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A companion in anthropology

George Paul Meiu, Michael Stasik & Anna Vollmer Mateus

'It is by conversing with our friends ... that we gain wisdom [*amahala*]', a Nyakyusa interlocutor tells South African anthropologist Monica Wilson in the 1930s, during her field research in what was then the British colony of Tanganyika. 'It is bad to sit still in [other's] company. A man [*sic*] who does this is a fool; he learns no wisdom; he has only his own thoughts' (quoted in Wilson 1951: 66). What this unnamed interlocutor points to, Wilson suggests, is 'the enjoyment of good company' or 'the value of good fellowship with equals' (the key value of *ukwangala*) (1951: 66, 163). *Good Company*, Wilson's book, demonstrates how this value of companionship is at the heart of Nyakyusa's so-called 'age villages' – settlements built as each generational cohort moves away from their parents, after being initiated into adulthood. Besides the obligation of food-sharing and mutual care, in age villages, the value of companionship is also a condition of knowledge and wisdom: it is about 'a sense of discussion and easy give-and-take', 'talking and learning in the company of contemporaries' (66, 163). Companionship then, we might say, can be about standing by those who craft a sense of the world; and, such 'standing by', in turn, expands one's own worldly sense. As Wilson's interlocutor puts it, it is to have more than one's own thoughts.

To produce knowledge and wisdom in 'good company' can also inform our work and life as anthropologists. Monica Wilson carried out her Nyakyusa fieldwork, between 1934 and 1938, mostly in the company of her beloved husband, Godfrey, a British anthropologist. While their fieldwork styles and topics differed sharply, they also experienced this time together as one of the happiest in their relationship. After Godfrey's death (by suicide) in 1944, Monica spent many years carefully

transcribing and organizing his seventy-eight fieldnote books and writing *Good Company* and three other monographs. 'This labor of the heart', Rebecca Marsland (2013: 130) argues, 'was one way for her to keep him, and her memories of these precious time together, close to her for the rest of her life.' It was, in other words, through the companionship of Godfrey's fieldnotes that she was extending his 'good company' to generate ideas in an ongoing conversation with him; a fellowship with the dead, a form of time-travelling, a mode of driving the imagination in a dialogue of sorts.

Keeping company, to be sure, means that one's presence is consequential – though not overbearing – for others' efforts, questions, imaginings and emerging understandings. But companionship can also be mediated through objects, texts or, like in Monica's case, fieldnote books. Reflecting on the bonds between humans and non-human species (e.g., pet dogs), Donna Haraway (2008: 31) shows how companionship enables a certain 'making of meaning together, the becoming-with'. Just like living interlocutors, human and non-human alike, artefacts and texts – all partial and tentative – may offer us the kind of companionship through which to continue to become, to expand the meanings of what we are and can be. For, as Haraway boldly puts, 'companions, not competitors, are what we need' (2008: 4).

This then is indeed the point of the present companion: quite literally, to keep you company, dear reader, as you try to discover what an anthropological imagination can be and do. We use the term 'companion' in its literal, relational sense: a guide that provides orientation by sharing experiences, sparking curiosity and inviting you to think, question and explore what it means to approach the world anthropologically, and what may be gained from it. As a text-object, our companion differs from a manual or textbook. It does not seek an authoritative delimitation of the discipline

and its methods; it does not seek to overdetermine or foreclose. Instead, it pursues the open-ended possibilities of the journey itself – a generative 'good company', as it were. As a companion, this volume refrains from providing definitive answers as to the subject and scope of the discipline. (There are plenty of texts already that do precisely that.) Aware that attempts to define and demarcate anthropology – whether through its institutional boundaries, research topics or methodologies – tends to fix and exclude, we are interested instead in activating the processual and open-ended potentials of imagination forms that we might also recognize as 'anthropological'.

When thinking of company, companionship or, for that matter, the current companion, we do not seek to romanticize what these terms designate. The goal is not to imagine scholarly companionship in the image of Nyakyusa age villages. It is instead to imagine new ideals of mutuality in knowledge production and transmission by thinking critically *with* such images and *about* the contexts of their emergence. To be sure, age villages were anything but utopias of equality, even if Wilson (1951: i) describes Nyakyusa as 'an extremely democratic people'. These villages involved myriad asymmetries of authority, wealth and gender and often also sparked mutual suspicion and accusations of witchcraft. *Good Company* itself, along with the companionship between its author and her spouse, emerged through forms of knowledge production that were indispensable from the asymmetries of colonialism and, in this case, the British empire. Approached from this perspective, companionship can hardly be a way to sidestep the social asymmetries and hierarchies that characterize a wider political economy of knowledge production. To think that would be naïve at best.

Yet, within this political economy, anthropologists have shown that the meanings and potentialities of various practices, attachments or values – many of them seemingly

trivial, marginal or obscure – are hardly overdetermined. Companionship then may be thought of as distinctly political, precisely in contexts of extractive economies and shifting inequalities, where it can be a way to sustain mutually caring relations, to reimagine what is possible through, around and beyond these contexts. Although Wilson does not explain Nyakyusa age villages in relation to the colonial relations of power that may have amplified their significance at the time, she does make an interesting admission: that social asymmetries – in this case internal to the society – are what makes companionship an important ideal. 'This very emphasis on the value of good fellowship with equals is doubtless a reflection of the difficulty of achieving it' (1951: 163).

Keeping 'good company' – standing by, being present with various human and non-human others – might also be an important way to inhabit what anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh (2020) imagines as 'convivial scholarship'. Key to Nyamnjoh's argument is an effort to transcend 'unproductive fixations with disciplinary boundaries and credos', to avoid 'over-prescription, over-standardisation and over-prediction – in short ... to undo the McDonaldisation of the disciplines' (26). Instead, convivial scholarship 'insists on openness to the sensitivities and sensibilities' that come with the complexity of our being, allowing us, as students of society, to better attend to the lived experiences of those 'whose sociality we seek to understand and represent in our scholarship' (27). The goal of a convivial scholarship, Nyamnjoh argues, is not to arrive at final answers and new certainties, but 'only permanent questions and ever exciting new angles of questioning' (27). It is in this spirit, dear reader, that the current volume seeks to keep you good company.

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Many of us came to anthropology drawn, if not already by a clear career path, then often by some inexplicable charm: perhaps an encounter that left a lasting impression; perhaps the thrill of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions in new ways; or maybe the promise of fresh perspectives on urgent political questions. We then came to know and identify these ways of questioning and tackling as 'anthropological'. Nevertheless, many of us have also felt disoriented at times, whether by the lack of a concrete definition for their field or, to the contrary, the proliferation, in and beyond academia, of self-assured, vehement and condemning statements as to what anthropology *really is*, after all: whether the 'handmaiden of colonialism', 'a tool of surveillance' or 'a dying field'. Have we been charmed by a wolf in a lamb's clothing? Is anthropology but oppressive power dressed in the robe of transformative critique? Or, to expand the question, why then does anthropology both entice and repel? Why does it prompt both intellectual enchantment and damning criticism – both in no uncertain terms?

To be sure, this paradox has characterized anthropology since its incipient institutionalization in the mid-nineteenth century and has continued to shape the field up until the present. Perhaps, after all, the question is not what anthropology *is* but what particular efforts deemed 'anthropological' do and have done in specific contexts. It is not a totality that needs to be named, defined, critiqued or defended, but the particular methods and modes of enunciation which, deployed in its name and with particular effects, might extend or interrogate the hegemonies of their time.

Anthropology's troubled legacy as an 'arrogant and ethnocentric science' (Leach 1982: 16) – originally entangled with evolutionist, racist ideologies and described as a 'child of imperialism' (Gough 1968) – is often at the root of the above-mentioned critiques. Closely tied to colonial projects,

the discipline has historically offered a 'home' for deeply problematic practices, such as 'salvage anthropology' involving the forced and often violent removal of artifacts, including human remains, from groups presumed to be 'vanishing'. It has also contributed to Othering ideologies of cultural difference, as part of what Michel Rolph Trouillot (1991) calls modernity's 'savage slot' – a discursive field that has been foundational to Western ideals of political order, if already long before the making of anthropology as such. This legacy continues to raise questions about the deep-seated and persisting inequalities that underlie ethnographic work and scholarly institutions, and which extend the dynamics of late capitalist political economy.

Our goal here is not to defend anthropology from such necessary critique. Neither is it to simply take this critique at its face-value, especially when its totalizing register and flattening generalizations (i.e., 'anthropology is this or that') end up reifying the discipline's boundedness and further occluding the myriad voices, contributions and imaginings at its various margins, the sidenotes in its various cracks. In this sense, anthropological practice has often entailed its own imminent critiques, its doings *and* undoings, like the classic *Ouroboros*, the figure of the serpent eating its own tail. And this paradox has made the field anything but coherent, even when we claimed various definitional certainties. So, dear reader, if you were to insist on a definition – and rightly so, for if anything can be anthropological then nothing is – our characterization of the field would revolve around such paradoxes and their generative capacity. It would also pertain to the communities of debate – those interlinked, though sometimes polarized 'age villages' – to which these paradoxes have given rise.

Consider two key paradoxes. First, the question of difference – social, cultural or otherwise. While anthropology has long been premised on the idea of difference – particularly as it

relates to distinct 'cultures' as Other – much anthropological practice has sought to question and critique how difference is produced politically, socially and epistemically. So if anthropology is about, as the old saying goes, 'making the strange familiar and the familiar strange', it has also been about interrogating the historical political projects through which familiarity and strangeness are constructed.

Second, the question of ethnography as anthropology's emblematic *modus operandi*: The adoption of ethnographic fieldwork around the early twentieth century marked a pivotal moment in shaping anthropology as it is known and practiced today. It moved the discipline toward a more engaged form of research that builds on insights through relationships with those whose social lives are being studied, attending to the '*imponderabilia of everyday life*' (Malinowski 1922: 18). Above all, this happens through participant observation, a constitutive dimension of anthropological traditions of fieldwork and understandings of ethnography. However, ethnography is not an exclusive characteristic of anthropology, or not any longer. Techniques of ethnographic inquiry have become widespread across other disciplines in the social sciences and beyond – in corporate marketing or security surveillance. This expansion is sometimes met with ambivalence by anthropologists. Many view ethnography not merely as a set of research tools, but as an effort to center the researcher's encounters and experiences of social intimacy, as well as the difficulties and impossibilities that emerge in the process. Despite not being the answer to anthropology's identity, ethnography is what prompts further questions about the kinds of imagination that ought to drive it.

Resisting definitional closure, we propose instead to position anthropological practice *queerly* across actors, methods and institutions, across definitions and their excesses. In their ground-breaking ethnography on the *hijras*

(trans women sex workers) in rural India, anthropologist Vaibhav Saria (2021) imagines queerness as more complex than mere anti-normativity, or something outside the norm. While often rejected by their families, hijras take on important roles in preserving the family as an institution: they are the necessary 'outside' that assures the forms of care and intimacy that sustains the norm. Saria offers the graphic of diagonality to show how hijras' position cuts across and binds norms and the non-normative, reproduction and non-reproduction. Their position and mobility queers the very binaries that they sustain. Borrowing from Saria, we think anthropology queerly in a similar sense: anthropological practices cut diagonally across, on the one hand, historical forms of institutionalization, expertise and privilege that have sought to systematize the discipline and, on the other hand, forms of imagination, writing and teaching that emerge in various, unexpected interstices of knowledge production.

To think anthropological practice queerly is to make paradox and ambiguity central to what we do. Engaging with anthropological thinking means grappling with these ambiguities, striving to convert them into new formations of critique, reflection, understanding and transformation. It is from within these tensions that anthropology's intellectual promise unfolds, offering a space to rethink and reimagine the world and our place within it. This potential thrives on creative, daring inquiry that embraces the frictions and contradictions that shape the vicissitudes of life, from the trivia of the everyday to planetary processes. And it is by harnessing, rather than seeking to resolve, these ambiguities, that we find a starting point for considering not only what anthropology is and might become, but also its relevance to understanding the contemporary world.

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Our companion comprises ten main entries, each offering an example of possibilities afforded by doing anthropology and cultivating an anthropological imagination. Drawn from presentations in the University of Basel lecture series *What is Anthropology?* (Fall Semester 2023), these entries were crafted without fixed lead questions. Instead, each author was invited to expand on one element of their research – centered around a chosen keyword – and to embark on a path of insightful, playful and provocative thinking with and around that element. In doing so, they reveal the kinds of questions anthropologists ask, the social domains they explore and some of the methodological and ethical dilemmas with which they struggle. Together, these contributions form an eclectic and inviting collection of gateways into the anthropological endeavor, encouraging exploration and dialogue.

Alongside these main entries, we inserted student interventions drawn from note-taking exercises that took place during the lecture series. These spontaneous reflections capture some of the uncertainties, questions and ideas that emerged during and after the discussions accompanying the lectures, offering you an extra source of companionship – one that is both generous and generative in sharing doubts and insights.

At the end of this volume, you will find two curated lists of reading suggestions. The first list comprises a few general titles that we, as editors, have found particularly valuable as companion-like sources for engaging with anthropological thinking. The second list presents more intimate recommendations from the volume's contributors – works they have found especially influential in their pursuit of anthropology and beyond. Each recommendation is accompanied by a brief explanation of the inspiration it sparked and the questions it provoked.

Keeping 'good company' with the discipline, we leave you, dear reader, with more questions than answers – an offering in the spirit of anthropology itself.

Title (Author)	Keywords	Ethnographic & conceptual thrust
Caring (Eeuwijk)	burden of care; care assemblage; eldercare; kin; power; social practice	Looks at everyday eldercare in Indonesia and Tanzania to illustrate negotiations of shared responsibilities and conflicts over norms and values
Dancing (Braun)	embodiment; gender; memory; nation-building; ritual; social change	Explores professional concert dance in the DR Congo to highlight how morality and politics resonate through embodied performance
Hustling (Stasik)	concept; emic/etic; ethnography; possibility; roaming; theory	Traces the concept of 'hustle' among West African migrants to consider the mobility of imagination in both lifeworlds and ethnographic theory
Infrastructuring (Schubert)	affect; colonialism; extractivism; globalization; state power	Examines infrastructures in Angola to demonstrate how sociotechnical arrangements mediate power, affect and social relations across scales
Inheriting (Meiu)	inheritance; intimacy; kinship; knowledge; unconscious	Attends to inherited family secrets in a Romanian context to probe how erasures shape the intimacies and knowledge of the worlds we inhabit
Kinning (Engeler)	belonging; diaspora; patchwork ethnography; postmigrant societies	Considers how practices of art and hair care encourage the reimagination of belonging and kinship in transnational contexts
Materializing (Jallo)	material culture; matter; post-humanism; relational ontology	Explores the analytical potentials of new materialism frameworks to reveal the agency of (sacred) objects
Objecting (Müller)	Actor-Network theory; hardcore punk; (quasi-) objects; M. Serres	Draws on a US hardcore punk concert collective to unsettle modernist distinctions between humans and non-humans
Queering (Dankwa)	desire; erotic power; feminist ethnography; postcolonial intimacy	Examines the transformative potential of tenderness in a fieldwork encounter to decenter regimes of sexual categorization
Visualizing (Sobolieva)	participant observation; knowledge production; representation	Looks at Crimean Tatar art and prayer practices to interrogate the possibilities and limitations of visual representation in ethnography

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Student intervention 1

Deep listening also makes us a citizen of the world. The anthropological inquiry is not so different than being aware: compassionate, reflective. OR then: what is the difference [to other fields and/or life in society]? Anthropology may be not so much the study of the human, but a way of thinking and moving through the world. Is the position of the researcher really mattering? Are we not surrounded by acquaintances, friends, enemies, neighbors... It's interesting that anthropology is such a 'niche' field, not read outside of the discipline. ... Most of the time, when I reflect about the discipline, doing research sounds like living, living in a particular way.

Anonymous

Caring
Peter van Eeuwijk

Saadijah, the same-aged wife of Hasan (60 years), a Muslim tailor in Manado (North Sulawesi, Indonesia), runs her own banana business in her small kiosk and tries concurrently to take care of her diabetic, obese husband who recently suffered a renal failure. Hasan still works in his tailor shop for a few hours a day, but needs regular breaks and medication. From her kiosk nearby, Saadijah observes her husband. Their unmarried adult daughter, Karsum, works as secretary in a private company and takes over the responsibility for caring for her father after work, particularly for activities outside the home. Mother and daughter have established a kind of joint monitoring scheme. Yet, Saadijah feels very relieved when, in the afternoons, her daughter steps in.

In his small office in Arusha (Northeast Tanzania), widowed Albert (70 years) waits for his son for their weekly get-together, where they discuss any emergent problem, from health conditions to material needs. Life is relatively comfortable for him in this urban area; he owns a guesthouse with a restaurant, which ensures a certain income. His health has deteriorated recently, leading to minor but potentially concerning ailments such as hypertension, hearing loss and poor vision. Albert has no old-age pension; his son pays his health insurance, which covers regular consultations in a private hospital in town. The son and his family increasingly assist him in housework such as cleaning, doing the laundry and shopping. When the son is abroad, he sends remittances to his father and maintains a helpline by mobile phone. In addition, Albert counts on the support of his neighbors and members of his church congregation who pay him a visit on Sundays. He considers his son's caregiving as a filial duty of parental care; neglecting this duty would attract social disapproval.

These two snapshots of eldercare from Indonesia and Tanzania respectively illustrate some of the social fabric of giving and receiving care, and they vividly demonstrate some of the many roles and relations care imposes on and between people. Caring, these two examples show, has much to do with the negotiation of shared responsibilities, often carried out through intergenerational kinship ties. These arrangements bear potential of conflict over norms, rules, values, preferences, meanings, expectations, imaginations and politics.

Antropology as a gateway to caring

The term 'care' has gone through an amazing evolution in anthropology, from a narrow understanding of providing technical medical assistance and life-sustaining health action to a broad perspective of being deliberately concerned with a wide range of life-affecting conditions and processes. Notably, many tend to associate care primarily with support, aid, attention and understanding for and from their grandchildren, children, partner and spouse, or their parents and grandparents, thereby highlighting that these attitudes and practices of care are deeply rooted in genealogy and kinship. This conventional understanding is increasingly broadened, not least through ontological perspectives, prompting us to take better care of our climate, natural environment, water, energy resources, animals or the way we dispose of waste. Moreover, we care not only for but also about our social networks and personal relationships, skin, hair, food and, lastly, about material things such as our bicycle, mobile phone or coffee machine. This expansion of the concept of 'care' has, on the one hand, led to a certain terminological fuzziness and, on the other, it reveals the concept's overwhelming relationality and compatibility in terms of content.

Anthropology shaped several general modes of understanding practices of care and differentiated them

according to specific interpretations often related to anthropological schools and their respective theories (Thelen 2014; Drotbohm and Alber 2015; Ticktin 2019; Drotbohm 2022), for example:

- Caring as technical supportive action: tangible medical intervention and assistance in a critical and problematic (health) moment.
- Caring as social practice: emotional-affective assistance, social support, religious relief, material and financial backing, everyday help in the household and physical aid in a broader sense.
- Caring as cultural norm: rules, regulations, values, beliefs and canons as ideal societal conventions which govern care.
- Caring as human virtue: personal trait and individual characteristic of being concerned with other persons' vulnerability, disadvantage or impairment in an assisting manner.
- Caring as work: provision of direct physical aid, material assistance and social support as remunerated care activity, including transnational care chains.
- Caring as kinship: social meaning of kin and one's belonging to biological kin as care commitment and social construction of kin-like relatedness through care.
- Caring as life course: interdependent and cumulative process associated with human development from birth to death of becoming and being both caregiver and care receiver during one's life trajectory.

Building on the characteristics of care concepts illustrated in our snapshots, caring encompasses two fundamental movements of human existence: towards the other and towards the future (Kleinman and van der Geest 2009). The first dimension frames caring as a strictly relational

phenomenon: a person becomes a caregiver because one is in a relationship with a person who needs care (Kleinman 2009). In this context, care assumes that an individual interacts with other persons and has to be present among them. The second dimension of caring implies a distinct intentionality with regard to the future, reflecting an affirmative attitude of expectation and hope towards the other(s) as well as oneself. In this respect, caring is a basic human projection into the future, though shaped by past experience and present practices. This 'understanding of "care" as both a relational and temporal concept' (Eeuwijk 2016: 75) epitomizes what it means to become and be interrelated with a person in need of social, emotional, economic, material, psychological, religious and/or developmental support. In this broad anthropological sense, caring can be summarized as follows: 'In personal relationships people care *for* because they care *about* them' (Manderson and Block 2016: 205).

Caring as a gateway to anthropology

Caring prompts anthropologists to reflect differently and in novel ways on fundamental elements such as societal norms, cultural values, and social structures. For instance, the uncertainty and insecurity as well as fragility, volatility and plasticity in attitudes, roles and practices of care offer new perspectives – not only on genealogy as main driving force of caregiving, but also on temporality and chronicity as significant trajectories in a dynamic life course where (long-term) caring plays a crucial role. We speak, for example, of a 'chronification of uncertainty' in care relations, which challenges social and cultural conventions and articulates transformations and adaptations over time. Moreover, caring raises critical questions such as: How do anthropologists deal with the blurring of categories and the challenging of dualistic ascriptions such as invisible-visible, formal-informal, near-far, stable-volatile and

giving-receiving? How far can caring be negotiated and thus become both malleable and fragile without compromising genealogical norms and undermining rules of morality – thus possibly sparking anthropological debates about 'thinking in variety and alternatives'? How does the multifaceted landscape of care provide an entry point for understanding the interplay of dynamics of social, cultural, economic, ecological, political, material and scientific power and control in human relations shaped by inequality, insecurity – and hope?

Such questions position caring as both nexus and gateway, which leads to new avenues within anthropology. My research in Indonesia and Tanzania was strongly influenced by global models and concepts, as well as national development programs and strategies, which have an immediate impact on care configurations. Caring acts as a lens through which we can anthropologically and ethnographically examine massive transformations, as suggested by the following examples:

- Rapid demographic and epidemiological transition: How are these powerful quantitative developments perceived at household and community level? Or in other words: How is caring framed in a precarious Tanzanian household where two old persons with progressive chronic illnesses need intensive long-term care? How can good care be maintained under such circumstances?
- Introduction of formal social security schemes: What does it mean for a household when an older person receives a monthly pension (Tanzania) or has a state health insurance (Indonesia)? Does caring under such 'unequal' conditions lead to de-solidarization and de-kinning among younger generations?
- National ageing policy: When children, family, community, non-governmental organizations, private and public companies or the state become main

caregivers by law: How does such juridification of care impact social coherence and mutual dependence? Are such policies a door opener for the growing commodification of care and where do household and family locate themselves amidst the competing interests of a new care market?

Caring as doing

For a long time, anthropology has focused on caring with an almost exclusive view on caregivers and their care provision activities, and much less on care receivers, their wider social environment, and transformations within care relations. Particularly in the field of eldercare, medical anthropology has broadened its perspective on care-related vulnerability and resilience in old age.

Numerous studies from South and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa reveal that eldercare activities are centered on three main fields of care provision:

1. Daily domestic work (e.g., cooking, doing laundry, shopping).
2. Activities related to physical and mental illness and general frailty (e.g., bathing, feeding, buying and administering drugs).
3. Psycho-social counselling (e.g., chatting, consoling and entertaining, praying together).

Some care activities include intimate practices on the older individual's body. Gender norms and religious precepts largely regulate such extremely delicate contacts and restrict the conduct of sensitive practices by defining gendered and intergenerational boundaries.

The vast majority – up to three-quarters – of caregivers in the Global South are close relatives (i.e., spouse, child, grandchild, sibling) and only rarely include kin such as a

cousin or niece. In-laws, especially daughters-in-law, are admitted as co-caregivers; yet this support is often considered as being prone to tensions and therefore not really approved of by the core kin. The few non-kin care providers are partners, tenants, neighbors, close friends and salaried housemaids; generally, they provide care together with family members. In some urban middle- and upper-class households, professional carers are fully employed by a family with an older member in need of intensive care.

Caring is strongly shaped by gender. The majority of caregivers are female partners, wives, daughters or daughters-in-law, be they old or young, married or single, with or without children, in poor or in good health. By far the largest part of eldercare responsibilities falls to female family members (Niehof 2002).

The identification of emerging care burdens evolves from a closer look at the relational processes between caregiver, care receiver and their wider social environment and economic circumstances. These burdens comprise the following five aspects:

1. Physical burden: fatigue through daily, heavy bodily care work.
2. Economic burden: financial costs due to medication and curative and rehabilitative measures, special food and infrastructural adjustments, and loss of income.
3. Social burden: moral pressure and interpersonal tensions between carer and care recipient or among carers, including family and kin members because of divergent expectations, accusations, and rumors.
4. Psychological burden: emotional exhaustion due to hopelessness, despair or anger when confronted with the physical and mental deterioration of a close kin, and struggling to cope with suffering, dying and death.

5. Infrastructural burden: tensions due to restricted housing space, loss of privacy or costly housing modifications.

These five types of burdens distinctly show that care support has its limitations as to quantity and quality. Fatigue and exhaustion among the mainly female caregivers increase with duration and progressing severity of the affliction. Many care-related needs arise suddenly and allow no time for preparation by any of those involved. Most caregivers, moreover, question their own competence and capability to provide good care for a person in need. In most contexts, care is subject to negotiation and re-negotiation between potential caregivers, especially in long-term care where the burdens mentioned above gain influence when it comes to bargaining one's role, readiness and capability within a care assemblage.

This rather new perspective on the many burdens of caregivers illustrates that carers too, may become vulnerable to ill-health, emotional exhaustion, economic hardship and social isolation. Hence, any vulnerability experienced by a carer makes the care recipient even more vulnerable due to his/her dependence on that caregiving person: the relatedness of a vulnerable caregiver to a care receiver increases the latter's vulnerability (Eeuwijk 2020).

Medical anthropology as critical lens for caring

Caring is intrinsically related to health, illness, suffering, disability and medicine. Accordingly, medical anthropology has increasingly dealt with the subject of care as a new field of research. It provides an appropriate gateway to advance the multifaceted understandings of care and its rapid transformation in an ever-more globalized world. Therefore, Helman (2007) called for a major shift from cure to care as

a novel paradigm in medical anthropology as well as in all health-related sciences.

Besides the aforementioned aspects of work, emotions, social relatedness and cultural norms, new perspectives of care include features such as medical technology (e.g., life-sustaining machines such as blood dialysis apparatuses), specialized health professionals, robots as virtual domestic helping hands (e.g., robocare), pet animals and digitalized support (e.g., [new] communication tools such as mobile phones, internet-based artificial intelligence and social media applications) (Mol 2008; Mol et al. 2010). They all fulfil a fundamental human requirement: 'Care is active, it seeks to improve life' (Mol et al. 2010: 15). Moreover, Mol (2008: 1) frames care as 'activities such as washing, feeding or dressing wounds, that are done to make daily life more bearable'. In short, care affects our life in an immediate and ongoing way.

In caring, most actors become either caregivers or receivers in unpredictable and thus improvisational ways. Actually, in my studies in Indonesia and Tanzania, when asked about multiple uncertainties and insecurities, older persons mentioned the need for care as one of the most worrying and distressing issues, especially in the face of expected frailty and precarity. For older people, the quest for care undoubtedly receives priority when they reflect on their increasing vulnerability. However, medical anthropology shows that care is by no means strictly an issue for persons of advanced age: 'Care in later life never exclusively impacts the lives of the old' (Buch 2015: 277). A consideration of life course and intergenerational relations is as important as a view on intragenerational dynamics when trying to better understand caring as an inter-relational practice and its temporality.

Current research in medical anthropology advances new conceptualizations of care by looking closer at common knowledge on care. One meaningful issue concerns care

arrangement, that is, the engagement and disposition of active caregivers in relation to a person in need of support. As my cases in Indonesia and Tanzania show, we often come across a combination of inter- and intragenerational kin such as children and grandchildren (i.e., different generation) or spouse and siblings (i.e., same generation). This is due to an aggregation of growing burdens caused by higher life expectancy, growing economic hardships, changing gender relations and new health profiles (such as chronic diseases), which often require long-term care, and, concurrently, by smaller household units: under such rapidly changing conditions, one person alone is often unable to provide the required care. With a focus on eldercare arrangements in the Global South, contemporary medical anthropology research reviews and refines this issue as follows:

1. Conceptual shift from living arrangement to care assemblage: Household living arrangements have become an unreliable predictor of sustainable caregiving. Neither spatial nor social proximity guarantee care. Indeed, family members living in the same household may or may not provide care. Ahlin (2018: 85) rhetorically asks: 'Only near is dear?' Owing to its flexibility and variability, the term 'care assemblage' seem to be a more accurate marker of actual care provision. However, one also has to take the set-up and dynamics of care assemblages over time into closer account, for instance, with regard to visible/invisible, direct/indirect and part-time/professional caregivers and new digitalized care relations by information and communication technologies (e.g., mobile phones and remittances such as in the snapshot from Tanzania).
2. Elder-to-elder care: In a growing number of cases, the main carer is an aged household member (see the snapshot from Indonesia). This care assemblage is a

relatively invisible arrangement not least because (A) almost half of the older carers are wives (or sisters) looking after their frail, ill or disabled husbands (or brothers) and thus carry out tacitly their gendered caring practices in the domestic sphere, and (B) young caregivers who are usually actively socializing and interconnecting with persons in the public sphere are less involved. Eldercare provided by older people actually goes against the cultural norms of filial loyalty, partially transgresses religious conventions of child-parent mutuality, and questions the centrality of intergenerational familyhood. Yet, it is increasingly accepted due to the circumstances of economic hardship, intersubjective stress, constricted housing conditions, geographical separation and the burden of long-term care which is felt and borne by all generations. In sum, elder-to-elder care does not undermine the normative eldercare morality; it goes 'against convention, but [is] accepted!' (Eeuwijk 2016: 89).

3. De-kinning induced by care: Kinning through caring – that is the construction and reproduction of kin-like relatedness through everyday practices such as caregiving (Carsten 2000) – occurs in many care relations. At the same time, the many care burdens may also lead to de-kinning by care, namely if the caregivers' support reaches its limits, leading to a situation in which family members no longer provide moral, social, economic or physical assistance: 'The high burden of care can strain, even rupture kin relations' (Eeuwijk 2014: 41). De-kinning by care is thus both a process of dissolving and hiding kin relationships and an attitude of refusing, rejecting and boycotting care obligations.

4. Care-induced mobility: This novel issue was primarily triggered by the political economy of care which is caused by economic inequalities between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South', such as when women from South America are hired to provide cheap care for affluent Western European households (Baldassar et al. 2007). However, inter-household mobility caused by caregiving and receiving is not yet substantially researched. This mobility on the individual level raises the question of who moves in and who moves out in the context of providing and receiving care. For instance, an ill, older widow moves to a child's household or a child (with his/her family) moves in to his/her frail parents' household. This care-induced mobility happens by pure necessity, personal will or individual preference. Critical moments arise when it is continuously renegotiated or deliberately interrupted, disrupted or even rejected, and where ageing in place (i.e., residing without children) becomes a new living model for older parents, emphasizing their autonomy and independence as a new value.
5. Institutionalized in-/formal (elder-)care: The number of nursing and old peoples' homes as well as day-care centers in the (urban) Global South is gradually increasing. Many of these institutions are founded and managed by faith-based organizations. However, research on such institutionalized care has only just begun. First studies show that such homes for older persons – often aged widows – are considered as not conforming to the prevailing normative culture: older persons ought to be cared for by their children. The social consequence is that children lose control over their older parents and neglect their role as main caregiver which damages their reputation. Nevertheless,

a growing number of older persons provide informal non-kin-based and institutionalized care in the form of clubs, associations, self-help groups, non-governmental organizations, and run formal care institutions such as day-care centers. This kind of community support provides welcomed assistance by engaging older people and providing appropriate support, thereby expanding the social space of care without transgressing cultural boundaries of old-age care. Still, such in-/formal non-kin care in/by institutions cannot fully replace eldercare through family and kin.

6. Biological care citizenship: Based on the notion of biological citizenship (Rose and Novas 2005), this mode of citizenship is exclusively grounded in biological identity, which is defined by a particular illness, ageing impairment or disability. This social-biological fabric of care establishes new social institutions such as self-help groups or associations whose purpose is to provide more reliable and appropriate care for a specific disease (e.g., diabetes club, HIV/AIDS group, deaf persons' association), particularly in precarious health circumstances. Such biopolitical citizenship includes claims, rights and ethical projects as well as duties and responsibilities (e.g., rigid adherence). However, it has not yet been explored how such governance of individual bodies conforms to prevailing notions of care assemblage, care morality and, hence, of good care.

The critical lens of medical anthropology sheds light only recently on the issue of power in caring. Hereby, two topics gain importance: (A) the omnipresence of power dynamics in every care relationship, and (B) the growing impact of biomedicalization and its controlling power over caring. The mode, quantity and quality of provided care heavily depend on the exchange process of giving and receiving –

and also withholding and refusing (A). Here, meaningful power is usually exerted through control: controlling while giving and receiving. This occurs between professional and layperson, caregiver and care receiver, healthy and ill, female and male, young and old and wealthy and destitute persons. Power in care through biomedicalization including pharmaceuticalization is closely linked to Foucault's notion of biopower (1976): power that exerts an influence on life, that aims to control, optimize and extend it, subjecting it to strict control and comprehensive regulation (B). Thus, lay caregivers and care recipients both increasingly become the target of biomedicine with the aim of making them comply with biomedical standards when providing as well as receiving care. Hence, the biomedicalization of care employs moral obligation, social pressure, hegemonic scientific knowledge and state body politics to control care receivers by disciplining his/her (lay) caregiver as the main provider of such authoritative (professional) medicine (Brijnath and Manderson 2008; Eeuwijk 2007).

Caring at the crossroads of anthropology

Anthropology provides tools to examine caring as social practice across various contexts, whether the natural environment, the material or the human body: we understand a society better when we know the structures, processes and mechanisms that enable and shape care for specific phenomena. Besides, anthropological concerns with care raise basic questions such as: Who cares for whom and who refuses to provide care? Who does not receive care and who rejects it, and what are reasons for that? What constitutes good care and what does it not include? The exploration of the granular level of care offers a more intimate and broader insight into how social life around care is organized and structured.

Care sharpens the anthropological focus on the intersections between change, continuity, fragility and volatility in a normative, context-specific setting, where powerful transformative programs and policies shape social institutions of care. This requires the convergence of a view 'from below and from above', which anthropology fosters.

Care is not only good to think with, but also to speak with: humans tell stories about care with their body and mind. These narratives epitomize the pervasive nexus of culture and biology which is inherently embodied in acts of care. Anthropology, positioned at these crossroads, engages with the political, economic and material realities, imaginations and articulations which shape new understandings of actual and virtual modes of caring. Yet, at this junction, new conceptualizations of care encounter the antagonistic, but also complementary, characteristics of care: hope and despair, empathy and insensibility, solidarity and self-interest, security and uncertainty, as well as autonomy and dependence.

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Student intervention 2 & 3

I can't really answer the question of what exactly anthropology is in connection with my studies. Before university, my knowledge of this subject was very meager; I associated anthropology with general human studies. Who/what are humans and why do they do what, how, when and where. I am very interested in these questions in cultural anthropology. However, up to this point in my studies I have rarely or never talked about the concept of anthropology. The concept of culture, on the other hand, is being discussed to death. ... One thought ... [is] stuck strongly in my mind. It's about the question of perspective, and how the researcher is received (or not received) in the field. What if I wanted to do exactly this kind of field research? Would I be able to draw similar conclusions?

Alana Kaeslin

How does one find a balance between authentic documentation and academic reconstruction? How does one reach a compromise with oneself as to where this threshold should best be? All questions that entangle me in an endless spiral and are impossible to put into words.

Nicolas De Simone

Dancing
Lesley Nicole Braun

To speak or write about dance is to grapple with the ephemeral; the object of study by its definition is always in motion. The subtle nuances of its shapeshifting form and the personal and collective experiences it evokes elude precise description. It is thought that prior to the advent of written language, dance served as a crucial medium for the transmission of narratives, communicated nonverbally, across generations.

Widely regarded as the oldest of creative expressions, dance resonates in archaeological vestiges dating back millennia. In the rock shelters found in Bhimbetka, India, paintings dated to 9,000 years ago depict early impressions of dancing, while Egyptian tomb paintings from around 3300 BC feature material renderings of human figures in motion.

Unlike many other art forms, dance does not require advanced technology; its primary tool is the human body itself. Intrinsic to it is the confluence of creator and means of expression, where the dancer serves as the instrument of artistic articulation. W.B. Yeats' poem (1927) points to the ways in which the expression and the dancer are so closely merged: 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' This sentiment finds an echo among artists and scholars like in Maya Deren's exploration in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), where the boundaries between the individual and the divine blur as dancing voodoo practitioners are 'ridden' by the gods. In both instances, the performer becomes an inseparable part of the expression, illustrating how, in dance, the performer and the observer can co-create a synchronous understanding of symbolism and aesthetics.

Dance's ability to evade categorization contributes to its potency and a foundational grasp of basic vocabulary and theories can therefore provide a framework for navigating

its complexities. I will discuss a few potential lessons that dance imparts, drawing from a few anthropologists who have significantly contributed to this field, pioneering theories of embodiment, performance and cultural representation. These offer insights into the significance of dance within societies, illuminating how movement – from nationally sponsored ballet to vernacular forms of urban choreography – transcends mere physicality to become a potent vehicle for nonverbal expression and dialogue. Dance is integrated into significant communal events such as births, funerals, weddings and wars. It acts as a conduit for transmitting moral values, religious traditions and societal norms; it can channel emotions like grief and foster communal cooperation during times of strife or labor.

Congolese rumba

We might better clarify the elusive subject of dance anthropology by imagining the practically bottomless depths of cultural meaning that can be carried in a single dance tradition. During my graduate studies, I encountered Congolese rumba music and its associated dances – patterns of bodily movement that, well beyond their catchy, club-friendly musical accompaniment, reveal patterns of history, migration and political control. In exploring the trajectory of the Congolese rumba, we can simultaneously accomplish a précis of scholarly methods.

Music and dance go hand-in-hand, each enhancing and amplifying the impact of the other. Cuban rumba developed in the 19th century from encounters between slaves from West and Central Africa who encountered one another in the new world. There, they were exposed to European music which involved partner dance like the quadrille. Cuban rumba music, which had been circulating in the Americas due to the advent of new vinyl technology, made its way

to the Congo sometime in the early 1930s (Stewart 2000). Greek merchants arriving at the docks of Congo's port of Matadi would play vinyl records, featuring popular rumba music of the day. When Congolese dock workers listened to these albums, they recognized the irregular yet familiar clave percussive beat from the ancestral music of their natal villages. Deeply inspired by this music, Congolese rumba emerged from this rhythmic recognition and blended with new rhythms of urban life. By the 1950s, many African countries on the verge of independence were dancing to these rhythms. Congolese rumba music, now recognized by UNESCO as part of the country's intangible heritage, has gained significant international acclaim. This recognition has propelled its presence in the global concert industry, leading to international tours and performances that celebrate and share Congolese cultural heritage with audiences worldwide.

The concert dancer and visibility

Just as in many countries around the world, the music industry in Congo faces challenges due to the absence of piracy laws and the limited purchasing power of its audience, resulting in minimal profit for musicians from the sales of cassettes or CDs. Consequently, the economic success of popular bands largely depends on their live performances. Given the critical role of stage shows in a band's longevity, considerable effort is invested in making these public spectacles appealing to a broad audience. Since the early 1990s, there has been a surge in the use of dancers by popular bands to amplify the on-stage spectacle. Concerts are now considered incomplete without the dynamic presence of women dancers, or *danseuses*, who wear revealing costumes and take center stage.

Danseuses perform during select songs, typically appearing in the second half, known as the *seben*, when the music becomes particularly energetic, or what people call 'hot'. A

crucial element in the success of a concert is the inclusion of women dancers. Popular bands employ these dancers for music videos and live shows, providing a visual enhancement to the song lyrics.

The influence of concert dancers has extended beyond Congo, popularizing new choreographies and inspiring people worldwide to celebrate through movement. A band's hit songs are often paired with specific choreography, and these songs frequently gain popularity due to an associated dance craze. Featured in music videos and performed at concerts, dance moves quickly become all the rage among people from Kinshasa, who then replicate them in other social gatherings.

During my fieldwork between 2008 and 2014, I spent a significant amount of time with popular concert bands and established friendships with several *danseuses* who performed with a popular band that tours internationally. This engagement led to my monograph, *Congo's Dancers: Women and Work in Kinshasa* (2014). During this time, several bands invited me to rehearse and perform with them multiple times a week. I navigated through training, striving to learn the routines. My primary focus was not to become a professional dancer but to spend time with the dancers, cultivate relationships and gain a deeper understanding of the work these young women dedicated themselves to. Every ethnographer seeks cultural intimacy, and I pursued this through the sensuousness of dance, mirrored back to me through my own participation.

Danseuses, with very few exceptions, come from very poor neighborhoods in Kinshasa, where mastering one's own body, rather than an instrument, is all that is needed to join a band. The majority of the *danseuses* I interacted with came from large families of more than six children, lived in their family's home, spoke limited French (a marker of education), and

had attended only a few years of primary school. Encouraged by their families to find ways of independently earning their own pocket money, joining a band became an incentive for many young women. As Léon Tsbambu (2009) has described, dance became a new possibility to climb the social ladder and change one's social status. I would add here that it is the public visibility that permits dancers to gain access to a broader social network, and thus increase their social capital.

Danseuses demonstrate a level of artistry that is not shared by the average Kinois woman. Simply put, not just anybody can become a *danseuse*. If she is going to be hired by a band, she must have dance ability and musicality, and as we will see later, she must often have a contact within the band. This talent is first cultivated at home, only later to be refined once a young woman joins a concert band. Young women sometimes begin to dance as majorettes in church and at weddings; however, the majority of dancers I spoke to told me that they honed their abilities at home. Regardless of talent, dancers, to a large degree, are considered replaceable, unless they achieve a level of popularity in which the public knows their names. Because of this, there is a lot of mobility of dancers between groups, and even genres of dance. A young woman may begin to dance with a small, unknown band, increasing her skill and familiarizing herself with the lifestyle and performance schedule, only to later leave and join a more famous band. Other dancers might begin their careers with a popular orchestra, later switching to a folkloric group that performs at funerals and weddings.

Some *danseuses* like Cuisse de Poulet (a stage name that literally translates as 'Chicken Thigh'), are aware of how far their influence has reached:

> We *danseuses* are stars in Europe. We represent Kinshasa. Kinois living in *poto* [abroad] watch us dance because they miss Kinshasa. We make them feel at home again. People

> know my name, and they study the way I move. Some girls try to do what I do, and copy my flavor. When I have children one day, they will know that their mother was famous.

Beyond contributing significantly to the spectacle and economic success of a band, the role of the *danseuse* extends far beyond mere ornamentation. Because they dedicate their days to mastering choreography, their dancing abilities far exceed those of most women in Kinshasa. As one young schoolgirl told me, 'The *danseuses* on television dance really well because they were born with talent. Some are not so good, but they are definitely better than your average person. I know they must work very hard and practice a lot.'

Werrason, one of Kinshasa's most popular bands, hosts a weekly show where band rehearsals take the form of an informal concert open to the public. Many people tune into the show specifically to see the *danseuses* perform the latest dances. Young girls stand in front of their televisions, mimicking the *danseuses*' movements and committing them to memory.

At concerts, it is common to see spectators filming the show with cameras and cellphones. Images of *danseuses* circulate on people's phones – their virtuosic displays captured on video to be appreciated later by those who missed the concert. These captured moments have found new life on TikTok, where vintage dance footage has become a celebration of past performers, preserving their artistry and honouring their legacy for new generations (see image 1). Moreover, *danseuses* continue to captivate audiences as their performances enter the virtual space, transmitted through the tiny screens of people's phones. The widespread access to technology, especially cellphones, has led to new conceptions of visibility, particularly women's visibility.

Muscle memory

People act as builders who lay the foundations and erect the social frameworks that connect individuals. Consequently, the physical body itself becomes a site of construction. Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, for example, have highlighted the importance of bodily aesthetic practices among Congolese urban men and women, such as bodybuilding and hair braiding (2004: 237). Dance, in a similar vein, operates not by altering the body's form, but by working with it, utilizing movement and choreography to express and embody new configurations.

Most people in Kinshasa possesses a vast repertoire of popular dances. Just as pop songs from a particular era become the soundtrack of people's lives, dance steps can serve as a kind of time capsule. Old dance choreography evokes memories of the past, bringing a sense of nostalgia, especially when people come together to perform these older moves. For example, it is not uncommon to hear someone say, 'When I dance the *kwassa kwassa*, it reminds me of the time I went to a nightclub with my very first boyfriend', or, 'When people dance *kisanola*, it brings back memories of the war in the east of the country.'

Upon entering most nightclubs in Kinshasa, regardless of neighbourhood, the first thing to catch one's eye will invariably be the mirrors, which in Lingala are called *tala tala*. In the darkness illuminated by strobe lights and neon décor, the mirrors lining the walls almost disorient. The effect they create is transportive and spatial, making the club seem larger than it really is. Since one is met with their own reflection everywhere, it becomes difficult to resist the temptation of consulting one's appearance. Of course, mirrors are not an uncommon nightclub ornamentation around the world, but it is perhaps how people interact with them that makes the Congolese context more unique.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a TikTok video featuring dancers with Wenge Musica (Werrason), concert at the Zenith de Paris in 2002. @archives_congolaises (Nov 8, 2022). Part 22: *Les danseuses de Werrason au Zénith de Paris en 2002*. https://www.tiktok.com/@archives_congolaises/video/7163553378734312710

Beyond mere ornament, nightclub mirrors allow for men and women to see themselves dance. When a popular song is played, the entire club will make their way towards the mirrors, jockeying for a position to ensure good visibility. One evening, I watched a group of club-goers take over the entire dance floor to perform a choreography made popular by Congolese hit songs (see image 2).

Figure 2: Mirror dancing in a bar in Bandal, Kinshasa, DRC. Photo by author, 2016.

Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster describes how dance has the potential to unlock memory that resides in ephemeral and often invisible realms. Dancers in cross-cultural contexts frequently refer to muscle memory, the capacity for memories to be stored in and evoked by movement and musculature. These memories can be personal and psychological, or they can reference cultural and historical experiences (Foster 2010: 122). In this way, popular dance serves as a kind of kinetic popular history, encompassing personal experiences and signs where intimacy – as a culturally specific complex of ideas, feelings, and practices – is deeply embedded (Cowan 1990: 4).

Dance as a tool of statecraft

Congolese Rumba dance became famous across the African continent, to the extent that postcolonial heads of state instrumentalized it for their own purposes. This state logic followed that of colonialist governments – and before them, European missionaries – who had often, conversely, sought to suppress indigenous dance traditions, branding them as licentious or distracting from the bourgeois values they were imposing. Recognizing its potency, both external and internal societal powers often attempt to control dance to maintain or challenge the status quo. Indeed, dance can be an integral part of broader nation-building projects, serving as a form of commemoration and embodied knowledge, reflecting and preserving heritage.

Mobutu Sese Seko, a long-reigning dictator, ruling the region now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo between 1965-1997, produced a complex legacy, including the introduction of various initiatives aimed at revitalizing the country's precolonial heritage and fostering a renewed sense of African identity on both national and international fronts. One such initiative, rooted in Léopold Senghor's *Négritude* philosophy and launched in the 1970s (when the country was renamed Zaïre), was termed *authenticité*. This program highlighted what Mobutu considered the nation's greatest asset: dance performance.

Mobutu's commitment to his particular vision of cultural revival was perhaps most clearly articulated in an official speech where he proclaimed: 'A people is truly happy when they can express what lies in their hearts through song and dance.' Inspired by the elaborate political dance spectacles he observed during visits to China and North Korea, Mobutu sought to introduce a similar, yet distinctly 'African' version. The program, known as *animation culturelle et politique*, curated dances from the country's diverse regions to create

Figure 3: Still from archival footage of the televised *animation politique* featured in Michèle Magema's *Oyé Oyé*. By Michelle Magema 2002 © 2021, ProLitteris, Zurich.

a public expression reflective of the postcolonial nation-state. Women chosen to perform in televised and live events were called *animatrices* and danced in rows wearing colorful printed textiles known as *pagnes*, which were decreed by the state as the 'traditional' attire for women (Braun 2020). Male choreographers were employed to stylize village dances from across the country, adapting them for televised formats. In these grand formations of dancing women, performers sang songs to honor the nation. Moreover, this gendered division of labor within such events raises another set of pregnant questions. Some of which include: the instrumentalization of women's bodies and notions of visibility associated with performers.

The incorporation of Congolese rumba's rhythms within nationalistic media events illustrates how dance can forge a sense of visceral collectivity in the modern world. Dancing can create powerful liminal phases – transitional periods in which participants temporarily transcend conventional social structures. Victor Turner, an anthropologist known for his research of ritual in central Africa, extensively explored the concept of communitas, which describes the sense of

solidarity and equality evoked by such liminal phases (1969). As an epistemic tool, communitas further elaborates merely observational description of dance to grasp its capacity to create emotional or spiritual experiences and spaces where more unitary or egalitarian identities can briefly emerge. While we must be careful not to conflate an authoritarian television event with the religious rituals that first informed theories of liminality, the anthropologist can note that both entail a careful sequencing of movement that open spaces of exception.

Defining the field

Dance anthropology began to evolve when researchers realized that dance is not just a set of movements to be recorded or stored, but a lively and socially connected activity. For example, simply documenting the movements of Congolese rumba misses its role in cultural exchange across the Atlantic and its importance in courtship, family bonding, and creating shared memories. In 1928, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard highlighted the tendency within ethnographic accounts to relegate dance to marginalia and pioneered methodologies to ascertain its expansive role in quotidian life – its social function. Much later, the author William Benzon, would continue this functionalist approach in his book *Beethoven's Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture* (2001). He posits that the complex coordination required to make music and dance together played a foundational role in the development of larger social groups. He argues that the synchronized brain activity generated during musical and dance activities transcends individual brains, creating a shared experience that fosters social cohesion and cooperation. This collective synchronization, Benzon argues, was crucial in the formation of early human societies.

Building on the so-called functionalist approach, later scholars emphasized not merely dance's mirroring of norms and values but its capacity to serve as a motor for social change, both representative and transformative of the culture from which it emerges. For instance, Congolese rumba became popular not merely because it reflected elements of the 'traditional' musical past, but because of its new cosmopolitanism, made possible through access to new instruments, music and ways of life in urban centers. Dance assumes new dimensions through migration, both literally, as dance itself migrates – crossing borderers, blending traditions and innovations in a constant stylistic evolution – and metaphorically, as people migrate across landscapes – their movement expressing personal histories and aspirations.

Dance anthropology crystallized as a distinct scholarly field in the 1960s and 1970s yet confronted a fundamental challenge: the very definition of dance across diverse cultures. Adrienne Kaeppler's 1985 study of 'structured movement systems' in Tonga elucidated the cultural relativity of the concept of 'dance', indicating that in certain societies the term itself may not exist, complicating discussions around its conceptualization. Another pioneer in the field was Katherine Dunham, who interrogated her own positionality as a member of the African diaspora studying Voodoo rituals in Haiti. Her *Island Possessed* (1969) is a rich dance ethnography in which her own participation in the dances she studied revealed more general principles of insider-outsider dynamics.

Understanding the meaning behind movement necessitates engaging directly with practitioners and participants. This approach allows for a nuanced comprehension of the cultural significance that transcends mere physical gestures. In dance anthropology, participant observation involves immersing oneself in the dance practices of the community being studied. This method ventures beyond observation,

requiring the researcher to actively engage with the dance forms, often learning and performing the steps themselves. By participating at various levels, from novice to experienced dancer, the anthropologist gains a deeper understanding of the embodied knowledge and cultural nuances that are often invisible to an outside observer. Through this immersive approach, the researcher experiences the physicality and emotional resonance of dance firsthand, enriching their comprehension of its cultural significance.

Scholars have been refining the rubrics that provide more methodological consistency when approaching dance. Deidre Sklar (2000), for example, offered a step-by-step technique by which observers of dance could carefully sequence its various meanings and balance their immersive experience with clear analytical structure. Taken together, this body of literature reminds us that as we listen to the rhythms of a Congolese rumba and perhaps even step into a Kinshasa club to dance to it, it behooves us to remain aware of the fluidity of its forms, our own preconceptions and the care with which we record our perceptions.

Online visibility

The emergence of social media platforms has catalyzed a significant shift in the dissemination and consumption of dance content. Dance, once confined to physical spaces, now proliferates across the digital landscape, traversing geographical boundaries at an unprecedented pace. In this digital ecosystem, dancers and choreographers leverage online platforms to amplify their visibility and reach. The increased access of video sharing enables dancers to not only showcase their talents but also monetize their performances through various means. For instance, dancers who accrue a level of visibility sometimes go on to offer international workshops, flying into dance studios where they give

specialized workshops to paying students. They may also work towards developing corporate sponsorships. As a result, the online sphere has become a bustling marketplace for dance culture, where influences and trends spread rapidly across global networks.

As the Congolese rumba emerged from the percussive echoes of vestigial villages sounding across oceans and in urban spaces, the diffusion of African dance now continues in widening circles. One example of this phenomenon is the intersection of African and Chinese cultures through the popularization of Afrodance or Afrobeat in China. This can be a slippery umbrella term that includes popular musical expressions from all over the African continent. Joining the ranks of trending dances in China, the main styles of African inspired dance are marketed under the name *feizhou liuxing wu* (African popular dance). Despite media narratives often framing these cultures as diametrically opposed, the popularity of this musical dance genre in Chinese urban centers challenges conventional perceptions. For over half a decade, young people in China have eagerly embraced Afrodance, attending classes taught by young Africans living there. These encounters in the dance studio facilitate cultural exchange and mutual understanding, yet they also risk perpetuating stereotypes and exoticization (Rautio and Braun forthcoming).

Hélène Neveu Kringelbach's (2015) explorations of dancing cultures in West Africa expanded the academic discourse by examining how dance intersects with tourism, migration and market dynamics, further enriching our comprehension of its roles within society. Her examination of the Senegalese national ballet theorized that its roots as a mid-20th century postcolonial statist project – not unlike Mobutu's efforts to institutionalize dance, constructing a museum of collective muscle-memory – grew in tandem with

the commodification of dance. As the Senegalese ballet toured the world, it blended a neoliberal form of branding with nationalist goals. Today's prospective dance anthropologist, observing how a medium such as TikTok – itself a curious blend of techno-capitalist innovation and geopolitical tool – carries constantly evolving forms of African dance, might well employ such a perspective to consider the latent cultural meaning of the latest viral choreography.

Amidst this digital landscape, the act of watching dance on video transcends mere entertainment; it underscores the significance of embodied expression. Bodies in motion convey narratives, emotions and cultural identities, shaping our understanding of the world and fostering connections across diverse communities.

Coda

Dance, with its ephemeral and non-verbal essence, illuminates the holistic discipline of anthropology by exemplifying the overlapping dynamics of history, economics, migration, political currents and memory making. Musical expressions like Congolese rumba reveal patterns of cultural exchange and social structures, offering insights into the lived experiences of communities. Through the rhythmic sway and intricate steps of dance, anthropologists uncover a reservoir of cultural memory and non-verbal communication, where moral values, religious traditions and societal norms are transmitted across generations. Dance, as an embodied performance, underscores the importance of corporeality in anthropological study, revealing how individuals navigate and negotiate their identities within their cultural milieus. Through this kinetic expression, anthropologists can gain deeper insights into how individuals convey their experiences, emotions and social bonds, thus enriching our understandings of each other.

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Student intervention 4

Sometimes, when I have to deal with a complex concept that I have not actually understood entirely although I grasped its basic meaning, I have an image of that concept in mind or perhaps rather a sort of three-dimensional building that seems to correspond quite well to its real counterpart. Of course, it is not necessarily very detailed and there are some corners of that image respectively building that are more vague and obscure. Nevertheless, seen on the whole, my understanding of that concept fits the one others have and more importantly, it suits its context. However, if I then start digging deeper into that domain, I soon have to realize that this entire construction is just collapsing in front of my eyes. This is not necessarily due to the fact that there was something incorrect about my understanding but rather that my tiny building as a metaphor of my thinking of the complex concept was in fact nothing more than a small shed in an entire village, in a whole world. That is why it had to collapse to make space for something more comprehensive exploring new territories. ... I am now left with a pile of stones that are waiting for me to being put one on top of the other to form a new building of my understanding of anthropology. One day, that new building may collapse again – I even hope so. Nonetheless, it should fill out this vast space offered by anthropology in a more voluminous way while still having some spare bricks to extend some parts later on.

Louis Zünd

Hustling
Michael Stasik

What is the goal of anthropology? There are many ways to approach this question, some of which are sketched in the introduction to this issue. Instead of trying to give a direct response, I will here take a different path by exploring two of anthropology's key tenets: ethnography and concepts. To refine our opening question: What is the goal of ethnography in relation to concepts?

Alex Golub (2012) identifies two approaches to dealing with concepts encountered during fieldwork. The first involves fitting the concept into an existing framework, often one rooted in Western social thought. For example, the Māori concept of *hau* – which Marcel Mauss famously describes as the 'spirit of the gift' where the receiver of the gift is bound by the spirit of the donor to reciprocate – can be understood as a form of exchange in societies without money. In this case, the concept is translated into English (or another dominant language) and then made to fit within a larger and already established theoretical framework (i.e., that of exchange in societies with/without money).

The second approach resists this easy assimilation. Instead, it seeks to elevate the unique, sometimes elusive, perhaps even untranslatable meanings and resonances of the concept – not to conform to existing theoretical frameworks but to trouble them. Rather than fitting the Māori *hau* into established theories of exchange, the idea of the 'spirit of the gift' becomes a way to question and challenge those frameworks. In a prominent reading, for example, persons and objects are imagined not as independent entities but as co-constituted through the relationship of gift giving. This approach is central to ethnographic theory, a form of theorizing from and with ethnography, and one that questions the classical (and

problematic) separation between ethnography as description and theory as explanation (for an elaboration of this topic, see Nader 2011).

This second approach sees concepts as potentially unruly, capable of disrupting dominant assumptions to foster new ways of thinking and imagining the world. It is to the generative potential of this unruliness, particularly in ethnographic concepts, that I want to draw attention in this contribution. To do so, I turn to the concept of *hustle*, as emerging from my ethnographic work in urban West Africa. As I will show, hustle is an ambiguous and eminently unruly concept. Its various localized uses make it especially effective for questioning established social science frameworks, particularly those interpreting lives and livelihoods in contexts of so-called 'informality'.

I ask: What are concepts? How are they formed and reshaped? What do they enable us to understand? And how do they relate to ethnography and theory? In closing, I compare how some of my research participants invoke the concept of hustle with how ethnographic theory deals with concepts – both of which, I suggest, demonstrate a constitute drive toward unruliness, characterized by a resistance to closure.

Toilet boy hustle

Let me begin by introducing you to a group of West African migrants I worked with during my fieldwork in Ghana, for whom the concept of hustle holds particular significance. The members of the group call themselves toilet boy hustlers, a name that both reflects and contrasts key aspects of their social and economic realities with their self-positioning. The 'toilet' part of their name refers to their precarious living arrangement – sleeping behind a public toilet near Accra's central market, where I first met them. The term 'boy' highlights their status in relation to

normative ideas of masculinity. Similar to the 'plastic boys' in Kenya, described by George Paul Meiu (2020), this label suggests an anticipatory, hopeful stance towards their future transformation into men. Their description of themselves as 'hustlers' is, in part, influenced by their admiration for US rap music, as seen in the prominent tattoos some of the group members have, often done through collective efforts. The hustle signifier also presents an articulation of their marginal role that simultaneously embraces and transcends that very role. I will elaborate on the significance and broader context of this idea below.

The toilet boy hustlers are a loosely organized group of mostly young, exclusively male foreigners, largely from francophone countries, who work in menial jobs around the market, primarily as carriers and sometimes as watchmen or cleaners. Their bond is largely shaped by shared experiences of alterity with their Ghanaian hosts, reinforced by their lack of local language skills. In conversations, they emphasized economic reasons as their principal motivation for coming to Ghana, combined with a youthful drive for adventure (*l'aventure*) and aspirations for self-reliance, embodying the desire to achieve a mature and elevated status and become proper 'men' upon return.

Tales of a triumphant return were a recurring theme among the toilet boy hustlers. During my fieldwork, I recorded many of their tales about future successes. These stories described the beauty, number and even names of the wives they would marry; the wealth they would amass, displayed through the houses they would build and the cars they would drive; and the respect they would command through titles like '*monsieur*', '*le grand monsieur*' or simply '*le grand*'. While these stories certainly leaned toward boasting, they were not mere escapist fantasies. Beneath the exaggeration, they reflected normative expectations about maturation and growth – expressing

desires for material security, marriage, household formation and moral demands for personal worth.

The position from which the toilet boy hustlers expressed these aspirations made them seem distant and unattainable. Their migrant status and homelessness left them vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, violence, hunger and disease. These structural disadvantages also thwarted their everyday efforts to secure better housing and better-paying work. As a result, there was a significant gap between their imagined futures and the harsh reality of their economic and existential distress.

However, the toilet boy hustlers did not deny this gap. This became especially clear during a conversation I had with Narcisse, a young migrant-hustler from Togo. When I asked him about his chances of achieving his goals, his brief response was: none. When I pressed further, pointing out the detailed visions of future prosperity he, like others, had shared, he compared his past life in Togo with his current hustle in Ghana. In Togo, he explained, he knew how his life would unfold, and this knowledge meant that he could never achieve his goals. By moving to Ghana and entering the hustle, he left that certainty behind, embracing the open-ended possibilities that came with it.

For Narcisse, uncertainty is preferable to the relative certainty of knowing that his goals will not be achieved. Migration, as a step into the unknown, becomes the source of this uncertainty, with hustle serving as its expression and social form. Narcisse and the other toilet boy hustlers recognize that their migration may ultimately not lead to wealth or high social status. However, the likelihood of achieving their dreams is less important than their ability to imagine a different future and maintain a sense of possible alternatives.

The distinction between pursuing a dream and preserving the capacity to dream is subtle but crucial to understanding

how the toilet boy hustlers navigate life and its hardships. Their embrace of indeterminacy – expressed through the concept of hustle – demonstrates a determination to keep possibilities open, both in life and in their vision of what life could become. As I will argue, the orientation behind the toilet boys' understanding of hustle offers a compelling example of the power of ethnographic concepts, which similarly resist closure.

Moving beyond 'informality'

Keeping this embrace of indeterminacy in mind, how can we understand the social position of the toilet boy hustlers in relation to their self-identification? Their economically marginal standing, particularly reflected in the 'toilet boys' of their name, might readily be interpreted through the widely used framework of 'informality', encompassing related concepts like the 'informal sector', 'informal economy', 'informal livelihoods' and even 'informal lives'. These terms have been instrumental in describing the opportunities and constraints faced by many of my West African interlocutors.

Informality is commonly defined as economic activities that take place outside formal institutional structures, such as (state) bureaucracy and taxation. Curiously, the concept was first introduced into academic debate by anthropologists Keith Hart (1973) and quickly gained traction among scholars and development specialists. However, it also became subject to critique. The list of problematic aspects of the informality concept is extensive (for a summary, see Rosaldo 2021). These include its tendency to homogenize and stigmatize, portraying the urban and working poor as an amorphous mass; its reliance on the state's gaze, rigidly distinguishing between self-organized (informal) and bureaucratically-organized (formal) economic activities; and its normative binary classifications, which often represents the 'informal' as

marginal, secondary or shadowy, contrasted against the norm of formality.

From an anthropological perspective, one of the most problematic aspects of the informality concept is that it operates as a negative qualifier, defining the urban and working poor by what they *lack* rather than by what they *do*. It fails to convey, in any substantial way, a sense about what is actually happening in these supposed negative spaces of informal conduct and lives, such as Accra's market area, where the toilet boy hustlers carve out a living.

Calls to move beyond the informality framework emphasize the need for more situated articulations, ones that prioritize how people themselves describe their ways of making a life (Thieme et al. 2021). Understanding the significance of these articulations requires attention to what Hart (2009), in his later critique of the informality concept, refers to as the 'social forms' that shape how people imagine and pursue a good life, both economically and otherwise (see also de L'Estoile 2014).

This brings us back to the imaginative possibilities offered by the concept of hustle and to the resistance to closure that the toilet boy hustlers express through their adoption of the term. What happens when we view such a situated articulation of existence and striving not as a disguised expression of economic distress, but as something meaningful and substantive in its own right? Can hustle lead us to a different understanding of existence amidst fraught and uncertain life chances? Could it even serve as a theory of its own?

Before answering these questions and ultimately returning to the opening question of anthropology's goals, I will first explore the broader relevance of the notion of hustle by tracing some of the social and historical relationships that underpin the toilet boys' use of it.

A genealogy of hustle

The term 'hustle' originally comes from the Dutch word *husselen*, meaning to toss, shake or push roughly. In the eighteenth century, it entered American English, where its meaning expanded to include working busily or moving quickly (as a verb) and a bustling or hurried scene (as a noun), as in 'hustle and bustle'. As the notion travelled west, it adapted to describe the harsh realities of life on the American frontier, capturing the ad hoc ways of making a living, often bordered on illegality, through moonlighting (today's 'side hustle'), gambling, and trading drugs, sex or stolen goods.

In the Jim Crow era, hustling also became associated with the experiences of black Americans, reflecting the racialized struggle against systemic inequalities. In this context, hustle reflected not only economic hardship but also the strength and ingenuity needed to get by. This dual meaning – of hardship and hardiness – folded into the more contemporary understanding of hustling, especially within a street culture of Afro-American youth. Hustling in this sense refers to savvy and sometimes illicit ways of making money, negotiating *and* transcending the constraints of structural violence in North America's black ghettos (Wacquant 1998), as exalted in rap music and associated movies. This image of the US hustle resonates with the toilet boy hustlers, who have adopted some of its aesthetics, as reflected in their tattoos.

It was likely through the global reach of US rap culture that the term acquired wider currency as a culturally significant concept across Africa, predominantly in urban areas. African youth, in particular, embraced hustle to articulate practices and attitudes of smartness, toughness and endurance in the face of uncertain livelihoods. It was also through the youth's adoption of it that Africanist anthropologists began using it as a lens to explore how people both embrace and resist

marginalization, inequality and economic adversity (e.g., Di Nunzio 2019).

In urban African contexts, the term hustle became somewhat detached from its association with crime, emphasizing instead its juxtaposition of harsh circumstances and shrewd resourcefulness. John Chernoff's programmatic book title *Hustling Is Not Stealing* (2003) nicely underscores this shift, although related practices may still involve activities that are socially considered illicit. Viewing hustling from the perspective of existential anthropology, Hans Lucht highlights an important dimension: the 'existential imperative to make more out of this life than what has been given' (2015: 122). Although hustling is rooted in survival, it also involves a productive engagement with and mastering of the world. While many 'hustle from "nothing"', as one of Lucht's interlocutors put it (109), most do not expect to hustle *for* nothing. As the toilet boy hustlers' stories of future success demonstrate, their hustle is about more than economic survival – it is also, perhaps primarily, about sustaining the possibility of alternatives, of imagining something more.

For the toilet boy hustlers, as for many other West African migrants I met, the aspiration for social mobility is often tied to geographic mobility. In contemporary West Africa, hustling and migration have become closely linked. Paolo Gaibazzi (2018: 477) notes that the hustler is 'typically a hardworking, honest, and dynamic man who ventures away from his homeland in search of the means to support his family and to realize himself as a self-reliant man.' (This applies to female migrant-hustlers as well; see Bredeloup 2014.) This understanding of hustle – rooted in hard work, perseverance and mobility – resonates with the toilet boy hustlers, casting hustle as a space where they navigate their present struggles while keeping the work of imagination viable and alive.

Having explored some the meanings and resonances in the toilet boys' use of 'hustle', I now turn to a discussion of the nature and generative potential of concepts – in both social situations and their anthropological engagement through ethnography. I focus specifically on their capacity to resist closure and invite new ways of imaging lives and worlds.

Roaming about, conceptually

What is a concept? At its most basic, a concept is an idea that helps us represent reality and, through these representations, gain a grasp on that reality. Concepts allow us to grasp reality in different ways and can be categorized into different types. Some are more directly tied to our experiences and material objects, like *table*, *window* or *river*. Others are more abstract, for example those referring to emotions (e.g. *happiness*), conditions (*uncertainty*), relationships (*employment*) or situations (*encounter*).

A classical view suggests that concepts are encapsulated in definitions. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, concepts are the 'building blocks of thoughts' (Margolis and Laurence 2023). These 'blocks' consist of distinct properties, which philosophers aim to identify and refine through analytical rigor. This view posits concepts as robust structures, with thoughts cast into a concrete architecture that provides us with a secure foundation for grasping reality. When philosophers ask, 'What is happiness?', they step back from reality to distill the concept's essence into a set of defining properties. Once refined, the concept is placed back onto reality, where it hovers in some metaphysical constancy, transcending any particular use or context.

In anthropology, however, the view and use of concepts can be quite different, especially among anthropologists who resist easy assimilations, as described earlier. One way to outline this difference is by considering the social life of

concepts, a perspective I borrow from the volume *Living with Concepts* (Brandel and Motta 2021). Seeing concepts as if they lead social lives emphasizes their embeddedness in human relations and how they evolve through people's attempts to engage with their manifestations. Unlike the solidified definitions of philosophers, these engagements are rarely analytically rigorous. Instead, they unfold in people's messy interactions with the abundance of life, where concepts are cast into the complexity of subjective, often idiosyncratic interpretations through which people make sense of realities.

This dynamic view lends itself to a life-course perspective on concepts: how they are born, grow, mature and gain in vitality; how they age, lose vitality and sometimes die or resurrect; and how, throughout their lifetime progression, they travel, circulate and adapt to different contexts, forming alliances with some concepts while keeping distance from others, much like living entities. Veena Das (2021: 104) expands on this mobility, suggesting that 'a concept is not simply capturing what is there, but might be thought of as roaming in the space of possibilities.'

Embracing the notion of roaming, which suggests a meandering, allows for an open-ended engagement with the 'endless and endlessly fragile constructions of worlds' (Puett 2021: 194). This engagement – driven by imagination, speculation and serendipity – does not aim to solidify our relationship with and grasp of reality through a stable, closed systems of thought. Instead, it facilitates the destabilization and decentering of certain entrenched assumptions, creating opportunities to pluralize and expand conceptions of the world. In anthropological practice, this openness is foundationally realized through fieldwork and ethnography – practices which themselves can be imagined as roaming in different spaces of possibility where concepts are revealed, transformed, elevated and propelled forward.

That said, it is important not to romanticize the anthropological work with concepts. Many foundational concepts in anthropology, such as religion, reciprocity and kinship, are entangled with problematic histories and often emerged from dubious sources like the colonial archive and Christianity (Brandel and Motta 2021: 1). Shedding their Western ethnocentric imprint is an ongoing challenge. Even with concepts encountered during fieldwork, the question remains: Do we treat them merely as interesting, perhaps 'exotic' artifacts to be translated and assimilated into existing frameworks? In so doing, they may enter into mummified existences, akin to a sealed collection of butterflies displayed for academic scrutiny. Or, do we recognize the imaginative and interpretative power these concepts possess in their own right, and seek to elevate them to convey a sense of the experiences and sense-making of the people we engage with in ethnographic encounters?

This distinction echoes earlier debates in anthropology concerning the epistemological value of the insider's perspective versus the outsider's perspective, with the former labelled 'emic' and the latter 'etic' (for a summary of the debates, see Mostowlansky and Rota 2020). Proponents of the etic approach would mobilize generalized frameworks to compare and classify observed behavior, including local concepts. An emic approach, by contrast, seeks to understand and describe the standpoints and conceptualizations of interlocutors. While the binary distinction has lost traction in anthropology's analytical vocabulary, it remains present in research design differentiation between (emic) data and (etic) theory.

Problematizing this differentiation, Tom Boellstorff develops what he calls 'emic theory': framing theory and the concepts that feed into it 'as emerging from both "within" and "without"' (2010: 218) – a form of dialogical concept generation across scales of life and analysis. Mirroring the

precepts of ethnographic theory, Boellstorff's emic theory treats concepts encountered during fieldwork 'as sources of theoretical insight, not just "data" narrowly defined' (220). Rather than merely translating and categorizing local ideas to assimilate them into existing, academically privileged frameworks, these ideas – along with their meanings and resonances – are elevated into vehicles for theoretical intervention and innovation, remedies for troubling established thinking.

Resisting closure

To bring the discussion full circle, let me return to the toilet boy hustlers and emphasize two points regarding their quest of indeterminacy – both of which align with my discussion of the inherent unruliness of ethnographic concepts. These points also guide me toward an answer to the opening question about the goals of anthropology.

First, consider the significance of the multiplicity inherent in the toilet boys' use of hustle. Drawn from the term's highly mobile and transformative history, their invocations of hustle encompass a variety of meanings: livelihood strategies; aspirations for social and geographical mobility; assertions of courage and presence; adherence to moral and aesthetic codes; as well as critiques of and resistance to structural marginalization. By embracing this multiplicity, the toilet boys embrace hustle as an eminently dynamic concept, one that enables them to roam within different spaces of possibility. This indeterminacy is crucial, as it allows them to navigate present hardships while keeping alive the potential for reimagining their futures.

In much the same vein, anthropology's engagement with ethnographic concepts can open up diverse spaces of possibility. Rather than pinning concepts down to stabilize our understanding of the world or merely stocking up the

inventory of emic concepts as 'data', we should recognize their mobility, adaptability and transformative potential. Concepts, much like those used by the toilet boy hustlers, are not static. They interact with cultural and structural forces, evolving as they move through different social contexts. In treating concepts as living, moving and adaptable, anthropology holds a privileged position for opening up the world to new forms of knowledge and thought, especially when it resists easy assimilations. Ethnographic and emic theory can push our thinking beyond conventional categories, pluralizing our ways of imagining the world.

Second, fostering this dynamic and open-ended engagement with concepts from fieldwork encounters requires resisting the urge to resolve ambiguity and claim certainty in our engagements with social worlds. The toilet boy hustlers' persistence beyond their current limitations is rooted in their capacity to imagine the world otherwise, demonstrating what I previously framed as their resistance to closure. Likewise, in anthropology, there is great value in embracing ambiguity, leaving space for the unexpected and the as-yet-unimagined. Rather than constructing a rigid, stable architecture of thought, what I referred to as the philosopher's 'building blocks', anthropology thrives on the mobility of imagination and thought. Ethnographic fieldwork allows for this flexibility, even provoking it, enabling a roaming through and revealing of the abundance of life and the possibilities it affords – which may also be very close to answering the question of anthropology's goals.

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Student intervention 5 & 6

I probably need to listen more and say less. But what happens if I say less? Will my fire die slowly? Will my love for my people fade out and disappear? Well, the question here is who I want to be in that space?

Elisa Valentina da Costa Policarpo

Today 'anthropology' means diversity and imperfection for me. All the people visiting this seminar would have entirely different fieldwork experiences and thus different results – even if we studied the exact same phenomenon and the exact same circumstances.

Noelle

Infrastructuring

Jon Schubert

Why would anthropologists be interested in infrastructure? There are a number of compelling reasons why infrastructures can be – and should be – an object of ethnographic inquiry.

Consider this: are you commuting to university or work by public transport? If so, what are the sociotechnical arrangements that make that possible? Think of the SBB '*Taktfahrplan*' (fixed-interval timetable) that makes efficient and reliable connections possible; think of the app you are using on your phone to pay for your trip on the go; but think also of how any new line and station brings new publics into being. Connection to a serviced train, S-Bahn (regional commuter rail line) or metro line can make a town, village or neighborhood's fortunes. Conversely, disconnection from a line will often be justified by a drop in demand (or the construction of a faster, more efficient line elsewhere) but can spell the slow death of a village or township's futures.

Railways are, of course, perhaps the prime example of what we think of as 'infrastructure nations' – Jo Guldi, for example, argues that, in the 19th century, Britain became one of the first modern nations through an extensive project of roads and highways – and that this connectivity between cities in the British Isles not only stimulated industry and trade, but also transformed the relationships among the population, and became a powerful channel for trade unions, and for other radical and dissenting movements (Guldi 2012). And interestingly, although in Britain, as in Switzerland, many of the first railway lines were initially private ventures, the state played a key role in licensing, unifying and setting standards, to the extent that the idea that states mediate between citizens and infrastructure has become totally naturalized since the 19th century. Beyond their centrality to imaginaries of

modernity and progress, railways were a tangible instrument of imperial expansion, especially in Africa and Asia (Miescher 2012). Railway corporations in the US, dealing with the managerial, financial and technical challenges of creating a continent-wide network, also instrumentally transformed the nature of capitalism: not only did they introduce innovations like a single rail gauge, nationally delimited, discrete time zones, and standardized accounting practices, the separation of ownership and management also allowed for the raising of funds at the New York bonds market that superseded individual investment capacities (Karayannides 2021).

Now consider another, more recent example, this time from my own research in Lobito, a secondary port town on the Atlantic coast of Angola. Here, Chinese-built gantry cranes loom above the port walls and dominate the small concrete colonial business district. They are not the only new installations at the port. As Engineer Barros, one of the port's technical managers explained to me, the Port of Lobito now had state of the art equipment:

> First, the old port quays of 1,122m in total were rehabilitated, with a depth of 8 to 12 meters. Then the new container terminal w 414m of quays and 14.7m of depth. It has 15ha of storage space and new cranes: a multivalent crane, two STS (ship-to-shore) cranes, 4 RTGs, that's those on wheels, Rubber-Tire-Gantry-Crane. And 2 RMGs, Rail-Mounted-Gantry-Cranes. These ... can move more than 250,000 TEU per year (Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit, or the standard container measurement).

Although the engineer mentioned that business was currently slow, he failed to mention that, in addition of there being almost no cargo coming in, the little work there was being carried out by the single multimodal crane. The dry port was empty, and the new Chinese cranes were all standing still because after

Figure 1: Porto do Lobito, photo by author (2019).

their installation it became clear that they were not adapted to the unreliable Angolan power grid, that there were no spares for maintenance, and that the port was waiting for a Chinese crew of technicians to come back and put the cranes back in working order. The new minerals terminal, equipped to handle 3.6 million tons of bulk minerals per year, had never been used: although the Benguela Railway line that links the port of Lobito to the Angolan highlands and to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo had also been rehabilitated, the bulk mineral exports from the mining heartlands of Katanga and the Zambian Copperbelt had so far failed to materialize.

This was the ethnographic puzzle for my 2018-21 research project, *The Afterlives of Oil-Backed Infrastructures* (Schubert 2020, 2022): What happens to the lives of people who live in the shadow of such seemingly failed infrastructures? I thought, when I started the project – and I still think – that this provides an interesting entry point to ask questions, such as: Why was so much money invested in rebuilding infrastructures that currently do not seem to work as planned? Or more broadly: What is the history and social life of these

infrastructures? How do these infrastructures materialize the commodity crisis? How do people depending on the ports deal with an economic downturn, and what kinds of affects does the 'failure' of these grand socio-economic projects generate? Are these failures also productive, and of what?

Why infrastructures?

Four interconnected aspects of infrastructures are, in my view, the ones we need to talk about and keep in mind: infrastructures as sites of state power and state violence; infrastructures as assemblages of publics; infrastructures as sites of desire; infrastructures as sites of claim-making, critique, contestations and negotiations. But before I do that, let us briefly ask: why this interest in infrastructures? What does a focus on infrastructures help us do?

When we think of infrastructures, we commonly think of something tangible, concrete, built – a road, a railway, a power grid, pipes, etc. But the term *infra-structure* also points to what subtends this tangible thing, and the considerable work that is necessary to produce this – the regulatory, legal and financial conditions, the social relations that both produce and that are brought into being by infrastructure. Designating something as infrastructure is then, both politically and for us, epistemologically, an ordering act. Infrastructure is a form of calculative reason that slots space and time into a narrative of progress, modernity and development, and organizes society's experiences, expectations and discourses into what are considered the proper relationships to, and between, government, the state, the economy, technology and development (Carse 2017; Hetherington 2014). In that sense, for anthropologists, infrastructure is a method: Looking at social relationships through infrastructure can reveal what counts and what is counted by whom, for what designated purposes and with what (unplanned) outcomes.

This offers a way to pull these disparate actors and power relations into a shared analytical framework and apprehend the relationships between them in a novel way. Bear this in mind as we go forward and look at these four aspects I flagged.

Infrastructures as sites of state power

Infrastructural projects are the physical manifestations of forms of political and economic power and control. This is especially the case in Africa, where historically, major infrastructural projects to facilitate connections with the wider world (roads, railroads, ports) were often emblematic for colonialism (Freed 2010). Any historical map of Africa will show you rail lines from hinterland to coast, serving extractivism, not internal connections or the population – and these patterns, laid down by colonial and imperial powers, shape the provision of (transport) infrastructures until today (on roads as power, see also Ficek 2016; Khalili 2017).

This is certainly the case with the Benguela Railway, or CFB, by its Portuguese acronym, that I have been studying in and around Lobito. From its earliest days, the CFB and the connected port were geared towards the need of colonial extractive capitalism, to provide a reliable, fast and cost-effective way of transporting African raw minerals to the industrial heartlands of Europe. Angola's two other colonial-era railway lines replicate this logic: the Luanda Railway (CFM) links the capital Luanda on the Atlantic coast north of Benguela to Malanje and the diamond-producing Lunda-provinces; the Moçâmedes Railway (CFM) connects the fishing town of Namibe, on the southern coast, to the granite quarries and cattle-ranching highlands of Huíla. Neither the colonial power nor the current government, however, ever had much interest in creating a north-south connection between these three lines, despite semi-regular vague statements of intention.

Figure 2: Angola and its rail lines, drawing by author, adapted from Open Street Maps.

Mozambique's rail network, on the Eastern, Indian Ocean coast of Africa, presents a mirror image, with three coast-to-hinterland lines but no north-south connection between them. This pattern is evident in other ex-colonies across Africa, too, where all railway lines were built for export and lead down to the sea (Rodney 2018: 251).

Consider, too, the Cahora Bassa Dam in Mozambique, built by the Portuguese during the last years of colonial rule (from 1965 to 1974) – at the time, the world's fifth largest dam. Colonial, socialist and now neoliberal governments have made the dam central to their development plans,

promising progress and modernity – but in practice not serving the Mozambican people but selling cheap energy to neighboring South Africa, thus perpetuating infrastructural dependencies installed during colonialism (Isaacman 2021).

Nowadays, large infrastructure projects are indicative of the aspirations of developmental regimes (Linke 2006) and old and new South-South economic partnerships (Bräutigam and Tang 2011; Hönke, Cezne and Yang 2023). The famous TAZARA Railway that links Tanzania and Zambia is a good example: built in the 1960s with Chinese assistance it has been redeveloped and privatized in the 2010s, again with Chinese investment and know-how.

One of the ways we can think of infrastructures is then as technologies of government. Primarily aimed to facilitate the circulation of people and things, infrastructures also allowed states to separate culture from nature, the technical from the political and the nonhuman from the human (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018). This is a classical move, which we also know from the critical study of development, i.e. framing something as a technical problem that needs to be addressed with rational, scientific, managerial means is a way of depoliticizing the issue (Murray Li 2007). So, throughout most of the 19th and 20th century, infrastructure management was a technical problem, which, once solved, would allow 'free' subjects to participate in economic and civic life.

Thinking with and through infrastructures can help reveal state-society relations, and how certain categories of people are framed, managed or in the extreme case, left to live or die. We can think of more obvious technologies of control and discipline for this: Basel's old, now torn down prison, *Schällemätteli*, which stood at the site of where today the University's *Biozentrum* rises, would be the most obvious example of an infrastructure as a technology of control – a 19th century-style panopticon, designed to mold people's

bodies into a specific form of discipline, with the very layout of the prison corridors designed to promote a certain kind of conduct among inmates. Yet infrastructures more broadly – the provision of roads, electricity, sewage, e.g. – are central to the work of government: a technology for 'modern states' to demonstrate progress, modernity and development, giving these categories' aesthetics, form and substance (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018).

Infrastructures also serve as a technology to differentiate between populations (and even subject some to death): All over the world cities stand as built proof of how urban segregation is produced by differentiated access to infrastructure (Caldeira 2000). Or if we take Nikhil Anand's work on Mumbai (Anand 2012), an ethnography that looks at how engineers, political fixers, slum dwellers, politicians, activists and bureaucrats are pulled into a shared field through the problem of water supply. Anand shows how Muslim settlers in a northern suburb are being rendered abject residents of the city. Abjection is, in his reading, not a lack of social and political entitlements, but a denial of them through the withholding of infrastructure provision.

As 'Muslim settlers are being *pushed down* to claim less desirable water through the deliberate inaction of city engineers and technocrats' (Anand 2012: 487; emph. in original), the tenuous water connections between the government and its subjects produce what Anand calls 'hydraulic citizenship' – reading pressure and differentiated access to piped water as an index of citizenship. In a similar vein, Dean Chahim looks at the management of flooding in Mexico City, and how sanitation engineers 'calibrate' water levels in the rainwater ducts to keep them within what populations will bear – and how those thresholds are evidently mediated by social class in the city (Chahim 2022). And in Russia's aggression on Ukraine, infrastructures become strategic targets, mnemonic projects and sites of rebuilding everyday normality in war (KSE Urban Studies Collective 2024).

Infrastructures as assemblages of publics

Another thing to bear in mind here are the shifts in the way infrastructures are funded, from the era of railway barons to infrastructure as a public good in the era of the welfare state and the New Deal back to a vehicle of investment. As the dominant form of organizing the economy and society has gradually shifted to what we commonly term a neoliberal regime, so has the investment in infrastructures.

Overall, we could say that in the 20th century, governments across the globe played a central part in funding, constructing, managing and regulating infrastructures as public goods (for purposes both of development and control). Today, however, the role of 'public infrastructure' is being recast and called into question (Collier, Mizes and Schnitzler 2016). Technological advances, the preponderance of financialized capital, and the spatial reordering of infrastructures pose new problems about the links between established forms of political collectivities and infrastructures.

What are the infrastructures that are necessary to ensure the continued flow of capitals and goods? In the Global South we can observe a game of catching up and 'closing the infrastructure gap', a flurry of investments, often based on private foreign investment, and carried out by private, foreign firms. In the Global North, at the same time, we see the post-Keynesian rollback of the welfare state, and the concomitant disinvestment from public infrastructure.

One of the ideas to keep in mind from the previous section is that of infrastructures as a technology of government that produces populations and publics. However, rather than understanding infrastructures as systems serving a preconstituted public, we might think about what new publics are brought together by 'the materiality of infrastructural connections, the spatiality of infrastructural flows, and the definition of technical standards' (Collier, Mizes and Schnitzler 2016).

Of course, the point is not that material, spatial and technical stuff directly and causally determines publics. Public infrastructures arise from social negotiation processes, and we can ask a number of questions about these: Who are the intended beneficiaries? How are these infrastructures financed? What kind of actors do they pull together into a common field of action? We need to ask about the politics of distribution, and the populations formed through practices of measurement and accounting (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018). Publics are constituted through, or impeded by, infrastructural processes (along a motorway or a metro line, e.g. Maqsood and Sajjad 2021). A lot of work, for example, has been done on US car cities, and how the expansion of freeways into cities deliberately destroyed public spaces and access to amenities for Black neighborhoods, by the same token accelerating white flight and suburbanization.

A second important aspect is the interplay of spatial and temporal dimensions: the spatial one is a bit more obvious, as many if not most infrastructures connect stuff – people, places, goods, services. But infrastructures mediate not only space but also time: as Kregg Hetherington writes, a 'salient feature of infrastructure is the way that it divides the built landscape into temporal priorities to be slotted into a promising narrative of progress' (2014: 196).

Infrastructures enable certain kinds of social time, while foreclosing others. In the contemporary world, this means chiefly space-time compression, i.e. the possibility to do 'real-time' financial transactions from one part of the world to another. This includes what we commonly understand as global logistics, and the promises of 'just-in-time fulfilment'. What are the infrastructural conditions that made 'globalization' possible (Chu et al. 2020; Schubert 2021)?

This highlights a very obvious point about infrastructures – when we are talking about infrastructures we are not just

talking about physical, concrete stuff, but about a bundle or *assemblage* of things, people, processes, and sub-tending technologies, laws, regulations, logics, financial and digital architectures that make an infrastructure and bring it into being: infrastructures are a process rather than just a thing. This is where ethnography, with its attention to process and everyday practice, can play a central role: in unraveling the contingencies and surface 'thingness' of infrastructure. Infrastructuring, as it were, serves as a method to draw together the disparate actors and things that assemble around it.

And that processual understanding of infrastructure directs our attention to two things – one is their materiality: the resistances, bottlenecks and obstacles presented by stuff (think of the challenge of laying a subsea fiber-optic cable, for example, or of electricity provision in many parts of Africa). How do we think the material affordances of infrastructures in combination (or assemblage) with the immaterial/social? And, if we think, for example, about unequal water provision and how certain, marginalized urban communities are exposed to contaminated drinking water, how does the physical, material presence of infrastructures shape and act upon the body, or press into the flesh?

The second is the substantial amount of work that goes into creating, reproducing and maintaining infrastructures. Thinking about temporality also forces us to think about histories of planning, cycles of maintenance and repair, and stories of failure and decay. How does the social life of infrastructures change over time?

Infrastructures as sites of desire

Having sketched out how infrastructures manifest state power and assemble social relationships in different ways, think back to the example of the Cahora Bassa Dam, and how that dam is used to signify development, modernity, etc. to

different publics. One of the key ways in which we can think about infrastructures as anthropologists is to think about what they communicate, what social desires they encode, or what Anand, Gupta and Appel (2018) call 'the promise of infrastructure'. This means thinking their material and their symbolic dimensions together.

Brian Larkin, who worked on radio in Nigeria, calls this the 'poetics of infrastructure' (2013). What aspirations, hopes and desires of a society, its people and its leaders do infrastructures signify? Visions of development, aspirations to modernity – or in Larkin's slightly more complex terms:

> Infrastructures also exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning, and they need to be analyzed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees. They emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function (2013: 329).

Architectural renderings of shiny new city centers and new centralities are one example of how infrastructures project dreams and desires. They encode visions of Dubai modernity and World Class cities, but also, for example, of eco-cities – infrastructural fixes that promise modernity and comfort despite the climate crisis, without having to actually reduce consumption or address the root causes of overconsumption and oil-dependency.

Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, looking at a highway being constructed in the Peruvian Andes, write of the 'enchantments of infrastructure', suggesting that the new road makes three promises to its addressees: speed, political integration and economic connectivity (Harvey and Knox 2015). But none of these promises is simply fulfilled in a straightforward way; rather, they chafe against the realities of travel, of discrimination and of histories of marginalization

in the Andean Highlands. And they coexist, in sometimes awkward ways, with older built manifestations of past economic boom-and-bust cycles.

Or, again on roads, the Puertorican anthropologist Rosa Ficek analyses the Pan-American Highway

> by focusing on interactions among engineers, government officials, manufacturers, auto enthusiasts, and road promoters from the United States and Latin America. [Her article] considers how the Pan-American Highway was made by projects to extend U.S. influence in Latin America but also by Latin American nationalist and regionalist projects that put forward alternative ideas about social and cultural difference – and cooperation – across the Americas... (2016: 129)

To quote Larkin again:

> Roads and railways are not just technical objects then but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire ... The political effects of these projects cannot be simply read off from their surfaces. They generate complicated emotional investments that induce a range of sometimes counterintuitive responses and distinct, if ephemeral sensibilities. (2013: 334)

Infrastructures often overflow the semiotic frame drawn up by grand government designs. As such, the final aspect of infrastructures I would like you to consider, and which is linked to the previous ones, obviously, is how:

Infrastructures are sites of claim-making

Because they bring together new publics, intended or unintended, and because they encode both government designs and popular desires, infrastructures become a prime site for political contestation. Especially in contexts where

governments or corporations stake their legitimacy on delivering on promises made via the medium of infrastructures, these can become a fertile terrain to make claims.

For example: why has the installation of prepaid water and electricity meters in poorer parts of Soweto been met with recurring violent protests since the early 2000s? Starting from this question, Antina von Schnitzler pulls people, ideology, administrative procedures, legal regulation and infrastructures into a common analytical framework of 'techno-politics' (2016). Unearthing how the material intransigencies of the apartheid regime resonate and shape citizen subjectivities in the democratic, post-apartheid present makes these service delivery protests intelligible as political action. Conversely, in Idalina Baptista's research on prepaid meters in Maputo, Mozambique, respondents shared a sense of empowerment and agency in the face of an unreliable and distrusted service provider (2019). Another example, from my own field site: In 2018, Angolans protested on social media against overall poor conditions in the capital Luanda – uncollected rubbish, neighborhoods submerged by rainfall, and crumbling roads. They posted pictures of themselves lying down as if dead, with their heads buried in mounds of refuse or submerged in puddles of stagnant water, with the hashtag #acabademematar (just finish me off already).

For Rosalind Fredericks, working with rubbish collectors and sorters on Dakar's main dump, protests and other means of collective action 'are the flip side of the performative mode of infrastructure' (2018: 131) that I discussed in the section above: infrastructures provide a fertile terrain for social actors who live with and through them to subvert the grand promises that were drawn up by them. Again: infrastructures are bound up with longer histories, and mediate state-citizen relations, through which service infrastructures emerge as political terrain for claims to citizenship, to a 'modern', dignified life etc.

Conclusion

In sum, because infrastructures as sociotechnical arrangements subtend our contemporary lifeworlds, they provide us with a privileged lens to trace, reveal and rethink what is the core preoccupation of anthropology: how people live in relation to each other in the world, and the meanings they give to their existence. From global economic and power relations to intimate practices of inhabiting, infrastructures thus become a means to assemble and dissect social life across scale and time.

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Student intervention 7 & 8

Overall quite every social aspect in this world can be explored within anthropology – we saw so many sessions during this lecture on different anthropological fields. One thing in common that stuck to me is the 'process-ness' of every day happenings. Every construct, every system is flowing, never-ending and dynamic – nothing is forever and stuck in one moment or time which for me is kind of hopeful in many ways and holds much power.

Leandra

I realized why anthropology in general but also in concrete might be such a relational and therefore relativistic science. ... Phillip Descola's definition of ethnography as concrete practice, ethnology as gathering and generalizing ethnographies and anthropology as abstract thinking about human lives bears on my mind.

Benedikt Mayer

Inheriting

George Paul Meiu

> We are bound to numerous ancestors about which we know nothing, through a loyalty whose force we can only imagine. We have in ourselves the memory of deeds that we do not know, but which we have embodied and integrated...
>
> Barbara Couvert

It all started with a story and a hand-scribbled inscription I spotted in the attic of my childhood home in the village of Vlădeni, Brașov county, Romania. To start with: the story. In 2013, I asked Uncle, my grandfather's elder brother, if he still remembered his paternal grandmother (my second great-grandmother), Susana Meiu. As I write, her portrait, the only image I have of her, hangs in front of me: bright eyes, an upright posture, a stern demeanor (Fig. 1). She must have been in her late teens when this portrait was made; the style of her hairdo and dress (including the beads) suggesting she was yet unmarried. Drawn in charcoal, the portrait must be from the early 1890s. I found it in the attic of our house nearly a century later, in 1995. My own grandma did not know who the woman in the portrait was. Grandma had married into this household in 1954 and did not care much about learning who my grandfather's ancestors had been. But Uncle, who himself had grown up in this household (before he married out), remembered her, if only vaguely. He was four years old, when Susana, his grandmother, died. But, throughout his childhood, her portrait continued to hang in the room facing the street – the house's 'good room', as it were.

'She was a kind woman', Uncle recalled. 'As children, we'd run away and do silly things. But she would never punish us or pull our ears.' Uncle paused to think. There did not seem

Figure 1: Susana Meiu (1875 - 1936).

to be much else to remember. Suddenly, like in a flash, he recalled that, after Susana's first husband (his grandfather) had died, she had remarried. She then brought her new husband into her late husband's household, where she had been living with her two teenage sons. Sometimes in the late 1920s, Uncle said, Susana's second husband hung himself. His suicide had been a family secret. Uncle found out about it by accident. One day, while Uncle was still a child, his father (my great grandfather) fought a man in the village pub

after he had unabashedly insulted him with a set of rather mysterious words: 'Gheorghe', the man said, 'your oxen got fat from the hanged man's twine.' (Romanian [henceforth, R.]: *Bă Gheorghe, ți s-au îngrășat boii din ața spânzuratului*.)

I had neither heard this phrase before nor fully understood why it had been insulting. I asked Uncle to explain. Tanti Reveca, Uncle's witty wife, who was listening in on our conversation jumped in to explain it herself: 'It's like saying that you got rich off the hanged man, that you profited from him. It's as if the hanged man continues to water your oxen.' There appear to be at least two layers of meaning to this phrase. First, a metaphysical one: the phrase posits the hanged man as continuing somehow to toil for the living. This echoes the Greek Orthodox belief that people who commit suicide do not pass easily into the other world, being left to roam in the *in-between*. Hence, the bodies of those who commit suicide are often not received in the church and are not buried in the cemetery, but on its edges or even outside it. Second, there is a more literal connotation to this phrase: 'to have one's oxen get fat through the hanged man's twine' can also mean 'to become rich by profiting from the deceased'; that is, by appropriating his wealth in a rather illegitimate way. Legitimate inheritance was not profiteering. So, in this instance, it might have been the particular kinship relationship *step*father–*step*son that the expression highlighted as problematic.

But what about the twine (R: *ață*)? Why not the hangman's rope or noose (R: *frânghie*; *sfoară*)? In Romanian, thread or twine can be used metaphorically to suggest the idea of 'course', 'flow' and 'continuity'. Grandma, for example, used to say that 'life is like a ball of twine, when the twine runs out, life ends, no matter where you are or what you do'. In the phrase 'to fatten one's oxen off someone's twine', the twine can then stand for two kinds of 'courses': first, the concrete vertical intergenerational kinship relationship

through which inheritance descends; a line of genealogical continuity. Second, it can also be an indirect allusion to the 'course' (vertical fall) of the hanging rope as an instrument of suicide. Gheorghe's inheritance was thus morally suspicious because of the nature of his relation to his stepfather *and* the latter's problematic death.

Uncle did not know why this man hung himself; nor, for that matter, what his name had been. He heard there might have been fights between him and his wife. All he knew was that he had hung himself in the barn. My own grandma later recalled vaguely having heard *something* about *some* hanging, in hushed voices, from her in-laws. This had been a secret that had not been spoken about openly among them. But, while she did not know much about it, Grandma asserted rather categorically that the hanging had happened in an older barn, not in the one we currently had, which had been built in the old one's place. Was she thus trying to distance us from this event in the family's past? Was she seeking to rhetorically cleanse and rebuild – as with the proverbial barn – the legitimacy of our genealogy and inheritance?

Some background is necessary here. From the late nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth, in our village, several principles of kinship, gender and residence shaped how property was passed down across generations. First, if a family's land holdings constituted what anthropologists call 'partible inheritance' (inheritance that can be divided amongst the family's offspring), the homestead (including the house) represented 'impartible inheritance': only one offspring could inherit it, along with the duty to care for the parents in their old age. For example, my grandfather inherited the house, while Uncle, his brother, married out, and Grandma married in. Similarly, two generations prior, my second great grandfather inherited the same household from his father, while his sister married out, and Susana, the woman in

Figure 2: A name and a year scribled in the plaster of an attic wall.

the portrait, married in. Things become more complex, as we shall see, when Susan marries her second husband who moves into her first husband's household.

Second, while last names were passed down patrilineally (through fathers), so-called 'homestead names' (R: *poreclă pe curte*) were passed down through either men or women, depending on who continued to live in the parental home. Hence, houses constituted a competing and complementary line of kinship and descent, being often even more important to social reproduction than patrilineal descent through last names (Because the village was endogamous – people married within it – last names repeated themselves often, while household names were unique, hence they were the ultimate social identifiers.)

Third, women played a central role in the reproduction and transmission of homestead wealth. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in Vlădeni, women often far outlived men. As widows and mothers, they played a very important role in keeping together and augmenting

household wealth, as a way to solidify relationships with and between their offspring. Such reproductive work also entailed, at times, taking on second husbands or carrying for elderly, childless relatives to then transfer their wealth (upon their death) to that of their own homesteads. Something similar happened with Susana and her second husband.

In summer 2013, rearranging things in the attic, I discovered a name and a year inscribed on the wall separating the roofs of the older and the newer house buildings (Fig. 2). Before my grandparents had built the extension in the 1960s, that wall had faced outside, towards the courtyard. On it, was the inscription *Neculaiu Stăniloe 1925* written in an elongated script that resembled the handwriting of a primary school pupil or of someone without much school education. At first, I did not recognize the name. I knew that, at least since 1820, this household had been in the Meiu family. It was also unlikely that construction workers would sign their names in the plaster of a house they helped build. Typically, it was the name of the person with whose money the house had been built that appeared scribbled on its façade. A few years later, while doing research at the State Archives in Brașov, I found this Neculaiu Stăniloae had been indeed the man to whom my second great-grandmother Susana had remarried (on January 29th, 1912), a year and a half after her first husband's death (Fig. 3).

The year the house was completed – the year next to Neculaiu's name – is also relevant here. In 1925, my great-grandfather, Gheorghe Meiu, was twenty-five years old and was probably getting ready to marry. At that time, Susana, Gheorghe's mother, had already been married for thirteen years to Neculaiu, Gheorghe's stepfather. Because Neculaiu married in the household that Susana and her sons had inherited from Susana's first husband, it is very likely that Neculaiu (who appears to have not been previously married) sold his own house,

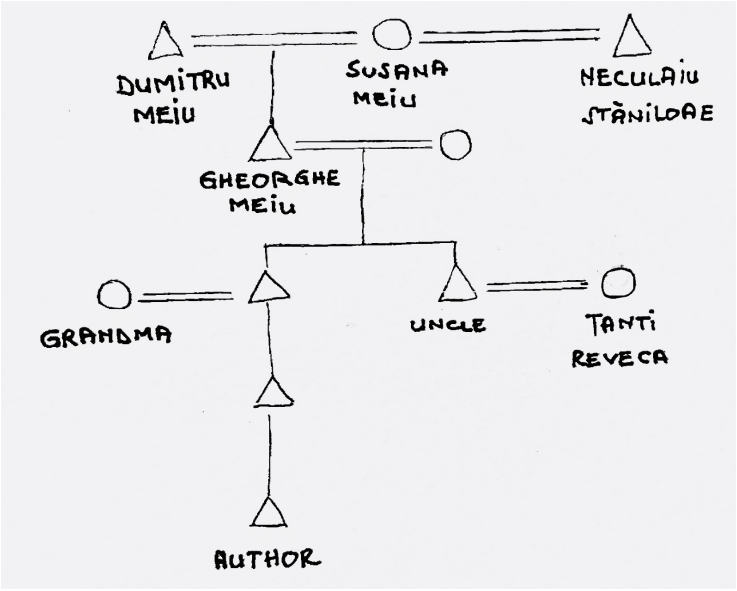

Figure 3: Kinship chart of people mentioned in the text.

elsewhere in the village. He must then have invested this money to build Susana and her sons a stone house. In the 1920s, most villagers had already switched from wooden houses to stone houses, now considering the wooden ones a sign of poverty and backwardness. For many, switching from a house of wood to one of stone was possible only after years of migrating as blue-color labor to the United States, Argentina or Brazil. But Susana's first husband had been too old – twenty-two years her senior – and ill to travel. When he died in 1910, it seems, he left her a poor widow. As widows often remarried to consolidate their offspring's wealth, might Susana have used the approaching marriage of her youngest son (who was to remain in the homestead) to persuade Neculaiu to sell his fortune and build them the new house? Could the quarrels between them have arisen precisely over property?

What preoccupied me more was yet another question: Could Neculaiu have put his name on the wall in a (desperate)

gesture intended to inscribe him in a line of descent (the household inheritance) that, as he might have correctly anticipated, would absorb his fortune but erase his existence, rendering him forgotten? After all, neither his wife nor his stepsons took his name. What is more, a few years after his death, Susana died and was buried next to Dumitru Meiu, the father of her children, thus excluding Neculaiu from any form of genealogical commemoration. Buried in an unmarked grave, by the edge of the cemetery, as people who committed suicide usually were, he was to be forgotten. He remained a passing story, a story that became taboo in part because of its tragic ending. Certainly, the offense brought to Gheorghe, Susana's son, by the man in the pub was also the transgression of this familial taboo. It is then precisely through the enforcement of secrecy that the *rope* itself becomes then a *twine*: a less visible line, a line of continuity disavowed from genealogical remembering and repressed into seeming collective oblivion, but a line on which a fortune had nevertheless descended; a line not quite invisible, an incomplete eclipse.

Neculaiu might have signed his name precisely in a desperate effort to survive in the face of a line that seemed to swallow him up. Regardless of his intent, however, his name written thinly, like a twine, in the mortar of the house becomes the echo of a *collective genealogical unconscious*: a sign left in the attic, an enigma, a symptom, whose threads can only difficultly be unraveled today, but which nevertheless resist immediate and complete forgetting – for a while, at least.

Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that genealogy is never self-evident: it is rather the product of a hard, ongoing social work of *alignment*: a continuous active (re)orienting of bodies towards particular pasts and futures, often via material objects. 'Rather than presuming that the vertical line [of genealogy] is simply given', Ahmed writes, 'we would see the vertical line

as an effect of this process of alignment' (71). Family portraits hanging on our walls are media of such alignment. They set us *in line with* a normative genealogy that orients our bodies in time and space. Importantly, such objects also 'orient us toward the future: it is where the child is asked to direct its desire by accepting the family line as its own inheritance' (90). Objects of alignment, Ahmed says, are often in the background of our everyday activities: in mundane life, we pass by portraits hanging on our walls without giving them much importance. It is interesting to return here then also to the relationship between Susana's portrait and Neculaiu's scribble. For a long time, one had hung in the house, the other stayed hidden in the attic. The portrait constituted a visible background to everyday activities, while the hidden scribble on the attic's wall had been something of *a background to the background* – an element of what I call the *unconscious of inheritance*: something thinner, less visible or accessible, something that – like the twine of the hanged – is disavowed, veiled in secrecy, an unknown known.

But genealogical alignment also requires forgetting as a necessary mechanism of its reproduction: soon, Susana's portrait also ended up buried deeply in the attic, where I found it later, and those of us living in the house did not know it existed or, after I found it, who she was. Hence, with time, objects of genealogical alignment can become objects of the unconscious of inheritance – things we don't know we know, things we live with without knowing we had inherited them in the first place.

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Inheritance, Siobhan Magee (2018: 1) argues, refers to the 'transferal of property from its owner to one or more heirs, usually related persons of subsequent generations'. It may include

> homes, land, livestock, ritual knowledge, titles, money,-genes, or intellectual property ... [and] ... may be framed primarily as a matter of kinship, a mourning practice, a process codified by a legal system, a facet of economic life, a political issue that brings social reproduction and inequality to the fore, or a combination of several of these frameworks.

For a long time, anthropologists have argued that to understand what kinds of society any one group of people seek to (re)produce, one needs to look at their inheritance practices. How and what is inherited and by whom reveal, in turn, what relations of kinship, descent, gender and generation people value or devalue; what institutions and ideologies dominate; how particular forms of memory (cultural arrangements of remembering and forgetting) work to foreground some relations and background others; and what kinds of material objects are necessary for a collective future to become imaginable.

Inheriting, as anthropologist Jack Goody (1983) famously shows, is a deeply ideological process: the customary regulation of wealth transmission has long been regulated through customary, legal, religious, and other forms of knowledge by way of consolidating wealth and power for various social categories based on gender, generation, class, race and more. Even so, inheriting has hardly ever been a straight-forward process. Indeed, more often than not, it is not only a source of continuity, but also of conflict. Conflicts over property may produce new lines of social divergence and difference. A closer look at inheriting practices anywhere shall reveal the kinds of struggles and contestations involved in social reproduction – that is, in the concrete efforts to craft a tomorrow through the cultural and material means available in the present. Struggles over inheritance are always also intimate struggles. Hence, to consider the implication

of inheriting practices, I suggest, one must also turn to the related concept of *intimacy*.

Intimacy refers broadly to a set of intersubjective processes that posit – and create the effect of –various kinds of proximities and attachments between different bodies or persons. In other words, intimacy refers both to the actual forms of closeness and mutuality that people create *and* to the discursive modes through which we describe and think of those relations as 'intimate' (hence, it is always also an object of ideology). Whether momentary or lasting, immediately corporeal or technologically mediated across distance, intimacies carry the possibility of both affection *and* aggression, the capacity to both bound *and* burden.

I propose we see inheritance and intimacy not only as strongly interlinked, but also as inherently polyvalent. First, if anthropologists have used inheritance to refer to the transmission of property across generations (vertical temporal line), they have also used it to speak of *cultural* transmission, more generally. Pierre Bourdieu (1972), for example, shows how the transmission of property entails also the passing down and transformation of subjective bodily orientations, a set of schemes of perception and thought that are inherent in action – what he calls the *habitus*. According to Bourdieu, 'the "book" from which the children learn their vision of the world is read with the body, in and through the movements and displacements which make the space within which they are enacted as much as they are made by it' (90). To recall the portrait or the scribble from the above example, we must then remember that the passing down of objects also entails bodily orientations that are cultural and historical.

Second, the intimacy involved in these encounters is also polyvalent. On the one hand, it can refer to the private attachments of a seemingly restrictive space of family, kinship, or – to recall the example above – the house and household.

On the other hand, anthropologists also speak of *cultural intimacy* (Herzfeld 1997) to refer to attachments, affects and knowledge shared across wider social spaces – from the face-to-face sociality of a village to the stranger sociality of a nation. Here, wider cultural understandings of what is inheritance, genealogy and legitimate social reproduction centrally inform more proximate relations. And the other way around: the subject's intimate space may shape cultural intimacies associated with inherited things.

In Figure 4, I add to the intersection of inheritance (vertical temporal line) and intimacy (horizontal spatial line) a third variable: the virtual, the unconscious of inheritance, that is, the totality of things *we do not know we know* that we nevertheless inherit and that shape our intimacies, even if from the background of the background, from behind the visible, the literal, the fully knowable. Although Grandma, for example, did not know who the hanged man had been or what his name was, she (and through her, my father and his brother) always felt the need to legitimize our family's inheritance as one derived from our genealogical line and based on that line's hard work. French psychogenealogy speaks of such phenomena as belonging to an 'intergenerational unconscious': an unconscious different from the individual one and through which our ancestors' sufferings, anxieties and aspirations continue to live through us, in our familial habitus. Indigenous ontologies also often reference the ways in which people's actions may have consequences for many generations of their descendants (consider, for example, the Samburu concept of *njoki*, according to which the transgressions, ritual omissions and other wrongdoings of long-dead ancestors can affect their unsuspecting living descendants with various physical and mental afflictions; Straight 2007: 96). Contrary to notions of autonomous personhood associated with liberal modernity, anthropology, like psychoanalysis

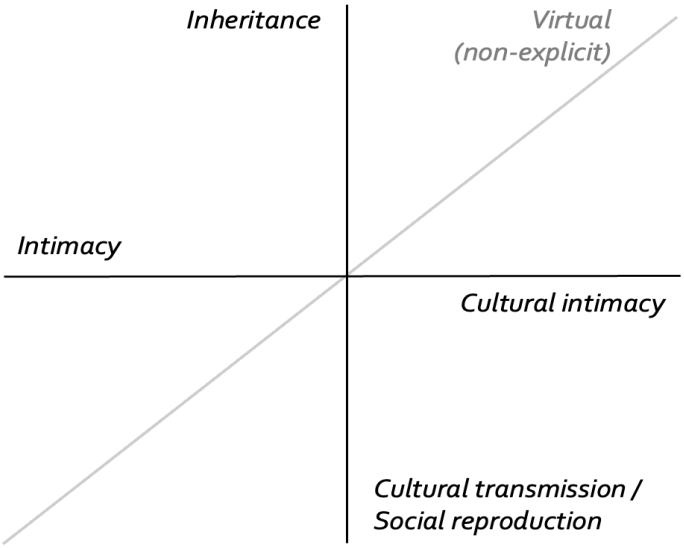

Figure 4: The 'unconscious of inheritance' emerges as a virtual third axis between inheritance and intimacy.

(and psychogenealogy) have emphasized the importance of deconstructing the individual, while attending to its complex interconnections with both its contemporaries and its ancestors. It is important then not only to attend to the literal, visible or known forms of inheritance but also to all that we don't know we know has been passed down to us and that continues to shape who we are and what we can become.

To interrogate what counts as inheritance, how extant intimacies are geared towards producing particular lines of legitimacy and genealogy, and what the intersection of inheritance and intimacy might hide, we can then start elsewhere. We can begin with the discarded materials of inheritance – a thrown-away portrait and a barely noticeable scribble on a wall. Elizabeth Povinelli (2002: 218) offers the term 'genealogical grid' to refer to the ideological mechanisms that deploy lines of descent to organize state dispensations like inheritance, marriage and welfare. This has meant that, at various times, non-

reproductive people, people engaged in non-normative forms of kinship and others often fell off the grid of genealogy. So too with Neculaiu: probably without children of his own, his wealth absorbed into Susana's household and line of descent, Neculaiu remained but a name scribbled on a wall. And it is precisely from such seemingly trivial signs and symptoms that our ethnographic imagination must proceed. For, what is inherited is not only the things we know and in relation to which we consciously position ourselves but also the effects of erasures, long-disavowed secrets, the numerous twines of competing, sometimes less legitimate, lines and attachments.

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Student intervention 9

I do not know what the reason for this exercise is. It might also not be relevant for me to know the answer to this question right now. I am in this class to learn. Am I? ... What I know is that today I try to learn about what anthropology really means. It is quite interesting and surprising to me that I might have been an anthropologist my whole life without knowing. Don't I love it to sit with strangers and talk, sitting on a random bench and observe people and think of their lives like a storyline of a character in a movie... Right now, I get nostalgic about my times in Luanda. I had done anthropological fieldwork so to say to find my roots. I would sit with the people of the streets on a plastic chair, sipping a Cuca for 500 Kwanzas and talking about God and the world, about politics, about love, about family, about work, about our dreams. Was that an anthropological act? I am not sure. I never thought about it until today. Until today where within academia I am pressured to think about this question. I am pressured but at the same time privileged. How many people might conduct research every day without even knowing? Is not every one of us a little bit an anthropologist? I am confused. I am new in this field, in this topic. I had thought or even hoped that this class would give me answers instead, I am here asking more and more questions. May I get better at this? Solve some of those question marks in my head or will my questions increase during this class? What if I feel dumber after this class then today?

Elisa Valentina da Costa Policarpo

Kinning

Michelle Engeler

At the heart of this essay is my deep curiosity about how people live together, belong and shape their individual and social lives across spatial and temporal boundaries. Building on previous research that has focused on youth and mobility in West Africa, my more specific interests revolve around the often intricate webs of transnational families and, more broadly, the practices of *living together, apart* in postmigrant societies. A focus on kinship and kinship processes has proved to be an insightful avenue for this exploration, as kinship can provide a mode of ordering relationships or an 'infrastructure' for people to stay connected in transnational social spaces, to use the framing by Apostolos Andrikopoulos and Jan Willem Duyvendak (2020: 303).

To discuss the topic, I will draw inspiration from two different exhibitions, both of which I attended with my daughters, focusing once on the artist and her art, once on my children's reaction and my thoughts around that.[1]

Social anthropology presents us with a unique opportunity to creatively contemplate on societal issues, drawing from a diverse and multifaceted array of data. As anthropologist you are becoming a careful listener and observer, a data collector, a storyteller and a collage maker, as it is you who decides which data sets, stories, pictures or words you are weaving together and how. Importantly, this process includes the recombination of 'home' and 'field', not least due to neoliberal university labor conditions and family obligations; in my case, this means juggling several temporary contracts and precarious positions while having the sole responsibility for two children. I follow the feminist and decolonial critiques of Gökçe

1 Both of my daughters are very aware of my working context and do often support me while reflecting on the one or the other exhibition visit, talk, teaching unit or writing project. They agreed to be quoted.

Günel and Watanabe (2024) and reconsider what constitutes fieldwork through the practice of patchwork ethnography. I concur that knowledge production can and perhaps should be closely connected to personal lives and domestic spheres, which is essential for making social anthropology an inclusive and diverse discipline. On a more abstract level, doing patchwork ethnography reveals kinship practices around the anthropologist herself, making the approach even more valuable for the purposes of this contribution.

With this in mind, the following sections represent patches of kinship infrastructures and highlight the often complex interconnectedness of doing and being kin in order to discuss *living together, apart* and the anthropology of kinship more broadly.

Gardening memories, interweaving diaspora (patch 1)

In the summer of 2023, while visiting my parents together with my children, we all went to the Kunst Halle St.Gallen for the exhibition 'Emine's Garden' by Melike Kara, an artist of Kurdish-Alevi descent, born in 1985 in Germany. Kara staged the space with the help of pictures and photographs, decorated with sugar-like ornaments in delicate pastel colors. The photographs show faces and scenes from other times and places: flowers are recognizable; children, playing; couples looking directly into the camera; groups of women in nature. As a visitor, you wander along the paths of carefully laid out fields – it is the garden of Kara's Kurdish-Alevi grandmother we are walking through. Within the exhibition, the artist draws on a variety of weaving techniques and customs to abstract, layer and interweave her family history with Kurdish tapestry motives from different regions.

Kara's artistic installation can be read as expressions of kinship, reflecting on the past but also offering strategies for living the present. While her photographs appear to have been taken in distant times and places, her paintings and ornate

designs have the ability to bridge this temporal and spatial divide and link it to her present. Moreover, the installation refers to the frameworks of both *kinship as doing* (symbolized and reenacted through practices of gardening and tapestry) and of *kinship as being* (through the references to the artist's belonging to a particular family and history). Kara's artistic expressions of kinship exemplify ways to practice kinship, to relate and belong within the context of a diasporic community, making them accessible to (and intertwined with) a broader audience and public. Moreover, the kinning practices both displayed and deployed in her installation can be read as providing what Janet Carsten calls 'a dynamic reservoir of resources with which to creatively imagine and put into practice ideas and visions that enable moving to and living in new worlds' (2020: 3). The exhibition addresses themes of displacement and expulsion, shedding light on the immense challenges of having to leave cherished places and loved ones behind, all whilst rebuilding one's life by reaching far into that reservoir that combines a sense of both *being* kin and *doing* kinship.

Indeed, the artist seems to point to the experience of an intrinsic and relational, multigenerational connection to her Kurdish Alevi family and ancestry. We might perceive in her work the experience of certain connections as simply given and corporeal; considering the wider political and historical context, there seems to be an urgency and necessity to trace and affirm genealogies that have experienced considerable erasure and existential threat. Simultaneously, by honoring her grandmother and the distant locales of her heritage through her artistic installation, she actively constructs and repairs relations, communicates and (re)connects across distances, both in time and space, 'not [relying] on aberrant or marginal qualities of kinship, but on some of its most fundamental and intrinsic aspects' (Carsten 2020: 321). Kara envisions and embraces both the present and the future, all the while preserving the significance of the past.

Doing hair, having families (patch 2)

In the autumn of 2023, my daughters and I visited 'Black Curls and Their Stories Behind Them', a photography exhibition led by Louise Brisante Mbakop Ngontchio, photographed by Paul Ndimande and hosted by the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel (Mbakop Ngontchio and Ndimande 2023). The exhibition portrayed persons who take pride in their Black identity and hair. Mbakop and Ndimande's objectives were to dispel stereotypes, to showcase the individuality of Black people and to promote visibility for Black experiences. Therewith, the photos sought to address pressing questions: Where do we come from? Where are we headed? Where do Black biographies in Germany and Switzerland stand today?

In one of the interviews displayed on the wall, Milose Turner, one of the project participants, was asked what she loves most about her hair:

> What I love most about my hair is that it makes me a member of a community. It makes me a member of a big family that I can meet wherever I am in the world. I love that automatically, through my skin shade and hair texture, I belong to a group of people who have been through (and are still going through) a lot, but who show an incredible strength every day and make me proud.

During my visit to the exhibition, I shared Turner's response with my two children. Both have (Afro) curls, and I inquired if they felt the same way. 'Yes', my daughter Maëlyne replied matter-of-factly, 'we're part of the curly-haired family'. By 'we' she referred to herself and her younger sister Louane, who chimed in, 'You can join us, too, Mom, as you're excellent at styling our hair'. Weeks later, I reminded my daughters to prepare for their shower and hair styling, a process that is quite time-consuming and requires a lot of patience from

them. Louane ran into her room and retrieved the postcard from the exhibition that she had brought home, featuring the phrase 'Don't touch my hair'. We could not help but laugh and decided to postpone the hair-styling session for another day.

The short incident made me think about the exhibition again: My daughters belong to more than our small nuclear family, and this multidirectional and multilayered belonging encompasses notions of both being and doing kinship. Their identities are intertwined with broader social structures, such as family, national and transnational affiliations, sometimes existing simultaneously in multiple contexts. As Josiane Le Gall and co-authors aptly observe,

> family networks are constantly being recomposed. Links are maintained by loyalty and obligation to kin but could also be strategically chosen. Indeed, individuals both establish, maintain or avoid certain ties with family members according to their needs, and actively pursue, passively neglect, or even invent kinship ties. (Le Gall, Therrien and Geoffrion 2022: 9)

While my daughters only have very limited ties to their distant (biological) kin network in West Africa, they maintain strong connections with persons who share 'the same hair and skin tone'. These creative social practices can be seen as a means to counteract or compensate for disruption caused by family separation, hopefully serving as a resource to navigate the challenges of growing up as a 'mixed' child or as a Black woman facing everyday racism in contemporary postmigrant Swiss society.

Living together, apart

How do people live together, to whom do they feel they belong? Whom do we imagine and remember as family

or kin, no matter of consanguinity or spatial and temporal separation? Each of these questions ask to consider how postmigrant societies organize or imagine, do and understand *living together, apart*. Doing or being kin, the two introductive patches showed, are central frameworks to connect to former generations and distant lands. But they also represent strategies to navigate the often fragile social life of the here and now. Through processes of kinning we thus create relationships with people.

Kinning practices had, from the emergence of anthropology as a discipline in the late 19th century until at least the 1970s, a prominent place in social anthropological research and theory (Andrikopoulos 2022). Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functional approach emphasized for instance the role of kinship in maintaining social order, while Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory analyzed kinship as a system of symbolic exchange (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Radcliffe-Brown 1952) – to hint at two of the classics of the anthropology of kinship. In the 1980s, the anthropology of kinship lost its privileged position, following a radical critique of kinship studies' ethnocentrism, expressed by David Murray Schneider (1984) and others. Subsequently, kinship research declined. In the 2000s however, there has been a revival of interest (Carsten 2000: 1), indicating kinship's dynamic return to the anthropological agenda, in particularly highlighting a more open model, stressing the importance of processual and performative ways of becoming kin:

> this model lays emphasis on the present and future rather than the past, and sees kinship largely in terms of practices of becoming, such as feeding or living together. It thus has the apparent advantage of being attentive to creative processes and activities in the making of kinship and relatedness, as opposed to assuming kinship to be strongly

> pre-scripted according to customs and precepts inherited from past generations. (Carsten 2020: 321)

Contrary to the once dominant (structural-functionalist) model of kinship that emphasized fixity and ascription, newer approaches (intellectually strongly influenced by feminism) study and conceive kinship in terms of practices and processes of becoming, to finally analyze and understand contemporary entangled settings of mobility, change and transformation. Relatedness thereby may be composed of various components – substance, feeding, living together, procreation, emotion – 'elements which are', Carsten highlights,

> themselves not necessarily bounded entities but may overflow or contain parts of each other or take new forms. ... The only necessary quality to the combination of these elements in particular cultures of relatedness is that they incorporate the capacity to generate new meanings and new experiences of being related. (2000: 34)

The study of 'kinning' is central to that more recent study and understanding of kinship in social anthropology; it is kinship as a verb so to say, allowing us to perceive social relations as processes and not as fixed categories which rely on the frameworks of both being kin and doing kinship. Kinning encompasses biological processes (nature, e.g. giving birth), social processes (nurture, e.g. by sharing of property, by caring, etc.) and legal processes that articulate the dominant understanding of relation between both in a specific context (law, e.g. marriage arrangements, adoption papers, etc.) (Schnegg et al. 2010: 11).

In the words of Signe Howell, kinning 'is meant a process by which a foetus, new-born child, or any previously unconnected person, is brought into a significant and permanent relationship that is expressed in a kin idiom' (2003: 465). 'To kin', Howell adds, 'is a universal process, marked in all societies

by various rites of passage that ensure kinned subjectivation' (466). Howell concentrates on transnational adoption while developing her approach and focuses on kinning processes in the context of adoptive families based in Norway. As she is concerned with the efforts by adoptive parents to make their adopted child into a relative, she is looking at the ways in which a sense of belonging is transmitted to the adopted children after they have been allocated to their new parents (Howell 2003: 466, 468). Through these kinning processes, adoptive parents do not only incorporate their children into their own kin but also transform themselves into parents, thereby challenging the separation between the social and the biological that is encountered elsewhere in society (Howell 2003: 482).

Riitta Högbacka (2016), while looking at transnational adoption, shaped the notion of kinning. She focuses on the families of origin of transnational adoptees, using the term de-kinning to describe the process between first mother and to their later adopted children. Her analysis of kinning/de-kinning processes against the background of transnational adoption reveals global dynamics, inequalities and asymmetrical power relations.

Processes of kinning, Simone Abram and Marianne Lien more recently add while focusing on the links between kinship and property relations, are 'always selective and negotiated, they also carry with them the potential for the opposite: just as property can enable kin relations to be re/produced, it can also be used to sever or weaken kin relations' (2023: 2). They, too, use the term 'de-kinning' to denote instances of failed appropriation and/or disrupted kin relations. Corinna Guerzoni and Alice Sarcinelli, while considering new forms of reproduction and contemporary family configurations also point out that kinship relations 'are far from stable, but rather present different degrees of closeness and undergo many changes over time' (2019: 11). Kinship can be a 'site

for ongoing security, belonging, and connection, as well as economic exploitation, ongoing imperialization, and cultural domination' (Crapo Kim 2024: 3).

Kinship Infrastructures

In the pursuit of understanding *living together, apart*, and a sense of belonging in the context of transnational families or diasporic communities and postmigrant societies, which initially piqued my interest, delving into the study of kinship, into being or doing kin and into various kinning practices can illuminate how individuals and communities navigate uncertainty, shape their destinies or imagine their future. For instance, through remembering or honoring a grandmother, or through the daily articulation of multilayered family networks, the negotiation of identities and the embrace of alternative social and political structures, people forge a sense of belonging within an ever-evolving world. Kinning practices seem to offer essential support and function as a vehicle for actively constructing or envisioning the future (and this can also be a political act) amid uncertain circumstances.

From an anthropological perspective and against the background of kinship as both *being and doing* in fragmented, dispersed families or postmigrant societies, kinship transcends biological ties and embraces a diverse tapestry of social relationships. In other words, it extends beyond the confines of bloodlines to encompass chosen families and imagined kin networks, reflecting the intricate web of social connections. This expansive view acknowledges that kinship is also a matter of genetics and that it is deeply rooted in society, politics and personal choices. One could conceptualize these reflections towards kinship infrastructures, bridging traditional understandings of kinship with broader structural and material analyses, integrating not just a system of relationships but also the means and material conditions that sustain them. The

focus thus shifts from the mechanisms and spaces that underpin kinship networks to emphasizing how these systems are constantly maintained, contested or transformed in everyday life.

Kinning practices, e.g. embracing chosen social networks of relatedness and belonging while doing hair or being/claiming/imagining to be family or kin through using kin idioms and remembering by one's grandmother gardening, offer a unique lens through which to examine or understand the complexities of how people create, maintain and signify relationships beyond temporal and spatial divides, shedding light on contemporary forms of *living together, apart*.

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Student intervention 10 & 11

Anthropology to me today is a form of translation. A way of observing and listening to then translate it into language and concepts. Through this it might make things visible that otherwise stay hidden and forgotten. At the same time things can be misinterpreted and I am still questioning how valuable having this outside perspective even is. ... Often, I'd find it better if the people being observed would tell their own stories, I even believe it would be more insightful. And if they don't want to share, then that's something to respect.

Mona

It is more about understanding than discovering, not about claiming but experiencing, I guess. ... How to get through our differences a meaning we cannot totally get.

Anonymous

Materializing
Zainabu Jallo

In the confines of the Frobenius Institute's depot at Goethe University, Frankfurt, I stood face to face with a row of artefacts that, once upon a time in their lives, had been at the center of several ritual ceremonies. The evidence of their storied past was palpable – bloodstains from animal oblations, remnants of offerings and the figures themselves, their eyes seemingly animated, as if caught in a moment of profound expression, frozen mid-sentence. While the question of their arrival lingered on my mind, my thoughts inclined towards their residual potency. What becomes of the agency and subjectivity of these sacred artefacts when they are removed from the context of veneration? Could one even think of them as scared still? What remains when their sacred meanings are stripped away? One thing was certain for me: these figures have never been passive, regardless of their transformations. From their origins as living trees to revered forms of devotion, to their current residence on storage shelves, they continue to inspire awe and curiosity. Through my ongoing journey in studying material culture, I have been fascinated by the relationship between objects and the meanings they convey. This inquiry prompts a deeper reflection on how these entities generate significance, serve diverse purposes and construct our realities.

My engagement with different artefacts across various research contexts has revealed that our understanding is deeply intertwined with our experiences and perceptions. It is a reciprocal process, a co-agency: as we create these objects, they, in turn, shape our understanding and provide us with multifaceted insights, enriching our perception of the myriad worlds we inhabit. These contemplations have inspired me to delve into the territory of new materialisms, seeking to uncover

how, as an anthropologist, I might benefit from its tapestry of theories.

What exactly is new about new materialism? Moreover, if there is a new materialism, then what were the critical theories of the old materialist framework, and how do they differ from modern interpretations? This entry introduces the theoretical field of new materialisms – plural, because it integrates insights from multiple fields, such as anthropology, philosophy, political science, science and technology studies and cultural theory, among others. It represents a diverse area of study that resists being limited to a single framework and, therefore, intentionally refrains from broad generalizations, as evidenced by the work of new materialist scholars. Despite its significance in the humanities and social sciences, it remains one of the least comprehended theories, mainly due to ongoing debates that hinder the establishment of a unified definition. This introduction will also highlight its progression within anthropology and the critiques that have arisen in response to it.

To get a grasp on some of the more unified ideas of the field, it is helpful to analyze the core principles of 'traditional' materialism, also called old materialism, which, in philosophical terms, posits that perceptible material, hereafter referred to as *matter*, is the fundamental reality, stressing that all phenomena, including consciousness, can be understood through material interactions. New materialists criticize these positions for their deterministic and mechanistic interpretation of matter as 'inactive', docile and immutable, a stance that originated during the Enlightenment. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost ask: 'How could we ignore the power of matter and the ways it materializes in our ordinary experiences or fail to acknowledge the primacy of matter in our theories?' (2010: 1). Hence, they advocate for a reassessment of the principles of traditional materialism and promote a refreshed perspective on our connection to

and interpretation of the realities around us. According to Keller and Rubenstein (2017), the theories under discussion illustrate that matter is not just passive material; it plays an active role in the processes of creation, destruction and transformation. This implies that matter should be viewed more as a process than a stable, unchanging entity. New materialisms illuminate the importance of objects in human actions and their capacity to convey meaning, advocating for a renewed focus on materiality – the quality of being material – and the profusion of matter in our everyday lives.

As an interdisciplinary, theoretical and politically committed field of inquiry gaining prominence since the late 1990s, the dominant new materialist ideas that more-than-human entities exert weighty influence are familiar outside of Western thought (here, I refer specifically to the 'West', which is an ideological construct deeply embedded in modernism and colonialism), particularly if we take various forms of indigenous knowledge into account. These perspectives have been invigorated by a commitment to theories that challenge the constraints imposed by an excessive focus on language, culture and representation.

Regarding physical and corporeal realities which exist independently of their ideological and discursive interpretations, their gainful examination has frequently been overlooked. New materialisms advance as a method, a conceptual frame and a political stand that refuses the emphasis on language, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power. Its foundations can also be linked to the ontological turn, which represents a shift in theoretical perspective where distinctions are perceived not merely as variations in worldviews but as differences in the worlds themselves, with each of these worlds regarded as equally legitimate (Viveiros de Castro 1998).

Figure 1: *Frontier*. © Maxime de Formanoir, 2024.

Anthropology and new materialisms

A core component of an anthropologist's role is to cultivate a deep curiosity about the world, using this inquisitiveness to investigate and express the complexities of human life and its interrelations. As a multifaceted discipline, it is dedicated to exploring the fundamental elements of human life. It

involves the creative act of imagination and the diverse yields, both individual and shared, that emerge from this process. By exploring the dynamic relationships between people and their surroundings, anthropology reveals the complex fabric of human life, not leaving out its material culture and conveying insights that deepen our comprehension of the diversity of our societies. Often regarded as the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities, anthropology employs various methods and perspectives to illuminate the complexities of human practices.

Material culture is a conduit through which anthropology attempts to interact with new materialisms, particularly by foregrounding materiality – as a seminal area of inquiry. The sub-field emerged as a cogent area of focus within anthropological discourse in recent decades, transcending the mere analysis of objects as naturally occurring or human-made and of their physical attributes, such as shape, size, texture, chemical makeup, molecular structure, color, weight patterns or symbolic interpretations. More so, the principal ambition is to reveal how human experiences and lives are profoundly influenced and articulated through the lens of material culture. These include how people relate to their belongings, the art of crafting them, their historical significance, their conservation and their analysis. It draws upon theories and methodologies from other disciplines, such as art history, archaeology, history, historic preservation and museum studies.

In anthropological investigations, there has consistently been a strong focus on the relationships and interactions among entities rather than viewing them as isolated or independent. This relational ontology is indispensable for understanding the foundational aspects of new materialisms. To unpack this a bit; ontology, within a philosophical framework, is a study of that which exists, of being. Relational ontologies, therefore, underline the importance of the

connections between entities in defining their very beings. Principally, things are what they are due to their relationships with other entities, which indicates that an object can take on multiple meanings and not remain fixed. Especially as 'meanings attach to things, impose themselves on things, may even be inscribed or embodied in certain things, but are always presumed to be – in the first instance – distinct from the things themselves' (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007: 3). For example, consider the relationship between a bed and the act of sleeping, cutlery and the act of eating, or a book and the process of writing or reading. One might also conceptualize a bed as a means to ascend – a ladder, a piece of cutlery as a measuring tool and a book as an object that holds a door open or even as a weight.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT)[1] highlights the dynamics in the networks between entities. It also shifts away from the Enlightenment's focus on binary oppositions such as individual versus society, people versus nature, human versus nonhuman, Western versus non-Western, urban versus rural, micro versus macro, local versus global, etc. Think of it this way: The importance of entities, according to ANT, should not be inferred from their categorization within binary oppositions. Instead, it arises from their interactions, which influence the networks of relationships in which they are involved. ANT highlights the interconnections among these categories, illustrating how various actors engage with and blend them into a range of hybrid forms. It is interested in how co-agents, 'actants' and 'agential entities', affect the dynamism of 'assemblages'

1 A domain of inquiry that extends beyond anthropology and is embraced by various disciplines within the humanities, ANT was introduced in the 1980s and further advanced in sociology in the 1990s. Specifically, from the founders of science and technology studies, including Michael Callon and his colleagues John Law, Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour, were associated with the *Centre de sociologie de l'innovation* at the École Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Paris.

and 'networks of power' within which they operate.

Consequently, materialities enable a range of relationships – whether within social, political, religious contexts or otherwise. These relationships are crucial in shaping our understandings of reality into more coherent concepts. As shown in Alain Müller's contribution (this volume), this dimension of new materialisms examines the mechanisms through which social order is constructed, accenting the crucial role of material elements, as other-than-human actors. This may be regarded as a more radical approach than other inquiries into material culture. It emphasizes the emergence of urgent ethical and political dilemmas accompanying scientific and technological advancements, particularly those informed by contemporary understandings of (living) matter.

Consider Alfred Gell's (1988) understanding of relationality in his anthropological theory of art. In his work, he compares the characteristics of the interactions between artworks and their audiences with those of living entities. The agency of the works of art described by Gell lies in their ability to impact viewers and prompt them to interact in a manner resembling sentient beings rather than inanimate objects. Thus, art is not evaluated solely by its visual appeal, historical or monetary value but by the interactions it inspires. It is worthwhile to consider agency through the term 'vibrant' (Bennett 2004) within 'Thing-Power Materialism', described as a kind of materialism 'which fleshes out an ontological imaginary of things and their powers [acknowledging] materiality as a protean flow of matter-energy and figures the thing as a relatively composed form of that flow' (349). Lorand Matory's 2017 exhibition describes 'spirited things', in the context of transatlantic religions as objects that are imbued with power 'through food, water, light, prayer, and dance', foregrounding the reality that spirits can be made manifest through sacred objects.

Others include explorations of the functions that objects serve within social contexts (Appadurai 2010). The authors of *Thinking Through Things* (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007) critically examine prevailing theoretical assumptions regarding the interplay between objects, their meanings, materiality and sociality. They emphasize the importance of not reducing their expressions to overly simplistic classifications like 'cultural perspectives' or 'beliefs' (i.e., 'worldviews'). Instead, these expressions should be understood as representations of specific 'worlds' or 'natures', without the assumption that they are condensed versions of 'worldviews'. Another facet of new materialisms is its contributes to ontological materialism, a perspective asserting that material entities – such as particles, chemical reactions and energy – hold a greater degree of reality than the human mind. The concept of 'worlds' as opposed to 'worldviews' brings to mind my visit to the *Chateau Vodou* in Strasbourg, where I found a relatively new shrine nestled among the extensive array of Vodun artefacts that had previously been used in sacred ceremonies before they were brought into the museum. The guide explained how it became necessary for the museum to commission a shrine to a vodun priest. The exhibits, comprised of human remains, ancestors, spirits and other divinities, caused the rooms to be infused with various formidable powers. The shrine, dedicated to one of the deities in vodun cosmology, holds particular importance for communities of vodun practitioners, who raised concerns about the implications of housing 'activated' objects within the museum. Visitors can also engage with the shrine and its deity, which acts as a guardian for the potent relics. The ongoing conversations about the display of sacred artifacts in museums remain a hotbed of controversy. Yet, one might argue that the settings in *Chateau Vodou* strive to embody a 'world' in its own right rather than a 'worldview'.

Acknowledging that reality exists independently of human perception raises the intriguing philosophical inquiry: 'If a tree falls in a forest and no one is present to hear it, does it produce a sound?' Questions arise concerning the realities beyond human dominance and the characteristics of a post-human existence. For example, highlighting the association between the harmfulness of capitalism and the strategies for collaborative survival in multispecies environments through a focus on the materiality of matsutake mushrooms, Anna Tsing shows how other organisms shape their habitats and suggests that:

> Organisms don't have to show their human equivalence (as conscious agents, intentional communicators, or ethical subjects) to count. If we are interested in livability, impermanence, and emergence, we should be watching the action of landscape assemblages. Assemblages coalesce, change, and dissolve. (2015: 158)

This mode of ontological relationality illustrates how contamination shapes the environment, supporting the growth of the mushroom and altering the forests where the mushroom flourishes. Consequently, the mushroom emerges as a byproduct of this contamination, a reality that exists independently of human intervention and perception. I reflect on the moments at the Frobenius Institute and other museum storages, where I found myself contemplating what possible interactions the artefacts could have with one another. This is not akin to the whimsical scenarios depicted in the movie *Night at the Museum* (2009), but rather a consideration of the potential exchanges occurring at a molecular level or other processes occurring within that environment. By their material properties, phenomena such as biodeterioration and the emergence of microorganisms within the wooden figures transpire independently of human interference.

Figure 2: Sacred artefacts in a museum storage. © Author, 2024.

Through the investigation of material religion, scholars such as David Morgan (2014) and Kyrah Daniels (2024) investigate these dimensions, illuminating the complex connections between physical objects and spiritual phenomena, practices and experiences. These conversations extend to the significance of materiality in the quotidian with questions raised by the likes of Christopher Tilley

(2007) regarding the theoretical and social frameworks that elucidate the meanings attributed to objects, their biographies (Kopytoff 1986), mobilities, while examining the agential capacity of objects in diverse contexts including critical examinations of the ethical dimensions inherent in the relationships between humans and other-than-human entities.

An engagement with the ideas presented by new materialisms highlights the significance of non-Western epistemologies, a point underscored by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998). Themes linked to indigenous thought systems are carried on to museum anthropology, where, amongst other concerns, the ethical considerations surrounding collection methodologies and the examination of how exhibitions influence public comprehension and awareness of diverse traditions through artefacts are addressed.

As one might expect, the intersection of anthropology and new materialisms reveals a wide range of perspectives that raise several critical inquiries, including: How does materiality shape the conditions for action in our analyses? In what ways do humans interact with other materialities? What social dynamics surround them? How does materiality influence the conditions for action, and in what ways do various analytical frameworks assist us in understanding these conditions? What social dynamics dictate the existence and importance of these entities? These are, by no means, exhaustive but offer a somewhat general idea of strands of inquiry within the discipline.

New materialisms assert that all forms of matter have the potential to influence their surroundings and find it crucial to explore the possibilities that arise from the interactions and relationships formed when different entities converge.

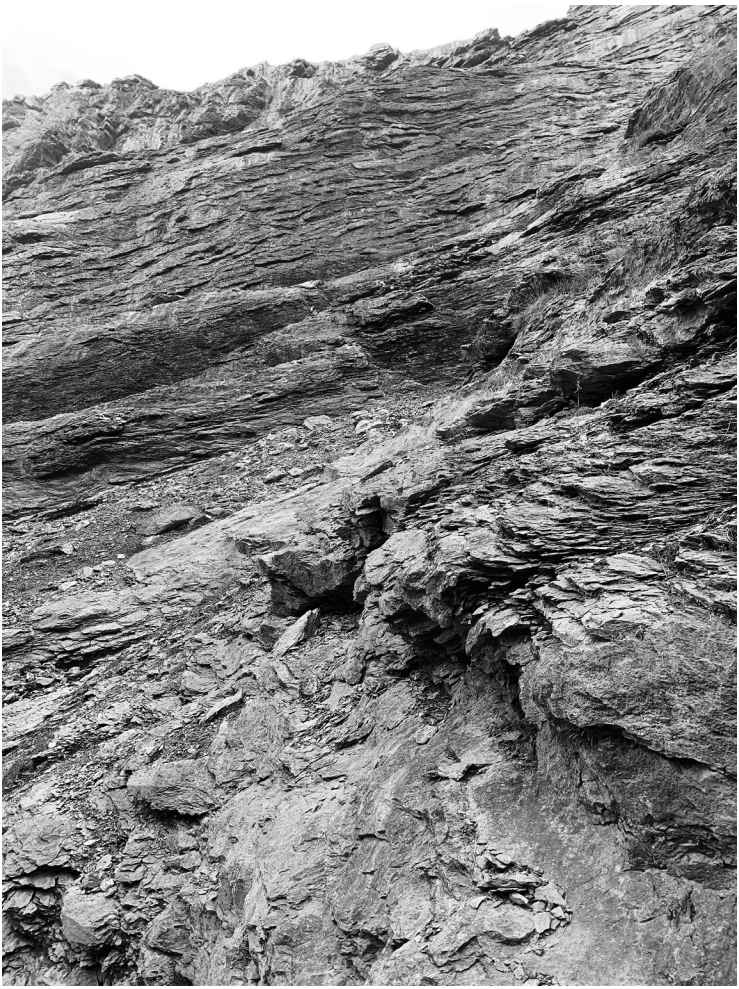

Figure 3: *Strata*. © Author, 2022.

Strands of new materialism

A thought that runs through all strands is post-humanism, which challenges and redefines traditional boundaries between different categories, questioning the notion that humans are the exclusive moral agents now and in the future. Advocates of this component argue that as technology continues to evolve,

the perception of the world as a moral hierarchy with humans positioned at its apex will become untenable.

Bioethics explores the ethical, societal and legal dilemmas that emerge in the arenas of biomedicine and biomedical research. Conversely, biopolitics probes into the interplay between political authority – the legitimate authority of a person or organization to lead and make choices for a community or society and individual biological autonomy – and the ability of living organisms to autonomously regulate and sustain their internal functions without reliance on external systems (Alaimo 2010). Recognizing the body as 'material-semiotic generative nodes' (Haraway 1991: 208) entails understanding it as a pivotal element within the framework of bodily production. Here, the body is not merely a passive entity but an active participant that generates meaning and significance within various contexts. This strand stresses the impact of governance on healthcare practices and its repercussions for the broader community. In this regard, the rise of new materialisms has initiated imperative discussions about the existence and role of living organisms, as well as urgent environmental issues.

Critical materialists grasp that society is made up of tangible elements and shaped by social constructs. It is essential to give due recognition to materiality while appreciating the diverse and intricate forms it takes. Critical materialism accentuates the importance of material conditions and social practices in shaping human experience and knowledge. It critiques traditional idealist perspectives that prioritize abstract ideas over tangible realities. Critical materialism seeks to understand how these factors influence ideology, culture and societal power dynamics by focusing on the interplay between material circumstances and social structures. This framework encourages a wide-ranging analysis of the ways in which material conditions inform human behavior and societal development.

Various ideas tied to these theories have been met with considerable criticism. *Against New Materialisms* (Boysen and Rasmussen 2023), for example, surveys the theoretical and practical challenges related to moving away from modernity and the idea of the human subject. They claim that the multiple endeavors of the theories appear unable to offer solutions to contemporary international crises while raising questions about what our interest in these theories reveals about the current global landscape.

Another criticism is that the concepts are rife with *semiophobia* – an irrational discomfort with human existence as situated within an analytic structure. Benjamin Boysen (2018) expresses concern about the displacement of human beings from their perceived moral superiority, resulting in a loss of their exceptional status. Boysen claims that humans are diminished to mere objects, subject to the influence of material agency, and that this endeavor to reject human exceptionalism and adopt a more modest viewpoint carries contradictions. It operates on a radical dualism, positing material existence as fundamentally opposed to human cognitive reality, which is essential for dismissing the idea of human superiority. Conversely, it then promotes a supreme monism emphasizing our complete dependence on materiality and assuming radical similarity. Boysen identifies multiple instances where new materialism reveals its own inconsistencies. Elsewhere, I have discussed the unease associated with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), arguing that its fundamentally reductionist stance seems to lead to 'a contraction of human relations with materiality [which] means material worlds are left unreachable' (Jallo 2023: 3).

In conclusion, for anthropology, there is a mutual opportunity for enrichment, as both fields provide new-fangled perspectives on the agency that transcends human activities.

While considering its pros and cons, new materialisms presents more benefits than drawbacks. This approach transforms social research from a human-centered perspective to an examination of the interactions and influences among interconnected networks or assemblages of both living and non-living entities. Therefore, if the new materialisms were summarized by a central precept, it would most likely be 'decentering the human'.

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Student intervention 12 & 13

While sitting here in this classroom I can't help but wonder how I would feel if someone was here observing and taking notes on what I was doing and I assume it wouldn't feel that comfortable. Therefore, I feel a bit skeptical of the field of anthropology right now.

Mona

Although the various contributions of this lecture series provided me with inspiring thoughts and even some answers, many of my questions remained unanswered... However, I have learnt to appreciate that ambiguity. I can now embrace it and even more, I actively try to reach that state of mind. ... On a larger scale, this flexibility in one's thinking, this embracing of ambiguity or even this 'keeping things in suspension' and not letting them settle down is what anthropology means to me after this lecture series. Thus, anthropology is less about the actual content of what it studies. Indeed, as the lecture series has proven, this can be anything ranging from revived railway lines in Angola to professional concert dancers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. On the contrary, what counts for anthropology is the way it engages with its surrounding.

Louis Zünd

Objecting

Alain Müller

To introduce the main object(ions) of this article, I invite my reader to accompany me on a retrospective journey through the making-of of my doctoral research. This journey started with the project of ethnographically following the transnational circulation of a so-called music-based youth subculture, *hardcore (punk)* (Müller 2019, 2020). While ethnography claims to follow an inductive heuristic, it is nonetheless embedded in academic institutions where the dominant hypothetico-deductive approach of so-called hard sciences shapes research practices and expectations. As a result, the formulation of a precise research question, necessary to enroll as a PhD student at all, often precedes fieldwork experiences, and it must adhere to the imperative of identifying a relevant body of literature and research gaps. This is why I began by immersing myself in the social science literature concerning 'subcultures'. The dominant theoretical framework in what are known as 'subcultural studies' originates from the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham (see e.g. Hall and Jefferson 2006; Hebdige 2002). The approaches defended by this school, rooted in Marxist and (post-)structuralist traditions, focus primarily on power relations *within society*.

So, it was with this analytical framework and its corresponding conceptual toolbox that I embarked on my first fieldwork experiences in Tokyo. However, subjecting these conceptual tools to the test of fieldwork gave rise to two main *objections* to this analytical framework; not so much for political reasons but for truly analytical ones. The first objection concerned – as my previous use of italics had already hinted at – its tendency to take for granted certain entities, such as social classes, subcultural groups and society

as a whole. And yet, through personal observation of my own involvement in hardcore, I could see *in practice* how the existence of hardcore as a more or less stable, self-identified collective sharing common values was not at all self-evident. On the contrary, it required a permanent work of composition and re-composition of the collective. Hence, my research question evolved as I inquired as to how hardcore, as a collective, is continuously and practically woven together. In other words: How is hardcore '(re)grouped together by the ... processes of re-composition, re-summoning and re-mobilization' in order to exist as a 'thinkable, visible, viable and unifiable' collective (Latour 2003)?

The second objection pertained to a significant oversight inherent in the theoretical framework of the CCCS (and more broadly, to modern social sciences in general): In this framework, objects are either absent or, at best, considered as 'passive containers of external social forces' (Denis and Pontille 2014: 14). This, again, did not stand the test of fieldwork: objects play a central role in the (re)composition of the hardcore collective, both through their circulation and their specific agencies. This holds true on different scales. The hardcore collective is partially deterritorialized and dislocated and the circulation of hardcore objects at a quasi-global scale contributes to weave it together (Müller 2020). Locally, concerts are crucial moments during which the composition of the collective is played out in a choreography where, as I shall show, objects also play an important role.

These objections resonate deeply with the etymology of 'object' and 'objection'. Both terms share the Latin root *ob-* meaning 'against' or 'in the way of', combined with *jacere* meaning 'to throw'. An 'object' is thus etymologically that which is 'thrown against' the senses, while 'to object' is to 'throw (something) in the way of'. As this linguistic kinship suggests, objects are not passive entities but active participants

that constantly intervene in human affairs, both as 'matters of fact' – tangible entities in the world – and 'matters of concern' – sources of controversy and debate that challenge existing paradigms (Latour 2004). This etymological character of objects as interveners underscores why their absence from theoretical frameworks is so problematic. Objects are not merely things to be observed or manipulated; they are active agents that 'throw themselves against' preconceptions, shaping, disrupting and reconfiguring both social worlds and their anthropological understanding. Hence, this etymological insight not only reinforces my objections but also inspires the title of this article.

Let me here re-compose an ethnographic case. It is based on a YouTube video of a 2019 concert by the Philadelphia-based band Jesus Piece as part of the *This Is Hardcore* annual festival in the same city (Hate5six 2019). The situation begins at the start of the band's penultimate song, 'Oppressor', a song whose lyrics denounce racism and white supremacy. 'Black people!' declaims the singer before the song begins. The motivational statement – amplified by the microphone – is an invitation for those who feel addressed to take over the stage, which must be understood in the context of a specific historicity and of a web of conventions specific to hardcore. Indeed, and this is especially the case in North America, hardcore, which comes from punk and is historically rather left-leaning, has nevertheless historically – or at least in the way its history is narrated – been dominated by an over-representation of young white men and the enactment of a certain (hyper)masculinity (Schulze 2015). Moreover, hardcore promotes a politics of horizontality between bands and audiences, which involves that they are not separated by barriers, that concerts are held in clubs where the stage is either low or non-existent, and that people in the audience are often invited to take over the microphone and/or the stage.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Jesus Piece's performance. hate5six (Nov 27, 2019). The discussed extract starts at 23'50".

The song begins. So does the aggressive dancing (referred to as *moshing* or sometimes *violent dancing*) in front of the stage. This is entirely part of hardcore, whose mode of existence is fundamentally intertwined with affects of anger and rage (Müller and Schulze 2023). After the first verse, the band's lead singer passes the microphone to a member of the audience who takes the stage. A second microphone is grabbed by another person who joins the other one on the stage, followed by several other people from the audience. The microphones are passed around and everyone sings the chorus, before they are handed back to the band's singer, who continues the second verse as the people who have taken to the stage leave it.

Examining what *the microphone does* and through what modes of agency, and weaving the ethnographic narrative of this analysis while using it as a *tracer*, conveys heuristic potential. To actualize this potential, the intervention of another set of objects – a *theoretical apparatus* – proves

powerful.[1] This intervention is enabled by the concept of 'quasi-object', as it has been theorized by Michel Serres within the framework of his philosophy of relations, and as it has been used by Bruno Latour as a building block in developing the framework of Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

To continue this thread, let me start by revisiting a dimension of Serre's definition of the 'quasi-object'. He argues that 'To achieve a narrative, one needs a tracing element ... [Quasi-objects] play this role in a well-tailored essay' (2011: 114, my translation). In this essay, I compose a double narrative, drawing on Serres's notion of quasi-objects as tracing elements. This endeavor will require mobilizing two tracers and freely circulating between two narrative planes. The first narrative plane focuses on tracing the role of objects in the composition of hardcore, using the 'microphone' as a tracer – which I have already begun. The second narrative plane aims to reconstruct the history of the (non-)apprehension of objects in the social sciences, and anthropology's complex relationship with this trend. To develop this second narrative, I will utilize the concept of 'quasi-object' itself as a tracer and reconstruct the concept's 'biography'.

Set off in pursuit of our two tracers, we will find ourselves wandering through Serres's relational philosophy and Latour's anthropology of the Moderns. This journey will allow me to address two questions, namely as to why, from the perspective of social sciences and anthropology in particular, objects should (but have not always) matter(ed) and what theoretical and methodological avenues we can rely on for

1 Note in passing that this implies disrupting the sacrosanct partition between theory and empiricism, between induction and deduction, and accepting to conceive of ethnography as a recursive movement in which empirical materials and theoretical concepts mutually generate each other.

integrating objects into anthropological and ethnographic analyses.[2]

Quasi-objects

Michel Serres first developed the idea of the quasi-object in his 1980 book *Le Parasite* [*The Parasite* (1982)]. His main ambition with this book was to establish a fundamental theory of relations. As Steve Brown puts it, for Serres, any form of relation is 'derived from a founding disorder by way of a minor differentiation', which the philosopher 'identifies ... as a kind of interruption' (Brown 2002: 15). The term 'parasite' allows Serres to illustrate this fundamental interruption through three facets: 'The first of these is as static or noise, that is, interference or interruption' (Brown 2002: 15).[3] The idea here is that the communication between two terms implies an always-present third element, which is the background noise. The second meaning, according to Brown, refers to 'the parasite as a biological organism which preys upon a host' (15). This leads to the conclusion that 'taken together these two meanings of the parasite suggest a way of considering human relations as a parasitic chain which interrupts or parasitizes other kinds of relations (that is those of other animals, or the natural world itself)' (15). 'The essence of such parasitism', Brown concludes, 'is taking without giving', that is, 'an asymmetrical, one-way relationship' (16).

2 Many intellectual traditions and approaches have theorized and/or followed 'objects' in anthropology. I cannot elaborate on them all, hence my (partial) choice to focus on the contributions of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the philosophy of Michel Serres. Both ANT and Serres's philosophy have developed in close conversation with other intellectual traditions, such as feminist technoscience and the work of Donna Haraway in the case of Latour's work. Their mutual influences would deserve an in-depth analysis.

3 Serres borrows this key idea from Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of communication (Gethmann 2013).

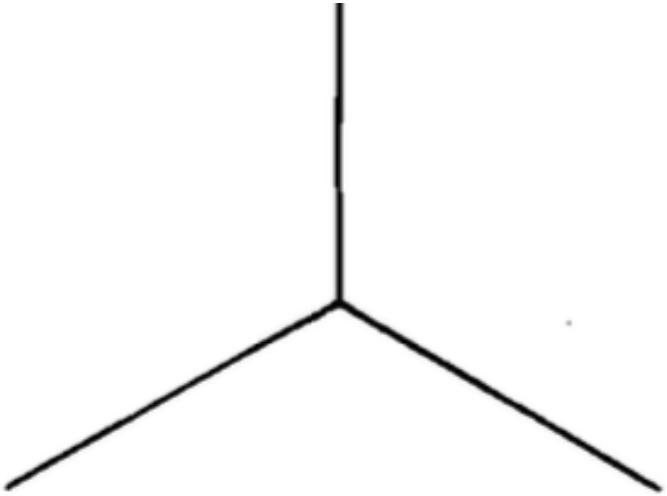


Figure 2: Serres (1982: 14).

It is important to add that the position of the parasite is by no means static. As Héctor González Castaño underlies, 'Serres wants to think of parasitism as a form of relationship where positions are not so easily assignable' (2013: 3, my translation). This means that if a noise other than background noise occurs, the entire information system changes. It also means that excluding the third is pointless, since it will always reappear in another position. Therefore, Serres states that to conceptualize any form of relationship, 'we would be better off with a new diagram in the form of a bifurcation' where 'the three positions are equivalent' and where 'each is in a line with the others, and each can play the third' (1982: 14).

It is within this general theory of relations that Serres rethinks the role of objects in the establishment of all forms of human relations. Adopting a perspective that includes the third element indeed implies integrating the fundamental role of objects in any form of relation. His theory of the quasi-object aims to achieve this integration. Serres defines the 'quasi-object' as following:

> This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. ... This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. (1983: 225)

He illustrates this definition by using the example of the ball in a game:

> A ball is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it. Over there, on the ground, it is nothing; it is stupid; it has no meaning, no function, and no value. ... The ball isn't there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun. ... It is the subject of the body, subject of bodies, and like a subject of subjects. Playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance. The laws are written for it, defined relative to it, and we bend to these laws. (1983: 225-226)

Let me briefly return to my ethnographic case in order to illustrate the heuristic and analytical potential of this conceptualization. The microphone operates as both a quasi-object (part of the material world) and a quasi-subject (conveying a specific mode of action). It amplifies collective and individual voices, both materially (acoustically and electrically) and socially. Like Serres' ball in a game, its circulation allows for the re-composition of the collective and its politics of inclusion. Meanwhile, its seizure by different individuals marks them as subjects by literally granting them a voice.

While the analysis seems to hold, it still reveals some shadowy areas, particularly relating to the definition of what an object is, which I will revisit later. In the meantime, let me return to Serres's philosophy and consider it as a radical

critique of modern philosophy, which establishes a dualism between object and subject, and thus constantly excludes the third element: the parasite. Indeed, Serres favors a fundamentally relational and processual philosophy that not only includes the third but also places the three-branch relational system at the basis of all forms of 'living together'. There, subjects and objects – and this is a fundamental point – are only provisional, fragile results that are played out and replayed at every moment.

To further explore this ontological principle, and especially to demonstrate its analytical potential for anthropology and ethnography, I continue tracing the biography of the concept of quasi-object, which has had a significant resonance in the work of Latour who used it as a building block[4] to lay the foundations of ANT.

Why do objects matter?

In his 1993 book titled *We Have Never Been Modern* (WHNBM), Bruno Latour presents foundational arguments for the importance of considering objects from an anthropological perspective. To establish this, he attempts to understand why objects (and materiality in general) have long remained in the blind spot of the social sciences, and why 'it might have been otherwise', to borrow Susan Leigh Star's famous formulation (1991: 53). Indeed, in WHNBM, which is a foundation of ANT, Latour commits himself to the social history of the constitution of modern scientific knowledge and the subsequent invention of modernity, challenging traditional distinctions between nature and society.

4 ANT was developed together with other scholars such as Madelaine Akrich, Michel Callon, Antoine Hennion, John Law and Annemarie Mol (Akrich et al. 2006; Law and Hassard 1999). Latour's 1995 interview with Michel Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, shows how greatly Serres influenced Latour's ANT conceptualization.

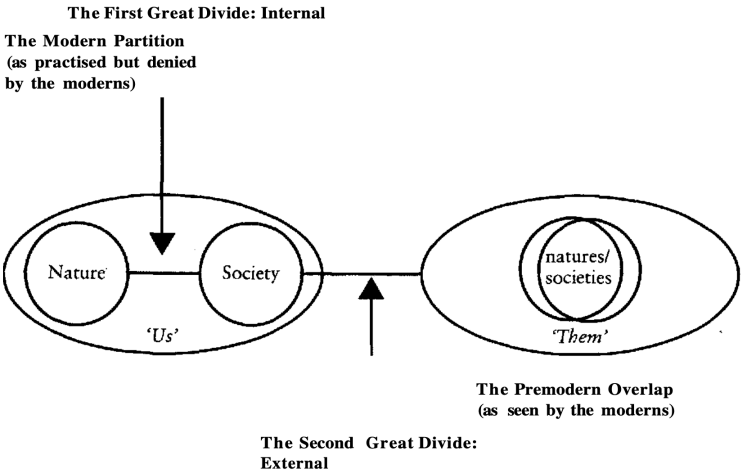


Figure 4.2 The two Great Divides

Figure 3: Latour (1993: 99).

Latour illustrates one of the central ideas of this book in a diagram schematizing what he calls the 'modern constitution', which 'defines humans and nonhumans, their properties and their relations, their abilities and their groupings' (1993: 15) and, consequently, establishes the ontological foundations of Western modernity. The central idea here is that these ontological foundations are not universal givens but a locally and historically situated invention.

As the diagram shows, the establishment of the modern constitution relies on what Latour calls the two Great Divides. The First Great Divide, which he calls 'internal' as it concerns 'Us', the 'modern societies', establishes a partition between nature and society – and, consequently, between nonhumans and humans who ought to belong to distinct ontological domains. The Second Great Divide, which he calls 'external', operates a radical separation between 'Us', the 'moderns', whose knowledge is based on reason, and 'Them',

the premodern societies[5]. The latter are radically different from 'Us' precisely because they do not operate such a distinction between nature and culture.

According to Latour, the two Great Divides are essentially performed *linguistically*. They are a *way of speaking* – a 'speech act' in the parlance of James Austin (1962) from whom Latour drew much of his inspiration. In other words, and this is the starting point of Latour's hypothesis, 'modernity' as it is *articulated*, or *proclaimed*, does not accurately depict modernity as it is *practiced*. This is why, according to him, the moderns pretend to be modern but have never been. Their practices, particularly *scientific* practices which are the first to which Latour devoted his ethnographic attention, indeed constantly mix what is supposed to belong to the opposite poles of nature and culture and produce what Latour calls 'Hybrids' (1993: 1) or 'quasi-objects' (51): beings that are both natural and cultural/social, and, in fact, proliferate in supposedly modern societies.

If the modern constitution is mainly a way of speaking, it is nonetheless actively maintained – Latour calls this process 'purification' (1993: 10) – and real in its consequences, that is, performative. A rapid examination of ordinary language – both the result and the instrument of this process of purification – shows the extent to which the separation between nature and culture seems self-evident to and taken for granted in modernity – where it is in fact a peculiar invention and an

5 While Latour has been much criticized for the essentializing character of the pronouns 'Us' and 'Them', which subsequently prompted him to clarify the issue (2013), it is worth noting that he borrowed the idea of the Great Divide from Jack Goody, who, in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, offered a reflexive critique of anthropology. This involved Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Pensée sauvage* [*The Savage Mind*] and showed how anthropological thinking at the time constantly, albeit unintentionally, reified a dualism between 'ourselves', the moderns and 'the rest', the 'non-' or 'pre-moderns' (Goody 1977: 3).

exception in human history (Descola 2013; Merchant 1984). We say, for example, that we go for a walk *in nature* as if we ourselves were not part of nature. We also say that we *have a body*, as if our materiality were in addition to who we really are – beings without bodies, when in fact we *are* bodies.

A further dimension, which is both an instrument and a consequence of the modern constitution, is the organization of academic knowledge in disciplines and the distribution of their respective 'objects'. Thus, all that pertains to the non-human defined in its radical separation from the human, falls within the purview of natural sciences. At the same time, that which pertains to the pole culture/society, purified of all 'naturality' and materiality, falls within the purview of social sciences and humanities. It is no surprise, then, that non-humans and the relations between humans and non-humans have remained in the blind spot of the social sciences and that the history of social sciences is one devoid of objects (see Latour 1996a). They are its 'missing masses' (Latour 2005). Anthropology is partially an exception based on the division of labor between academic disciplines. In fact, its historical analytical focus was precisely the 'Premodern overlap', where the poles of nature and culture have not been purified from each other. This makes the anthropological approach and its ethnographic method heuristically interesting for methodologically suspending the modern constitution. Indeed, ethnography is accustomed to account for practices that constantly mix the poles of nature and culture, as Latour argues by speaking of a fictional ethnographer:

> Once she [*sic*] has been sent into the field, even the most rationalist ethnographer is perfectly capable of bringing together in a single monograph the myths, ethnosciences, genealogies, political forms, techniques, religions, epics and rites of the people she is studying. Send her off to

> study the Arapesh or the Achuar, the Koreans or the Chinese, and you will get a single narrative that weaves together the way people regard the heavens and their ancestors, the way they build houses and the way they grow yams or manioc or rice, the way they construct their government and their cosmology. In works produced by anthropologists abroad, you will not find a single trait that is not simultaneously real, social and narrated. (1993: 7)

There lies the core of Latour's project: Repatriating anthropology's methods to account for the practices of the so-called moderns, especially their practices in the natural sciences. 'Ethnologizing' (Bonneuil and Joly 2013: 47, my translation) the practices of the moderns makes them as 'strange' as the allegedly irrational practices of the so-called pre-moderns. By suspending what the moderns say to account for what they are doing and observing instead of what they do *in practice*, the ethnographer realizes that they are in fact no different from those that they call pre-moderns. Moderns constantly mix beings of culture and beings of nature, signs and things, humans and non-humans. Thus, Latour argues for an 'amodern' anthropology (1993: 45) of so-called modern societies that (1) suspends the modern constitution, (2) repopulates itself with non-humans, and (3) studies humans and non-humans in their relations without presupposing a fundamental ontological distinction differentiating them *a priori*. This applies to objects and things[6], whose relations to humans allow them to inhabit the world (Latour 2004) as well as other living entities.

6 For the sake of brevity, I cannot elaborate on Latour's distinction between objects and things here. I refer here to the following quotation: 'A thing is, in one sense, an object out there and, in another sense, an issue very much in there, at any rate, a gathering' (Latour 2004: 242).

ANT's fundamental methodological principles

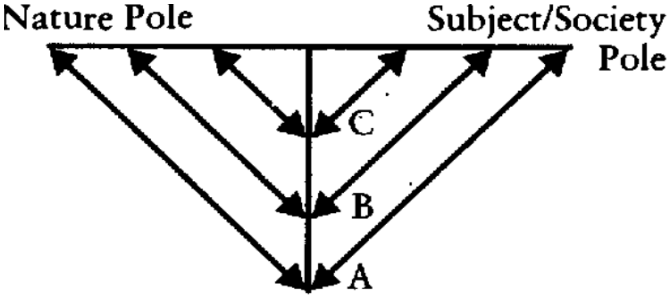
Latour summarizes ANT's program as follows:

> ANT [...] aims at describing the very nature of societies. But to do so it does not limit itself to human individual actors, but extends the word actor – or actant – to *non-human*, *non-individual* entities. (1996b: 369, emphasis in original)

This program, however, is often misunderstood as limiting itself to acknowledge the agency of non-humans. The fundamental methodological principle of ANT formulated in WHNBM, the 'principle of generalized symmetry' – Latour borrowed the expression from Michel Callon (Callon et al. 1986) –, is in fact more subtle. Indeed, in order to apply it, 'the anthropologist has to position himself [*sic*] at the median point where he [*sic*] can follow the attribution of both nonhuman and human properties' (1993: 96; see also the figure above).

Applied to the definition of what an actor is, this principle means to acknowledge that 'an actor is what is made to act by many others', that is, 'an "actor" in the hyphenated actor-network expression is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it' (Latour 2005: 46; on this point, see also Olson 1995: 63-64). This means that an actor's ontology (its shape, its properties) is never to be taken for granted. Rather, it is the result of a process of *attribution* of agency involving a broader *semiotic-material* or *sociomaterial* network.

To conclude, I once again return to my first narrative plane and draw on the case of the microphone and its role in weaving the hardcore collective. Is the status of actor of the microphone strictly semiotic, that is, a *description* in which the agency of weaving the collective and marking the subject is semiotically (and retroactively) attributed to it, either by everyday accounts or by the analysis itself? Or is it also material



SYMMETRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

All the collectives similarly constitute natures and cultures; only the scale of the mobilization varies

Figure 4: Latour (1993: 105).

(the complex properties of electric amplification, coupled with the material capacity of the microphone, as an object, to circulate)? Precisely both! These two examples underline the fluctuating and multivocal nature of both the terms 'object'[7] and 'actor'. Does the microphone 'act' as an 'object', or because it is a complex sociomaterial assemblage of materials whose fuzzy, fluctuating finitude can only be provisionally assured by its capture in language? Following the microphone as a quasi-object indeed implies not taking its ontological finitude for

7 The question of the very definition of what an object is, and, more broadly, of the ontological presuppositions and implications of the use of the notion has been the object of clarification, interrogation and controversy in philosophy and the social sciences. Both ANT and Michel Serres have been the objects of critiques for their alleged tendency to assume that the stability and ontological finitude of objects are self-evident (see e.g. Ingold 2012; Domínguez Rubio 2016; Denis and Pontille 2023). Other approaches and theoretical frameworks propose to focus on materials or materialities in general rather than objects and artifacts in particular (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Ingold 2012).

granted, but rather approaching it as an actor-*network*. This implies tracing the network gathered in it and thus 'dislocating' (Latour 2005) the examined situation by showing that it relies on the infrastructures and technical networks necessary for the concert, such as the electrical circuits, or the industrial networks that that produce objects such as the microphone. These actor-networks also acts in the re-composition of hardcore!

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Student intervention 14 & 15

The concept of anthropology is still very strange. ... I got the impression that a lot of what anthropology is has to do with emotional intelligence. To be able to insert oneself into a totally different life, to form a connection to people but also to be able to cope with the loneliness and sadness of fieldwork. Today, I feel like research is important but at what cost? Ethical questions such as is it okay to insert oneself into people's real life and 'studying' them. What emotional connections are being used to collect data. ... It is not easy to classify the work of an anthropologist simply as research and a year away can be very influential on the course of future life. After that the memories stay and having to cope with that is not easy.

S.R.

What are my own background, my beliefs, my assumptions on the people, place, practices I do research? What do I think I already know and what can I decenter to see other or new possibilities? → Power of imagination and openness to let go and courage to find parallel ways. What is the relationship between researchers + interlocutors? → they could be part of our audience later when the research is published! → responsibility → using deep listening as tool to recognize and honoring possibilities. Challenges → because we are looking often for soundbites, quick information that we try to kind of capture in a 'literature' as 'results'. → culture cannot be packaged! Instead of capturing we can show and find plurality. Using fantasy and imagination and openness instead of looking for quick answers, instead of quick responding honor the slow process and learn to accept ambiguity, dialectic, silence and the slowness of the practice!

Shereen S.

Queering

Serena Owusua Dankwa

'Can I give you a peg?' Janet asks, as I am switching off the recording device. We are sitting in the dimmed hall of Janet's friend Vida. It is a hot afternoon and the blue walls of the narrow hall do not help to reduce the heat crawling in through the entrance next to me, a door that needs to stay half open, even as we are talking about the intimate and the erotic – no need to perform secrecy by shutting doors closed. To my opposite, another opening. This one leads to a small kitchen stuffed with buckets, charcoaled pots, metal tubs and piled up mortars and pestles of all sizes. A rectangle of light falls on the heavy boots that Janet removed after returning from the military campus. Janet fixes me with her eyes, her compact, groomed hands resting on Vida's armchair that is still wrapped in plastic, possibly never to be unwrapped.

She had arranged that I interview her at Sister Vida's place. It promised more privacy than the buzzling compound Janet herself lived in, sharing rooms with her mother and brother. Sister Vida's compound was located in an airier corner of their busy working-class neighborhood of central Accra. Sister Vida was more than a friend. Not long after the two of them had become lovers, Vida decided to sponsor Janet so she could pursue an unpaid internship in Ghana's military vehicle repair services. I was eager to interview Janet that day. She was the first woman I had met in Ghana who was articulate about her same-sex desires and about 'knowing women' intimately – starting with her awareness of women's capacity for same-sex love (Dankwa 2021: 122), to the knowledge of how to transform passionate friendships into kinship. When we met, however, I was still unsure if I was ready to study a topic that I barely dared to address when talking to friends, let alone family, in Ghana. I hoped to gain clarity by listening to Janet,

by telling her about my research interest and getting to know more about her life – with and without women.

A few weeks earlier, when asking if I could interview her, Janet conveyed to my friend and research associate Josephine that she too took her time to 'interview' the women she liked before proposing love to them. Unimpressed by me being a doctoral candidate, she made her own sense of my desire to know about her and her life. Did she interpret my interest in studying female same-sex culture as a subdued way of indicating sexual interest? Later I wrote, one might argue that 'Janet chose to sexualize my intentions as a way of articulating her own interest in say, having a well-to-do "half-caste" girlfriend, somewhat "exotic", yet accessible – or in setting the romantic foundations for a lasting overseas connection' (Dankwa 2021: 9).

Touching on the erotic

Whatever inspired Janet to agree to me interviewing her in the sticky intimacy of Vida's hall, during our conversation something happened that felt clarifying. For almost two hours we had worked to put to words our diverging desires – starting with my desire to learn about female same-sex intimacies that were not articulated in LGBT terms and Janet's eager reconstruction of how she began to desire women. In a language she had learnt at school, she explained to me and perhaps herself, why she chose to 'do supi'. *Supi* is a polyvalent Ghanaian term for an intimate friend or girlfriendship that may include erotic intimacies and has been firmly associated with boarding school girlfriends. Janet's own phrasing of doing *supi* rather than being *supi*, suggests an erotic belonging to herself based on *doing* things, rather than *being* a certain type of person. While talking and listening, our desires seemed to align into seeking to understand why you would, against all odds, choose to do *supi* and how Janet,

without ever having attended boarding school, had found ways of knowing women.

I hesitated when she offered 'the peg'. With my limited English, I was not sure what a peg was, but felt that Janet was suggesting a meaningful way to seal our conversation. And indeed, the peg that turned out to be a light kiss placed on my cheek did not feel like a sexual promise. The intimate gesture summed up the proximity of the interview moment. It seemed to embody the touch we had already allowed to happen through our conversation. This touch became the basis for connecting and weathering the troubling inequalities between us for almost two decades now. This (staying in) touch was and is not always as gentle as the peg, but more like the rubbing described by Keguro Macharia in *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (2019). Understood as a relation of proximity, frottage is premised not only on shared struggles or identifications (in our case not necessarily race, gender and sexuality, though we both identified as women, black and same-sex desiring, but by parents hailing from neighboring villages and a preference for gender differentiation within same-sex intimacies), but on the constant friction and 'the difficult work of working through differences' (2019: 8).

'Can we allow ourselves to be touched or do we alone do the touching?' Anima Adjepong asks as they advocate for an 'erotic ethnography' (2022: 397). We have learned that touch and attachment jeopardize objectivity and are to be avoided in scientific research. The erotic in particular is associated with sex and thus with the risk of harassment and abuse. Framed as a source of danger and unethical behavior between researcher and researched, the erotic remains invisible and bodily presence is barely analyzed in the process of ethnographic knowledge production. In the 1990s, lesbian-feminist anthropologists began to explore 'the erotic

equation in fieldwork' (Newton 1993) and the productivity of allowing for touch and intimate attachment in the field (Wekker 2006), all whilst knowing that sex must not be the ultimate expression of the erotic.

More recently, queer anthropologists of the Afro-Atlantic have conceptualized the erotic beyond sex or sexuality (Allen 2011; Gill 2018), inspired by Audre Lorde's speech *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (1984). Lorde emphasized that knowing our capacity for (erotic) joy can be a transformative force, especially in the lives of women whose bodies have been s/exoticed and marginalized from power. To Lorde, the erotic is a powerful site of knowledge production that transpires sensual, spiritual and political energies. It is this erotic that Adjepong conjures, when asking us to lean 'into the erotic as a necessary modality for knowledge production' and permit 'ourselves to be touched even as we touch our interlocutors, these people who let us into their lives and share some of their most intimate selves with us' (2022: 397-8).

Touch emerges at the heart of a new queer and feminist anthropology that seeks to be accountable to the lives at stake. Concerned with transnational hierarchies and solidarities, it aims at queering normative projects of knowledge production. This essay sketches out a postcolonial and feminist focus on power and understands touch as the biggest potential of queer anthropology today.

Coming out and into an alphabetical order

Queer scholarship has been animated through its oscillation between theory and activism, identification and analytics, based on the stigmatized term 'queer' – signifying strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric in 16th century English – that was chiefly appropriated by activist movements and feminist scholars. By the early 1990s, philosophers and cultural theorists, mostly identifying as lesbian or queer, were hailed as the founders of

queer theory. Inspired by the feminist movements and HIV/AIDS activist collectives, such us ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) initiated in 1987 in a lesbian and gay community center in New York, queer theory sought to resist not only heteronormativity but the 'regimes of the normal' (Warner 1993: xxvi). Both in activist and academic registers, queer became a key term for a critique of power embedded in sexual, gendered and other regimes of categorization.

Today, queer has become an umbrella term for non-normative sexual and gendered identities. It is often used synonymously with LGBT+ (in its many different iterations) and as such incorporated into international human rights language and policies. But what happens to queer resistance, when it is mainstreamed into policy frameworks and commodified into consumer capitalist logics? And should Janet or Vida and other same-sex oriented women be considered queer, even as they are not using this term themselves? Answering these questions requires a brief look at the dominant North Atlantic representations of the LGBT+ acronym and the imperative of coming out.

First, the act of coming-out and verbally embracing and testifying to a non-heteronormative identity has become the hegemonic signifier for being a liberated 'LGBT person'. The emphasis on a narrative of sexual self-disclosure is tied to 'technologies of self' (Foucault 1998), rooted in Europe's 'history of sexuality' (Foucault 1980). It goes along with a visibility and rights, that are beneficial to financially secure metropolitan lesbians and gays, but less compelling to queers living in the peripheries or relying on family and friends to make ends meet. In North Atlantic settings, coming out narratives and articulations of sexual liberalism are yard sticks within asylum and migration regimes: queer refugees are interpellated to produce a coherent coming out story when seeking asylum (not only) in Switzerland and migrants who

want to be naturalized need to perform their level of homo-tolerance (Mesquita and Purtschert 2016).

Queer affect theorists argue that the emphasis on coming-out flattens out and displaces a range of less tangible, unbridled or troubling, but potentially productive queer feelings, such as shame or loneliness (Love 2007). Black queer scholars of the Caribbean critique the (supposed) privilege of coming-out and seek to dethrone 'the closet' (Sedgwick 1990) since the metaphor does not apply universally, but speaks of the bedrooms of white middle-classes. As Omiseke N. Tinsley remarks in *Thiefing Sugar* not everyone has their private bedroom (2010: 25). Janet, too, lived without owning her closet. She kept her belongings in 'Ghana-must-go bags' under her mother's bed and found ways of knowing women without much privacy.

Secondly, the LGBT+ acronym is a global signifier for non-cis-hetero-normativity. Its enumeration of anglophone self-identities reflects the power of naming. In its different iterations, the acronym seeks to be inclusive, to the point where a '+' is added that gestures at terms to come that have not been incorporated yet. Its success as an international signifier ties in with a neoliberal political grammar, in which labels are the prerequisite to claim rights and recognition. Its reduction of erotic/gendered subjectivities to clear-cut labels, however, inevitably leads to the call for additional terms and categories. Thus, the acronym's expansiveness mirrors the antagonism of desires that are easily incorporated into late capitalist discourse: the desire to belong to a 'tribe' with its own flag – a rainbow nation, so to speak – dovetailing with the desire for individual uniqueness. Ironically, we are incited to venture out of existing boxes and express our unique selves only to be channeled into a celebration of self-expressions that can be reabsorbed into an alphabetical order.

Advocating for an overarching term for the anthropological study of alternative genders and sexualities, anthropologists have critiqued LGBT's 'logic of enumeration' (Boellstorff 2007). Tom Boellstorff posits that 'political and theoretical efficacy can exist only through naming each category of selfhood or experience: women, men, transgendered persons' (2007: 19). By extension, this logic also reflects in enumerations of analytical categories such as gender, sexuality, race or disability; they lose substance when listed for purely representational purposes. Enumerations presume 'that concepts name preexisting entities and relations, rather than asking how the social is produced and sustained through acts of representation, including scholarly and activist representation' (2007: 19). Subsequently, 'lesbian and gay anthropology' was renamed 'queer anthropology', for queer's capacity to exceed identitarian logics of representation. Meanwhile queer activists themselves are joking about the 'alphabet people' and usurping a logic of enumeration.

As the LGBT acronym has gained much traction, it is ridiculed and attacked by conservative politicians across the world. In Ghana, where the acronym has been mediatized as an expression of western deviance and neocolonialism, nationalists conjure the specter of 'LGBTTTIQQAAP+'. Additional '+' are added to emphasize LGBT+++'s 'exaggerated length and alleged absurdity' (Adomako 2002: 83). Animated by American 'pro-family' evangelists, the moralizing goes: What will be the next letter in this never-ending alphabet of perversion and aberrations?

Meanwhile, African activists are pragmatically adopting LGBT+ and other acronyms that cater to sexual rights policies. Aware that these terms and concepts do not reflect everyday lives and concepts of people on the ground, activists deploy them to be legible and eligible to international

funding.[1] Queer African artists are at the forefront of (consciously) mispronouncing, respelling and playfully challenging western categories of identity. Queer African scholars are thus pointing not so much at LGBT's inability to include African terms, but at postcolonial modes of queering that ought not to be captured in labels. In *Vocabularies of the Non-Normative* (2015), zethu Matebeni and Thabo Msibi hint at ways in which Binyavanga Wainaina and other artists and activist-scholars neither reject nor fully embrace Euro-American designations, but playfully bend and queer them into African grammars.

From the art of disturbance to queering anthropology

German philosopher Antke Engel understands queer as 'die Kunst der Störung', an art that is not so much about outrightly opposing hetero-norms or gender binaries, but playful disturbing them. Just as in Judith Butler's (1990) theorization of drag, gender binaries are simultaneously reproduced and subverted – as the boundaries between original and copy, real and fake are blurred, binaries appear to be less imposing. Queer theorizing did not just inspire activists in the US, but resonates with slogans such as 'queer is the privilege to imagine more' by Sündikat, a queer-feminist platform started in Zurich in 2004 by activists who identify as non-binary, trans, black or queer of color today (Rosen and Keller 2019: 296). 'Privilege' in connection to the originally stigmatized term 'queer' indexes a refusal to be seen as lacking. Equipped with a vibrant life of imagination, Sündikat sought to disturb commodified lesbian and gay identities

1 Medical policy terms like MSM (men having sex with men) have made it into everyday parlance and the same may happen with UN abbreviations like SOGI (for Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities).

and Zurich's (gay) gentrification.[2]

Queering has been theorized as a way of making complex forms of being imaginable in a process that does not only work its way through opposition but seeks new horizons of disturbing. This queering strategically refrains from either multiplying or dissolving gender and sexuality rather than striking against binaries and thereby hastening into new closures (Engel 2015: 194). Aware of the ways in which individual desires for sexual liberation are usurped by late capitalist logics, Engel advocates a strategy that goes *Wider die Eindeutigkeit* (2002) [against unambiguesness]. Aware of the proximity of queer and neoliberal politics, this *queering* resides in collective processes of 'VerUneindeutigung' [ambiguation] and redistribution (Engel 2015: 196-201).

Nevertheless, queer is oftentimes equated with anti-normative North Atlantic politics of resistance. Despite its complex articulations among activists and intellectuals in different parts of the world, queer theory is firmly associated with queer studies in the US and analyses of North Atlantic cultural texts. Moreover, the ways in which queer, 'in academic parlance', denotes 'anti-normativity' has prompted scholars of Africa to doubt the usefulness of queer theory (see Hendriks 2021: 398). Thus, Rachel Spronk and S.N. Nyeck, who understand queer as 'a set of predefined gender characteristics, modes of behavior or orientations of desire ... suggest twisting the term "queer" by combining it with the verb "to query": querying' (2021: 392). In African contexts with their deep entanglements between the normative and the non-normative, querying aims at accommodating 'the queer affordances of

2 In 2009, Sündikat mobilized a range of differently positioned queers to organize an autonomous 'off-pride', an alternative to Zurich's LGBT pride march. However fleeting, the alliance and contestations enabling this 'queerfest' (https://www.offpride.ch/) to get off the ground were formative for scholars, artists and activists, including myself, and point at the cross-fertilization of (queer) intellectual and political desires.

everyday life' (Spronk and Nyeck 2021: 395). Disidentifying with queer *theories* made in the US, Africanists may overlook how lesbian-feminist and queer ethnographies have already queryied queer, by documenting how the non-normative articulates itself through norms and vice versa without declaring their interlocutors as 'queer' (Gaudio 2009; Wekker 2006).

Queer loses some of its analytical potential for African contexts that could be considered non-normative in themselves vis-à-vis hegemonic Euro-American concepts of gender, kinship and sexuality. I did not think of traders and successful big women like 'Sister Vida' as queer. She complies with matrilineal Akan standards of strength and respectable femininity, while also 'sugar mothering' and erotically engaging with younger lovers such as Janet. There is much reason to believe that historically, erotic same-sex friendships among the matrilineal Akan were seen as neither deviant nor normative, but did simply not register in competition to the institution of kinship and procreation. Still, we should not pour out queering as analytic with the bath water of North Atlantic closets and coming out narratives.

Queering, to me, implies that we not only query monolithic understandings of queer theory and disturb the logic of enumeration, but interrogate the ongoing coloniality of transnational studies of sexuality. This pertains to cross-cultural documentations of same-sex and gender-transgressing 'behaviors' that were informed by an 'ethnopornographic' gaze on racialized bodies (Tamale 2011). Thus, racist reports of explorers and colonial administrators provided the basis for anthropological 'ethnocartographies' that hierarchically mapped out same-sex institutions of different societies (Weston 1993). Cultural relativists and later generations of lesbian and gay anthropologists generalized on these accounts in order to dismantle the homophobia within their own (academic) cultures (Dankwa 2021).

The reader *Unsettling Queer Anthropology* (Weiss 2024) points at the coloniality of anthropological documentations of sexuality, but also identifies the reorientations and departures of a new queer anthropology – departures that have largely been overlooked by queer cultural studies of the 2000s. Cultural critiques with a background in English literature consolidated 'a view of anthropology as just "data" – and colonialist, voyeuristic, objectifying data at that' (Weiss 2024: 57), while neglecting their own disciplinary situatedness. The critique of queer studies' whiteness and gayness and the call for transnational queer studies (Eng et al. 2005: 12) was accompanied by a disdain for the empirical. Today, ethnographic and less theoretical contributions of lesbian anthropologists and queer feminists of color are barely visible in queer theory's intellectual history. In her own retelling of queer theory's origins, Margot Weiss (2024: 55) calls upon black queer feminists such as Audre Lorde whose theoretical reflections were firmly grounded in the autoethnographic and the everyday lives of women on the margins.

Horizons of touch

When I embarked on my doctoral research, there were no publications on 'queer' women in West Africa. Had I believed my Ghanaian fathers in the diaspora that 'homosexuals' did not exist in West Africa, had I listened to the British anthropology professor who indicated that the topic was 'weird' and had no relevance, or the Africanist historian who suggested it was too difficult to raise material on such a tabooed subject, I would have not found Janet. It was the ethnographic encounter and the mutual touch, however fleeting, that opened up the possibility of unlearning (homo)sexuality – inspired by early queer theories. Once the infamous 'closet' is dethroned and considered to be but one metaphor among many, some queer theories made in the US do offer routes into studying

intimacies in Africa and elsewhere: I read the relational same-sex dynamics against *Butch/Femme* theories (Martin 1994), Janet's styles resonated with Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) and Janet's insistence on the 'enjoyment' of 'doing *supi*' reminded me of the power Lorde – who has been considered a 'black queer theorist' avant la letter (Gill 2018) – afforded to the erotic and the 'joy which we know ourselves to be capable of' while living precarious lives (Lorde 1984: 57).

Above all, queer analytical approaches made me doubt the universal significance assigned to gender by 'western' feminism (Oyéwùmí 1997) to the point where my questions regarding Janet's erotic relationships and how they shaped her self-understanding became blurry. Preoccupied with Akan concepts of personhood, property, mothering and trading that pertained not only to women who love women, I worried over circling too far away from my original object of inquiry and ending up elsewhere. Weiss considers the circular push and pull of inquiring supposedly queer intimacies and the longings for an *elsewhere* as constitutive of a new queer anthropology: '[Q]ueer indexes that desire to reach beyond theoretical or conceptual closure to an *elsewhere*, the frustration when one's desires are thwarted and then the return and reopening of new horizons' (Weiss 2022: 2). In this understanding queer anthropology takes shape as a 'political-intellectual desire' that lingers between a focus on same-sex or gender-transgressive subjectivities and queer as a much broader horizon. By bearing with the frustration that objects of study slip away, we may query and perhaps transform normative processes of knowledge production.

As anthropologists, we try to do justice to the terms and metaphors shaping our interlocutors' (same-sex) worlds. Still, we come with analytical framings that are shaped by our own scholarly locations and identities. My own investment into queering is inspired not so much by the aspirational vagueness queer holds, but by the ways in which it has been appropriated

by feminist scholars on the African continent (Ekine and Abbas 2013; Sika and Okech 2019). There, too, frustrations are being expressed – frustrations not necessarily with queer's slipperiness, but with generalization on African homophobia that do not account for the extractivism and necropolitics endangering queer as much as other African lives. In *On Being Area Studied* (2016) Macharia points at the coloniality in the growing field of Queer African Studies. His 'complaint' addresses US-centered African Studies that are absorbing queer African voices as 'data' or 'evidence', while remaining indifferent to African conceptual frames (Macharia 2016: 185).

Against the background of today's nationalist Ghanaian anti-LGBT+ politics, it is not farfetched to consider Janet's cherishing of her erotic self, her embodied knowledge and secrecy around same-sex passion, as a way of tacitly queering the laws and moralities once introduced under colonial rule. But is the insistence that colonialism brought homophobia to Africa enough to decolonize queer anthropology? Is it enough to assert that (African) languages that use non-gendered pronouns are quintessentially queer? Both queer-feminist and decolonial approaches aim at transforming modes of knowledge production towards being accountable to the lives we study – the lives we inevitably touch and that touch us. This process goes far beyond authorizing indigenous terms as the new queer.

Researcher and researched study and desire each other's knowledge, my encounters with Janet and other knowing women taught me. And more than that, we touch and are touched by each other without any sexual desires involved. Understanding touch through the transformative energies the erotic harbors, implies that 'we attend to the political and spiritual alongside sensuality' (Gill 2018: 9). That which moves between the bodies of researchers and researched, including the erotic, is political in as much as it is framed by the workings of power. Our moments of intimacy and the proximities

nurtured by prolonged touch go with friction and frottage (Macharia 2019). Thus, if touch is to stretch our scholarly horizons, we need to interrogate not only our situatedness as engaged anthropologists who desire new modes of knowledge production, but face up to the simultaneity of difference and mutual identification, by working through the frottage in all its materiality.

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Student intervention 16 & 17

What does anthropology [do] today? Anthropology is more than just a subject, for me it is almost a sort of philosophy. In anthropology you don't only learn how to deal with things externally but also to reflect [on] oneself. ... Anthropology gives you a broader perspective on life as a whole concept.

Anonymous

I also understand the importance of my social relationships on a new level since I have been able to concern myself with anthropology academically. I see them as a safety net that I unconsciously create. ... I am given tools to categorize my daily thoughts and needs. And more importantly: I can continue to think about it from always new perspectives.

Joëlle Martz

Visualizing
Olena Sobolieva

Diving into visuality when exploring the question 'What is anthropology?' reveals the intricate interplay between different types of knowledge production and cultural communication. Anthropology, fundamentally concerned with the study of humans, provides insight into how visual elements – art, symbols, media – shape and mirror cultures. Conversely, visuality shapes the discipline of anthropology itself, encouraging scholars to consider not only *what* they see but *how* they see, thus challenging their assumptions about and methods of representation, and broadening the field's engagement with sensory and embodied experiences.

The phrase 'a picture can speak for itself' is often invoked to highlight the power of visual representation. While commonly used to describe the power of a single image, this saying also underscores the impact an image can have on people. It suggests that visual representations can capture details, emotions and cultural nuances that may be difficult to express in words. Images can provoke strong emotional responses and provide rich data that seem to exceed the impact of textual descriptions. In addition, instead of simply providing information, a single image can elicit different interpretations influenced by the viewers' distinctive cultural background, history and personal experience. This interpretive richness makes visual media an especially compelling – and, I will show, particularly complex – field for anthropological research.

During my MA research, I encountered the complexity of working with and interpreting visual material. I gathered a large collection of photos of traditional Crimean Tatar art, embroidery in particular, from museums, private collections and various publications. As I was facing hundreds of expressive images from different sources, I grappled with how exactly I

should describe this material. What exactly do these pictures tell me? What can I say about them? Perhaps these pictures are so expressive that they can speak for themselves. Then why would I be needed as an anthropologist? In the archives, I came across the diary of Evgenia Spaska, an ethnologist and researcher of folk art who studied and systematized drawings of Crimean Tatar embroidery in the early twentieth century. She was later repressed by the Soviet authorities in the 1930s. In her diary, she wrote 'mass visual material is a lot – hundreds, thousands of homogeneous things, which immediately frighten with their number ... Work with mass material, when it is conducted without a certain strictly thought-out plan, is too difficult, frankly, anxious, nervous work' (Spaska 1926: 66). As Spaska's remarks reveal, studying visual culture, using visual data in research and communicating one's findings through visual images, is a significant challenge for researchers. One challenge can be the amount of collected imagery, as it appears in Spaska's case. Another challenge for me was how to combine two forms of narrative – visual and textual – and how to describe in words what is depicted.

While the saying 'a picture can speak for itself' emphasizes the power of images, it is crucial to question its assumptions, particularly in the context of anthropology, where the visual representation of cultural realities is fraught with ethical and epistemological concerns. In the following, I will approach visual representation from four angles: in terms of its relation to (1) the production of knowledge, (2) observation, (3) visual anthropology and (4) the limit of visualizing.

Visualizing, knowledge production and power

First, I propose to consider visuality from an epistemological point of view, namely as a means of constructing knowledge about the world and humanity. Our understanding of the world is profoundly shaped by visual representation. Both

as a tool and as a subject, visuality plays a crucial role in the development of knowledge and ideas across various social science disciplines, including the history of art, sociology and anthropology (Hockings et al. 2014; Rampley 2019). In anthropology, in particular, visual materials such as photographs, films drawings and sketches in field dairies have long been recognized as essential tools for capturing and conveying cultural meaning. In their methodological reflections on the work with visual information in anthropology, Hockings et al. emphasize that images, due to their capacity to seemingly freeze forms in time, are as essential as words to portray the wide diversity and singularities of human existence:

> These details are in the anthropologist's photograph because it is itself the index of the presence of the human being, who is there, who is living, who is existing and whose details are also an index of his singularity. ... The image thus becomes an epistemological necessity in order to get at the details of human presence. (2014: 449)

Ethnographic films, they add, offer a subjective experience, capturing mental phenomena in ways that words often fail to express. Visual media counteracts the abstraction of written language, preserving the complexity of human life and cultural phenomena.

Continuing in our reflections on the epistemological potential of visuality, we should also focus on the sensory and embodied quality of perception. Humans have different senses that help them grasp and process information about the world around them: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and even proprioception. Visuals and sounds are dominant media for communication and information. This prompts the need to examine the divide between visual and auditive or oral information. Maria Kakavoulia (2008) brings to our attention that this distinction echoes Michel Foucault's

semiotic division between seeing and saying. Writing itself is a transformation of auditive into visual information. The association between vision and knowledge has deep roots in Western philosophy, where seeing is considered a primary mode of understanding. In Western societies, vision is regarded as providing direct ('objective') access to reality. Visual and cognitive abilities are intricately linked in a number of ways. According to Tim Ingold:

> Of all the implications of the contrast between vision and hearing, the most consequential has been the notion that vision, since it is untainted by the subjective experience of light, yields a knowledge of the outside world that is rational, detached, analytical and atomistic. Hearing, on the other hand, since it rests on the immediate experience of sound, is said to draw the world into the perceiver, yielding a kind of knowledge that is intuitive, engaged, synthetic and holistic. (2000: 245)

Knowledge and cognition are metaphorically associated with concepts of light: 'clear' vision, enlightenment, sight, insight and so on (Grimshaw 2001: 5; Kakavoulia 2008: 214). Post-Enlightenment European societies embraced the dominance of the visual over the auditive in the construction of knowledge about the world. Information that can be visualized in the form of paintings, photos, films or even written text is considered the most objective, unlike oral or acoustic information.

In Western European societies, the value of visuality is at the heart of not only knowledge production but also power hierarchies. The dominance of vision peaked in the late 18th century as modernity's projects unfolded. The conscious manipulation of vision, images and the concept of the 'gaze' became essential practices for constructing modern systems of power and social control (Kakavoulia 2008: 215). A notable example is Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, an idealized prison

where a single central observer can see all prisoners while remaining unseen (Foucault 2008). The contemporary world is heavily dominated by visual phenomena. The concept of the panopticon is often referenced in order to understand the contemporary moment marked by the dominance of media and digitalization of social interactions and relations between individuals and power (Mathiesen 2017). In both past and present, symbols of surveillance and control have taken many forms – from the ancient Middle Eastern 'evil eye' and 17th century British houses with an eye-shaped façade (see figure 1), to modern surveillance cameras. Each serves as a reminder that the gaze of others can exert significant influence over our behavior. Whether it is the watchful eye of the gods, the prying lens of a surveillance camera or the scrutinizing gaze of social media followers, the sense of being constantly observed can be a powerful tool of social control. Despite their differences in historical, social and political contexts, these symbols share a common function. Ultimately, it matters little who is watching – be it the gods, a security officer or your followers on Instagram. Visibility, transparency and constant observation may be considered to be a more efficient form of social control than force and violence.

Visualizing and observing in the field

Secondly, I want to talk about visualizing as a method. The distance between researchers and the people they study in anthropological inquiry has taken root in the key methodological tool of (participant) observation. Observation has evolved into a foundational method in anthropology, with the extensive vocabulary of 'visuality' serving as a key instrument for accessing and understanding human practices. Conducting observations whilst engaging with actors and participating in social dynamics is an important component of ethnographic research. Observation allows researchers to learn from their environments and gain

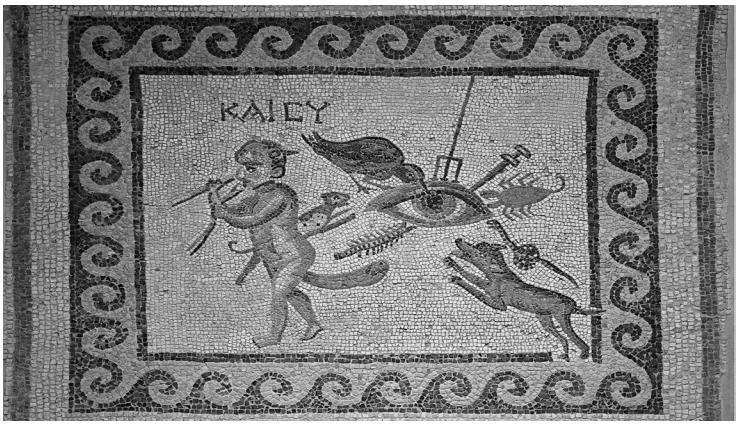

Figure 1: Roman mosaic from Antiochia, House of the Evil Eye. Hatay Arkeoloji Müzesi, Antakya.

insights that appear to be more readily available than if they were to be gained through other sources. Through this process and practice, researchers identify patterns, develop hypotheses and formulate conclusions. Moreover, 'in a sense all social research is a form of participant observation because we cannot study the social world without being a part of it' (Aktinson and Hammersley 1998: 249). About anthropology's main method, Nancy Foster states:

> Anthropology textbooks and handbooks provide extensive guidance, but the essentials are easy to relate. To develop observational perception, sit and watch, listen and sense. You need not take notes; instead, become immersed in sights, sounds, aromas, temperatures, and other ambient qualities of human life. To gain further understanding, look for patterns of movement and practice. Watch people interact with each other and with their environment. Notice how people are similar and different. Write as much as you can, as fast as you can. Make maps or use codes and make counts for quicker data collection. (2015)

Forster's text about participant observation is notably rich in sensory vocabulary, particularly terms related to vision (*looking*, *watching* and *observing*). At the same time, anthropological research aims to explore how sensory experiences are embedded into social contexts. Sensorial anthropology explores how different cultures use sensory symbols and contrasts these with Western models that prioritize sight over hearing (Geurts 2003). Tim Ingold's (2000) work proposes a new approach that integrates all senses, including movement, to build knowledge. This approach moves away from the traditional focus on sight and instead considers how we perceive the world through a combination of sight, hearing and movement.

Anthropological writing was started by academics who were not ethnographers or field researchers. Early anthropological writing was produced by 'armchair' anthropologists – scholars who assembled data remotely through the accounts of missionaries, administrators and travelers, without direct observation or immediate experience of the subject of study. Lewis H. Morgan (1881) is credited with taking the first step in the field by studying Iroquois kinship systems in the mid-18th century, followed by Franz Boas (1889) with his study in Baffin Land (1883-84). The shift to fieldwork was significant, as it allowed anthropologists to directly engage with people and their cultural practices, making them visible and audible to researchers. Natural sciences, with their use of illustrations in taxonomy, significantly influenced early anthropology by encouraging a visual approach to studying culture. Inspired by 'field sciences' disciplines like zoology and botany, early fieldwork based anthropology emphasized documenting aspects of culture that could be captured with images, a trend also adopted by 19th century travelers who filled their ethnographies with visual records of cultural artifacts and practices (MacDougall 2005: 215). At the turn

of the 20th century, anthropologists studied 'authentic' cultures in geographically 'remote' and limited areas in their 'natural' environment and conditions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 6-7).

Bronisław Malinowski is a pioneering figure in anthropology, renowned for his ethnographic fieldwork. During his time with the Trobriand Islanders, he took photographs documenting their everyday life, rituals and material culture. These photos became crucial not only as visual aids for his written works, prominently *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, but also as valuable anthropological resources in their own right (Malinowski 2013 [1922]; for a discussion, see Goin 1997). Malinowski's ethnographic methods influenced the later development of visual anthropology, where photography and film became vital tools for capturing and presenting cultural realities. His insistence on immersing himself into the daily life of a community laid the groundwork for later anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, who made significant contributions to ethnographic photography and filmmaking (Sullivan 1999).

Perhaps every anthropologist has experienced firsthand how central to field research is the visualization of the cultural phenomena under study. For me, this became obvious when I studied the practices of domestic Islam of the Crimean Tatars (Sobolieva 2017). Before attending collective home prayers, I recorded a series of interviews about this phenomenon. In each interview, my interlocutors would narrate their story up to the moment of the prayer itself, and then summarize it in the style of: 'and then we read the Qur'an'. It was only when I attended these collective prayers myself that I realized what it meant, 'to read the Qur'an'. Reading the Qur'an meant following a very complex and branched ritualistic structure, and this process was accompanied by certain movements, repetitions and collective choral singing. I saw certain objects

on the table that had a specific purpose and symbolism: candy, which denotes the Qur'an read and presented by one person, and pieces of sugar, which symbolize the Surah Yasin, which was read 40 times the day before and presented by guests. All of these details were revealed to me only after I saw them with my own eyes. In the interviews, my interlocutors did not share these nuances with me, perhaps because I was a representative of a different community or religion, or perhaps because it was difficult for them to describe all these details to a stranger. Since I did not ask about these details, they did not talk about them. But after what I saw at the ceremony, I knew what I needed to ask.

Visual anthropology

Thirdly, I would like to consider how visual anthropology is currently being institutionalized through publishing activities in academic journals and the efforts of societies and associations like the Society for Visual Anthropology and the Visual Anthropology Network. Visual anthropologists focus on the cultural dimensions of visual media and art, but sometimes also strive to represent anthropological data visually. They explore both the visual elements of culture and the media that help visualize data. These two often coincide: it is much easier, for instance, to display a photo of an artwork than to describe it using words. The subfield's focus encompasses a broad range of cultural art forms such as dance, ritual, jewelry and body adornment, and frequently intersects with the anthropology of art (Rampley 2019).

For many decades, anthropologists have accumulated vast archives of visual materials, like photos and videos. MacDougall emphasizes that there was often a methodological problem when working with these images. Photos, in particular, he writes:

> appeared to show everything and yet, like the physical body, remained annoyingly mute. The visual world was like the husk you removed to get at the conceptual and verbal worlds inside, but having done so you couldn't in good conscience throw it away. (MacDougall 2005: 214)

Visual sources are indeed a great challenge for anthropologists, as, often, fieldwork results in hundreds of photos and dozens of videos in our archives. These amassed visual materials are seldom adequately analyzed or even used at all. But at the same time, they are an elementary part of fieldwork, just like field diaries or audio recordings of field interviews.

As was already pointed out, the discipline's engagement with photography and films as media has been longstanding and is largely conditioned by the development of fieldwork methods. Photography as a medium, while remaining an integral part of fieldwork, rarely found methodological reflection within academic texts (Grimshaw 2001: 3).

But in recent decades, new and multimodal aspects of working with visuality in anthropological research have been raised in scholarly discussions. For Elizabeth Edwards, photographs are ultimately

> evidence of affect, of how people feel, and think and negotiate their worlds, and as such photography and photographs are at the very heart of the anthropological endeavour. What was simply unproblematised evidence has become affect, and the processes of affect have, in their turn, become an evidential force in anthropology as a humanistic discipline. (2015: 248)

Edwards proposes to rethink conventional photographic analysis and to reveal photography's deeper connections with history, memory, identity and cultural heritage. In recent years, anthropologists have debated how to apply knowledge produced in the discipline in different social

projects. Sarah Pink (2011) notices the potential of applied visual anthropology in making visible the experiences of individuals who are often marginalized or overlooked. This approach, working through media like video diaries, documentaries and photovoice projects, allows people to bring their stories and emotions to the forefront, offering a more accessible narrative than academic texts. Already in the mid-20th century, Jean Rouch, a French filmmaker and anthropologist, pioneered a collaborative style that involved his subjects in the storytelling, aiming to capture the fluid, dynamic nature of human experience. By using tools such as the camera, visual anthropology can explore emotional and sensory dimensions that are difficult to express verbally, adding depth to the understanding of cultural practices and individual experiences (Pink 2011). This approach blurs the boundaries between scientific, applied, public and activist anthropology, challenging traditional definitions and creating new possibilities for engagement.

Limitation of visual representation

Fourth, I would like to discuss how the methodology of visual anthropology pushes us as researchers to reflect on the limitations of our methods. Still and moving images create the illusion of greater objectivity and evidence. However, visual representations are by no means neutral, let alone objective. As Marc Henri Piault et al. (2015: 172) observe, even in spontaneous moments, individuals being filmed are aware of the observers, both present and beyond the camera, which influences their behavior. This awareness shapes their behavior, often leads them to reflect on their own culture and identity, which may involve exaggeration, deviation or masking. The presence of the observer thus shapes self-representation, creating a dynamic exchange between both sides.

We must also bear in mind that while photographs and images may seem to enhance objectivity, they are never neutral. The way an image is perceived depends heavily on the viewer's cultural background, biases and expectations, as indeed is the capacity to 'read a picture' in the first place (Hauser-Schäublin 2024). What might 'speak' to one person could be meaningless or even misleading to another. In anthropology, the same photograph of a ritual or landscape could be interpreted in vastly different ways depending on the viewer, raising questions about the reliability of visual data.

The important limitation of visual methods is that not everything can be captured or adequately expressed through images. Complex social relationships, historical context and unspoken cultural norms remain often invisible in photographs or film. For instance, an image of a group of people might give no indication of the intricate kinship ties, power dynamics or historical tensions that define their interactions. Anthropological inquiry often deals with these subtle, underlying forces that a single image, or even a series of images, may fail to convey.

I will give you an example of how many layers of meaning and interpretation can make up an image. Figure 2 is a photo of an elderly Crimean Tatar woman making coffee in the yard of her house on a small portable stove. We can start with the basic visual characteristics presented in this image. We can assume that the photo is old, taken in the first half of the 20th century. We can examine her clothes: they are dark, and she has a *fez* hat and a scarf on her head, but her hair and face are not fully covered. We can also examine the objects that are in the frame: a copper *dzhezve* coffee pot and a small stove that is obviously made for cooking outdoors, in public places. We can make some assumptions about the social practices of coffee consumption among Crimean Tatars.

Figure 2: Crimean Tatar woman, photo by Usain Bodaninsky, 1924-25. Bakhchisaray Historical, Cultural and Archaeological Museum-Reserve.

Perhaps that is almost all that the image itself can offer us. The image itself cannot tell the story behind it. In particular, the story about the fact that this picture is part of an ethnographic photo collection. This collection of photographic negatives on glass is now kept in a museum in the city of Bakhchisarai, the former medieval capital of the Crimean Khanate. This collection was the result of an expedition organized by a group of ethnographers and archaeologists in 1924-25. What made this expedition so special was that it was organized not from the center of the imperial metropolis, Saint Petersburg or Moscow, but by researchers from Crimea. The organizer of this expedition, and probably the author of the photo, was a Crimean Tatar, the first director of the Bakhchisaray Museum, Usein Bodaninsky. He was assisted by another Crimean Tatar scholar, an orientalist, Osman Akchorakly. A few years later, these two would be rounded up by the secret police of the Soviet Union and shot in the prison yard, as would many other representatives of the Crimean Tatar

intelligentsia. Some years after that, the entire Crimean Tatar community would be subjected to ethnic cleansing and deported to other regions of the Soviet Union.

This collection of negatives on glass would remain in the archives of the Bakhchisarai Museum, undescribed, unexplored and hidden from the eyes of visitors. Only decades later, after the return of Crimean Tatars to Crimea, this photo, together with other images taken by Usein Bodaninsky, would be returned from the archive boxes to the exhibition of the museum and included in guidebooks. Later, it was depicted on postcards collections, was represented many times in the drawings and paintings of Crimean Tatar artists, and a video was made about it in the Crimean Tatar local media.

This example shows how much there is behind an image by itself and that, while images without context may say a lot, even more remains unsaid and unrevealed. This example also shows how a photo can be used to articulate and trace cultural and historical circumstances. Through the description of the context of this photo, I tried to tell the story of colonization, repression, production of local knowledge, return of cultural heritage to the repressed community, and the visualization of belonging and inheritance. Thus, while visuals are powerful, they are not always complete. Pictures most often work well together with a broad contextualization of the phenomena they depict. We can say that they require careful contextualization and what Clifford Geertz termed 'thick description'.

Visuality holds a special, if not always easy or straightforward, role in anthropological research. Visuality is a metaphor, instrument and subdiscipline, among other qualities. Visual research methods are important in ethnographic field studies, especially in complementing participant observation. When we say that 'a picture speaks

for itself', we emphasize that the power of visuals lies in a strong sense of evidence and affective impact on the viewer. At the same time visual representation has certain limitations. Visualization requires the researcher's deep engagement with the various cultural nuances of the case being presented. Photography and video are predominantly visual, which limits their ability to convey other sensory aspects like smell, touch or sound that may be crucial to understanding a cultural context fully. Relying mostly on images may lead to reduction of social meanings. Complex social interactions may be difficult to capture in a single image or video clip, particularly when subtle cues, body language or social dynamics play a role. In anthropology, visual methods are invaluable, but they must be used carefully, in conjunction with textual and contextual analysis.

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Student intervention 18

I am home now, sitting at my little writing desk in front of a notebook sheet. My hand is holding a blunt pencil. My mind is filled with sharp impressions of ... [an] ethnographic film ..., which I watched a while ago. The leading emotions that overwhelm me as I resume the faces and phrases of the film's characters in my memory are bitterness, fascination, and 'awakening'. ... I can say that almost all ethnographic media products based on personal storytelling evoke in me a mix of these three emotions – bitterness, fascination, and awakening, in varying proportions. What about this ... ethnographic film I've watched that makes me feel the bitterness? I think the reason is that the people in the focus of the research often can't escape the overhanging sticky effect of objectification. ... But what evokes the emotion of fascination is how contemporary anthropological media products struggle to crush this global objectification of 'the Others' with cinematic techniques, detailed contextualization, and deep personal immersion during interviews with their characters. It gives back the agency to them. ... [About] the third mentioned emotion/feeling of 'awakening', I can say that my inner revelation primarily causes it. The honest realization that before assuming that I know something, it is incredibly productive to take the 'I don't know yet' position. Maintaining such a fresh view of things triggers an inevitable awakening, a sincere revision of used stereotypical attitudes. And I can confidently say that today, I see this ability to induce such an awakening from the illusory world of habitual prejudices as the primary mission of anthropology.

Anastasiia Yaroshenko

Reading recommendations 1

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Reading recommendations 2

Abu-Lughod, L. 1991. Writing against Culture. In: E.G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press. [Serena Owusua Dankwa]

> Abu-Lughod's classic feminist advocacy for writing 'ethnographies of the particular' encouraged me to find 'ways of writing about lives so as to constitute them as less other' (1991: 149).

Bear, L. 2015. *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt Along a South Asian River*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press. [Jon Schubert]

> A tremendous source of inspiration to think about economic flows across scales while keeping it grounded in careful ethnography.

Berry, M.J, C.C. Argülles, S. Cordis, S. Ihmoud and E.V. Estrada. 2017. Toward a Fugitive Anthropology: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field. *Cultural Anthropology* 32: 537-565. [Serena Owusua Dankwa]

> This multi-vocal analysis is one of the few articles that addresses the embodied experiences of racialized and gendered anthropologists, and the violence we may experience while doing engaged ethnographic fieldwork.

Castro, E.V. de 1998. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4: 469-488. [Zainabu Jallo]

> This text emphasizes the significance of incorporating non-dominant perspectives into anthropological discussions. It advocates for acknowledging Indigenous theories that shape how humans perceive various entities in the world, including animals, deities, spirits, the deceased, beings from different cosmic realms, weather phenomena, plants and sometimes even objects and artifacts.

Dunham, K. 1994. *Island Possessed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Lesley Nicole Braun]

> As a pioneering work in dance anthropology, this book brings together ethnographic research on Haitian Voodoo rituals with personal experience. Dunham's unique position as professional dancer, academic researcher and participant demonstrates how embodied knowledge can enrich anthropological understanding of ritual and movement practices. The work remains an invaluable example of how to write about embodied religious experience while maintaining scholarly rigor, and stands as an early example of reflexive ethnography that acknowledges the ethnographer's own transformation through fieldwork.

Ferguson, J. 2006. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press. [Jon Schubert]

> As my first contact with anthropology left me somewhat mystified as to the relevance of a discipline that seemed still concerned with shapes of huts and modes of subsistence agriculture in the early 21st Century, this loose collection of essays by James Ferguson was a real eye-opener to understand what anthropology had to say about the contemporary world.

Guyer, J. 2004. *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Michael Stasik]

> While the book's subject, West African economic practices, is deeply compelling, what struck me most was how Guyer builds her arguments: *Marginal Gains* is a masterclass in blending detailed ethnography with theoretical acuity and out-of-the-box thinking.

Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Alain Müller]

> This book summarizes and systematizes Actor-Network Theory as developed by the author – alongside others – until then. I personally loved the provocative and slightly iconoclastic tone that resonated strongly with the somewhat confrontational rhetoric of *hardcore punk* – which not only was my anthropological *object* but has profoundly shaped my worldview. It has acted as a *travel guide* – a term invoked by the author himself – for me, helping me find my way in my own anthropological work. The book is an invitation to take nothing for granted – particularly the referents of traditional concepts that sociology and anthropology sometimes rely on too heavily, such as 'society' or 'groups' – and to start from the ontological principles that nothing holds together on its own, everything must be patiently and continuously assembled, reassembled, called and maintained in existence.

Latour, B. 2012. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [Olena Sobolieva]

> *We Have Never Been Modern* provides anthropologists with a conceptual toolkit to rethink long-standing assumptions about modernity, agency and the boundaries between the human and non-human.

Lino e Silva, M. 2022. *Minoritarian Liberalism: A Travesti Life in a Brazilian Favela*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Anna Vollmer Mateus]

> Among many other reasons, this book is an absolute pleasure to read because the relationships the author is engaged in and depends on are presented with so much care. Marked by humor, intimacy, grief and generosity, these relationships not only animate the analytical reflection on liberties in and beyond Rocinha, but – and I hope the author would

not disagree too much with this statement – also made the analytical elaborations of the book necessary, almost of the order of something akin to fate.

Mauss, M. 1936. Les techniques du corps. *Journal de Psychologie* 32(3/4): 4-23. [Lesley Nicole Braun]

This seminal essay contributes to how we think about the relationship between body and culture. By demonstrating that even our most basic physical actions are culturally learned rather than naturally given, Mauss provided a theoretical foundation for understanding how societies inscribe themselves onto and through the body.

Mazzocchetti, J. 2019. *Là où le soleil ne brûle pas*. Paris: Harmattan. [Michelle Engeler]

Mazzocchetti's book reminds us that an anthropologist must sometimes become a novelist in order to tell the biographies of the people she has met and whose stories she must do justice to. It also underscores that ethnographic writing can be both a challenge and a commitment.

Mintz, S.W. 1986. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Random House. [Peter van Eeuwijk]

A fascinating and multi-faceted book about the object and the subject of sugar – a first essential work on 'following the subject' for centuries and through many social strata and historical layers. Mintz portrays how sugar has transformed and influenced in so many different ways nations, regions, ethnic groups, communities, individuals and particular actors over centuries. This book is a significant publication in anthropology because it sharply dissects the globalizing entanglement of power, economy and hegemony build on sugar as acting subject – and this book is thus a pioneer document of what we call today globalization.

Navaro, Y. 2020. The Aftermath of Mass Violence: A Negative Methodology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 49: 161-173. [Olena Sobolieva]

> Navaros' 'negative methodology' critiques traditional anthropological practices that rely on the availability of tangible, evidentiary materials and proposes alternative ways of engaging with voids, silences and remnants left by violence.

Sahlins, M. 2022. *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [Zainabu Jallo]

> In his final book work, Sahlins shows that in numerous cultures, human life is intricately connected with a variety of entities, including supreme gods, minor deities, ancestral spirits, demons and the souls of animals and plants. These entities play vital roles in influencing human experiences in fields such as agriculture, hunting, reproduction and politics. While they are not entirely human, their impact on everyday life is profound. I find his citation of French anthropologist Jean Pouillon particularly insightful: 'It is the nonbeliever who believes that the believer believes.' This statement underpins the idea that the distinctions we, as anthropologists, often make today – such as spirit versus matter, mental versus sensory, divine versus mundane, or beings versus objects – do not resonate with the viewpoints of the indigenous communities he examines. Many of the commonly used terms such as belief, myth, personification, projection, religion, economics and politics, can obscure our comprehension of their lived experiences.

Neuilly, M.A. and B.M. Muhammad, eds. 2019. *Mothering from the Field: The Impact of Motherhood on Site-based Research*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. [Michelle Engeler]

> The various contributions in this reader encourage us to rethink, or perhaps even revolutionize, the way we approach research and data collection in particular. An vital read, and not just for mothers!

Serres, M. 1982. *The Parasite* (L.R. Schehr, trans.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. [Alain Müller]

> This book is not an anthropological book in the strict sense. Among the many reasons for my fascination for Serre's work is his writing, allegorical and dense, without any reference or footnote – many consider it difficult, and I am no exception. The book challenges the boundaries between philosophy and anthropology and forces one to abandon the idea of a content that needs to be 'understood,' but rather invites one to multiply the interpretative paths through repeated readings and re-readings, sometimes including an additional mediator (what could be more Serresian!), a *passage* through an adjacent reading.

Taussig, M. 2011. *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in My Fieldnote Books, Namely My Own*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [George Paul Meiu]

> The book offers a set of fascinating reflections on field note drawings that end up being about so much more. The book illustrates the anthropological dictum of being able to see the world in a grain of salt. But it also offers inspiring strategies for prompting one's imagination to think about the world in a focused way.

Turnbull, C.M. 1961. *The Forest People*. New York: Simon & Schuster. [Peter van Eeuwijk]

> This book is a very lively description of daily life of Mbuti Pygmies (in then Belgian Congo) and attends to the questions of the boundaries and tensions between the anthropologist, participant observation and research participants. It offers an investigation of the daily hardships of this ethnic group, but also of the forest people's affective relation with their physical environment, particularly the forest and its inhabitants – all that without romanticizing their daily lives. This book is therefore an early significant work on human ecology (physical, social and economic), as well as on the power relations and political economy making the latter vulnerable.

Wacquant, L. 2005. Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership. *Qualitative Sociology* 28: 445-474. [Anna Vollmer Mateus]

> Wacquant's texts, with their specific combination of precision, ambition and vitality, have been my companions from the very beginning of my studies and have, time and time again, electrified me. I could have chosen another one of his pieces, but *Carnal Connections* it is: I believe it offers to students like me an interesting starting point for meta-reflections on the apprenticeship, awkwardness, ambiguity and affect characterizing ethnographic practice.

West, H.G. 2007. *Ethnographic Sorcery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [George Paul Meiu]

> Raising questions about how anthropologists can agree on what is 'true' or not, how they can assess the veracity of spiritual practices or witchcraft, the book proposes an imaginative way to rethink our own ethnographic practices as more alike to magic: a way to call forth in the concrete world at hand a world beyond it.

Wikan, U. 1992. Beyond the Words: The Power of Resonance. *American Ethnologist* 19: 460-482. [Michael Stasik]

Combining philosophical reflections on the limitations of language with methodological guidance on the role of feeling in fieldwork encounters, Wikan's argument for rooting mutual understanding in empathy is as instructive for anthropologists as it is vital for humanity at large.

bap