

Anthropological Renga

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What would an anthropological ‘thing’ (think parliament) look like, sound like, feel like if it emerged in the midst of engagement rather than as a result of retrospective analysis? What would be anthropological about it? Is “it” a helpful pronoun? Artefacts tend to be lively in many situations. Even assuming that an anthropological product may not be something living or part of the living, is itself an effect of the hegemony of scriptocentrism (Conquergood 2002) that modern academic institutions are founded upon.

Gey Pin Ang and I exchanged these sorts of questions, among many others, as part of the project called ‘Knowing from the Inside’ that led to us to organising the Sourcing Within Worksession in Aberdeen from which Walking Threads emerged. ‘Knowing from the Inside’ (KFI) is an ERC funded project based in the anthropology department, University of Aberdeen. Although the project is based in the anthropology department, the ethos of the project is ‘anti-disciplinary’. Not in the sense of foregoing rigour, but facing away from the separation of knowledge making into expert domains, cutting up the world a priori into separate categories of knowledge. KFI rather looks towards experimenting with an anthropology as ‘speculative enquiry’. Within this broader frame there are five sub projects, all of which in some way question perception, creativity, and skill. My own project is one of three in the sub project ‘Environments of Policy and Practice: the management of sustainability’. I am investigating performance training as an exploratory mode of inquiry. In conjunction with this I ask: How may performative enquiry together with anthropological ways of working lead to sustainable forms of academic knowledge production? The underlying aim of my project is to find ways to decolonise academic scholarship that transcend the apparent complacency that cultural critique has proffered (Escobar and Restrepo 2005). In resonance with Escobar and Restrepo’s “anthropology otherwise”, I am exploring a recrafting of what anthropologists *make*. This needs to include who they make it for, in other words who anthropologists are accountable to, as well as the expected ‘products’ of their scholarly endeavours.

Exploring how to develop a collaborative anthropology project is one way in which I am interpreting our overall project’s aim: Knowing from the Inside. In order to be genuinely collaborative, the project needs to be designed as well as followed through in tandem (Lassiter 2005). This includes adapting along the way if any of the parties collaborating shifts. While this implies less freedom for the anthropologist than previous instrumental types of ‘rapport’ with field participants, it does mean that what the anthropologist proposes is hierarchically indistinguishable from the contributions of their collaborators. Importantly in this approach the anthropologist’s stance is *not* primarily that of the apprentice (Agar 1996). The main point here is to assume that the anthropologist should be contributing or risking to the same degree as their collaborators. In 2013 Gey Pin Ang and I decided to try and work out how such a collaboration could work between our two practices – hers theatre and mine of anthropology. The preparation for the collaboration began slowly – I participated in two Worksessions led by Gey Pin, and she visited me in Cambridge, where we spent three intensive days discussing our respective work and hopes for future work and collaboration. Then as the project got going we exchanged our writing, specifically draft chapters for publication, draft PhD chapters and other texts, such as funding proposals, to read and carried on discussing via skype and email. Due to the iterative nature of collaboration, our collaboration did not run along conventional anthropological research project lines with three separate blocks; preparation, fieldwork and analysis and writing up. Rather the nature of the project required all three strands of work to be kept going simultaneously. It meant dedicating moments to reading and preparation for an upcoming event, dedicating others to writing, analysis and reflection, as well as participating in Worksessions, another form of fieldwork, while simultaneously keeping up my own daily theatre training.¹ In the context of the KFI project the conventional block approach would not make sense anyway. If the project’s aim is to attempt to move away from the concept of the ethnographer who returns from fieldwork, armed with data to be analysed and written up, and instead hopes to generate insights for the carrying on of life, then the conventional three block approach to research also needs to be revised.² When

¹ See Lucas (2006) for what he calls a plaiting approach.

² The type of knowledge the scholars in KFI are attempting to generate is anthropological rather than ethnographic (Ingold 2015), and anthropological rather than documentary in Marcus (2009).

these three blocks are shaken up, where moments of fieldwork intertwine with presentation of work done so far, even if only from a short period of work, and further merge in purpose with preparation for future moments of fieldwork, then the possibilities for collaboration become both more complex and simpler, since the anthropologist is not tied to a rigid timetable.

In January 2014, I participated in two Worksessions organised by Gey Pin, one in Portugal and one in Barcelona. In each, although the structure of the Worksession remained recognisable, there were specific changes. In Portugal I ran an experimental exercise on two afternoons, and in Barcelona after her performance, Gey Pin invited me to respond with her to the audience's reactions. In addition, Gey Pin shared her thoughts that I interpreted as arising from some of our previous activities and discussions in the Worksessions. We had always imagined organising a Worksession in Aberdeen and this came about in March 2014. The previous two encounters were essentially Gey Pin's 'Sourcing Within Worksessions' with certain adaptations to introduce our collaboration, to allow for my experiments and a latent change in our ongoing thinking processes. Unlike these previous Worksessions the Aberdeen gathering was considerably different, the Aberdeen event needed to be adapted for anthropologists rather than for the professional actors Gey Pin normally works with. The aim of the Aberdeen Worksession was manifold but we also did not try to pin down these aims too explicitly. A clear aim for Gey Pin was to carry on her own theatre research through a Worksession, as with all her Worksessions. I had a similar motivation: to participate in the Worksession as part of my own enquiry through training. However, I also wanted to share the way Gey Pin and I were working with my colleagues in Aberdeen, as well as with others who have participated in similar workshops I have organised in the past. In fact, all the participants in Walking Threads, except for Brian, were people I met through previous theatre and anthropology workshops that I either organised or participated in. The Worksession in Aberdeen was therefore one of the iterative nodes in an anthropological project that aims to interweave preparation, fieldwork, reflection and presentation. The Worksession presented the work Gey Pin and I had been doing together over the last few months. Through the discussions held at various points in the event, we included space for shared reflections on our work and the work of the others who presented their resonant experiments (Paola Esposito, Brian Schultis, Valeria Lembo). It was definitely fieldwork in at least two senses: 1) I carried on my training and collaboration with Gey Pin, and 2) observed how anthropologists respond to the tasks of perception and awareness proposed by Gey Pin. Finally, it was preparation for future fieldwork, future experiments in bringing together the skills of anthropologists and performers.

The Worksession was an experiment, a laboratorium in Ssorin-Chaikov's (2013) terms, producing the unknown. Participating in life's ongoing formation not only through participant observation but also by using the anthropologist's skills to propose possibilities. When we consider the anthropologist as an equal member of a team (Gatt 2005) and therefore not as *the* ethnographer or documenter, their role is that of one who offers, one who gives as well as receives. In my case, I offer my collaboration with Gey Pin (this is great deal of what anthropologists make after all, we create relationships Das nd), my personal anthropologically informed and motivated training in theatre, and finally, the anthropologically versed meta-attention to the form of collaboration itself. This experiment dips into what theatre makers and performers work towards, and that is this offering while simultaneously receiving, the virtue/skill of performance is action that is doing and listening simultaneously. Here I deliberately do not use the common binary pair of active/passive as listening is never passive. The performer receives and offers simultaneously, proposes and absorbs, proposes only because they absorb. When a performer does not listen either to the other performers or to the audience, or both, the particular spark that brings a performance to life is missing, the performance felt as stilted. The skill of this 'doing-listening', I hope, offers a way of scholarship and anthropology that is not only attentive and observant but simultaneously imagines futures and participates in constituting our common world.

The Worksession in Aberdeen therefore was an experiment, proposing a way of working – a method of doing anthropology drawn in collaboration with theatre. I had no idea, and deliberately/accidentally did not attempt to imagine what might come out of this experiment, except for a hope that the sort of attention Gey Pin works with and offers participants of her Worksessions might be taken up by some or any of the anthropologists who participated. In fact, Walking Threads fulfils this hope. A group of anthropologist who are also performers, and a performer who also reads anthropology, began and sustained an engagement through the Worksession. It took many years for this to be possible, I believe. No Walking Threads or anything similar emerged after previous theatre and anthropology workshops I was involved in organising or giving. Many years, or many months in some cases, for all of us involved to develop their own work, and our engagement together with performance and anthropology. Walking Threads, I would suggest, was not a single event, not

just a group of anthropologists and performers who made with their watchful, listenful “drifting” through a park in Aberdeen in order to analyse their observations into discrete moments of data. Rather, they created a gently tensing cat’s cradle of thread and thoughts. In serious play (Bateson 2000 [1972]: 14, 191), they experimented further with this ‘method’ of doing anthropology. But what was most unexpected to me was the ongoing engagement between the walkers that carried on past that week in Aberdeen. Their thinking work now laced through by their doing/listening, even their dreams (Esposito). The ongoing engagement between them, even if not metrically proximate to each other, sings through the resonances in their writings, with Deleuzian and Ingoldian concepts participating in shaping their engagement. Knowing the walkers, I also know that these were resonances they held in common before their threading through Seaton Park and one of the reasons I felt they would be happy to participate in the Souring Within Worksession. And yet, many scholars read Delueze and Ingold without coming together to produce anything like the ongoing team thinking, “teem thinking”, that Walking Threads gave us a glimpse of. A hive mind perhaps? I am referring to Parikka’s notion of communication drawn from his study of insects, where “anything can become a medium” (2010: xviii), thus allowing for environs to be incorporated into the thinking and the making of beings. The parallel cooperation in a hive mind is embedded in its environment drawing on what ever materials may be to hand to communicate, and therefore to be/become. Yet the beings driving the Walking Threads did not become a hive mind in the sense that the persons were swallowed, subsumed. Maybe a more helpful analogy is the practice of renga? A form of early Japanese collective poetry writing, a form of writing that is alive, collective and non-linear – performative – offering anthropologists a way of writing that is not trapped by associations of fixity otherwise afforded by text in academic contexts. Permutations of renga offer another way that writing can have recursive publics (Kelty 2004). Online composition, argues Kelty, allows real-time engagement, publics folded into the production of anthropological text because of the ease and speed of those publics’ access to anthropological writings. In this particular case the Internet, that forms the basis of Kelty’s insights, also facilitated not only my collective thinking work with Gey Pin but also the collection of writings of Walking Threads. I meandered along Lembo’s embroidery through a link sent to me by email.

A challenge does appear here though. Who do anthropologists want their recursive publics to be? How can experiments like the Aberdeen Souring Within Worksession and Walking Threads unfold beyond the circles of the university? What sort of renga can be crafted between anthropologist and what were once considered informants? Why and when would ‘others’ be interested in working with anthropologists? I believe that is only answerable in practice, each research project wondering how to collaborate, how to co-produce ‘things’ valuable to all the parties involved, how to establish between them what rigour or ‘quality’ will mean for each granular experiment. And yet, these questions, although open ended, are vital for these sorts of experiments in order to retain in Ingold’s terms that ‘sideways glance’ (2008). And to conclude, here my reference to the sideways glance is not intended as an invocation of anthropology’s historical dependence on alterity or ‘otherness’, but rather a constant reminder to look beyond what is familiar, what is already known, in other words to experiment.

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