ETHNOGRAPHIC TWISTS AND TURNS

An alternative epilogue

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Introduction

Even most anthropologists are unfamiliar with Bronislaw Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*. First published in 1935, it is far less read than works like *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922). However, while its title implies the work is limited to agriculture, it is actually an expansive study – including, for instance, a vital theory of language as social action. Yet even those generally familiar with *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* may not know of Section 3 from Chapter 9, “An Odyssey of Blunders in Field-Work.” Malinowski chose his metaphors carefully, and the reference to Greek myth (like the reference to “Argonauts”) indicates the section's conceptual importance, despite being buried in the middle of a chapter toward the end of the text.

What is remarkable about this 15-page essay is that it is not a chronicle of everyday blunders (compare Malinowski 1967). Instead, the section recounts an odyssey of conceptual blunders. Noting that he first suffered “from a belief of infallible methods in field-work,” Malinowski came to realize that method was not enough. His early attempts at ethnographic analysis “contained some elements of truth. What was wrong ... was the perspective in which these elements were placed” (1935, 325–326). By acknowledging his mistakes, Malinowski sought to “retrace the steps by which, in a somewhat roundabout and blundering way, I finally arrived at an adequate theoretical grip of the problem, which in turn enabled me to collect and organize the evidence in a satisfactory manner” (1935, 329–330).

Let us say that his ethnography needed a twist.

The chapters comprising this book are linked to the Ethnography with a Twist Conference, held in 2019 at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, where I was

honoured to be a keynote speaker. Throughout these chapters – from the Introduction onward – the notion of “ethnography with a twist” is taken seriously. It is deployed as a creative point of departure from which to frame challenges and solutions to ethnographic research. Like Malinowski in his “odyssey of blunders,” the authors frame these challenges and solutions by connecting methodological and theoretical innovation. The odyssey as such is not new. But the paths forward cannot be extrapolated from the past; present challenges demand novel trajectories.

In this Epilogue I begin by reflecting on the various ways the concept of “ethnography with a twist” shapes the analyses in this volume. The editors have grouped the chapters under four themes: 1) new collaborative practices; 2) visibility and multi-modality; 3) power dynamics in shifting contexts; and 4) embodied and affective ethnography. Below, I provide four alternative themes: 1) emergence; 2) memory; 3) representation; and 4) authority. These do not replace those of the editors: they are indeed “alternative,” “like alternating current in an electric wire” (Maurer 2005, 50). Placing the two sets of themes in dialogue with each other provides a “twist” in its own right, and through this complementary discussion I hope to gesture toward unfolding odysseys.

Let's do the twist

While the contributors to this volume come from a global array of backgrounds and address a global array of fieldsites, the English-language phrase “ethnography with a twist” serves as a remarkably consistent organizing principle. As the editors state in the Introduction,

By twists we mean both a) an intentional aim to conduct ethnographic research with novel approaches and methodological tools but also b) sensitivity to recognize and creativity to utilize different kinds of ‘twist moments’ that ethnographic research may create for the researcher.

“Twist” is fascinatingly polysemous in this volume, and deserves closer attention as a keyword for ethnographic innovation.

As both a noun and verb, “twist” is extremely common in contemporary English and appears in a range of slang forms. (A comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of my argument; its etymology dates back to the 1350s and cognates exist in many northern European languages.) One of the most common meanings of “twist” as a verb is “to join or unite by twining or interlacing; to twine together; to entwine (one thing) with or to another; to intertwine, interweave” (“twist, v”. 2019). The sense is of a circular or screw-like movement, as when taking two threads and combining them into one by turning one’s hands in opposite directions. This sense of non-linear movement shapes most uses of “twist” as a noun—in particular, the idea of a “twist” as “an unexpected development of events, esp. in a work of fiction; a change from usual procedure” (“twist, n”. 2019). This appears

in the notion of a “plot twist,” and in adjectival forms like terming someone “twisted,” meaning unusual or bizarre.

The phrase “with a twist” originally referred to cocktails – specifically, using citrus rind as a garnish, which is twisted to release its aromatic oils. It combines the noun and verb senses of “twist”: the physically “twisted” rind imparts a new taste to the drink – a “twist” to its flavour.

These delightfully multiple meanings of “twist” shape the four themes by which the editors braid together these chapters. New forms of collaboration provide a “twist” on established norms for fieldwork. Multimodal forms of data collection and presenting ethnographic findings “twist” the dominance of textuality. Power dynamics between researchers and those they study “twist” ethnographic claims and their implications. Embodiment and affect “twist” not only methods of data collection and analysis, but how ethnographic work is articulated to varied publics. I will now weave my own four-part braid. This alternative does not replace the first braid: you, dear reader, might consider them as elements to “twist” into a thicker, stronger rope for scaling the heights of new ethnographic opportunities to come. Or you might consider them an alternative “twist” with which to concoct new flavours for the heady brew of ethnography. Cheers!

Emergence

“Emergence,” the first stand of my alternative conceptual braid, shapes each contribution to this volume in some fashion. As noted above, a common use of “twist” is in the sense of a “plot twist”. In this regard Marilyn Strathern has asked “What research strategy could possibly collect information on unpredictable outcomes?” (2004, 5), answering:

Social anthropology has one trick up its sleeve: the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection. Anthropologists deploy open-ended, non-linear methods of data collection which they call ethnography; I refer particularly to the nature of ethnography entailed in anthropology’s version of fieldwork. Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact. (Strathern 2004, 5–6)

As Strathern notes, ethnographic fieldwork has never involved “purifying” the site of study, as in laboratory research. In place of purity, ethnography has always been “with a twist”. Strathern emphasizes that this “twist” takes a temporal form: the ethnographer seeks to generate more data than they are aware of at the time of collection, and conceptual frameworks for analysis are often devised after the fact.

Ethnography always has plot twists: its conclusions cannot be predicted in advance because they appear through embodied participation in fieldsites. In other words, ethnography is emergent, and this provides one way to do ethnography

with a twist. Turunen et al. emphasize how their notion of “poly-space” emerged from forms of collaboration that also produced poly-space as ethnographic object. The “bizarre moments” they describe are bizarre precisely because distinct social worlds emerge in unexpected ways. Cheesemen et al. explore the emergent forms of knowledge walking practices provide, while Strandén-Backa invokes the notion of the “involuntary ethnographer,” whose research emerges from everyday interaction. In this sense ethnography might be said to seek the ethnographer, an emergent character of investigation that finds an analogue in Bradley’s account of studying performers. Here, forms of intentional – indeed, “staged” – meaning making anticipate the ethnographic encounter.

Emergence involves not just fieldsites and projects, but method. Hänninen asks how elicitation shapes ethnographic knowledge production with regard to interviews. Noting that the question of elicitation is a classic methodological question (indeed, it can be seen in Malinowski’s distinction between what people say they do and what they do), Hänninen asks how uses of digital technology emerge through everyday practice, and how accounts of those uses can emerge through an interview method that treats elicitation as a joint activity. Siim’s discussion of drawing with Estonian children shows the value of an emergent methodology for ethnographic knowledge production, one well-suited for persons that might otherwise be deemed less insightful cultural commentators.

Memory

Ethnography is always history, a fundamental condition of its existence masked by misleading notions of anticipatory ethnography. Short of owning a time machine, there is no way to conduct ethnographic research on the future. The desire for a predictive ethnography results from a misunderstanding of ethnographic research as seeking general laws (like the law of gravity), a misunderstanding anthropologists have sought to correct for over 125 years (Boas 1887).

The fact that ethnography is always history has sometimes taken the form of temporal othering, presenting cultures as stuck in the past or timeless (Fabian 1983). However, this is not inevitably the case, and we can find a thread throughout this volume of work that rethinks the historicity of ethnographic research, including how memory “twists” understandings of culture as an individual and social phenomenon. Sandberg’s notion of “retrospective ethnography” builds on the reality that all ethnography is retrospective to ask what happens when memory itself can be said to serve as a fieldsite. In other words, history in this perspective represents both a method and a substantive place of fieldwork. Such a framework appears as well in Dalbello and McGowan’s discussion of interviews contained in the Ellis Island Oral History Collection. By exploring these oral histories with regard to embodied data, they treat memory as a sensory narrative that reveals experiential dimensions of migration.

This approach articulates with Tervahartiala’s processual use of drawing as an auto-ethnographical method. Tervahartiala shows how autoethnography, like

autobiography, is both personal and historical, literally “drawing on” memory to articulate the broader cultural logics memory can illuminate. For Hänninen, participant-induced elicitation allows older adults to reenact and collaboratively reflect on their experiences with lifestyle blogging, linking memories of the life course to recollections of their own digital media use. Indeed, the production of “poly-space” explored by Turunen et al. is fundamentally a production of memory as well: it is in this conjuncture between space and memory that “heritage” can be said to appear. We find a resonance between such practices of memory among older Finnish adults, and those addressed in Siim’s study of storycrafting with Estonian children. A participatory ethnographic method allows these children to narrativize their social contexts, remembering past experiences of migration and their current implications.

Representation

No matter how much ethnography twists, it still pivots around the fundamental issue of representation. Many ethnographically-inflected social sciences have advanced forms of nonrepresentational theory that contribute to our understandings of subjectivity, culture, and power (e.g., Thrift 2008). However, frameworks termed “nonrepresentational” are predicated on an oversimplified characterization of representation. Nonrepresentational approaches often index processualism and contingency rather than representation, and scepticism toward such approaches is warranted (Cresswell 2012). This work is best read as contributing to the body of scholarship reframing what “representation” might involve and how most effectively to conduct it. In that regard Koskinen-Koivisto and Lehtovaara join those (like Thrift and others) who explore how embodiment – and particularly the senses and emotions – reshape representation. As Dalbello and McGowan’s work with the Ellis Island Oral History Collection indicates, such explorations can draw on archival data as well. Such work reveals how embodiment is profoundly personal, as is one’s sensory experience.

Indeed, questions of the senses, emotions, and affect have an important relationship to ethnographic knowledge production. These are often understood as subjective and individually specific, outside semiotic regimes that make representation possible. A vibrant body of work in sensory ethnography and the ethnography of emotion has sought to rethink affect as a methodological resource and ethnographic object. This includes the sensory and emotional experience of the ethnographer, and treating this as part of the analytic frame leads to new ethnographic possibilities. An important strand of innovation in this volume extends this set of insights. Consider how Tervahartiala’s exploration of autoethnographical drawing points toward its possibilities as a method for producing data as well as presenting research results. After all, the suffix *-graph* can refer to drawing as well as writing (for instance, in the notion of “graphic novel”).

Because ethnographies in various ways represent cultures, issues of representation inform the epistemology and ethics of ethnographic practice. As both Stark and Everri et al. note, digital technologies make video far easier (and potentially, more collaborative) than film, but raise new concerns as well. These include questions of

rapport with the researcher, but also privacy and informed consent, particularly with marginalized communities.

While representation is arguably the goal of ethnography, it is an emic category as well, a process in which all humans engage through language and a range of other semiotic forms. The study of representational practices themselves constitutes a form of ethnography with a twist, as in Sandberg's study of commemoration as a form of representation, and Turunen et al.'s study of heritage.

Authority

One powerful way to "twist" ethnography is to confront questions of authority. For instance, through their "International Society of the Imaginary Perambulator," Cheesemen et al. explore how forms of authority can be constituted through movement articulated through collaboration. Instead of place-based claims to ethnographic authority, that "I was there" (Clifford 1983, 128), this imaginary perambulation raises questions of what we might term pedestrian authority – "I walked there" – with all the "pedestrian" implications of the everyday and taken-for-granted. While the focus is on walking practices, the questions of aesthetics and knowledge production they raise have implications for movement more broadly. For instance, they speak to ableist logics of mobility that shape the recognized authority of persons who cannot walk because they move in wheelchairs, or whose walking is assisted by canes, crutches, or other devices that might make them appear as "misfits" within dominant conceptions of perambulation (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

Discussions of authority are often muddled by unclear or implicit theories of power and inequality that undergird them. For instance, there are important differences between "speaking for" and "speaking about" another culture, and not all distinctions in social status or power are oppressive. New twists on such questions of ethnographic authority are provided by Koskinen-Koivisto and Lehtovaara, both of whom explore how sensory ethnography might transform questions of authorial voice. They appear as well in Bradley's discussion of entanglements with the interpretive practices of street performers. Lounasmeri reframes questions of ethnographic power when addressing contemporary dynamics of "studying up". Anthropologists have addressed such dynamics for over a half century, asking what happens to ethnographic authority in contexts where researchers have, in some sense, less power than those they research (Nader 1969).

A personal twist

In setting out these themes of emergence, memory, representation, and authority, I have provided an alternative pathway for "twisting" through the contributions to this volume, one that complements the overall narrative by adding another strand to the discussion. While I have done so without reference to my own work, given the consistent emphasis on self-reflection appearing in every chapter, a brief

exploration of my own ethnographic practice can serve to reinforce and conclude the analysis.

Many contributions to this volume touch on the role of digital technology with regard to ethnographic practice, from Skype to blogging to video production, but the digital as such is not a primary focus. This is valuable, because too often digital technology is taken as innovative by definition. In fact, the digital does not necessarily “twist” ethnography more than any other domain. The category itself must be disaggregated and specified: while there are some features of the digital that are broadly shared, others are specific to gaming, to social networks, to surveillance, and so on, or to specific places (be those places virtual or physical). In my own ethnographic work in the virtual world Second Life, the greatest “twist” has been the discovery that so many aspects of digital culture are similar to physical-world cultures, even when the sociality in question is exclusively online (in other words, when the persons in question do not meet in the physical world; see Boellstorff 2015).

Similarity can thus be the greatest twist of all in ethnographic practice, not least because of the mistaken assumption that the goal of ethnography is to document difference. Indeed, this is a powerful point of commonality between my digital ethnography and my work on LGBT Indonesians (inter alia, Boellstorff 2005; 2007). In that work, the most surprising twist was to realize the ways in which these Indonesians saw themselves as similar to LGBT persons outside Indonesia, including in the “West”. It was to realize that the conceptual rubrics by which one understands something to be similar or different are themselves being globalized and reconfigured in a range of local and national contexts. Whether with regard to Indonesia or Second Life, I have also been struck by the relationships between widely distributed cultural practices and assumptions, and more specified cultural logics. These can be inflected by some notion of locality, or by forms of social and embodied specificity like disability (Boellstorff 2019; 2020). The idea that embodiment is a transcendental category is ableist.

Weaving together these reflections on my own work with the contributions to this volume, I see an unfolding tapestry of possibility for ethnographic practice and collaboration. Ethnography has always been twisty, always open to the contingent and unexpected. Building on that history and the kind of work represented by these chapters provides us with a new beginning for our own odyssey. That odyssey will certainly involve new blunders, but through that very process of learning and growth lead to productive new twists for ethnography itself.

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