
An Elephant in the Room: Tracking an Awkward Anthropology¹

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Abstract: Drawing on trail anthropology and the notion of the *through line of action*, this article tracks the feeling of awkwardness I experienced in an imaginative ethnography project I conducted in collaboration with a Polish Romani woman, Randia, in an attempt to re-envision anthropology as an engaged, collaborative and interventionist practice. I follow the trail, its offshoots and connections to arrive at what I call an *awkward anthropology*, which entails a radical and imaginative epistemic politics. Reflecting on how working at the intersections of ethnography, performance, storytelling and fiction shifted reflexivity from the purview of the anthropologist to that of the interlocutor, I propose an imaginative and creative praxis as a starting point for reinventing anthropology.

Keywords: imaginative ethnography, performance, storytelling, reflexivity, fiction, affect, praxis

Résumé : S'inspirant de l'anthropologie de la marche et de la notion de « fil conducteur », cet article part à la recherche du sentiment de porte-à-faux que j'ai éprouvé dans le cadre d'un projet d'ethnographie imaginative mené en collaboration avec une femme rom polonaise, Randia, en vue de repenser l'anthropologie comme pratique engagée, collaborative et interventionniste. Ce chemin exploratoire, ses bifurcations et ses embranchements, m'a conduite à ce que je nomme une « anthropologie en porte-à-faux », laquelle implique une politique épistémique radicale et imaginative. A partir d'une réflexion sur la façon dont le travail mené à la croisée de l'ethnographie, la performance, la narration et la fiction a fait basculer la réflexivité du domaine de l'anthropologue à celui de l'interlocuteur, cet article propose une praxis imaginative et créative comme point de départ pour une réinvention de l'anthropologie.

Mots clés : ethnographie imaginative, performance, narration, fiction, affect, praxis

Feeling Awkward

Randia, an elderly Polish Romani woman, and I are recording a dramatic storytelling session in which she narrates a script of a play loosely based on her life. Dramatic storytelling is more than simply delivering a character's lines: Randia fully steps into character and acts with gestures, movements and vocal expressions. I am using such storytelling as an ethnographic research methodology to learn about Romani women's experiences of aging following the recent mass migrations of Roma from Poland to Western Europe. I am personally invested in the topic of migration and aging, as my elderly mother in Poland has been diagnosed with a serious illness. An only child who immigrated to Canada years ago, I have juggled my university job and family responsibilities in Canada with caring for my mother in Poland.

The transnational migration of young and middle-aged adults has tremendously affected the lives of many elders in Eastern Europe. Many elderly people have been fending for themselves since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, which opened access to western labour markets, and the 2007 Schengen Treaty, which eliminated tourist visa requirements for Polish citizens (White 2011). Romani elders are one of the social groups most affected by this migration (Kazubowski-Houston 2012), and Romani minorities' quality of life has deteriorated due to ongoing socio-economic transformations. Negative stereotypes, combined with economic crises and resurgent Polish nationalism, have increased acts of prejudice, marginalisation, and violence against the Roma (Jasinska-Kania 2009).

Since 2001, I have been conducting fieldwork in Elbląg, a mid-sized city of 130,000 people in northern Poland, located in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie *voivodeship* (region), which has one of the country's oldest populations, an unemployment rate of approximately 20 percent between 2010 and 2015 (Powiatowy Urząd Pracy w Elblągu 2015) and high migration rates among Romani people (Kazubowski-Houston 2012). Elbląg's Roma, who

belong to the group “Polska Roma,” had settled in Poland and were granted Polish citizenship after the Communist government banned itinerant Romani caravans in 1968. While I have worked with other Roma from Elbląg, the focus of this article is my dramatic storytelling sessions with Randia, a widow now in her early seventies, who has been one of my two key interlocutors. Most of Randia’s children and relatives have immigrated to Western Europe. Her pension is meagre, and she lives in a decrepit government-subsidised apartment block. She suffers from heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and depression, and has recently lost most of her vision to diabetes.

In one storytelling session, Randia takes on the role of *Córka*, her play’s protagonist, and is telling her friend, Ela, about her children: how they abandoned her, how they didn’t send her money, how they didn’t care if she was dead or alive, how she missed them like she had never missed anything before and how she was afraid of dying alone. At one point, Randia – as *Córka* – falls silent, raises her wrinkled, swollen hand and carefully places it on mine. She looks into my eyes. I think Randia will step out of character and ask me to comment on her performance, but she doesn’t. She is still *Córka*. I see tears welling up in her eyes, rolling down her face and onto my arm. Then, in a quiet but stern voice, *Córka* asks me, “Ela, how could they have left me like that? How could children do anything like this to their mother? Tell me!” I remain silent, not knowing what to do. But *Córka* insists, “Tell me!” I realise that Randia wants me to take on the role of Ela. Unsettled, I mutter, as Ela, “They can’t come back – it’s not that simple. They’d like to come back, but they can’t – they’ve set up their lives over there and it’s not easy to return.” *Córka* remains silent but keeps looking at me, and now my eyes well up with tears. Finally, she breaks the silence: “Maybe you’re right.” Later, in the session, she states, “I will keep on waiting ... Waiting, and waiting ... but what am I waiting for? For what?” She pauses, and I, as Ela, reply, “Things will change – you’ll see.” As I am about to turn off the voice recorder and leave for the day, Randia as *Córka* interjects: “Don’t go. Don’t leave me alone – I always sit alone ... When will you come next?” Unsure whether Randia is asking me or *Córka* is asking Ela, I reply as myself: “Not sure – how about Wednesday?” Randia agrees. “Wednesday is good, Ela. We’ll have lots more to record then.” I spend the whole afternoon thinking about what has occurred in this storytelling session but cannot put it into words. I feel awkward.

This article is an attempt to put into words what transpired in that and many subsequent sessions. I begin from the feeling of awkwardness I had on that day and

track its affective trails to understand: Where did this feeling come from? How and why did it materialise in the context of our dramatic storytelling sessions? What can it tell us about the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of ethnographic research? What is the broader significance of feeling awkward for the anthropological project?

Here, I am guided by the assumption that the feelings and emotions we experience while in the field are not windows onto a self-evident and unmediated truth but, rather, trails to be followed. I am indebted to recent scholarship that conceives of trails as “journeys, ... circuits, ... ways of dwelling in the world” (Knowles 2014, 4) that can provide important insights into the social worlds connected through them (8). I also draw on the notion of the *through line of action*, as conceptualised by early twentieth-century Russian theatre director, actor and theoretician Constantin Stanislavski ([1936] 1989, 276), who describes the through line as the “inner current of a play,” guiding the actor from the beginning to the end of the performance. But what do trails and plays have in common? I am extending Stanislavski’s concept of the through line by conceptualising my feeling of awkwardness as an inner trail that steered our dramatic storytelling sessions. While Stanislavski envisions a play’s through line as a straightforward thread the actor relies upon to direct his or her actions (274), I see my trail as non-linear and haphazard. I track its offshoots, twists and turns, because these “are worth taking seriously as critical spaces and sites for emergent voices and dreams” (Tsing 2004, 196). In particular, I am interested in learning how Randia’s and my social worlds “grate[d] against each other” (Knowles 2014, 7) with power, history and politics. Following Knowles’s (2014, 187) notion of “social theory as scratching,” by gathering my reflections on the trail, its offshoots and the connections between them, I endeavour to “scratch” the insights accumulated on my journey into a heap, in order to imagine how anthropology might be conceptualised and practised otherwise.

In recent years, much has been written about the future of the anthropological project in this era of globalisation, interdisciplinary borrowings, post-colonial geopolitics and neoliberal competition (Comaroff 2010; Gingrich 2010; Moskowitz 2015). Many debates focus on how to make anthropology relevant both within and outside academia. I hope to contribute to the conversations concerned with re-envisioning anthropology as an engaged, collaborative, reflexive and interventionist project (Clarke 2010; Hemment 2007; Johnston 2010; Kline and Newcomb 2013; Lassiter 2005; Low and Merry 2010; Osterweil 2013; Razsa 2015; Skidmore 2006). Such conversations have become ubiquitous in anthropology

since the 1980s' "crisis of representation" – a scepticism about ethnography as an adequate means to describe social reality – that had come to see ethnographic truths as partial and subjective (Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar 1996, 2007; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988). This critique of scientific positivism and the shift toward hermeneutic and critical approaches have put to question the authority of the researcher and the power imbalances that have traditionally defined ethnographer-interlocutor relations. This, in turn, has transformed the anthropological project; reflexivity, collaboration and community engagement have become the staples of how we should know what we know. It now goes without saying that one's published work ought to at least acknowledge (if not reflect on) the ways in which our own biographies, histories, diverse structural positionalities and theoretical and methodological commitments have shaped our research processes and results. In much of contemporary anthropology, it is taken for granted that researchers should strive to minimise power differentials by working collaboratively with interlocutors and even involving them directly in decision-making processes. And many, if not most, are committed to the idea that our anthropological undertakings should somehow "give back" to the people we work with. Maple Razsa (2015, 14), for example, advocates for a "militant" researcher (Colectivo Situaciones 2003) who "both seeks to study as well as to contribute to social struggles" (Razsa 2015, 14). In his view, anthropology must address the "crisis of the political imaginary" by offering ethnographic reimaginings of possibilities (210). In particular, Razsa champions creative and visual approaches to ethnographic research that foreground the imaginary and attend to the embodied, sensuous and extralinguistic dimensions of social life as ways of engaging in activism. From a slightly different standpoint, J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006, xxvii) approaches research as a collaborative action that directly involves communities in building a "(feminist) imaginary of possibility" that challenges and does away with economic capitalism. For Gibson-Graham, research attuned to the "politics of possibility" must ultimately privilege and mobilise "local capacities for change" (xxvii).

In this article, I trace how working with performance, storytelling and fiction has brought me to realise that what we now see as essential to anthropological research is still shaped, to a large extent, by the very same problematic ontological and epistemological assumptions that have been critiqued and challenged. In doing so, I set out to strip the wolf of sheep's clothing and consider how we might go about reimagining a different – wolf-free – anthropology. *Wolf anthropology*, as I call it, is a project that – despite its seemingly impressive history of

self-critique and commitment to a more equitable knowledge co-production – still largely perpetuates its colonial legacy of speaking for, and acting on behalf of, the people to whom it claims to be committed (Simpson 2014). Such an anthropology still, fundamentally, practises reflexivity, collaboration and community engagement on its own terms without serious consideration of interlocutors' perspectives on what truly equitable research might look like and how it might need to be carried out.

Imaginative Ethnography

I adopted dramatic storytelling as an approach to ethnographic research, in addition to participant observation and unstructured interviews, because it turned out that issues of confidentiality were paramount in the small Romani community. Randia and other Romani women were reluctant to discuss many aspects of their lives in interviews and were concerned that pseudonyms alone would not guarantee their anonymity. Randia suggested that we engage in dramatic storytelling: she would narrate her life experiences in a dramatic and fictional form, and I would respond improvisationally when called upon. A decade earlier, Randia had worked with me on a performance ethnography project to develop and present a play based on Romani women's experiences of violence (see Kazubowski-Houston 2010). Though she did not want to perform on stage because she was concerned about potential violent repercussions from non-Roma audiences, she collaborated with Polish actors in rehearsals and was actively involved in all stages of developing the performance. She had enjoyed working with imaginative and performative approaches and thought that dramatic storytelling would be ideal in the current project to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity.

My storytelling sessions with Randia took place over a period of six years, during which she narrated improvised fictional dramatic scripts based on her life experiences; these were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Frequently, Randia stepped into character by assuming different voices and physicalities and treating me as an audience member or as another character in the play (Kazubowski-Houston 2012). She acted in a style that could be referred to as *psychological realism*,² wherein the actor "steps into" and emotionally identifies with the character being portrayed. Her acting style also at times resembled that of the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht,³ in which the actor adopts a variety of illusion-breaking strategies in order to portray rather than "feel" his or her character, as well as bearing similarities to magic realism (Ahmadzadeh 2011, 289),⁴ which is characterised by the incorporation of both the real and the fantastical. Randia usually developed her scenes

through spontaneous improvisation, meaning that she did not discuss or plan her scenes prior to acting them out. No post-storytelling debriefing sessions were specifically designated, although Randia frequently reflected during our informal conversations on some of the issues raised in the storytelling sessions. Whenever I asked her what, according to her, the most important themes that emerged during our storytelling were, she cited old age, loneliness, her children's migration, longing for her children, poverty and her impending death.

This approach to ethnographic storytelling can be situated in the context of imaginative ethnography that concerns itself with both "imaginative practices" and "creative methodologies" (Culhane 2017, 13–18). Imaginative practices can be seen as both constituting and constitutive of intersubjective experience, social relations and the interrelationships between the present, the past and the future. Imaginative ethnographers are less concerned with imagination as a conceptual category and more with imagining as an emergent and shifting process, action and interior and exterior mode of being and expression (Culhane 2017). In other words, they attend to imagination as "an active component of experience and perception, engaged in constant interchange with the material textures of the existing world" (McLean 2007, 6). But, most importantly, imaginative ethnography takes seriously what our interlocutors understand as imagination and pays close attention to how they negotiate and live imaginative practices on a daily basis (Culhane 2017, 15). The approach to ethnographic dramatic storytelling I employed in my project sought to attend to the incidental, unintended, improvisational and generative imaginative practices that constituted and were constitutive of Randia's life circumstances, my fieldwork experiences and our mutual relations in the field. Through our dramatic storytelling sessions, I was particularly interested in facilitating a space where my interlocutor could employ imagination (as she understood it) to "project [her] 'fables' in a direction that [did] not have to reckon with the 'evident universe'" (Crapanzano 2004, 19). While recognising that the generative capacity of imagination cannot be understood solely in utopian terms,⁵ I am inspired by Vincent Crapanzano's (2004, 14–15) and Amira Mittermaier's (2011, 30) position that breaking with the evident, the expected, can conjure up new ways of being, dreams and desires, and shift focus toward what surfaces, sprouts and promises.

Imaginative ethnography also embraces "creative methodologies": transdisciplinary, collaborative, embodied and critical research methods that draw from ethnography, anthropology and the creative arts (Culhane 2017, 16; Elliott and Culhane 2017; Kazubowski-Houston 2010,

2017a, 2017b). In particular, my project bridged fiction, performance and storytelling.

Anthropology's recognition of the partiality and subjectivity of ethnographic truths has blurred the border between ethnography and fiction, which, in turn, has sparked much experimentation with anthropologists trying their hand at different literary genres, seeking a more evocative, embodied, affective and accessible means of expression than the traditional ethnographic monograph aimed at specialists. Most anthropologists today agree that ethnography is rooted in fieldwork and accountable to the people it represents, while fiction invents the world at will (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fassin 2014; Narayan 1999). Nevertheless, many have begun incorporating literary conventions (such as suspense and exaggeration) into their ethnographic products (Ashforth 2000); improvising upon interlocutors' stories (Myerhoff 1980); making research locales and characters anonymous (Elliott 2014; Kazubowski-Houston 2012); inventing locales, characters or events as inspired by one's fieldwork (Augé 2013); and shifting between ethnographic accuracy and fictional invention (Stewart 1989). In her dramatic storytelling, Randia incorporated suspense and exaggeration, and she invented locales, characters and events; however, all her stories were loosely based on either her own life experiences or her knowledge of the experiences of other Roma with whom she has been personally acquainted.

In the last few decades, performative approaches to research have arisen out of the desire to transform traditionally hierarchical interactions between ethnographer and informant, and to find ways to disseminate knowledge more effectively and accessibly than through conventional scholarly publications. Many scholars see the collective nature of performance as facilitating more collaborative research relationships, wherein the ethnographer and interlocutors can co-create both the research process and its performance (Conquergood 1988; Culhane 2011; Fabian 1990; Kazubowski-Houston 2010; Madison 2010). The interplay of dramatic text, image and sound has also been seen as a means of documenting and representing research findings, and potentially facilitating a more engaging and accessible knowledge exchange (Allen and Garner 1995; Denzin 2003; Mieniczakowski 1995, 2001; Saldaña 2003; Schechner 1985; Turner and Turner 1982).

Most ethnographic experimentations with performance, however, have taken place at the level of representation; experiments with ethnographic process – performance as ethnography – have been relatively rare (Conquergood 1988; Culhane 2011; Fabian 1990; Kazubowski-Houston 2010, 2011, 2017a, 2017b;

Madison 2010; Magnat 2012; Papa and Lassiter 2003). In anthropology, Johannes Fabian (1990) has been a trail-blazer. Working with a theatre troupe in Shaba, Zaire, he employed theatre performance as a form of participant observation, addressing his research questions by collaboratively developing a theatre performance with his interlocutors. Fabian (1990, 19) advanced a “performative” – as opposed to “informative” – ethnography, in which the ethnographer becomes a co-performer who does research “*with*, not *of*” the people with whom he works (43; original emphasis). Our storytelling sessions could be situated as an approach that employs performance as a form of ethnographic process – although, as such, these sessions were also forms of performative representation, which I reflect upon and analyse in this article.

The approach to ethnography as storytelling that my project adopted has been seen in anthropology as a means of addressing the power imbalances between ethnographer and informant (Anderson 2008; Cruikshank 1998; Jackson 2005; Myerhoff 1980; Robertson and Culhane 2005; Thomas 2005). Most frequently, storytelling has taken the form of “life history/story” interviewing, where the interviewer listens to and records the narrator’s account of his or her life. However, it can also incorporate the recounting of historical and/or mythical events, traditional origin stories, songs, genealogies, personal or place names, poetry and fictional stories (Cruikshank 1998; Myerhoff 1980). Anthropologists recognise that storytelling is a form of social performance because meanings do not reside within the stories told but are rather co-created between storyteller and listener – or interviewee and interviewer – through verbal and nonverbal interactions, and are mediated by technique, audience and context (Benjamin [1936] 1973, 91; Cruikshank 1998). As such, storytelling is seen as a complex performance that “does things” in the world – such as reaffirming a sense of order in a chaotic and changing world; establishing significant linkages between the past, the present and the future; articulating personal, social and cultural ideals; subverting hegemonic ideologies and practices; or inviting philosophical critique (Bakhtin 1984a, 1984b; Benjamin [1936] 1973; Cruikshank 1998; Myerhoff 1980).

An Elephant in the Room

Randia’s and my life circumstances had a lot in common. Randia was an elderly mother left behind by her migrant children, and I was a migrant child who had to leave behind her elderly and ill mother in Poland. Whenever I was doing fieldwork in Elbląg over the summer, I was looking after my mother, who also lives there. I understood how difficult it was for Randia to live without her

children. Randia would also show concern for my mother; however, each time we broached the topic of my mother’s care, there was an elephant in the room – a big elephant. Sometime following the storytelling session I described, I came to realise that what had transpired that day was that the elephant, for the very first time, began to trumpet. And this is what felt awkward: that deafening clarion call.

I realised that in the session, Randia (as Córka) was not only forcing me (as Ela) to co-perform her thoughts and feelings about the migration of her children, but, more importantly, in her stubborn request that I, as Ela, explain her children’s actions, she also was asking me to explain my decision to immigrate to Canada and leave my ailing mother in Poland. Thus, my attempt to justify Córka’s children’s decision to stay abroad was my attempt to justify my own actions – and Córka’s admission that maybe Ela was right – constituted Randia’s acceptance of my decision to emigrate. Thus, what really happened in that dramatic storytelling session was that Randia asked me about my own decision to leave my mother behind in Poland, which I think she always wanted to ask, but was reluctant to, fearing that it might compromise our relationship. While we had known each other for a long time, I was a researcher, after all, and Randia might have been inhibited inquiring about this aspect of my personal life. On many occasions, when asking about anything not relevant to my research, she would begin with an apology for doing so. This time, however, was somehow different. It was different because our dramatic storytelling sessions facilitated a highly reflexive ethnographic practice, but it was a practice unlike most approaches to reflexivity that have been conceptualised and employed within anthropology. We experienced what I call an “awkward reflexivity.”

Remaking Reflexivity

This awkward reflexivity that had materialised in our dramatic storytelling sessions can be, in part, understood in relation to the critical approaches to reflexivity that have arisen within anthropology in the last few decades. Rather than merely exposing “their methodology and themselves as the instrument of data generation” (Ruby 1980, 153), critical anthropologists concern themselves with relationships among history, politics, power and knowledge (Scholte 1972; Scott 1990). Critical reflexivity is meant to shift attention from texts to relations of power, which both shape the contexts in which research is conceptualised, conducted and analysed (Fardon 1990) and define the relationships between ethnographers and interlocutors.

Our awkward reflexivity, however, also carried with it a complete reconceptualisation of reflexivity

and how it has been understood and practised within anthropology. Thus far, the strategy of reflexivity, even in the most critical approaches, has remained primarily within the purview of the anthropologist. What I mean here is that the anthropologist has been traditionally the one who decides if, how and when to use reflexivity as a strategy. As such, anthropologists have ultimately retained control over which aspects of their biography, research process and theoretical and methodological commitments to reveal and reflect upon, both in the field and in subsequent ethnographic products. In other words, reflexivity has generally been practised on the anthropologist's own terms. And it was frequently merely a cherry on top of the ice cream sundae to satisfy the post-*Writing Culture* anthropological palate. Our dramatic storytelling sessions, however, had reversed the direction of this reflexivity, making it possible for my interlocutor, Randia, to engage me in self-reflexive performances. The "cherry on top" became the through line of the ethnographic process as she usurped my reflections in order to ponder, come to terms with, reimagine and act upon her own life.

Our dramatic storytelling sessions facilitated a space wherein Randia and I became both spectators and actors, or – to use Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal's (1979) term – *spect-actors*, in our own and each other's lives. Boal coined this term to describe audience engagement in his Forum Theatre, created in response to a particular group's oppression, in which spectators are invited to take the actors' roles and replace the play's protagonists, and encouraged to improvise alternatives to the running narrative. In our dramatic storytelling sessions, Randia and I became simultaneously actors and spectators, as we both performed and witnessed each other's performances. It is this process of co-performing that, inadvertently, juxtaposed my position as a migrant child of an elderly mother (that both resembled and differed from that of Randia's children) against that of Randia's position as an elderly non-migrant mother (that both resembled and differed from that of my mother's). I maintain that this co-performing inspired Randia to make reflexivity the driving force of our ethnographic knowledge construction and, ultimately, to take control over it.

The ways Randia accomplished this were evident in the way she, as Córka, compelled me to reflect on my decision to emigrate out of Poland and leave my mother behind. Subsequently, she used my reflections on my life to measure against and evaluate her own. This constituted a complete inversion of reflexivity, which traditionally involved anthropologists "measur[ing their] ideas against people's lives" (Salzman 2002, 808). By asking

me (Ela) through her character of Córka how children "could do anything like this to their mother;" Randia not only expressed her disillusionment with her children and me but also forced me to explain my actions, so that she could understand the actions of her own children. When I replied that her children "can't come back" because "it's not that simple," she expressed her acceptance with, "maybe you're right."

This was made even more explicit in a twist in which Randia as Córka broke the fourth wall and, in a Brechtian manner, slipped between addressing me as the character Ela and me as the ethnographer. This slip is evident when Córka referred to Ela as a professor, because, up to that point in the storytelling sessions, Ela was not a professor but a Polish woman, Randia's friend, who was yet to immigrate to the UK in search of work. Córka said,

I don't know why my children don't care ... why are they like that? I did so much for them, worked hard to support them ... they had everything they wanted ... and now I have nothing to put on the table. They won't even call. Look, you went away too, but you come back, look after your mother. You even hired a caregiver! I know they can't afford that ... You're a professor! They can't measure up to that ... I know they have their own families to feed ... life is hard abroad, not for all, but for many Roma it is. I understand all that, but they could, at least, send me a few *zloty*, so I can pay off my bills. They still have more than I do. Or [they could] call me from time to time ... Will they ever visit? ... Just keep me waiting ... like a dog at the door ... That's what children do ... Both Roma and Polish children. They don't respect their parents ... but one day, we'll be gone ... One day you'll all be left without your mother. Every single one of you. And you all will be waiting for your children ... just like we did for you.

In this scene, Randia evaluates her life against mine by making an astute observation that while the circumstances of our families are similar, they are also very different due to our disparate economic standing. My university professorship affords me the resources to hire a caregiver for my mother, but Randia's children's temporary and low-paid jobs in the UK do not. Here, Randia, in a critical reflexive manner, evaluates our different life experiences by placing them in the larger contexts of migration, ethnicity and class, and the interrelationships between them. This is clear when she expresses her disillusionment with all migrants who leave their parents behind, when she reflects on the difficult lot of Romani migrants, and when she draws attention to the intergenerational power dynamics within transnational migrant

families. She brings into focus the fact that many migrants, although facing challenges of their own, are still more advantaged than their elders left behind, by merit of being younger, healthier, mobile and more financially independent. Their more secure socio-economic standing yields them certain power over their elders. Among the Roma, and many middle- to lower-class Poles, this power translates into the ability to choose if, or when, to visit parents or to send remittances, while the parents, frequently elderly, ill and poor, have few options but to await their children's return or support. For Randia, waiting was something she did every day, not so much for remittances (those almost never came) but for someone to visit, for a relative to call, for a passerby to be willing to pay to have their fortune told, for me to stop by to record her stories and, finally, for her children to return to Poland.

Randia, with her frustrated comment about "waiting ... like a dog at the door," makes a critical commentary on waiting as a necessary life condition for many left-behind elders in post-socialist states. Here, Randia's observation echoes that of [June Hee Kwon \(2015\)](#), who, writing about the recent Korean Chinese labour migration to South Korea, notes that the inescapability of waiting and loneliness that come with it has become an essential activity for those who stay behind. In another storytelling session, I (as Ela) responded to Córka, "Your children are also waiting, Córka ... they're waiting to see you, to come and visit you ... it's hard on them too ... they miss you. It's not easy on them," drawing attention to the fact that waiting can define not only the lives of those who stay behind but also the lives of those who migrate. But Randia as Córka exposed a gap in my thinking with a brisk, "Yes, they're waiting ... but they don't have to be waiting, I do," bringing into sharp focus the inequities of waiting that are inextricably linked to one's social and economic standing and age.

Finally, Randia's usurping of reflexivity in our dramatic storytelling sessions led to another uneasy offshoot when she threw into high relief the power inequities underlying our ethnographer-interlocutor relations. In doing so, she accomplished what Lila Abu-Lughod (1991, 147) calls a "strategy of writing against culture," drawing attention to the histories and politics behind specific interlocutor-anthropologist relations and their respective worlds. The scene cited at the beginning of this essay clearly indicates this: as I was about to turn off my recorder, Randia blurred the line between fiction and reality by asking me, seemingly in character, when I would visit her next. Here, Randia could have been asking me when I would return to record her stories, or Córka could have been asking her friend Ela when

she would visit her next. The irony is poignant if one considers that Ela was a migrant child (like I was), that Córka was a non-migrant mother (like Randia was) and that I was an anthropologist and Randia was an interlocutor. My confusion as to whom Randia was addressing poignantly exposes the relations of power that render parallel the relationship between the migrant child and the non-migrant parent and the relationship between anthropologist and interlocutor. Later, Randia encapsulates this moment of awkwardness by stating, "You come and go too ... I got so used to you being here ... it'll be hard when you're gone. I'll be waiting for you, as I'm waiting for my children ... Will you come back next summer? I'll have much more to tell you. Will you still want to record?" Randia's observation underscores the fact that the anthropologist – like the migrant child who calls the shots when or if to visit their elderly parent – is also free to come and leave at will, while the interlocutor is left waiting. And the anthropologist has the power to invite her interlocutor to participate in the project, or not, while the interlocutor is not afforded a similar opportunity.

Later, Randia further punctuated this parallel between the anthropologist-interlocutor and migrant child-non-migrant parent in ways yet more unwieldy when, unexpectedly, in a magic realist fashion, she became me, Magda, and addressed me as Randia, while simultaneously holding the physical comportment of Córka: "I won't come here anymore, Randia, when my mother is gone ... it's too expensive to travel back and forth." Then she responded in a way that was again confusing (she could have been saying this as herself or as Córka): "But you could always stay at my place, there's plenty of room here." Then, she broke the fourth wall and addressed me directly: "No, you won't come ... you will only come here as long as your mother is alive ... then it will be time to say good-bye." Finally, she concluded, "But Ela still wants to see Córka ... you see, they are friends, when Ela leaves they may never see each other again." In that moment, the anthropologist-interlocutor and Córka-Ela pairs became Siamese twins, inseparably conjoined by history, power and imagination.

Randia also used my self-reflections to imagine her own life differently. In one dramatic storytelling session, in a largely Brechtian manner, she did this by unexpectedly switching our roles – that is, she took on the part of Ela and cast me as Córka:

Randia: Córka says this to Ela, she says, "I hope your mother lives forever ... I hope she does, but a time will come, when you know ... God will eventually call us all to eternity ... What will you do then with your mother's flat? Will you sell it?"

I repeat Randia's text as Córka, and then Randia responds as Ela.

Ela: Well, let God allow my mom to live forever, but, yes, I would probably sell the flat. Maybe renovate it a bit first, it's an old house. I could make some decent money on that ... and then buy myself my own flat ...

Randia stops acting and looks at me. She says, "But what if Ela's mother doesn't own a flat? What then?"

Magda: Uhm ... I'm not sure ... maybe ...

Randia: Okay, so Ela, this is what Ela says: "I will go abroad and work there ... there are lots of jobs in England ... and they pay well ... Once I make enough money, I'll come back and buy my mother a flat ... with hot water."

Randia now takes over my role of Córka.

Córka: You know Ela, that's what my children are thinking too ... they left for work so they can buy me a flat ... But maybe ... now ... Maybe I could buy myself a flat on my own? Why would I wait for my children? It could be mine and then, one day, the kids could have it ... My neighbours want to buy out their flats ... they asked me if I would too, but I told them I had no money. So they said that they would all pitch in and buy out my flat for me. Isn't that nice? I said, "No ... I don't want to," but now, I'm thinking, why wouldn't I? I could always sell it one day ... couldn't I? Better than sitting and waiting on my children.

This scene is interesting on many accounts. First of all, what is clear here is that Randia switches roles to ask me what I would do with my mother's flat after my mother's death. It is difficult to know whether this role switch was intentional on Randia's part, but it is easy to see what it does. It allows Randia to ask me the question, but in a way that the question actually comes from me. This enables her to circumvent asking me directly about my mother's death, a query I might potentially perceive as insensitive. What happens later in the scene is equally curious. Randia – imagining a situation in which Ela's mother, just like Randia, does not own a flat – uses my life to reimagine hers. Subsequently, as she works out a possibility for Ela's mother to become a homeowner, she also works out one for herself. She decides that Córka (really herself) could become a homeowner through the possibility offered to her by her neighbours. This scene was directly based on an event that had recently occurred in Randia's life: the neighbours of her apartment block decided to purchase their subsidised flats

(*mieszkanie komunalne*) and offered to help Randia with covering the costs of her flat, so that the whole apartment complex could become privately owned. Some municipal governments, in order to avoid costly renovations, had been offering this option in recent years to social housing residents, and at a low price. In our dramatic storytelling sessions, Randia was considering this option against the backdrop of my life. This allowed her to imagine what her life might look like had she owned her flat and what she needed to do to become a homeowner.

She also reimaged her life, albeit in different terms, in another scene in which Córka told Ela how her children often appeared in her dreams as young kids running around the house. At some point, Córka stopped, closed her heavy eyelids and sat in silence for a while.

I thought Randia was done [acting]. She seemed tired, which worried me. I looked at my watch ... it was already 3:00 pm. Wasn't Randia supposed to take her insulin shot an hour ago? She probably forgot again.

Magda: Are you okay?

Randia (as Córka): [pointing toward a blue pouch, with a picture of Lisa Simpson from *The Simpsons* on it, that was lying on the table across from her] I feel weak Ela ...

I passed her the pouch. So Randia was still acting. At the same time, I knew she really wasn't feeling well. I also knew the contents of the blue pouch ... so did Randia forget her insulin shot? ... Or was she only using the pouch as a prop? My thoughts now wandered to my mother. She would also forget to take her pills ... just like Randia ... until I hired a caregiver to look after her.

Randia opened the pouch, looked inside. She took out a bundle of needles, a syringe and a blood glucose meter. She reached out for the monitor ... looked at it ... then looked inside the pouch.

Randia (as Córka): See, Ela ... stupid me ... forgot to buy the test strips.

Magda (as Ela): Córka, you can't be forgetting your insulin shots – you can't wait until you're feeling weak. I can't keep reminding you – You can't really expect me to – I can't be phoning you daily to remind you to take your pills ... these pills keep you alive, Córka. What are we going to do? [pause] I think that ... if you ... if you – we need to think about finding a good home ... a care home – you know – where you won't be alone ...

Randia (as Córka): [angrily] Roma don't go into homes ... not like you [non-Roma Poles] do ... our families look after us.

Then Randia looked up at me. Uneasy, she replied as *Córka*.

Randia (as Córka): Well, sometimes, Roma might go into homes ... It depends ... sometimes they do ... I don't know if my children ... could come back – Ela, I know you didn't have another option. You had to give your mother away. You live far ... and have no siblings ...

Here, Randia is reimagining her life in response to mine. Halfway through my response to *Córka* as Ela, I was re-enacting a conversation I really had with my mother a while back about the possibility of her moving into a long-term care facility. At first, *Córka* is hostile to Ela's suggestion that she should move into a care home, but later she reconsiders her response. She softens her tone and acknowledges that "sometimes – Roma might go into homes" and that she does not know if her children will be able to return to look after her. Clearly, *Córka* recognises that one day, she too might have to live in a home. While Randia's response as *Córka* seemingly did not relate to my personal life, as my mother did not yet have to move into a long-term care facility, it was directed at my potential future. Randia knew that, eventually, my mother would likely need to move into a home. It was Randia's consideration of my future through which she was able to reimagine and prepare for her own.

"Fiction Stood Safely between Us"

The trail of my awkwardness had also sneakily zig-zagged beyond the storytelling sessions into the "real world," with the awkwardness unexpectedly diminishing along the way. First of all, our sessions had subverted power dynamics between Randia and me, significantly altering our relationship in everyday contexts. Randia became more comfortable discussing with me, in our daily conversations, my decision to immigrate to Canada and my mother's care. Initially, these exchanges were rather moralising on Randia's part, as she adamantly asserted that she would have never emigrated abroad and left her mother behind. She was also very critical of my intentions to eventually move my mother into a long-term care facility. When I tried to explain that I had no easy options, as my mother was too ill to relocate to Canada, and I could not give up my professorship in Toronto to live in Poland, Randia would frequently counter that "one had only one mother" and that caring for her "properly" was one's fundamental responsibility. However, the storytelling session in which *Córka* acknowledged that her children might not be able to return to Poland to look after her, and that Ela had no other

options but to move her mother into a long-term care facility, transformed her position on this issue. As soon as we finished recording that storytelling session, Randia asked me what I was planning to do about my mother's care. At first, I was not sure how to respond, as I had interpreted *Córka*'s comment that Roma do not go into homes like Poles do as Randia's way of making a cutting remark toward me. I managed to mutter that I had no good ideas. Randia then replied, "You have to find your mother a good home. You still have time ... go and look around. You don't have other options ... you can't be back in Poland in three months. You can't afford that!" At the time, I was surprised by her response, but I now recognise that this transformation in her attitude likely took place as a result of our dramatic storytelling sessions. And over the course of the next two months of my stay in Poland, Randia provided me with much-needed counsel and support. The elephant in the room was no more.

Moreover, as Randia's attitude toward me altered outside of our dramatic storytelling sessions, it also did toward her own life and potential future. Prior to our storytelling sessions, she would always assert that "when the time comes," her children would return to Poland to look after her as all Romani children do; however, at some point during the course of our sessions, she began speaking about moving to a smaller apartment with central heating and hot water. She also started considering "finding a girl" who would be willing to care for her in exchange for a place to stay. She even entertained immigrating to England, or moving into "an old folks' home," although she saw these as last resorts.

So why did such an awkward reflexivity materialise in and through our dramatic storytelling? I suggest it was because our sessions facilitated a unique process of knowledge construction. By the end of the storytelling day when I had first encountered that feeling of awkwardness, I jotted down in my field notes, "[Randia] was *Córka*, and I was Ela. Fiction stood safely between us ... like an invisible screen, concealing a heartbroken mother abandoned by her children, and a guilt-ridden daughter who had abandoned her mother." It was that fiction, in part, that was responsible for our performances of awkward reflexivity. This was the case because the characters, relations and locales in Randia's play were fictional, which offered a level of anonymity. As such, fictionality also mitigated some of the politics of representation that constrained our interactions outside of dramatic storytelling. As Randia once aptly put it, fiction allowed her to "say what [she] really want[ed] to say." In interviews and outside of the dramatic storytelling sessions in general, Randia felt she had to be more guarded about what she

said or asked me, because she knew that excerpts from the interview would be quoted verbatim in my published work and thus might reach other Roma in Poland and a larger international audience. For example, not wanting to represent her relatives negatively to the outside world, she rarely was critical of her migrant children in the interviews, and she never asked me questions that could be deemed inappropriate to ask of a researcher. But in the dramatic storytelling sessions, in these liminal “betwixt and between” (Turner 1982, 113) spaces, Randia could express herself as someone else and thus feel safe to articulate what she would otherwise suppress. Those moments when Randia narrated the script “in character” can be seen as what Richard Schechner (1985, 38) refers to as “restored behavior” – a projection of one’s particular self, in which one becomes someone else. In our project, her anonymity was bolstered by the fact that Randia participated individually in the storytelling sessions rather than with other women, and because the plays were not intended for public performances. Randia was not concerned about confidentiality in my published work because, she claimed, her play’s fictional characters and events sufficiently protected her identity.

Affective Work

However, there was something else at stake that made our awkward reflexivity materialise: these sessions mobilised a peculiar kind of “affective work” (Kwon 2015, 480) that may have been diametrically different from that in more conventional forms of ethnography. This affective work may have drawn more on the unarticulated, subliminal bodily sensations and moods than on the more consciously experienced and acknowledged thoughts, feelings, emotions and desires that are explicitly stated in interviews (Irving 2011; Massumi 2002). While improvising, Randia and I had to allow our stories, movements, expressions and emotions to arise with little time for rationalisation. For Brazilian theatre director and theoretician Boal, working intuitively with the body allows actors to connect to their unconscious feelings and desires (Jackson 1992, xxiii). Working with fiction, which also opens a window onto the unconscious, might have contributed to this process. Our improvisations allowed us to step into different characters – which inadvertently represented me, my mother, Randia’s children, Randia herself and others – with little time to rationalise our choices. In so doing, Randia was able to imagine her life not only from her own perspective but also from my perspective as a migrant child and from the perspectives of her children, as well as from the perspectives of other characters, some of whom personified her other relations, friends and neighbours. While

she acted in a style of psychological realism, she was not bound by one character throughout the storytelling process, but instead she shifted and switched roles, more in the mode of a Brechtian actor. And her imaginings were never completely limited by the perspectives of the people in her life – because, as it happens in fiction, the characters she created both resembled and departed from the actual people on which they were based. Moreover, the on-the-spot nature of our improvisations also further ignited Randia’s imagination, which, in turn, inspired her to adopt yet another acting style that could be classified as magic realism. This somewhat fantastical mode of representation added further complexity to her performative imaginings, allowing her to construct characters that were never closed, unified persons of fixed biographies, but who occupied different personhoods, locations and temporalities simultaneously. In some scenes, Córka was the elderly protagonist of Randia’s play, living in present Poland; in other scenes, she was the protagonist’s cousin, sister-in-law, daughter or friend, sometimes in the past and sometimes in the future. Also, while in some scenes it was clear that Córka represented Randia or my mother, in other scenes, she could have just as well been me or Randia’s children. Similarly, in some scenes, Córka’s friend Ela clearly personified me, while in other scenes, she figured as an elderly woman, who could have been Randia herself. At other times, it was not completely clear for whom she stood. As such, the characters were akin to Amazonian notions of personhood as “uncertain and transitory ... caught in a continuous process of ‘Other-becoming’” (Rival 2012, 130). The variety of acting styles that Randia adopted allowed her to step into my shoes and those of her children, but also to step out of those shoes in a multitude of different directions and reimagine how life could have been – and could be – different for her, her children, my mother and me. While Randia, through her characters, was able to “experience” what my life or her children’s lives could have been like, she was not bound by our experiences but instead was able to “live” different lives while still embodying our personhoods. Conversely, she was also able to embody different personhoods while simultaneously “living” our lives.

Such affective imaginative work, wandering from character to character, location to location, and temporality to temporality, may have allowed Randia to reconsider her life against mine and transform our relationship in ways not possible in other research contexts. This work, to a certain extent, may have unhinged the preconceptions and feelings she had toward her own life, future and children, and toward me. While fiction provided a protective veneer that made it possible for

Randia to sidestep the politics of representation, the improvisations, in tapping into the more unconscious realm of experience, may also have made it possible for her to reimagine her life and mine beyond the very stereotypes that have historically framed Roma–non-Roma relations in Poland. Such stereotypes typecast the Roma as negligent and abusive, while the Roma retaliate with similar stereotypes of non-Roma Poles. On several occasions, Randia hinted that Poles, but never Roma, neglect their elderly and “lock them away in old folks’ homes.” She also, on several occasions, remarked that “Romani children will always look after their parents” because of “tradition among the Roma.” Thus, it may have been that Randia generally perceived me in a stereotypical way as a neglectful Polish daughter and, conversely, saw her children as caring and protective. However, as she cast herself and me in roles of complex and unfixed characters, she may have been able to newly perceive her own life and mine as such, too. Perhaps this is why she began considering that her children might, in the end, not be able to return to Poland to look after her, and that one day she might have to emigrate or relocate into an eldercare facility. And perhaps this is why she became more understanding of my situation as a migrant child.

An Awkward Anthropology

Analysing my feeling of awkwardness has made visible some directions for rethinking a collaborative and engaged anthropology, one that does more than simply strip the wolf of sheep’s clothing. I have used the notion of *awkwardness* not just to track and reflect upon my feelings of vulnerability, unease and ambivalence that defined my relationship with my interlocutor but, more importantly, as a conceptual and practical approach for anthropology to reimagine itself into becoming a “wolf-free” project.

In the context of my research, engaging in an awkward anthropology meant reversing reflexivity and relinquishing its reins to my interlocutor. Certainly, one could argue that although Randia did demand some self-disclosure from me, I was and am still the one ultimately in control of what to reveal or conceal, as I decided what my characters would say (especially when Randia was not feeding me the lines), and I select what to reflect upon in my scholarly publications. However, while all representations are partial truths with plenty of room for deception and manipulation (Salzman 2002, 809), the spontaneous nature of our improvisations made self-censorship – at least intentional self-censorship – more difficult. But what matters most is that the elephant did trumpet: Randia did ask me the

questions she always wanted to ask. In many research contexts, certain questions cannot even be asked due to the power inequities between ethnographers and interlocutors.

An awkward reflexivity in my project also meant taking imagination seriously as a space from which ethnographic collaboration and political intervention can spring forth. Igniting the interlocutors’ and the ethnographer’s imagination to attend to the diverse, complicated, multi-faceted and unpredictable possibilities of everyday life might be where the transformative potential of anthropology lies. This conclusion required broadening my understanding of what constitutes an engaged anthropology. It meant opening myself up to the possibility that engaged scholarship might, in addition to direct political action, also entail imaginative, creative and critical epistemology. It might be, as Hale (2006, 100) argues, that activist research is best located “squarely amid the tension between utopian ideals and practical politics.” Imagination and creativity might be important to anthropology because in order to bring about transformation, we may need to first facilitate a space wherein to co-imagine alternate worlds with our interlocutors, a process that may require crafting new techniques to do so. In my project, bringing together imagination, performance and storytelling enabled both Randia and me to engage with the emergent and the possible and, as such, could be seen as constituting a form of what Michal Osterweil (2013, 615) has called “a radical epistemic politics.”

Clearly, not every project should adopt research practices that bridge ethnography and the creative arts, but an awkward anthropology might, at least in part, proceed by way of imaginative “recourse to the praxis” (Comaroff 2010, 533). Praxis, after all, has historically constituted anthropology’s knowledge production, theory and ethnographic method; and it is ultimately anthropological praxis that unites anthropologists across different topical, theoretical and ethical alignments (Comaroff 2010). Perhaps, the task of “awkwarding” anthropology might begin from imagining ethnographic fieldwork differently. This, ultimately, may be a less daunting task than it might seem, because as anthropologists, we have long been challenged to think about how we listen to and record people’s stories, how we participate in events, and how we experience, feel, write up, perform and share our ethnographies.

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Notes

- 1 Sections of this article have been previously published to support different arguments and conclusions in the *Canadian Theatre Review* (Kazubowski-Houston 2012).
- 2 In psychological realism – an approach to acting defined by Russian theatre director/actor Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) – actors invoke their own “emotion memory” in order to faithfully represent the characters’ emotions and intentions.
- 3 Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a poet, theatre practitioner, theoretician and playwright who developed *epic theatre*, which aimed at the politicisation of audiences by inviting them to engage in social critique and action. Brecht’s epic style of acting is characterised by, among other qualities, actors stepping in and out of character; shifting roles, playing more than one character and addressing the audience directly – all strategies aimed at staving off the audience’s empathy and, instead, inviting rational thought.
- 4 The term *magic realism*, coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, is used in reference to certain post-colonial literature, drama and performance that incorporate magical elements into otherwise realistic representations of life to subvert western hegemony and dominant forms of representation (Ahmadzadeh 2011).
- 5 As “an impulse of real life” (Ingold 2013, 735), imagination can both empower and disempower, both subvert oppression and sustain it. Imagination can imbue us with happiness, hope and strength, just as much as it can fill us with sadness, despair and resignation.

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