

# Anthways



**Issue 2024**

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## Editor's Note

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When we sat down to consider themes for the fourth issue of Anthways, things felt unstable; locally, globally, inside and out. Perhaps they always do. But this moment feels especially fragile, as the convergence of a multitude of crises threatens worlds as we have known them.

*We need other kinds of stories.* Haraway has implored - *stories otherwise*.

And so we looked to the jellyfish. Theirs' is a tale as old as time, having danced in our oceans for over half a billion years. Renowned for their radical ability to adapt and regenerate, they thrive (albeit occasionally to the detriment of others) - even in today's damaged seas. Their bioluminescence a flash of possibility in the darkest depths.

And so we looked to the jellyfish. Theirs' is a tale as old as time, having danced in our oceans for over half a billion years. Renowned for their radical ability to adapt and regenerate, they thrive (albeit occasionally to the detriment of others) - even in today's damaged seas. Their bioluminescence a flash of possibility in the darkest depths.

That light only hints at what they're capable of. Things get far more juicy. As in the case of the immortal jelly, *Turritopsis dohrnii*, who call temporality into question as they continuously shift between infancy and adulthood, shedding a translucent skin as cells reorganise and revert to an earlier stage of the life cycle. Beginning again.

We too, can begin again. Shed skin. Shift beyond the order of things and experiment otherwise. And as we experiment, what role might anthropology play? And what if anthropology too, underwent a cellular regeneration? How might it twist and turn, adapt and emerge? As a discipline, method, or perspective?

We are delighted to welcome so many inspiring contributions to this issue, which delve into worlds as we have known them - and don't yet. Which experiment with form and medium, dwell on the unimagined, and weave together threads from near and far. Threads weave quite literally through Sarah Ramadita and Atri Siregar words on ancestry, craft, history and storytelling, told in beautifully reflexive vignettes woven through Indonesian cloth. Emelie Isaksen similarly eschews traditional form in favour of correspondence - as both method and care. Gabriella Santini too, considers methods, and the toolkit required for multispecies ethnography in Kenya's Maasailand. By contrast, Nguyen Huy Hoang's worlds are many but immaterial, as they consider how their interlocutors, the drag queens of Queens of Phoenix's, not only re-imagine gender, but the ontological possibilities of what a body is, as they traverse its material boundaries.

Without wanting to divulge too much, there is a lot more to discover in the following pages. We hope you enjoy reading these works, and share our gratitude for the authors' efforts. Anthways creates a vital space for early career researchers, and while it's a pleasure to compile, it feels increasingly essential as the precarity of higher education (like so many other elements of our worlds) shifts sharply into focus. Our hope is that it can continue to provide a platform for new writers, forging pathways for those with imaginatively crafted, collaborative, carefully researched stories to tell.



# The Drag Queen's Posthumanist Bodies – One but several, material but incorporeal, worlds across worlds

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982227](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982227)

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## Beyond the dualistic bodies

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Amidst the sculpted bodies as perfectly preserved in the ambient light of the stage, I breathed in a reality of the drag queens' own making. They populated the stage like a stretched veil of bodies and clothes, enmeshed with light. The voices of iconic pop stars like Lady Gaga along with the audience's periodic cheering pulsated through my skin. I listened inwards, towards echoes of hardening sounds, my body dissolved at the point of contact. Then, I came to learn a dance that hitherto is strange to my swirl of being. It was almost an *automaton*. Suddenly, behind the curtain, or perhaps the shade of their moving dress, I found myself in the world(s) of their craft, world(s) which are no less real than that of mine before I met them.

The practices of drag queens as central to the articulation of transgressive gender norms have been influential as an interdisciplinary locus of study, ranging from gender activism, literary works to queer aesthetics (see Muñoz, 2009; Seitler, 2014). Such lines of approach, extrapolated to the drag queens' doing in Vietnam, would yield a unified image of bodies caught in socio-cultural webs, manifested in the ongoing homophobia against "bede" (bê-đê), those who do not identify as male or female in Vietnamese societies. In fact, the leader of *Queens of Phoenix*—a rising group of drag queens based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam—commented on how harsh the audience's reactions were, "going so far as to throwing broken glasses on stage," when the group went on tour in Ha Noi, the capital of Vietnam. Their bodies then are configured as a site of possibilities countering the post-socialist and hegemonic gaze associated with "bede" as a cultural lexicon, especially when the model of drag queens was imputed to Vietnam during the 1990s (see more on the morphology of homophobia in Vietnam's post-revolution period in Tran, 2011).

This article, in engaging with the selective thinkers from philosophy, focuses on the drag queens' possibilities for gender reification not in disembodiment, or beyond the socio-cultural configurations but from within their bodies. The localized ethnographic engagement with the *Queens of Phoenix*, concurrently and methodologically, gives way to the anthropologist's more intimate and affective co-experiencing of gendered bodies. Therefore, in this article, I seek to chart a conceptual shape for the drag queens' bodies that ties specifically to the question of their ontological principles, how they experience their bodies, not merely think or reflect on them, and in doing so, what a shape might be comes out differently to each reader.

As such, I argue that the drag queens of *Queens of Phoenix*'s sexed bodies are not merely a site of gender re-imagining, but of ontological possibilities traversing what the material boundaries for a body are in the first place. In particular, I will draw upon the interlocutors' conceptualization of their bodies to probe how the inscription of gendered meaning presupposes the body. This sets the stage for the body to be investigated in its ontological conditions, the merits of which are neglected in the scholarship of Donna Haraway's and Judith Butler's feminist philosophy. In strategically pursuing diverse notions of "desire," the drag queens enact what can be understood in Gilles Deleuze's term as an ontological exercise. This situates a more strategic reading of the body, one that propels a turn towards an ontology capable of multiplicities. In the end, I arrive at a polymorphous arena beyond what is allowed for one body: a stratum of linguistic utterances and affective solidarity among and across several of them.

According to one of the charismatic founders of *Queens of Phoenix*—Jean Phoenix, gender is not just a malleable social category, it is where sex realizes itself in the first place. In specific, the biological bodies, through extensive and continuous training, can be manipulated for a more feminine appearance. Bodily conditioning takes place until it becomes a given that you know "how to utilize butt-pads for more evocative bodily contours, evoke certain muscle groups, and break your masculinity," asserted Jean. Anybody, gay, gen girl, straight, or lesbian, can always be trained to transgress the behavioural norms expected of men, physical boundaries even, to cultivate that

feminine facade of the drag queens.

By setting up the body as biologically malleable, this ethnographic vignette sets the stage for a re-reading of bodily possibilities away from a form of biological determinism. Such naturalization of sex and gender is what Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (1990) argued against. The dualist formulation in gender studies, for them, problematically lays claims to an immutable, "pre-discursive" sexed body through which gender is made sense of and traced back to (Butler, 1990, p.11). Succinctly put, gender, more discursive, presupposes sex as a material meaning-making edifice. For the drag queens at the Queens of Phoenix, however, sex and gender alike are a fabrication, just as when Judith Butler declared that sex is also a social construct.

## Materiality in its primacy

First, I will examine how the inscriptions of gender norms and acknowledgement of sex presuppose the drag queens' bodies, assuming their liability in a cultural landscape. The article proceeds by situating the line of analysis on the drag queens' conceptualization of their bodies in parallel with Haraway's and Butler's analysis of the body, or lack thereof in their scholarship of gender subversion. It follows that a clear-cut epistemological consideration of the body in mind/body dualist ontology fails to consider the body in its ontological implications.

To start with, Mika, a kinky swooner in the team who has mastered the art of feminization, expounded on the intricacies, and perhaps, contradictions, in the transformation process into a drag queen. Distinguishing between the two distinctive parts of her identity, one of a drag queen, and one of the so-called original self, she explicitly stressed their incompatibility, lamenting the temporal and spatial exclusivity with which each self occupies her body: "*One can not exist while the other is in existence.*" On some occasions, "*[her] body refuses to reconcile that it belongs to a female, even protesting against going filming under such guise.*" Her body's rejection to embodying a woman problematizes a clear-cut separation between the mind and the body: Her body thinks and decides instead, whether to go ahead with drag or not. In the case of Mika, a dualist logic implicated in mind/body metaphysics affords nothing but a blunt reductionism of the body to a material template preconditioned for meaningful cultural dialogues fashioned by the mind. Subverting the mind with a new hierarchy centring on the body as a site of creative potentiality and reflexivity would not do the job either. So much so about a bad form of idealism and biological determinism, opting for either of them fails to bring awareness to "[both] the bodily basis of thought and the cognitive component of bodily processes" (Blackman, 2021, p.5). Mika's primacy of the body, as a point of genesis for acts of decision-making,<sup>1</sup> illustrates what ontological possibilities are left out of the mind/body incompatibility and separation.

This theorization takes shape due to my reading of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), both of whom configure the body as only a given in the politics of gender subversion and in the larger economy of regulating discourses and gender asymmetry. In Butler's framework, the sexed body should not be naturalized, not as a passive medium awaiting signification. The body is, instead, a set of changing boundaries, mediated between the socially signified and the politically maintained (Butler, 1990, p.44). Her appeal to a corresponding genealogical reading of the body in its specificities and determination in systems of power hints at its "cultural possibilities" in its ability to performatively re-invent itself under otherwise deterministic discourses (Butler, 1990, p.119). While Butler's polemic aims towards a less stable ontology of gender, she refrains from an ontological reading of the body in its inert, materialistic, and inherent properties, thus limiting the chart of its possibilities to the social, cultural, and political landscape that conditions its emergence only. As such, just as there is "no true body beyond the law," there are few possibilities beyond such very

law (Butler, 1990, p.119).

From the standpoint of Donna Haraway, the body, as a "material-semiotic actor," draws its potentiality from the image of the cyborg at a particular speculative conjecture of technology and fiction (Haraway, 1991, p.208). The cyborgs are a hybrid entity between organisms and machines, amounting to a breakdown of the dualistic distinction between materialism and idealism (Haraway, 1991, p.152). While this expanded definition of the body ensures a more cautious, partial, and polyvocal reading of what constitutes and produces it, revolving more around peripherals than a centred narrative, it "[foregrounds] knowledge as situated conversation at every level of its articulation" (Haraway, 1991, p.200). To conceive of the cyborgs requires a shift in the modality of thinking, one that entails epistemological escapes from existing categories like humans and animals (Haraway, 1991, p.200). In this instance, while Haraway acknowledges the complex materialistic, ontological nature of the body in this technology-fiction conjecture, it is subordinated to the epistemic orientation of what the cyborgs are in the first place. Recast differently, Haraway's constant recourse to a cybernetic, bio-informatic assemblage dictates the terms, epistemologically speaking, for possible forms of bodily production, those that are certainly far away from what the drag queens and I included, were imagining with the inert ontological capacity of the body for actions and changes.

The first part of this article has illustrated the drag queens' conceptualization of the body outside the naturalized sex/gender logic, pushing towards the body's materiality as primary in that regard. Substantiated along the way is my critique of Butler's and Haraway's formulation of the body, both of which fail to situate it in an ontologically rich examination of the bodies. On this note, I progress into Deleuzian philosophy as a frontier capable of a pure ontological investigation into the body outside of historical specificities and epistemological constraints. Hereby, Gilles Deleuze attempts a new ontology altogether whereby the body's existence is recognized as fundamental. Specifically, I will introduce "desire", a key theoretical concept in his ontology, and how it urges a more due reading of the body's ontological conditions in the setting of the drag queens' performance.

## An interplay with desire

For once, on the point of bodily conditioning, Mika also revealed another thrust that necessitates the transformation: you have to "muϖn," or "desire." "Desire" here escapes the sexual connotation and pleasure that is usually directed towards definitive goals or determinate objects in the mind. To be a drag queen entails working towards an infinitude of things, "*talent, attention, catwalking, posing, identity,..*" - Mika listed out feverishly. Even after the drag queens have become the drag queens, they continue this forever-becoming project. They can always achieve more drag-queen-ness. "*One always has to reinvent herself against the backdrop of her past*" - uttered pensively Mika. "Desire" here realizes its determination insofar as it exercises its capacity for determination. "Desire" is fundamental to becoming and re-invention.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) postulate the same indeterminacy and capacities for newness in the channelling of "desire." As opposed to how psychoanalysis defines "desire" in terms of "lack", an "incurable insufficiency of being" always contingent on the fantasy of unattainable exterior objects to make sense of itself, "desire" for Deleuze and Guattari is autonomous, self-constituting, and creative (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.26). It is made up of "connective syntheses," which engineers beings as "units of production" in a process of mutual becoming, one that opens up pure multiplicities and metaphysical possibilities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.26).

Aside from setting the groundwork for the body's ontology as exemplified above, this theoretical concept by Deleuze and Guattari helps flesh out the mechanism through which the drag queens' conscious mobilization of "desire" in a performance vis-a-vis the responses from the audience.

One consensus shared by the drag queens is that before stepping on a stage, one must "assess what kinds of audience they will cater to." This act of relational assessment points to a retrospective curation of their performing bodies across a spectrum of shapes, sizes, proximity, and sexual plays: To what extent should one's body be too evocative, close to that of the audience, or invite sexual and bodily contact? For the drag queens, approximating the audience's desire means outlining the most effective route for an affective synergy between their bodies and those of the audience, only so can the performance be a mutually constitutive success, a crisscross between lines of becoming. "Desire" is not an innocent, arbitrary artifice, but its intensities vary to accommodate the "states through which a subject passes," those states brought out by affective connections among bodies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.17).

To further elaborate on the metaphysical conditions of such mobilization of "desire," I turn to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "the virtual." For the two theorists, "desire" can never be externalized in a "sensible form [or] conceptual signification" but whose existence is temporary, always in shifting modalities (Deleuze, 1994, p.183). It is only fair to say that desire are forces embedded within "the virtual." "The virtual" is a field of conditions for the genesis of real experiences; and these conditions are pure differences or metaphysically primary matter (May, 2005, p.87). Beings are only able to constitute their identities in "the actual," a working term for lived reality by Deleuze, when drawing and actualizing conditions from "the virtual" (Deleuze, 1994, p.208). Nevertheless, it is wrong to limit the actualization of "the virtual" to the actual, for the former is not a mere "copy for which substance provides the original model (May, 2005, p.49)." Precisely for this characterization of "the virtual," it posits a source of inexhaustible metaphysical possibilities for the becoming of beings.

A bar, a stage, and a dancing pole can be considered concrete effects of their actualization, wherever they are in the virtual. In a performance, the drag queens' bodies encounter not the bar, the stage, or the dancing pole per se, but their version in the virtual, giving rise to multiple usages of a pole used in conjunction with a body, for example. This conceptual orientation from Deleuze helps restore the vital dynamism to the otherwise inanimate objects in the performing bar as well as the bar itself. The drag queens' bodies then strategically connect with such, all for the success of their performance. Of course, the role of the audience here regarding the mobilization of desire matters.

To continue, the drag queens' bodies not only mobilized "desire" in Deleuzian terms in relation to those of the audience; "desire" re-conceptualizes the body at its fundamental, independent of a drag queen's performance. And this is what distinguishes Maya, the charismatic leader of *Queens of Phoenix*, from the rest, for whom, most explicitly Mika, there is a distinction between the performing self and the original self. "Maya is Maya, there is no Pham Trung." The birthmark inscribed within the name "Pham Trung," Maya's original name, lost its provenance to a radicalizing becoming-body, one that needs not any stage or gender-bending performance to accumulate ontological stability. It is a performance in and of itself, so much as it is a continuous act of coming primal with its ontology.

Maya also brought to the fore a powerful charge on "desire" as fundamental to any materialistic body outside the apparatus of sex and gender: "The point of having sperm implantation, sex toys and other artificial methods for reproduction is to pose an alternative to sexual organs. The important thing is that one is willing to love/desire, even the husband can go so far as to give birth for his wife." Sexual organs are no longer indicative of a naturalized sex category,

but their insignificant role in the ontogenesis of a body. The role of sex and gender altogether, according to the adamant statement by Maya, bores no ontological implications for the body. The ontogenesis is no longer treated as dealing with "the genesis of the individual but rather designates the becoming of being" (Smith, Protevi, and Voss, 2023). It is desire, a fundamental state of the body that transcends the functions of body organs. Giving birth that is otherwise ineligible by the designated sexual organs is an act of coming primal with their ontology and their desire.

By tracing the application of Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of "desire" under different conjunctions with the drag queens' conceptualization of their bodies, this section reinforces an ontological formulation of the body exclusive of the component of gender altogether. This does not cancel out the vital role of "desire" as a fundamental determination of the body that propels utmost resonance among bodies. At the same time, for Maya, desire needs not to be directed towards the goal of becoming a drag queen with indeterminate possibilities of gender meanings, nor strategically relayed across bodies, but instead, always capable and inherent in hers; and by extension, in those that are yet to become a drag queen.

## Arena of voices and resonance

The last portion of the article returns to Maya as someone who enacts herself and impacts her body's corporeality through her utterances. Transgressing the idea of voice as exclusive to one person, she arrives at a polymorphous arena beyond what is allowed for her own body, entertaining the possibility of coalition across bodies. At first, Maya perceptively picked up the conundrum of translating what she desires through languages: "Even if language is mediated through gender social idioms, the important thing is still the feeling and judgment in the head. That way, somehow the words will be answered!" Mediated as though one's expression is through a finite ecology of linguistic categories, Maya believed what is uttered can be effectively felt, even carrying the reverberation of what is not. As a biological male, appropriating the pronoun of "cô," or "miss/sis" helps Maya not only bypass gendered roles' address but construct an affective space conjured up by her to actualize "cô" as an identity vis-a-vis her body as a material reality.

Maya's instantiation of such a new spatial configuration enacts what Deleuze would call a "sense-event," the event that arises when a particular proposition comes in contact with the world (Stivale, 2014, p.36). By uttering a proposition, the speaker ascribes a quality to the states of thing to which the proposition is referring (something happens to the world through one's proposition), while manifesting oneself as a corporeal being in the world capable of uttering (one exists at the moment one speaks) (May, 2005, p.102). To affirm oneself through language, or to be more precise in Maya's scenario, through her own voice in redefining linguistic categories, despite their inadequate expressiveness, is to open up new possibilities for the body's corporeal state.

Here, the idea of voices, metaphorically formulated for more attunement to the bodily re-imagining by the drag queens, now literally manifests in the act of lip-syncing as the most unforgettable feature of any drag performance. To lip-sync is to embody the voice of any pop artist, and by embodiment, the stage is a transgressive medium for affective connections and spatial collapse across corporeal bodies, that of the drag queens and pop artists. Each voice is a register into a larger "assemblage" of identities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.406). To explain in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, "assemblage" is a becoming that brings elements together, all the singularities and traits of each body and each existence into "an unfixed, shifting mass of movement, speed and flows (Stivale, 2015, p.93)."



The notion of voices as indicative of identities collapses into polymorphism and resonance, almost a horizontality of different bodies across the world(s). World(s) here can be that of the drag queens in Vietnam, that of the pop artists in Western countries, or that expressed and created at any moment the drag queens perform with voices. The act of voicing as an event of linguistic utterances, forms the larger assemblages which “come to compose bodies and worlds simultaneously (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p.6).” The possibilities of multiple voices and assemblages open up materialistic connections (or collapse) not only among bodies but across the world(s): *“Maya is Maya, but Maya is different from herself. On stage, I am a mature woman. I am a Marilyn Monroe, a waacking dancer, a woman of colour. I have an aura, it occupies the entire stage.”*

This is a materialist ontology for Deleuze. It rides on process, contingency, as well as impersonal and pre-individual forces, it is not easily instantiated by concrete, politically recognizable figures (Smith, Protevi, and Voss, 2023). This is Maya’s calling, invoking “desire” through which unstable, indeterminate ontological beings can come together to entertain the possibility of coalition in the Butlerian sense while maintaining diversifying points of actualization without risking totalization and identity-making. In this last part of the article, I have argued that Maya’s conceptualization of her body transcends a corporeality-laden entity, but an assemblage of her voices and materiality. Her becoming is a becoming possible across different spatial localities, so as those of many others, afforded by the drag queens’ shared access to one same voice in any song.

## Worlds between and in the bodies

This article has traced the articulations of bodily possibilities across theoretical strands to leverage the ontologically rich nature inherent in the bodies of the *Queens of Phoenix*’s drag queens. In particular, the body, with its Butlerian subversive and inter-penetrating becoming, negotiates the symbolic boundaries and as a consequence, re-define what an idea of the body can be in such a process of negotiation, a cyborg for example, to pace Donna Haraway (1991). “Desire” as an affective orientation and ontological condition of one body is utilized vis-vis others and mapped onto the virtual images of performance tools. Decoupling and connection re-frame possibilities not in an otherwise preconceived idea of what a body is and its material boundaries but what a body and its parts can do. Voices then compose new coalitions across the arena of bodies. In this space of resonance, what worlds are expressed through the beautiful vibration of drag queens’ vocal cords, even if they do not sing?

*“Learning about drag queens means adopting completely different worldviews. From the beginning, you had to be ready to receive, ready to ask, and listen to the answers.”* Maya concluded avidly. Concurrently, she pulled up her imaginary skirt, chiming in acutely that it was “drag,” which according to her, used to be an erotic gesture of the females to reveal what was hitherto unseen for the males. In this affective encounter, my body is forced to think, to reconcile with what it is not, to enact ways of becoming with the drag queens’ bodies. As a part of the audience and their “personal photographer,” at least according to their passing of words to the bar’s staff when I entered the venue with them, my body learned to breathe, to listen, and to dance in the world(s) of their own making. It has been a privilege for me to witness the *Queens of Phoenix* whenever they drag up their clothes!

## Reflection on Ethics and Consent

The project started in March 2023, when I met the drag queen team at the bar and asked for their permission to tag along, which the team leader graciously approved. Later in August 2023 when the research design was formulated, I explained the purpose of the study to them and asked for their verbal consent to conduct semi-structured interviews (all of which were recorded and stored on my phone with password protection) and participant observation at their common house. This is where they re-convened to put on makeup before travelling to the show.

There were a total of ten interviews conducted throughout the fieldwork period from August 2023 to December 2023. Since the drag queens’ schedule was quite busy, I used convenience sampling to interview whoever showed up at the common house, including the drag queens’ personal assistants as well as the costume and hair designers. Nevertheless, I focused my attention on the founders of the group to understand their business model, the group’s vision, and their in-depth personal reflection after years-after-year in the industry.

I applied anonymization and pseudonyms in this submission to protect all the drag queens’ personal information, especially those on social platforms or their house addresses. Their privacy is thus preserved. The team’s name (Queens of Phoenix) is also a pseudonym to avoid any identification of the specific drag queen group in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with whom I worked, since competition among different groups in the city is an issue, the point of which was articulated by the leaders of Queens of Phoenix.

This article was the outcome of an Independent Study supervised by Professor Tram Luong at Fulbright University Vietnam. While the study, according to the regulations at my university, did not require a formal application for Institutional Board Review (IRB), Professor Tram Luong’s rigour and meticulousness in overseeing the research design, procedures, and interview questions have been fundamental to the ethical gloss of the study.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The research theorizes on the image of the non-humans as capable ontological entities in larger ecological relations and the process of worlding, or building world(s). Located at the intersection of posthumanism, interspecies ethnography, and Indigenous cosmopolitics, Nguyen’s work radicalizes hitherto conceptual and metaphysical systems about non-humans in anthropology. Inspired by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the anthropologist Viveiros de Castro, Nguyen aims to investigate ‘difference’ at the fundamental level of thought, the form of which is fashioned reflexively at the contingency of the ethnographic data, namely of the whales-fishermen relations in Quy Nhon, Vietnam as his current thesis. Associating himself with an emergent theoretical strand in anthropology called “The Ontological Turn” as “a machine for thinking in perpetual motion” in the words of Martin Holbraad (Holbraad, 2012, 265), Nguyen finds himself in a type of anthropology that keeps turning, keeps asking philosophical questions about the non-humans, and by extension, the humans, ourselves.

## Endnotes

1. Here, the formulation of “the felt body” by Lisa Blackman (2021) disentangles the complex conversation between the mind and the body very well. The point is, aligning with my intention for my ethnographic analysis and Butler’s scholarship of subversion from within (1999), to de-naturalize the mind/body categories, not merely to replace them without proper deconstruction.
2. These connective syntheses are mechanisms between the connection of partial objects, a smaller unit of what Deleuze and Guattari define as “machine” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.17). The point here is to grasp the extensive groundwork for this ontology of differences, for only then can separated concepts be understood with their corresponding significance.
3. It is interesting to note that according to Brian Massumi, a Deleuzian scholar, affect, as the “capacity to act and to be acted upon in the world,” is pre-linguistic (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p.1; Massumi, 2002, p.30). It logically follows that two drag queens performing together can not communicate their intent on how to approximate desire from the audience through language. This strengthens the role of affect in connecting the drag queen’s bodies in a performance such that their performance, though undertaken by two separate bodies, can be experienced as consistent for the audience.
4. I define success here as a temporary actualization in the space-time fabric, where there is a certain degree of stability to the drag queens’ becoming and the audience’s becoming, usually almost at the peak of the performance. This is because continuing Deleuzian logics of “the virtual,” success can only be fittingly formulated as a part of “the actual;” otherwise, such stability-to-becoming would be an ongoing metamorphosing process stretching to no end (Deleuze, 1994, p.208). The definition of success would explode itself, a metaphysical contradiction. Still, that is when success is mutual, thus interdependent, becoming of both the drag queens and the audience at the same time. Other cases where success transpires are when the drag queen succeeds in becoming at the peak of the show, but in ways that go against the expectations of the audience. The audience’s line of desire, for being subverted by an unexpected performance, fails to actualize, still sustained in “the virtual” (Deleuze, 1994, p.208). Here, by no means the show is a failure, the definition of success qualified by chances of becoming is just substituted by that of success by monetary metric. But again, my definition of success here is a logical consequence of the argument on desire and becoming, for the drag queens and the audience, and even among them, would qualify success differently. More on the shared mode of being between the queer performer and the audience as a form of potentiality stretching into “futurity,” see Muñoz, 2009, p.99.
5. Encounter is different from mere interaction between subjects. It is “a sensation that cannot be thought [of]” (Smith, Protevi and Voss, 2023).
6. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, by emphasizing how languages are inherently stratified with multiple points of view and “centrifugal forces” like dialects, speech types, and voices, resonates here (Bakhtin, 1934, cited in Leitch et al., 2018, 999). By extension, in “[this] elastic environment of other, alien words,” emulating voices for the drag queens go far beyond just lip-syncing, but inclusive of bodily poses, the volume of the track, and even mismatching mouth shapes (Bakhtin, 1934, cited in Leitch et al., 2018, 999). To break a character is to create a new character.
7. This is an inference from my part on what kinds of metaphysical systems Deleuze argued for, specifically in conjunction with my analysis of the drag queen’s inert potential in the bodies (see Coole and Frost, 2010 for more exposition). Yet, for a radical thinker like Gilles Deleuze, his philosophy orients heavily towards the task of concept creation, instead of continuing or extending any past strands of thinking (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). Labelling runs the risk of totalizing over what the true function of philosophy is for Deleuze.

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# Indigenous knowledge and beautiful experiments in the unruly edges

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982234](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982234)

## Abstract

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Framed within the three dimensions of Joanna Macy's 'Great Turning' this discussion considers how Indigenous knowledge might be intrinsic to survival on a planet in polycrisis. While reflecting Macy's optimism for a future in which multispecies might flourish, it also highlights challenges, encompassing both the violence enacted upon Indigenous communities, and a resistance to world-making practices that sit beyond Western ontologies. Woven throughout, is a call to anthropologists to amplify lesser-heard voices and advocate for ways of being that foster a planet upon which we might collectively thrive.

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## Indigenous knowledge in the Context of Joanna Macy's 'Great Turning'

### Beautiful experiments in world-making otherwise.

"It's true that the world was failing at its one task — of remaining a world. Pieces were breaking off. The ice cubes were melting. The species were dying. The last of the fossil fuels were being burned up. A person collapsing in the street might be collapsing from any one of a hundred things. New things to die of were being added each day."

Heti, 2022, p. 212

With the 17th century Enlightenment began an era in which has continued to subjugate nature to facilitate the rapid growth of the Western empire. Positioning those living in close relations with nature as 'primitive', early colonisers sought to eradicate these intimacies (Hickel, 2020), instead building modernity on the premise of nature "as a resource for us to use as we wish" (Escobar, 1999, p. 6). We've truly leaned in; at a pace the planet can no longer sustain. This damage (I'd argue largely wrought by capitalist pursuit of profit) is evidenced in the convergence of ecological and social crises unfolding globally – albeit affecting some (places, people, creatures, critters) more than others. From climate change to loss of biodiversity, food scarcity and pandemics, what many identify as 'the polycrisis' can be paralysing in its horror - and so it's with hope that we might look to other ways of world-making. Indications of alternate means of surviving on a fragile planet. Beautiful experiments (Hartman, 2019), and stories otherwise (Stengers, 2015) that play out in what Stoler (2008) might describe as the shadows of empire; peripheral, overlooked, but potent with possibility.

Here resides evidence of actions that aren't augmented towards capitalist growth or a singular idea of 'progress', but instead might contribute to what Joanna Macy identifies as the 'Great Turning' (2009); emerging pockets of resistance as people seek alternative ways of being that are a little more collaborative, with collective, multispecies thriving in mind. A shift from an "Industrial Growth Society to a life-sustaining civilization" (Macy, 2009, emphasis added). While more academic minds might be dismissive of her optimism, it comes from a place of hunger; a desperate desire for us to attend to, be inspired by, and adopt alternative futures - when our own has become so fragile. Here, I think, resides an opportunity for anthropologists; we who are endlessly curious might use that appetite to illuminate alternative means of world-making, foregrounding that which troubles the hegemonic narrative of Western modernity.

It's with this in mind that I turn to Indigenous knowledge, which we'll discuss in the context of three dimensions – a mutually reinforcing framework that comprises Macy's 'Great Turning'. Its success, Macy notes, is dependent on "a profound shift in our perception of reality" (Macy, 2009) and as we delve in, it must be with a willingness to think expansively, mindful that "grasping the deepest truth can involve departing radically from everyday perception and knowledge," (Szczepanski, 2019, p. 204). As such, we'll also consider the challenge of translation between divergent cosmologies, and the very real dangers faced by Indigenous People participating in the activism that the Great Turning asks of us. This is not to romanticise the world-making practices of those who have been marginalised or suffered in the name of imperial Western progress, and I remain conscious of language of 'difference' and 'othering' which has historically made anthropology implicit in

“the exploitation of dependence, the oppression of peasants and the manipulation or management of native societies for imperial purposes.” (Said, 1989, p. 207). I conclude with the suggestion that as we navigate unstable worlds, anthropology might move beyond the negative connotations of its past, and offer value in advocating for, and amplifying “epistemologies and cosmologies that subtly or explicitly challenged mastery.” (Roane, 2018, p. 244).

A quick note on the terminology of ‘Indigenous knowledge’, which is sometimes referred to as ‘local knowledge’ and ‘traditional environmental knowledge’, among other terms. In this essay, I use the term in reference to the knowledge systems and practices of individuals identifying as Indigenous People. I follow Johnston (2023) in capitalising Indigenous, and Indigenous People, recognising and valuing a cultural group that has been subject to “centuries of dehumanization and derogatory stereotyping.” (Johnston, 2023, p. 8).

### Seeking systems augmented for collective thriving

In thinking with the three dimensions of the Great Turning, I would argue that the success of the two to follow, depend largely on the first; a shift in consciousness.

Despite the damage wrought by capitalist production methods, it’s a model that continues to proliferate creating spaces of ‘out-and-out exterminism’ that “destroy their own base, exhaust soils, exhaust peoples, exhaust plants and animals, and proliferate pathologic pathogens.” (Haraway et al. 2019, p. 10). As the resulting polycrisis becomes increasingly prevalent, Macy notes the growing urgency with which people are seeking alternative approaches to world-making; determined to weave regenerative threads through a global tapestry of destruction. They do well to look to the entangled, multispecies frameworks synonymous with Indigenous practices, which have long contradicted hegemonic understandings of nature as a resource, and instead tread gently; prioritising sustainable, mutual flourishing. While knowledge, beliefs, and practices vary among communities around the world, Lyla June Johnston’s thesis (2022) identifies a common denominator in value systems that are “rooted in relationality, reciprocity, respect, reverence, regenerative practice, responsibility to homeland... and a notion that all life is equal.” (Johnston, 2022, p. 286). To think with this further, many Indigenous cosmologies also recognise more-than-human entities as active participants in world-making. In Chao’s (2018) research with the Indigenous Marind People in West Papua, she describes a multispecies cosmology of the forest, in which “each agent has an interest in seeing the other maintain its existence.” (Chao, 2018, p. 622). Multispecies communities of care emerge, and while it’s a notion that might stretch our current ontological understanding of human and nature relations, (and we’ll return to this later) as Cruikshank poignantly notes, the value of alternative frameworks may become apparent in unstable and uncertain times that “force persons, things and ideas into new and unexpected relationships.” (Cruikshank, 2012, p. 240).

Bound up in these multispecies relations is, unsurprisingly, a deep ecological understanding that informs intelligent systems, augmented for collective thriving (Johnston, 2022). This brings us to the second dimension of Macy’s Great Turning, which asks that we analyse the structural causes of the polycrisis and pursue alternative approaches. Here I could happily dwell, exploring the many instances of Indigenous ingenuity and thoughtful, non-human-centred food production and world-making methods that have effectively sustained healthy ecosystems.

Johnston (2022) has recorded myriad examples, from Shawnee chestnut grove management through gentle burning, to the Amah Mut-sun Indigenous Nation’s approach to farming salmon, which allows the strongest, most determined to swim upstream and reproduce, passing those traits on to future generations. Or we might consider ‘good fires’, integral to forest management for centuries, as a means of minimising fuel load to prevent catastrophic fires and adding nutrient dense ash to the soil to stimulate healthy grass for grazing animals. Moreover, increased space

between the trees prevents the rapid spread of pathogens and allows for easy transit through the forest, while ensuring optimum light and water for all. “By applying methodical... ecocentric disturbance to their homelands, Indigenous Nations managed to augment biodiversity and ecosystems health” (Johnston, 2022, p. 277). A similarly regenerative model, Kimmerer (2015) notes how multispecies flourish in the ‘honourable harvest’ practiced by the Potawatomi Nation, which commands that only what’s needed is taken, received with gratitude, used well, and reciprocated.

That low intervention, collaborative methods don’t proliferate, has largely been in the interests of a colonial aspirations, Johnston reminds us, who have long been incentivised to “position Indigenous People as ‘passive and primitive hunter-gathers’ to legitimise the seizure of land... resulting in the omission and misunderstanding of these vast systems in many historical records.” (Johnston, 2022, p. 286). And yet, underpinned by the values discussed above (those many Rs), these systems demonstrate the potency that resides in Indigenous practices that have demonstrated their efficacy over many generations. In gently cultivating biodiverse landscapes that are wildly removed from the ‘out and out exterminism’ (Haraway, 2019) favoured by modern production methods, sanctuaries for collective thriving emerge (Tsing, 2012; Li and Semedi, 2022). And the benefits are many; much research supports the idea that species diversity can “stimulate productivity, stability, ecosystem services, and resilience in natural and in agricultural ecosystems.” (Khoury et al., 2014, p. 4001).

### The long shadow of colonialism

As such systems of mutual flourishing are increasingly subsumed; prey to an insatiable capitalist appetite, many Indigenous People (and allies) are motivated to participate in movements that comprise Macy’s third dimension, ‘actions that slow down damage to the earth and its beings’. While it’s beyond the scope of this essay to explore the humbling number of grass-roots actions galvanised by Indigenous communities, briefly we might consider the (successful) fight for compensation from Ok Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea, which damaged swathes of rainforest and produced chemical toxicity that made the local Indigenous community’s subsistence impossible (Kirsch, 2002). Or the (unsuccessful) Dakota pipeline protest (2016) that residents of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation fought in defence of their water security.

A campaign I’d like to think with in more detail is documented in de la Cadena’s ethnography, *Earth Beings* (2015). It illuminates a key challenge within this space; that of translating Indigenous knowledge – and it being taken seriously. De la Cadena calls our attention to Sinkara, a Peruvian mountain threatened by a mining corporation, which the Indigenous Quechua community of Pacchanta were motivated to defend, predominantly due to their understanding of it as an earth-being (sentient more-than-human entities that participate in daily life). Protecting nature was inherently intertwined, but wasn’t something they felt needed to be highlighted; because surely, earth-beings as world-making participants were a worthy cause in and of themselves? This concept presented such a radical departure from hegemonic thinking, that NGOs supporting the campaign deemed it to be outside of what might be understood - or important - to their opposition. Instead, they insisted on an environmental angle, a “cause the state could recognize,” (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 275). While in the end the mountain triumphed, the process made earth-beings (and by extension, Indigenous world-making practices) invisible, discrediting their worth.

Chao (2018) describes similar circumstances for the Marind community discussed above, who, in their efforts to protect their region from encroaching oil palm plantations, also exclude what might be considered beyond ontological understanding from the narrative. While the Marind fear oil palm because it imposes itself on “preexisting multispecies lifeworlds and appropriates the resources necessary to their survival only to sustain its own” (Chao, 2018, p. 624) they recognise that in negotiations with multinational corporations this might “reinforce entrenched stereotypes

of Papuans as primitive and superstitious peoples" (Chao, 2018, p. 636). Suppressing certain knowledge systems becomes necessary when "how indigenous actors engage in strategic self-representation before powerful and predatory audiences... profoundly determines the shape of reality itself." (Chao, 2018, p. 636). While these are only two of a great many more examples, they demonstrate a failure to take Indigenous knowledge seriously – which I'd argue presents one of the biggest challenges to the Great Turning, when therein lies such a wealth of valuable and brilliant knowledge that has become lost amid colonial efforts to devalue Indigenous world-making practices and close relations with nature (Johnston, 2022). It's perhaps this that leads Macy to argue that a shift in perspective is intrinsic to the Great Turning's success. That hearts and minds must be open and receptive to that which might exist beyond our ontological understanding. To think with Viveiros de Castro will be helpful here, in recognising the "indefinitely many possible worlds of which humans are capable," (Viveiros de Castro, 2003, p. 5), and what I hope this discussion goes some way in demonstrating, is the wealth of knowledge and stories of collective thriving that are unfolding - if we can learn to 'take native thought seriously' (Viveiros de Castro, 2023).

In discussing challenges, I'd like to return briefly to the participation of Indigenous People in environmental activism, and acknowledge the well documented danger inherent in their engagement. In Lopez's (2022) article on the devastating number of environmental activists murdered in Mexico, it's striking how many are identified as Indigenous. Accurate figures are impossible among the unrecorded deaths and 'disappeared', but in the space of several months he reports the killing of three Indigenous environment activists, including Mr Rojo, a leader of northern Mexico's Indigenous Yaqui community locked in "a decades-long battle with the Mexican government for control of the river, exacerbated by the construction of a giant aqueduct to siphon water to send to the state capital." (Lopez, 2022). Simultaneously in the Amazon, the murder of Bruno Pereira and British journalist Dom Phillips (June 2022) was widely reported as he sought to protect ancestral land threatened by a complete spectrum of "poachers and fishing gangs encroaching from the north, drug traffickers from the west, goldminers from the east and cattle ranchers from the south" (Phillips, 2023). These accounts reflect Global Witness (2023) reports that 1,910 environmental defenders have been killed in the space of a decade (2012-2022), of which over a third (34%) were identified as Indigenous – despite making up only 5% of the global population. As modernity threatens to raze not only Indigenous land, but erase ways of world-making and the people who practice them, Luz Mery Panche (identified as both an Indigenous leader in Colombia and an activist in the Amazon rainforest) notes that while "Some have decided to keep quiet out of fear, for us that's not an option," (Lopez, 2022), because of the threat to their very existence. Her words are echoed in Phillips article which recounts the words of a young Indigenous man readying himself to continue Pereira's fight "we're going to continue fighting our enemies until they can no longer bear it... If I have to die, it will be for our people." (Phillips, 2023).

### **Pursuing alternative pathways on a fragile planet**

Without the scope to discuss these themes more extensively, I hope the above goes some way in demonstrating how Indigenous knowledge might provide a thoughtful and necessary departure from the dominant Western narrative of progress; illuminating stories otherwise unfolding in the unruly edges of capitalism. Perhaps most exciting, is the evidence that humans have been (and therefore could be again), a 'keystone species. "A linchpin that helps hold ecosystems together" (Johnston, 2022, p. 17), enhancing, and not exhausting biodiverse life systems. But recognising the value of Indigenous knowledge and creating space for unfamiliar world-making practices more widely – which feels imperative to the future of more-than-human, and planetary survival - will

require new and expansive thinking; a willingness to unlearn individualism and lean into that which sits outside of our hegemonic understanding of nature; as a resource, as a backdrop, as inexhaustible.

This necessitates reverence and respect; there is a violent and oppressive history of abuse and co-option of Indigenous knowledge, not only that which has been discussed above, but of widely documented intellectual theft. Azúa (2023) documents repeated instances of Indigenous knowledge shared by Mexicans living in the south Texas biome regarding the area's biodiversity and how it might be utilised for healing, who never received recognition or compensation. Worse still, this information was used to demonstrate the region's value, "heralding in an era of extraction, militarization, settler colonialism from both Mexico and the United States, and ecological destruction in the twentieth century and beyond," (Azúa, 2023, p. 4). When knowledge sharing has become entangled with exploitation and abuse, a response of trepidation, reluctance and even resistance to the increasing interest in Indigenous knowledge is understandable.

While I'm conscious of anthropology's history of collusion in this, I also see an opportunity for contemporary scholars to disrupt this narrative, aptly demonstrated by the collected knowledge above which has been produced by or in collaboration with Indigenous People. In producing ethnography collaboratively with care and respect, anthropology has the power to communicate valuable stories otherwise, platform knowledge and amplify voices that might not otherwise be heard. Disputing the idea that ethnographers should be neutral, Kirsch argues that "activism is a logical extension of the commitment to reciprocity that under-lies the practice of anthropology." (Kirsch, 2002, p. 178). Advocacy, he suggests, might go some way in levelling the playing field in which Indigenous communities come up against governance and corporations.

As anthropologists seeking a purpose on an unstable planet, advocacy seems a poignant sentiment on which to conclude. Macy's Great Turning proposes a valuable set of tools for navigating the polycrisis, that might make some (not all) worlds possible, and in illuminating means of world-making more collaboratively and generatively, we might inspire others to join in. Savransky (2021) describes the modern world as crumbling "under the pressure of its own imperial weight" (Savransky, 2021, p. 93) and it's in this space and time that experimenting – beautiful or otherwise – (Hartman, 2019) becomes essential. While this discussion has focused specifically on Indigenous knowledge – and still only touches the very edges - cast the net wider and such experiments are truly many, and amplifying them might lend our practice an honourable purpose as we navigate possible futures.



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# OVERFLOWING ANTHROPOLOGY: A MANIFESTO

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982245](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982245)

## Abstract

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This manifesto urges anthropology to undergo transformation. Currently confined to mere description, the discipline should embrace creative action. By collaborating with researched communities and employing design thinking, anthropologists can co-create solutions for the future rather than merely documenting the past and present. The aim is to shift from being “spectators” to becoming agents of change. At its core, this text serves as an invitation to rethink the very foundations of anthropology and to embrace a broader spectrum of perspectives and forms of knowledge, drawing from diverse human experiences and understandings.

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It is impossible for me to theorise or think critically about anthropology without acknowledging my own situated perspective as a designer who transitioned to anthropology after my postgraduate studies (Haraway 1988; Gledhill 2019; 2016). I highlight this because one of the conditions that may have impeded a more transformative reach of the discipline of anthropology is precisely that it has been conceived almost exclusively by anthropologists (Ingold 2013; Murphy 2016). This is, of course, a rather obvious point for any field of knowledge.

Similarly, I write this on a chilly autumn morning in the southern hemisphere, in Chile, Latin America, reflecting on how anthropology is experienced from colonised territories (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel 2007; Escobar 2018; Costanza-Chock 2020; Restrepo 2010). I wonder: How much influence do European Western ideas have on my thinking? Or how much does Andean, Mapuche, or Aztec thought shape my worldview? I pause, recognising that thinking about decoloniality as part of the colonised is not an easy task, but it is a worthwhile exercise when considering the possibilities for transforming anthropology. In this framework, the Colombian anthropologist Eduardo Restrepo (2010) emphasises the concept of ‘Border Thinking,’ which emerges from those who are directly affected by coloniality and its subaltern conditions. This concept involves generating knowledge from positions of subalternity or colonial difference, highlighting the importance of both the location (locus of enunciation) and the critical perspective adopted in the production of knowledge.

When considering the future and its challenges, which inevitably compel us to transform reality—particularly the current reality characterised by extreme scenarios such as massive migration crises that bolster nationalism and authoritarian governments that question democracy and foster discrimination against foreigners, or, from an anthropological perspective, engender a profound rejection of otherness—one must also consider the climate crisis. This crisis prompts questions about the role of solidarity and the nature of accumulation encouraged by neoliberal systems.

In this context, the idea of inviting “the others” to reflect on our own discipline, understanding this otherness as individuals with ideas from fields of knowledge outside anthropology, seems imperative. Our societies demonstrate an inability, or at least a difficulty, in dealing with differences across various social dimensions, as illustrated by the examples previously described.

Much has already been said by literature and theorists regarding the ontological limitations of anthropology to effectively transform social reality (Hunt 2011; Clark 2011; Merzali Celikoglu & Hamarat 2022). This is precisely because its disciplinary foundations entail an ethical and methodological condition to operate in the social field while minimising its impact on the researched communities. Even though there is a growing interest within anthropology itself to contribute disciplinarily to social change and future transformation, it lacks tools and methodologies to actively engage in shaping the future, as it does not possess the transformative character of other disciplines, such as education or design (Gatt & Ingold 2013; Tarek & Marcus 2010; Clifford & Marcus 2010). While the descriptive practice of anthropology operates at a descriptive and analytical level, it fails to transform the realities it studies.

Moreover, another crucial aspect to consider is how collective the outcome of anthropological research is in order to impact the world. Once again, we observe that anthropology has traditionally been associated with individual research work, where the anthropologist conducts fieldwork individually and writes alone, disconnected from the researched communities (Ingold 2018; 2020). This dimension requires us to open ourselves to alterity—literally—by including others in our theoretical construction, not only through observation, description, and interpretation, as has historically been the case. Therefore, efforts to construct collaborative ethnographies or fieldwork alongside communities, as developed in Design Anthropology, pave new ways for advancing towards a broader disciplinary framework (Akoglu & Dankl 2021; Barab et al. 2004;

Costard et al. 2016; Ibarra 2019; Wasson 2002).

I advocate for the necessary inclusion of others in the process of theorisation and subsequent implementation of findings in communities. This is akin to the idea of Correspondence proposed by Tim Ingold (2020), but in my view, it should not be limited solely to ethnographic exercise as a mutual learning experience; rather, it should encompass transformative perspectives that transcend research and written reflection to include the implementation of initiatives relevant to the researched communities, addressing various themes that drive our research. For example, Brazilian anthropologists are empowering indigenous communities in the Amazon through their ethnographic film project, *Vídeo nas Aldeias* (2024). This initiative involves providing cameras to the communities so they can create recordings for their own use, training them in video editing, and supporting them in the production process. The goal is to enable the communities to produce films on their own terms, respecting their self-determination and viewpoints. From the outset, the project's aim has been to support indigenous political struggles, strengthen their identities, and safeguard their territorial and cultural heritage through audiovisual resources and collaborative production.

However, my reflection goes deeper, inviting us to rethink the disciplinary foundations and limits of anthropology so that this approach to research can completely transform the discipline. This is not by denying or undermining its historicity, but by complementing it, offering a new dimension of professional action where anthropological practice adds a projective, creative, or educational dimension to develop instruments that enable us to move towards a transformation of the societies we investigate. This involves moving beyond theoretical reflection and interpretation, from being mere spectators of the social to becoming instruments in the service of transforming these theoretical ideas into concrete actions of social change.

Undoubtedly, my thinking is influenced by Design Anthropology (Tunstall 2013; Wallace 2015; Van Dijk 2010; Singh et al. 2021; Otto & Smith 2013; Murphy & Marcus 2013; Clark 2011). Not only because I have a background in design, but because it is— from my situated point of view—one of the most concrete and pragmatic ways to translate it into reality. Adding to the anthropological tradition, typically associated with the recent past and present of culture, the methods of creation and projection offered by design, proposing an interdisciplinary field of knowledge with reflexive and theoretical capacity, along with creative and projective skills, allows us to add a temporality associated with the future to our research (Ingold 2013; Murphy 2016). This translates into a toolkit of concrete tools to think about future social transformation and the projection of future scenarios that can improve the fractures we encounter in our chaotic present.

Finally, I raise the question: Why overflow? Because, I believe, we need to surpass the limits of the anticipated. Investigating recent pasts and the present of our societies has not been enough. Therefore, in the future, history cannot repeat itself by merely staying in reflection and interpretation. We need to embrace the challenge of transformation with concrete tools and with the disciplinary conviction that the paradigm shift must lead us to take a more active and participatory role in shaping the future. To do this, thinking about our theoretical production with the possibility of prototyping solutions alongside the people we investigate, and co-creating prospective possibilities, emerges as an urgent and necessary demand for the perspectives of our anthropological research work.

How many of us have returned to a researched community after publishing an article or book to offer our knowledge in their service and collaborate in formulating an improvement project for their territory? How many editorial boards of indexed journals have a content section that offers dissemination or synergies to collaboratively work on projects with research communities that need structural changes to improve their development conditions? I know this is not the focus of

How many of us have returned to a researched community after publishing an article or book to offer our knowledge in their service and collaborate in formulating an improvement project for their territory? How many editorial boards of indexed journals have a content section that offers dissemination or synergies to collaboratively work on projects with research communities that need structural changes to improve their development conditions? I know this is not the focus of science, let alone anthropology, many might declare. However, the invitation is precisely to open the discussion and ask ourselves if perhaps it is time to rethink our ontology and transcend our limits, overflowing our beliefs and assumptions, to add more ideas, people, and minds in our research work on/with people and culture.

It is about rethinking the visibility of the invisible not only in empirical description but also in a prospective exercise. The Portuguese theorist Souza de Santos (Santos 2010) introduces the concept of the sociology of absences, which aims to show that what does not exist is, in fact, actively produced as nonexistent, or rather, as an incredible alternative to what exists. It is about transforming impossible objects into possible ones, and absent objects into present ones. I advocate for this to be our perspective towards the future and the seemingly impossible scenarios of transformation. To move them from the invisibility of their nonexistence to a visible space of possibilities—which, even though speculative, transform them into intelligible alternatives with a prospect of existence—is a significant step.

Lastly, I return to the reflection of Peruvian writer Patricia de Souza (De Souza 2016), who, in her text "Decolonizing Language," raises questions and reflections regarding this 'other perspective' that we eagerly seek to decipher in anthropology. She questions what we know and believe to be unmovable, as in the invitation I have attempted to weave into this manifesto. I hope it also encourages you to challenge your own beliefs so that from that place, we can reconstruct a new anthropology to materialise actions of social transformation towards the future:

Of course, it is obvious that all my culture is Westernized, what I like is that the experience has put me in doubt and that it helps me to think against what I have acquired. This step is important. It's like a new journey. An inner journey. There's something being traced, but I still don't know what it is

De Souza, 2016, p. 53, author's translation



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# TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY THAT MAKES POLICY 'PUBLIC'

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Anthways, 2024 © Mandeep Singh

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982255](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982255)

## Introduction

Policy is regularly understood as being shaped by politics but less so the other way around. Insofar as there has been a proliferation of critical thought in studying policy as a vehicle of social construction—notable examples being the argumentative turn (Fischer and Forester, 1993), interpretive analysis (Yanow, 2000), and value-critical analysis (Rein, 1983)—mainstream analysis remains dominated by the empiricist approach where policy is studied as a linear model of implementation guided by rational choice (Clay and Schaffer, 1984). The consequence of this neglect means that policy is still conceptualised as a technocratic problem-solving device, neglecting its 'public' ability of promoting democratic purposes and ushering just forms of political governance.

Taking ethnographies of development practice for example, anthropology shares an overlapping concern with critical studies of policy in understanding how local and transnational politics transform social realities lived by everyday people (Olivier de Sardan, 2005; Lewis and Mosse, 2006). However, while Shore and Wright (2011) used the term 'authoritative instrumentalism' to describe the technocratic bias of policy analysis, this assumption is still prevalent within popular discussions of policy within anthropology. Policies are either viewed as failed instruments of high modernism (Scott, 1998), anti-politics machines (Ferguson, 1994), or devices of control to establish new forms of governmentality (Ong, 2006). While these studies are cogent in outlining the machinations of the modern state, they only tell half of the story of the relationship between politics and the public.

The above explains briefly how modern politics shape policy. Yet I premise my argument on the fact that with the rising popularity of right-wing authoritarian tendencies amongst liberal democracies today (Applebaum, 2020), exploring the inverse relationship of how policy gets to shape mass politics—and subsequently affect democratic norms and beliefs—has become ever more crucial (Mettler and Soss, 2004; Campbell, 2012). The one-sided discourse of policy as authoritative instrumentalism means that it is frequently understood as simply a product of absolute state power. As much as this analytical lens coheres, it also overlooks the idea of policy as spaces of participatory governance (Fung and Wright, 2003) and as an organising principle of society akin to family, nation, class or citizenship through which people mobilise and structure their realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Hence, this essay is a call for a public anthropology that restores the purpose of policy for democratic participation. Picking from Arendt (1958), the public realm exists because of the human capacity to engage politically through action (praxis) and speech (lexis), out of which arises a "common world [that] gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other" (p. 52). Where Arendt (ibid.) established that the public realm can only exist by the political capacity of its people, the rapid decline of democracies today into authoritarian tendencies ought to be taken as a critical inquiry into the process through which politics transforms the capacity of a 'public' and vice versa. As this essay will later show, policy-making, through its discursive abilities, is precisely an example of this dynamic process taking place.

More importantly, I am advocating for anthropologists of policy, as first-hand witnesses to the experiences of subjection faced by impacted communities, to be a politically engaged participant who insists on upholding the 'public' as an agent for social change (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Borofsky and De Lauri, 2019). It is recognising the public sphere as an epistemic space where socio-political values are actively shaped and negotiated amongst different 'publics' (Habermas, 1991; Calhoun 2010) and that making policy a 'public' tool is part and parcel of preserving this democratic function of the public sphere. Following Cornwall's (2018) example of her work for the British National Health Service, this would mean leveraging anthropological knowledge and methods to "identify and then use whatever levers existed

for change, to prise open doors and create spaces for [people] to have a voice" (p. 10). If modern politics is potent because of its ability to dictate who and what gets represented as a social fact (Rabinow, 1986), it becomes essential for anthropologists to identify the social categories that are encompassed within its practice of governance and assess the consensus (or its lack thereof) through which their condition gets defined. Instead of taking policy as a tool of 'authoritative instrumentalism', it should be viewed as constituting our '**collective will to govern**' (see also Foucault, 1991; Li, 2007).

To pursue my case for the above, I begin by revisiting the epistemological dilemma that exists within the social sciences in realising Harold Laswell's (1951) ambition for a 'policy sciences of democracy' and bring it home to the tensions within the anthropology of policy. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to proffer a solution to the dilemma, I propose that to navigate this conundrum, a renewed understanding of policy needs to be established, which I do so by exploring the idea of policy as influencing the democratic functions of the public sphere. Having restored the 'public' conception of policy, I discuss what this could mean for anthropologists working with impacted communities on the field and identify examples that are already in practice. Finally, I conclude with the urge for anthropology to make policy 'public' as an agenda for collective change.

## Policy Scientist of Democracy: An Epistemological Dilemma within the Social Sciences

The origins of policy analysis as an emergent area of study can be traced back to Harold Laswell (1951) who saw the need for a 'policy sciences of democracy' as an interdisciplinary movement that integrates knowledge across the social sciences with public action. With the 20th century ushering in a new world rapidly altered by technological advancements, Laswell proposed that the overriding goal of policy has to be directed towards maximising the dignity of freedom for all that lives as a response to the profound new challenges that democratic leaders were bound to face. As succinctly put by Farr, Hacker and Kazee (2006), "it was the charge of the discipline to embrace a new ideal of scientific achievement—not the monastic, value-free practitioner of technical research, but the engaged, value-focused 'policy scientist of democracy'" (p. 580).

Despite that, the ideal nature of Laswell's vision also lays bare the contradictions that exist within policy analysis until today. The primary of them is that the very vision represents an oxymoron of the fact-value divide prevalent within the social sciences, something which Farr, Hacker and Kazee (2006) further discussed in their review of Laswell's discipline. On one hand, taking an objectivist stance, social scientists engaging with policy are expected to be expert practitioners who use the methods of general science in solving real-world problems. On the other hand, taking a value-laden position, they are also expected to actively engage with ambiguous and contested spaces characteristic of a democratic society. Facing the risk of "an epistemological blur between a rigorous approach and a normative drift", social sciences have always kept an ambivalent relationship with public involvement (Fassin, 2013, p. 625). This thus leaves the ideal of an interdisciplinary, public-oriented policy scientist of democracy as "too demanding and contradictory a hero" (Farr, Hacker and Kazee, 2006, p. 586).

Nonetheless, the initial flourishing of contemporary policy analysis did come on the back of a grand political vision, namely US President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s. The massive scale and urgency set by the Johnson administration created an immediate demand for policy specialists to design and quickly deploy an array of socioeconomic programmes focused on eliminating poverty in all forms (Fischer, 2003). Compounded with the dominant influence of Keynesian economics and its positivist methodologies inherited from the Kennedy administration,

the field of policy studies thus turned towards a technocratic approach. Given America's hegemonic influence in setting the norms of the international political economy during this period (Finnemore, 1996), the technocratic approach to policymaking was simultaneously adopted by Western Europe in its post-war reconstruction (Krige, 2006) and other nations benefiting from Western development aid (Escobar, 1995; Woolcock, Szreter and Rao, 2011). Social problems were positioned to be a matter of having the right policy strategy rather than politics (Bell, 1973).

However, the mixed outcomes of the War on Poverty followed by public outrage at the political deception behind America's involvement in the Vietnam War threw into doubt the credibility of a technocratic orthodoxy for administration. A critical text of this time was Arendt's (1972) 'Lying in Politics' published shortly after the release of the Pentagon Papers. Reflecting on the nature of action in politics, she wrote:

Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings. Whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance, on the one hand for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the case.

Arendt, 1972, pp. 4-5

This conflicted legacy thus led to the advocacy amongst scholars of a post-empiricist approach, which calls for a critical study of social and political values in determining the functions of policy, as an alternative to mainstream policy analysis.

It is within this broader intellectual backdrop that an anthropological study of policy shares with the post-empiricists a common goal to understand what policy means for different audiences and the ability of policy-relevant actors to shape social and political values. With an awareness of its political nature, both similarly strive to develop a more inclusive and democratic conception of policy (Yanow, 1996; Shore and Wright, 2011). Indeed, it is through this analytical framework that anthropologists of policy have contributed productively to many issues of widespread political concern—some relevant ethnographic examples include Mosse (2005) on the practice of aid as shaped foremost by the need for development actors to maintain a coherent representation of their actions which were then packaged into an authorised policy, Greenhalgh (2008) on the scientisation of sociopolitical life that guided China's one-child policy, and Andersson (2014) on Europe's border crisis as an illegality industry.

The increasing presence of anthropologists as ethnographic witnesses to issues of public concern, oftentimes with direct implications on democratic discourse, adds a new imperative for them to be a politically engaged intellectual (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Borofsky and De Lauri, 2019). Anthropologists of policy thus face an inverse problem of the fact-value divide compared to policy empiricists, where having unveiled the continuous process of contestation over the policy in question, they now "sit at the juncture of tensions within the discipline as a whole, over how to produce and assess academic and public-oriented ethnographic knowledge and how to act on the urgent political commitments produced through ethnographic study" (Tate, 2020, p. 92). In other words, bringing back the epistemological dilemma of Laswell's (1951) policy scientist of democracy, having blown the whistle on policy processes that subject democratic values to authoritative control, how can anthropologists of policy then enunciate and address real-world problems in a way that justly treats the value system of their interlocutors?

To navigate this conundrum, a renewed understanding of how policy influences the democratic functions of the public sphere is needed, which the next chapter explores.



## Making Policy 'Public': Policy influencing the democratic functions of the public sphere

At this stage, it is worth taking a brief detour into unpacking the concept of the 'public'. Taking a stance similar to Bangstad (2017), it is often striking to see that anthropologists participating in arguments about public anthropology are more concerned about the 'anthropology' than the 'public' part of the equation. The flourishing of multiple 'publics'—some with complementing while others with competing claims over the public sphere—reflects the broader problem across the social sciences in capturing the contingencies through which the boundaries of the 'public' get defined (Calhoun, 2010). If Arendt (1958) merits the consideration that a public realm can only exist by the political capacity of its people, it becomes essential to recognise the extent to which the emergence of a 'public' is contingent on the nature of politics and vice versa. In doing so, I find the Habermas-Foucault debate on the functions of the public sphere as a good starting point for the discussion.

As Bangstad (2017) rightly pointed out, central to Habermas's (1991) idea of the public sphere was his normative emphasis on its potential to function as the arena for the articulation of a critique or a corrective to the power of the state. This can be realised from, what Habermas (1984) developed as, communicative action in which different actors in society aim to reach a mutual understanding by coordinating their actions through reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation. The promise of Habermas's vision has inspired a flourishing of studies to establish the theoretical foundations and practices for deliberative democracy—some examples being Dryzek (1990), Cohen (2003), and Fung (2003).

Amidst that, Habermas's vision of a public sphere as discursive spaces that exist outside of power collides head-on with Foucault's (1980) idea that power and discourse produce one another. In other words, to paraphrase from Taylor (1992), this poses the serious question of whether the public is political because it is "a discourse on and to power" or because it is a discourse "by power" (p. 233). Even though I do not wish to revive the philosophical discussions behind the Habermas-Foucault debate, I do see a need to succinctly interrogate both schools of thought in establishing the democratic functions of the public sphere.

In doing so, I shall refer to points made by Buchstein and Jörke (2012) who have extensively reflected on later works made by both thinkers and identified the implications from their findings on critical policy studies. While Foucault initially described power as disciplinary, he did eventually reconceive power as working in and through individual freedom. In that sense, the power that shapes political subjectivities to be disciplined—techniques of domination—and the power that shapes individual identities for social participation—techniques of the self—are two sides of the same coin. Governmentality is not so much a way of top-down coercion, but a versatile equilibrium achieved between both sides of power. This then provides room for the act of governing to be moulded in the Habermasian aim of advancing a deliberative democracy. As put by Buchstein and Jörke towards the end of their article:

Of course, on a rhetorical level, Foucault still distances himself from Habermasian discourse ethics. But what are the institutional consequences of Foucault's claim to limit relations of domination in the field of public policy? Is it not to give the people a voice in those political fields where the social conditions of their lives are decided? And is this not the aim of Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy? In other words, Habermas's ethical and political theory offers a normative foundation for those institutions and practices that Foucault postulates to minimise the relations of domination.

Buchstein and Jörke, 2012, p. 297

To put it another way, the political attitude of a public can vary depending on the extent they are empowered to participate in collective decision-making. As outlined by Goenaga (2022), in representative democracies, public spheres are expected to perform the normative functions of providing a voice to alternative perspectives, empowering citizens to criticise political authorities, and disseminating information on matters of public interest. More crucially, he also found that citizens can develop differentiated views on the relative importance attached to each function based on the democratic problems they care about and their ability to influence political decisions through public debate. An example from his study based on European democracies is that while more educated citizens equally cared about all three functions, members of minority groups were more likely to emphasise on the importance of giving voice to alternative perspectives. Borrowing from the title of his paper, knowing 'who cares about the public sphere' allows one to follow the strategies that exist for the public to push against techniques of domination.

Policy, in this respect, gets to influence the democratic functions of the public sphere through its allocative and interpretive ability to alter the capacities and interests of affected publics (Pierson, 1993). To corroborate this, further studies found that the design of a policy can directly affect how the public coheres through the following pathways: defining membership of a political community, directing levels of resources relevant for agenda-setting, affecting feelings of political engagement, and determining the likelihood of political mobilisation (Mettler and Soss, 2004; Campbell, 2012). Reminiscent of Cody's (2011) argument then, policy has the technological, linguistic and conceptual ability to shape 'public culture' which then informs how individuals identify themselves within the public sphere and engage in political debate. Succinctly put, policy determines how the public works.

## What making policy 'public' means for anthropologists

Before I advance further into the heart of this essay, I shall lay out some key takeaways that have been established so far from the preceding chapters. Firstly, the epistemological tension faced by anthropologists of policy to be a politically engaged intellectual plays itself against a broader historical ambition for a 'policy sciences of democracy' as an interdisciplinary movement that integrates knowledge across the social sciences with public action. Secondly, it is in cognisance of this tension that, through a renewed understanding of policy as influencing the democratic functions of the public sphere, I establish policy as determining how the public works. This means the goalpost for policy design can shift depending on which public it interacts with. The problematisation of a policy is a politically dynamic process. This finally leads to the critical point that shall guide the remaining discussion—that policymaking is an act of deliberation. It is guided by a strategic choice from multiple alternatives that are viable within the public domain instead of a linear causality of problem/implementation.

It is no coincidence that policy-making as a modern form of governmentality came with the birth of liberal democracies for, to echo Dewey (1927), political knowledge can only come about through conversation among and between citizens which policy has the crucial role to facilitate. The transformation of policy to become tools of authoritative instrumentalism then is a broader sign of the decline of public involvement in political life in recent decades (Sennett, 1977).

Anthropologists of policy, as first-hand witnesses of political alienation and democratic decline, bear a moral responsibility to regain the democratic functions of the public sphere. To do so, I follow Fassin's (2013) call for the politicisation of ethnographic works by contributing to debate and action amongst publics. To quote him from a later writing, this would mean:

In the case of public ethnography, the first operation—debate—entails, on the side of the ethnographer, the translation and dissemination of knowledge and, on the side of the public, its appropriation and contestation, while the second operation—action— involves the transformation of the knowledge thus discussed into practical orientations and decisions, which can be taken by institutions or individuals.

Fassin, 2017, p. 6

To make a case for anthropologists of policy realising Fassin's (2013; 2017) call for a politicisation of ethnographic work, I shall adopt from Tate (2020) where she proposed two paths that can be considered: (1) anthropology of policy that emerges in dialogue and relationship with impacted communities, and (2) anthropology of policy focused on the ethnography and critique of powerful policy-making elites.

Starting with the first path—engaging in dialogue and relationships with impacted communities—much progress has been made through practices of decoloniality. A brilliant example of this is the ethnography on the rights of undocumented immigrants in the United States by Bejarano et al. (2019), in which they created an alternative method by conducting ethnographic work together with immigrant activists. This therefore enables local people to become subjects in the research process and leverage on this platform to produce knowledge that they can then use as instruments of social resistance, transformation, and liberation. This, in a way, is also reminiscent of Hale's (2007) case for an activist anthropology which "align[s] oneself with an organized group in a struggle for rights, redress, and empowerment and a commitment to produce knowledge in collaboration and dialogue with the members of that group" (p. 105).

Since Nader's (1969) appeal to 'study up', the second path—focusing on powerful policy-making elites—has gained significant traction amongst anthropologists looking to uncover the complex machinations of the modern state. This is especially the case for scholars from the Global North where Cabot (2019) suggested that "a more responsible way of dealing with problems of power and co-optation may be to focus not on border crossers but on police, border guards, bureaucrats, and humanitarian actors" (p. 271). Such an approach has been instrumental in understanding the pattern of disasters that occur across the Western hemisphere as shaped by the intersecting interests of powerful actors (Keen and Andersson, 2018).

While the two paths that Tate (2020) proposed made significant strides in public engagement, I find it crucial to add a third suggestion: the anthropology of policy that collaborates across different life-worlds. As Low and Merry (2010) highlighted, engagement is about transforming the way anthropologists do fieldwork, the work they do with other scholars, and with those they study. In this case, I add that policy is a potent tool for engagement because of its ability to bring together and connect multiple lived experiences of a shared reality. This is especially the case for transnational issues like environmental policy, an example being Haenn and Casagrande (2007) where they acted as cultural brokers who had to navigate various functions of policy-making including public advocacy, multidisciplinary research, and collaborations with environmental managers, natural resource exploiters, and government agencies. From this experience, both authors advocated for anthropologists to be active in policy-making work itself by helping policy experts and local people to find common ground in defining problems.

The ability of anthropologists of policy to collaborate across different life-worlds adds a new dimension of practice to the existing tools available for public engagement. While ethnography remains central as the means for knowledge production and methodological rigour, Cornwall (2018) made the case to look at anthropology as a mode of practice that can have real-world effects in the absence of textual production—what she called as 'acting anthropologically' through her own experience as a development anthropologist engaging between local communities and bureaucracy. Acting anthropologically is thus a critical engagement with culture and with power, leveraging on one to change the other. This is where she overlaps with scholars of deliberative democracy as mentioned in previous chapters where both see policy as spaces for critical interaction between public culture and institutional power in advancing social and political change (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007).

## Conclusion

I write this essay as a call for anthropologists to make policy 'public'. Yet, with democratic institutions under constant threat today, I also see the need to emphasise for urgency of action. On a few occasions throughout the essay, I have touched upon the technocratic turn of policymaking as a bellwether of how political processes have withdrawn from the public sphere. The blatant chasm created between a supposedly public-oriented tool of governance and the opacity of political discourse has rendered a severe trust deficit in the ideals of liberal democracy (Applebaum, 2020). This stark reminder of unfulfilled promises of utopia—and the lack of alternatives—left societies even more vulnerable to the advent of post-truth politics (Mishra, 2017). We are living in an age of polycrisis where rigorous methods of policymaking are used to justify maintaining the status quo, instead of implementing reforms for change, as a solution to multiplying shocks across societies (Tooze, 2022). If we put this in a historical narrative starting from Laswell's (1951) advocacy for a policy scientist of democracy, it becomes clear that the authority of policy is problematic not because of how it works, but because of how we as a collective get to decide on how it ought to work.

To pick from Dewey (1988), a true democracy is far from a set of institutional arrangements that exist outside of its people; it is an ongoing social project that requires constant public vigilance and engagement. This means puncturing the aura of authority and helping the public to realise the processes of political subjection, what Shore and Wright (2011) succinctly put together as producing a 'creative stutter'. Following that would be to translate this awareness of creative stutter into an agenda for collective action. This means recognising policy as a critical method to make change a possible reality and thus empowering the public to participate in its processes and create alternatives which are aligned with their shared values. The essay should be read with this eventual goal in mind.

This leaves one last question—why are anthropologists best suited for the above? To answer that, let us ponder the following note from Bangstad (2017):

Anthropology presents us with a set of methodological and conceptual instruments, and a potential set of normative commitments to the equal worth of humans across the divides of ethnicity, faith and beliefs, gender and sexual orientation, which makes anthropology more suited than most other disciplines to explore and to understand the troubled contemporary and interconnected world in which we happen to live. To speak about anthropology's potential contribution to understanding this world fraught with fractures and fragilities requires a public which has to be created and created anew over and over again".

Bangstad, 2017, pp. 20-21

Policy shows us that change can happen by reshaping our reality using the tools of our common world. In the words of the late David Graeber (2015), "the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently" (p. 89). Making policy 'public' thus represents the possibility of us—in that 'us' here refers to a diverse set of epistemic communities gathered as a collective—coming together in 'equal worth' and taking part to determine how our reality ought to be reshaped. Keeping this undertaking perpetual will be the task for anthropology ahead.

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# The Human-Horse Euthanasia Experience: Actions, Emotions, and Relationality during a Euthanasia Process

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982285](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982285)

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## Introduction

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During the summer of 2023, I carried out a short fieldwork in the *Residencia Equina La Corona* (*Equine Residence La Corona*): a place that works as a nursing house for retired horses, in Catalonia, Spain. While being embedded in different tasks with the workers of the place, I could observe how horses group themselves in herds and how people interact with them in relation to these social structures: when they take a horse out of its herd, he/she may behave anxiously (from a human point of view), but when returning him/her to the grouping it is possible to notice a relief in the horse. Even though workers deal with these changes of behaviour in relation to the herds in everyday circumstances, in this essay I approach a sort of unusual situation (a euthanasia) and how people and horses interact and perform actions together within the process of transition. Although I have not heard people of *La Corona* referring to this moment as a ritual, I will use concepts and ideas from Michael Houseman and François Berthomé (2010) about rituals to reflect on relationships in non-ordinary situations and paradoxical and patterned collective actions. I will also use the concept of *Sympoiesis* from Donna Haraway (2016), which refers to the creation of alliances between beings of different species, to highlight a specific form of human-horse relationship in the event.

## Beginning of the problem

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It was August 3rd at around 13:30. I was gathering excrement with the rake and the dustpan in the area of the oldest horses and the ones that need special care when suddenly I saw one of the owners of *La Corona* (I will call her 'the woman') and her daughter coming with their horse called Nescafé. They arrived close to a feeder (a squared and metallic structure to deposit hay and feed horses). I saw them from a long distance, and after around thirty minutes I approached them. I saw Nescafé laying down on the ground with a halter on the face, while the daughter grabbed the extreme of the rope. I asked what happened and the woman told me that Nescafé had a severe colic and, although the veterinarian has done as much as he can, he will not recover. So, they will sacrifice the horse. I felt goosebumps at that moment and could not avoid expressing my surprise. I looked around and paid attention to an element that I did not notice quite well (like if my gaze integrated something that I was ignoring): there were horses eating around the feeder.

Anthropologists Van Gennep and Turner propose the term *Liminal* to indicate phases or moments of ambiguity in rituals, in which the status, role, or relationship of individuals is about to change: this transformation is not yet realized but in the process. (Turner, 1974; Van Gennep, 1960) Considering that these authors developed these ideas thinking of specific traditional rituals, scholars in theatre and performance studies such as Diana Taylor (2005) and Richard Schechner (2011) propose the concept of *Liminality* (a wider term) to refer to situations of ambiguity and shifting of the state of things in diverse contemporary events. For example, likewise in the Eucharist believers participate in the transformation of the bread into the body of Christ and when eating it their souls will become cleaner, in some strikes protesters may demand a change in the political structure of their society through street performances. These are moments of shifts, and they are ambiguous because the expected transformation is not yet achieved: it is a betweenness, a threshold, a time/space in suspense. Schechner and Taylor refer to these situations as performances where participants perform repetitive actions, which become different from everyday activities and are embedded in the liminal context (Taylor, 2005; Schechner, 2011). This approach to liminality that considers other events (not specifically traditional rituals) as sort of *performances/rituals* may be suitable for the case of this essay.

## A device for the death

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Five horses were eating around the feeder. The woman told me that she and her daughter brought them to eat here because it is the herd that Nescafé is part of, and Nescafé may feel a bit calmer if they are close to him. The woman and her daughter were using their ethological understanding of the sensations that horses living in herds may have when they are with or without their groupings.

They applied it in favour of Nescafé by making an interspecies dramaturgical device: the feeder was full of hay, so horses kept eating and stayed concentrated together within the same place (instead of scattered all around). The woman, the daughter, and Nescafé were close to them. In this regard there were two groupings in the space: 1) horses focused on eating, and 2) people observing a sick horse on the floor, talking about him, and sometimes looking to the entrance in case the veterinarian arrives: The space was organized for the euthanasia.

The scholar Michael Houseman (2006) refers to rituals as special and paradoxical modes of interaction and action: 'a distinctive way of enacting relationships' (Houseman, 2006: 9). Returning to the idea of Performance/Ritual, it is pertinent to say that participants of the event perform actions in a non-ordinary context to generate a change in the state of the things. Houseman talks about actions that enact relationships, which implies that they provoke emotions, ideas, and behaviors of participants, and transform the ways in which they relate to each other. (Houseman, 2006) In his article *Relationality*, the author mentions that in rituals:

Non-human entities acquire the attributes of agency, becoming virtual subjects with whom a 'relationship' may be possible, precisely to the degree that the participants encounter with them is causally embedded in a network of interpersonal ties.

Houseman, 2006, p.3

This inclusion of non-human entities in relation to participants of a ritual may happen in different ways such as in religious contexts where animals represent gods or other ceremonies where animals are representations of people or shown as figurative images. For example, the classic works of Lévi-Strauss (1962) about Totemism where animals represent specific groups and communities, or the Balinese cockfight by Geertz where it seems that cocks are fighting but it is actually men. (Hartigan, 2021; Geertz, 1973) So, to not mention these entities in a symbolic or represented manner, and to engage deeply with the interspecies case that I address in this essay, I draw on the concept of Sympoiesis (which means making-together) by Donna Haraway (2016). This idea, which implies the alliance/collaboration/cooperation between different species, may be identified in creative practices such as in the arts, sciences, and other communitarian contexts; where humans and non-humans create entangled, affective, and responsible bonding: multispecies relationships (Haraway, 2016). In this case, I address this concept to approach the relationship human-horse as key in the event, and to see how the actions are related to these associations.

## The moment of the euthanasia

We saw a pickup coming from the entrance. They arrived: the other owner of *La Corona* (I will call him 'the man', who is also the woman's husband and the daughter's father) and the veterinarian got out of the vehicle. This last one prepared the 'medicine' at the back of the vehicle and the man waited for him. While holding an injection, the veterinarian approached the woman, the daughter, and Nescafé; and the man came behind him. The man asked the daughter to give him the rope (the extreme of the halter of Nescafé) that she was holding. At the moment of this encounter, I walked a bit far from them: I came closer to the pickup and watched them from a larger physical distance.

From my perspective, there was a pharmacological feature of this performance/ritual that gave special qualities to the actions: these qualities involve different ways in which people touch, approach and even talk to the horse (in comparison to daily situations that I witnessed in the field). The Greek term *Pharmakon*, which unifies the contradictory double meaning of cure and poison (at the same time), resonated within the paradoxical and patterned

behaviours: the veterinarian started by caressing Nescafé with one hand while grabbing the injection with the other. He alternated between touching and looking at Nescafé and preparing the position of his hand to insert the needle. The woman, the daughter, and the man were together in a standing position while the veterinarian, in his almost squat posture, started applying the poison to Nescafé's neck little by little. The effect came immediately: Nescafé's head fell with just a small portion of liquid, but the man held him with the rope and the halter. Nescafé raised his head and accommodated his body on the ground in such a way that his neck had a vertical position: he did not die at this point, he resisted the first portion of the dose.

While the veterinarian applied more medicine, the woman started saying words to him: '*Gracias, cariño. Gracias por todo, rey.*' ('Thank you, darling. Thank you for everything, King.') What are these new elements appearing? According to Houseman, 'Ritual discourse is used less to convey information than to accomplish certain acts.' (Houseman, 2006:2) It may imply that words in rituals, beyond communicating information or messages, they rather enact dispositions: and generate sensations and emotions, affecting participants of the event. Considering that many of the actions were performed to ensure the calm of Nescafé during the euthanasia, the speech of the woman did not communicate anything to the horse, but it was expressed to produce something in him. It appeared at a key moment: when Nescafé started falling (when he started to die). The veterinarian continued injecting his neck, making pauses, and continuing. Nescafé kept resisting by letting his head fall, which made him balance on his side and raise his legs but returning to try to keep his neck vertically. The woman continued speaking and the daughter started to clean the teardrops of her face with her t-shirt. The contradictory relationship between poisoning the horse and nurturing/supporting him is displayed throughout the sequence of actions, and the emotive expressions increase when Nescafé became weaker.

Berthomé and Houseman state: 'We should expect emotional expressions to emerge at key moments of ritual repositioning.' (Berthomé & Houseman, 2010:58) *Ritual repositioning*, is a term related to Turner's ideas of how social roles and identities shift during a liminal process (Turner, 1974). In the case of the euthanasia, Nescafé's state was progressively changing to a possible death, and the others around were continuously affected and responded to the horse in different ways. Drawing on Berthomé and Houseman's citation, it is possible to state that emotions have their time to appear within the sequence of the ritual: they are patterned and performed according to the moments of the event. It was visible in the way in which people added new actions and emotions in relation to how Nescafé was close to death. After a few minutes, Nescafé fell and did not rise anymore but remained immobile. I thought that he finally died, but people were still looking at him attentively. The veterinarian touched one of Nescafé's eyes and said that it was still moving. Then, he went to the pickup to grab another injection. At that moment I heard that the first one was to make him fall asleep.

While the veterinarian went and came back, people marked a short but clear moment of silence, in which the chewing of the horses around the feeder felt loud to me only at this point. The veterinarian approached Nescafé with the injection, and the woman, the man, and the daughter went down in a kind of squat position. They caressed Nescafé while talking to him and crying together. The veterinarian removed the injection and the three people remained touching Nescafé. Again, a short moment of silence: I heard the strong chewing of the horses and very weak mourning from the woman and the daughter. We waited a bit. Suspense. The man, the woman, and the daughter embraced briefly. At this point, Nescafé was already dead. I felt that at that moment I should approach and express my condolences, but I did not do it immediately. The man went away to get some tissues for the woman. I approached to hug her, and she smiled at me and said thank you: the euthanasia was over. Although afterwards, other things happened related to the corpse in a more ordinary manner (from my perspective), I need to stop the narration here and let the reader stay with this part.



## Final reflections on relationality

Through the patterned and paradoxical actions that people performed during euthanasia, it is possible to consider this moment as a ritual. However, it is not a traditional and cathartic ceremony like the ones that are usually conveyed in academic texts on ritual practices. (Turner, 1974; Van Gennep, 1960; Houseman, 2006; Berthomé & Houseman, 2010; David, 2009; Bell, 2021) Although in this situation people added emotions according to the moment that Nescafé was closer to death (a sort of a sequence towards a climax), they did not do it to achieve relief or liberation of their mental or emotional states. Even though they cried and their faces changed from the beginning to the end of the euthanasia, the purpose of the event was not a cathartic ritual (in the sense that Aristotle refers to the function of the Greek tragedy) because, instead of performing to alter emotions of human participants, their target was the peaceful state of Nescafé: a horse that needed to relax and which its only possible transformation was to stop living. The linkage between people and horses gives a form to the manners of performing the patterned and paradoxical actions that Houseman and Berthomé talk about. In this case, the sympoietic relationship (affective interspecies bonding), may complexify the concepts by approaching other possibilities of relationality.

## Conclusions

I selected the most relevant part of the event (that I considered) to convey in this short essay and briefly analyse the complexities of relationships in a non-ordinary context. Through approaches on relationality, emotions, and actions in ritual practices by Houseman and Berthomé, and by considering the interspecies linkages of this case, it has been possible to reflect on patterned and paradoxical behaviours of people that organize a peaceful death/goodbye to a horse. In this regard, the euthanasia of Nescafé may shed light on approaching relationships of care that go beyond affinities or identifications in terms of species. At this point, it may be convenient to make some questions for future research: In which ways do humans and non-humans create affective and responsible bonding? How can these relationships be studied by focusing on movements and actions that they perform in ordinary and non-ordinary situations? What theoretical and methodological tools may be appropriate to understand their interactions without treating them as simple functionalist matters but engaging effectively with them? In which other ways do humans and non-humans behave during death moments and/or help to die the others? What can we learn from these relationships? Multispecies perspectives may be key to complexifying the frames on relationality that are usually conveyed in theories on rituals, performance, and patterned behaviours. There are many things to reflect on, to understand, and to contribute with new questions.

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# Thoughts on Doing Multispecies Ethnography in Kenya's Maasailand

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982297](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982297)

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As anthropology tries to reach beyond the study of humans, researchers are expanding their field of attention to non-human species, including animals, plants, cyborgs, and earthly processes. But how does one *really* do multispecies research? I asked myself this question upon arriving in the field. Full of concepts and theoretical ideas, but lacking a methodological toolkit — or perhaps the experience — I ventured out to Kenya's savannah in search of an answer.

Preparations included re-reading a book I read in my undergrad to refresh my memory: Tim Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment* (2000). Ingold has conducted fieldwork amongst the Saami of north-eastern Finland and has written extensively about their relationship with reindeer. Interestingly, he extends social reasoning to reindeer. Unlike many social scientists, who he claims have little regard for animal behaviour, he concerns himself with animal sensibilities. Working with herders in Kenya on human-animal relations, I considered that Ingold's research with herders in Finland might offer some insights into conducting anthropology beyond the human.

It took a while before I started noticing the entanglements between all earthly beings in the savannah. I was too focused on my research aims and collecting the data I needed to go back home to begin writing my thesis. After a while though, I began to notice the playful monkeys using my tent as a trampoline, I noticed an irritated elephant glaring at safari vehicles as it crossed the road with its calves and saw hyenas patiently waiting for their turn once lions finished feasting. I also began to notice the rebellious behaviour of local community members, taking risks and going against conservancy rules. Humans and non-humans alike create a niche for themselves in the unforgiving savannah. Yet, as Ingold points out, niches are not fixed, predetermined positions, but emerge from ongoing practices and engagement of living beings within their environment. Sometimes, organisms might even challenge our understanding of the world by evolving to occupy different niches — what ecologists refer to as niche differentiation.

My research looks at herd(er)-lion dynamics. Drawing from the field of environmental anthropology and adopting a multispecies approach, I look at how people and wildlife shape each other and their environment. Particularly, I explore the strategies herders and lions have developed to live with each other in the savannah ecosystem. At times, lions prey on Maasai livestock, resulting in frustration and economic loss among herders. What are the reasons lions do so, and what strategies do Maasai livestock owners use to protect their livelihood? To gain some insight, I conduct ethological studies of lions with audio playback experiments.<sup>1</sup> A fundamental element of more-than-human anthropological work is recognizing animals as agents with social behaviours, able to make their own decisions about how to thrive in a given environment. The aim of these audio playback experiments is to explore lions' responses to anthropogenic sounds in hopes to better understand their behaviour around herd(er)s and in turn, inform conservation interventions aimed at reducing human-wildlife conflict. Surprisingly, it was not the dozen sets of playback experiments that taught me the most about lion behaviour. It was rather an unusual event that stood out of the ordinary.

One evening, while out patrolling for lions, we get a call from a nearby ranger that two prides have been spotted hunting buffalos. The two prides each manage to make a kill, capturing both a mother and its calf. We arrive on site as the sun is rapidly descending on the horizon. We spot several tourist vehicles in the distance and approach the scene impatiently. We see in our headlights the two prides, the Engiyoni and the Isiketa prides, each feeding on their respective carcasses, less than 200 meters apart from each other. The rangers and safari guides are both puzzled and full of excitement. Safari vehicles are circling the two prides, providing the tourists with a better view of the feast. Rangers and safari drivers are exchanging theories they have about the event. How can this be? How can two different prides hunt together? What will happen next? Will they fight? Have they hunted together deliberately?

<sup>1</sup> Playback experiments are a research technique used to study animal communication and behavior by playing recorded sounds or signals to animals and observing their responses. Playbacks are helpful for understanding the significance of signals in animal communication systems and can be used to investigate various behavioral dynamics.

Half an hour after watching the two prides feast on their respective catches, the Isiketa pride which was feeding on the calf, in one sudden movement, left their carcasses and moved along to join the Engiyoni pride which still had plenty of meat left to feed on. The merging of the two prides came as a surprise to researchers, rangers and safari drivers alike. They told me they had never witnessed such an event before; they were all stunned. I felt fortunate to witness it too. *How can this happen? It has never happened before.* One researcher for the Mara Predator Research Project told me that this event has given them a clearer picture of these lions. "It has challenged what we thought about lions. We know now how far the Engiyoni pride can go outside their territory, into Isiketa pride territory. It would be interesting to do DNA testing to see if they are related."

In a way, this unexpected event taught me more about lion behaviour than my carefully planned studies. Animals, like humans, can act in ways that are out of the ordinary, unusual, and sometimes even improvised. Playback studies remain a rigid way of analysing lion behaviour because they apply laboratory-like methodologies to an environment that we cannot control. As such, I began to wonder if adhering to my research protocol vehemently caused me to overlook the lion's other curious behaviours. So, how does one do anthropological research with the more-than-human? I argue that letting non-beings challenge how we think about them; to see them as agents creating their own narratives; and rewriting the stories we tell about them. But most importantly, as advocated by Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret (2016), we must allow animals to be actively interesting. By stunning a multitude of researchers and conservationists who have been following these lions for quite some time, they effectively challenged assumptions experts held about them.

Humans and other organisms engage in a continuous process of adaptation and improvisation. This unusual event was a reminder of the importance of understanding our relationship with the environment as dynamic and relational. As anthropologists, it is our work to consider ways in which humans and non-humans actively shape and transform their environment through everyday practices, rather than simply adapting to pre-existing ecological conditions. Doing anthropology beyond the human is to make other beings interesting and to "holding open the possibility that surprises are in store, that something interesting is about to happen" (Haraway 2015, 10). While I continued with my playback studies and adhered to my initial research protocol, I approached my studies with a renewed curiosity and spent a lot more time engaging with lions in a playful way — like playing a game of hide and seek with a shy lion who did not want to be observed... the lion won and we finally gave up. This event also questioned my positionality as an observer of the observed. I no longer saw myself as the expert, gazing at lions and waiting for them to offer me expected reactions. Instead, I began to see lions as collaborators; we think in attunement with each other and are co-creating knowledge through our regular interactions.

As Donna Haraway (2015) writes about Despret's work with ornithologists, like Amotz Zahavi, animals and scientists "do something, and they do it together. They become-with each other" (6). One can achieve this, not by doing research *on* animals but rather *with* them. It may require us to unlearn what we know about these non-human beings and to give them more scope to how we observe and understand animal knowledge.

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# Rhythms of Connection: A call for feeling in Anthropology

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Anthways, 2024 © Stephanie L. Ellison

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982318](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982318)

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## Introduction

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Movement, not pondering, brings new knowledge.

Bartineff, 1980

This article explores a ‘reworlding’ in anthropology through a lens of rhythm and embodied wisdom, advocating for a shift in academic practices that embrace the body’s role in acquiring, interpreting, and affecting knowledge. *Rhythm* is here defined as our innate, multi-modal way of perceiving and interpreting the sensory stimuli of the world around us into meaningful information, establishing connections and relationships. In tuning into an awareness of rhythms through embodied practices, this is a call for *doing in relationship with*, embracing a physical approach to our understanding of human culture—an approach radical in its simplicity of engaging the body to illuminate fundamental connections with ourselves, each other, and the more-than-human. Such an approach offers a fresh perspective into human relationships and suggests that anthropology can lead academic innovation by integrating more physical and sensory-engaged learning into its curricula, fostering self-discovery and purposeful exchange by turning attention to the wisdom of what the world has to tell us. (Ingold 2013:1).

Drawing on environmental ritual and dance fieldwork in Southern England, I illustrate how greater sensory awareness and embodied presence through processes such as ‘grounding’ and ‘staying open’ offer opportunities for meaningful connections in the field and other settings. With current research exploring embodiment frameworks for learning based on this concept of rhythm, the goal is to promote new pathways to knowledge, enhancing collaboration and communication within academia and beyond. Such practices, beneficial for researchers at all institutional levels, hasten a radical embrace of interdisciplinary approaches to meet a rapidly changing world with greater empathy and resilience, where feeling—not emotions per se but sensorial feeling—and the rhythmic patterns and narratives those sensory perceptions produce are as integral to anthropological understanding as traditional methods of direct observation and analytic discourse. As Donna Haraway says, “Reworlding requires the ability to engage with the world through sensory and material practices,” directly highlighting this need for an embodied approach (Donna Haraway: Storytelling for Earthly Survival, 2016) where in the deepest of truths “Knowledge ‘is *always* an engaged material practice and never a disembodied set of ideas” (Haraway 2004b: 199–200, Haraway’s emphasis).

## Understanding Rhythm

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When asking for a definition of ‘rhythm’, the response is usually related to music and tempo, heard with our ears. Music powerfully encapsulates our understanding of rhythm, but there is much more to it beyond listening. In a recent lecture, Susan Magsamen of the John Hopkins Mind Arts Lab notes that humans possess way more than just five senses, closer to fifty (Magsamen, 2024). Music is not just an auditory experience but is multi-modal and includes, at the very least, our vestibular and tactile senses (Judge, 2019: 89). In short, we feel *rhythm*. Expanding beyond its musical relationship, one might begin to recognise rhythms across different forms, feeling them through various senses (Cheyne, 2019), from the strokes and colour in Van Gogh’s paintings to the rhythms of the smells and feels of an autumnal walk.

It is understood that humans process about 11 million pieces of sensory information per second while consciously only processing 40 to 50 bits per second (William, 2006).

Considering this, rhythm could be associated with the perceived objective patterns (Cheyne, 2019: 265) of information consciously collected through our senses. In this way, rhythmic patterning may allow us to find meaning in the most pertinent, conscious information, recognising narratives, relationships, and affordances for existence.

Rhythm is our heartbeat, our breath, our friend's walk from far away, how we sleep, the languages that we speak, how we interact with co-workers and loved ones, the cities that we come from and the places we live now, our roads and signs, our meals, in the rising and setting of the sun, our seasons, topographies, local flora and fauna, our governments, our art, and the stories that we tell. Consider that a baby often learns to bounce and sync to musical rhythms or with others before they can walk, and current research points to the critical engagement with rhythm even earlier, in preterm babies and while in the womb (Provasi et al., 2021). Everything is rhythm, and connecting with such patterns appears critical for survival. Rhythmic patterns underlie everything and shape the perceptions of human relationships within ourselves, each other, and the greater world.

To further highlight rhythm's depths in human culture, American philosopher Susan Langer defines *rhythm* not as binary, interval beats expressed in a two-dimensional sine wave, but as concatenations or groupings of elements (Langer, 1967:323). "The main source of all functional continuity must have been the establishment of rhythms. Rhythmic concatenation is what really holds an organism together from moment to moment" (1967:323). Langer also notes that rhythms are made up of endless groupings of both smaller and larger rhythms. (1967: 323) For example, a single person possesses countless small rhythms, including breath, heartbeat, and blood flow, and larger rhythms of a family, community, city, and culture. Langer also notes that although rhythmic repetition is perceived, it is not exact in its moment-to-moment replication (323). Like two snowflakes, a rhythmic pattern might contain no points of exact repetition; however, perceiving greater patterning might be necessary for our life on Earth. Rhythm is more dimensional, complicated, and pervasive than we might initially think, and even more difficult to define (Tenzer, 2019: 213).

## Rhythmic attention as a method

Thus far, rhythm is understood as perceived patterns derived from groupings of sensory stimuli that foster human relationships and affordances. This brief conceptualisation could extend broadly within anthropology, offering multiple avenues for inquiries. Henri Lefebvre, in his 'Rhythmanalysis,' posited rhythm as a method for understanding the patterns that characterise the flows of time and spaces we inhabit. Similarly, Michael Tenzer suggests an anthropological approach to human interactions and relations through rhythm that "considers human rhythmic production in its interaction with social order, the environment, natural order, and the capacities of the body and consciousness to synchronise and unite people through rhythm" (Tenzer, 2019: 201). Additionally, rhythms might be observed in the embodied features of mimetic ritual processes, such as movements, gestures, and postures, along with utterances like sentences, words, and sounds (Bell, 2021: 396).

Despite various applications, this article focuses on tuning the rhythmic attention of the researcher through embodiment. In parallel, Tim Ingold emphasises that observation requires more than just looking; it involves an attention formed through both 'exposure and attunement' that joins *with* subjects in mutual exchange, guiding each other's attention in a practice he describes as one of 'correspondence and care' (Ingold, 2023).

He argues that acquiring wisdom entails turning towards the world itself to attend to and learn what it has to teach us rather than merely acquiring knowledge (2023). Building on Ingold's ideas, this essay expands into a few practical ways by which anthropologists can deepen their embodied awareness, enriching their perceptual engagement *in relationship with*.

Using rhythm as a structural lens in anthropology foregrounds the body and the senses as the foundational elements of inquiry. If rhythms encompass all human activities, then an embodied inquiry must be a starting point for the researcher. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone states, "The body is not often recognised as being conceptually alive, as already being attuned in fundamental and essential ways to the world and of its own corporeal-kinetic realities" (Johnstone, Corporeal Turn, 2009: 224-225). Johnstone, too, underscores a need for rewording anthropology, advising that "we would do well to pay attention to movement and to probe nature's dynamic strategies through experiential and experimental methodologies" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009: 334).

We all have inherent capacities for being ourselves in our bodies. However, training one's instrument for the situation at hand is critical. Nicolai Bernstein called this "tuning to the emergent task", and notes 'the essence of dexterity lies not in bodily movements themselves but in the *'tuning of the movements to an emergent task'*, whose surrounding conditions are never precisely the same from one moment to the next (Bernstein 1996: 23, original emphasis). For researchers, whose bodies are the tool of relations in the field, training and exploring the body and sensory awareness opens possibilities for new knowledge, flexibility, resilience, and empathy in their work. Training a rhythmic perspective in anthropology facilitates a dynamic exploration of how the researcher's embodied wisdom attunes to other humans, their environments, and broader systems with which they interact and co-evolve.

The following sections provide a glimpse into this methodology through personal rhythms, embodiment practices, and exchanges during fieldwork. Beyond this, there is a brief consideration of embodiment challenges in discourse. It is worth noting that sensory and embodiment practices are deceptively simple to state but profound in practice.

## My Rhythms

When you change the body of somebody, the concrete body of somebody, you change his or her way of perceiving the space.

McHose, 2003, p.34

Hubert Godard's quote encapsulates my long-held fascination with how bodily experiences establish and shift perceptions, physically changing us — a phenomenon I have witnessed and experienced firsthand. As a Pilates and movement teacher for decades, I have worked with people to move more efficiently and rehabilitate injuries. Pain is the sensation that most tunes us into our interoceptive sense — the internal feeling world. As with any skill, after years of practice, I could perceive structural patterns and stories in the body — a pain in the left shoulder might be related to an injury in the right knee, or a person's neck or shoulder tension could be more directly linked to an accident from twenty ago than to their desk posture today. Bodies are whole, complex, and fluid, with layers of possibilities. I cannot 'fix' someone's body, but I can perceive certain rhythms, and together, we can collaborate on reorganising their patterns of space and movement. The question becomes one of *how* and is unique to each person and situation.

Sometimes it helps to change a story. For example, a client might note one leg as their 'weaker leg'; however, I might suggest reconceptualising that leg as 'the support leg', providing essential stability needed to perform expressions with the other leg. Subtle narrative shifts like this can change one's relationship with their body, opening opportunities to explore new rhythms of being in the world.

Another way of affecting change is by accessing a sense of imagination and sensory memory. For example, imagine wearing a headband with 15 giant, silver helium balloons tied to it. Take a moment to feel that sensation. Gently move your head so the balloons shift. What do you notice in your posture, neck, or someplace else? By using your sense of imagination, sensory memories, and interoception, changes in space occur both inside and outside the body, experienced by you and perceived by others. There are rhythms to your space and movement.

Another means for changing embodied patterns is by exploring new rhythms of doing. The musician and educator Heinrich Jacoby once made a group of his students spend time exploring "hand and arm-like" things they might do with their feet – drawing, opening doors, and picking up things (Jacoby, 2018: 356), finding new possibilities of support from the lower body and the ground. (2018). As Jacoby put it, "Only when you try things out for yourself do you acquire some idea of what is possible for all of us" (2018: 338).

Dance and movement scholars have long considered the connection between human movement and our engagement with the world. Andrea Olsen articulates this well: "Bodies are part of Earth. Humans co-evolved with this planet, and our perceptual and movement systems are embedded within every landscape and cityscape we inhabit. Orientation to weight and to space informs inner and outer movement. As dancers, we don't create movement; we participate in a dynamic, moving universe" (Olsen, 2014: 2). Echoing this sentiment, Kimmerer La Mothe emphasizes the inherent impulse that "Humans are nothing more or less than an impulse to connect," and that our movements are not just actions but are responses that create and become patterns of sensing and responding. These patterns relate us to our environment in human-sustaining ways, educating our senses to possibilities and ranges of perception (La Mothe, 2015). She elaborates, "If the act of sensing and responding is first and foremost a process of creating and becoming movement patterns, then how humans dance—the patterns of movement they rehearse—educates their senses to particular possibilities and ranges of perception" (La Mothe, 2018: 131).

In preparing to enter the field, I made time for new movement practices, like taking tai chi and occasionally dancing with my dance anthropology colleagues. In tuning my body and its movements, I attempted to shift my rhythms, practising more presence and flexibility in the moment. Collaborating with the embodied wisdom of others in my work is only possible by first staying grounded in my own embodied experience and then staying open and curious about others, with empathy and not knowing. These also happen to be essential qualities for an anthropologist in the field.

## Rhythms with others

By offering these ceremonial practices, it helps those that come along feel into it. And be enlivened and lifted back into the feeling of that oneness and that unity, and that's very helpful and very healing...most humans don't feel they only think they feel. I'm saying this because you're so interested in the body. And so that's really relevant. So, we only think we're feeling something. Are we really feeling it, really? If we were really feeling, we wouldn't have allowed what's happened to the planet to happen. We couldn't bear it because we'd be feeling her (Julia, 6.20.22 interview).

This conversation with Julia stays with me. We met during my master's fieldwork exploring ritual movement and dance practices in relationship with local water resources in Southern England. Julia was part of an activist community, Friends of The River Medway (FORMed), an interdisciplinary group of lawyers, activists, environmentalists, artists, and spiritual leaders who "unite practical and legal action with the sacred" to "create projects that serve the River, her inhabitants, and their local community" (Friends of the River Medway, n.d.). Julia is an artist, a Water Shaman (she notes, lacking a better term) and a Spiritual Practitioner from a long line of women. In 2021, FORMed hosted a community May Day celebration and water ceremony, where a Water Goddess, sculpted from local Wealden clay and dressed in flowers blessed with participants' intentions, was gifted to the Waters of the Shalebrook, which flow into the Medway River. Julia, with another artist, sculpted the Water Goddess, and Julia facilitated the ritual and May Day festivities. What follows are a few rhythms of the places and people, specifically through processes of grounding in my own embodied awareness and staying open to others and the environment. By highlighting these two spatially embodied processes within sensory experience, I aim to do two things. First, these moments express embodiment practices and rhythms as applied by this researcher. Second, to turn attention to Julia's call for more feeling in our relationship with the earth. I call upon moments from May Day, other water rituals, and community efforts to honour their local water resources, rivers, and springs, reviving a culture of stewardship and care. I share their knowledge through my experiences, offering cues for how researchers can alternatively tune into the rhythmic patterns of connections.

## Grounding

A grounding process can unfold on many levels. It can be personal, like a first cup of coffee in the morning or a walk between meetings. Somatic movement practices, such as contact improvisation and Authentic Movement (1) often start with a process of grounding or orientation — arriving to meet yourself where you are right now. Authentic movement practitioner Andrea Olsen notes, "If we do not take time to give our body-level intelligence the support it needs for orientation, we waste time in distraction. Can you feel your feet? Is your spine relaxed and free? Is your breathing calm and deep? This three-step sequence helps create the conditions in your nervous system for clear thinking and communicating" (Olsen 2022: 31).

When I first met Julia in person the day before FORMed's May Day celebration and water ceremony, we exchanged hellos, and she immediately had me orient to the landscape, requesting that I go off alone and have "a sit" and "tune in" to the space. I found a patio chair between a house and the stream and sat alone. It was awkward. I travelled far to meet these people, and they were working, and here I was sitting by myself. But I quickly realised I was not alone; my senses began to notice the place. I was here to meet the landscape and water as much as the people. You can feel this unfolding of noticing in my fieldnotes as I sat there:

"There are mowed grass fields, wildflower meadows, and wooded spaces with paths. The Maypole is set up in a wide-open space where the grass is mowed. Amongst all the spaces, a long and gentle brook, The Shalebrook, flows across the length of the property, with several Asian-style garden bridges traversing the brook where one can cross over to the other side of the property. All the plants seem to be in bloom. A dazzling array of colours and shapes—daffodils, bluebells, dandelions, and violets. The dappled sunlight through the trees scatters little beams of light around the water and the flowering wild garlic, highlighting the buzzing bees and other insects. Birdsongs peppered the air, and a few workers are quietly whistling or humming while they work.



The space is peaceful beyond words, feeling like the most perfect Midwestern Day. The spring days of home that I miss. I suddenly feel a longing for childhood. It's completely enchanting." (Fieldnotes, 31.04.22)

Grounding includes orienting oneself to a sense of safety and support and knowing one's physical location in space and gravity. From there, connecting with others and to an environment flows easier.

## Staying open

This grounding interaction was an anchor from which to go out into the field, expanding into a relationship with community members and the environment. When not talking to others or attending events, I actively tried to cultivate a personal relationship with the landscape. Taking in the shape of the ground and plants, the animals, and the urban layout and architecture. I walked almost everywhere — to local springs, destinations recommended through local interactions, or just wandering around town, exploring the sensation of the ground rising to meet my feet and enjoying the process of tuning my awareness. If possible, no earbuds, phone maps, or tech distractions, attempting to avoid the focused, narrow gaze of staring at my phone, creating eye tension and, generally, a certain ambivalence to the greater world. While walking, I kept my head lifted, practising a soft peripheral gaze, taking in as much space as possible (Bond 2018). My other senses and movements tended to follow. I would experience an opening of muscles at the base of my skull, a refreshing feeling after time spent at the computer.

Wandering and getting a little lost, albeit safely, helped to create a heightened awareness of others and the environment, a sense of wonder of the place, and a curiosity for new rhythms. In this way, it often leads to unexpected opportunities. For example, in the middle of Ashdown Forest, I met Katharine, an Eurythmy teacher who uses the movement practice as a physical therapy modality. Our random encounter led to an evening of dance performance at Emerson College, followed by tea and an impromptu movement session, where Katharine taught me a water choreography she had workshoped for FORMed.

"I went for a walk and decided to try and get lost in the woods. It was 6 pm. The ground is full of mounds and hills with round centre holes. Human activity happened here, but I'm not sure what. I get a magnetic, pressurised sensation in these woods, like the air before a thunderstorm. I was dismayed at not seeing wildlife other than birds and the errant squirrel. But suddenly I heard a noise. I stopped, and there in front of me were two young deer! They quickly trotted away. Soon after, I heard more rustling, but this time it was a medium-sized brown dog. Soon came the dog's owner walking behind him. As she passed, we said 'hi' and I commented, 'Your dog certainly knows where he's going.' She stopped and turned to me and said, 'It's funny, I never see anyone in this wood. And you're American?' We started talking, and it turns out she is from California and teaching the Eurythmy teacher training workshop at Emerson College. I told her about my studies. As it happened, she said, there was an Eurythmy performance at Emerson College that very evening at 7:30 pm and would I like to go with her? She would give me a lift. Of course, I said yes! Her name is Katherine" (Fieldnotes, 4 August 2021).

Perhaps surprisingly, many such encounters took place, which I attribute to staying open. Staying open naturally exists in a sense of wonder, curiosity and not-knowing. This is where new rhythmic connections are usually made, conversations happen, and new patterns are perceived, resonate, and move in sync. An experience with Michael, another interlocutor, exemplifies rhythmic resonance:

If there was anyone who metaphorically embodied the properties of water, it was Michael. He is one who goes with the flow. Adaptable, shaped by all he encounters, but nevertheless continues onward, driven by gravity or flow or purpose. His base rhythm throughout our day together is a steady and regular pulse of walking, talking, and picking up trash with a trash picker. We went along like this, talking for some time, and then there'd be a rest. A stop. A piece of trash, other people who crossed our path, or a particular destination. And then it would be back to the regular beat. (Field notes, 8 August 2022)

On this day of hiking around the border between East and West Sussex, I noted not only my interactions with Michael but also my sensory experiences and our mutual exchange of 'correspondence and care' with the places we visited.

On one occasion, we hiked to a relatively hidden iron spring. I was overcome by the deep green smell of the plants, the mysterious flower decorations with which someone had 'dressed' the spring, and even the iron taste of the rust-red water. Before leaving, Michael stuck a leaf in the place where the water flowed outward from the well, enhancing the sounds. He looked up at me and smiled with bright eyes, "So it's basically alive! Look at this! I just think it's amazing! I can hear the sound now! It's kind of like a 'thank you'." (Field notes, 8 August 2022)

These resonant experiences were enchanting and memorable, often instilling a sense of vitality and joy. I navigated short fieldwork by grounding in my rhythms and staying open to observing them in relationships with others and the more-than-human. In doing so, I honed my skills in the 'art of noticing, something that anthropologists should do best (Tsing, 2017). As a result, I received many 'Aha! experiences'—moments of resonance in collaboration with others and the land that allowed me to glimpse the wisdom and relationship of the community and its Waters.

## Embodied Discourse

Until the foundational kinetic dimension of human life (in fact all life) is acknowledged, there is no point of entry for nonlinguistic corporeal concepts in analyses of 'embodied image schema'.

Sheets-Johnstone 2009: 225

Maxine Sheets Johnstone highlights the challenge of prioritising the nonlinguistic, corporeal dimensions of human experience in anthropological discourse, dimensions that are not pre-conceptual but are already concept-laden and essential for a comprehensive understanding of cultural and social interactions (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009: 222). She notes that effectively communicating bodily experiences remains a significant challenge (2009). Perhaps in parallel, Heinrich Jacoby addresses this issue from a pedagogical perspective by observing that the more we rely on the cognitive "knowledge" of what to do, the less present we are in our bodies, often becoming disassociated from the vibrant, lived context of our actions (Jacoby, 2018: 356).

Some approaches move towards the body in discourse. Thomas Csordas' method of embodiment in anthropological inquiry remains foundational, focusing on analysing the cultural patterning of bodily experience and the intersubjective constitution of meaning through that experience (Csordas, 1993). For example, during an interview with FORMed founder Ellen, we discussed the sensations she experiences during ritual connections with the water and land. Ellen described "energy running through my body or even like chills. But I have learned to discern the different types of chills" (Ellen, 2 August 2022, interview). Furthering Csordas' ideas, Clare Petitmengin's micro-phenomenology offers

a form of explicitation interview that delves deeply into the fine details of experience and sensory memories (Petitmengin, 2016), such that one might conduct an hour-long interview on the experience of taking a sip of tea. In the field, I experimented with a survey based on Alfred Korzybski's general semantics to elicit sensory language from participants, attempting to help them articulate bodily sensations and rhythms in connection with their movements and experiences. This survey was based on Korzybski's idea that individuals experience the world through a blend of sensory capabilities, past experiences, and conditioning, highlighting that life is initially processed on a physiological-neurological level before being translated into verbal expression (General Semantics, n.d.).

Like the body, rhythm, too, is experienced in process activities, exemplifying qualities of ongoingness, emergence, movement, growth, and learning (Hasty, 2019: 234). This persistent dichotomy between our cognitive attempts to 'fix' and the inherent fluidity of rhythm and bodily experience underscores the critical need for a paradigm shift to integrate more dynamic aspects into educational practices. By drawing the body itself forward and allowing discourse to flow from there, we might begin to bring academia to the body. Rhythm as a foundational structure can facilitate a starting point with which to situate new learning frameworks, enhancing the depth and relevance of anthropological practices and understanding of our own cultural knowledge-making in *relation with*.

## Reworlding anthropology through the thing itself

A pedagogy of embodiment through rhythm offers a transformative approach for the researcher to engage with kinetic realities in exploratory, playful ways while facilitating an attuning to our bodies and the bodies of others within anthropological research and education. "The growth of human knowledge, the contribution that each generation makes to the next is not an accumulated stock of representations but an education of attention" (Ingold, 2001: 114) that arise within processes of development (2001).

The call for more embodiment in *relationships* appears to arise not only in anthropology but also in other societal pockets, illustrated broadly in a conversation with FORMed founder Ellen, who mentions the importance of using physical experience in the ritual 'doing' within community ceremonies.

"The most difficult thing in my experience about leading a ceremony is dropping people from their heads, their minds, into their bodies so that they actually have those sensory experiences. So, things like drumming, or using rattles or singing, or dancing, or praying. You know, meditation can be good, but it sometimes gets so people get too distracted. I think more physical things, where someone's actually doing something—making something with their hands, you know that kind of thing. It's a way of dropping people in and then they can actually ground in their body and then they can actually connect and have an experience" (Ellen, 2 August 2022, interview).

Ellen's words harken to a sense of grounding, moving our attention back into the body, and from there, being able to move outward in relationship with, in this case, the environment. This ritual connection is also a process of tuning awareness through physical experience through a conduit of curiosity and not-knowing.

I have often considered how rhythm and embodiment tuning could unfold in institutional settings to enhance creative pathways to knowledge, social cohesion and communication flow. In advocating for more embodiment courses in tuning the body, I began a research project in the summer of 2024, offering a series of public workshops. The workshops, combining lessons from fieldwork with my movement background, offered simple movement exercises supported by

interdisciplinary research, encouraging participants to explore grounding, staying open, and tuning themselves into their sensory perceptions and body experiences in relationship with. The activities were designed to be approachable, encouraging even sceptical participants to engage and gently reigniting a playful sense of curiosity. Reflecting on FORMed's May Day event, Julia, too, stressed the importance of the embodied celebratory experience of the May Day water ceremony: "Often in these times we're told to be positive, but it's only when you have this embodied experience with other people and in a special activity or ritual or moments such as this where you feel that warmth and you feel that joy. I think that can be transformative" (Julia, 20 June 2022). By the end of my first workshop, many participants expressed a willingness to be more playful and open, with a renewed sense of wonder for their physical experience, not to mention that new community connections were formed.

The integration of embodied pedagogy in exploring rhythmic connection for researchers represents a significant shift — a reworlding of anthropology — towards a more engaged, empathetic, and holistic discipline. Ingold agrees "to grow in knowledge of the world is at the same time to grow in the knowledge of one's own self" (Ingold 2018). By emphasising the importance of the body and sensory attunement, we reframe wisdom in academia, better understanding ourselves, communities, spaces and environments. This approach does not merely add a layer to anthropological research; it fundamentally transforms the disciplinary practices, encouraging a richer, more connected form of study that resonates with the complex, dynamic rhythms of life on Earth.

## Statement of Ethics

All people interviewed in this article have given their consent for this researcher to use our interactions and interviews and signed a consent form. The Norwegian University of Science and Technology was the institution responsible for this Master's project. Choreomundus is an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD). It investigates dance and other movement systems (ritual practices, martial arts, games and physical theatre) as Intangible Cultural Heritage within the broader contexts of Ethnochoreology, the Anthropology of Dance, Dance Studies, and Heritage Studies. The program is offered by a consortium of four universities internationally recognized for their leadership in the development of innovative curricula for the analysis of dance and other movement practices: University of Clermont Auvergne (UCA, coordinator), Clermont-Ferrand, France; Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway; University of Szeged (SZTE), Hungary; University of Roehampton, London (RU), United Kingdom. Participants from privately funded public workshops in 2024 gave verbal consent and signed a form to use our interactions in research.

## Endnotes

(1). Contact Improvisation originated in 1972 by Steve Paxton, is a partner dance based on the principles of touch, momentum, shared weight and a point of contact (Zemelman, n.d.). Mary Starks Whitehouse's Authentic Movement, also began in the 1970s, incorporates self-directed movement promoting wellbeing while exploring dynamics between a mover and a witness (Olsen, 2022).

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# Violation of Child Rights through Pashtun Tribals' Socialization in Colonial and Post-Colonial Times

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982328](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982328)

## Abstract

This study focuses on the tribal socialization of children as a violation of their rights in Pashtun tribal society. An ethnographic approach was adopted to explore tribal socialization. The data was collected in six months from the parents and grandparents in the ethnographic field through in-depth interviews to learn about the socio-cultural and political aspects of tribal socialization. The qualitative data were analyzed in light of different discourses. It reveals that Pashtun's Indigenous community has a different understanding of male and female children's socialization. Colonial and post-colonial history, family, and kinship groups have significantly influenced the socialization of children in Pashtun tribal society. Male children socialize violently to survive in Pashtun tribal society in the absence of state institutions. It is revealed that the British in colonial and Pakistan in the post-colonial period exploited their resources but deliberately did not curtail structural violence in Pashtun Tribal society. Family inculcates masculine traits and reinforces patriarchy while keeping in view their experience in Pashtun society. At the indigenous level, male children prepare to protect their family, clan, or sub-tribe from violence or aggression of other fellow Pashtun which violate their rights.

**Keywords:** Tribal Socialization; Cultural Discourses; Violence; Family Responsibilities; State; Child Rights

## Introduction

Family is the basic and primary agent of socialization. It plays an important role in child rearing, caring for, and socializing children in light of prevailing cultural norms and social structure which might be contrary to the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC). In Pashtun tribal society, children are exposed to the outer world through family. Parents prepare them for future roles in light of their history, experiences, and culture without keeping in view their basic rights in Pashtun tribal society. Pashtun tribal cultural norms and values might be contrary to the basic rights of children in certain cases. The Pashtun tribal cultural norms and values significantly influenced the process of socialization, and cultural norms and values influence the children's socialization more visibly in the weak states<sup>1</sup> compared to strong states (Waltz, 2014).

The British in colonial times from 1849 to 1947 adopted different administrative policies in the Pashtun tribal region and labelled the Pashtun tribal people uncivilized and wild. The British forces were ruthless when there was a threat to their interests, but were not taking interest in the social affairs of Pashtuns. Pakistan also adopted the same policies and reinforced the stereotypical understanding of the British about the Pashtun tribal people. Historically, the state institutions had not been extended to this region which increased their dependency on their family and social organizations. The government institutions do not interfere in their family matters or their personal family disputes. Pashtun is dependent on the family institute and the family protects them from outside aggression. Hence, the family as an institution takes the responsibility of the state and performs the socio-economic, political, and security functions in Pashtun tribal society (Khan, & Shah, 2021; Kakar, 2004; Khan, 2022).

Tribal socialization inculcates masculine traits to their children. They aim that masculine and strong children can protect them and their families from the aggression of other fellow Pashtun. The vacuum created by the British in colonial (1849 to 1947) and post-colonial times (1947 to date) was filled by the family in Pashtun society.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of state institutions, Pashtun tribal people have expectations from the family. A family tries to impart socialization according to an expectation of society (Absolon, 2022; Sanauddin, 2015). It is the responsibility of the family to take revenge through the family rather than the state. Based on historical experiences, the people do not trust the state's role in resolving their family disputes through peaceful or violent means (Chang, Pengtao, and Xiyao, 2022; Lane, 2005). This article explores the causal factors of violent children's socialization in Pashtun tribal society. In addition, this study explores the tribal socialization of male and female children and why Pashtun tribal people socialize children without keeping in view their global rights.

## Theoretical Framework

Keeping in view the complex nature of the tribal process of children's socialization an eclectic approach was adopted to investigate its different cultural and structural aspects. The main research question of this essay is how the tribal mechanism of a child's socialization affects their rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (CRC, 1989) provides a theoretical framework for this research essay. According to CRC, children should be protected from all forms of physical and mental violence, and gender discrimination. I believe that tribal socialization violates the rights of the children as I will detail in the following. Moreover, the state-society interaction model describes the relationship between state and society (Sellers, 2011). It is argued that society is not a monolithic organization but a mélange of social organizations such as family clans and tribes. State and society are always competing to subdue each other. The state offers incentives such

<sup>1</sup> In this study, the weak state society refers to those societies in which states lost control over the legitimate use of violence to provide security and protection to their citizens from outside aggression. In other words, states have less control to maintain law and order.

<sup>2</sup> In this study, Pakhtuns society refers to the recently merged districts (previously known as Federal Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the province of Pakistan.

as security, prosperity, and status, or threatens with sanctions such as violence to make people adhere to a particular type of state and society. When a state does not fulfil the expectations of the people then society resists conferring authority. In a weak state, the authority lies with the social organization, particularly with the family to maintain law and order (Migdal, 1988). The strong normative order compels the family to violently socialize their children. This theory provides theoretical insight to this study because the family socializes children in ways which are locally acceptable to the family. The state's failure to protect the Pashtun tribal people during inter-family or intra-family disputes reinforces violent socialization.

## Methodology

This study follows the methodological rules and technicality required to ensure reliability and validity. Keeping in view the nature of this research and expected data, the qualitative paradigm was adopted for the completion of this study. The purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from the parents whose children fall into the age category of 5 to 18 and also from their grandfathers. Through ethnographic research design, the primary data was also collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. I conducted six months of fieldwork and collected data from the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (previously called Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)). I conducted 50 in-depth interviews with parents whose children fall into the age category of 5 to 18 years, in an effort to understand why children are exposed to violence through tribal socialization. The data was also collected from the elders of the Pashtun tribal people to understand the cultural and structural aspects of tribal socialization. Themes are analyzed in the light of primary data and theoretical framework to link them with the broader literature on the issue at hand.

## Theorizing Tribal Socialization of Children in Pashtun Society

The socialization of children is embedded in local culture and traditions across tribal and traditional societies (Hogan and Liddell, 2023). Socialization is a complex life-learning process and history, culture, and political structure have a significant influence on it (Fung, 2006). Family and state both are the basic agents of socialization. However, developed states also share the responsibility of the socialization of children with family (Wendt, and Barnett, 1993). The state also keeps a check on family institutions to socialize their children and does not permit corporal punishment which violates the rights of children. According to the CRC, it is the prime responsibility of states to protect the rights of children. However, states may not take an interest in interfering in family affairs in tribal societies and allow families to socialize children according to their local cultural values and traditions. States only protect their vested interest in tribal regions. Rather control violence until and unless it is not a threat to their interest.

Pashtun as a tribal ethnic group depends on family institutions for their needs and resources (as discussed above). Historically, in colonial post-colonial periods, both British and Pakistan took little interest in their family affairs or protect them from the violence of fellow Pashtun. The British in the colonial era and Pakistan in the post-colonial exploited their natural resources and manipulated culture in ways that suited their interest. The British regime and also Pakistan were/are not interested in evolving their socio-cultural institutions or positively utilising state authority. Pashtuns have a fear of hunger and threats from outsiders and also from fellow Pashtuns; therefore, they make their family ties stronger. Families act as a state for their members and mothers feel proud of their sons who possess masculine traits in Pashtun tribal society. Socialization of children in Pashtun society not only imposes masculinity over the male children but also intersects women's marginality in Pashtun tribal society (Stevenson, 2019; Jamal, 2014). For instance, masculinity and

patriarchy further increase the gender gap that intersects women's marginality.

In Pashtun tribal society, the family institution has a monopoly over the use of violence if it is not against the state. Pashtun in family disputes attack on each other and these disputes cannot affect the interest of the British in the colonial era. The British stigmatized them as wild people based on their family disputes. British in this way tried to legitimise their undemocratic and draconian colonial laws in this region. The presence of these states reinforces tribal socialization in which children are more exposed to violence as compared to strong democratic states (Cole, Tamang, and Shrestha, 2006). Cultural norms, violent discipline, exposure to violence, and violent communication collectively influence the tribal socialization of children in Pashtun society. This violent familial socialization involves harsh discipline based on Pashtun culture and parents' "failure to recognize violence as deviant behavior. Harsh discipline based on Pashtun is violation of CRC (Shah, Ullah, & Khan, 2022). This is not only parents' failure to recognize violent behavior as deviant behavior of children but it was also the failure of both British in colonial and Pakistan failures in the post-colonial period to reduce the burden on the family in Pashtun tribal society (Kakar, & Shah, 2023). Violent socialization is reinforced by state policies in this region and parents in Pashtun tribal society do not recognize violent socialization as a violation of children's rights. It is culturally recourse and in line with the tribal norms.

Cultural norms are considered the collective property of a group or society. Cultural norms define, and regulate the behavior of the people and maintain social order in Pashtun tribal society in the absence of state institutions (Rzehak, 2011). Pashtun tribal people define differently the phenomena of violence, deviance, and conformity. In certain cases, it is contrary to the discourse of child rights. For example, corporal punishment is culturally acceptable in Pashtun tribal society but it is a violation of CRC (Hussain, Naz, Khan, Daraz, Khan, 2015). Corporal punishment and violent communication are culturally acceptable and in line with the cultural norms of Pashtun tribal society (Wakil, Siddique, and Wakil, 1981). The Pashtun tribal society has in certain cases monopoly over the use of violence and state organizations are less effective or the state does not want to control intra-family violence; hence, they need to socialize their children according to their socio-cultural requirements to survive in tribal setting (Posada, and Wainryb, 2008).

Culture, social structure, state and illiteracy collectively expose male children at an early age to violence. Its become a normative part of Pashtun culture and parents do not recognise it is against the rights of children. Child exposure to violence is not culturally discouraged in Pashtun tribal society. They are doing this by keeping in view their family disputes and social structure. The absence of state institutions compels Pashtuns to resolve their family disputes through *Jirga*<sup>1</sup> or violent means. Family disputes frequently occur among families, sub-clan, or tribes. They need males to protect their property or family from outside aggression. Therefore, they celebrate the birth of male children to protect the property of the family. It is the Pashtu proverb "*zaman the da plar mati de*" which means only male children have the strength of the parents rather than female children, a cultural understanding which negatively affects the socialization of children and also violates their rights. Pashtun culturally defined masculinity violate the right of both male and female children. It increase burden on male children and increase gender gap. The family takes the burden of the state because in colonial times the British and in post-colonial times Pakistan deliberately reinforced the oppressive tribal norms for their political interests in this region. The British distorted the tribal values, adopted different policies in this region, and labeled the tribal as wild and uncivilized people (Yousaf, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Jirga is a assembly of elder to resolve disputes in light of Pashtun culture. It is traditional institution to maintain law and order.

## State versus Family Functions: Socialization of Children in Pashtun Tribal Society

State and family are the basic agents of socialization. Historically and also in the present time, families in Pashtun society take the responsibilities of the state. However, strong state institutions often reduce the responsibilities of the family such as the provision of economic opportunities and public and private security for an individual (Chickering, Haley, 2007). The British in colonial and Pakistan in the post-colonial period failed to reduce the responsibilities of the family and, simultaneously, the people did not trust state institutions compared to family. It is found in the field that most of the people get socio-economic support from their families rather than from the state in Pashtun tribal society. One respondent stated that<sup>1,2</sup>:

Family disputes frequently occur in Pashtun society and the state does not take the responsibility to protect us from outside aggression. Male members of the family have the responsibility to give you support and protect you from outside aggression. Therefore, Pashtun tribal people socialize with male children to protect themselves from outside aggression during family disputes (Jan, Personal communication, February 10, 2023).

The British and Pakistan as powerful states exploited their resources but did not extend state institutions to provide social services and resolve their family disputes in the Pashtun tribal society. They imposed collective human punishment under Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR). This law manipulated the tribal customs and created further polarization in family disputes among the tribal people. The British and Pakistan policies in this region created mistrust among the tribal which further increased their dependency on family institutions. Colonial and post-colonial policies created mistrust on the state institutions (Mallick, 2020). They are emotionally, economically and socially dependent on family institutions. Due to repressive policies of colonial British regime and Pakistan in post-colonial period they prefer their cultural institutions over state institutions. The British and Pakistan deliberately depicted them as marshal and violent race to justified repressive policies in this region. Pashtun depiction as a violent ethnic group in colonial and also in post-colonial literature distorted Pashtun's cultural identity. The British regime legitimized collective punishment in this way to depict them in literature as violent ethnic group. initiated in colonial times strengthened the collective structure in Pashtun tribal society (Zahab, 2016).

Pashtun have strong kinship ties and live in extended families. They need strong kinship ties because their kin protects them from outside aggression and also supports them economically in hard times. They reciprocally support each other in family disputes due to the least interest of the state (Serpell, 2014). The family needs children who are ready to protect the family from outside aggression of fellow Pashtun. One respondent stated that:

We have a strong kinship and family bonds that give us all kinds of help. Kinship (Rishtadaar) gives us an immediate response in the time of disputes. Our family members give an immediate response when we need their support. Family is more important to me as compared to the state. Therefore, Pashtun tribal people socialize their children in ways to meet cultural expectations (Khan, Personal communication, February 1, 2020).

In Pashtun tribal society, they socialize children to learn the importance of kinship ties for their survival in tribal settings. It is not appreciated in their culture if the male child learns docile behavior and their kin group laughs at those who are not fighting during the family dispute. In Pashtun tribal society, children are exposed to violence in the social structure. For instance, Pashtun are culturally bond to stand with brothers or cousins and extended during disputes. It is a

a social humiliation if they do not take part in disputes and do not stand with their relatives against other family or clan. In Pashtu, they use Pashtu word Poza prekawal (nose cutting) for social humiliation. They prepared to resolve their conflict through their social organizations Jirga rather than state institutions. Jirga is conducted by men who possess strong masculine traits and they have the power to implement Jirga decision. *Jargaees* (members of Jirga) are respectable people and they also appreciate bravery and masculine men who have courage to protect fellow Pashtun from outside aggression. In folk stories, masculinity is appreciated in Pashtun society. Therefore, children are exposed to violence in tribal order in absence of state institutions. In this regard, one of the respondents stated that

Our children are exposed to violence inside and outside the family. Without state protection, we have expectations for the male child to come and protect us. It is culturally acceptable to inculcate masculine and violent cultural traits into the personality of a male child in Pashtun tribal society (Jan 15, 2022, individual interview).

The state has more power as compared to the family and the state can easily resolve family disputes but the state's least interest in family affairs affects the children's socialization in Pashtun society. Pashtun tribal people had bad experiences with states both in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The state exploited their resources but failed to resolve their disputes or reduce poverty in the region. They trust the *Lashkar* (private militia) which is part of Pashtun tribal culture. When there is the threat of outside aggression every male Pashtun has the cultural responsibility to take part in it. Lashkar is not the permanent militia force and it is formed when they need it. It is culturally appreciated to take part in Lashkar in Pashtun tribal society (Miakhel, 2008). It is caused social humiliation if someone does not take part in Lashkar. In *Pakhtunwali* a man who shows bravery is highly appreciated. In this regard one of the respondents stated

Pashtun social organizations such as Jirga and Hujra (a place for guests) also significantly influence children's socialization in Pashtun tribal society. Only male children are allowed to sit with the elders. Children learn from the elders and these elders share stories of the colonial and post-colonial times with them. Children get socialization according to our prevailing socio-cultural environment in Hujra. Jirga usually takes place in Hujra to resolve disputes (Jan, Personal communication, February 17, 2023).

In Pashtun tribal society, only males are allowed to participate in Jirga. Children learn this behavior through tribal socialization in Pashtun tribal society. It creates gender inequality and children learn it through tribal socialization. It is a violation of female children and also a violation of CRC. It is reflected in the Pashtu proverb and literature where they only appreciate the masculine personality traits of males and the feminine of the female. It is a violation of both male and female children because, at an early age, it increases the burden of masculinity on the male child. When the male child is crying their parents criticize him 'you are not female do not cry'. In this regard one of the respondents stated

In the tribal socialization male children prepare for the masculine role and participation in Jirga is only allowed for males. In Pashtun tribal society, state least interest further reinforces gender inequality which violates the rights of the female child. State least intervention in their family matters further strengthens their tribal socialization in Pashtun tribal society (Asfandiyar, Personal communication, Jan 3, 2023).

Children's socialization is the prime responsibility of both the parents and the state. However, in Pashtun tribal society the state takes the least interest and they are bound to family institutions. Pashtun tribal society has not evolved smoothly into a state society. They were exploited both in the colonial and post-colonial periods and their evolution from tribal to state society has been

<sup>4</sup> I collected data from native people of Pashtun tribal society and they speak Pashtu language. The above statement is translated from Pashtu to English language.

<sup>5</sup> It is already anonymized and it is not the original name of the respondent



slowed down by state policies in this region. They are not aware of the rights of children indicated in CRC. The people of this region have negative experiences with states in both colonial and post-colonial times. The state institutions have lost trust in this region which makes family institutions stronger than the state in the socialization of children. Moreover, the state also needs children. They are more susceptible to violence in this region therefore the state deliberately ignored the process of socialization. Moreover, the material feminists' view (Jackson, 2001) endorses the current study that only patriarchy is not responsible for masculine traits but the wide experience of Pashtun in the prevailing social structure reinforces gender inequality and male dominant role in Pashtun society. The Pashtun tribal order, states policies in colonial and post-colonial era, family disputes collectively reinforces gender inequality in Pashtun society. The indigenous socialization process also increases the burden of masculinity at an early age on male children and they are also culturally exposed to violence in the Pashtun cultural setting.

## Conclusions

This research article focuses on the socialization of children in Pashtun tribal society. As mentioned above Pashtun live in tribal settings. Pashtun society suffered under the colony of the British, and when Pakistan also adopted British policies in the region. The state institutions deliberately have not been extended to this region: Both the British and Pakistan exploited their resources but deliberately reinforced Pashtun cultural violence for their vested interest in this region. The British colonial regime used this region for the geo-strategic interest to counter Soviet-Union and Pakistan also continued the same policies and created congenial environment for the non-state actor in this region. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United states funded non-state actor to counter Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Pakistani state institutions take the least interest in family affairs and disputes. It is revealed that Pashtun society has a monopoly over the use of violence, as a result of, state institutions failing to intervene in their family disputes. Family disputes have a significant effect on the children's socialization. States' least interest in family affairs allows the family institution to socialize children in ways that violate the rights according to the convention on the rights of the child. They are consciously exposed to violence to survive in the violent culture of Pashtun society. The non-state actors can easily recruits these children who are socialized in violent environment. Children who are socialized in violent environment, cannot easily accommodate themselves in socio-culturally diversified global community. They can jeopardize the global peace. It is an highly important to protect the rights of children in isolated tribal regions where in past they faced worst colonial policies and also currently live in undemocratic environment in post-colonial era.

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## 'Should I lose my voice, yours will remain': Anthropological Reflections on Solidarity, the Space and the Practice

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Anthways, 2024 © Alreem Alameri

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982348](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982348)

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## Introduction

The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make and could just as easily make differently.

David Graeber, 2015

This essay explores the Palestine solidarity movement and the broader concept of solidarity by examining various activities that have occurred in London since 7 October 2023. These solidarity actions include weekly national marches on Saturdays, student campus occupations, and educational events centred on the Palestine cause and solidarity. The primary aim is to investigate how public spaces are being transformed into arenas for political activism, emotional engagement, and knowledge production.

The first section of the essay offers a concise overview of the contributions made by anthropologists who have actively participated in solidarity movements throughout modern history, particularly during the 20th century. The second section examines the contemporary Palestine solidarity movement, looking at it from an anthropological perspective.

## The Legacy of Engaged Anthropology, Reflexive Turn, and Repositioning

Despite anthropology's controversial history—marked by its involvement in colonial projects and the propagation of stereotypes about cultures and races, particularly in the Global South—the discipline has played a constructive role in liberation movements since the mid-twentieth century. During this period, anthropologists have actively participated in a range of historical and contemporary protest movements, including anti-colonial struggles, civil rights movements, feminism, queer liberation, and AIDS activism.

Anthropologists' involvement has gone beyond mere participation to encompass crucial roles in movement building, organising, planning, and advising on protest strategies and challenges to prevailing socio-political hierarchies. As Carles Feixa notes, anthropologists who participated in the Anti-austerity movement in Spain, also known as the 15-M Movement in 2011, assumed the role of 'organic intellectuals.' Feixa points out that, although anthropologists were once tangentially involved during the colonial era, they have now become key figures in shaping public discourse and guiding solidarity and liberation movements, serving as intermediaries between participants and a broader society.

In the context of the ongoing Palestine solidarity movement, which has been active for the past 11 months, teach-ins have emerged as a key educational initiative to raise awareness about the Palestinian cause. These teach-ins are being held in many different places as a form and practice of solidarity, with the aim of educating and informing people about the issues at hand.

Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021), the renowned anthropologist, introduced the concept of the teach-in in 1965 during the anti-Vietnam War movement. At the same time, sociocultural anthropologist Eric Wolf (1923–1999) was among the first to implement these teach-ins on American university campuses. Teach-ins are a form of non-violent protest that unite students and educators for study, reflection, and discussion. According to *The New York Times Magazine*, Sahlins conceived the idea in response to criticisms that educators were neglecting their responsibilities: "*They say we're neglecting our responsibilities as teachers. Let us show them how responsible we feel. Instead of teaching out, we'll teach in—all night*" (Gladys Perez, 2021).

Essentially, the teach-in functions as a form of protest, akin to the sit-in. Historically, teach-ins on U.S. campuses in the 1960s were instrumental in mobilising student activism—a role they continue to play effectively today.



Figure 1. LSE students held a sit-in at the Marshall Building on May 14, 2024, labeling it the 'liberated zone' and demanding divestment. (Photo by the author.)

Lastly, in the realm of engaged anthropology, Nina S. de Friedemann (1930–1998) is another pivotal figure. A distinguished anthropologist, she dedicated her career to advancing social justice in the communities she studied and lived in. Her research focused on the genocide and ethnocide of indigenous peoples in Colombia and highlighted the cultural contributions of Black populations to the country's diverse identity. Friedemann also challenged the hegemonic structures that oppressed Black communities (Friedemann-Sánchez, 2022). As part of a cohort critically addressing colonialism, imperialism, and racism, she significantly contributed to the decolonisation of knowledge and the empowerment of marginalised communities, steering anthropology towards a more inclusive and representative paradigm.

## Protest Anthropology of the 21st Century

Another form of anthropologists' engagement with public issues, known as protest anthropology, involves not just aligning with protest movements but actively participating in them (Maskovsky, 2013). The late David Graeber (1961–2020) is probably the most prominent example of this approach. He played a significant role in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement, which sought to address economic inequality and corruption in the U.S. Regardless of differing views on his ideas, Graeber's impact is undeniable. Media outlets like *Rolling Stone*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, and *The Atlantic* recognised him as a key figure, particularly for his support of the movement's leaderless, horizontal decision-making approach. Graeber's work effectively bridged anthropology with activism, bringing a distinctive form of 'public intellectualism' to the forefront of solidarity movements.



Similarly, the American Anthropological Association (AAA)—the world’s largest organisation of anthropologists—demonstrated its commitment to activism by endorsing a boycott of Israeli academic institutions and universities in support of the Palestine solidarity movement. This decision was made before the events of 7 October, when the AAA issued a statement calling for an end to ongoing violence, including the targeting of civilians and the destruction of essential infrastructure. The statement also highlights a substantial body of anthropological research that documents the various forms of structural and everyday violence inflicted by the Israeli government on the Palestinian population. These forms of violence include the continuous expansion of Israeli settlements into Palestinian lands, the demolition of Palestinian homes and villages, forced evictions, the use of walls and checkpoints to restrict movement, and the discriminatory treatment of Palestinian citizens within Israel.

Another notable form of symbolic activism and protest is the ‘die-in’. During the 2014 American Anthropological Association meeting, anthropologists and activists staged a die-in to support the Black Lives Matter movement. This performative act of solidarity extended beyond traditional academic settings. One participant described the experience, saying

‘dying, it turns out, changed everything. I died in that hotel so that we might be able to live. As I lay on that polished floor, feigning death, I heard a distant voice quoting a Dickens character recalling me to life. Dying in that lobby staunched the bleeding in my heart, patched it hastily, and returned it to me’.

Anthropology Now, 2015

This may exemplify the potential of symbolic actions to evoke emotions and lead to cognitive shifts among participants, as well as to forge new collective identities.

## Post-October: An Upside Down World

On 7th October, an attack carried out by the Palestinian resistance group sent shockwaves across the globe. This operation broke the longstanding siege on Gaza, often described as ‘the largest prison on earth’ (Pappe, 2011). However, the attack led to the deaths of many Israelis and the capture of several hostages, who were taken to Gaza. In response, the Israeli military launched a vigorous retaliation, targeting both combatants and civilians indiscriminately, including children and women. Extensive violence, destruction of infrastructure, and strikes on schools and hospitals have sparked international condemnation and urgent calls to halt what many are describing as an ongoing genocide.



Figure 2. Students and local protesters demonstrating in front of the Israeli embassy on 9 October 2023. (Photo by the author).

It didn’t take long for many people to begin protesting and demanding a ceasefire. London, known for its history of protests and large peaceful marches, witnessed its first demonstration on 9th October 2023 (The Guardian 2023). Thousands of protesters gathered outside the Israeli embassy, calling for an end to the violence. I joined the protest alongside a group of university students and staff from LSE, King’s College, and other institutions. Before heading to the embassy, we met ironically in front of LSE’s large inverted globe—a symbolic representation of the world turned upside down. Although only three days had passed since the aggression began, I could already see a deep emotional impact on many of those I encountered that day. Their faces displayed a spectrum of emotions—confusion, anger, and distress.

Since 7th October, those participating in pro-Palestine demonstrations have been motivated by a belief that they are protesting against what they view as genocide, standing in solidarity with Palestinians who face oppression and hardship. A moving and powerful song, frequently heard during these marches, encapsulates this dedication: ‘Should I lose my voice, yours will remain. My eyes are on tomorrow, and my heart beats for you,’ and, as Maurice Bloch noted, ‘you can’t argue with a song’ (Bloch, 1974). These lyrics evoke a deep sense of collective unity, mutual responsibility, and solidarity—ideas explored by Durkheim—that can emerge on both local and global scales.

However, it is more accurate to describe the Palestine solidarity movement as political solidarity rather than social solidarity. Scholz (2008) defines political solidarity as ‘a unity of individuals who consciously work to oppose injustice, oppression, tyranny, or social vulnerability.’ In contrast to social solidarity, which is based on shared characteristics and social ties, political solidarity is driven by a collective commitment and moral duty to pursue social justice. In this form of solidarity, moral obligations come before social bonds. This distinction more accurately reflects the true essence of the movement in support of the Palestinian cause.



Figure 3. LSE faculty and students demonstrating in front of the Central Building on campus. (Photo by the author)

## Public Spaces, Emotions, and Solidarity

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.

Sara Ahmed, 2012

Emotions should be understood not just as psychological states but as cultural and social practices, a notion supported by many anthropologists (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990). In their 2004 edited volume, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*, Goodwin and Jasper call for increased attention to the affective dimensions of social and solidarity movements as essential for a research approach that does not impose fixed models on these movements. This is especially pertinent to the solidarity movement with Palestine, where emotions are intensely present and clearly serve as a powerful and pervasive element.

In this context, Julia Eckert writes that the 'transformative force of solidarity' is grounded not only in the struggle against injustices but also in its passionate and imaginative power to invent new institutions of care and support, thereby making the world otherwise (Eckert, 2020). Similarly, Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2018) emphasised the critical role of emotions such as pain, love, and empathy in solidarity movements.

They describe empathy in particular as an ethical response that initially emerges as an affect and manifests itself through spontaneous bodily reactions to others, whether through marching, chanting, or other forms of expression.

The power of emotions in Palestine solidarity movements can often be observed in public spaces. Streets where national marches for Palestine take place, squares where events occur, and university campuses where students advocate for Palestine and call for BDS are all spaces where individuals come together, share their emotions, and imagine alternative realities. These spaces are continuously constructed and reconstructed by the collective efforts of communities, groups, and individuals, transcending the territorial, political, and cultural boundaries of any single nation-state.



Figure 4. A group of UCL students took over Jeremy Bentham Hall and declared it an Apartheid-Free Zone. The space was used for group discussions and learning about the Palestinian cause. (Photo by the author).

## Conclusion

To conclude, anthropology has expanded beyond academia, with anthropologists engaging in public issues as both scholars and activists. In movements like the solidarity campaign for Palestine, the field offers valuable insights into how emotions, collective action, and symbolic activism drive and shape solidarity movements. Anthropology also highlights the significance of public spaces as dynamic sites for political practice, knowledge production, and emotional expression, where new realities and futures are imagined through the collective efforts of the people.

Through pictures



Figure 5. Public lecture by academic and author Eman Abdelhadi on solidarity, hope, and Palestine in London, June 2023. (Photo by the author)



Figure 6. A protest by LSE students and staff followed a court ruling to terminate their Solidarity Encampment with Palestine on 17 June 2023. (Photo by the author)



Figure 7. Public lecture by archivist Hazem Jamjoum on Palestine and the Colonial Survey at Pelican House, London, on 8 April. (Photo by the author).



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## Correspondence as care

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Anthways, 2024 © Emelie Isaksen

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982359](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982359)

Umeje/Umeå, Sábmie, Sweden 19/5/2024

Dear Reader,

*I want to talk about letters.*

Recently, I have been reflecting on how we can create space for more conversations that help us see the world differently. How we can find methods that help us rethink our positions within a society troubled by ecological collapse, inequality and polarisation; in constructive ways. As I currently find myself driving across Sábmie<sup>1</sup> and Sweden to speak to people from different walks of life about their relationship to surrounding forests, the question feels more acute than ever. The Swedish forests are a sticky topic politically, and one that at first appears to be split in a binary between Indigenous rights and biodiversity vs. productivity and the right to private property. Delve deeper, and the topic is more nuanced than that. I haven't figured the full picture out yet. With an art practice mostly focused on photography and an academic background in interdisciplinary social science, I have found myself drawn to what I now recognise could be categorised as "ethnographic methods". For me, that has included mostly informal deep conversation, creative writing, and visual documentation of people in my surroundings. Growing up queer in rural Sweden, this exchange has been a way for me to explore my identity; my shifting circumstances as I moved to different urban centres around the world or came back to rural spaces, and the privileges I embody. I have mostly done this without a goal to publicise a project or arrive at a certain endpoint; the correspondence between myself and my environment has been what mattered most. It has all been part of a continuous process of learning, relating, and undoing.



Figure1. Bundle of tape-recording stills from fieldwork. A glimpse of some of the people I met in the forested landscape.

In 2023 Thandiwe Gula-Ndebele, Jana Mlaba, Clair Sinclair Brazier, Thando Mlambo and me, who had gotten to know each other over a couple of years when I lived in Harare, Zimbabwe, started a slow-moving transnational collective. All of us are artists whose work addresses topics such as ecology, community, queer identity, and healing. We set up the collective after two of us moved countries, as a space to both reflect on issues that linked our practices as well as a way for us to

<sup>1</sup> Sápmi in Umesámi dialect. Sápmi/Sábmie is an area which has traditionally been home to indigenous Sámi peoples and includes large parts of northern Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola peninsula in Russia.

keep in touch and update each other. We did this by starting an email chain, where we share thoughts on care intertwined with anecdotes and an eclectic selection of everyday moments that provide a window into our daily lives. This format felt particularly conducive for exploring topics that we did not already have a clear opinion on, but were discovering slowly. The correspondence allows for reflection, each intentionally crafted email between us feeling like a small gift when it lands in your inbox. Poet and black studies theorist Fred Moten captured this feeling of gaining insights through everyday practice well when he said that “study is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice” (Harney and Moten, 2013). On the same note, author and poet Maggie Nelson writes in her book *On Freedom* that;

(I) If we want to divest from the habits of paranoia, despair, and policing that have come to menace and control even the most well-intentioned among us – habits that, when continuously indulged, shape what’s possible in both our present and future – **we are going to need methods by which we feel and know that other ways of being are possible** [emphasis added], not just in some revolutionary future that might never come, or in some idealized past that likely never existed or is inevitably lost, but right here and now.

Nelson suggests that we look at freedom not as an imaginary emancipated future, but as an ongoing venture, echoing anthropologist David Graeber’s call to “act as if one is already free” (Graeber, 2007, p. 430; Nelson, 2022, p. 15). Doing this involves exploring ways of being in this world that divert from hegemonic narratives. This is an area in which one could hope that anthropology, as the study of human behaviour and culture, can bring about at least some degree of further understanding. The open-endedness that is offered by both artistic practice and anthropological inquiry creates a space in which an assembly of perceptions beyond binaries are awarded validity (Rikou and Yalouri, 2018; Wright, 2018). Many artists and anthropologists investigate the relationship and exchange between themselves and the world around them, furthered by the shift towards increased attention to subjectivity in both disciplines.<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence and gift giving* are thus concepts that are central to both fields; and as an example, practices such as letter writing, and forms of auto-ethnography, often linger unsorted in between the two. This article tries to uncover the use of reciprocity and exchange in writing and literature that refuse categorisation and carry elements of autoethnography, poetic art practice and critical theory, as a *method* to grow ongoing practices of care and offer insights into *other ways of being together* (Nelson, 2022, p. 17). It examines three books on personhood, sexuality and art that all explore corresponding; *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke, Fanny Sjö Dahl and Alva Jeppsson’s *Vem är du som bor här?* and lastly, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*.<sup>2</sup> The format creates an exciting and usually more accessible space than that of academia or that of a gallery.

## Correspondence and gifts in art and anthropology

As noted, both *correspondence and gift* are recursive concepts, postulated many times within both anthropology and art. In art, the gift has been explored by, for example, the situationists and other avant-garde movements, and later also by artists turning towards “relational esthetics”, where art is read as a situation of encounter and social relations (Bourriaud, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> However, it’s worth noting that friction can erupt when collaboration between the two is attempted. Although this is beyond the scope of this essay to explore in detail, Elena Yalouri exemplified it well in her account of attempts around Documenta 14, explaining how “contentious rather than harmonious (trans)disciplinary exchanges ensued, and these were exacerbated by “resistances,” and criticism from both sides” (Yalouri, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> There are many categories of letters and correspondence that would be interesting to explore in addition to those in this article. For example, those that illustrate and deepen the relationships between diasporic communities or with prisoners, those addressed to non-human interlocutors or those by artists who have used the medium to for example speak to people who have passed away.

According to anthropologist Roger Sansi-Roca, who explored the concept at length in his book *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, artists orchestrate “free, spontaneous, personal, and disinterested events, in opposition to commodification and mass consumption” (Sansi and Strathern, 2016, p. 426). That is; some form of “free gift” s received by participants who are proposed to be complete equals in the gallery (in contrast to within society at large); creating an event in which new forms of relations can take place. Anthropologists would however argue that there are still hierarchies between for example artist and participant (Strathern, 1988; Mauss, 2002; Sansi-Roca, 2015). Although there is an exchange ‘without hierarchy’, value resides around the artists themselves, as they remain ‘authors’ of the event. Additionally, hierarchies rebound again once you walk out of the gallery space, leaving potential small potential for tangible change.

Anthropologists have instead applied an increasingly intersectional lens and paid careful attention to power. Marcel Mauss’ essay *The Gift* set the tone in 1926. When discussing the importance gifts have with relation to value and exchange, he argued that “(i)n a good number of civilizations exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory, these are voluntary, in reality, they are given and reciprocated obligatory” (Mauss, 2002, p. 3). Another classic work that shaped how the gift was further theorised was that of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern who, based on research conducted in Melanesian societies, highlighted the need to read gift-giving as a practice grounded in gendered social relations (Strathern, 1988). In contrast to hegemonic Western conceptualisations (and to a large extent the contemporary art world) where they are still often seen as “freely given objects”, Strathern accounts how gifts are inherently gendered and play an important part in fostering, upholding, or disrupting social relations and hierarchies. Taking this into account, a study of gifts is one that can “make explicit the dependency of the relations of gift exchange upon the nature of things” (Strathern, 1988, p. 167). In other words, gifts are an extension of people and their (often hierarchical) relations, rather than free entities or objects. To link the concept back to writing, I find filmmaker Trinh T Minh-ha’s discussion on gifts and poetics to be useful. She suggests that a piece of poetic writing is propelling when it becomes the site of “interrelations between giver and receiver” (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 25). She explains how sometimes a work “assumes this double movement, where reflections on what is unique to the artistic form and sets it off from other forms are also reflections on its inability to isolate itself, to prevent itself from participating in the flow of social life, and from engaging in other forms of communication” (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 25). The work is both separate from the world as well as intrinsically linked with it. Minh-ha famously holds that ethnography should “speak nearby” rather than about (Minh-ha in Chen, 1992). She calls for a sort of “speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it” (Minh-ha in Chen, 1992, p. 87). Similarly, she suggests that art and writing can (and should) speak to rather than about. She explains; “ “Speaking to” the tale breaks the dualistic relation between subject and object” (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 12). This creates an intertwined relationship between author, reader, and context, thereby giving the story agency. Through autoethnographic correspondence, truth and subjectivity merge and “(d)irectly questioned, the story is also indirectly unquestionable in its truthfulness” (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 14).





Figure 2. Bundle of tape-recording stills from fieldwork. By closely filming and interacting with the landscape itself, the forests' order and chaos becomes part of the conversation..

Anthropologist Tim Ingold has explored topics of reciprocity and relationships between humans, animals, and our surroundings at depth.<sup>4</sup> Ingold holds that there are many parallels to be drawn between the field of anthropology and that of art. Specifically, and much like Minh-ha, he argues that artists and anthropologists alike (should) engage in the art of inquiry. This entails setting up a relation with the world built on correspondence where the aim is "not to describe the world, or to represent it, but to open up our perception to what is going on there so that we, in turn, can respond to it." (Ingold, 2021, p.7). This echoes the writing of Potawatomi botanist Robin W Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where she explains the role of the gift in many indigenous societies as one establishing relationships built on gratitude and reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013, p.28). Using the example of picking wild strawberries, she explains that "our human relationship with strawberries is transformed by our choice of perspective. It is human perception that makes the world a gift. When we view the world this way, strawberries and humans alike are transformed. /.../ The stories we choose to shape our behaviours have adaptive consequences" (Kimmerer, 2013, p.30). Again, the gift, gratitude and reciprocity become actions and relationships rather than objects or things. Kimmerer maintains that for her "writing is an act of reciprocity with the world; it is what I can give back in return for everything that has been given to me" (Kimmerer, 2013, p.152). Building on Minh-ha, Ingold and Kimmerer, correspondence in this article will be treated as an ongoing relational and reciprocal act - a method if you will - of both listening to and answering the world we inhabit with care, sensitivity, and judgement.

### Exchange uncovering relationships

To delve into what this relation-focused outlook could encompass, I have looked at three examples of writing. They all carry elements of correspondence and deal with topics of auto-ethnography while simultaneously having been published as literature. They all refuse to be categorised by genre. But more importantly, they go beyond refusing, they offer. They offer a form of interaction that seems at once unpolished, open-ended, and generously precise. They offer to "open up our perception to what is going on there [in the world] so that we, in turn, can respond to it" (Ingold, 2021, p.7).

<sup>4</sup> I look up to the writing and theories brought forward by Tim Ingold, as well as the format in which these are delivered. However, I often find myself lacking a proper attribution of thanks to the many Indigenous peoples whose knowledge systems carry traces of the same theories. Such as the Sámi of northern Finland where he initially did his doctoral research. To speak and write about exchange is to also credit the forms of co-creation and collective knowledge production inherent to ethnographic research.

### Letters to a young poet, Reiner Maria Rilke (1929)

Rilke, who was an Austrian poet, is known to have written an enormous number of letters in his lifetime and this book, while never intended to be published as such, is one of his most widely read works. Over the course of six years, Rilke exchanged letters with the younger aspiring poet and military officer Franz Xaver Kappus, who asked for and received advice on artistry, work, sexuality, and solitude. Tim Ingold wrote on letter writing that it "highlights two aspects that I take to be central to correspondence: first, that it's a movement in real time; and second, that this movement is sentient." (Ingold, 2013, p.105). He then draws the conclusion that reading letters - awaiting them and relaying - is an act that you continuously do together with the person you are corresponding with, never alone. He explains; "It is as though the writer was speaking from the page, and you - the reader - were there, listening" (Ingold, 2013, p.105). Corresponding is done with animacy, with care and constant motion - the reader and writer equally intertwined in the social relations and expectations of the act. Containing only text, it is not a direct representation of events, but rather a process of building a shared world in which indexical recollections are piled up and brought together to create something new. In addition, the haptic elements of reading and tracing the lines of written words on a paper further blur the lines between person and letter. Most of Rilke's letters start with a greeting and short description of his current context, both physically and mentally. Take for example the letter sent from Rome on the 29th of October 1903:

Your letter of 29th of August reached me in Florence, and only now - two months on - do I give you news of it. Forgive me this delay, but I prefer not to write letters when I'm travelling because letter-writing requires more of me than just the basic wherewithal: some quiet and time on my own and a moment when I feel relatively at home.

Rilke, 1929, p.35

Rilke is generously giving his time, advice, and reflections from his own life. The letters are an intentional but unfinished product, one that has no clear goal or end, but that keeps on moving forward. The content of the letters is often centred around movement and growth, and an attempt to find a way to interact with one's surroundings in a meaningful way. When Kappus chooses to pursue a career in the military, Rilke responds:

"Art too is only a way of living, and it's possible, however one lives, to prepare oneself for it without knowing; in every real situation we are nearer to it, better neighbours, than in the unreal half-artistic professions which by pretending to be close to it hurt its very existence /.../ I am glad, in a word, that you have withstood the dangers of slipping into all this, and that somewhere you are living alone and courageous in a rough reality."

Rilke, 1929, p.73

Building on both Strathern and Kimmerer's understanding of gifts as both building and uncovering the nature of relationships (Strathern, 1988; Kimmerer, 2013) - I would argue that this specific act of correspondence blurs the hierarchy between what could be described as teacher and pupil, young and older. The gift the letters constitute is perhaps not one of advice but rather one of company and care:

I think of you often, dear Mr Kappus, and with such a concentration of good wishes that really in some way it ought to help. Whether my letters can really be a help to you, well, I have my doubts. Do not say: Yes they are. Just let them sink in quietly and without any particular sense of gratitude, and let's wait and see what will come of it.

Rilke, 1929, p.68

To us, however, who are reading the letters not as intended recipients but as spectators, the gift is of another kind. Kappus published the letters – in themselves perhaps more ethnographic artefacts rather than prose – arguing that they were “important for the insight they give into the world in which Rainer Maria Rilke lived and worked, and important too for many people engaged in growth and change, today and in the future”(Kappus in Rilke, 1929, p.5). As there is no claim to represent an authentic history or story beyond that of the author’s, the book itself however erupts as an artistic work by a poet, located in between fiction and the real. The book offers perspective, an invitation to explore what was important to the two poets and in prolongation what is real and important to us.

### Vem är du som bor här? Alva Jeppsson and Fanny Sjö Dahl (2020)

In the book which title translates to *Who are you that lives here?* Alva Jeppsson and Fanny Sjö Dahl discuss rural/urban belonging and identity in what they call “an artistic field study”. Through an exchange of emails that are directly transcribed into a book, they explore the questions *why did we move away from here, where do we belong now and what is left?* Although radically more instant than letters, emails too are acts of correspondence, waiting and exchange. By reading their conversations we are invited to share thoughts on their respective rural upbringings in different parts of the Swedish countryside as well as their hopes and wishes for what is to come. The book invites us to enter a dense space where hope, queer and femme experience, nostalgia, and anger meet. In correspondence, thoughts never have to be fully developed before they are sent off to be picked up by the next person, making it possible for the authors to be both reflexive and reflective and think collectively. After some changes have been implemented in the village where she grew up, Sjö Dahl writes:

my approach to the countryside is in short “don’t move here and try to change it, if you’re going to move here you have to adapt or go back to where you came from. but preferably don’t move here at all, if you don’t already live here, you can leave because then you’re just a city dweller. but at the same time, don’t let the countryside die, hey, why don’t you give a shit? why doesn’t anyone want to move here? why would anyone move here?” i’m a walking paradox, i realize that. i don’t think i can stand for what i’m writing right now. but i have to write it because the anger in me is boiling, i can write things i can stand for later.

Sjö Dahl and Jeppsson, 2020, p.74

As the email is addressed to a friend, uncensored spontaneous thoughts inject the narrative. Sjö Dahl’s trail of thought, written all in lowercase, is as much an inquiry into herself and her immediate surroundings as it is an opening up of the question to Jeppsson. Responding to Sjö Dahl, Jeppsson writes:

With regards to what you wrote on having to adapt if one is to move to the countryside, I don’t agree. I think that’s maybe what I like most about the countryside, that we’re such a motley crew. That there is space (both spacially and and mentally) to be who you are and develop the sides of yourself that might not fit in a city.

Sjö Dahl and Jeppsson, 2020, p.75

Unrehearsed ideas, frustrations and vague recollections take up space in the book, just as comfortable and well-practised topics or romantic prose focused on mundane beauty does. In one of Sjö Dahl’s emails specifically tackling the paradox of feeling like one belongs to two worlds at once and neither of them at the same time, she signs off by summarising:

“I am a countryside-queer in urban exile.”

Sjö Dahl and Jeppsson, 2020, p. 51

Linking this back to Minh-ha’s arguments on art as situated between the giver and the receiver, the book encapsulates this equilibrium between truth and subjectivity. This book stayed with me after reading it as it aligned closely with my own experience. In fact, it sparked a small email chain on the same themes between me and the friend who had gifted me the book – perhaps acting as inspiration years later when the new collective was set up. The informal tone of the emails and rapport between the two young women opened access to my own memories, and the organisation of the study allowed for something more than simply an affect or poesies. It has what Wright calls “a productive ambiguity” (Wright, 2018), circumventing rules of ethics, aesthetics and format that it might have been constrained by, had it aligned itself with one discipline. The book is a particularly generous offering of honesty from both authors’ individual and multilayered perspectives. It’s accessible, poetic, and intellectual at once.

### The Argonauts, Maggie Nelson (2016)

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson has filled 178 pages with careful, blunt, intimate, and sharp thoughts on identity, freedom and queer parenthood. At the centre of the book is her relationship with her partner Harry Dodge, who is gender fluid, as well as her own transformative experience of pregnancy. These personal stories are interwoven with critical theory presented in palatable bites and made relevant through their explicit links to Nelson’s own experiences. Almost all pages are either addressed to or bouncing off her relationship with Dodge and as a reader, you feel almost as if caught reading someone’s private and personal (incredibly expressive and well-structured) diary.

I told you I wanted to live in a world in which the antidote to shame is not honour, but honesty. You said I misunderstood what you meant by honour. We haven’t yet stopped trying to explain to each other what these words mean to us; perhaps we never will.

You’ve written about all parts of your life except this, except the queer part, you said.

Give me a break, I said back. I haven’t written about it yet.

Nelson, 2016, p.40

Again, the format of correspondence allows for changeability and inconsistency. The book is a conversation, not a manifesto bringing us to a destination but a request to partake in finding one of many answers to the many questions life throws at us. *The Argonauts* is described on its cover as a “genre-bending memoir” (Nelson, 2016) and is actively refusing categorisation by positioning itself as both auto-ethnographic, academic, and poetic. According to Graeber, auto-ethnographic work is the research method with the biggest potential to formulate new visions as it is attempting to map out hidden logics behind specific social action, in which oneself feels a part and has a vested interest. He argued that “(t)hese visions would have to be offered as potential gifts, not definitive analyses or impositions” (Graeber, 2005 p.200-201). I think that is just what Maggie Nelson does.

I’m not on my way anywhere, Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy? I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don’t want any of it. How to explain that for some at some times, this irresolution is OK – desirable, even /.../ whereas for others, or for others at some times, it stays a source of conflict or grief?

Nelson, 2016, p.67

Nelson has submerged each page in care, each academic or poetic reference in personal vulnerability. By sometimes simply adding the reference as a name in the margin, the text reads smoothly but contains its multitudes with accuracy. You are in conversation with the author, who is talking not with an expert voice, but from her own perspective and as a peer, friend or loved one. This way, conversations around topics that are within themselves fluid are allowed to flow and fluctuate within the scope of the correspondence.

### Further elaborations of care

All these authors are creating and furthering social relations within their practice, and the works themselves carry these relations into new territories. These books - artistic but with autoethnographic elements - employ correspondence as a method to uncover other forms of being in this world. The author(s) in each book give their correspondent the gift of engaged and ongoing dialogue, with care that perhaps can only be inserted into a text that is addressed to someone you know and deeply care about. This form of correspondence also allows you to finish your thoughts without interruption and get to the bottom of an argument before you await a response – something that to me seems rare in a time when cutting in with an immediate response or counterargument has perhaps become the norm. You as a reader have in turn been granted the opportunity to eavesdrop into an intimate conversation, giving you the choice to tap into feelings or acts of gratitude and reciprocity. Informally addressed, these books put forward an example of a relation between two people and with the world that surrounds them. They become, if we will, a type of interlocutor with which we can ponder on the same questions.

Letter writing and forms of correspondence can be approached as both art practice and autoethnography and examples span way beyond those explored in this text. Practitioners leveraging the medium of letters or emails to explore themes of personal and collective significance are not necessarily merging ethnography and art practice, but rather borrowing from and reinventing the two by showing there is a slippage between categories. Although there are limits to what a sole piece of literature can do, correspondence as a method has the potential to grow relations that we need to deepen to make the world we live in slightly more habitable. Relations that are fostered with care and through inquiry, and shaped by practices of giving that we understand as reciprocal and generous. When writing is peppered with artistic curiosity creativity and ethnographic self-awareness, it can help us map out new ways of looking at and with our surroundings, beyond binaries and taxonomy, right and wrong. Help us study and navigate human behaviour and culture. This brings me back to my practice; the forest, and the collective. The process of learning and relating continues, and my research in the Swedish forests has offered a great opportunity to further explore correspondence as a method. Listening to and interacting with people whose relationships and views on the forested landscape I travel through both overlap with and contrast mine, camera in hand, has allowed space for open questions and diverse opinions. It has granted me the opportunity to get beyond the 'stereotyped', and to see people and places as their stories. As for the collective; unsure yet of what is to become of our emails, we continue exchanging and gifting thoughts with care while it feels regenerative for us. If it might uncover something of interest for others too, is yet to be determined.



Figure3. Bundle images and screenshots from the collective's email chain.

To end this article, dear reader, I want to leave you with another quote from Harney and Moten's conversation in *Undercommons*. I hope this perspective can deepen your relationships just as it continues to do mine.

When I started working with Fred, social life, to me, had a lot to do with friendship, and it had a lot to do with refusal – refusal to do certain kinds of things. And then gradually /.../ I started to think about, "well, refusal's something that we do because of them, what do we do because of ourselves?" Recently, I've started to think more about elaborations of care and love."

Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 120

Best,

Figure4. Signature



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# Wastra and Kain: Indonesian Creative Journeys Through Textiles

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Anthways, 2024 © Sarah Ramadhita

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13982363](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13982363)

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I am thread, I come from this land. I grow from fertile soils and I transform. I bind what was and is, I am dreams and hopes...

They tell stories through me, they send prayers and blessings through the symbols they form with me, they express in the patterns they turn me into...

Grandmothers, mothers, daughters...as generations weave me into cloth, they weave history, they weave spirit...I represent shelter...a home.

*Wastra Indonesia*<sup>1</sup> are the tangible stories of cultural origin, they are made of the prayers and blessings of ancestors and a lineage of creativity interwoven within the thread or in the malam (batik wax) that make the motifs. The artisans who make wastra show respect through rituals of fasting and prayers. The families who keep them honour them the same way by wearing them only for special rites of passage and passing down the traditional practices that make them. As part of a journey of a people and family, wastra is sacred.

*Kain Indonesia*<sup>2</sup> is where identity, culture and creativity come together. It is how wastra evolves creatively. It is a story of cultural diversity, environmental impact and social development. In everyday life, kain is personal style - people wear them to explore where they come from. For those who make kain, they are expressing their creativity and innovation, continuously exploring their talents, sharing the stories of their culture and region.

Multicultural takes on a different meaning in Indonesia. And its relatively small size on a world map often feels like a misrepresentation of its vibrant and wildly varied cultural practices. A difference of a few kilos in the single digits would transport you through contrasting cultural norms. Life could be read and experienced through textiles - no, not just textiles, Wastra and Kain. There is more to Indonesian textiles than what is tangible because it opens up a world of diversity, one that you could travel through without going anywhere. As Indonesian textiles change with time, so do their creative journeys, expressing cultural identity in the layers of individual and community stories existing in parallel to societal change and globalisation.

## Atri

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Batik had always been personal for Atri, she grew up hearing stories of her *yangyut*<sup>3</sup> penning batik patterns using traditional canting (dip pen), wax, and natural dyes. She easily recalls summer-tinted memories, of school holidays spent at museums and galleries dedicated to batik, and watching artisans work during road trips across Java.

And above all, were vivid memories of the joyful hours spent with her family in batik shops, swathes of fabric before her in glorious piles, the earthy smell from dyes and the fine dust that would billow with every piece of batik that was unfolded and stretched out, for generations of women poring over details and colour combinations.

<sup>1</sup> Wastra Indonesia: translates to Indonesian traditional textiles, but it extends beyond a piece of cloth, it is embedded with cultural meaning, each cloth has characteristics of symbolism through colours, size and materials.

<sup>2</sup> Kain: also translates to textiles, but rather than being sacred, kain has more freedom, it represents cultural identity and how local artisans are exploring with their natural surroundings (to make colours and patterns), it shows innovative techniques and new materials. It connects wearers to the cultural identities of where the textile comes from (whether it be Indonesia in general, or particular regions).

<sup>3</sup> Yangyut: a shortened form of eyang buyut in Javanese, which translates to great-grandparent.

In contrast, her memory of Batak tenun/ikat is centred on one specific visit to *Ina Craft*<sup>1</sup> which celebrates Indonesian craft in all its glory, showcasing handmade wearable art from across the archipelago, ranging from woven fabrics to intricate metal work, traditional wood carvings to modern repurposed, remoulded and reused plastic. Parting crowds and squeezing through aunties bargaining for cheaper prices, she stumbled on a stall that proudly declared their Batak origins. "She's actually a Siregar." Her mum declared, giving Atri's Batak surname to the seller. Waking Atri from her trance, the event was an overwhelming assault on all the senses. It was loud in every way possible and Atri found it increasingly difficult to answer any questions the seller had about her Batak heritage.

The way the seller eyed her disapprovingly, was branded in her memory. But he nevertheless brandished a heavy, woven stretch of fabric, deep colours of blacks and reds dominated, streaked with mustard and vivid greens in interlocking patterns. "This is the ikat<sup>2</sup> of your family." He had said.

And the noise melted away.

Used to smoother, and lighter fabric of batiks, the ikat was a new experience in textures. It was a different brand of brash and bold than the batik that she was used to, the contrasting colours He expertly wrapped her in the fabric. "There. You look like a Siregar now."

Since then, she has always kept an eye out for ikat. While her understanding of the fabric's history is still in its infancy stage, the appreciation and connection is now a blossoming seedling that she was determined to grow.

Trade events that centre around craft remain an overwhelming assault on the senses. Not only from the crowds of visitors who flock and flutter to and fro, eager for the chance of seeing crafts from far away regions and to haggle for discounts but also by the wares themselves.

Indonesians are storytellers at heart, but the written word had never been their chosen way of communicating. A verbal passing of the stories is time honoured tradition that has shaped the way Indonesians communicate and the way its language developed, and crafts were how meticulous records of tradition and culture were passed down.

Every piece of Indonesian craft carries with it a story, and if you knew how to read between the lines and curves made by deft hands, the craft events that are regularly held are akin to a library visit – if all the books were audiobooks, all playing at the same time.

Information of the origins and people from which craft comes are easily distinguished by type, while region-specific flora used as raw materials would indicate its geographic origins. Patterns and motifs become a descriptive, indicating their people's history, the intent of the craft's creation itself, and local beliefs. Every little thing becomes an indication, heavy with meaning with a joyful flourish that is never absent from Indonesian craft.

This makes craft events both a blessing and a curse for Atri. While the chance to explore Indonesia's culture through art is always a welcome experience, the sheer information overload and the intensely stimulating few hours spent looking at crafts would often leave her drained for days. But piggybacking on Sarah's quest to talk to the sellers was a chance too good to pass up.

Closely shadowing Sarah who was seeing the crafts with an academic lens allowed Atri to enjoy the experience at a different level. And while Atri's own heritage drew her to Javanese batik and Batak ikat, Sarah's research focus on woven traditions from NTT<sup>3</sup>, meant she was taken away to adventure in new areas of Indonesia.

<sup>1</sup> Ina Craf: an annual event which covers a span of an entire stadium to celebrate Indonesian craft showcasing handmade wearable art from across the archipelago, from woven fabrics to metal work, traditional wood carvings to modern repurposed, remolded, and reused plastic.

<sup>2</sup> Ikat: an Indonesian weaving process that uses 'a dyeing technique used to create a distinct style of textile patterns. Ikat is done by resist dyeing sections of the yarns prior to weaving the fabric.' (<https://craftatlas.co/crafts/ikat>)

<sup>3</sup> NTT: Nusa Tenggara Timur – East Nusa Tenggara, Flores, Indonesia.

## Sarah

Sarah has always been drawn towards tenun, it's not the wastra of her own culture, but it was and has been a journey to discovering and reconnecting with her own Indonesian roots. She is Javanese, so Batik has always been part of her. She remembers going to batik shops with her mother, running around in between the different colours and patterns as her mother finds the right ones for a wedding, or to give as presents. She even remembers playing amongst the large ceramic pots they used to make them colourful - there was always someone chasing her around telling her she wasn't supposed to be there.

But tenun is her kain. She first felt a connection when she went east for a research project working with weaving communities in Flores. It was a draw that sparked her interest because she had never seen them before, and it ignited her academic interests. To be in the same space where traditions and creative practice come together was eye-opening and it was where she first experienced the true diversity of the Indonesian Archipelago. It became a journey she has never been able to walk away from. To watch and learn from a weaver using her traditional back-strap loom makes her curious about how these skills were often unconsidered when people buy the finished product. How could sitting on a loom for hours on end, whilst feeding a family and raising children be anything but a miracle? What are the lives of these women who also tend to their rice paddies during the day? How do they value these skills that have been passed down through generations? Do they know how indescribably talented they are? How does creativity live in them?

Sarah walked into *Adiwastra Nusantara*<sup>1</sup> entering a library filled with stories, at the entrance is an anthology of wastra and kain Indonesia, Batik, Tenun, Embroidery...new and old existing side by side. They tell stories of the islands and villages, their cultures, family histories, the past, present and future. These stories are told through the patterns, colours and materials that are bound together through expert hands and creative thought. The best part of wastra and kain was that you could travel through them and with them, this was what connected the archipelago. Adiwastra is like an introduction, building the first connections to experiencing different cultures - you could touch and wear a kain from Sumba and learn about the plants that grow to make the browns or see the intricate horse motifs that symbolise heroism and bravery to connect with the people. You did not have to be there to know these stories, but it was always a privilege if you could travel deep into the villages, into the homes of where they are made...

Looking at a *tenun*<sup>2</sup> from Timor, Indonesia is reading the story of a mother teaching her daughter to weave as she becomes of age - it is a skill she must possess to show she is ready to become a wife and mother. She teaches her to make patterns and motifs through memory and stories. As the mother's expert hands make intentional movements, it is as if these motifs lived in them. As her fingers touch the thread arranging them for ikat, they are the bridges creating the path for the patterns to cross. As the ties are put in place, what cannot yet be seen begins to take shape, connecting with *leluhur*<sup>3</sup> - what emerges are the ideas from her mother before her and hers before her, all the way back to the first moment the first ancestor who first opened this connection from mind to thread.

<sup>1</sup> Adiwastra Nusantara: an annual traditional textile expo that showcases the diverse traditional textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago. The exhibition showcases sacred textiles (wastra) as well as innovative interpretations (kain and fashion).

<sup>2</sup> Tenun: woven textiles traditionally made on a back-strap loom. Patterns are made through different techniques: ikat (tye-dye), songket (similar to brocade).

<sup>3</sup> Leluhur: ancestors.



Through these fingers flow messages from family, stories of relationships and blessings. A young woman becomes ready to be a mother in these threads, the wastra symbolises that she is ready to build a home, provide shelter for her and her family. As the mother teaches her daughter, she guides her to embody the patterns in her own hands. Her fingers practice arranging individual threads in the right order, her hands follow her mother's as she observes the right places to make the tie, counting each thread – as she does this, she imagines the patterns they will create, ones she knows come from this bond between the mothers and daughters that came before her.

As she creates, her own stories are told, adding and continuing as they build - as they become part of her, she puts herself into them, the stories of her time, of a new generation. As the daughter practices, she memorises and learns her own family story, the ikat that will take the shapes of the sea creatures she sees in the waters by her home, or the trees in the forest that surrounds them. She begins to interpret them in her own style whilst also honouring the stories told by her mother. This kain she is creating is driven by her own imagination and what comes out of her hands is a new story, one she will continue telling until she passes it down to her own children.

I am thread, I am colour, I am symbols...I am a story

I could come from a different place, travel across seas, roads and mountains, but I return to where I used to grow...and connect my origins to the new...

Sometimes I am fed by the indigofera that grew wild in the forest, by the roads, behind the homes...I can become a deep dark blue, almost black, sometimes the water turns me a bright blue, almost as bright as the sky...

Sometimes I bathe in tree bark that turn me a warm brown, an earthy strong brown, I represent the growth of the land...reconnecting me with where I used to grow...

Sometimes...I tell a story of landscape, of nature...but now I tell a story of change, expression and style...my how times change...

I become wastra and give the blessings and prayers of the ancestors, I provide warmth and strength for the next stage in life...

I become kain and express individuality...of those who made me...of those who wear me...

**Anthways 2024**

**Vol 4, Issue 1**

**30 October 2024**