

In and Out of Place: Ethnography as ‘Journeying With’ Between Central and South Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the case of an Aboriginal woman from Central Australia who has in recent years experienced a radical shift in her life circumstances. It pursues a writerly approach that makes the variety of forces and relationships legible that she now navigates, including that of the anthropologist-friend. ‘Journeying with’ is proposed as an ethnographic method as well as an ethical stance well attuned to the turbulent circumstances of the present—in the Warlpiri life sketched here, and globally. Destabilization and displacement are increasingly common features of contemporary experience, and this paper proposes that ethnography anchored at the level of the individual person is well placed to engage unsettling transformations in the world at large, in social relationships, and modes of personhood, as well as in anthropological production.

Keywords: displacement, ethnographic method, journeying with, nostalgia, tactical humanism, Warlpiri.

PROLOGUE: ANTHROPOLOGY’S SHIFTING RELATIONAL GROUND

We had spoken on the phone only intermittently over the past four years. Nungarrayi¹ always seemed to be able to locate my number whenever she wanted to make contact. She lost mobile phones frequently, so my ability to contact her was constrained by circumstance and contingency. Her two adult daughters, mothers themselves, were much more adept at holding onto their phones. Between these women and several kin who frequent Facebook I did have ways of tracking her down. My impression at a distance, supplemented by snippets of gossip from Warlpiri friends, was that her life had gone off the rails since she had left Central Australia.

When we first became friends two decades earlier Nungarrayi was a committed non-drinker. She was a proud and doting mother of two young children, a regular church goer, and an accomplished translator who had been employed at the school for several years. She was a woman born into families of considerable authority, and carried herself with dignity and pride, as a leader in the making. We met in Warlpiri language classes. We were the same age. At the end of the intensive course she promised to teach me more, but in the weeks that followed our cursory attempts at structuring one-on-one tuition quickly gave way to a looser and more intensively engaged friendship. Her English was too sophisticated to lead our dialogue in the direction of language lessons. I was a slow learner. There were more pressing matters to talk about and explore. We became firm friends. We hung out at each other’s houses, attended football matches, discos and travelled together to Alice Springs. My adoptive

skin name—a form of local identification pragmatically issued by Warlpiri to any whitefella who spends any significant time in their communities—related us to each other as cross-cousins, or ‘sisters’. In this relationship we danced together at the ceremony where her son went through the first stage of initiation to manhood. I became part of an extended network of carers for her children, although she rarely spent time away from them. In the years after my PhD fieldwork I saw her on infrequent return visits. The last time we were together in her hometown was during a short visit in 2009. Following a period of sporadic movement between the town and Alice Springs she had left her long-standing job at the school and was now employed by a government department to monitor the welfare of ‘at risk’ children.

Her husband, who was also a close friend of mine and with whom I had worked several years earlier at the local media association, was by now employed as community translator. In this high-profile role, he was charged with mediating between government service providers and the town’s residents in the intense period of new programme implementation that followed the Northern Territory Intervention. In short, both Nungarrayi and her husband were employed in front line positions at a time of considerable destabilisation for their community.

He, like many of his male kin, had always struggled with alcohol. Nungarrayi bore the brunt of his infrequent grog-fuelled incidents of fury and distress. But something must have ruptured the night in 2009 when he let rip and nearly killed her. When she rang me from Adelaide hospital two weeks later to tell me about the attack, about the nature of her life-threatening injuries, and about surgery she had undergone to have a plate implanted in her skull, I was dumbfounded. Over time that sentiment shifted to quiet burning anger. I decided I could never speak to him again. But when she and I visited Alice Springs together seven years later it was she who encouraged me to go and visit him in gaol. He was on remand awaiting trial on new charges of domestic assault laid against him by a new partner. Nungarrayi, along with his sisters and other close female kin, blamed the woman who ‘put him in gaol’. Sitting with him at a metal table in the visitor’s room of the prison I day in October 2016, I try, without success, to get him to talk about why it is that he and so many of his male kin are getting stuck in cycles of incarceration for violent assaults of women they purportedly love. Why the descent from responsible community-based work to the ravages of town camp drinking circles? His deflection of my questions and long silences between us make it clear this line of conversation was going nowhere.

A single person focus has become compelling as I have pursued a register of ethnographic writing that does justice to my friend’s situation and enables me to render partially visible a constellation of forces at work in the circumstances faced by her and other members of her community. This approach has arisen out of contingency; I went to visit an old friend, I found her new life circumstances to be enthralling and deserving of sustained attention, and so the current project unfolded. Like other anthropologists who have been moved to adopt a biographical perspective, I am convinced that attention to the intimacies of life history and experience enables a forceful view of larger complex phenomena. Moreover, to adopt a register of writing that simultaneously conjures intimate *and* structural perspectives amidst destabilization seems vital at a time when the practice of anthropology in the field of Aboriginal Australia has itself been newly destabilized (Altman and Hinkson 2010; Sutton 2009).² This paper thus explores the efficacy of single person-focused ethnography to grapple with destabilisations; in the shifting nature of anthropological production, in the world at large, and within the context of a long-standing research-related friendship.

BEWARE THE OBITUARY MODE

In looking for precedents that resonate with the aims of this paper, it is hard to go past WEH Stanner’s (1958) ‘Durmugam: A Ngangimeri’, an essay much celebrated for its

capacity to combine deep humanistic understanding with fine-grained attention to world-changing social transformation, while paying homage to a formative relationship (Beckett 2008; Clendinnen 2005; Manne 2010). Stimulated by Joseph Casagrande's (1960) invitation to contribute an essay to a book celebrating anthropological friendships, Stanner found a newly focused narrative form in which to figure his deep appreciation of Aboriginal culture, the perceptiveness and human frailty of Aboriginal persons, and larger questions of the implications of fracturing forms of social organization. Stanner took up biography as the genre in which to conjure what turned out to be his most captivating work on social transformation, a creative and open-ended exploration of the human condition of a kind that was not easily pursued from within the format of structural-functionalism that dominated the period in which he wrote (Hinkson 2010). Yet, for all this, Stanner's 'Durmugam' is not without limitations. In his critical appreciation of the essay, Jeremy Beckett draws attention to the naturalized arc of decline Stanner narrates:

Having Durmugam in his prime, with his superb physique and commanding stature, embodying a still vital Aboriginal way, prepares the reader for the inevitable decline of both; as the body becomes infirm, so too does the Aboriginal way... here we are to understand the man and the social order going down together before a misguided policy (Beckett 2008:98).

'Beware the obituary mode', Beckett perceptively alerts anthropologists who venture near biography. As my opening vignette suggests, the situation with which I am concerned contains a good number of pitfalls of this kind. The arc of decline is not, however, only a pitfall of biographical writing, but it also pervades the history of Australianist anthropology more broadly. Think Daisy Bates' smoothing of 'the dying pillow'. Think Strehlow as the self-anointed last holder of Arrernte high culture. Think the 'before it's too late' mantra that shaped decades of anthropological fieldwork as well as the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1961. Think Peter Sutton's (2009) 'politics of suffering'. Yet Beckett's warning presents something of a paradox for those of us working with Aboriginal people in the present who are confronted with the distress and misery of frequent premature deaths, chronic illness, hunger, economic stress, incarceration, and existential crisis. In short, as students of anthropology's post-'crisis of representation' period, we are all too aware of the obituary mode as reductive anthropological trope, but also of life in Aboriginal communities being, as Ute Eickelkamp puts it, under siege (Eickelkamp 2017: personal communication; Biddle 2016). How, under such circumstances, can anthropological writing transcend the kinds of debates in which it has recently been embroiled, that would reduce it to contributing to one or another policy-making trajectory?

Biographical and autobiographical modes have been adopted in ethnographic writing with varied intentions and affects across the discipline's history. By and large such approaches have been taken up by writers keen to transcend the abstraction of conceptual models that foreground social institutions and higher scale units of analysis. One genre of the biographical idiom emerged as anthropologists were moved to write creative companion volumes to their formal ethnographies, dissatisfied with conventional forms of scholarly writing that effectively disappeared the flesh and blood, complex emotions, and uncertainties of their fieldwork experiences (Buechler and Buechler 1981; Mayberry-Lewis 1968; Powdermaker 1966; Rabinow 1977; Sexton 1981; Shostack 1981). In this context, Crapanzano (1984) alerts us to a second pitfall, that of sentimentality, as well as to a certain tendency to apply a naïve empiricism to the biographical endeavour rather than to approach it as the critical, distinctively located outcome of 'the interplay between demand and desire' between anthropologist and informant/interlocutor (1984:956).

On either side of the 1980s ‘crisis of representation’ and the new interpretivist attention to writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988), anthropologists experimented with modelling dialogical engagement (Crapanzano 1980, 1984; Dwyer 1982; Tylor 1986), individual creativity (Rapport 1997; Rosaldo et al. 1993), autobiography (Okely and Callaway 1992) and various forms of life writing (Beckett 1978, 1993; Cowlishaw 2000, 2009; Jackson 2013; Musharbash 2008; Myerhoff 1978; Vincent 2017). Just as anthropologists turned to history to inflect their ethnographic accounts with an enlarged sense of transformation and political economy, biography has been alluring for its inevitable considerations of human agency, individual aspiration, intention, and affect. Often adopted as experimental forms, ethnographically inflected biographies inevitably speak, consciously or otherwise, to prevalent themes and concerns of the times in which they are written. For example James Clifford (1986) reads Marjorie Shotak’s (1981) *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, as an experiment in ethnographic writing framed by American feminist concerns, and ultimately as an allegory of female humanity. Interestingly, and somewhat ironically, as Crapanzano (1984:953) observes, an explosion of biographical writing in American Anthropology coincided with the publication of Foucault’s declaration of the ‘new man-less science of man’. Across the same period there was a proliferation of autobiographical writing by individuals whose communities had long histories of engagement with anthropologists (e.g. Lester 2000; Rubuntja and Green 2002; Ellis 2016; Ward 2018), but consideration of this work is beyond the scope of the current discussion.

In highlighting that experiments with life writing occurred on the margins of the discipline, Nigel Rapport tracks what he calls anthropology’s commitment to ‘impersonalisation’ as a particular kind of scholarly ‘strategy, a rhetoric, an instrument to denaturalise the world’ (Rapport 1997:24) deeply rooted in social scientific method. The world, Rapport observes, ‘becomes impersonal in our various conceptual plays (of power, purity, theory, identity) ... in order to win a world-view which significantly limits human intimacy and belonging’ (*ibid.*:23). But, he continues,

There is no ontologisation, institutionalisation, sacralisation, objectivation or negation which does not manifest itself through personal relations, which is not practised in terms of personal relations, and which is not animated, maintained, originated—in a word, caused, by personal relations (*ibid.*:25).

Rapport appeals to anthropologists to give greater attention to the practices through which individuals interpret themselves and their own societies. He figures individuals as boundary riders and bricoleur interpreters, ‘part of the culture and not’ (*ibid.*:57). Yet Rapport appears not at all interested in the relationship between an anthropologist’s adoption of a focus on the individual and her deployment of particular models of culture. Several substantial single-person focused ethnographies enact critical responses to erstwhile forms of cultural modelling. Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, adopts a biographical perspective as a methodological outcome of her affinities with the work of Bourdieu and her critique of reified models of cultural difference and their tendency towards homogeneity, coherence and timelessness (Abu-Lughod 1991:154; 2008). Working with women across Egyptian society, she posits an agenda in ‘tactical humanism’, whereby writing ‘close to life’ is pursued to ‘bring out the similarities in all our lives’, rather than ‘making other’ (Abu-Lughod 1991:157).

Further, Abu-Lughod’s biographical frame works across different scales of civic association, from kinship, to community, to region, nation, and beyond. She thus makes visible transformations as well as qualitative differences in social relationship and subjectivity and the identities and identifications they call out. Abu-Lughod makes a powerful argument

about the need for anthropologists to grasp social processes at the level of their lived reality, via close attention to particular situations and particular women's lives. She presents rapport with actual persons as the ground of ethnography, and biography or life story as the method for building narratives that interleave what she describes as the 'contrasting cosmopolitanisms' (Abu-Lughod 1997:126) of differently socially located women.

João Biehl's much celebrated *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005) explores practices and processes governing the mentally ill in contemporary Brazil. Through his discussions with one woman, Caterina, and his reading of the remarkable dictionaries she keeps, Biehl explores the 'complex network of family, medicine, state, and economy in which her abandonment and pathology took place' (Biehl 2005:8). Through the specificity of Caterina's situation, he elucidates a contemporary cultural attitude towards dealing with those who have been assessed as unable to care for themselves. Biehl was drawn to a single-person focused approach as he grappled with the problem of how to restore context and meaning to the lived experience of abandonment. How to produce a theory of the abandoned subject and her subjectivity that is ethnographically grounded? (*ibid.*:23) Crucially, Biehl observed:

ethnography makes visible the intermingling of colloquial practices and relations, institutional histories, and discursive structures that—in categories of madness, pharmaceuticals, migrant households, and disintegrating services—have bounded normalcy and displaced Caterina on the register of social death, where her condition appears to have been 'self-generated' ... From the perspective of *Vita* and from the perspective of one human life deemed mad and intractable, one comes to understand how economic globalization, state and medical reform, and the acceleration of claims to human rights and citizenship coincide with and impinge on a local production of social death' (*ibid.*:23).

Biehl's project builds upon the body of work by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, and colleagues, to read social suffering, the brutalities born out of large-scale forces, through the intimate lens of personal experience (Das et al. 2000, 2001; Kleinman et al. 1997). In both Abu-Lughod's and Biehl's projects, a focus on single persons opens out to a consideration of wider webs of relationships and social processes through which individuals negotiate life's constraints and possibilities. However, there is an important distinction to be made between these works. Where Abu-Lughod is concerned to give shape and form to diversely situated individual lives, Biehl more explicitly pursues the kind of opening out that I refer to, where the biographical mode is transcended by an overt concern to understand larger-scale processes that can be glimpsed in terms of their human consequences through a focus on a single person.

SUFFERING IN AN EXPANDED FIELD

The generative aspect of Peter Sutton's critique in *The Politics of Suffering*, which excoriated Australianist anthropologists for being complicit in a liberal consensus of commitment to culture over the lives of actual persons, challenged us to find new and potent ways to convey the contemporary conditions of Aboriginal life beyond metropolitan centres. Sutton's appeal coincides with a wider turn in anthropology in which the ethnography produced by Biehl is also situated, a shift identified by Joel Robbins as a turning away from 'the other', from 'the cultural point' to 'the suffering other', to the universal space of humanity; or more succinctly, 'from the savage to the suffering slot' (Robbins 2013:2). Robbins tracks this change by way of arguments made by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003), observing

seismic shifts both in empirical circumstances as well as ‘in the broader symbolic organization that defines the West and the savage’ (*ibid.*:3). The rise of humanitarianism followed the critiques of cultural studies that had mired the study of difference in colonial practice and ways of seeing. Amidst this disciplinary crisis, the symbolic field that gave birth to anthropology was changing dramatically. Distanced observation was being transposed with empathy and human feeling. In place of difference, trauma emerged as the new ‘bridge between cultures’ (*ibid.*:7). Ultimately, these shifts marked the fact that ‘the West had lost a role for difference and the radically other in its intellectual life and its self-understanding’ (*ibid.*:8). Such an observation goes some considerable way to explain the intensity with which cultural difference has come to be disparaged in local, nationalist debates in Australia (Hughes 2007; Johns 2011; Sandall 2001).

With the appeal to produce vivid, intimate accounts of trauma rather than cool descriptions of social organization, with certainty and solidity of analysis giving way to flux, the anthropological project shifts to a new kind of human ground, with work that aims to move the reader to act, urgently, just as visual scholars have observed the circulation of images of distant suffering subjects similarly operates (Boltanski 1999; Lydon 2012; Silverstone 2007). Yet it is also a hallmark of immersive accounts to disregard any systematic attention to the processes by which suffering, in either specific, embodied, or broader, processual terms is produced. It is in making this move that contemporary scholars can find themselves, inadvertently or otherwise, producing work that resonates with and at times justifies interventionist governmental programs.

Robbins’ appeal to an alternative frame, to an ‘anthropology of the good’ as he puts it, can be read as in some basic sense a reassertion of anthropology’s erstwhile commitment to cultural relativism, redirecting attention to questions of what better ways of life might look like from the distinctive vantages of the people with whom we work. Robbins does not cite Sutton, but his argument could be mobilized to make a compelling response to *The Politics of Suffering*. Yet, for all the important work Robbins does in revealing the hegemonic deployment of the suffering trope, his move in respect of ‘the good’ can be read as enlisting yet one more trope in place of another. An obvious question follows: need those of us who are concerned with writing ‘close to life’, reduce the scope of our anthropological endeavours to a choice of adopting this or that framing concept? Kirsten Hastrup (1992:122) seems to have had these concerns in mind two decades ago when she reflected upon fieldwork as inherently a generative space *between* those involved, but also simultaneously a space of inherent violence.

So it is that a melancholic, desert-focused disposition co-exists in tension with a more upbeat, enthusiastic embrace of the world-changing possibilities of life in the city. On a good day, life in Adelaide is ‘free’, ‘open’. It is ‘relaxing’ because of an absence of family pressure and the vitality of all these different people living side by side. Outside the house, as we walk the streets of her suburb together, Nungarrayi insists on continuities and affinities between the desert and Adelaide environments, pointing out resonances between the streetscapes of Elizabeth Vale and Alice Springs, willing her new surroundings to affectively adopt recognised features of her beloved desert country. The deep knowledge of her paternal estate she acquired as a child is close to the surface, easily recalled, as is a broader awareness of the seasonal transformations taking place in her country during her absence. Displaced to Adelaide, Nungarrayi’s memories of her early life in the desert are vivid, supercharged.

The area in which she is living is identified as one of the most economically depressed parts of settled Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018; Peel 1995), yet she knows it otherwise, as a place where she prefers to live, with parklands she can wander through and allow her imagination to transport her back to Central Australia; with groves of eucalypts

and scrubby tee-tree that remind her of the bounty of honey ants at this time of year; and, with hill tops that allow glimpses of the snaking Stuart Highway that leads to Alice Springs. She longs for a day when she and her new Bhutanese partner Ram will be allocated a Housing Trust house with a backyard in which she can light a fire and cook kangaroo tail and burn ashes for her chewing tobacco. There is something here of John Berger's idea of places being doubled (Berger 2005), a here and an elsewhere held in fusion, a here inhabited with deep sentiments and ways of relating drawn from there, a here made bearable via this very process (see also Ahmed et al. 2003; Wise 2004). The presence of the highway also indicates the peculiar nature of Nungarrayi's exile, where here bleeds into there in myriad ways.³

In the time since the publication of *The Politics of Suffering*, the deployment of the suffering trope has taken on a dispersed life of its own. I find myself seeing suffering—chronic health, the deep grief associated with premature deaths, hunger and economic hardship, varying degrees of physical and existential brokenness—everywhere among Warlpiri friends. It would not have been possible to imagine Nungarrayi's dislocation two decades ago. The kin-based, wider social, and institutional relations that held her in place were relatively robust; a close-knit family unit, albeit troubled by her partner's sporadic bouts of drinking, nested within extended relations of care; a generation of elders who exercised firm authority through provision of guidance to younger kin and in ceremonial and community-based practice and politics; a community sector that called out the work of middle-aged bi-culturalists, and a public sphere centred on the 'community meeting' through which issues that advanced to the status of 'problem' were vigorously dealt with.

I ask myself: is nostalgia at work in the way I conjure this long since passed set of arrangements? It's a topic of discussion between Nungarrayi and I. We both look back with considerable longing to that time, the 1990s, to a space where various forms of order and optimistic possibility were tangibly present. Is this an inevitable outcome of the mind's 'settling' of past times? My anthropological memory is drawn to the certainty of recognisable arrangements and categories I worked with emerging from PhD fieldwork. Certain persons who loomed large in orienting me to that time and place, many related to Nungarrayi and many now deceased, float as a series of spectral anchor points in my mind. Her memory produces a variety of narratives and perspectives, more or less dark or hopeful, depending on the day and her mood. But the basic arc of those memories does not change: in the 1970s life was 'really good', there were lengthy periods of carefree living at her father's outstation, there was much promise in the way the town operated, in the division of responsibility for local precincts with tractors and associated resources for keeping the community clean and tidy, in the working of the Yuendumu Housing Association. But, I remind myself, Nungarrayi was a child in the 1970s. Could she really have had an eye on the workings of community development? What are the slippages of memory, the temporalities of nostalgia at work here? What other forms of security and insecurity do these memories index? How is the process of ageing and its associated loss of innocence implicated? To what extent are we both longing for earlier manifestations of ourselves? Against the heroic national gloss that imagines the 1980s as the time of Aboriginal advancement, she recalls that time as marking the horrors of the explosion of petrol sniffing

NOSTALGIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In different ways Svetlana Boym and Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos insist that the workings of nostalgia should be interpreted in terms of complex processes. Boym reads nostalgia as a longing for a different time, but also for 'the unrealized dreams of the

past and visions of the future that have become obsolete' (Boym 2001:10). In other words, nostalgic longing is related to, perhaps even generated by, presentist preoccupations. Reflective nostalgia, Boym writes, 'dwells in the ambivalences of human longing and belonging' (*ibid.*:13). The 'rhetoric of reflective nostalgia is about taking time out of time and about grasping the fleeing present' (*ibid.*:14). More pointedly in respect of anthropological analysis, Kapferer and Theodossopoulos (2016:13) observe that ethnographic practice always bears the mark of nostalgia. They go on to ask:

Is this an indelible mark, unredeemable, the ultimate sign of orientaling exotism? A deluded desire to salvage what is unsalvageable? Or, as we would like to argue here, does ethnographic nostalgia present an opportunity to reposition oneself with respect to exteriority: to deterritorialize and detemporalize ethnographic practice? And in that process, discover new meaning and unexpected, alternative perspectives?"

Read in tandem, these two insightful interpretations encourage a troubling of both my and Nungarrayi's glosses of the past.

On our trip to Central Australia in October 2016 we visit the now abandoned outstations on her paternal estate. But she has no interest in getting out of the car. This country, an ex-cattle station, has in recent years been newly gazetted as a wildlife sanctuary and the Nature Conservancy people have graded a network of new roads. In the process of doing so the landscape has been newly reoriented and signposted—no longer known as two Aboriginal outstations and a series of interconnected sacred sites, but a wildlife reserve with a cartography geared to the interests of animal-watching scientists.

During our visit the country does however throw up a surprise gift, a jitti stone of love magic, which lies directly in Nungarrayi's path as we climb the gentle incline to a water-hole. Spotting the stone she is overcome with emotion and bursts into tears. Our encounter with this stone is a defining moment on our journey, it ruptures the fast-paced reverie that has until now swept us along. In the days that follow Nungarrayi tells everyone we cross paths with about the stone. She interprets the visitations to the window of my hotel room of a tweeting bird that keeps me awake through the night as further confirmation of the ancestral charge activated by our visit to her country. Finally, one day in an Alice Springs car park she allows her daughter to take the stone; it will, she tells us, bring her luck at cards.

The dynamic relationship between town and country that emerged through self-determination policy's twinned focus on outstations and community development (Peterson and Myers 2016) was an artefact of that period and substantially subsided in Central Australia from the mid-1990s. With some important exceptions, outstations were no longer viewed as places where people wished to reside for significant periods of time. People retreated to the larger settlement, which over time morphed from 'community' to 'town', and even at one stage to 'growth town' (Musharbash 2017), where better resourcing, shopping, health care, schooling, and a variety of social stimulations were on offer. Some were lured to regional centres and further afield to pursue educational and employment options, to access medical treatment, to play music (Ottosson 2014), to join kin-based drinking circles, or establish life at a distance from the intensity of desert-based sociality (Burke 2018).

One could cite myriad examples of disenchantment across the subsequent two decades, that at the highest level of generality might simply be described in terms of the displacement of cultural production as a primary impetus for government supported activity—in the realm of art production and its public reception; in the retreat from outstations and desert places; in the kinds of activities supported by women's centres; in the demise of community governance councils and their replacement by regional shires; in the delivery of curriculum and

involvement of local Aboriginal teachers and teaching aides; in the shrinkage of ritual activity as a space of community invigoration and the simultaneous rise in frequency of funerals; and finally, in an increased propensity to travel and spend significant periods of time living away from kin and home towns. Policy practice decentred ‘community’ as its primary unit of engagement in favour of a new insistence on the ‘individual’. The confluence of these developments is distilled in a new imaginary in respect of remote Aboriginal life, the idea that Aboriginal people might leave their home towns and kin-based commitments in pursuit of better life possibilities ostensibly offered elsewhere (Sullivan 2011).

The most significant collapsing of the separation of the worlds of Central Australia and Adelaide occurs for Nungarrayi in her weekly visits to Magda, who has been undergoing months of intensive treatment for a chronic spinal injury in a rehab unit in the outer suburbs. Wheelchair bound, physically separated from her husband and family, Magda, like Nungarrayi, is profoundly estranged from the intense sociability that characterises life in the desert. I have known Magda as long as I have known Nungarrayi. She has always been a gregarious woman, always at the centre of lively activity. When Nungarrayi first told me of Magda’s situation I was incredulous: how could she possibly cope with such prolonged isolation? Nungarrayi was dismissive of my concern. ‘She was upset when she first arrived, but now she’s found Wapirra [God], she’s really good’.

Conversation with these women is a heady mix of family news, proclamations on the power of God, the power of sorcery, and love of country. Magda tells us that evangelist Billy Graham’s grandson performed at Alice Springs showgrounds two weeks ago. Their sister Amanda walked several kilometres from a town camp on the other side of town to attend. Her recent kidney transplant operation was successful and now, Nungarrayi tells me with a smile, ‘she’s everywhere’. Nungarrayi and Magda dream of better futures for themselves. Nungarrayi dreams of making enough money to buy a car, or even a house—she has heard it is possible to buy a house in Adelaide for just \$95,000. Her eyes sparkle as she tells me her new Bhutanese partner Ram dreams of buying a campervan and taking her driving all around Australia. She wishes that the interpreter job she longs for will come about, and that she will be flown all over the country doing this important work. She wishes that she will end up in a job like me at a university, helping her people to learn. She wishes that her son will come out of gaol and manage to stay out. She wishes that the prominent woman, her relative, who has been unlawfully claiming royalty payments for mining on her country will be exposed as a thief and publicly humiliated.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AS ‘JOURNEYING-WITH’

In an insightful essay speaking back to the celebration of rapport as the ground of substantial and ethically guided ethnographic research, George Marcus suggests that complicity, with its complicated, ironic associations, is the more generative and appropriately morally ambiguous descriptor of the fieldwork relationship (Marcus 1997:101; Rabinow 2008). Marcus’ exploration of complicity is an extension of his figuring of multi-sited fieldwork as the necessary ethnographic space of accelerated globalization. To commence with the realities of globalization is to read rapport as the impossible pursuit of ‘insider’ status, the companion of a model of bounded culture. In what he describes as anthropology’s shifting *mise-en-scène*, the destabilization of anthropological categories and associated ways of figuring places and relationships between places and persons demands a different attitude. ‘The sense of the object of study being “here and there”’, he suggests, ‘has begun to wreak havoc on the “being there” of classic ethnographic authority’ (Marcus 1997:96). Complicity:

does not posit the same faith in being able to probe the ‘inside’ of a culture (nor does it presuppose that the subject herself is even on the ‘inside’ of a culture, given that contemporary local knowledge is never only about being local). The idea of complicity forces the recognition of ethnographers as ever-present markers of ‘outsideness’ (*ibid.*:97).

In order to get at the new configurations of person, place, and time wrought by the large-scale transformations of late capitalism, Marcus suggests ethnographers seek not forms of local knowledge but understandings of *a different kind of difference*—a ‘difference that arises from the anxieties of knowing that one is somehow tied into what is happening elsewhere, but... without those connections being clear or precisely articulated through internal cultural models’ (*ibid.*:97). In terms of ethnographic relations, such a project only fully evolves when an outsider/anthropologist forms a relationship with a ‘subject also concerned with the outsideness of everyday life’ (98). Relatedly Nigel Rapport has foregrounded movement not only as the ‘quintessential experience of our time’ (Rapport 1997:55), but also as vital in the ‘acquisition and representation of knowledge’ (79).

Two and three decades after Marcus and Rapport penned their reflections on anthropology’s changing *mise-en-scène*, the destabilisations against which they model new approaches have significantly accelerated. The local–global conjuncture has been further intensified, with pervasive forms of technological mediation now operating at the level of the mobile person, and impending environmental disaster figured at planetary scale. In ethnographic and theoretical terms anthropologists are chasing understandings of relationships between persons and places and larger processes that are shape-shifting before our eyes (Berlant 2011; Fassin 2011; Hinkson 2017; Muehlebach 2013; Vigh 2009). Grappling with the way persons figure relationships between a ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’ is now a widespread concern of anthropological research. It is a logical progression of these developments that displacement and hyper-mobility give rise to anthropology on the move, investigations that are no longer place-centric, or even multi-sited, but person-centric (Jackson 2004, 2013), introducing new kinds of dynamisms and destabilisations into the anthropological endeavour.

Travelling by tram through the city, Nungarrayi recounts for me, yet again, her Christmas Day run in with the ‘Indian woman’. I learn for the first time that the altercation occurred in Whitmore Square, where the fountain and water sculptures draw many visitors on hot days. 25 December 2016 was such a hot day. N was cooling herself off, splashing water onto her belly, half-charged and in the company of two female kin, when she saw this woman looking at her. She called her out and made her declaration about being from this place, ‘a member of the oldest living culture’. Her mimetic performance of Nicky Winwar’s much celebrated stance on the racialized Australian Rules Football ground, proudly pointing to the bared skin of her torso, was viewed differently by the woman who reported the incident to police. Nungarrayi’s gesture was caught on CCTV. She was arrested for indecent exposure and public drunkenness two blocks down the road, out the front of the hotel that still stakes its fortunes on the Beatles’ visit to Adelaide, all those years ago.

For now, I observe, Nungarrayi’s cosmopolitan aspirations appear to have dissipated, they have been displaced in her reversion to the easy space of the kin-based drinking circle. I am aware of my own discomfort and the judgmental urges that are becoming harder to contain as her daily life becomes more chaotic. I also know that there is something substantial to the dreams of transformation she energetically sketched for me during my first visit. As I have discussed elsewhere (Hinkson (in press) these dreams have been blunted by the gruelling experience of dealing with Centrelink and various job search agencies. At one level it seems both as simple and as complex as Fred Myers (1986) put it for the Pintupi

30 years ago—autonomy and relatedness, the two poles of subjective realisation continue to churn at the heart of the way desert persons live. Once transposed to the city the instability of this interrelation is intensified, as is its transformative possibility. This story of dislocation is not only Nungarrayi's story. I'm astonished to learn that the idyllic and close-knit camp we enjoyed during our short visit to a small desert community in October 2016 has now also been transposed to Adelaide, with a twist: four of the five adults we camped with there, are now here. They came to visit Magda and stayed. Molly and her husband have been in Adelaide for nearly a year. Following a grog-fuelled argument several months ago Nungarrayi is not speaking to either of them. Her relationship with Magda, once so vital to her endurance of life in Adelaide, has directly suffered as a result.

These volatile circumstances demand a method, analysis, and mode of writing that grapples with displacement and the related expanded social field of Warlpiri life, the abiding hold of attenuating kinship relations which paradoxically provide anchorage *and* undermine life's possibilities, which are then cut across by the individualizing tendencies inevitably called out by city life. My adoption of 'journeying-with' arguably shows up the paradigmatic limits of a biographical approach, in a similar vein to Marcus' displacement of rapport with complicity (see also Gomberg-Muñoz 2018; Maclean 2012, 2013). The pursuit of a more open-ended single-person focused approach—a refashioning of Abu-Lughod's concept of tactical humanism—causes me to look to a larger intergenerational context to understand and de-exceptionalise Nungarrayi's contemporary mobility. It also causes me to look to the proximate relationships that figure so prominently in her current situation that are beyond the frames of genealogy and kinship. The approach sketched here also requires the examination of inheritances, in whatever form they might take. It requires an intimate focus on personality, aspiration, creativity, and vulnerability. Memory reveals life as distinctively recalled, storied, and reified. Memory is also a resource from which creative strategies for dealing with the challenges of the present are drawn. In this sense, and as Edward Casey (2009) argues, memory is social process, as well as filter, a source of existential anchorage and emplacement. Memory works vigorously in tandem with particular objects, particular songs, particular media. It is activated and stimulated by movement. The kinds of movement involved are both continuous *and* discontinuous with earlier chapters in a long history of Warlpiri mobility, as well as with forms of mobility that are identified as the cornerstone of modernity (see Hinkson in press).

Our journeying together between all manner of places and assemblies brings into view Nungarrayi's vigorous wrestling between the terms and associations of here and there, the conjunctions she produces between dislocation and creative placemaking, and the situations that trigger her differently geared and emergent subject positions. Journeying in this way is not a seamless flow of mobility but rather an uneven, volatile mix of relational, temporal, and spatial elements. Physical movement and rapid-paced mediated communication coexist with forms of governmental containment in conditions which, following Henrik Vigh, we might describe as 'motion squared', where vigorous interactions occur between transforming persons in places marked by volatility, insecurity and uncertainty (Vigh 2009:421). Getting stuck is as much a feature of these circumstances as is movement. As we move together through many different kinds of spaces and social interactions across South and Central Australia, Nungarrayi's shifts in mood and demeanour also reveal a great deal about the racialized expectations and presumptions that mark the ground of dislocated existence. I have become alert to the stark change in mood that often occurs as we leave the easy, open space of walking the streets together and climb into the back seat of a taxi, especially one driven by a Sub-Continental man. As a result, discussions with taxi drivers, whether I am on my own or travelling with Nungarrayi, have emerged as a vital source of ethnographic material.

Complicity entails irony and critical distance. As Nungarrayi enthusiastically adopts the role of research associate/ethnographic subject, she takes to narrating for my benefit her responses to all manner of stimuli. I have taken to reading drafts of ethnographic writing to her; a strange, self-conscious exercise that in turn produces new issues for us to negotiate. Our relationship has come to occupy a space of what Boym (1998:499–500) describes as ‘diasporic intimacy’, which trades in stories and secrets, ‘thrives on unpredictable change encounters, on hope for human understanding’. Diasporic intimacy, Boym writes, ‘is haunted by images of home and homeland, yet it also discloses some of the furtive pleasures of exile’. Renegotiating the terms of our friendship in this volatile space involves ‘precarious affection’.

POSTSCRIPT

Throughout my visits to Adelaide across the past 2 years, I have been struck by the way my tendency to try and settle a predictable interpretive pattern across the new landscape of Nungarrayi’s exilic existence gets continually upended by shifting circumstances. Just when I think I’ve got the shape of the thing, a relative settling of her situation, a new surprise or tipping point is introduced. This is a story that started on my first visit with Nungarrayi’s vigorous performance of cosmopolitan aspiration, but has increasingly lurched towards an intensification of attenuated kinship relations. I set out to research and write what I sub-consciously anticipated would be a relatively heroic tale of a woman struggling to remake herself as a new kind of person, a new migrant to the city, in the face of near impossible challenges. But as I’ve watched Nungarrayi wrestle between the terms of her imagined new life and the kin-based drinking circle, which increasingly makes a strong claim upon her, I have had to confront my own desires, discriminations and shifts in attitude. Where does one draw the line between the demands of writing close to life, the expectations of friendship, and responsibility to intervene in life changing situations? These are the kinds of unsettled and unsettling questions this journeying continues to generate.

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NOTES

1. The protagonist-primary interlocutor for this research is referred to throughout by her Warlpiri subsection, Nungarrayi. This term indexes the distinctive relational web through which a person interacts with all others one knows as kin. All other names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
2. It is beyond the scope and interests of this paper to rehearse the debates over Australianist anthropology’s complicity or otherwise in indigenous policy perspectives of the past and present. The debates have played out

- extensively and vigorously in books, journals and wider public commentary. Beyond these two books see for example Cowlshaw (2003a, 2003b), Morton (2004), Ponsonnet (2007), Rowse (2013), Clark (2014).
3. This ethnography is also explored in Hinkson in press.

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