . This empty space or 'lack' is an artifact of the design itself, like the self-styled sociology of the Network" (144).

I will admit that, as I read *The Network Inside Out,* I worried a bit that the focus on aesthetics somehow trivialized the issues that may have motivated NGO members' involvement in networks. I wondered how much the fact that these networks were concerned with women rather than the environment, human rights, or something else mattered to the analysis. I recalled the legal case of a Peruvian domestic violence victim who, despite being divorced by her U.S.-citizen husband, was able to self-petition for legal status in the United States, and I speculated that the remedy that this woman availed herself of was brought about in part through the international conferences analyzed by Riles. I also realized, however, that such more "instrumental" readings of network actions were beside the point. Through her ethnographic enactment of the informational practices that create the Network, Riles has made apparent the power and complexity of seemingly mundane artifacts of law, politics, and academia. *The Network Inside Out* offers new paradigms, is fascinating in its detail, and deserves to be read widely within anthropology, law, and cultural studies, and by all who are interested in globalization and the politics of international "Networks."