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# The ethnographer's magic as sympathetic magic

With all the attention paid to empathy in recent years, sympathy has received short shrift. Yet it is sympathy that has the longer legacy in anthropology, both as a descriptor for certain ways of relating to the world, and as a moral passion that characterises something important about the relationship between ethnographers and those they study. By juxtaposing biographical accounts of the author's own research with a reading of 18th-century texts from the Scottish Enlightenment on sympathy, this essay calls into question the assumption that sympathy arises from, even as it generates, culturally inscribed forms of empathy or closeness. I argue that what Malinowski called 'the ethnographer's magic' is (or can be) a sympathetic magic woven from biographical threads, depending for its efficacy on concealment and action at a proximate distance, rather than 'shared experience', identification with research participants, or affective appeals.

**Key words** ethnography, sympathy, methods, affect, ethics

## Introduction

'Don't get too close.' If anthropology were optics, the advice would have made perfect sense. Images blur as the camera lens approaches its subjects at close quarters; details and even recognition are lost. But what could 'don't get too close' mean for ethnography? First and foremost, don't 'go native'. Come back from the field. Learn to distinguish your relatively fleeting participation from enduring affiliation. Adoption into the group you studied might be fine, even something of a coup perhaps, so long as you treat it as a sort of honorary title, like the PhDs doled out to captains of industry or the knighthoods conferred on rock stars. Alternatively, if already judged by your fellow ethnographers to *be* irretrievably native, in order to have any hope of gaining the 'perspective' (again with the optics!) required to make meaningful observations, you should do your utmost to extricate yourself from the mire of loyalties and tacit knowledge that belonging implies.

In the late 20th century, postcolonial critique and the reflexive turn set this once time-honoured advice to departing fieldworkers on its head. Urgent, ostensibly new objects of ethical contemplation appeared in the form of empathy, engagement and respect. By bringing researcher and researched into a more intimate and presumably less exploitative relationship, many hoped to make morally defensible forms of fieldwork possible for a discipline with a complex historical relationship with inequality and colonising projects. Might closeness or 'life experience' sometimes constitute ethnographic virtues, in the sense that 'insiders' and 'advocates' are positioned to perceive (or come to know) things that more distanced researchers would never fathom?<sup>1</sup> Could shared joys and shared sufferings become a wellspring for what disciplinary ancestors

1 On the context-dependent instability of the insider/outsider distinction, see Weston (1997b).

once sought at the fount of ‘rapport’? The very premise of this special issue – that biography and ethnography are entangled in ways worthy of inspection – owes much to questions such as these, considered and reconsidered over many years.

A now routinised ‘I’ has survived those debates and gone on to populate successive generations of ethnographic accounts. Not surprisingly, it is to that ‘I’ that analysts often look for evidence of biographical influences on ethnographic research.<sup>2</sup> This essay, in contrast, presumes biography can exceed and even evade the ‘I’, in ways scarcely explored when it comes to shaping anthropological practice. The first edition of my monograph, *Families we choose*, for example, was sometimes taught as a reflexive ethnography due to a liberal sprinkling of ‘I’s’, with little notice taken of the absence of any biographical material on the family formations in which I had grown up (Weston 1997a [1991]). This was a carefully considered absence, from the author’s perspective, but not without influence on the fieldwork or the text.

How then to get at the biographical ingredients in that particular alchemy known as the ethnographer’s magic, if not through a stable ‘I’, or not simply through an ‘I’? A clue lies in the persistent appeal to moral passions – Resentment! Loyalty! Betrayal! Regret! – in attempts to configure biography as a ‘resource’ for fieldworkers (see Collins and Gallinat 2010). Such passions have European antecedents older than the 19th-century expeditions that launched anthropology. To grasp how biographical affinities can shape ethnographic practice, with or without intentionality in tow, this essay navigates past today’s empathic ‘I’s’, setting course for the 18th century, when moral passions drew critical scrutiny and sympathy drew people into relationship.

To the degree that the current ‘empathy boom’ in anthropology roots ethnographic ethics in an empathetic stance, aspiring ethnographers no longer have to worry about getting ‘too close’ (see Bell 2013b). Empathy enjoins them to try to see as those they study see, and feel what those they study feel, the better to understand what it means to inhabit a world, albeit while acknowledging the ethnographer’s own relative privilege. In the process, the cultural opposition between closeness and distance holds steady, even when the phenomenon of empathy itself becomes an object of study.<sup>3</sup>

While all this traffic in empathy has begun to attract critical scrutiny, sympathy continues to receive short shrift. Yet it is sympathy, not empathy, that has the longer legacy when it comes to ethnographic practice and all that an anthropologist brings to a field. It was sympathy, not empathy, that preoccupied ethnologists such as Durkheim and Mauss, whose *Primitive classification* presented readers with a ‘world still conceived as a vast system of classified and hierarchized sympathies’, right up to ‘the time of Plato’ (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]: 80). If early fieldworkers assigned sympathetic magic to corners of the world they perceived as still waiting to chance upon modernity, sympathy retained resonance for them in an interpersonal domain, when they pondered their relationships with ‘informants’ (see Dureau 2014). These researchers were heirs to Europe’s 18th century, where any archaeology of sympathy must begin. Near enough to understand what those who now equate sympathy with something mild or quiescent have forgotten: that the power of sympathy lies in a stimulus to action which exceeds observation or contemplation.

2 See Bochner and Ellis (2001), Okely and Callaway (1992), Reed-Danahay (1997) and Strathern (1987).

3 See Bell (2013a) and Hollan and Throop (2011).

The fellow-feeling that sympathy engenders also has a political history. In her work on postwelfarist Italy, Andrea Muehlebach (2012: 132) notes how neoliberal projects have invoked Adam Smith's treatment of sympathy to replace a 'Durkheimian ethic of solidarity' with appeals to the voluntarism of 'caring individuals'.<sup>4</sup> Smith himself argued that people's sympathies could be influenced by the disparities in wealth that a commercial society fosters, encouraging them to aspire to riches and pay little heed to the poor (see Rasmussen 2017: 172). This essay, then, is not so much a call for a sympathetic turn as it is a call for a more nuanced treatment of sympathy: As a moral passion highlighted during the Scottish Enlightenment that has left its mark on ethnographic practice today. As an integral part of anthropology's historical development. And, most importantly for the purposes of this special issue, as an analytic that encourages us to treat the relationship of biography to ethnography more, well, relationally, by abjuring facile generalisations about distance and closeness in favour of attention to subtler relations of contiguity, likeness and concealment.

### Lessons on sympathy from the Scottish Enlightenment

What did sympathy mean to its ardent proponents in 18th-century Scotland, and how does that differ from received understandings of sympathy today? Even a cursory look at texts by two key Scottish Enlightenment thinkers calls into question the assumption that an ethnographer's sympathetic engagement arises from, even as it generates, culturally inscribed forms of closeness. The first is Adam Smith's 1759 *The theory of moral sentiments*; the second, John Gregory's 1772 *Lectures on the duties and qualifications of a physician*. Both writers had inherited a notion of sympathy shaped by controversies over the validity of sympathetic medicine. The 'powder of sympathy' flogged by Sir Gilbert Talbot in the court of Henry VII and later by Sir Kenelm Digby in the 1650s promised to cure wounds when applied to the weapon that had caused the injury or when the powder was dissolved in a basin placed somewhere near the patient, in each case without any direct contact with the wound itself (Fulton 1937: 34–5). Digby was a proponent of what the Victorian ethnologists would recast for their still-modernising age as 'sympathetic magic'. In Britain knowledge about home-grown histories of sympathetic medicine receded along with the early modern period, allowing James Frazer in his bestseller *The golden bough* to assign sympathetic magic to an emphatically non-European Other.<sup>5</sup>

As children of the Enlightenment, it is hard to imagine Adam Smith or John Gregory availing themselves of such powders, but their use of sympathy retained from sympathetic medicine the concept of *action at a distance*. It was a considered distance, not some fuzzy psychic merger, which sympathy relied upon for its best effects. For Smith, sympathy was at once an exercise in imagination and situation. A sympathetic heart could quicken with misery as well as love:

When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and

4 Thanks to China Scherz for the link to this piece of Muehlebach's work.

5 'Home-grown' not in some purist sense, but in the sense that sympathetic medicine had its European proponents. Digby, for one, tried to enhance the allure of his powder of sympathy by trading on the rumour that returning Crusaders had carried it to England from the Holy Land (see Fulton 1937).

when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer. (2005 [1759]: I.i.1.3)

Because sympathetic encounters in Smith are imperfect, they tend to elicit social negotiations. Sentiments do not always correspond. Sensing this, Smith believed that people regularly toned down expressions of grief, joy or approbation.

Scholars sometimes contrast Smith's imaginatively mediated 'projection' account of sympathy with his friend David Hume's 'contagion' account, in which feelings conveyed themselves directly, with less expenditure of effort (Rasmussen 2017: 94, 110).<sup>6</sup> While both examined sympathy primarily in terms of human relations, it seemed possible to mobilise the faculty for other purposes. At a time when Hume was house-bound due to illness, Smith counselled him to enjoy the fine weather 'by Sympathy', which, Hume remarked from the proximate distance of his bed, 'I endeavour to do' (in Rasmussen 2017: 208).

For John Gregory, a medical man and member of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, sympathy represented not only a most moral passion but also a prerequisite for competence in a physician. Far from impeding the physician's ability to arrive at a proper diagnosis, sympathy facilitated the diagnosis by acting as a spur to action. 'That sensibility of heart which makes us feel for the distresses of our fellow-creatures', he wrote, 'incites us in the most powerful manner to relieve them.' Nor was the passion of sympathy incompatible with reasoning one's way toward a cure. Gregory held that 'the insinuation that a compassionate and feeling heart is commonly accompanied with a weak understanding and feeble mind, is malignant and false'. Genuine sympathy, he concluded, 'is never ostentatious, on the contrary, it rather strives to conceal itself' (1997 [1772]: 757).

The Scottish Enlightenment was not the era of tea and sympathy, when pats on the hand, murmured reassurances and distracted nods of the head served up signs of acquiescence to regrettable circumstances that no one seemed to be able to do anything about. This was the era of sympathy as a fierce moral force, capable of enlisting compassion and placing it in the service of intellectual inquiry, of public improvement, of soon-to-be-materialised projects. As Neal Hargraves (2009: 1) has argued, the Scottish literati hoped to cultivate a sociability rooted in '*politesse* and magnanimity' to lay to rest factional resentments that had sparked conflict after bloody conflict in the past. Their task was complicated by the imbrication of Scottish narrative history with those very conflicts, which meant that simply recounting events gone by could rekindle resentment.

The word resentment, from the French *ressentiment*, originally signified nothing more than strong feeling, either 'for good or ill'. Thus unqualified it was the essence of passion, and could attach itself to all other passions. Gradually, it was refined into a 'deep sense of injury', and closely associated therefore with the idea of justice. (Hargraves 2009: 6)

Somewhere in this process of transforming resentment into an object of inquiry, sympathy became key to the Enlightenment endeavour, underwriting 'the coherence of economies of self-interest and economies of fellow-feeling' that Muehlebach (2012: 27)

6 But see the cautionary passage below, which explains why it would be a mistake to dismiss a projection account of sympathy as mere projection.

detects in Smith's work.<sup>7</sup> A rehabilitated, more socially productive resentment could take the form of sympathetic indignation, born of sympathy for another's distress, knowing what one feels for one's own.

How, then, to go about translating into ethnographic practice this 18th-century understanding of sympathy as a passion that need not be at odds with reason *or* social struggle? The hardest interview I ever conducted was with a man in his forties in the late stages of Kaposi's sarcoma who offered to talk to me about living with AIDS. This was in San Francisco back in 1985, when there was no remedy for HIV/AIDS and people had begun to mark time with a litany of funerals. Were it not for his diagnosis, he said, he would have described himself as 'well off', but now even that simple euphemism for class privilege seemed suffused with irony. He filled out a consent form, then spent the entire four hours that the tape recorder was turned on raging. Not at God or the drug companies or the unfairness of it all, but at me. He was scathing. He was merciless. I was young and driven to tears. In the end, it came down to this: He was dying. I wasn't. At least, not imminently, in the way that he was. The acid in his words dissolved any bond our gayness might have presupposed, until all we shared in that room that day was the knowledge of this bitter unbridgable difference.

'Sorry for living!' we used to say in the Chicago neighbourhoods where I grew up, whenever a person felt unjustly attacked. Sorry for living: I think that was the apology he really wanted.

As someone with friends who were succumbing to AIDS-related maladies all around me, I was already committed to offering whatever the humble anthropologist could by way of documenting the epidemic, especially as it affected kinship. But as a fieldworker this interview shocked me – out of my head, as it were, into a different modality and intensity of investigation. I understood with a startling clarity that longitudinal fieldwork would be impossible because so many of the people I worked with on a day-to-day basis were in the process of leaving their bodies. I sensed, even then, that this interview would have an afterlife. Its action at a distance extended to a book chapter on AIDS and reproductive technologies, to an essay on the dedication of one of my books to a friend who had committed suicide, to a lecture on the HIV/AIDS pandemic in my Disaster course that students characterise as the most powerful presentation of the term. While these links are not exactly concealed, in Gregory's sense, neither can a reader or listener discern them without some biographical offering.

## The ethnographer's magic as sympathetic magic

Sympathetic magic relies for its effects on associations produced through *contiguity*: a spatial configuration that establishes a potent relationship between things, either through an initial direct contact or by bringing them into rough proximity. Once established, this relationship persists, even at a remove, allowing each to continue to affect the other from afar.

What Bronislaw Malinowski (1932 [1922]: 6) famously termed 'the ethnographer's magic' looked to contiguity to produce its most vigorous effects. The immersive fieldwork he advocated, soon to become codified as participant observation, required anthropologists to move into everyday proximity with those they hoped to

<sup>7</sup> See also Phillipson (2012: 149).

understand, with the expectation that this reorganisation of spatial relations would promote what today's researchers might call sociocultural competence. Geographically speaking, well before Malinowski began his wartime sojourn in the Trobriand Islands, anthropologists had been edging ever nearer to their newly conceived objects of study. His call in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* for researchers to get off the veranda only made sense in an era when armchair anthropology was already giving way to the more proximate investigations of the Torres Strait Expedition, whose members utilised the veranda of the colonial bungalow as a liminal zone where 'natives' and anthropologists could meet up to pursue their respective queries.<sup>8</sup>

But geographic proximity was not the only way that contiguity fuelled ethnographic inquiry. A re-examination of the ethnographer's magic passage in *Argonauts* suggests that this particular brand of magic concerns not only method, as Malinowski's successors often have it, but something more. Malinowski's question to himself, and to his readers, was this: 'What is then this ethnographer's magic, by which he is able to *evoke* the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life?' (1932 [1922]: 6; my emphasis). To be sure, this magic relied on novel procedures of investigation, predicated on daily contact and the proximate distance of co-residence. But *this* magic also enlisted evocation as a kind of action at a distance, through words transported into lecture halls and texts. Its mystical power derived from associations established on-site through contiguity, associations that could manifest robust effects far from the original locales of observation. A sympathetic magic indeed.

Analytically speaking, it is possible to parse the act of ethnographic conjuring more finely. In his classic treatise on sympathetic magic, Frazer (1922 [1890]: 11) divided his subject into branches, as befitted any 'system of natural law', however 'spurious'. The first subsidiary he called Homeopathic Magic, based on the Law of Similarity; the second, Contagious Magic, based on the Law of Contact. To cause injury to an enemy by destroying an image that resembles him would be an instance of homeopathic magic. To keep someone in good health by protecting the umbilical cord once joined to her body would be an instance of contagious magic. In each case, an intervening distance – between enemy and image, between body and what has touched it – cannot prevent sympathetic engagement from producing ongoing effects. Indeed, when it comes to sympathy, that intervening distance is the very thing that gives it its character.

In anthropological practice, the making and deployment of fieldnotes bear certain hallmarks of contagious magic. Notes can be entrusted to paper or screen at any point in the research process, from 'first contact' with a topic explored in the pages of books, through scribbled impressions set down in the midst of participant observation, to the annotated outlines that structure many an essay. They can even be carried around 'in the head', congealed into images or emerging as 'flashbulb memories' triggered by the affective prompts of later events (Brown and Kulick 1977). All bear traces of 'the field', canvassed and reconstituted for a reading public. But fieldnotes, as commonly conceived, must be set down while the researcher inhabits 'the field', not elsewhere. They must be portable, created with a future intervening distance in mind, if only the distance achieved by taking the metro cross-town from the site of an interview back to

8 That Murray Islanders staged their own inquiries into the practices of visiting researchers is evident in Haddon's (1901) account of his time in the Torres Strait, *Head-hunters: black, white, and brown*. For an image of C. G. Seligman and unnamed 'informants' at work on one of many colonial verandas, see Stocking (1992: 29).

one's study. Maps inscribed in the sand with a stick might lodge in memory, but they do not count.

Fieldnotes also possess a certain physicality. The material culture of fieldnotes varies tremendously, from digital files to the grease-spotted bags from fast-food counters I used to jot notes on while riding buses during the research for *Traveling light: on the road with America's poor* (Weston 2008). One colleague of mine carefully preserved thickly inscribed rolls of toilet paper he had smuggled out of his minimum-wage workplace in the days before ethics committees made undercover research less practicable. A few stolen moments each day in the stalls afforded the only opportunity for him to create notes on-site. He would not have been on-site at all if his own working-class childhood had not convinced him of the need for fieldwork in the most exploitative jobs where employers would never knowingly admit an investigator.

Notes of any kind are supposed to jog and corroborate memory, but the creation of fieldnotes *in* a field lends them a certain aura. When fieldnotes get lost – the wartime fate of so much that Edmund Leach (1954) committed to paper during his research for what became *Political systems of highland Burma* – the published ethnography may be greeted with a whiff of suspicion. (Never mind that reconstruction has an integral part to play in ethnography as such.) I will not hesitate to recycle the notes for this essay, but the old steel file drawers that house my fieldnotes would surely give me pause, should I approach them with any maleficent intent. And even if I *were* to conclude that those site-specific musings from projects gone by would be of no use to me going forward, the Spirit of Regret would surely strike me down if I discovered at a later point that I could have enlisted them with a new scholarly purpose.

Physicality, portability, creation in the field, consultation in other settings: are such *de facto* requirements for a fieldnote mere practicalities demanded of any reliable spur to memory, or something more? Might the fieldnote also serve as a kind of talisman: a paper or digital scrap that derives an enduring power from its original contact with a place, a setting loosely dubbed 'the field', and continues to radiate that contagious power once transported to new venues? Records of things that the ethnographer has forgotten to document can be created some months hence, wherever the researcher lands up, but they will lack these magical properties.<sup>9</sup> They will be, simply, notes, not fieldnotes, which opens them up to the possibility of a different valuation.

Like the Kai sorcerer in W. H. R. Rivers' *Medicine, magic, and religion* who secures a bit of soul-substance and 'repairs to a lonely hut', anthropologists leave fieldwork clasping annotated observations and snatches of conversations that they plan to submit to analysis (see Rivers 1924: 18). And who can say what will happen there, in the writer's hut? Sympathy with the inhabitants of investigations now departed can certainly tempt us to overlay our biographically distinctive concerns onto the characters that populate any text, peppering the ethnography with intrusive objects that lie in wait for some *curandera* of a critic to extract them. Where's the scholarship in that? At its best, however, sympathy cultivates in the fieldworker a kind of biographically informed imaginative apprehension that is faithful to another's circumstance, not her own, and more productive of insight than any objectivist detachment.

What, then, of the homeopathic variety of sympathetic magic, which appeals to similarity rather than contagion? Ethnography would be hard-put to proceed without

9 Compare Sanjek's (1990) rather different take on fieldnotes as a rite of passage for aspiring anthropologists.



drawing on analogy. ‘This dance/altercation/living arrangement/factional fight/infrastructure project/(insert X) that I observed during field research can be understood by appealing to something I already know or do, preferably something that you, dear reader, should recognize as well.’ The Yorkshire schoolboy and the apprentice ‘witch doctor’ in E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1976 [1937]) *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande* do not have to touch, or meet, outside the pages of a book. Evans-Pritchard makes the case for the reasonableness of one, newly apprehended, through an appeal to the presumed reasonableness of a more familiar another.

At a glance, analogies are explication powered by similarity. Without some homeopathic frisson, they struggle to persuade. Look again, and the distinction Marilyn Strathern (2011) draws between analogy and resemblance gains importance. In ‘Binary license’, Strathern reserves the term analogy for ‘how one may say or know about one thing through knowing about another thing’ (2011: 96). This is not a matter of comparison of two fully formed instances that already wear resemblance on their sleeves. Perceiving analogously need not imply perceiving resemblance (2011: 102), and when analogies do foreground likeness, they may attenuate knowledge that undercuts the analogy (Schueller 2005). The very process of redescribing one form of sociality in terms of another changes things, yielding a ‘not-quite-replication’ of persons or terms which may or may not be said to resemble one another (Strathern 2011: 98).

Rather than run a single bright chronological line through a narrative, people often explain how, when something happened, it was like (or unlike) something else. One story acquires shape through another, sometimes even as an event unfolds. In Tokyo, during the 3.11 earthquake that opens a chapter in my book *Animate planet*, the woman hanging onto the door frame for dear life next to me exclaimed, ‘It’s like a movie!’ while the tremors still threatened to take our entire building down. I have since remarked how frequently survivors of cataclysmic events narrate their experiences through the filter of disaster films. Not ‘the movies are like this’, mind you, but ‘this is like a movie’, with that illusory quality life sometimes assumes as the heart-mind (*kokoro*) tries to come to terms with things that are readily imaginable for someone else yet heretofore unimaginable for *us*.

To say ‘this is like’, with one’s future condensed on the point of a swaying skyscraper in Shinjuku, can be a sympathetic statement. Similarity is implied, but so, too, is action at a proximate distance, with proximity established when analogy sets up a relationship that redescribes a situation: in this case, the unimaginable-for-us has come for us. Stories about other people’s lives supply matériel to redescribe something about our own, allowing us, in the moment, to perceive and potentially act differently than before the analogy was drawn. Homeopathically similar, never simple. In analogical ethnography – to borrow Ashley Lebner’s (2017: 12) phrase for Strathern’s approach – people can go on living rather parallel lives, even as those parallel alignments exert an effect on each other when analogy brings them into relationship.

A homeopathic impetus also inhabits the analogy that figures ethnography as an exercise in translation, where translation establishes similarity (and an invitation to sympathy) by rendering each practice, phrase and artefact into the form of an already familiar another, even as it mediates sociocultural difference. Any wizardry to this sort of enterprise resides precisely in effects achieved at a distance through contactless homeopathic pairing, by working with what happens during field research in a way that ignites understanding at some remove. And where would competence in the

humble 'home' register for translating *into* originate, if not with a life the anthropologist has lived beyond the rigours of professional training?

Although Frazer assigned contiguity to the operations of contagious magic, contiguity can enliven homeopathic varieties of sympathetic magic as well. Where ethnographic enchantments are concerned, it is the proximate circumstance of living-here, researching-here, that gives the use of homeopathic correspondence and translation metaphors their intellectual force. Only after living-here, researching-here ('here' being the Solomon Islands) could Christine Dureau (2014: 58) conclude that the difficulties Simbo had with their ancestors were 'somewhat like my own'. Among her own ancestors Dureau numbered anthropologists from the colonial period whose unsavoury comments about those they studied bequeathed to their professional descendants a necessary ambivalence about their shared discipline.

Often enough, ethnographers draw on contagious and homeopathic versions of sympathetic magic simultaneously. In practice, the two are often bound up together. My first-ever foray into field research – excluding a couple of archaeological summer camps, where I did my level amateur best not to ravage my bits of a gridded Havana Hopewell village and a Mogollon pueblo – involved an investigation of gendered divisions of labour in 1980s Japan. Post-Meiji prescriptions for becoming a Good Wife Wise Mother carried a great deal of social weight at the time, which meant that the idealised life for women after marriage did not include working outside the home for money. Corporate employers seemed only too happy to institutionalise this ideology through exclusionary hiring practices that required women to resign if they wanted a wedding. Factory work, especially for the legions of subcontractors who made lifetime employment at larger firms possible, was another matter. When home finances were tight in working-class and even some middle-class areas, women routinely went to work for wages.

Did I suss this out by reading economics reports or interviewing people in the suites of managerial offices? On the contrary: the first hint of these sorts of arrangements turned up with the daily mail. Plain, plain envelopes arrived with regularity in the Kurume neighbourhood where I was staying in Kyūshū. At first, I had no idea what was in those envelopes, of course, or whether the content would relate to my project. They were not directed to me but to residents like the family that had agreed to host me. But those envelopes piqued my curiosity because they reminded me of the 'brown paper wrapper', a technology designed to conceal (back where I came from) that had acquired new piquancy in my life as I felt my way toward coming out in the wake of 'gay liberation'. All sorts of newly launched gay publications had become available in the USA, but they travelled through the mail in anonymous (and therefore ironically identifiable) wrappers like these. *Like* these. Or so I thought.

Such sympathetic inferences can generate misunderstandings, of course, but even if later dismissed on the grounds of validity, they should never be dismissed as 'mere projections'. For one, they are not without effect. Misunderstandings, once recognised, offer rich ethnographic material. And biographically inflected inferences, regardless of truth status, set in motion investigations an ethnographer might otherwise not pursue.

Many sorts of homeopathic likenesses and contagious contacts are embedded in that recognition scene with the envelope in Kurume. It's not just that my hands had torn into plain paper wrappers before. A childhood stamp collection ensured, early on, that little to do with the globalisation of postal services would escape my notice. It probably helped that my father worked as a letter carrier. Over school breaks he encouraged me to

accompany him on his route. It was a thrill when he let me place letters in the hands of waiting pensioners, for whom the daily mail represented the kind of lifeline people associate with the Internet today. My father taught me how to dodge the postal inspectors who spied on ordinary workers and would have docked him for the illicit practice of taking me along. Whenever the lookouts (aka mail recipients) on his route reported seeing an inspector, we hopped buses to keep those nasty ferrets at bay. More concealment. With a government-issued mailbag on his shoulder my father could ride the buses for free, which led me to conclusions about the elevated powers of postmen that took years to undo. All this made Japan Post and the prospect of home delivery immediately legible, even if the local postman in Kurume called out '*ojama shimasu*' (a formulaic 'sorry for disturbing you') when he made his rounds, a practice that intrigued my dad when I later described it. Biographically illuminated, these deliveries thousands of miles away from the pavements where I once walked a route with my father acquired intelligibility, but also something more. They became noticeable in a way that served as an incitement to action.

I asked whether I might open one of the envelopes that had found its way through the by-lanes of Kurume to the place where I was staying and discovered that, sure enough, this strangely familiar device of the plain wrapper *was* intended to conceal. Yet the matter calling out for concealment here was nothing *like* what I would have stumbled across in the States. Inside were solicitations directed specifically at women, offering them paid, if often menial, work. The wrappers made it appear that nothing at odds with Good Wife Wise Mother ideology was going on. They also shielded the overtures from the restless eyes of neighbours.

This simple case shows how biographically informed perceptions of similarity can widen the scope of ethnographic inquiry and lead to sympathetically inspired questions. At the time, I wondered what it would be like to be a woman who needed a job like the ones advertised. What hardships would dialling (or not dialling) the phone numbers listed on the flyers impose? How would her efforts to manage her neighbours' perceptions resemble or differ from the ones I routinely employed in situations where it was not safe or advisable to be out about my sexuality, whether in Japan, the USA, or elsewhere in the world?

Similarity encodes difference, not just sameness, lending an almost-but-not-quite quality to anything it brushes. Some of the homeopathic likenesses I initially perceived in Japan turned out to make sociocultural sense, while others, on further investigation, did not. Either way, the sympathetic engagement led me to actions I might otherwise not have taken. Without it, I probably would not have set up factory tours when I returned to Tokyo. Without it, my conversations with women on the shop floors would not have happened, or would have veered off in different directions.

## **Sympathetic action at a mobile distance**

I have strategically woven these biographical snippets into an account of preliminary fieldwork written up for the first time here in order to disrupt any temptation to map the 'action at a distance' of sympathetic magic onto some mythical 'home'/'field' divide.<sup>10</sup> Too often ruminations about the influence of biography on ethnography

10 On the effort required to maintain the home/field opposition in ethnography, see Gupta and Ferguson (1997).

assign biography to the prequel and afterlife of field research. George Stocking's (1992: 40) essay on the ethnographer's magic contains a charming passage of this sort, in which Malinowski's mother makes an anthropologist of him as she reads to him from *The golden bough*. But biography also operates within the anthropologist's notional field, not just outside it, and continues to unfold as anthropologists go about their investigations. The contagious magic of the European novels that Malinowski retired to read when he had had his daily fill of Trobrianders lent a lyrical cadence to his prose, from the troubling pages of his diaries to the *Argonauts*' polished proofs.

Bidden or unbidden, biography also worms its way into the writing process. For 'Political ecologies of the precarious', a chapter in *Animate planet* originally published in *Anthropological Quarterly*, I devised the notion of the 'ethnographic stopgap', a vignette repurposed from memories never originally meant to qualify as part of fieldwork. A childhood trip to a car dealership in Chicago, sights glimpsed along a toll road in Delhi, and a conspiratorial exchange over breakfast in Venice landed up together in a scholarly book. Originally scattered across decades and continents, these scenes drew alongside one another into a new sort of contiguity, illuminated by their late-breaking illustrative mission. Memory-infused passages now carried theoretical allusions 'to the promising yet utterly inadequate stopgap measures currently advanced to address ecological degradation', with 'a nod to the sporadic and perpetually disrupted character that eco-economic precarity lends to environmental politics' (Weston 2017: 178). As stories settled into the mire of an essay on the sensuous attractions of synthetic chemistry, I hoped they would provoke a visceral response in the reader, something more fiercely sympathetic than the dull impulse that registers yet another litany of environmental woes.

Through it all – from childhood bedtime stories to professional training to field research to the writer's hut – the 'distance' in sympathy's capacity to act at a remove is a mobile one that can assume many forms, not all of them geographic. The chasm that joined me to and separated me from the man I interviewed for *Families we choose* whose life was edging over into death was never spatial, though it opened up between us in a way more palpable than measurement.

Temporality, too, can encode distance. Whenever I talk about my historical research on interactions between Andamanese, convicts and government officials at the British penal colony in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, colleagues routinely ask me whether I have been there. 'What, to the nineteenth century?' I playfully respond. 'Not until our friends over in the engineering school work out the last kinks in their time machine!' For George Stocking, an inability to go there, be there, 'do there', marked a crucial distinction between the historian's archive and the ethnographer's field: 'You cannot directly question dead informants; nor need you worry about their reactions, or how your inquiry might affect their lives' (1992: 13). But I did eventually go to the Andamans, to take in the memorialised version of what remains of the Cellular Jail and wander through shops run by descendants of some of those self-same convicts. On the launch to Ross Island, filled with Indian families and honeymoon couples, my thoughts chugged along to the beat of the old diesel engine, tacking between a lively anticipation and remembered passages from the archives. My wife and I spent hours poking around the ruins of the colony's administrative centre, now *jungli* and overgrown, as well as a Japanese bunker constructed during the Pacific War. Months later, I was surprised how details from this imaginative excursion saturated the air around my desk as I began to write things up (see Weston 2006). My prose, which tried to convey

something of the flavour of a time I could never visit, was, I would like to think, the better for this journey, which could only approximate the closing of a proximate gap with my subject.

Adam Smith presented sympathy for the dead as a kind of limit case for the compatibility of moral sentiment with understanding.

Overlooking what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them [the dead], we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike *our* senses, but can have no influence upon *their* happiness. It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth. (2005 [1759]: I.i.1.13; my emphasis)

Even in this moment of misrecognition, the exercise of sympathy for Smith was not without salutary effect. ‘From our lodging, if I may be allowed to say so, our own living souls in their inanimated bodies’, he contended, rose a fear of death that he credited with the protective power of restraining ‘the injustice of mankind’ (2005 [1759]: I.i.1.13).

The ‘incompleteness and incommensurability of experience’ that Victoria Goddard explores in her contribution to this special issue can be tempered, then, by the nimble, even provocative, engagement that sympathy represents. Artfully constituted, such engagement does not dissolve the distance between us in ways that only reason can restore, but depends on it. Frazer called it ‘a secret sympathy’: secret, by virtue of the invisible means through which one thing presumes to act on another across a distance, however that distance be conceived. Frazer, too, worked with analogies. Sympathetic magic, he argued, enlists ‘what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether, not unlike that which is postulated by modern science for a precisely similar purpose, namely, to explain how things can physically affect each other through a space which appears to be empty’ (1922 [1890]: 12). These days, he would be writing about quantum entanglement, that ‘spooky action at a distance’ that so disconcerted Einstein.

## The parallax worlds of ethnography and biography

To style the ethnographer’s magic a sympathetic magic is to attend to the raw delicacy required to come and go in difference. When the ethnographer works her magic and manages the trick, sympathy is born of contiguity, of contact or proximity in a near distance traversed (but not bridged) by words and the occasional silence. If ethnography and biography unfurl in parallel, as the title of this collection suggests, then moments like this give way to parallax.

Parallax occurs when an observer’s movement to a new position – across an ocean, a boundary or a room – appears to displace whatever is observed. It powers the optical illusion of a convergence at the vanishing point where parallel lines/worlds/biographical narratives seem to meet, not anywhere and everywhere, but under conditions that lead the ethnographer’s eye to the horizon of something forever elusive and always yet to be grasped. The heart-mind follows, propelled in directions a less sympathetic researcher might never have ventured.


Born in parallax, ethnographic sympathy is not empathy. Neither is it some way station *en route* to an empathy conceived as more intimate, morally salubrious and epistemologically capacious. The 'anxious attention' that John Gregory prescribed during the Scottish Enlightenment as a bedside manner for physicians was not supposed to yield any straightforward identification, much less an empathetic claim to inhabit another's 'experience' (see Hollan and Throop 2011). Rather than attempt to *feel* a patient's pain, the physician's sympathetic task was to imaginatively apprehend what it might be *like* to feel it, in order to direct the physician's attention to 'a thousand little circumstances' otherwise missed that would help him decide on a course of medical action (Gregory 1997 [1772]: 757). This imaginative mediation via likeness could go both ways, and need not always be placed in the service of observation. In Lorraine Daston's (1992: 604) reading of Adam Smith's *The theory of moral sentiments*, sympathy entails a kind of reciprocity, in which the sufferer may begin to 'approximate the cool indifference of the spectator', even as the spectator begins to grasp 'some of the anguish of the sufferer'. The opposition that 21st-century pop psychology constructs between an empathy that 'fuels connection' and a sympathy found wanting because it 'drives disconnection' would be unrecognisable to these Enlightenment thinkers, as it would to many of our anthropological forebears (see Bell 2013a). Sympathetic action at a distance partakes of both impulses, attending to concealment without assimilating concealment to treachery or disassociation.

The imaginative exercise at sympathy's heart requires a researcher to conjure circumstances that she accepts she will never fully understand, at least not in the ways that those daily ensconced in those circumstances know them. Yet the homeopathic and contagious enchantments involved do not return the ethnographer's magic to the realm of the speculative. Parallax may generate convergences that exist only in the imagination, but it brings ethnography and biography together through an empirically informed sorcerer's conceit. Only in the course of paying 'anxious attention' to stories, to directions, to surroundings, do railroad tracks and 'like' experiences appear to meet. An ethnographer sets out to find the point where lives converge, knowing she will never quite get there, but guided by observation. What happens next changes things, even as the point of convergence perpetually recedes.

This is why the contiguity that enlivens sympathy cannot be equated with closeness, no matter the affections or political solidarities involved. An ethnographer sits down with other people, biography shoving up against biography, the gulf between them as wide as a table or as narrow as death. Together they work their way toward some reasoned, impassioned understanding, if only of that which separates them. Most likely the ethnographer has been trained to feel responsibility to an abstraction called 'knowledge', but as time passes, she begins to feel an equal responsibility to all the rage and curiosity, joy and indifference, struggle and anticipation that others have entrusted to her. Informed by that responsibility, wisely or unwisely, she acts.

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## La magie de l'ethnologue comme magie sympathique

A cause de toute l'attention accordée à l'empathie au cours des dernières années, la sympathie a été négligée. Pourtant, c'est la sympathie qui est un opérateur depuis plus longtemps en anthropologie, à la fois comme descripteur de certaines manières de se rapporter au monde et passion morale qui caractérise quelque chose d'important dans la relation entre les ethnologues et les personnes étudiées. En juxtaposant des récits biographiques des recherches de l'auteur et une lecture de textes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle des Lumières écossaises sur la sympathie, cet article remet en question l'hypothèse selon laquelle la sympathie provient--tout en générant--des formes d'empathie ou de proximité incarnées dans la culture. Je soutiens que ce que Malinowski a appelé «la magie de l'ethnologue» est (ou peut être) une magie sympathique tissée de fils biographiques, et qui pour être efficace dépend de la dissimulation et de l'action à proximité, pour être efficace plutôt que «d'expériences partagées», d'identification avec les personnes impliquées dans les recherches ou d'appels affectifs.

**Mots-clés** affect, éthique, méthodes, ethnographie, sympathie