Introduction to theme issue

Otherwise: Ethnography, Form, Change

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Ethnography

Why a theme issue on ethnography and form? Why think about form at all? For many years anthropologists, especially politically oriented anthropologists, have been suspicious of questions of genre, narrative, and form. Consider, for example, the fervent debate that swirled around Michael Taussig's (1986) form-shifting ethnography *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*. In tracing the violent excess of colonialism and the promise of healing among Indigenous women and men in Columbia, Taussig (1986) draws on the cinematic aesthetics of early Soviet directors Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, who sought to disrupt habitual ways of seeing, as well as surrealist techniques of juxtaposition and montage. In transposing forms that emerged in the visual realm to narrative and writing, Taussig sought to convey the terror-ridden charges of living in and with violence. Much lauded today, then reviewers called Taussig's approach "lapidary," "capricious," or "untidy." At best, form, and especially narrative form, was seen as epiphenomenal to the true purpose of ethnographic labour: critiquing power, exposing the real.

Since then, a once-dismissive attitude to considerations of aesthetic and narrative forms has clearly changed. In tackling the supposed naïveté of a mimetic realism that assumes that our senses provide us with direct and transparent access to the world, and that documentation and reportage only entail observable data (Willerslev and Suhr 2013), anthropologists have worked hard to make space for insights, experiences, and affects that spill beyond such mimetic borders (McLean 2017; Narayan 2012; Pandian 2019). Kathleen Stewart (2007) and Lisa Stevenson (2014), for example, have taken their cue

from Walter Benjamin's imagistic and montage-like writing to make palpable the (often traumatic) fragmentations of political and everyday life. Recently, the Crumpled Paper Boat Collective (2017) has employed an essayistic form in which writing is not closed but open-ended and responsive to the feelings, perceptions, thinking, and writing of others. Anthropologists situated at the intersection of history and anthropology, too, have started to think creatively about form. David Scott (2017) has recently drawn on the epistolary form to open up a space for hospitable communication with deceased friends and interlocutors, and Gary Wilder (2015) makes use of a conceptual parallelism to show how decolonial and critical-humanist thought have shaped each other. The emergence of creative digital platforms has made possible the relational and interactive design of the feral atlas (Tsing, Deger, Saxena, and Zhou 2021) that brings together science and in-situ analyses, poetry, art, politics, and maps. The ethnographic novels of Ella Deloria (1988), Zora Neale Hurston (1935, 1984), and others are finally finding their rightful place on syllabi. Autobiography and memoir (Behar 1996), life histories (Cruikshank, Sidney, Smith, and Ned 1992), blogging (Stoller 2018), poetry (Rosaldo 2013; Kusserow 2013), and the photo essay have all begun to matter.

One reason anthropologists used to be suspicious of inquiries into form was because form was purely seen as an aesthetic issue. Closely connected to narrativity and genre, form seemed to privilege shape, image, style, tone, voice, and trope over content and meaning. Even recently scholars have continued to argue that an emphasis on form risks being a recipe for ahistoricism and political quietism (Lesjak 2013). Art critic Hal Foster (2012), for example, has remarked that attention to form detracts us from paying attention to the politically critical work of interrogating, defamiliarizing, and demystifying. In tracing scholarly interest in form and modes of affect back to the politics of the Bush administration that bullied scholars by suppressing oppositional thought, Foster concludes that our moment in time is not an opportune moment to go supposedly post-critical. In insisting on the necessity of critique in bleak times, Foster is particularly concerned with keeping a spirit of agency and resistance alive.

It is certainly the case that at a time when higher education is increasingly under siege, and assaults on the autonomy of universities and disciplines like anthropology continue, critique matters. Yet even if critics continue to provide powerful critiques of hierarchies, inequities, disciplinary power, and instrumental reason, the payoffs of critique are, however, no longer so clear

(Anker and Felski 2017; Fassin and Harcourt 2019; Latour 2004). The contributors to this volume agree with the necessity for critique, but they also ask if there are other ways of framing the political meanings of our current moment. All politics, including the politics of critique, will succeed only if it is canny about deploying multiple forms. Instead of (only) critically appraising scholarly interest in form, it might be more productive to ask which forms may actually succeed at dismantling unjust, entrenched arrangements, and—thus—which forms we may want to use for specific ends. One contribution of this theme issue is to show that the political, aesthetic, and affective are not divorced from but nest in each other. A second contribution is to foster the increasing recognition that scholars have much to learn from contemporary interests and forms, including the collaborations and purposeful engagements with politics that emerge out of them. And a third contribution is to encourage a less antagonistic and combative attitude toward the political, and to no longer keep discussions of politics and aesthetics sequestered, thereby working to ensure its impact or influence in broader social spheres.

Form

Form is a broad term, one that comprises an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping—in political, literary, and social theory. As alluded to above, in anthropology, questions of form emerge most often in the neighbourhood of narrative (Klima 2018; McGranahan 2020) because they point out the political effects of ordering, patterning, and shaping. What is it that disruptive, montage-like ethnographic writing does that ethnography envisioned as a long argument does not? What is it that the epistolary form does that other forms do not? What is it that a graphic ethnography can do that more habitual forms of telling cannot do? Why does it matter whether ethnographic poetry is written in rhyming stanzas or free verse? Whatever their work, forms are heterogenous, both limiting and enabling. As each contributor pays careful attention to the ways in which particular aesthetic and material forms—photography, monuments and art installations, buildings and the temporal rhythms of a strike—require particular narrative arrangements, each contributor also shows how narrative takes shape at the intersection of aesthetic and social forms: circulation and networks (Tomov), empowerment and self-imagination (Rougeon, Trad, Gomes, Brasil, and Mezza), temporality and sequence (Gilbert and Kurtović), and enclosure (Rethmann).

As a number of scholars have recently begun to attest, one of the most promising ways to think about form is affordance (Keane 1997; Levine 2015; Strassler 2020). Most decidedly, considerations of form emerge in design theory, where it is used to describe the political forms or actions latent in materials and designs (Fortun 2015; Yoko, Pink, and Sumartojo 2018). For example, as Levine (2015: 6) says, "glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. Cotton affords fluffiness, but also breathable cloth when it is spun into yarn and thread." What's more, specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own affordances. "A fork affords stabbing and scooping. A doorknob affords not only hardness and durability, but also turning, pushing, and pulling." Designed things then have unexpected affordances that can be generated by creative users: for example, you may have signs or clothes hanging on a doorknob, or use a fork to pry open a lid—and in the course of this, expand the intended affordances of an object.

Precisely because narrative forms are capacious they are also able to hold other forms. In contributions to this issue, the forms narratives most frequently hold are the forms of the image—photographs, imaged monuments, visual forms of writing and depictions. Initially, I felt that this might be coincidental, but in thinking about this further I felt that this was not the case. Each contributor to this issue situates their analysis within the context of a national state, in which images and media play significant roles in processes of democratization. In this way each contribution traces an image-event, by which I mean a political process set in motion when a specific image or set of images erupts onto and intervenes in a social field (Strassler 2020). Taken together, contributions show that such interventions can be uneven. Even as horizontally produced and distributed media come with no democratizing or progressive guarantee, they often ocupy a privileged place in democratic imaginaries precisely because they appear to operate outside of traditional established media channels.

Theme Issue/Change

The theme issue opens with an essay by Valentina Tomov in which she traces the circulation of a photograph taken by freelance photographer Stefan Stefanov shot in the wake of Bulgaria's November 2013 mass demonstrations. The image shows a male Bulgarian police officer and a female demonstrator in a tender gesture that displays mutual desperation and pain. Stefanov said that

he saw emotion happening, and so he took the shot. In Bulgaria's unruly media ecology, the image moved beyond national borders, going globally viral. In tracking the impacts of this photograph through her body, its impact on Dessi, the young woman from the photograph, blogging communities, and global audiences who no longer care about the national significance of the image, Tomov provides a fine-grained analysis of this photograph's affective charge: appealing to a possible future in which hospitality, generosity, and kindness may matter.

In her evocation of the image's affective force, Tomov draws on Roland Barthes' differentiation between stadium and punctum. In a nutshell, stadium means precisely this: the study of the photograph's historical, political, and social contexts. Punctum, by differentiation, means an affective charge, excess, or surplus that cannot entirely be explained. It is the punctum of the photograph—affect, for sure, but also the image's future promise—that interests Tomov in her interpretation. Indeed, as Tomov suggests, it is the punctum of this image that holds up the promise of creating sprawling, overlapping, and expanding networks linking bodies, ideas, and politics through medial forms and across different spaces.

In similarity to Tomov, Marina Rougeon, Leny Trad, Thai Mara Dias Gomes, Sandra Assis Brasil, and Martin Mezza also ask about the capacity of photography to afford social imaginations that differ from what is usually thought of as "normal" or "normative." In providing three examples that emerge out of the Brazilian context, they centre on subjects habitually marked as vulnerable or marginal: hysterical women, impoverished oyster and mussel collectors, Black women and men. While visually these persons and groups are often shown in negatively stereotyped ways, Rougeon, Trad, Gomes, Brasil, and Mezza argue that photography can also assist in combating and discounting stereotypes. Key in this struggle against stereotypes is an emphasis on understanding how subjects visually represent and affirm themselves, rather than being seen by others.

Photography, especially if marked as self-authorship and self-imagination, has become an important part of economic and social justice struggles. Insofar as the eye is also a "we" or an "I," or the optical consciousness a self-consciousness, photographs mediate and frame personhood, identity, and collectivity. Instead of being seen through the eyes of others, auto-portraits—as Rougeon, Trad, Gomes, Brasil, and Mezza collectively point out—can make you appear in the ways in which you see yourself and desire to be seen. Photography,

image-making, and seeing itself may not change one's conditions of living, but it is an important means in struggles against vulnerability and for recognition.

In collaborating with Sarajevo-based artist Boris Stapić in the creation of a graphic ethnography that recounts the struggle of workers to keep open the detergent factory Dita in the Bosnian industrial city of Tuzla, Andrew Gilbert and Larisa Kurtović's contribution takes up the collaborative thread demonstrated in the previous piece. In charting how a graphic ethnography facilitates public openness, participation, and collaboration, they caution against analytical overdeterminations of political hopelessness and abandonment. In clearly situating their contribution in the discipline's creative turn that is advocating for multimodal methodologies and innovative forms of ethnographic representation, they trace graphic ethnography's potential to cut through social and authorial hierarchies. In fusing together ethnography and collaboration, Gilbert and Kurtović argue that political significance happens when these cross.

As anthropologists we have been largely conditioned to treat images in ethnographies as illustrations, usually supporting the authority of the ethnographer or supporting a point made in a textual way. Graphic ethnography's commitment to set both visuality and textuality on an equal footing reflects the desire to not simply privilege writing in the recognition of disciplinary knowledge, but also to afford the representation of different temporalities and materialities in creative ways. Perhaps one of the most exciting affordances of graphic ethnographies is that it enables anthropologists to not only contextualize collaboration but show how it works: by depicting the ways in which fieldwork happens, by not only talking with but learning from others. In visually introducing issues of authority in an ethnographically-oriented collaborative research process, and in including the participation of Dita's workers in this process, community members emerge as emotionally and politically involved community members in their own right.

In the theme's fourth contribution I examine the enshrining of left-internationalist history in the art installations of *chto delat*, a contemporary Russian political-artist collective. In building in particular on three mnemonic monuments exhibited from April 2017 to April 2018 by the collective in Mexico City's Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, I argue that *chto delat*'s left-wing melancholia does not inevitably mark historical stuckness but temporal openness to forms of mnemonic solidarity. Part of what is at issue, though, is that—unlike in Tomov's contribution—*chto delat*'s images may experience

some difficulty in creating political happenings in future fluxes of time. No longer instantly recognizable icons, the monuments can also be read as silent reminders of a socialist-international time that seems to recede into the past ever more quickly. In their stasis and as stills, the images urgently also speak to the fracturing of the left. If *chto delat*'s images and installation will be able to traverse social, linguistic, and other barriers, and thus be capable of drawing the shared attention of activists who may occupy very different positions, this depends on the monuments' ability to keep socialist history itself open as a field of struggle.

In our contributions, both Tomov and I, mention our struggles with writing about images and art whose significance hovers in the interstices of the aesthetic, political, and social. In an initial submission of my contribution, I had commented on my fear that at times I might sound more like an art historian than an anthropologist. While this comment evinced my fear of finding a form for writing about melancholia and temporal haunting in ways that would not make *chto delat* look like curios of the past, it also evinced the challenge of finding a form for objects and art whose meaning would not necessarily emerge when described in terms of narrative sequentially. These challenges will remain, but attention to form can assist us in addressing them in more nuanced ways.

Taken together, the contributions to *Otherwise: Ethnography, Form, Change* show that explorations of aesthetic objects and innovative social arrangements require new forms of writing. In asking how ethnographic genres can be opened up to hold experiences that are otherwise challenging to make palpable, relate, or describe, this theme issue marks a purposeful contribution to discussions on critique, change, and form.

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