

# Holding the Story Forever: The Aesthetics of Ethnographic Labour

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## **Ethnographic Sociality**

Since the late 1970s, anthropologists have examined ethnography as a form of textual production (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986) and as a politicised dialogue between ethnographer and ‘other’ (Crapanzano 1980; Dumont 1978; George 1995; Rabinow 1977). This literature suggests that ethnography is what you write and how you write it (Clifford 1986; Geertz 1973) but not a record of social realities (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Drawing on these critiques, more recent analyses of ‘fieldwork’ examine the very notion of ‘the field’, the centrality of fieldwork to anthropology and the contradictory nature of the discipline in which we are expected to examine an interconnected and deterritorialised world *and* conduct long periods of research in one ‘localised’ setting (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 4). Gupta and Ferguson question whether, given the questions we ask in this postcolonial globalised world, we can continue to valorise ethnographic fieldwork as the central experience of anthropology.

Marcus (1997) has argued that ethnography is a form of social production that hinges upon ‘complicity’ between anthropologist and ‘other’. For him, the presence of an anthropologist is a constant marker of other places and ways of being in the world and, because of this, anthropologists can access people’s ideas about other places, times and peoples (Marcus 1998, 119). Therefore, fieldwork elucidates and makes connections (p.120). The anthropologist’s presence makes a perhaps inarticulatable ‘elsewhere’ present for the informant. Complicity is then an affinity between the anthropologist and the informant that ‘arises from their mutual curiosity and anxiety about their relationship to a third’, and this ‘third time space’ is what creates the bond between the two (p. 122).

These productive critiques leave a central part of the social relations of ethnography unexamined. They fail to examine the ways in which anthropologists themselves experience the practice of ethnography and the ways in which ‘the field’

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transcends space and time as we carry it with us in our social and academic lives. Crapanzano (1992), in his analysis of anthropologists as Hermes-like messengers, argues that we are caught between the people with whom we work and the people for whom we write. Desire, power, longing and responsibility infuse these relations between the messenger, message giver and message receiver. While the participants are dialogically engaged, their dialogues are not dyadic; rather, the participants are all the while taking part in multiple dialogues, which Crapanzano (1992, 6) calls 'shadow dialogues', that shape both the ethnographic product and the social relations that go into the dialogues. Crapanzano's dialogues can be the rules under which the engagement takes place—linguistic conventions or grammar, for example—or they can be the internal conversations that both participants have with an 'elsewhere' during the ethnographic engagement.

In what follows, I examine the social relations of fieldwork, the bodily experiences of being 'in the field' and the ways in which our fieldwork experiences are tied to the 'shadow dialogues' in which we participate. My intention here is not to present an ethnographic 'confessional' (Trencher 2002, 213; *cf.* Marcus and Cushman 1982) but, rather, to examine the aesthetic or bodily experience of ethnographic sociality. By 'ethnographic sociality', I mean the social relations that comprise ethnographic research and transcend the times and spaces of ethnographic research and writing. I want to add to this conversation concerning research, writing and ethnography a line of argument that concerns personal social relations and the relationships that we have with our students.

### **The Card Game**

All is silent in the heat of the day except for the smack of our cards as we throw them quickly and expertly on the dry, hard ground. We are sitting in Esta's father's compound in Maimafu village, a settlement located in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, and it is a beautiful day in July 2001. Esta, Jerry, John and I are playing the fastest round of the card game One Thousand ever. The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church strictly forbids playing cards and we are all SDAs, Esta, Jerry and John by baptism and I by action when I conduct research in Maimafu. At home, I am not an SDA but, for months at a time when I am in the social space of ethnography, I live my life as one. Esta, Jerry and John are devout believers, but my presence creates moments for play and for imagining life as not bound by rules and religion. So, our card game is illicit and subversive, but fleeting because, the moment Esta's grandmother later admonishes us for playing cards, we acquiesce by handing them over and apologising. It is also contradictory in that I try my best to be a good SDA when I am in Papua New Guinea, but my presence there allows for the creation of a non-SDA space for Esta, Jerry and John.

During the card game, as its subversiveness to the Christian present in Maimafu slips into my consciousness, I think about Gewertz and Errington's (1996) work on Christianity, modernity and tradition. The card game, a social form tied to modernity

in Papua New Guinea, subverts devout Christian practice and belief, another of modernity's Papua New Guinean social forms. For Esta, Jerry and John, like other young people in Papua New Guinea, these social forms of modernity are the lenses through which they see and make themselves.

Some years before our card game, when I was attempting to conduct interviews on 'identity'—as was the fashion in 1997—Esta told me that she was a Christian first, before anything else. In 2003, she finally asked me if I believed in God. She told me that she had had a conversation with an Australian tourist earlier in the year, during which he had told her that the devout nature of local Christianity was a sign of a lack of education and that 'no one' in Australia was deeply religious. Esta's questions about my beliefs, and our conversation about the tourist, made me uncomfortable, because I had to slip between 'the anthropologist' who thinks about Christianity and modernity, and a social self who would never want to make Esta feel that I did not respect her beliefs.

Back in 2001, however, I am at ease during the card game, because I do not feel the pressure of being 'other' that I usually feel when I am in the social space of research. I do not feel as if I am performing my role as 'the anthropologist', and my visage reflects this. I am wearing trousers, something I hardly ever do in a place where women always wear skirts and dresses, my long hair is down, neither pinned up in a conservative non-attention-getting bun nor stuffed up in a dirty Atlanta Braves baseball cap, and I am wearing lip-gloss. I keep a bag of my possessions at Esta's father's house, and in it I keep things like my credit card, traveller's cheques, passport and pictures of my husband and mother. Earlier this morning, deep in the bottom of the bag, I found a small container of pink lip-gloss. It is sticky and melted and smells like America. We are all wearing it now, and we are smacking our lips and smacking the cards on the ground quickly like the old men who play One Thousand at the market in the provincial capital of the Eastern Highlands, Goroka.

We have all seen these old men playing cards in Goroka as we have wandered around the market, watching, listening and learning. About 15 minutes into the card game, I place a piece of rolled paper, like a cigarette, behind my ear. I do this in response to Esta putting a flower behind hers. While my cigarette simply draws laughter from the group, Esta's flower generates a conversation about prostitutes in Goroka. We all wonder aloud about the ways in which men who want to sleep with prostitutes identify them, why men go to them and why women become prostitutes. I answer a series of questions about prostitution in my home, New York City. It becomes clear that prostitution rather confounds us all and that we see it as 'other'. At some point during the conversation, I tell a story about the first time that I realised that the prostitutes working outside a bar where I once worked were men dressed as women. This is beyond the imagination of Esta, Jerry and John, and they accuse me of lying to them. Later, John tells a story about a prostitute with the AIDS virus whose uterus fell out one day at the market in Goroka. This is beyond my imagination, but Esta and Jerry assure me that, 'of course', it could have happened.

In the spring of 2002, I taught a paper on the political economy of prostitution that focuses on the consumptive patterns of men who pay for sex (Bernstein 2001). I chose to teach the paper because of our conversation, as it seemed to me that our question about the political economy of desire might be of interest to graduate students in my seminar on consumption. I thought of our conversation again when I read a paper about sexuality, mythology and modernity in Papua New Guinea (Wardlow 2002). That paper helped me to understand the experiences of women who are 'sexually mobile', and the ways in which those experiences work to make identity and destabilise meanings traditionally associated with women. I took a photocopy of the paper to Maimafu with me a year later and gave it to Esta. Some of the language in it was challenging for her, but she read it and we talked about it. She was particularly taken by Wardlow's (2002, 16) argument that new forms of women's subjectivity lead to new ways for society to discipline women and police their behaviour. Esta compared what we read with her own experience as the only woman in her village who had attended high school and who was fluent in English, facts that make her 'different' and 'modern' in ways that are similar to sex workers. She told me a story about her father's brothers saying that it was not appropriate for her to teach other women in the village to speak English at weekly literacy classes. They argued that her teaching would engender jealousy towards her and make her a prime target for sorcery. Esta theorised, after reading Wardlow, that her uncles were not looking out for her best interests but, rather, that they were finding innovative ways to police her behaviour, given that she is a social anomaly.

Back to the card game, though, and our conversation about bodies: body parts are not bound to people in Maimafu the way they are in other places. In deepest sorrow, women cut off their fingers to express grief, and sorcerers steal organs from the living all the time. No one else except Soko, Esta's grandmother, is in the compound during our card game. The four of us are taking the day off, because we have been working hard. Earlier in the week, we had walked to the outskirts of a village to the north-east that shares a border with Maimafu, in order to conduct some interviews about a gold-mining exploration site on the border. Because of this site, tensions run high between residents of Maimafu and residents of the other village, even though family ties between the two villages are thick. The following July, we will walk to the village to spend the night during the 2002 national elections. That night, Jerry will literally save my life. While sleeping in a men's house, he, Daniel and Lukas will hear a group of men from another village plotting to rape and rob me. In the heart of the night, they will come to the house in which I am sleeping and gather me up to take me out of harm's way. As we hurry away from the village into the bush, all I will be able to think about is my husband, who so trusts that I will take care of myself and come back to him after my many months in Papua New Guinea that he never utters a word of concern or apprehension when I leave.

Maneha, the man who had taught me to play One Thousand, was my 'father'. Like my social relations with Esta, my social relations with him feel real. The only time I was ever truly ill in Maimafu, in 1997, Maneha had decided that I was suffering from

poisoning. I was living in a house on his land, and he was beside himself with fear that I might die. When New Tribes Mission made an emergency flight into Maimafu to collect me and take me to a doctor in Goroka, Maneha accompanied me on the terrible walk from the house to the airstrip. As it turned out, I had malaria and, with medical attention and rest, I was fine. Upon my return to Maimafu, Maneha met me as I stepped off the plane and told me that I was his 'daughter'. I became in that instant his adult child, the anomaly of an adult daughter who lives on the land of her father. One late afternoon in October 2003, I was sitting at my office desk googling the word 'Maimafu' as I do about once a month just to see how and why it pops up on web pages. I was shocked to see a photograph on one of the SDA pages of Maneha literally on his deathbed. The page is a fund-raising page for the SDA Mission Air Services emergency evacuation fund. They had flown Maneha to Goroka when he became ill, and in the photo he is on a stretcher looking directly at the camera, while his wife, Kalasaga, is looking at him as she crouches by his side.

I became an anthropologist because of Papua New Guinea. For a child living in Georgia, there was no place that seemed farther away or more exotic than the island of New Guinea. I imagined New Guinea as an Edenic paradise that I could explore the way intrepid women characters had explored the generic 'Africa' of Tarzan movies. Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) began in Atlanta, and one of Turner's first broadcasting moves was to buy the rights to all the old Tarzan films. TBS showed these films every Sunday morning, and I would watch them, rapt by their exotic Orientalist presentations of nature, culture and the 'other'. Somehow, I dreamed those movies into my vision of New Guinea. My grandmother taught me to read as a young child by using the *National Geographic Magazine*, and I image us reading the March 1972 edition, which has a story about headhunters of remotest New Guinea (Kirk 1972). I often wonder, because I got my own subscription when I was in first grade, if I pored over Gillian Gillison's (1977) article about the Gimi, imagining myself as Gillison or, more likely, as her young daughter of whom there are two photographs in the magazine.

Knauff (1999) has written about the ways in which Melanesia, generally, and Papua New Guinea, specifically, have been seen as an 'ethnographic backwater'. Lederman (1998) has similarly written about the 'savage slot' occupied by anthropology in general, and Melanesianist anthropology specifically. Papua New Guinea has been made by, and has made, anthropology (Knauff 1999, 7; Lederman 1998, 428). Our representations of the place and the people who live there make imagining it possible. My own ideas about what I would find when I got to New Guinea the first time were wrapped up in reading the literature written by other anthropologists and my own imagination, and had little to do with fleeing for my life in the dark of the night, or with mourning for old men who come to mean more to me than I can express, or with sleepy afternoon card games.

On the day of the card game, Soko is at home because she has been sick with a terrible cough. She usually spends her days in one of her gardens, but in this past week she has been at home recuperating and has been doing some work in her house.

Soko keeps a full-grown male cassowary sequestered in her house and she has even given him his own room. Whenever I arrive at the compound, after greeting Esta's father if he is home, I head for Soko's house. If she is home, I stick my head in the door and startle her. Soko is funny and mischievous and reminds me of my mother's mother. She keeps a hat that my mother made for her in the rafters of her house. It resembles one of those floppy 1960s bridesmaids' hats and Soko does not ever wear it. Just as my mother's mother would, she saves it. We ask her, 'for what?' and, in Unavisa Gimi, one of the languages spoken in Maimafu, she screams at us good-naturedly that we are nosey children who should be out working and not lazing around the house. Composing this right now, I can hear her voice in my imagination, '*ba, kage tai bau*', and see her fingers sweep the air as she waves us out of her house. She is missing two digits above the knuckle on her left hand, and every time I see it I feel a rupture in time. Soko cut them off in grief as she mourned the deaths of her father and her husband. With her hand as it is, her father and her husband, both long deceased, are always with her; they are always present in the space between her fingers.

Daisy, my mother's mother, has outlived her husband by 12 years so far. She gave him 12 children, worked weekdays in a carpet mill to support the family, and worked evenings and weekends on the family farm. As I write this, Daisy is having a bad day. I spoke with her this morning, as I do every morning when I am at home in New York, and she told me that she did not feel well, that her back was hurting severely. I wondered aloud if she had been foregoing her doctor's orders and working in the garden to dig potatoes, and she laughed and said that, indeed, she crept outside in the night and spent hours bent over digging. As she said it, I remembered Gillison's (1993) ethnography of Gimi women singing to their sweet potatoes as they dig them. I imagined my grandmother as a girl not knowing that, after she met my grandfather in 1928, her life would become one of childbearing, carpet mills and farm labour. Then I thought about Soko, my Gimi grandmother, who had been left as unmarried after she had refused to marry the man whom her father had picked for her in Kora. She was sent to live with her cousin, Kalasaga, and her cousin's new husband, Maneha, in Maimafu. There she met Falau, Maneha's uncle, who already had two wives and who, she says, liked the look of her; she married him.

During the last part of the card game, the sun is high in the sky and Esta, Jerry, John and I are laughing and pretending to be dangerous gamblers. I am utterly relaxed, until Esta's father arrives. He is a powerful man and I am both afraid of him and grateful to him. Esta's father sits down with us and picks up my notebook, ever near even on a day off, because life is work when I am in Maimafu; the social is always data and I am always 'the anthropologist', no matter how much I imagine that I am part of the social goings on. He pulls out a real cigarette and lights it, hands me my notebook, and tells me that he wants to tell me some stories. One of the stories is about a giant gold man that appeared after a lighting strike on the slopes of Crater Mountain on 31 December 1999, as the clock struck midnight. When he saw The Man, he says, he thought about me. He knew that I would come back to Maimafu,

that he would tell me the story and that I would like it. He knew that I would record him telling the story and that my recording would 'hold the story forever'.

### **Intersubjectivity and the Practice of Ethnography**

After completing a first draft of this paper, I returned to Papua New Guinea in the summer of 2003. I spent lots of time with Esta, and we talked about ethnographic labour and production quite a bit. Esta said that, when she had read the things that I had written in the past, she remembered the events that took place but did not see 'us' in my ethnography. She said, 'you tell the things we have done, but you don't tell about us'.

I want to argue here that Esta's comments are instructive for how we think about ethnography. Esta's critique of my writing is that I do not and cannot represent our relationship as we experience it. Here, I want to draw on the work of psychoanalyst and psychoanalytic theorist Thomas H. Ogden. Ogden (1999, 463) argues that the social relationship between the analysed and the analyst gives rise to an 'analytic third' that generates a third subjectivity and a kind of intersubjectivity that is separate from the subjectivity the two participants bring to the relationship. He draws on the literature from psychoanalysis that emphasises the 'interdependence' of participants in the psychoanalytic relationship (p. 462), and argues that 'there is no such thing as an analysand apart from the relationship with the analyst, and no such thing as an analyst apart from the relation with the analysand' (p. 463). The analytic third, this 'intersubjectivity', is made by, and makes, negates and preserves, each individual subjectivity (p. 463).

As Ogden develops this argument he brings in notions of time, and it is worth quoting him to convey the character of his argument:

The analytic experience occurs on the cusp of the past and the present, and involves a 'past' that is being created anew (for both analyst and analysand) by means of experience generated between analyst and analysand (i.e. within the analytic third).  
(p. 471)

Ogden describes with great candour the way his mind wanders during a session with a client. He thinks about his car, parked in a nearby garage, and fantasises that the garage might close early and that he might be without the car. He experiences the sensations of the garage and begins to feel an anxiety about the time he is spending with the client (p. 472). Upon coming back to the moments of analysis, in which the client is still speaking, Ogden realises something about the client and his analysis. He comes to understand the client through this wandering of his mind, through the shadow dialogues he participates in during their session.

Ethnographic labour, and by that I mean the work of ethnographic research embodied in participant observation, creates a third time space like this intersubjective time space, a third that is a rupture in the past, present, future triad, and a character in the creation of each of the subjectivities that take place in its creation. Ethnographic writing often fails to capture this intersubjective object and

space because it is too personal; it is not 'scientific'. Even though many of us would not say that we are scientists, there is still a bias in the discipline that urges us to present our ethnographic work as data that happened in the past (because we no longer use the ethnographic present) and that is over, now ready for interpretation and analysis. My argument here is that it is not ever over, that this third time space or analytic third is in us, that it makes us, that as we incorporate it into our selves it becomes part of what produces our writing, teaching, research and thinking in ways that perhaps defy the traditional bounds of ethnographic representation.

I am not suggesting that everyone make explicit the kinds of third time spaces that their ethnographic labour engenders, but, rather, that we might be able to understand better the ethnographic production of knowledge if we let go of the idea that the past, the present and the future are fixed in time and space. Geertz's 'being there' can mean being physically in Papua New Guinea doing fieldwork, sitting behind a desk in New York writing about fieldwork, teaching a class on anthropology or talking on the telephone to one's grandmother. While ethnographic research has traditionally been seen as a practice in a particular time and space, it is in fact much more temporally and spatially slippery than has previously been discussed. A moment in 'the field' is connected to the past, present and future; hence my argument is that ethnography works to rupture both time and space.

## Note

- [1] All the names in this paper are pseudonyms. I would like to thank Michèle Dominy, Laurence Carucci, Rena Lederman, Andrew Bickford, Vincent Crapanzano, Debra Curtis, J. C. Salyer, Michael Taussig and Ellen Tom for comments on this manuscript, the people of Maimafu for allowing me to work in their village, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and Barnard College for funding this research.

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