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“Teaching Ethnography through Thick and Thin”

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Hello. My name is Sawa Kurotani. There are three parts to my talk: Intro Crowd as Public Audience, Ethnography as a Lens, and Teaching Ethnographic Thinking. Complete reference information for sources cited in this talk is attached at the end of the transcript.

Anthropology is everyone’s one-hit wonder.

We’ve all had the same conversation, at a wedding reception, a holiday dinner table, a cashier’s line at the grocery store. As soon as people find out that we teach anthropology, they start reminiscing about that one anthropology class they took in college.

“It was soo interesting,” they gush. “I looved learning about all these different cultures!” Then, we move on to another topic, just like they moved on to study something else, business, psychology, nursing, whatever.

We’ve always catered to the so-called “intro crowd” to earn our keeps. A necessary evil that makes our smallish academic departments institutionally viable. Don’t take me wrong – this marriage has been successful in its own way. We love to talk about our stuff to a roomful of people. Undergrads find us quite entertaining, too. Middle-aged academics, foaming at our mouth about some fine points of exotic rituals, the plight of an obscure ethnic minority group, or in my own case, mundane household

routines of expatriate Japanese families. At the same time, we haven't given much thought to the majority of these students, who only take anthropology for their general education requirement.

This got to change, is the main point of this talk.

Intro Crowd as the Public Audience

The discipline of anthropology – at least in the United States – is at the crossroads. Has been there for the past decade or two. Our concerns are many: the scarcity of funding for academic research, shrinking enrollment, diminishing value of college education. Economic disparity, civil unrest, environmental devastation, and many other issues of global import also demand swift actions, to which anthropology can, and should, make significant contributions. The pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake seems more and more like a luxury we can no longer afford. COVID-19 exacerbates our sense of urgency.

As we navigate these troubled waters, public engagement has taken on new significance. Academic anthropologists are pursuing public anthropology; many others work outside academia. A few anthropologists with high public profile are our discipline's new heroes.

Rising interest in anthropological pedagogy is another response to changing times. We have two online journals now that are dedicated to teaching and learning of anthropology. Contents on the AAA website still focus on graduate students and advanced undergraduate majors, but more information-sharing is taking place to support intro-level teaching. Take, for example, the AAA's open-access textbook, *Perspectives: an Open Invitation to Cultural Anthropology*. A laudable effort at increasing the accessibility of quality anthropological material. But we must do more, to reach and capture the imagination of the intro crowd. Why? Because they *are* our biggest public audience.

Ethnography as a Lens

All these years of teaching intro-level survey courses, I was haunted by a nagging doubt. Students went through a laundry list of topics, their attention focused on the unfamiliar and exotic. They were not getting what it was to see the world through an ethnographic lens.

What does it mean, though, to “see the world through an ethnographic lens”? By now, it is almost a second nature to me – too ingrained in my everyday perception to even take notice. So, I go back to where it all started.

“Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village...” (Malinowski 1961: 4). In Malinowski’s oft-cited arrival scene, a lone anthropologist embarks on an adventure of his lifetime (gendered pronoun after Malinowski’s usage) in a strange island far away from home. The romanticized vision is incongruent with the ethnographer’s “scientific aim,” to “[introduce] law and order into what seemed chaotic and freakish” (9). The sense of incongruence is reinforced by Malinowski’s choice of words: “spirit”, “evoke,” and most of all, “magic,” to describe the efficacy of his scientific method (6). And, finally, quizzical instructions he gives to this scientist-ethnographer: “Forgetting for a moment that he knows and understands the structure... to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on” (21).

Malinowski’s idealized Ethnographer, with a capital “E”, has a split personality. On one hand, he is an objective and rational scientist, systematically collecting data and giving order to the otherwise lawless cultural universe. On the other hand, he is a feeling/sensing human being, with innate curiosity and gregarious nature, a conjurer of the spirit of the culture he studies, a process unfathomable by the empirical science he himself extolls.

Since then, modern ethnography walked the fine line between science and magic – Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; *Argonauts vs. A Diary* (Malinowski 1961 and 1967); Elenore Smith Bowen, Laura Bohannan’s doppelganger, who believed her personal narrative would tarnish her professional credibility. All the way down to Clifford Geertz, who asserted the place of interpretation at the center of our craft, and yet, called it science with his own brand of empiricism: thick description.

So the fate is sealed, it seems. Nitty-gritties as anthropology’s *raison detre*. To squirrel away every morsel of ethnographic detail, in hopes of transforming disordered bits into the coherent whole.

As professional researchers, we should, of course, mind all these nitty-gritties. Not only of what details we gather, but also how we do it consistently and ethically. Similarly, when we are working with students who are headed toward our profession, we should also guide them to take them seriously. Then again, what about our biggest public audience, the intro crowd? How do we teach them, in short 15 weeks of the semester, that elusive magic Malinowski spoke of?

It should not be a surprise, perhaps, that it took an anthropological thinker outside the academy to cut through the endless details that we uphold as the foundation of ethnographic practices. Jay Hasbrouck, a strategist and anthropologist, urges us to think of ethnography as a “mindset,” or a habit of thought – hence his book title, *Ethnographic Thinking* – that allows us to understand human actions in context.

I hear a Malinowski’s echo: put aside the nitty-gritties and explore the world as it unfolds around us. This is the magic of ethnography we can impart to our intro crowd, our captive public audience. Who will become, in 20 years’ time, Hasbrouk’s audience in the world of practical problem-solving.

Teaching Ethnographic Thinking

In a moment of clarity – or insanity, depending on how I look at it - I decided to completely redesign my intro courses around this new agenda: to teach ethnography as a way of thinking that anyone can apply anywhere, anytime. I would like to share three preliminary thoughts to conclude this talk.

1. Teach Single-Topic Intros. If your curricular structure allows, try teaching an intro-level course on a single topic, and use it as the window through which to explore many areas of anthropology. In my introductory course on material culture, for example, I was able to incorporate family and marriage, gender, economic and political systems, beliefs and rituals, globalization and migration, into our conversations. Students learn these subjects in a more holistic way, rather than as separate topics that come and go weekly.

2. Use Role-Playing Activities. At first skeptical of using role-playing, I found the result of my first attempt eye-opening. I devised an in-class exercise called “Eager Anthropologist,” in which an earnest but inexperienced ethnographer tries to ply some culturally sensitive information out of Reluctant Informants, while Gawking Tourists eavesdropped on their conversation. They were all given scenarios to follow and told to act in their character for the duration of the 30-minute exercise.

At the reflection session after the exercise, students reported exactly the kind of responses I hoped for. From those who played Eager Anthropologists: the frustration of obtaining information without sufficient knowledge of the social and cultural context. From Reluctant Informants: Being obligated to protect insider knowledge, and yet, feeling awkward about saying no. And from Gawking Tourists: Curious yet confused by the strangely disjointed conversations unfolding around the room.

3. Turn Ethnographic Gaze onto the Familiar. If health concerns diminish our opportunities to be out and about, why not turn our analytical gaze to the familiar.

Two of my examples are the analysis of one's own bedroom, and changes in food-related habits during the pandemic. The trick is to incorporate activities to encourage an analytical distance. Before the bedroom assignment, my students read the analysis of domestic space by Jeanne Arnold et al. (2012). It helped them see how an ethnographic lens allowed them to extract more information from the mundane details of their everyday life that were otherwise overlooked. In the food assignment, students shared their thoughts online, and then, analyzed all the posts as a set of "case studies," from which to find recurring themes and patterns. These exercises and activities required my students to apply ethnographic thinking and attempt, at least for the moment, a deeper understanding of their everyday world, without having to go through the rigamarole of methodological training or institutional review process.

My exploration is ongoing, and I will be sharing more of my findings at my website in the future. If you are curious about my progress, please visit me at www.thinkethnography.net. Thank you for listening!

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