



re:think

A Journal of Creative Ethnography



Unfolding

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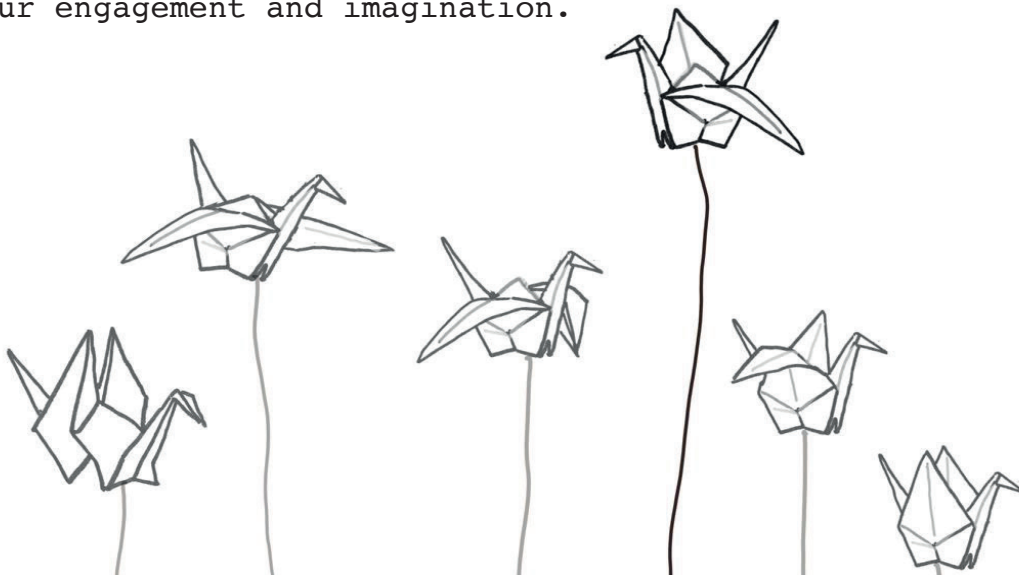
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From the Editors:

After a few years of quiet, the editorial team are delighted to present the latest edition of the re:think journal, 'Unfolding'. We are a student-run, undergraduate anthropology journal based at the University of Edinburgh, committed to foregrounding ethnography as a distinct lens through which to see the world. This edition mounts an expansive definition of what anthropological research can look like, demonstrated in the broad spectrum of work found in the articles. The journal presents exhibition reviews, short-term ethnographies, photographic pieces and reflective articles, to see how an ethnographic lens is ever-mutating and always applicable. This 2026 edition emphasises the nature of ethnography as a continuous and unfolding project, bringing new perspectives to the fore. It presents ethnography as a tool as malleable as origami, where square pieces of paper transform imagined shapes into materiality; a shared adaptability that allows ethnography to connect beyond anthropology. Ethnographic writing is ultimately about making connections between seemingly disparate elements through intertextuality, reflexivity, and between the author and the reader.

This edition of re:think highlights the "Anthropology Teaching Collection", an exhibition of "ethnographic" objects brought by anthropologists at the University of Edinburgh. The exhibition follows the efforts of a group of undergraduate students who have attempted to engage with this collection's difficult past, creating an up-to-date catalogue and website (<https://anthropologyinpractice.sps.ed.ac.uk>) accompanied by creative reflections, including a zine and individual blog posts. The exhibition is rooted in creating visibility for the collection, showcasing what students have discovered while drawing attention to the practical and ethical challenges that remain.

At its core, re:think is a collaborative project. With this in mind, we want to thank the student contributors for offering their work to a public audience. And thank you to Dr Grace Zhou for the steady support and to the peer reviewers for your discerning eyes! Finally, a thank you to the reader for helping to bring this edition to life, with your engagement and imagination.



Exploring an affective critique of anthropology through creative responses to colonial violence: with reference to El Anatsui's 2024 exhibition 'Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta'

Izzie Atkinson

Abstract

This article considers creative responses in the wake of colonialism. With research situated at the Talbot Rice Gallery, it looks towards the work of El Anatsui, a Ghanaian artist, and sees how anthropology is important in critiquing methods of studying the past. The article argues that anthropology has the potential to resist the academic tendency to write about history as simply an object of study and instead understand it as a lived reality that can be resisted. The article ultimately explores how this exhibition space allows for an encounter with the art that engenders an affective response.

Keywords

Visual art, museum studies, ethnographic methodology

As I escape the cold chill of morning and venture into the Talbot Rice Gallery, I am greeted by a wall adorned in bright yellow, a metallic blanket hanging in the gallery's main hall: Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta. On closer inspection, the sculpture appears fluid, with thousands of individual pieces woven together with copper wire, creating an imposing, larger-than-life piece. Taking yet another step, I can see how the individual pieces are covered in words, symbols, resonances of whatever objects they used to be a part of. Each aspect of this piece connects to an experience, a place, a people, and a project too easily resigned to the past.

El Anatsui, an internationally acclaimed artist hailing from Ghana, is described as one in a generation of artists from across Africa intent

on rediscovering and retrieving what has been erased during the colonial period (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery (TRG)2024:1). Constructing large-scale, multi-media installations and sculptures, Anatsui explores the way in which the unification of 'fragments' (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024:1) reflects the experience of rediscovery for citizens in post-independence countries such as Ghana. Through his art, Anatsui navigates Africa's long histories of migration and state formation, its devastating encounters with European empires, and the resilience of its people's culture and memory (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024:22). This essay aims to align this exhibition with anthropological theory concerning responses to colonialism. Conversing with Anand Pandian (2019) I want to question ways in which artistic responses to violence and oppression could contribute to a critically engaged anthropology. Pandian writes in *A Possible Anthropology of utilising creative methods alongside traditional ethnographic research*, arguing the latter still depends on extractive practices counter to anthropology's true aim of cohesion and collaboration (Pandian 2019). Pandian offers creative and affirmative critique as ways in which anthropology can be constructive to rediscovery and retrieval, considering colonial projects. I argue that these propositions, ones that focus on anthropology's endeavour to conceive of 'a humanity yet to come' (Pandian 2019:4), mirror artwork such as Anatsui's celebrating the endurance and power of ordinary citizen's cultural heritages. By analysing Anatsui's exhibition, the methods and research behind it, I hope to reflect the affective potentiality of art and other creative methods in instrumentalizing empathy (Pandian 2019:113), offering insights into ways in which individuals rediscover and retrieve that which was erased during the colonial period.



Figure 1: 'Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta'

It takes my friend and I over an hour to walk through the relatively small exhibition, and I credit this to the intricacy of each piece in El Anatsui's repertoire. Taking the titular sculpture as an example, *Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta* (Figure 1) fills an entire wall, made specifically for its dimensions. Thirteen metres wide, the installation is constructed of hundreds of aluminium bottle caps, each no larger than an inch or two, and each deeply connected to Ghana's history of colonial occupation. In El Anatsui's words, the liquor bottle cap has an extensive history which reflects centuries of economic and cultural exchange (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024: 23). Referring to the trade of alcohol and enslaved people, the names of 'trade spirits' imprinted on the metal strips harken back to a time when alcohol was the second highest import of West Africa (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024:7), intrinsically tied to the slave trade, and dehumanisation central to colonial projects. El Anatsui's artistic vision in using these found materials is twofold.

Firstly, Anatsui's most recent work is dedicated to the memory of Scotland's role in colonialism, offering contrasts between 'old and modern realities' (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024:13) in order to evoke a response from viewers. Writing in 2019, Anand Pandian argues such creative modes of response work particularly well in contexts instrumentalising sympathetic affect and empathy (Pandian, 2019:113). In other words, as Anatsui strives to rediscover

and explore aspects of West Africa's cultural heritages and histories, he draws on existing feelings of sympathy, empathy, unease, and guilt. Pandian (2019:115) refers to this as 'an affective and ethical malaise' induced upon the consumer so as to elicit a critical or practical response to expressions of injustice. Politically charged responses to colonialism and violence create 'a visceral sense of unease' (Pandian 2019:115), one I can attest to being present that September morning. As we sat or stood with each piece, I felt an undeniable reaction. Whether a frowning of my brows or an ache in my chest, the presence of this artwork and what it was in reference or reverence to was embodied. Rather than just retelling histories of pain and atrocity, Anatsui's work exemplifies the embodied and cerebral affective potentiality of creative methods. Pandian (2019) conceptualises this as a critical response that acknowledges that which must be changed to propel critical endeavours. In Pandian's (2019:118-121) own words, affirmative critique is:

To take up critique...in an affirmative rather than negative manner: to work within the space of what would seem to be given as a problem in the world, and to seek out...ways of seeing the world anew.

Pandian uses the example of poetry within ethnographies to further this proposal. Drawing on words from Theodor Adorno, they summarise the value behind creating atmospheres of empathy and unease through art in the unshakeable sense they give viewers, or readers, that 'it should be otherwise' (Adorno, 1974 cited in Pandian, 2019:115).

This leads me to the second artistic goal found in the exhibition, that of expressing the value and power of Africa's cultural heritages (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024:22) as a way of offering up alternative futures. Anatsui describes his artworks as remedial acts, processes of mending broken things, or binding fragments to form a whole (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024:22). This reading offers a hopeful, prag-

matic retrieval of that taken by colonialism, and an artistic celebration of what remains. Anatsui's wooden carvings aim to mirror Europe's violent carving up of the African continent, while metallic amalgamations such as the exhibition's central piece methodically piece it back together. In this sense, Anatsui reflects a structure of expression which could gesture towards new possibilities, rediscovered heritages and histories, and other ideas of how to make current realities 'otherwise'.

A strange sense of juxtaposition hangs in the air of the gallery. First, the space itself, white-washed and embellished with intricate carved ceilings and pillars, hosts huge, metallic, shockingly colourful artworks. "It's like waves", my friend remarks, as we notice the stark contrast between the rigidity of the architecture of aptly named Old College, and the almost animated character of Anatsui's pieces. Second, as we venture through the exhibition an air of unease settles over us as we note on the history of the building; the university, its projects, and the people who have passed through these halls before us. "It's rather ironic.", a place seeped in colonial histories, violence, and ongoing complicity in what is continually referred to as 'a moment' is advertising - and profiting from - a project artistically acknowledging and challenging colonialism.

The day I attended the exhibition, the outdoor installation, *Searching for Connection* (Figure 2), was torn. By wind or deliberate action, I wasn't sure. Regardless, the scene was, to me, an ironic manifestation of the juxtaposed happenings within the space. Again, Pandian's affective unease punctuated the exhibition and my own experience of it.



Figure 2: '*Searching For Connection*'

The University of Edinburgh - and further Scotland, the United Kingdom and 'the West' - remains complicit in projects of colonialism, genocide, inequality and violence, all while artwork such as El Anatsui's is championed. Writers of the Talbot Rice Gallery's guidebook refer to this, rightly describing the university as 'a beneficiary of the proceeds of empire' (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024: 20). However, empire and colonialism are implied as things of the past, an historical colonial 'project' or passing 'encounter' (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024:9, 28). In considering how citizens rediscover and retrieve things taken by colonialism, we must also consider how this is an ongoing reality of the present, that the colonial moment has not passed, and the violence in understanding colonialism in terms such as the colonial moment (Todd 2016:14). Pandian reflects on this in conversation with scholar Zoe Todd, who remains adamant in their stance that colonialism is not merely an atrocity of the past, but an existing process of violence, inequality and control. By perpetuating a rhetoric of the post-colonial, argues Todd (2016), we become complacent. Anthropology is taken as guilty of such complacency, hence Pandian's (2019) suggestion of a system of affirmative critique, one which bases itself in an open-ended process of creative emergence. Affirmative critique within anthropology would involve such artistic exploits as El

Anatsui's complex project of rediscovery, retrieval and celebration, offering ways in which to create a future in which nothing is taken away in the first place; to conceive of a humanity yet to come (Giblin for Talbot Rice Gallery 2024). Beyond academia, though, ordinary citizens, artists, writers, and so on, can all become a part of an affirmative project which seeks to learn from the past as a way of propelling into the future.

Anthropology holds out the prospect of a lingering unease, a persistent sense of something unwell in the world (Pandian, 2019). He writes deliberately in the present tense, and it is important, as anthropologists or ordinary citizens, that we read it as such. In conversation with creative responses like El Anatsui's exhibition, anthropological thought shifts towards an affirmative critique of methods, study, rediscovery and retrieval. Artistic methods of rediscovery – from sculpture to poetry – can exist as forms of resistance against continuing projects of colonial power and violence. Integrating these within anthropology may help in resisting the academic tendency to write about a people, an issue, or a history as only a subject for study, and not a lived reality we must strive to change. Further, physically being in these spaces, encountering art in a way that engenders an affective response, and embodied experience, is more than useful to anthropologists. I would argue that these affective encounters are what build a passionate anthropology, the kind we need in order to engage in affective critiques of that which we practice.

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Humans, Animals, and the Environment: The Role of Ethnography in "One Health" Studies - Rethinking of the border

Diogo Henrique Novo Rocha

Abstract

Applied ethnography in contemporary health and One Health studies plays a vital role in understanding the interconnections between humans, animals, and environments. Despite its theoretical depth, this essay maintains a distinctly practical focus, positioning ethnography as a central methodological tool for a local case study. It argues that engaging with ethnography - its fieldwork, methodologies, and conceptual approaches - is a fundamental aspect of both practical and ethnographic work. In the Portuguese context, the essay highlights the need to move beyond the dominance of biomedical approaches by integrating social sciences to foster a more holistic and applied understanding of One Health.

Keywords

One Health, ethnographic methodology, Portugal

The term One Health is increasingly gaining institutional and academic traction in contemporary science as a conceptually interdisciplinary field. The concept emerged more broadly in 2003 following the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic, and in 2008 it achieved international prominence and relevance through joint statement issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), thereby becoming part of the common guidelines for studies of "well-being" and "good health". In this brief reflective article, I aim to draw attention to the role that ethnography, as a leading anthropological methodology, can play in One Health studies, and to how new methodologies within the field are necessary to keep pace with an

ever-evolving area. I shall address, more specifically, the case of Portugal, a country in southern Europe where the term is beginning to gain prominence in academic debates, university courses and field research methodologies.

In today's world, it is difficult to draw a definitive epistemological boundary between people, animals and environments (Haraway 2007; Giles-Vernick et al. 2013), which in turn gives One Health a comprehensive strength that extends to debates on rapid population growth, environmental destruction, climate change and mass mobility. These debates intersect with issues of health and disease, as broad cultural worldviews that converge on topics such as the rise in zoonotic infections and spillovers, increasing rates of neoplasms, greater bacterial resistance to antibiotics, the emergence of new allergies (Woolhouse et al. 2012).

In this way, One Health can be defined as a collaborative, transdisciplinary and multisectoral approach which, working at both macro and micro levels, unites a wide range of sciences to address health by recognising the interconnections between animals, environment and humans, seeking real solutions to concrete problems and contributing to the well-being of people-animals-environments. It is situated within a broad conceptual dialectic between One Medicine (human and veterinary medicine), Biology and Ecology, Law, Ethics and the Social Sciences, particularly Anthropology.

One Medicine translates the results of primary research into direct contact with patients, where socioeconomic and sociocultural systems are interpreted in light of health and disease within the people-animals duality, whether in outpatient settings or in surgery, thereby rethinking the aetiology of health and disease. Biology and Ecology represent primary research that ex-

tends from virology laboratories to ecosystems, elucidating the causes of problems and proposing solutions which One Medicine subsequently applies. We should not discard these areas from current anthropological and ethnographic reflection simply because classical positivism appears to have alienated ties with subjectivity in them; a careful, on-the-ground perspective – whether in laboratories or walking alongside a biologist in the field, as Latour (1979) has demonstrated is essential. Law, combined with Ethics, constitutes a fundamental area for devising the applicable framework in One Health jurisprudence, where extensive debates on genetic engineering, new monoclonal treatments, alternative agricultural productions, acquire depth both in legal reflection and in international, administrative, health and environmental law.

The Social Sciences, together with Anthropology and Ethnography, assume an increasingly pivotal role in the epistemological construction of the One Health field. Anthropology, with over 30 years' experience in studying and understanding the health–disease worldview, and as an inherently transdisciplinary discipline, enables us, through its ethnographic presence, to actively follow and participate in stories of resistance, suffering and resilience – truly inspiring accounts – by getting to know and giving voice to the “neglected actors”, while considering the social, economic, political, technological and historical factors that shape biological relationships (Calain and Poncin 2015; Narat et al, 2017; Varanda and Santos 2023), from humans to bacteria and viruses. This approach avoids interpretations and decisions that fall into biological reductionisms, instead offering more contextual, processual and holistic perspectives (Farmer 1999; Singer 2009), perspectives that only an on-site ethnographic presence can yield and that must be reflected in new methodologies and composition techniques that influence political decision-making.

We now begin to discuss a new reflexivity (I use the term in line with James Clifford's [1986] concept) and new models of ethnographic writing

that are more creative and holistic, rooted in anthropological concepts yet extending into other fields and reformulating conceptual boundaries. In this regard, I refer to two key books that are fundamental for understanding the interconnection between One Health and ethnography as fieldwork: *Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds – Ebola and the Ravages of History* by Paul Farmer (2020) and *The Histories of HIVs – The Emergence of the Multiple Viruses that Caused the AIDS Epidemic*, edited by William H Schneider (2022). It is, however, important to clarify why in an essay on creative ethnography – an inherently practical methodology – there is such an emphasis on the theoretical level through cited articles and books. Simply heading into the field with notions of “field notes”, “interviews” or “participant-observer” concepts is insufficient; empirical experience dictates that much more is required, especially when dealing with the duality of health and disease, the intimate world-views of the individual and the community that cause suffering. Moreover, in the social arena these are spaces of fierce and genuine struggle between biomedicine, the patient's perspective and the community's social interpretation of disease (*Diseases, Illnesses and Sickness*). To carry out innovative, creative and critical ethnography that remains focused on the object of study within the chaos and vastness of the field, and that can transcend disciplinary boundaries, it is imperative to theoretically understand the field and those who have already paved the way for these new perspectives.

Ethnography is the stage upon which One Health unfolds, where One Medicine, Biology, Ecology, Law and Ethics do not occur in a vacuum but within broader social, political and historical contexts, in unpredictable ways (Harper 2021).

At this point, where I believe I have clearly laid the foundation of my argument, it is essential to bring ethnography to the centre of the essay and to clearly state its role and its novel contribution to One Health studies. Ethnography, as the classic science and methodology of anthro-

pology, is by no means a dead field. Tracing its roots back to Malinowski (1911), it extends far beyond that, undergoing multiple changes and innovations across every school and current of anthropological thought. Today, ethnography, as a methodology that embraces subjectivity, can add great value to health studies. Through it, we can rethink alter-ontologies (Descola, 2013) that open up new perspectives, not confined to the biomedical domain of the physiological action of disease. It also brings local perspectives (eliminating the local versus global analytical duality), which are crucial for understanding phenomena such as epidemics, zoonoses or new diseases. It is impossible to grasp the whole without first accessing the local dimension by engaging with communities, thereby providing a picture of the practical responses to the challenges they face (Varanda and Théophile 2019).

Thus, with ethnography we can give voice to those who would otherwise go unheard, account for their problem-solving approaches and forge connections between biomedicine and local beliefs. We can provide the qualitative dimension that is essential to substantiate the thousands of quantitative data collected by public health. Ethnography enables us to give faces to numbers and names to problems. Here, alterity, comparison, “field notes”, reflexivity, “interviews”, “participant-observation” methodologies and “life histories” acquire new contexts and boundaries, tracking not only people but also animals and environments (as multispecies methodologies), as well as viruses, bacteria, protozoa (Burgess 1997; Fife 2005). Not least, the emerging fields of digital technology and Artificial Intelligence must not be set aside; they are central and beyond simply considering them, we must incorporate them into our research outputs and writing practices.

The ultimate aim is to produce innovative, creative ethnography where the classic and the contemporary blend seamlessly, retaining its anthropological character while extending beyond it, so that it can be read and utilised by doctors, lawyers, activists, virologists, bacteriol-

ogists, humanitarian workers and public health professionals. For this, new forms of writing and new media – such as ethnographic films, photography or AI – must be integrated into a substantial, dense body of work that demonstrates significant technical relevance.

I now turn to a brief overview of my current work context, the case of Portugal, a country where the One Health concept is growing exponentially, with university institutes calling themselves “Institutos One Health”, political projects for One Health cities emerging (e.g., Porto) and where the expansion of working and laboratory groups are contributing to a rise in publications. There are already public reference works that extend beyond academia. This is, of course, in the context of a country where chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases are on the rise. Furthermore, while the effects of climate change are perceptible, they still seem distant, with most research coming from laboratory biology, functional ecology and human biomedicine.

The question I pose is why One Health does not fully embrace the interdisciplinarity that constitutes the basis of its establishment. This occurs for two broad and central reasons, which I shall only briefly indicate due to space constraints. The first is the lack of field engagement, the absence of practical involvement with communities and the application of the knowledge produced in universities and laboratories. In other words, the dearth of ethnography that gives testimony to communities, their needs and the way they perceive and interpret biomedicine within their “cultural milieu”. The second issue relates to the insularity of the social sciences – particularly classical European anthropology and ethnography – which often resist new fields, methodologies and perspectives; in short, they reject the new reflexivity I propose. The classical studies of “medical pluralisms”, though highly significant and of great interest within the anthropological community, do not extend to our frontiers. Social sciences must assert their presence, demonstrate their strength and ensure they are

heard in the contributions they can make to One Health.

This essay invites us to rethink the boundaries of ethnography within the context of One Health. The complexity of contemporary health challenges demands methodologies that transcend classical disciplinary limits, enabling a more integrated and situated approach. In this sense, ethnography is not limited to a method of observation and description but assumes a critical, dynamic and creative role. Hence, it calls for reflection on the field, the methodologies used, ethnographic writing and the very objects of study. This reflection may seem overly theoretical, but in reality, it is inherent in the ethnographic exercise – a deep consideration of the field and the fundamental dimension of fieldwork – rendering the essay an eminently practical and applicable tool.

When considering the Portuguese case, it becomes evident that there is a need for greater involvement of ethnography in constructing knowledge in One Health. The predominance of biomedical and laboratory approaches reveals gaps that anthropology can help to bridge, particularly by introducing community perspectives and their experiences of health and illness into the debate, as evidenced by my empirical experience. The integration of ethnography into One Health studies not only gives a voice to “neglected actors”, but also provides a deeper understanding of the social, cultural and political dynamics that shape the health and disease of people-animals-environments, thereby promoting more effective and sustainable approaches. It is a space where the frontiers between disciplines are rethought.

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The Subversive Art Gallery: Latrinalia as a Form of Resistance

Jessica Holmes

Abstract

This photographic article turns its lens to the walls of a student bathroom in Sweden and finds a subversive art gallery. The camera-watches as social movements play out along the walls, seeing how these cries for action walk the line between public and private forms of expression. Ultimately, this article asks what it means to resist.

Keywords

Visual anthropology, photography, social movements

Latrinalia is inherently subversive in its act of vandalism and yet exists throughout time and place. Though most of Latrinalia is created in the space of a bathroom, it does not mean that it is contextless or that one can draw limitless parallels. These photos belong to one bathroom from a student organisation in Sweden; the building is a place which operates with a narrative of resistance in its key messaging. From being a fundraiser for the University's Students for Palestine movement, hosting a free food initiative with meals sourced by dumpster diving, and existing as a key organiser for political action in the city, the organisation serves as a beacon for inclusivity and social change.

Latrinalia is marginal because of the space it is created within, but flourishes in this building without consequence. I hypothesise that this is because it aligns with the nature of the organisation to build a place which fosters resistance, social change, and a space for marginalised voices. The art form offers a communicative moment which walks the line between public and private forms of expression (Trahan 2016), shouting down to a captive audience with a

message that is, in that moment, unignorable.

The acceptance of this act as a social norm, which goes unpunished in the building, fosters an increase in these art moments. It operates in this place as a form of structured deposition, in

which the leaving of one Latrinalia 'deposit' invites the creation of another (Houlbrook 2018). From the seemingly comic to the politicised, to the calls for change, every picture is something someone has deemed valuable enough to be immortalised on these bathroom walls. The narratives of this space have been co-created with the attendees who have picked up pens (and occasionally lipsticks) to make a statement.

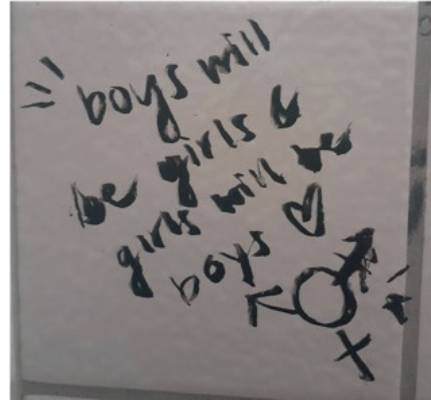
I invite readers to take a look at a snapshot of this subversive art gallery and consider the stories behind these moments. Imagine the anonymous person who picked up the pen in these seemingly mundane moments of self-expression (Trahan 2016:92). What can we learn about their stories from this practice?



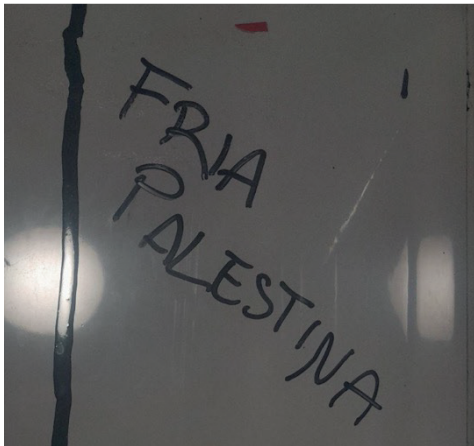
*THE WHOLE OF SKÅNE HATES
THE POLICE
(Skåne is an area in Sweden)*



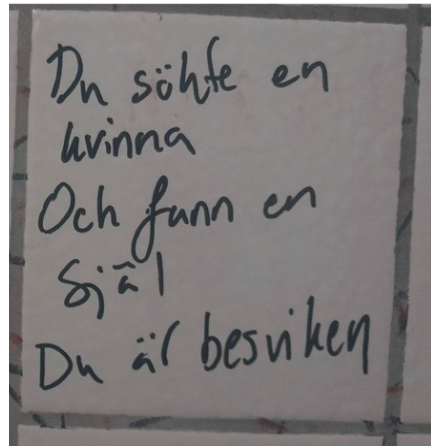
MAKE ART NOT WAR!



*"boys will be girls & girls will be boys"
(Potentially a reference to the song 'Lola' by The Kinks)*



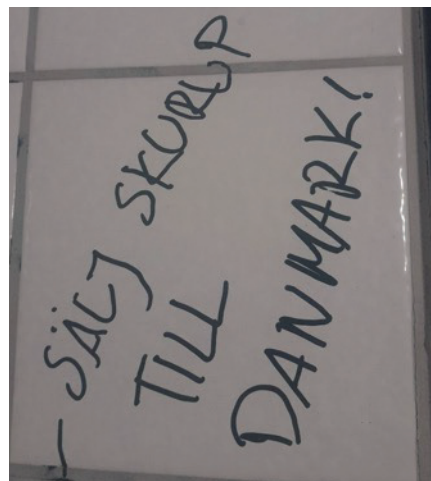
FREE PALESTINE



*You were looking for a woman
And found a soul
You are disappointed*



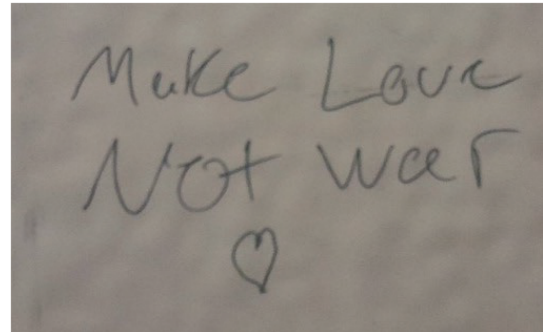
*Heart against heart!
Class against class*



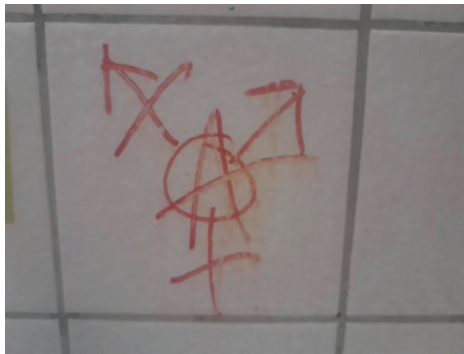
SELL SKURUP TO DENMARK! (A place in Southern Sweden)



Capitalism isn't forever



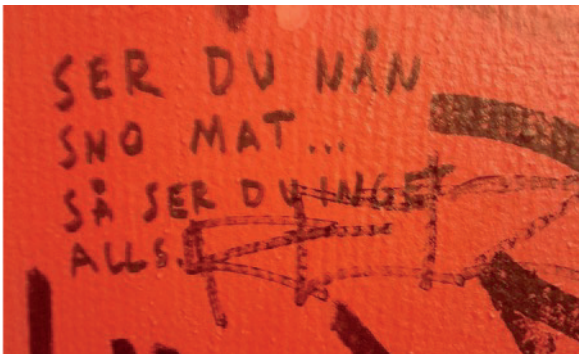
Make Love Not War



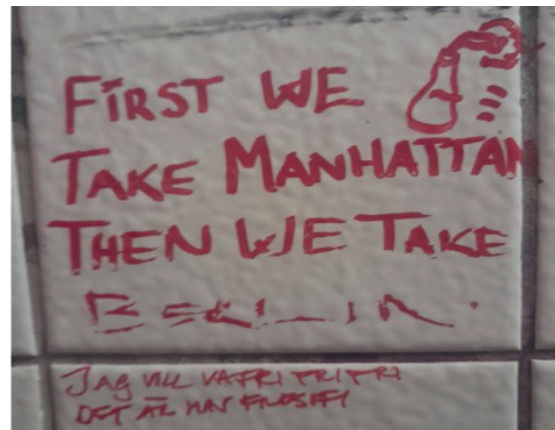
The anarchy symbol mixed with the symbol for men, women and gender non-conforming individuals.



COMMUNISM WILL WIN



IF YOU SEE SOMEONE STEALING FOOD... YOU DON'T SEE ANYTHING AT ALL...



FIRST WE TAKE MANHATTAN THEN WE TAKE BERLIN

(Song lyrics by Leonard Cohen's song 'First We Take Manhattan')

want to be free free free



DUMP YOUR GUY! GET A GIRL



FREE PALESTINE (In pink)
The arrow in the diagram says: Find the clit!

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Selkie Women: Wild Swimming and Embodied Ritual

Rosie Sumsion

Abstract

Following a short-term ethnography of fresh-water wild swimming, this essay examines the practise through the lens of ritual study. I explore the way swimmers engage in collective, ritual meaning making through spatial boundaries and engaged sensory experience. Through the embodied nature of the wild swimmer identity, I continue previous theorist's questioning on the extent to which ritual knowledge can be understood by outsiders and how it may be defined outwith doctrine and hierarchy. Instead, finding a practise that allows swimmers to carry their ritual space, identity and logic beyond the shoreline and into their 'everyday'.

Keywords

Wild swimming, Scotland, ritual, embodiment, women, meaning making

I am told the day I visit is a 'good swimming day'. I am unconvinced at first. It is 9:30 on a Sunday morning in mid-November on the West Coast of Scotland. To me it seems grey and cold, and I don't trust it not to start drizzling. I follow the swimmers away from the carpark, between low trees to where the gravelly shore instantly shifts beneath my feet. I hadn't realised how still it was until I saw the loch. The water is a silken mirror, reflecting the silver of the mist that hangs above it. One of the tour boats sits quietly anchored a little way out and farther behind it an island sleeps covered in fir trees. Nothing breaths, nothing moves, but us. The swimmers walk in slowly, steadily, their tow floats in pink and yellow the only glowing colour. And I (having promised my mum I would not swim with my flu) cannot follow.

Wild swimming appeared as a craze across the United Kingdom during the COVID-19

pandemic in response to pool closures and social isolation (Swain 2019: 814). However, its continuing popularity three years later suggests it has become more than just a stop-gap measure for exceptional circumstances. This essay will seek to understand the phenomenon of wild swimming as a transformative ritual deeply embedded in its own ritual world. It will begin by exploring why it is productive to study wild swimming as ritual, identifying its shared characteristics with the ritual form, and where its deviations help illuminate the limits of current definitions. It will move on to discuss how the ritual world of swimming is created, by transforming the community and environment to create a ritual space. In this way, the water is entered as a ritual world. Engaging ideas of embodiment will reveal how individuals are physically and mentally changed through swimming in the act of becoming the wild swimmer. Finally, it will trace the way this transformation creates an unconscious embodied ritual space within the swimmer, an untranslatable but nonetheless powerful logic that is carried into daily life and urges the return to the water.

Recognising wild swimming as ritual requires asking why this ethnographic account, but not for example my flatmate and I's spontaneous swim at a local beach, counts as ritual. Many of the surface elements appear the same: we go in, experience the cold-water shock, swim for a little, then come out and warm up. If Staal (1979) were correct in arguing the only important part of a ritual is the actions performed correctly then there would be no explanation for why, as a participant it is easy to say that they felt different. Identifying what causes this ritual feeling, as critical to the differentiation between the two swims, would thus help identify what constitutes ritual. Roy Rappaport (1990), studying ritual among the Tsembaga people of Papua New Guinea, identified ritual primarily through the performance of actions imbued with meaning and varying degrees of formality. This

is productive for contrasting the informal and impulsive nature of our swim, with the more formalised wild swim integrated into swimmers' routines. However, Rappaport (1990) suggests meaning can be either self-referential, referring to what happens in the ritual, or canonical, referring to symbolic meaning which relies on authority or liturgy to explain itself. Yet this group of roughly homogenous women have no leader to tell them what their swim means, nor canon to refer to. Understanding wild swimming as a ritual therefore challenges anthropologists to consider how meaning is constructed outside of institutions or hierarchies.

This is the argument proffered by Don Handelman (2005:2) who proposes studying ritual exclusively through its contents rather than context. By doing so, he suggests ritual meaning comes from a cycle of self-referencing its own practises and creating its own internal logic and value system. This he refers to as 'the ritual reality' (Handelman 2005:20) which one can begin to see reflected in the swimmers' concept of "a good swimming day" which seemed unconvincing to an outsider such as myself. A similar concept is employed by Catherine Bell (1992) who suggests activities become ritualistic when their impact on their environment changes the environment in such a way that it appears to cause and necessitate the ritual. This transformative thinking is seen in the way swimmers described wild swimming as fundamental to their health and wellbeing, despite the fact nearly all of my group were over 40 at a minimum and had only taken up swimming in the last couple years. Having spent the duration of their lives beforehand without it, now years prior to wild swimming was reframed as a time in which something was missing, where less effective techniques such as the gym or drinking were employed to create a shadow of the same result. For example, in Charlotte Bates and Kate Moles' (2022:7) ethnography of a wild swimming group at a lake in London recounts the way swimmers were no longer interested in returning to traditional pools, finding it 'dead' and heavily disciplined in comparison

to wild swimming. Like many other rituals, wild swimming has a transformative impact on participants, in this case how they rethink past experiences and shift their values. However, it is unique because it lacks any significant history or canon to guide this meaning making. Understanding wild swimming as a ritual, thus invites anthropologists to consider the way individuals engage in self and meaning making outside doctrine. In doing so, pushing the boundaries of ritual and religious knowledge to make space for what is produced.

The Water is Entered

The carpark we meet in is filled with campervans and road trippers in Summer but at this time of year we are the only ones here. Still, we are parked in the farthest corner closest to the shore. This section is divided from the rest of the carpark by a tall line of trees and everyone has parked their cars in a row on the other side. The walls of trees and cars hem the space and remind me of standing in a ruined abbey, with only grey sky for ceiling and a strange amalgamation of grandeur, fractioning, and fresh air. The swimmers have created a space for themselves born out of functionality, proximity to the water, but there is also a symbolic element to this (Bell 1992:71) in bounding their community. For example, in Summer they will swim elsewhere, away from the casual swimmers who visit on hot weekends. This shows the way spatial boundaries are used to support the definition of their ritual activity, that which takes place in their constructed ritual spaces.

The firmest boundary is the water itself. As I stand paddling in the shallows in my wellies, a couple come down to the shore with their dog. The woman comments that she would love to be able to swim like that and the swimmers laugh about how cold it is. Their jokes gloss over the truth that for newcomers to attempt to swim brings with it a very real threat of hypothermia or cold-water shock (Rew, undated). The regular participation acclimatises the swimmers to the cold and grants access to the

ritual space of the loch. Swimmers share their space, not with those on the shore, but with the animals such as ducks that inhabit it, each other, and the water itself as an entity (Bates & Moles 2022). The ability of ritual to suspend usual social relations (Clark 2017) allows swimmers to engage such non-human participants in their boundary making. Participation in the ritual is defined through the ability to co-exist in the space, to be 'one' with the water (Swain 2019: 815). The ritual world of swimming is thus an inter-existence with non-human participants as their shared use of the space and awareness of one another creates the ritual world (Escobar 2020: 28). This is unique from a public pool, described previously as 'dead' or the three swimmers the group did not engage with who swam for athletic training and consequently existed with the water in a different relationship. Therefore, the ritual world is created not just through bounding the physical space, but through acting in the appropriate way to become fully immersed.

They swim only about ten metres from shore in a rough huddle, breaststroke with their heads out of the water, allowing them to chat throughout. Indeed, there is little pause in conversation at any point. They discuss swimsuits and new equipment like thermometers as they change by the cars. They talk about the books they are reading on swimming and the way they relate to them. Mainly though, they talk about the impact of swimming. Someone mentions a study they read about how wild swimming can slow down dementia and everyone agrees in a way that suggests 'of course it does'. This is the logic of their ritual world - a mutual certainty in the power of wild swimming. The swimmers identify this shared aspect as a key motivation in when they choose to swim, a concept Bates and Moles (2022:11) recognise as 'conviviality' referring to the ability to create unique relationships, including with the nonhuman, to meet your social needs. As a group, they decide it is too cold to swim all the way along to the pier, a further 15 metres, and instead turn back. While all rituals maintain some capacity for variation

(Rappaport 1999: 36) conviviality clarifies how this group mentality meets the social need to determine what will still 'count' as a swim and validate the ritual meaning and benefit they are ascribing it. Indeed, Houseman (2005:81) suggests it is not the actions themselves that are important but the meaning that is imposed on them and the assumption the meaning exists. Indeed, one woman having initially decided not to put her head under says she will 'have to do it now' once someone else mentions it is the most beneficial part. The swimmers reinforce their ritual logic through their actions based on their belief in its truth. The community of shared ritual thoughts, as well as their 'oneness' with the water and unique way of existing in the environment build the boundaries of their distinct ritual world.

The Water Enters

However, inter-existence is a process of collective constitution meaning the swimmer is also transformed through the ritual. This is what you are taught at your first swim – don't trust your body when it tells you it is warm; get out before you think you need to; the cold will keep growing even once you are dry. Your body is no longer something you are primary master of, your senses are not to be trusted here. When I swim, I must force myself to breath out for the first few minutes, against my body's wishes to squeeze in and away from the cold beyond my control. I am fighting against it, fighting what the water wants it to do. In this sense, swimming is like possession in which the body exists in a state that is shared but still your own, and unfamiliar but yours to relearn as a new self (Goldman 2007). Swimmers discuss these experiences as they swim – the gasping, a burning feeling, an ache that sinks quickly into their bones – and each has learnt to recognise the unique signs in her own body. To be able to exist in the ritual space of the water they must relearn the way their body is communicating and to push through the moment of alienation. In doing so, they teach themselves to find ritual meaning in this through the benefits they

describe to one another and train themselves to feel (Downey 2015: 54). One swimmer describes the way they don't get as much of 'a buzz' from the wetsuit, a sensation I only vaguely understand but that is valuable and notable in this ritual space. Accordingly, they have learnt how to feel it.

Wild swimming is an embodied ritual in which the connection between the intense sensory environment and self are the basis for transformation (Clark 2017: 43). As Kelley Swain puts it, 'it yanks you out of yourself, rather, thrusts you back into yourself'. Every time the swimmer is 'possessed' by the water, they become more adept at transforming into the version of themselves that can wild swim. In the water, there is no separation between 'knowing-doing-being' (Escobar 2020) thus to know your body as a swimmer and to be able to do the swim is also to become a wild swimmer. Wild swimming then, is a ritual that transforms the participant into a wild swimmer co-constituted with the water. It is this making of the actor into something that defines Bell's (1992) understanding of ritual and the unique, self-referential ritual world that makes the circular logic of wild swimming to become a wild swimmer to wild swim, make perfect sense.

The Water Recedes

This Sunday, many are disconcerted by how cold they remain, their familiarity to the water constantly changing. They bring hot water in recycled milk and juice bottles to pour over themselves and it rises off them in steam. Their bodies glow pink, the parts covered by straps of their swimming costumes are pale in comparison as if this burning, freezing version of them is more alive somehow. There is a physiological element to this – the cold-water shock triggers the release of hormones and endorphins that sits alongside the way they train themselves to experience this as being alive (Swain 2019). This is the quietest part of the swim, and the part swimmers most identified as ritual when I explained my research. There is something

they say, in caring for yourself, returning to your normal self, the careful steps required. The concentration in layering clothes onto damp bodies that are sluggish from the cold. It is a liminal space between the ritual world and the everyday one – at once the body feels most alive and is hardest to control.

If, as Handelman (2005:5) suggests, ritual is a way of calibrating relationships to the everyday world, a way of stepping behind the scenes to make alterations, then this process of re-dressing is an apt metaphor for the difficulty in carrying things back. Indeed, Handelman (2005:20) goes on to argue that the stronger a ritual reality, the more distinct it is from other realities making it even harder to find compatibility. However, writing on the use of breathing in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in Brazil, Maria de Abreu (2005) explores how focusing on breathing, something fundamental to all of life, removes the boundary between ritual and the everyday and allows ritual values to exist in the body as a ritual space. Hence the deeply embodied nature of the ritual world of wild swimming allows swimmers to carry their transitional identity within themselves. Just as a selkie, a mythical creature of the Scottish seas, is as much a selkie when she is human as when she is seal; even when the one form is rendered invisible in each world. Although, swimmers themselves are more inclined to pull on the more widespread imagery of mermaids – beings that surrender any loyalty to the land – both are creatures whose forms challenge the limits of what a woman's body may look like, find itself capable of, or store within it.

Bell (1992: 99) suggests such ritual knowledge is unconsciously held in the body and consequently questions the extent to which it can translated or understood in a disembodied domain. Perhaps to be a wild swimmer, as Swain (2019: 814) suggests is the moment one stands at the edge of the water and thinks 'now, we must go in' as though it is the only logical thing to do. To be a wild swimmer then, much like believing in some kind of religious truth, is

to cultivate a disposition that recognises a kind of knowledge and way of existing only found through this ritual and its ritual logic. Talal Asad (1993:36), states 'It is a modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge'. When wild swimming is understood as a ritual, it illuminates, just as Asad suggests, the many ways of ritual knowing and being that exist beyond the articulatable or liturgical.

Conclusion

In conclusion, wild swimming is a transformative ritual existing in its own ritual reality. This reality is created through the physical boundaries of space which are both functional and performative. In the water, swimmers inhabit a unique ritual world in which their own logics and values are reiterated. The community of swimmers is fundamental to fostering the shared belief that individuals rely on when cultivating their own behaviours. However, the world of swimming is one that is also co-created alongside the water and its non-human inhabitants. To enter this space and wild swim, swimmers must overcome the loss of control and discomfort created by the cold water. To do so, they build a new relationship with their body and sensory environment, alongside connecting these experiences to their desired emotional response. Through this, swimmers come to embody the 'Wild Swimmer' as the ultimate ritual aim.

However, the deeply embodied practice changes the way swimmers exist in the world and challenges them in moving their transformed self between the ritual and everyday world. Embodiment creates a ritual space inside the swimmer that makes it an internal identity hard to understand if one does not share the embodiment. It is closest understood as an understanding of wild swimming as a way of knowing and experiencing the world through its ritual logic. Swimmers return to the water, just as others return to their rituals, because their embodied ritual logic decrees it the only obvious thing to do - to maintain the embodiment and way of

being. Thus, Wild Swimming encourages an expansive understanding of ritual meaning defined through the experiences, logic and transformation that it cultivates in those who look for it. Critical to this ethnography is the way meaning is constructed intentionally and intuitively, and the limitations of anthropology to truly represent, and thus comment on the ritual knowledge such meaning produces.

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Social and International Mobility Are Deals with the Devil

Asumi Kato

Abstract

This autoethnography explores the author's experience at Edinburgh University as an international student from a non-elite socioeconomic background. By framing their upward mobility as "a deal with the devil," the author advocates for the recognition of emotional tolls over material gains in mobility. The author depicts the intersectionality creating complex forms of isolation and critiques popular narratives of social and international mobility that reduce them to mere material success stories. Highlighting the cases of both international and local students, the author outlines how layered identities shape individual experiences of mobility, particularly in British universities.

Keywords

Social mobility, international students, classism, identity struggles, intersectionality

Introduction

Social mobility is [...] about tremendous personal sacrifice.

I was inspired to write this article by the 2023 speech by Sophie Pender at the TEDxPCL, the founder of the British student organisation 93% Club. Despite the great number of stories, I had heard about the university from the Internet and people I know, I never encountered something that I could as strongly relate to as what Pender (2023) narrated. It might sound odd, given the seemingly different profiles of Pender and me: I am an international student from Japan at the University of Edinburgh, while Pender was a local student at the University of Bristol.

Pender (2023) established the student group, the 93% Club, during her undergraduate studies, where she experienced classism as a working-class student. With the organisation, she aimed to offer support for economically marginalised students just like her. The number 93% represents the proportion of British students taking public education, though the number is much lower in prestigious institutions like Bristol. Today, the club has expanded to many British universities, including the University of Edinburgh, and has become the largest community for publicly educated students (Pender, 2023; The 93% Club, no date).

The unexpected parallel between my experience and Pender's (2023) highlights that class dynamics in British universities are not limited to local students but exist among international students too. I encountered alienation at the university due to my class, where most other international students are from wealthier backgrounds than mine. My situation, however, seems slightly more complicated than Pender's (2023), which I shall call intersectional alienation - class struggle mixed with cross-cultural adaptation.

Moreover, in her TEDx Talk, Pender (2023) emphasises the problem of social mobility and its framing as an individual success story, despite challenges like social isolation. She powerfully argues (Pender 2023: 12:37-14:46):

A successful picture of social mobility, as we understand it, is one in which the individual is separated from the place from which they came. It's alienation. It's hearing your own voice and not recognising yourself.

We often idolise social mobility ... What I think we have so critically failed to do is really look at the how in social mobility. If I offered you a ticket to the Maldives but told you that

you had to swim through shark-infested waters to get there, you'd probably say to me, "Sophie, I think there's a better way." Why are we not applying this same logic to the golden tickets [emphasis added] that bright, poor children get to a better life?

As opposed to the media and narratives I was exposed to before coming here, my university life has been far from a successful or dream-like story, as one might imagine. I learned what being socially mobile in a foreign setting feels like. It is marked by massive alienation - emotional disconnection from your family, your childhood friends, as well as people you meet in the new place, including those who are from the same country as yours. The mobility opportunity I received was not a golden ticket for free - it was a deal with the devil with overwhelming personal and emotional loss.

As a theoretical contribution, I present two original framings of mobility: mobility as intersectional alienation and as incomplete postmodern projects. Mobility as intersectional alienation understands mobility experiences as shaped by multiple axes of identities, unlike the conventional narratives that make sense of the mobility experiences with a single aspect of identity, such as class for social mobility and nationality for emigration. It draws broadly on feminist literature, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism. Through these perspectives, I suggest that power relations in mobility are entangled with complex webs of elements that constitute social self; Hence, adjusting the power dynamics and supporting mobile students requires strategic (non)usage of identity labels. With the notion of mobility as an incomplete postmodern project, I aim to present the divergence between the potential of mobility to resist modern ontology and the popular narratives that uphold it. This argument is grounded in anthropology texts examining ontological questions. For mobility to be transformative, socially meaningful projects, I advocate for circulating mobility

stories that can be categorised into emotional, personal dimensions over material, public ones.

Through such reflection on my experience and its link to the broader theoretical framework, I aim to add new perspectives to socioeconomic and international mobility. In Sections 1–3, I feature an auto-ethnographic reflection on my upbringing and university life to highlight the complex intertwining of class, culture, and other identities shaping the emotional reaction of social and international mobility. In Section 4, I highlight how this intersection can also be observed among domestic students, citing the recent controversy over the marginalisation of Scottish students at the University of Edinburgh. Sections 5–6 apply these reflections to the broader theoretical framework, suggesting frameworks of mobility as intersectional alienation and incomplete postmodern projects.

Navigating the Working, Middle and Upper Class

I would not dare to state that I was from a working-class family. I had a very financially stable, though not luxurious, childhood in one of the world's wealthiest countries, Japan. Both of my parents have a rather high and steady income. My mother was one of a few women in the Japanese 2000s who continued working as a full-time employee even after having me, which made my household even slightly financially better than others in the region. Since I was very little, my parents have bought me many books, toys and drawing tools and taken me to many places, from regional nature spots to amusement parks. I must admit that my upward mobility was owing to the resources and opportunities my parents had offered me.

The crucial point to note here, however, is that my parents themselves climbed the socioeconomic ladder. They are the ones who came from typical working-class families who had a financially strained childhood and could not pursue university degrees. This could explain why my parents seemed to have values

more aligned with those of the working class. My father especially despised elitism, sometimes mocking his highly educated colleagues when they were too cliquish and erudite. Both were never prideful about their gained positions or income. Rather, being underprivileged appeared to be one of their core identities. “We’re poor, and the world has countless rich people.” They used to tell me many times, as I grew up, that, objectively, they gained salaries far higher than the national average, and we had a materially sufficient life with occasional luxuries.

It is clear, however, that my family and I were never among the elites. My idea about the upper class was also intangible, partly because of the geographical setting. I did not grow up in an urban city or resort area where most of the upper class in Japan reside. My hometown is far from every large city, and it is rather famous for its agriculture and natural sites. Though I have been exposed to movies, series and books depicting the “rich,” I never encountered them in real life. In childhood, all I saw was a rural, relatively uniform society, where most families belonged to the middle or working class, detached from the broad socioeconomic picture.

The New World

When I was selected as a scholarship recipient from a Japanese private organisation to go to a British university, I did not give much thought to what it socioeconomically meant to my family and me. I was purely excited that I had finally secured a way to live abroad for several years, which was one of my long-time dreams. Entering university, however, I shortly realised that the scholarship was not just money to support my studies but a “golden ticket” for me to climb the social ladder and allow me to join the elite community.

I realised it through the interaction with my fellow Japanese students, which taught me how different, sometimes incompatible, their values and assumptions are different from mine. Most of the non-exchange international

students I met here, including the Japanese, did not have scholarships or external financial support, implying that they were inevitably from the upper class that could afford the incredibly expensive overseas tuition fees. Most Japanese students went to private schools in urban cities or abroad, appearing to carry the shared tastes, behaviours and values of the elites. Whether it was bags from high-end brands, luxurious travel experiences, dining at a sophisticated restaurant or a high priority on material aspects of life, all these types of cultural capital were very foreign to me, which made me doubt if I was from the same cultural sphere as they were. It took me a while to figure out that their leather bag did not mean that they merely liked the design, but it was from a luxury brand and signified their status. I could not understand why they cared about their partner’s class or financial background in dating. I was a stranger to the gossip about whose family owned the house, company or brand.

I conceptualised the notion of my class-based barrier more clearly when I befriended Hana [pseudonym] last autumn, a Japanese student who matriculated at another university in Edinburgh. When I figured that her socioeconomic background was similar to mine, I told her about my struggles. A few weeks later, when I hung out with her again, she shared with me that she had gone to an event by the Japanese student community. “I know what you mean now,” Hana said. “The students in Edinburgh are actually high-class. I also felt like they were from a different world from mine.” I was relieved to learn that I was not alone in feeling that way while figuring out that social class played a huge role in shaping the student experience here.

I surely expected some sort of “culture” shock before coming to Edinburgh, as I would have to live in a foreign country after all. I did have culture shock in ways I expected: I still struggle to navigate British university culture, communication style, accents, and the list goes on. However, I never expected to feel disconnected, even from the Japanese students, due to socioeco-

conomic factors, which struck me harder. When I faced the double alienation of culture and class, I was overwhelmed by a sharper sense of loneliness than ever.

The Old World

Nonetheless, I had to realise another type of alienation that emerged in my old community. My childhood friends and even my parents did not seem to manage to grasp my struggles because of the goldenness of my ticket to get here.

When I went to a reunion event where I met my classmates in middle school in January 2025, it was clear that I had come far away from where I was supposed to be.

“Did you know she lives somewhere abroad now?” When I went to say hi to a group of my former classmates at the very beginning of the event, before I even mentioned what I had been doing, one of them drew attention to me. I was stunned that he knew about my life now because we were never close in school, and I never told him anything about what I had done after middle school. After conversations with a few others, I figured that people knew and talked about what I was doing—it had become a source of gossip. My former classmates showed a mix of curiosity and confusion when they asked me about my present life.

“Your life in Europe looks amazing.”

“It’d be nice to visit you, but I need to save up for years.”

“Can you actually speak English?”

Did I not expect these comments at all? I definitely did. I could not, however, process them very well, as they confronted me with this painful fact: I was the “other” in both my new and old worlds. Pender narrates similar experiences (2023: 10:41):

It was that feeling of going home during the university breaks and bumping into people

that you'd known at school and feeling like, “Thank God I'm finally around people who know what it's like to be like me”, but then realising that, in the time that you've been gone, you'd become a complete stranger. It was the feeling of being too common to be at university and too posh to be at home.

During the whole struggle in university and back home, I deeply knew how lucky I was. It is such a dream come true for anyone like me, a middle-class student from a Japanese rural region, to go to an internationally recognised university without financial constraints. At the same time, it was very clear to me that my golden ticket stealthily required me to “swim through shark-infested waters” (Pender 2023), losing previous emotional basins and facing immense difficulties in building new ones in an unnatural place for me in terms of both class and culture. Crossing these boundaries was, for me, nothing but a Faustian bargain - I gained so many opportunities and benefits by studying here while giving up something fundamental to my identity and emotional world.

Class, Nationalism and Accent Bias at the University of Edinburgh

In British universities, the identity struggles shaped by multiple factors, such as class and nation, are not unique to international students or me. This is, in particular, visible here at the University of Edinburgh. Despite being in the capital of Scotland, the institution has an enormous number of non-Scottish students. According to their report, in the academic year of 2022/2023, only 30% of undergraduate students were from Scotland (University of Edinburgh 2023: 2).

Under this condition, the tension among students at Edinburgh University appears to stem from the mix of classism, often found in other British universities and national identity, as shown in the social media controversy in 2024. In October 2024, the student news site Edin-

burgh Tab received backlash for its comment on its TikTok street interview video in Edinburgh. The Edinburgh Tab wrote that the little presence of Scottish students was “as god intended” in the comment section, which was accused of marginalising Scottish students (Jackson 2024). Shortly after, the university reissued the guidance “counteract socioeconomic microaggressions” (Barnard 2024). Moreover, the Scottish Social Mobility Society, which was newly formed to produce safe spaces for Scottish students facing classism, was also involved, stating that “[The comments made by the Edinburgh Tab] aren’t just harmless jokes - they reflect deeper issues of classism and exclusion” (SSMS 2024). Scottish students shared their voices in multiple ways. For example, Mackenzie (2024) shared her experience at Edinburgh University in the student magazine the edi: “I am not a ‘trust fund baby’, and I wasn’t privately educated, but I have just as much of a right to be here as everyone else.” The debate seems still ongoing. The principal of the University of Edinburgh, Peter Mathieson, shared with The Times that they needed to discuss the issue of student media mocking Scottish accents in a meeting at the beginning of 2025 (McLaughlin 2025).

As this case shows, a complex web of social identities, including class, nation, accent, and educational background leads to tensions, microaggressions, and subtle discrimination in personal relationships, even among British students.

Mobility as Intersectional Alienation

Therefore, I advocate for the recognition and adequate support structures for intersectional alienation, beyond discussing marginalised experiences, focusing on one identity like nationality or class. When mobility occurs, one social factor, whether class or nationality, often seems to be overemphasised. In my case, it was more visible that I crossed a cultural border rather than a class. As Holliday (1999: 237–238) argues, when they examine international mobil-

ity in education or work, the national culture is often regarded as the factors that influence their experience the most. For instance, cross-cultural communication and management studies, such as cultural dimensions theory by Hofstede (1997), explain the value and behaviour differences among people based on national culture. However, these narratives can be misleading, as they impose inflexible classifications of social groups. As Abu-Lughod (1991: 137–147) argues, identity labels like culture and nationality can build artificial barriers between the self and the other. She argues that, even though the concept of culture challenges inherent distinctions among people and the hierarchical racial categorisation in colonial discourses, it can nonetheless serve similar functions to the notion of race by drawing rigid boundaries between communities and emphasising their internal uniformity. Indeed, the dominant culture paradigm may not account for the shared experience of Pender and the author at a British university.

This discussion on culture can be compared to the development of feminist theories, which led the scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to coin the term intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) critiques the use of the concept of “women” in conventional feminist discourses, as they led to the diminishment of Black women. She points out that Black female perspectives and struggles differ significantly from those of White women due to their intersectional identity and distinct lived experiences, from their relationship to the public sphere and how their sexuality was handled. Highlighting the speech *Ain’ I a woman?* by Sojourner Truth (1851) at the Women's Rights Convention in Ohio, United States, Crenshaw raises the issue where Black women constantly need to question if they are qualified as women in feminist movements (Crenshaw 1989: 152–160), which resonates with when I had to question if I truly belonged to the Japanese student community in Edinburgh. In sum, in the discussion of mobility, concepts like nationality may obscure both intra-group diversity and inter-group similarities, unless examining one’s

intersectional identity.

This idea might be useful in examining the safety net for minority groups in university settings. When students face social exclusion in universities, they are often encouraged to join student organisations, clubs and societies to integrate into the university community (Gallagher and Gilmore 2013). In general, psychological studies suggest that joining a group can be a way to find new, meaningful connections that reduce stress and isolating feelings caused by major life changes (Haslam et al. 2022). In university, those organisations are often made for certain identities or interests, such as the Japan Society, Feminist Society and Scottish Social Mobility Society (Edinburgh University Students' Association, no date). However, to provide a safe space for the targeted students, they must carefully maintain what roles the labels of "Japanese," "feminist," and "Scottish" play. If they function as a rigid category to artificially distinguish people, it can suppress diversity within and amplify the exclusion of students who have unique backgrounds in the community.

In this discussion, the concept of strategic essentialism by Spivak (1984) can be useful. Strategic essentialism recognises both the need to generalise minority groups for solidarity and to recognise the fluid and diverse nature of communities. Spivak (1984: 10–12) points out that essentialism, which recognises the shared values and experiences of a specific identity, has played a role in provoking and uniting the minority. For example, the concept of "women" successfully induced the feminist movement and solidified women under the shared opposition of patriarchy. Spivak emphasises that, however, this use of labelling should be a mere strategy for calling into action rather than a command to define the characteristics of the group (1984: 12). Though the concepts of gender and nationality have the practical utility of giving voice to the marginalised, Spivak emphasises the necessity of being critically aware of their limits to capture individual experiences. The support for alienation should thus consider

intersectionality. Single-axis communities, such as nation-specific university societies, which are supposed to be safe and comforting spaces for the minority, should adhere to tact rather than uncritical essentialism and avoid creating another type of marginalisation and erasing internal diversity.

Mobility as Incomplete Postmodern Projects

Furthermore, we must critically examine the implications of public narratives around mobility as material success stories. In this context, current social and international mobility can be framed as incomplete postmodern projects.

I argue that socioeconomic and international mobility have a significant potential to challenge the value systems of modernity that have led to multiple toxicities. This assertion is built upon the extensive examination of modern, dualist ontology and its consequences by anthropologists from the 1980s, which Allen and Jobson (2016) call the decolonising generation. These theorists point out that the dominant ontology today, which largely originated from Enlightenment thoughts, categorises and imposes hierarchies between binary concepts. Examples include culture over nature; the public over the private; reason over emotions; men over women; the West over the "Orient"; and the extrinsic over the intrinsic. Such a hierarchical worldview led to multiple consequences, such as dehumanisation of the female or non-Western "other"; environmental destruction; individualised, materialistic social norms; work- and productivity-centred lifestyles (Paulson et al. 2020: 97; Hicel 2020: 30–36). A similar trend to question injustice stemming from these values is seen beyond academia. From the late 20th century, primarily in the global North, there has been a shift in public opinion from prioritising material gains, such as reputable occupations and high incomes, to non-material, intrinsic values: self-expression, social tolerance to diversity, eco-friendliness and quality of life - all of which seem to belong to the inferior category in mod-

ern ontology. Inglehart (2014) calls this phenomenon a silent revolution, which is embodied in social movements like feminism and environmentalism that emerged in the 1970s (Johnston et al. 1994: 3–10).

On one hand, the current increasing attention toward social and international mobility seems to reflect this post-material trend and uphold moral, collective ideals that challenge materialistic, hyper-individualistic social norms. Though seemingly concerned with material conditions, social mobility is generally gaining attention as a social justice project aiming for a more equal and inclusive society (Wood et al. 2023: 79; Ingram and Gamus 2022: 191–192). Exchange programs or educational migration, too, are encouraged as crucial opportunities for students to gain cross-cultural understanding and minimise ethnocentric worldviews (Tarchi and Surian 2022: 123–124; Anderson et al. 2006: 458).

However, for social and international mobility to be truly effective projects to challenge modern ontology, we should critically examine the public narratives around mobile individuals, which so far seem to have succumbed to the dominant ontology. When someone achieves upward mobility, popular discourses often praise individuals' talent and effort and regard their experience as a "success" in a limited sense, such as gaining high-paid occupations (Morton 2019: 120). Moreover, in the period of globalisation and the rise of study-abroad programs and initiatives (Gan and Kang 2022: 207; Tarchi and Surian 2022: 123–124), international mobility is also framed as a way to boost one's intercultural competence and language skills for employability and future career development. These narratives overemphasise the public side of mobility stories based on the dualist public/private hierarchy, neglecting the costs that often fall into non-material, "private" dimensions.

Disseminating mobility stories that belong to the emotional, private domain can thus be a significant component for social and international mobility to be thoroughly postmodern, thus

socially meaningful and "realistic." Non-material narratives of upward and cultural mobility, which are often more multidimensional and ambiguous, do not fit into the ideal trope of modern ontology that prefers simplifying and categorisation. Emotional distress, identity crisis, and loss of connections are often reduced to secondary to the positive mobile people gain for their public selves, recognised by conventional narratives.

Spreading these narratives and deconstructing modern ontology is crucial in offering better support for and understanding of mobility students. As Pender neatly expresses, the lived realities of mobile individuals exhibit the dissonance from what conventional narratives see as realistic and legitimate about mobility experiences (2023: 15:13):

How to become socially mobile isn't the narrative that we would want it to be. [...] Social mobility is no longer just about getting good grades or a good job but actually about tremendous personal sacrifice. It's about making decisions that come to be incredibly hard to live with in later life.

Indeed, as Escobar (2020: 5–7) argues, rethinking modern ontology requires rethinking what counts as "possible" and "realistic." Although Escobar articulates this idea in a radically different context, I believe there is unexpected relevance between this case and his, both of which examine the legacy of modern ontology. As I narrated both in the mobility as intersectional alienation and the incomplete postmodern project, the new framings for mobility I presented here push back against the neat, normative framings of mobility. Modern ontology often categorises the world into elements and values some but not others, simplifying a phenomenon yet presenting its version as more realistic and legitimate. Pender's story and mine argue against such a framing of "realistic." The postmodern understanding of mobility accepts multiple possibilities, complexity, contradiction and ambiguity over a single "success" narrative.

Conclusion

Transcending borders of class and culture cannot always be a movie-like success story, including mine. It can be a tremendously difficult exchange of fundamental elements of themselves, such as connections, understandings, and old identity, for better education and opportunities.

The autoethnography depicted my experience at the University of Edinburgh, shaped by my class and nationality/cultural background. These intersectional isolating experiences are not unique to mine, as experienced by Hana and Scottish students in Edinburgh. Socially mobile individuals, including Pender and me, are often simultaneously othered in their old communities. Therefore, I advocate for the transformation in the support and narratives of mobile students. As opposed to the rigid essentialist approach that emphasises one identity and fixes its characteristics, I advocate for considering multiple identities, including class, cultural background, ethnicity, accent, gender, and many more, to understand and give support to socioeconomically and culturally mobile students. The supposed safe spaces for minorities, such as university societies, must strategically apply essentialism for the practical purposes of unifying the community rather than overemphasising group coherence and producing another form of exclusion. Moreover, by framing mobility as incomplete postmodern projects, I pointed out that social and international mobility can aim to create more equal, inclusive societies, through which we can resist modern dualism, which devalues the natural, private, emotional, and non-material. Nevertheless, public narratives often emphasise material gains of mobility, such as skills and employability, while emotional and personal tolls are often downplayed, undermining the potential of mobility projects to deconstruct modern, dualist ontology.

I am not arguing against individuals striving for social and international mobility; nor do I

personally regret that I took this path I was given, despite the costs. I nonetheless resist the simplistic understanding and framing of mobility that ignores the enormous emotional struggles exchanged for material gains. Thus, we must rethink the reality of mobility. Traditionally, mobility stories characterised by a single identity axis, material gains, and linear progress are considered realistic, possible, and legitimate, submitting to modern ontology. On the other hand, intersectionality, emotional tolls, and contradictions were reduced to trivial aspects. I advocate for transforming this structure. If modern ontology sees the public dimension of one's life and frames mobility as a golden ticket, I see it beyond the dualism, arguing that mobility is a deal with the devil.

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How is filial piety renegotiated in transnational Chinese families?

Hui Jun Cheyene Yong

Abstract

This essay examines how filial piety is renegotiated in transnational Chinese families amid migration and global mobility. Drawing on the author's multi-generational family ethnography spanning Meizhou and Singapore, it argues that distance reconfigures what counts as "care," shifting practice from co-residence toward remittances and affective reciprocity. These changes are primarily modal and do not dislodge filial piety's patriarchal foundations. As women increasingly perform the emotional, organisational, and material labour of cross-border caregiving, ritual authority in funerals and ancestor worship remains masculinised, publicly reaffirming patrilineal continuity. Contemporary funerary economies further commodify filial virtue, privileging performative displays over everyday caregiving.

Keywords

Kinship, filial Piety, performative care, migration

Introduction

Filial piety, central to Chinese kinship, refers to the moral obligation of children to respect, obey and care for parents and elders. In Chinese contexts, this duty has often been understood as sanctioned by broader moral and cosmological authority, reflected in warnings that "the unfilial will be struck by lightning" (Yan 2003). Under globalisation and labour migration, however, filial duties are increasingly enacted from afar, creating a paradox in which absence becomes a meaningful form of care (Murphy 2002). Remittances (Harrell and Santos 2016), long-distance caregiving (Yan 2018) and reversed care arrangements (Chiu and Ho 2020) have reshaped how responsibility is fulfilled. Yet

these shifts do not unsettle the patriarchal foundations of filial piety. Although women shoulder substantial material and emotional labour, ritual roles in ancestor worship and funerals remain reserved for men, reaffirming lineage continuity (Mulyani, Manggala and Nirwinastu 2022; Yan 2023).

Meizhou, located in northeastern Guangdong province, is a historic centre of Hakka culture. The Hakka are a subgroup of Han Chinese whose name, meaning "guest people", reflects a long history of migration and resettlement across southern China (Leung, 2013). In my grandfather's ancestral village, this kinship structure is reflected in circular communal dwellings, where extended families reside within a single enclosed space. At the centre of these dwellings, ancestral halls serve as sites of ritual practice and lineage governance, anchoring collective belonging while sustaining patrilineal hierarchy (Xie et al. 2026). This spatial organisation helps explain how migration may re-shape care, while ritual authority remains tied to patrilineal lines.

Drawing on my multi-generational family ethnography — from my great-grandfather's migration from Meizhou to Singapore, to the exclusion of female caregivers from key funeral rites and my grandfather's return to his ancestral village — this essay asks: How is filial piety renegotiated in transnational Chinese families? I argue that global mobility reconfigures filial behaviour but preserves the symbolic authority of patriliney, as ritual recognition remains masculinised even when care becomes feminised. The essay first outlines the historical and moral foundations of filial piety, then examines how migration reshapes obligations through gendered care and how rituals maintain kinship across borders.

Foundations of Filial Piety in Chinese Kinship

Filial piety (*xiaoshun*) is historically grounded in the patrilineal lineage system that structured Chinese society. From the Ming-Qing period onward, households headed by senior men served as units of governance and economic survival (Kwee 2007). Patrilineal descent functioned not only as a kinship principle but also as a system of social security (Yan 2018). This structure was institutionalised through ancestral worship, which linked the living and the dead to a single male ancestor, making male heirs essential for lineage continuity (Ling, 2017; Mulyani et al. 2022). Within this framework, filial piety involved respect for elders and reinforced male authority. Sons, by virtue, held greater authority than daughters, whose loyalties were expected to shift to their husband's family at marriage (Harrell and Santos 2016). Thus, filial piety reinforced generational and gender hierarchies, positioning youth beneath elders and women beneath men, embedding patriarchy within kinship morality (Nguyen, Zavoretti and Tronto 2016). These hierarchies were reproduced through everyday practices. Children, regarded as long-term investments (Zavoretti 2017), were expected to return parental nurture through adulthood care (Stafford 2000; Yan 2003). Confucian ethics further codified this moral economy through the principle of *yang*, which frames supporting parents in old age as deferred repayment for being nurtured as a child, while the logic of *renting* treats these debt as morally unrepayable, binding children through emotional attachment, material reciprocity, and ritual gestures toward both living parents and deceased ancestors (Stafford 2000). These everyday exchanges accumulate into ritual authority, making end-of-life rites the moment where moral and symbolic filial duty is publicly judged. End-of-life rites (*songzhong*) are regarded as the highest expression of filial virtue and the final affirmation of moral standing (Yan 2003). Sons, especially the eldest who historically inherit family assets, are traditionally the only ones permitted to preside over funerary

rituals and carry the ancestral line, reinforcing a patriarchal kinship order (Yanagisako 2013; Hu and Scott 2016). These practices reveal how filial piety functions as a cultural logic that binds generations through moral, material, and ritual obligations within a deeply gendered patrilineal system.

Filial Piety Across Borders

Filial piety has long been sustained through generational and gender hierarchies that embed patriarchy within kinship morality. Migration disrupts co-residence as the primary form of filial practice, shifting care toward obligations performed from afar (Carsten 1995; Harrell and Santos 2016). My great-grandfather's migration from Meizhou to Singapore demonstrates how filial piety is renegotiated through transnational mobility rather than eroded by it. He left Meizhou during a period when transoceanic travel involved months on overcrowded ships, limited infrastructure and significant risks. His journey was undertaken not for individual gain but as a sacrifice oriented toward securing land, marriage arrangements, and educational opportunities for the family he left behind. In the absence of modern communication, kinship was sustained through infrequent letters and an expectation that his remittances would support the family. As my grandmother recalls, distant relatives still attribute their contemporary success to property purchases and investments made possible by his earnings, demonstrating how economic sacrifice rather than physical proximity came to signify filial devotion. Therefore, Migration became a moral strategy for lineage survival, where income earned abroad secured the family's livelihood and upheld its honour (Driessen 2015). My great-grandfather's physical absence thus expressed filial duty, with the demands of transnational life redefining what counted as moral presence and care.

This dynamic is not unique to my family. Similarly, Chu's (2006) ethnography on Fuzhounese migrants, where tall, uninhabited houses materi-

alise the moral value of overseas labour by visibly signifying wealth and status. These empty houses become tangible evidence of sacrifice, publicly affirming the migrant's ongoing commitment to the lineage despite physical distance (Hao, 2024). Such structures directly challenge earlier formulations of kinship and filial piety by Carsten (1995) and Stafford (2000), which foreground everyday co-residence and shared meals. In this context, absence is not regarded as unfilial, it becomes a potent index of virtue. Relatedness is reconstituted through material accumulation and architectural inscription, fundamentally altering what constitutes filial expression (Choi and Peng 2016). Filial obligation shifts from embodied presence to economic remittance and spatial display, redefining what it means to be 'present' and 'caring' in a transnational family.

However, this reconfiguration relies on gendered infrastructure of care that remain largely unrecognised. Such mobility is only possible because women remain at home to raise children, manage remittances, and care for elders, enabling men to fulfil their filial duties through migration (Buch 2015; Zharkevich 2019). Yet the social and symbolic recognition for these transnational achievements continues to be attributed to the male lineage, even though women sustain the everyday moral and material labour that makes such mobility viable (Wright 2020). This asymmetry of power: where men are publicly positioned as bearers of filial virtue and lineage continuity, while women's efforts are rendered invisible, reveals how transnational filial piety preserves patriarchal authority even as its material form transforms.

Since filial piety is expressed materially, this reconfigured form simultaneously intensifies gendered expectations. Xiang's (2021) notion of 'suspension' captures how migrants forgo personal aspirations to maximise savings for kin. As recalled by my great-grandmother, a single piece of meat was shared among the family of seven so that most of my great-grandfather's earnings could be sent home, with his hardship

concealed from relatives in Meizhou. By hiding the difficulties of migrant life, he created the impression that he was thriving abroad, preserving the family's name. Such frugality is therefore not simply self-denial; it is a filial strategy to secure dignity through the household, a moral calculus in which hardship is justified through its potential to uphold familial honour (Fengjiang, 2021). This pursuit of dignity is inseparable from face (*mianzi*), the social recognition of competence and moral worth within one's kin group (Choi, 2025). Driessen (2015) and Fengjiang (2021) show that property ownership and gift-giving are not merely measures of respectability, but fulfil filial expectations by conferring honour within a broader moral economy of aspiration. The dignity earned is thus relational, as migrants gain 'face' as moral sons through what they secure for others, not through what they keep for themselves (Choi and Peng, 2016). Migrants therefore work not only for their families, but to materialise a morally recognised self through sacrifice, tying their aspirations to the needs of others.

When one achieves success, they find themselves trapped in new obligations. Zavoretti (2017) shows that those who have 'made it' are expected to help relatives pursue the same path by using their earnings and connections to assist others' mobility. Success becomes a shared obligation. Migration becomes both a route to class advancement and a filial responsibility to lift the wider kin group, maintaining the household's honour (Kuah, 2024). This turns mobility into a cycle of obligation that reinforces suspension, as the migrant continues to sacrifice for others, instead of settling their own desires. However, Zharkevich (2019) argues that, even while migrants remain suspended, money becomes a 'substance of relatedness', embodying care, prestige and masculine authority. In patrilineal Chinese contexts, this embodiment affirms gendered responsibility: men are expected to secure lineage continuity through financial provision, and their migration is morally justified as ensuring intergenerational survival (Yanagisako 2013). Through remittances and

status-building, men remain morally present, reproducing kinship as a collective project across distance (Chu 2006; Zharkevich 2019).

My great-grandfather's life thus demonstrates how transnational mobility redefined filial piety such that care is no longer expressed through everyday physical presence, but through material sacrifice and gendered obligation to sustain family lineage. While these inherited ideals continue to be passed down (Yan 2003), they also open space for new interpretations of what filial duty should look like and who is expected to perform it, particularly as caregiving patterns shift.

Gendered Shifts in Contemporary Filial Piety
The format of filial piety has shifted in recent generations, as obligations are increasingly fulfilled through emotional reciprocity rather than unquestioned duty. Younger generations no longer treat filial piety as a debt owed to parents, but as a reciprocal relationship (Hao 2024). They assess whether their parents have fulfilled their parental care duties in terms of the love and affection they received before repaying them with their own filial obligations (Hu and Scott 2016). As Yan (2003) shows, parental value is no longer guaranteed by biological reproduction but is judged through the provision of care during childhood. This relational shift is further reflected in Chiu and Ho's (2020) study of 'floating grandparents', who emphasise grandchildren's well-being rather than demanding repayment, suggesting that ageing migrants increasingly moralise autonomy over obligation. As filial piety becomes reciprocal, daughters gradually emerge as preferred subjects of repayment. Harrell and Santos (2016) argue that this shift is fuelled by the perception that daughters are more attentive, emotionally reliable, and trustworthy compared to sons. This perception is not merely symbolic; it is enacted through the way some daughters send remittances, arrange medical care, and co-reside with ageing parents even after marriage (Buch 2015; Ling 2017). Still, this shift in the subject of filial obligation signifies a transformation in moral expectations

rather than a change in the lineage structure. Daughters become affective guarantors of care and sustain kinship as 'moral daughters', but they are still denied ritual heirship by patrilineal norms that position them as outsiders (Mulyani, Manggala and Nirwinastu 2022; Kuah 2024). This moral elevation fails to translate into ritual authority, revealing that transformations in affection and care do not necessarily disrupt the patrilineal logic of kinship.

Far from weakening patrilineality, the feminisation of filial responsibility actively sustains it by redistributing the burden of care onto women while preserving men as the symbolic bearers of lineage. Nguyen, Zavoretti and Tronto (2016) highlight that the patrilineal ideal of sons upholding family honour is only achievable because women perform the emotional, financial and organisational labour that enables this ideal to appear natural. Sangren's (2017) analysis of false consciousness further illuminates this dynamic, where individuals misrecognise the gendered foundations of kinship, attributing filial virtue and lineage continuity to men even when women produce the labour that makes both possible. Women's care thus becomes the invisible infrastructure of patrilineal honour, allowing gendered inequality to persist under the guise of continuity.

Filial Performances: Gender and the Price of Funeral

The tension between women's everyday caregiving and men's ritual authority becomes most visible in funeral practices. Daughters now shoulder the emotional and economic responsibility for families, yet they are routinely excluded from officiating rituals that publicly signify filial virtue (Hsu and Palitsky 2023). This contradiction became particularly visible in a recent family funeral. Despite undertaking much of the day-to-day care, a female family caregiver was excluded from officiating and ranked after younger male siblings in the published obituary. This suggests that ritual recognition

remains masculinised even when caregiving is feminised, exposing a moral economy in which daughters may perform filial labour without being granted equivalent symbolic authority (Kuah 2024). Within patrilineal kinship, men continue to be treated as the formal heads of household and principal bearers of lineage, while women are positioned as supportive figures whose loyalties are presumed to shift upon marriage. Daughters are often treated as “spilt water” (Zhang 2009: 257), a phrase that symbolises their presumed transfer to another family, even though marriage itself does not erase their material or emotional contributions to parental care. Although age and generational position shaped ritual ranking, gender remained the more decisive principle in determining ceremonial authority.

This unequal distribution of ritual recognition is further intensified by the commodification of death rituals. Funeral practices are increasingly shaped by neoliberal economies in which filial virtue is displayed through materiality such as lavish flower wreaths, personalised services, gold-plated coffins, and Rolls-Royce hearses (Woodthorpe 2017; Bloomberg 2018). At my grandfather’s funeral, symbolic honour was measured through expensive floral constructions and curated offerings such as paper goods, where status, not caregiving, became the visible currency of filial display. Under such conditions, recognition is often granted less to those who provide physical or emotional care than to those who can finance extravagant rites (Kipnis and Cliff 2020). This places women in a structurally disadvantaged position, as their disproportionate caregiving limits their ability to accumulate the wealth that men can mobilise to perform filial devotion (Buch 2015; Zharkevich 2019). Consequently, men’s ability to appear filial becomes increasingly class-dependent, revealing how patriarchy now intersects with wealth to produce status hierarchies not only between genders but also among men (Kwee 2007).



Image 1. Burning paper mansion and BMW car as filial offerings. Photograph by the author.

These transformations cannot be separated from the conditions that made migration necessary in the first place. Earlier migrants endured frugality and sacrifice to accumulate wealth and elevate social status for their descendants (Chu 2006). The material displayed at funerals represents the culmination of those aspirations, where material success becomes visible, moralised and tied to lineage honour (Woodthorpe 2017; Hao 2024).



Image 2. Sand Dragon pilgrimage. Photograph by the author.

Particularly in Hakka funerals, sand dragons publicly symbolise filial honour, transforming obligation into visible lineage prestige rather than private sentiment. In other words, migration produces the very wealth that now determines who can be seen as filial, creating a ritual economy in which status, rather than care, becomes the currency of filial virtue (Yanagisako 2013). Filial piety thus becomes gendered and commodified,

where women sustain kin through emotional and economic labour, yet men, and increasingly money, represent filial virtue.

Ancestral Anchors: Belonging in Motion

The patriarchal character of filial piety invites not an assumption of cultural compliance, but a closer inquiry into the social mechanisms that enable its persistence. Drawing on my ethnography across three generations, I argue that such practices endure in transnational Chinese families because they produce continuity, relatedness, and moral belonging in settings marked by transnational mobility, uncertainty, and spatial suspension (Xiang 2021). As Forbes-Mewett, Han and Yang (2020) argue, death rites sustain communication between the living and the dead, reaffirming kinship ties that migration would otherwise stretch or sever. Rituals therefore, act as relational infrastructures that maintain kinship across distance, reminding migrants of their origins. My grandfather's insistence on returning to his ancestral village in Meizhou before his death reveals this moral pull of home. His final journey embodies what Tebboth and Locke (2023) describe as 'home as a moral anchor', a stable point through which individuals maintain their roots, ancestry, and sense of self amid turbulent mobility. His return was not simply about honouring the ancestors but about securing continuity for those who remain. It affirms identity not purely as a nostalgic orientation to the past but as an ongoing discovery of what it means to be "Chinese" even as traditions have evolved through migration (Forbes-Mewett, Han, and Yang 2020).



Image 3. Photos taken by my late grandfather who visited the ancestral graves in Meizhou

This also echoes Chu's (2006) notion of the 'impossible return' and Xiang's (2021) description of migratory 'suspension', in which imagined homelands are upheld as moral horizons even when physical return is fraught, incomplete, or symbolic. Rather than signalling nostalgia alone, these rituals articulate a future-looking horizon of obligation, identity, and belonging. Importantly, such practices also generate collective aspiration. As Kwee (2007) illustrates how ancestral worship reinforces a shared orientation toward lineage advancement, not because ancestors are spiritually central in themselves, but because ritual unity produces hope, duty, and imagined socioeconomic futures among descendants.

Likewise, Lin's (2022) research on 'virtuous eating' demonstrates that everyday caregiving is not merely obedience to tradition, but a moral practice that cultivates well-being and relational reciprocity. Through vegetarian dietary care among older adults, Lin (2022) shows how mundane acts are mobilised as ethical labour, sustaining intergenerational responsibility even

amid shifting family structures. Rituals persist, then, not as static remnants of tradition, but as flexible strategies for securing continuity and connection under the destabilising effects of migration. Thus, while filial piety has been redefined as reciprocal and increasingly feminised through everyday caregiving, its ritual expressions remain anchored in patrilineal authority because lineage continuity is still safeguarded through male ancestry, which rituals make publicly visible and morally binding (Kwee 2007; Kuah 2024). Rituals continue to sustain the transnational moral work of relatedness by locating belonging, obligation, and continuity in the patrilineal line.

Conclusion

The childhood warning that ‘the unfilial will be struck by lightning’ once shaped my understanding of filial piety as a cosmic commandment enforced by divine punishment. However, the ethnographic and theoretical insights in this essay show that such fear no longer structures filial obligation. Filial piety has been reshaped through three intertwined shifts, from sacrifice to reciprocity, from women’s unseen caregiving to the feminisation of filial labour, and from ritual duty to the commodification of filial authority. Across these transformations, what has changed is not the imperative to be filial but the criteria through which filial virtue is recognised, valued and morally justified. The axis of filial piety has therefore shifted from who labours to who is recognised as filial.

Together, these shifts suggest that for younger generations in transnational Chinese families, filial piety no longer rests primarily on obedience or ritual authority, but on affective accountability and the capacity to secure elders’ well-being. Care is not motivated by fear of cosmic punishment, but by the fear of failing to reciprocate the sacrifices and emotional labour that enabled our mobility. Filial piety thus persists not as a fixed tradition, but as an adaptive framework through which transnational Chinese families negotiate care, obligation and belonging across distance.

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Masking Neurodivergent Traits as a Form of Play: A Reflection on What Role the "as-if" Plays in My (!) Life

Emily Harriss

Abstract

This article reflects on the author's experience of neurodiversity, where "masking" neurodiverse traits becomes a task of living "as-if". This entails the learning of rules via playful and curiosity, allowing for a "normal" engagement with the social world. The role of "as-if" thus allows the author to imagine other ways of being, making way for interpretations of the social world that allow emotions to feel light and manageable. Ultimately, the article sees how this subjunctive worldbuilding enables the author to function in a confusing world.

Keywords

Play, neurodiversity, the "as-if"

When I sit down to plan an essay, the first thing I do is mark the words that stand out to me, as I have replicated in the title. I imagine how I am supposed to answer, what is expected, while studying a mark scheme. I must constantly check: "am I answering the question" with every sentence I (re)write. Essays are evidence of my learning as a student. My learning elsewhere doesn't culminate in the production of essays, yet I still consider myself to love learning beyond being a student. I am constantly aware that to be a "student" is very different from being me.

"Oh, what do you do?"

Someone will ask, but I will know the answer looked for is "student". Soon, I will not be a student, but I know I will still be a role, and I will understand that to be part of who I play in the world.

Bloch wrote that 'the role of being a student is

independent of the empirical person and what they are up to at any particular instant' (2016: 82). It made me think, how much do I consider people to be their roles? How much do I think of myself as my role? And more widely, is the world we live in and its conventions just a series of playful imaginings? Seven months ago, I was diagnosed with autism and ADHD. I have been reflecting during this time following my diagnosis, on how I view the world and how my neurodivergent traits were not realised sooner. Seligman's piece on the "as-if" subjunctive world, created by ritual and play, was a similar world-building exercise that I have used to learn, imagine, and operate in the "as-is" world (2008). This paper is a reflection on the role I play as a student and my understandings of rules and conventions through masking, using an "as-if" approach to the "as-is" social world.

Autism spectrum conditions are neurodevelopmental conditions characterised by 'difficulties in social interaction and communication, alongside the presence of restricted interests, difficulties adapting to change, and repetitive, stereotyped behaviour' (Lai et al. 2011: 1). Publicly, I have displayed a few of these characteristics. At most, I have been considered mildly eccentric and sensitive to loud and busy environments. Recently, there has been an increased awareness of masking to camouflage neurodivergent traits. Masking, otherwise known as social camouflaging, is defined as 'the use of strategies by autistic people to minimise the visibility of their autism during social situations' (Hull et al. 2019). This is something I am familiar with. The implication is that at some point, I have learned to perform in different social situations to the extent that I am passably "normal". It is ironic, but understandable, that my interest in learning about how the social world is structured led me to study Social Anthropology at university. Observing social situations is an essential aspect to how I have learned to mask. It is worth noting

that this is not necessarily true of anyone else but is my own experience.

The “as-if” as defined by Seligman is a ‘symbolic subjunctive world’ created through ritual or play (2008). Ritual and play create an “as-if” world in different ways. Seligman argues that subjunctive worlds of ritual are ‘endless’ compared to an ephemeral play world (2008:74). For example, a ritual is repeated, such as graduation ceremonies held each year to signify the completion of higher education by its students. Graduation is a meaning making ritual that renews the university as an educational institution. Alternatively, play is ‘improvisational’ and a ‘free expression of creative energies’ (Graeber 2015: 191-2). Unlike formalised ritual, play offers an “as-if” world of potential, producing an unknown future, since its ending is undecided (2008: 74). Play and ritual are not entirely separate. For example, a degree is only a piece of paper that we treat “as-if” it is evidence for education, something more than just paper. Therefore, rules and conventions are born out of playful experimentation and world-building through both play and ritual. This human imaginative capacity using play and ritual allows for the creation of ‘stable institutional structures’ that make up our social world (Bloch 2016: 81). Although imagined, our social world appears “as-is”, real and inflexible, guided by naturalised fundamentals. In this way, being a student seems just “as it is” while at university. For me, complex social systems appear as arbitrary and confusing. I am constantly approaching the social as “inside from the outside”, as Bloch might say (2016). I overcome this problem by employing an “as-if” interpretation to every situation. This could be understood as a process of worldbuilding.

Pretend play is essential to the imagination of an-other. Just as we could pretend a stone to be an apple, could we imagine a social order with rules and roles – both are fundamentally a form of play (Bloch 2016: 83). The “as-if” allows for temporal and spatial movement since ‘the concept of stone and of apple need to be separated from the here and now’ (Bloch 2016).

This is an example of a porous boundary, central to the ‘construction of subjunctive worlds’ (Seligman 2008: 70). By pretending one thing is another, the rigid concept of both things in the present must be dissolved. This porosity allows for meanings to flow and change, unbounded by time and space. This is true of social roles as well. Writing this as a student submitting a midterm, I feel distanced from the roles I have played like when I was a tour guide or a barista. Playing different roles, even as the same person in “real” situations, is still an imagined process of shifting boundaries. It is the same playful process that allows for empathy, pretending “as-if” we were another by crossing boundaries (Seligman 2008: 87).

Although associated with children, the process of imagining by pretend play is something that resonates with my own approach to the everyday as I play roles to navigate different social situations, student, friend, customer, and employee. Of course, I do not see myself as a student in my entirety, even when performing university tasks. However, when asked what I do or who I am, my answer is that I am a student. Adopting pretend play, I can imagine our social structure where occupation, under capitalism, is central to identity formation – doing is being – and for me, at this moment, that is the role of a student. By learning complex systems of rules via playful engagement and curiosity with the world around me, I can mask traits and engage “normally” with the social world.



Untitled drawing/watercolour from my sketchbook, 2023

Play is a useful tool for teaching emotional control. An ethnography of Inuit training by Jean Briggs explores how play is considered as a 'positive moral value' (1991: 276). 'Playfulness... distances people from emotional upheavals' that assures the individual can cope with difficulty and misfortune (Briggs 1991: 277). Pretend role play is used to teach children how to cope in situations that may be dangerous. One game involved a group of adults acting out threatening scenarios with a 4-year-old child, Saali. Saali was offered food and told he would be kidnapped, and a seal foetus (used as a toy) was poked at his groin as he was told it would bite (Briggs 1991: 278). The point of this pretend game was to 'arouse intense feelings' that Saali could learn to control, as well as exploring potential real dangers he could face (Briggs 1991). Only once a child learns not to respond emotionally, will the game stop. For the Inuit, a happy person who plays and laughs – Pivigunnangngittuq (takes nothing seriously) – is a safe person (Briggs 1991:276). Here, the "as-if" teaches vital lessons of how to survive.

For me, playfulness is important so that I manage being overwhelmed when I am confused or overstimulated. Feelings can pile up and being distanced helps me to manage. Below, I offer a drawing I made around a year ago of this concept. It shows a large pile of splotched colour, representing feelings, and a distant figure looking upon it. Imagining how I interact with my feelings "as-if" they were separate from me is a tool for maintaining a sense of safety during uncertainty.

The role of the "as-if" in my life helps me to understand a world that I have always felt separate to. The creation of a 'subjunctive world' allows me to imagine other ways of being and operating in the social order (Seligman 2008; Bloch 2016). Furthermore, playful interpretations of the social world around me make emotions light and manageable. Playing into subjunctive worldbuilding is what enables me to function in a confusing world of rules, roles, and interactions.

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Neither War nor Peace: Refashioning the Frontline in the Ukrainian Diaspora

Eva Sinclair

Abstract

This article builds on anthropological research that contests neat distinctions between war and peace. In a short ethnography of an Edinburgh street, my article sees how war figures in the everyday of the Ukrainian diaspora. I consider how the diaspora support the war effort from afar through raising funds for the purchase of a military vehicle. I then watch as congregants of a Ukrainian church negotiate their place in Edinburgh, not as passive recipients of forced migration, but as a community re-forging ties. The article ultimately rejects the assertion that war and peace exist as discrete and antithetical notions.

Key Words

Anthropology of war, Ukrainian diaspora, Edinburgh

Introduction

One still Sunday, I travelled the length of Edinburgh's Leith Walk. Through a short ethnography of this street, I encountered a Ukrainian diaspora for whom the conflict with Russia was an enduring presence. In this essay, I consider fundraising efforts for the conflict as a way of exploring the diaspora's proximity to the front line. Following this, I turn my attention to Mass at a Ukrainian Catholic Church in Edinburgh. I see this service as a site for an unfolding of the ordinary during wartime displacement. I will draw on a series of scholars who offer differing understandings of what it means to study war. First, I look towards Carolyn Nordstrom (1997) who considers the role of creativity in the face of wartime violence. I extend on this by employing the work of Stephen Lubkemann (2008), Tobias Kelly (2008) and Sharika Thiranagama

(2011) to think about the role of the ordinary in times of conflict. It is with these works in mind that I begin to view the Ukrainian diaspora as fertile ground for complicating simplistic distinctions between war and peace. My ethnography fell short, however, in its lack of direct engagement with the community due to my incapacity to conduct interviews. This meant that my fieldwork was, first and foremost, observational and, to make matters more complicated, these observations were marked by a language barrier. All this resulted in a stark absence of Ukrainian voices. I have attempted to use this shortcoming to pick out elements from scenes that went beyond the linguistic. This has meant that interpretations I made about what was being spoken (at the Mass) were merely speculative. To bolster my fieldwork, I have had to turn towards secondary texts including a social media account. Despite these shortcomings, I believe my ethnography still does important work in seeing how war figures in the diaspora in ways that are swallowed up in the 'ordinary' of purported peace. This ultimately allows me to show that for diasporic Ukrainians in Edinburgh, there is no neat end to the conflict.

Support from Afar

My departure point is to consider how the Ukrainian diaspora in Edinburgh is implicated in the war effort. I see this through my analysis of a food shop specialising in Ukrainian goods. In the process of checking the shop's Instagram page (MAK_Eastern_European_Food 2025) for opening times, I got caught up in offers for herbal tea, festive wine and honey cakes. Among the kitsch designs and AI generated images sat a photo of a wicker-basket food hamper. Next to the photo of the hamper, there was text, which read:

FUNDRAISER FOR A VEHICLE.

Help us raise funds to purchase a vehicle for our soldiers' unit.

LOTS OF TREATS FROM OUR SPONSORS.

10% of all purchases this day go to the fundraiser.

Win-win lottery with beautiful prizes.

Then there was the date, time and location. And for those who could not attend, the bank details of someone named Olena. Below this, the caption of the post read:

“Let's unite and make a real difference together!”

#SupportUkraine #UkrainianCommunity
#SupportOurSoldiers #UkraineStrong

What struck me most of all was the line, 'a vehicle for our soldiers' unit'. By invoking the purchase of a new vehicle (as opposed to a vague allusion to "war effort"), the linkage to the front line is made explicit. There's no obfuscation about who will benefit from these funds: by paying into Olena's account, the benefactor has a direct stake in the front line. This message constitutes a direct appeal for help, not only to the diaspora but also, in the use of the English language, to those who don't speak Ukrainian. In fact, only one line is translated to Ukrainian: 'win-win lottery with beautiful prizes'. This fundraising work blurs the line between the violence and nonviolence of war and peacetime, and between the Ukrainian diaspora, allies in the local community and soldiers on the front line. I consider the work of Nordstrom (1997: 4) and her thinking on creativity in the face of violence as 'rebuilding human worlds'. Nordstrom says that to engage meaningfully with this creativity, anthropologists have a responsibility to look at the brutal reality of violence itself and not be restricted to the before and after of conflict. Nordstrom's discussion on creativity amidst war is important, but her attention is restricted to the

epicenters of violence. This gaze excludes the role of conflict as it is experienced in the diaspora — something that is evident here in the initially unassuming promotional post for a food hamper. In regarding the seemingly mundane work of a fundraiser, my ethnography sees how war is enfolded in the ordinary. This allows me to follow in the steps of Lubkemann (2008), who claims that examinations of war should not only be organised around what it means to survive violence. He diverges from Nordstrom (1997) in believing that it is fruitful to study everyday social life amidst war. He argues that although violence is destructive and can work to erode the agency of individuals, so too is violence a tool through which agency can be enacted. Violence thus produces contradictory effects, providing both constraints on agency and the grounds for new expressions of agency (Lubkemann 2008). The shop's fundraising efforts go far in demonstrating the agentive capacity of the migrants (and the local community).

This section has addressed the crowdfunding of military supplies from afar. This follows in a tradition of scholars who consider the role of non-state support amid war. Ostap Kushnir (2025) does so by examining the interplay between formal and informal institutions in sustaining the country's defence during the Russian invasion. Within this, he sees how civil society organisations contribute to defence through material support to the army. This reveals the importance of non-state actors on the frontline as compensating for underachieving formal institutions. This puts emphasis on the shrewd nature of civil society, the limited efficacy of formal institutions, and the need for cooperation between these actors in the face of war (Kushnir 2025). The promotional post I encountered in my ethnography extends on this argument by showing how this non-state material takes place in the diaspora. Thus, Edinburgh becomes a site from which the diaspora can stake a claim in the conflict from afar, muddying any neat distinctions between the violence of war and so-called peace.

Sunday Mass

The question of how diasporas emerge is important to this article, which argues that diasporas are not a given, but rather emerge through migrants' shared practices and aspirations. Rogers Brubaker (2005) argues that diasporas have generally been characterised as a dispersion in space, sustained through an orientation to a real or imagined 'homeland' as a source of identity. Brubaker (2005: 3) claims however, that the notion of diaspora is invoked so frequently that it loses its power as a useful analytical concept. To avoid the imprecise use of this term, Martin Sökefeld (2006) argues that attention must be turned to the specificity of the conditions under which diasporas emerge. With this in mind, I attempt to understand this diaspora within their historical context. The next step on my journey — a Mass at a Ukrainian Catholic Church— helps me do so. The Catholic congregants at this service belong to religious minority, making up less than 10% of Ukraine's population. This group had a presence in the UK that predated the recent Russian invasion. In fact, the earliest significant group of Ukrainian immigrants who arrived in Great Britain between the 1890s and early 20th century were Catholic (The Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain 2025). The number of Ukrainians of all denominations in the United Kingdom increased significantly after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine; this came when the British Government introduced schemes aimed at assisting the movement of refugees from Ukraine to the UK. As of July 2024, about 210,000 Ukrainians, mostly women and children, had arrived in the country (The Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, 2025). The invasion saw Ukrainian civil society become involved in fundraising and organising humanitarian aid to Ukraine and the dissemination of information on the situation in Ukraine (The Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain 2025). This follows in Sökefeld's (2006) thinking that understands diasporas not as a natural consequence of migration but as a historically contingent process.

I slipped down a side street and was met by church with a Ukrainian flag and coat of arms marking the entrance. In front of me was St. Andrew's Ukrainian Catholic Church. As people filed in, conversation was in Ukrainian, and congregants shook hands and kissed each other's cheeks. By the time the service began, there were 50 bodies huddled in long coats, clouds of breath rising to the ceiling. Ukrainian hymns guided the hour and a half— everyone knew every word of every hymn by heart. The only word I understood all service was something that sounded like 'Russia'. As the service ended, the congregants hung back to chat: old men, old women, young women and children. There were no young men.



The Ukrainian flag and coat of arms at St. Andrew's Ukrainian Catholic church, photograph by author.

This Sunday Mass demonstrated how congregants at the church were continuing their projects of faith during displacement. The perfectly remembered hymns suggested an enduring commitment to this religious practice, one that predated arrival in Edinburgh. I consider the work of Kelly (2008), who posits the importance of thinking about the ordinary amid war. His ethnography examines the role of the mundane in the lives of West Bank Palestinians dur-

ing the second intifada. For these Palestinians, living what passed for an ordinary life became a form of resistance, and letting life be disrupted would be doing 'the work of the Israeli army for them' (2008: 358). Similarly, the Ukrainian diaspora at Mass were continuing to aspire towards seemingly ordinary projects (in this case, their Catholic faith) in their displacement. Thiranagama (2011: 10) draws on her family's history in the Sri Lankan Civil War to argue that the conflict became a distinct social force. She sees wartime displacement not as mere migratory flows, but as a new way of inhabiting the world. As Thiranagama (2011) argues, wartime migrants remake their old lives and recreate their past relationships in new locations. Wartime may provide a different texture and shape to these projects but, as Lubkemann (2008) argues, this does not mark the erosion of pre-war projects. At the Ukrainian Mass, previous lives and projects were brought into the present, constituting the way that this diaspora inhabit life in Edinburgh. This is evident as the church service, as Ukrainian refugees work to forge a community. Lubkemann (2008) posits that war is not an event that suspends the normal but instead changes what constitutes normality in the creation of a distinctive social condition. He argues that Nordstrom's (1997) view treats violence as the only concern of consequence for people in war zones. Lubkemann (2008) instead claims that ordinary projects and aspirations continue to animate life in wartime (with the difference being that they must be realised under new conditions). Within this view, Lubkemann calls for a re-theorisation of wartime migration, he pushes against the idea that war migrants' activity is 'devoid of strategic calculation' whereby people are expected to have "no motivations other than bare survival" (2008: 5). This echoes Sökefeld's (2006) understanding that the development of diasporic identity is not an inevitable result of migration, but a historical contingency that unfolds in response to critical events. My ethnography thus sees the Mass as a site for the emergence of the Ukrainian diaspora. Through invoking ties to life in Ukraine, these congregants continue to work towards the

ordinary during wartime displacement.

Conclusion

My essay has considered the ways in which ongoing war in Ukraine bleeds into the diaspora in Edinburgh. Through examining the role of an unassuming food hamper and a service at a Ukrainian church, I see how war becomes embedded in the (seemingly peaceful) every day in Edinburgh. In raising money for the purchase of a vehicle for a military unit, the Ukrainian diaspora makes material change and provide practical support for the war effort from a distance. This demonstrates how the Ukrainian community and those allied with the Ukrainian cause are implicated in the front lines of the conflict through creative yet startlingly mundane means. Moreover, what I saw in the pews at Mass was a community in the process of negotiating their place in Edinburgh, not as passive recipients of forced migration, but as a community re-forging ties and gesturing towards life in Ukraine. Ultimately, I saw Edinburgh as a site that complicates the seemingly neat distinction between war and peace. Thus, to treat war and peace as discrete and antithetical categories would be to obscure the everyday realities of the diaspora.

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"Appropriation," "Reclamation," and "Reimagination": Metafolklore Relationships in the Beltane Fire Society

Elliana Efird

Abstract

This ethnographic study examines how participants in Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society navigate the tension between "appropriation," "reclamation," and "reimagination" in their relationship to Celtic folklore. Drawing on participant-observation with the newly formed group No Joy and interviews with key festival figures, I analyze how Beltaners engage with fragmented historical records, contested Gaelic heritage, and the ritual landscape of Calton Hill. Rather than reducing their practice to cultural appropriation, participants embrace an inventive "metafolklore" that blurs fact and fiction. I argue that BFS Beltane straddles this reductive binary and is a living, evolving tradition – with meaning forged through embodied, place-based collaboration.

Keywords

Ritual, embodied ethnography, landscape theory, appropriation, invented tradition, metafolklore

It was a February afternoon, and the eight of us were kicking up dirt in corner of the Edinburgh Meadows where the Monday fire spinning club had long before danced most of the grass away. After attracting curious stares from passersby with our dramatic movements and vocal improvisations, we lowered our energy for a practical discussion. This inaugural "Open Practice" had two goals: to break the ice through traditional Beltane rehearsal games, and more fundamentally, to define participant relationships with Beltane itself – the (possibly) pre-Christian Celtic pagan holiday turned Edinburgh springtime tourist attraction. As prospective members of "No Joy" – a new group performing in the Beltane Fire Society (BFS) lineup – we needed to identify what had brought us all to the Pavilion

Café that day, for the answer would underpin our preparations for the live performance atop Calton Hill in a few months' time.

Mitch, one of No Joy's Group Organizers (GOs), opened by inviting those in the group who had participated in BFS festivals before to speak. This gesture, as I later came to understand, was characteristic of the Society's leadership values which were designed to limit top-down power dynamics and allow festival traditions to be co-constructed and collectively rearticulated. "What does Beltane mean to you?" Mitch asked, gesturing towards the center of the circle.

Jeremy, a third-time participant clad in a leather bomber jacket and famous for his previous year's costume containing over 100 safety pins, took the initiative to fill the space first. He declared in a matter-of-fact tone, staring at a patch of dirt in the circle, that the modern festival is a performative production complete with acrobatics and fire spinning, and at its core, it represents "an appropriation of sorts of an ancient practice."

The words landed heavily. Jeremy's use of "appropriation," particularly, elicited a subtle but palpable discomfort in the group. I noted bodies shifting, eye contact diverting, and mental gears turning. There was little time to process, however, as Mitch immediately re-entered the discussion in gentle but steadfast rebuttal: "Well, it's more of a reclaiming." Nora, another returning Beltane participant, then offered her own interpretation, framing the performance as a "reimagination" of ancient rituals and local lore through community-focused performance art and evolving expression.

This moment of tension – the friction between appropriation, reclamation, and reimagination – crystallized the central question of this ethnographic account. In the pages that follow, I

explore the multidimensional relationships that BFS Beltane 2024 participants foster with the dynamic bodies of folklore they channel in their performance. I analyze my findings through loosely structured thematic categories corresponding to the three terms above, situating these human-folklore relationships within wider conversations regarding the invention of tradition, landscape theory, and the narrative tension between “fact” and “fiction.”

Background, methods, and ethics

Beltane is a festival which marks winter’s turn to summer in accordance with the solar and lunar annual events dividing the British neopagan calendar known as the “Wheel of the Year.” On an institutional level, BFS highlights the festival’s historical significance to centuries of rural Celtic peoples – from the “Irish, Scots, Welsh [and] Galicians” (BFS 2024). Drawing on the Latin root of “pagan,” meaning “country-dweller,” BFS describes Beltane as a “celebration of the return of the fertility of the land” and a moment when the “veil” – or the threshold between the mortal world and the otherworld – grows thin, allowing spirits to pass freely (Beltane Fire Festival 2022).

Archival research reveals a plurality of interpretations within the tradition of Beltane. Scholars present myriad – and often conflicting – claims regarding the festival’s origins, its characters, and its geographical dispersion (Dahmer 2019; McNeil 1968; Hutton 2014). Beltane’s historically intimate nature makes its lineage difficult to trace, for both researchers and modern practitioners alike.

This ambiguity positions BFS – the largest practitioner of a public urban Beltane celebration – as a unique case study. As an institutionalized storyteller composed of diverse perspectives, the Society offers a localized window into how modern-day practitioners of folk rituals forge relationships with the folklore they perform. This relationship is further nuanced by the organiza-

tion’s socio-political influences during its incipience in the Thatcherite era, the ritualization of Society-specific lore and its integration into annual tradition, and the festival’s commercialization in the 2000s (Dear 2007).

BFS have been publicly performing the festival in Edinburgh since 1988. Present day Beltane involves hundreds of volunteer participants consisting of locals, traveling UK residents, and international transplants (Dear 2007). I first attended BFS’s Beltane in 2023 as a “punter” – BFS vernacular for an audience member. The live event – fiery, avant-garde, and deeply symbolic – moved me profoundly, and I decided then that I wanted to participate as a future performer. So, when I was tasked the following year with conducting a short-term ethnography in Edinburgh, I knew immediately where I wanted to base my participant observation.

My transition from “punter” to “Beltaner” was crystallized through my decision to join No Joy, a newly formed rainbow-themed group of Beltaners diverse in age, experience, queerness, and performative flair. My field notes derive largely from my participant-observation in movement-filled, sensorily stimulating group practices atop Calton Hill. I have supplemented these observations with interviews: one with a returning Beltaner; another with the reigning May Queen, the ritual’s central figurehead; and several with members of the Blues, the administrative group responsible for overseeing the yearly reformulation of the Beltane story and the physical procedures of its procession.

I use aliases when referencing my fellow participants to protect identities and blur the lines between fiction and fact. The ethnographic craftsmanship of “true fiction” preoccupies all ethnographers as they weave stories out of fleeting moments and inevitably power-infused interactions with various social actors (Clifford 1986: 6, 8). In other words, ethnography dissolves the binary between two seemingly opposed paradigms: social science as an objective recorder of reality, and the inherent fiction-

ality of any attempt to capture, translate, and fix fleeting social moments in writing. This same tension between fact and fiction tension will resurface in my analysis of BFS human-folklore relationships as they relate to past traditions and present-day enactments.

Forming relationships with other Beltaners was not initially a hurdle, as my preexisting connections with and interest in neopaganism and performative fire arts in Edinburgh granted me baseline access to space and trust. However, once I became a contract-bound volunteer for BFS, my positionality shifted considerably from prospective researcher-participant to committed steward of the BFS mission. Thus, reflexivity became more important than ever. I wanted to mitigate disturbing group dynamics and exploiting interactions with group members for data. The Madison (2005; 2011) framework of critical ethnographic reflexivity, underpinned by Neila Miled's problematization of the entrenched, static anthropological categories of the "Self" and the "Other", guided me in this ongoing labour of un-making the "Self" and the power dynamics that come with it (2019: 6-7). Though the slight discomfort that came with my split positionality as both researcher and performer, I found that the intimacy baked into the communication cultivated in such a small group – both verbal and movement-based – made the space feel more open from the onset. As I grew increasingly vulnerable with my fellow No Joy members – cultivating a group chemistry which would be essential to our performance – I could hear the critiques of performance ethnography ringing in my ears: primarily, warnings against "collapsing the social world into one's own lifeworld" (Atkinson 2004; cited in Harrop and Njaradi 2013: 2). Yet this very vulnerability revealed something crucial: my "researcher" body was itself a performance, which became increasingly clear in my own evolving embodiment of my Beltaner role.

Building genuine connections with No Joy members required an ongoing deep awareness of my embodied participation in Beltane's "meta-

folklore" – the phenomenon in which modern interpretation, performance, and study which blur the boundaries of an initial folklore source and become incorporated into its fabric (Harrop and Dunja Njaradi 2013: 5, 15). I was one of the constituents in this weaving process, which required dispelling classic ethnographic binaries and crafting relationships built on trust – both with myself and with fellow Beltaners – before and throughout my research. I could not forget that my research positionality, and my tendency to fully inhabit whatever I performed, might influence those around me, thereby reshaping the very data I sought to collect.

'Appropriation' and the politics of tradition

When I began analyzing my field data, I could not shake Jeremy's bold use of that word now virtually synonymous with a red flag: "appropriation." In carefully unraveling the word's significance in the context of Beltaner relationships to Beltane folklore, I lean on the critical analysis of former BFS member and researcher Adam Dahmer. In his essay "Pagans, Nazis, Gaels, and the Algiz Rune: Addressing Questions of Historical Inaccuracy, Cultural Appropriation, and the Arguable Use of Hate Symbols at the Festivals of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society," he analyzes BFS's common use of the Algiz Rune – an ancient Germanic cultural symbol unfortunately common in far-right extremist groups – within the wider scope of Beltane symbolism and meaning-making (2019). I borrow two-thirds of his tripartite critical framework for analyzing what he refers to as the more "socio-politically problematic" elements of Beltaner tradition-building: (1) historical inaccuracy, (2) insensitivity toward Gaelic culture (2019: 149). Using these two analytics, my analysis does not seek to condemn but rather to explore the nuanced manifestations of "appropriation" in Beltaner relationships to the "ancient Iron Age Celtic ritual" lore that BFS advertises on its website (BFS 2024) – which I further complicate by contemplating the "metafolklore" element of the tradition.

Historical accuracy, while not an explicit aim of BFS, is implied by their communications platforms. The first objective listed on their website is “to advance the education of the general public in the traditions of the Celtic lunar calendar fire festivals and their relevance to contemporary culture” (BFS 2024). When speaking with the festival’s participants, I realized that most individual Beltaners uniquely develop their own personal relationships to these elements rather than educating the public on a unified historical narrative of the tradition. In fact, on the night of Beltane, almost none of the performers engage verbally with the public. Groups such as the Blues and the Stewards – the latter responsible for narrating the story to the audiences they shepherd on the night of the event – are instead tasked with consolidating research and spreading stories of Beltane’s past in an accessible yet reverent manner.

One of the “elder stateswomen” of BFS, Chloe Dear, unashamedly admits that BFS members “don’t actually know the details of what Beltane celebrations were like” (EdiGuide 1998). This sentiment was echoed by the May Queen, who, like the majority of Beltaners, distances herself from an “appropriative” label in relating to lore of Beltanes past. As she aptly notes, the tradition of Beltane “was never well-recorded, nor a monolith to begin with.” Accounts containing vague, incomplete descriptions of Beltanes past in rural parts of the country are the closest evidence after which any semblance of “historical accuracy” could be modeled. Even the festival’s name lacks an unanimously agreed-upon origin, as shown in the phrasing of the Dictionary of Celtic Mythology definition of “Beltaine”:

“[Beltaine] may or may not derive from the veneration of Belenus” (the Celtic god of light) (MacKillop 1990: 38).

The fragmentary record of Beltane’s past collapses the binary between historical fact and narrative fiction. Bridging its gaps demands an informed imagination, an act of creation that lies

at the very heart of “invented tradition.” To label modern Beltane as mere “appropriation” overlooks a crucial nuance: its practitioners actively participate in the centuries-old process of piecing together tradition, which cannot be conceptualized as neither “fact” nor “fiction.”

As Eric Hobsbawm proposes, many invented traditions – as opposed to “genuine traditions” which he frames as committed continuations of a known past event – lean on vague historic lineages as an initial “legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion,” though deviate from such origins in their development of the tradition (2012: 12). While I would problematize the binary Hobsbawm imposes between “genuine” and “invented” traditions, BFS’s Beltane certainly possesses characteristics in line with his “invented tradition” framework. For example, group cohesion is a common legitimator of BFS’s deviations from traceable information on Beltane tradition. No Joy is a primary example of this. The group was invented due to social and practical realizations rather than commitment to historical accuracy. No Joy filled a need within BFS for a group committed to maximum participant accessibility and one which would disperse the crowd on Calton Hill by counter positioning themselves opposite the May Queen and her procession.

Dahmer’s analytic of “historical accuracy” is not the only one which opens more questions than it answers. His second – insensitivity toward Gaelic culture – is distorted by the fact that all known “indigenous literature for Celtic Scotland” was forged in the late 1700s by Scottish literary collector James MacPherson and his brother, Sir John MacPherson, a British colonial administrator in India (Hobsbawm 2012: 17). As Hobsbawm recounts, the MacPhersons appropriated songs and stories that “had been stolen from the Irish” in their large-scale writing of Scottish Celtic culture (2012: 17). The “Celtic history” with which the Society legitimates its existence is itself a nuanced fiction: Irish sources refashioned by Scottish colonial administrators as indigenous Scottish tradition.

Additionally, BFS's use of Gaelic, a Celtic language which settled in Ireland and later Scotland, is seen by some both within the society and beyond as a tokenization of wider Celtic culture. My peer's interview with a different festival figurehead suggested that Gaelic, "a mystic language that is not familiar to people," could be used in performance to add "mystic vibes" and bring audience outside of their reliance on definitions for meaning. Such relationships lean more towards classical understandings of appropriation, and the interweaving of multiple lore traditions under a single banner can invite similar claims; however, this one Beltaner's take, as well as Jeremy's, do not represent the hundreds of heads which comprise BFS. Many Beltaners also either spoke Gaelic, knew in detail about the history of marginalization of the Gaels, or demonstrated the desire to learn more.

Anthropologist Deborah Root names two criteria for an act to be considered cultural appropriation: "those from who material is taken aren't consulted, and motivation is primarily financial" (1996: 69). The Irish whose histories and traditions the MacPhersons forged in the nineteenth century were victims of cultural appropriation from the moment their practices were non-consensually recorded under the "Scottish Celtic" label. BFS, however, presents a much more nuanced case for analysis due to the entanglements of folklores which interweave in the annual re-creation of the Beltane story. This involves local performance histories and what I refer to as "intra-society lore." While the festival is currently commodified, with on-the-gate tickets a steep twenty pounds, the initial eighteen years of BFS's performances were free to the public, suggesting that initial motivations were never financial (Dear 2007). Furthermore, Beltaners themselves are not profit driven. In my group, as in most other performance groups, participants had to pay a fee to support bookings of practice space, costume and makeup materials, and in many cases a group-bonding weekend away. These factors help explain why most Beltaners distance themselves from "ap-

propriation" as a descriptor for their practice for reasons beyond just its negative connotation. Even those who can see its relevance participate anyway – a paradox that points toward a more nuanced understanding of how ritual communities engage with fragmented, invented, and reimagined traditions.

Reclaiming Landscape

One of the other lores operating in Beltaners' imaginaries is the "reclamation" narrative, as Mitch introduced in the opening vignette. Participants' relationship to reclamation hinges on Calton Hill: the UNESCO site where Beltane processes anticlockwise and BFS's origin story unfolds (Beltane Fire Festival 2022). During afternoon tea with the May Queen of Beltane 2024 – the "historically novel" but "authentically Scottish" ritual figurehead who personifies the land's potential for growth and renewal (Dahmer 2019: 149) – it became clear that Calton Hill's status as a safe, accessible green space is a source of pride for Beltaners, for such was not always the case. She animatedly told the story of how the anti-assembly laws of Thatcher's "tenure," as she phrased it, nearly froze Calton Hill permanently in its inaccessible and unsafe status. In response, a local anarchist drummer named Angus Farquhar mobilized artists, folklorists, and University funding to create a performance drawing on Galoshans street theatre, restoring the Hill's accessibility through its own regional traditions (Dahmer 2019: 139). This tradition became what is now BFS's Beltane.

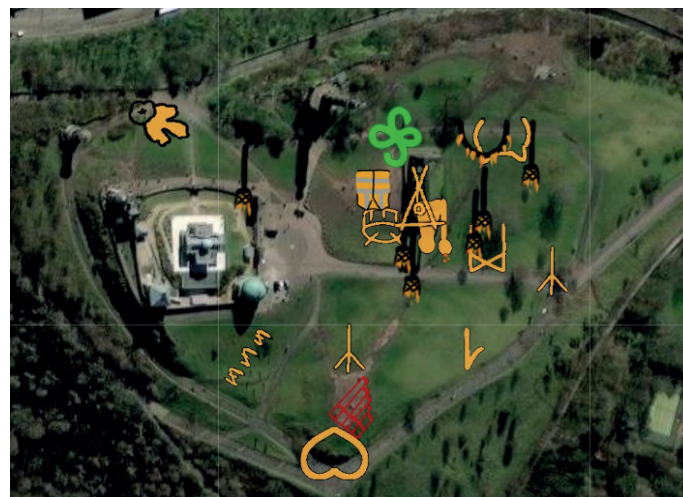


Beltane Run-Through, Northeast corner of Calton Hill Acropolis (photo by author)

Within BFS discourse and practice, Calton Hill is an actor which actively commands reverence and draws the community together. Many performance groups, including No Joy, hold their practices atop the Hill, and these sessions are often interspersed with anecdotes of previous Beltanes, triggered by material features that held memory for participants. In veins of symbolic anthropology, I interpret Calton Hill as a ritual space which represents a network of material and immaterial memories of past BFS events and their ability to “evoke, produce and maintain” the current community (Jedan et al. 2020: 5). For example, the history of police interference in Beltane processions – particularly the fencing and guarding which forced the festival to relocate to a discreet location and turn away public audience in 2003 (Dear 2007) – was recollected during multiple practices. This illuminates how memory binds present Beltaners together with the pride and purpose of rooting communal identity in the ongoing reclamation of physical space.

In unpacking the various networks of historic memory and present experience shaping many Beltaners’ relationships with their practice, landscape theory surfaces as an apt analytical lens, as it foregrounds how places themselves participate in the making of meaning. Recognizing Calton Hill’s landscape as a dynamic network of perspectives “allow[s] us to think across a variety of scales” operating, in Anna Tsing’s words,

on both “imaginative and material” planes (2017: 13). This theory complicates the notion of Beltane as the culmination of one cohesive, timeless story and gets to the heart of Beltaner lived experience as a constellating spacio-temporal phenomenon – one snapshot of such captured in the above photo. Understanding Calton Hill as a site of storied tension between multiple pasts and presents reveals “overlapping projects of world-making” traditional to landscape theory (Tsing 2017: 14). This framework illuminates the neither-fact-nor-fiction drama at the heart of BFS’s localized reclamation narrative. For many Beltaners, the reclamation of the Edinburgh park operates not in opposition to wider Scottish Beltane folklores, but in convergence with them.



BFS Community Calton Hill Memory Map (Bonfire, 2021)

Reimagining tradition

A final key element of the individual and collective world-making of Beltaners, as Nora asserted at the Open Practice, is “reimagination” – the sentiment which I found to be most widely adopted by both individual Beltaners and the Society. One of the Blues – the group of experienced members who oversee much of the festival administration and its narrative curation – triangulated Beltaner motivations between ritual commitment, performance, and partying. This framing captures the adaptive plurality

driving participation in the festival. Throughout BFS's history, activities such as group drumming, Live Action Role Playing (LARPing), and fire-spinning have been folded into intra-societal tradition which then becomes enacted on the hill, even if it deviates from existing Beltane folklore and Galoshans-style Scottish street performances.

In this way, BFS can be seen as a practitioner of metafolklore – or folklore about folklore, in which the commentary and embellishments surrounding some “original” event become enveloped in the fabric of the tradition, itself (Harrop and Dunja Njaradi 2013: 15). Each year, a revised processional narrative is crafted by the Blues in collaboration with the wider community, which involves screening new groups and proposed ideas on a consensus basis. This year, No Joy was one such group, proposed with the intention to spread the “joy” of Beltane via unabated silliness and discordance with the May Queen and her more formal, ritualized procession. I was initially self-conscious of the physical and narrative distance between my group from wider Beltane folklores – both from intra-society and extra-society sources. I was fearful of my own implication in acts of appropriation, both as a Beltaner and a researcher. However, I felt the embodied desire to participate in the imaginative enfolding of queer joy into the fabric of Beltane 2024. I was so convinced by the reimagination narrative, myself, that I did not stop my fellow group member from painting the Wunjo rune – a Proto-Germanic symbol of joy – on my forehead as we got ready together on Beltane eve.

BFS participants widely relate to the flexible, pluralistic nature of that which they perform with pride, understanding its evolution as the very vitality which keeps the tradition alive, paraphrasing reflections of the May Queen and the Blues. The “reimagination” element operates as a counterforce to “appropriation” for many participants. Dahmer echoes this sentiment in his assertion that “Beltaners straightforwardly prioritise cultural diversity over historicity” in a

way which excuses the melding of multiple folklores into a “creative oeuvre” (2019: 153). This harkens back to the emphasis on “group cohesion” in the maintenance of “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm 2012: 12). While the participant demographic evolves each year, the festival remains anchored in Calton Hill's ritual landscape and the memories it holds, tethering change to tradition. This balance – between creative freedom and rootedness – allows Beltane to evolve without losing its sense of continuity and connection to the surrounding land and its histories.

BFS participants intentionally pluralize “folklore,” acknowledging that Beltane's past was never monolithic. Space-based relations and intra-society lore matter as much as historical precedent in the annual co-creation of BFS Beltane's story. Just as ethnography derives its vitality from the dynamic relationship between ethnographer, interlocutors, and landscape, so too does Beltane thrive on participants' shifting relations to storied predecessors and ritual ground. Beltaners inhabit a braided tension between appropriation, reclamation, and reimagination – a tension not unlike the ethnographer's ongoing ethical struggle to represent others faithfully in their written reproduction of a social narrative. Both practices find refuge in subverting the fiction/nonfiction binary. They reject the modernist presumption of “properly bounded, singular and distinctive... ‘cultures,’ ‘communities,’ and ‘identities’” (Macdonald 1997: 5), embracing instead the process of inventive, collaborative meaning-making based on an original past event. For this reason, I call BFS Beltane, like ethnography itself, a creator of “true fiction”: neither claiming factuality, nor reducible to falsehood.

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The “Anthropology Teaching Collection” Re-imagined

Zahra Abdalla

Looking to the beginnings of the anthropology department at the University of Edinburgh, the “Anthropology Teaching Collection” is made up of a group of objects brought by anthropologists working or studying at the university. Despite its sparsely documented history, the oldest items in the collection are associated with the work of Professor Kenneth Little and PhD students he supervised in the 1950s. Over the years, the collection grew, absorbing smaller objects only accompanied by fragmented cataloguing attempts, leaving several objects in a dilapidated state and resulting in the increased difficulty of provenance research. In this light, the collection is inextricably tied to the history of anthropology at the University of Edinburgh and the longer history of anthropological collecting.

The process of collecting “ethnographic” objects from source communities and their presence in Western institutions, museums and universities, is deeply implicated within the work of colonialism. However, interrogating the outdated practices of collecting within anthropology urges us to reimagine what it can mean to interact with an ethnographic collection. The exhibition ‘The “Anthropology Teaching Collection” Reimagined’ follows the recent efforts of a group of undergraduate students who attempted to engage with the collection’s complex and contested past, creating an up-to-date catalogue and website alongside some creative reflections including a zine and individual blog posts. The exhibition brings the collection into visibility, bringing objects back into public display. It showcases what students have discovered while drawing attention to the practical and ethical challenges that remain, reimagining our relationships with this inherited collection.

The exhibition will be temporarily displayed at the ASA PeopleFest: Public Anthropology Festival 2026, and permanently housed at the

Chrystal MacMillan Building, University of Edinburgh.

The first cabinet holds three Sierra Leonian Soweï Masks traced back to Professor Little’s research in Sierra Leone. There are also some musical instruments, including a group of Cameroonian Bamileke rattles (presented together following previous vague cataloguing attempts), alongside two South Asian drums believed to be collected by previous PhD students. The second cabinet highlights the treatment of the objects, revealing instances of damage and poor repair. It also presents a number of smaller objects, some which may simply be souvenirs brought back by Edinburgh anthropologists, which have been absorbed into the collection over the years. In doing so, the cabinet underpins this notion of reimagining the ethnographic through this curious assortment of things, proposing that we confront our histories of neglect and unsettling our understandings of what comprise an ethnographic collection.

As a student-led project, this exhibition is centred on creating visibility for the collection as a step in a larger initiative. As well as creating new opportunities to care for these objects we hope to create a critical space to reflect on the long history of anthropological collecting and its association with the legacies of colonialism, situated within wider discourse on decolonisation, and the multiplicity of approaches to decolonisation. Reflecting on how objects may speak not only of the ways and habits of source communities but also of the legacy of anthropological entanglements with the lives of others.

Reimagining this collection hinges on highlighting how learning takes place and reflecting on the turbulent past of the discipline. Exploring and discussing theoretical challenges which arise in class while shying away from interacting with collections like these seems like a disjointed approach, which denies the very inheritance

we live with and amongst. Through this exhibition, and in aspiration of bridging these gaps, we ask 'how might we create space to sit with these challenges, continuing difficult conversations, while also recognising that there is much more work to do?



Carved Statue of Giraffe/Antelope. [Softwood]. At: Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, School of Political Science, Sa 024.1 – 024.2.



Sowei Mende Mask. [Wood]. At: Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, School of Political Science, Sa 031.



Sowei Mende Mask. [Wood]. At: Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, School of Political Science, Sa 030.



Sowei Mende Mask. [Wood; Vegetable dye]. At: Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, School of Political Science, Sa 029-029.1.



Big Drum. [Animal skin; Wood; String]. At: Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, School of Political Science, Sa 037.



Carved Gourd (?) Container. [Gourd or Wood?]. At: Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, School of Political Science, Sa 015-015.1-5.

