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Translations on the Move

A Review Article

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In recent years, the tracing of conceptual movements across the boundaries between disciplinary and everyday practices has been increasingly becoming a concern of ethnographic analysis itself, whether it is the Kayapo of the southern Amazon who objectify their relations in terms of culture, or infertile couples in North America who narrate their lives through idioms of race and ethnicity (Thompson 2005; Turner 1992). Others call for revitalizing anthropology by working through the very conceptions we encounter in the field, and which seem to have been explained away by analytically infused notions of culture, society, religion, or what have you. Anthropology, this argument goes, rather than chewing on old bones, is a practice that generates new concepts (Carrithers et al. 2010; Henare et al. 2007). In the former case, informants shape their ideas in ways oddly familiar to most anthropologists; in the latter, fieldworkers are busily revolutionizing the discipline by creating new conjunctures between methods and objects of research.

Although these tendencies seem, at first glance, to be at odds, this article will focus on some important connections between the two. Both are concerned with linking the analytical devices of anthropology and indigenous conceptions, be they borrowed from the social sciences or radically incommensurable with them. We will argue that these concerns are related to the problem of translation,

including spatial connotations present in the original meaning of the word: movement across disciplinary, national and ontological boundaries. If we listen carefully not only to the narratives but to the “theories” of our informants, it may happen that instead of something original and state-of-the-art, they will tell us about the things (i.e. concepts) we were just trying to throw out of the window. It may be that the work of translation is not really the magic trick that, reflexive critiques would have you believe, enables anthropologists to explain difference and similarity. The objects of translation, we will suggest, are neither in the field, nor on our bookshelves. They are in between and on the move, and this constant motion makes anthropological work ever more complex and challenging at the same time. We call this traffic of concepts “translational movements”.

Technocultural practices seem to be a good place to start from. It is quite revealing how well “translation” already travels in technoscientific realms.¹ It refers, for example, to the *translational motion* of atoms and particles that gives a substance its temperature, or to the process that leads from ideas to therapeutic solutions — from bench to bedside — as in *translational medicine*. Exploring the possibilities of thinking through translation, ethnographers at the crossroads of anthropology and STS have found much inspiration in such technoscientific practices. So, for instance, C. Hayden described how local plants and indigenous knowledges turn into industrially useful pharmacological products through the laborious work of Mexican and American scientists, fieldworkers, government officials, and brine shrimps (Hayden 2003). Or take, for another example, A. Mol’s beautiful description of how numbers of blood velocity in atherosclerotic patients are translated into anatomic images of thickened vessel walls with a simple pen:

While the patient dresses I follow the duplex technician to another room. Here light boxes make it possible to look at images printed on transparent plastic. The technician takes his prints out of a machine. They show the duplex graphs and the white echoes with red and blue that were printed each time he pressed his button. He looks at them carefully. Then he takes a form out of a stack. It allows him to write down PSV ratios for various parts of the artery. And there's a drawing in the middle. It shows the aorta and the larger leg arteries in schematic form. The technician draws a stenosis in this image: he enlarges the vessel wall of the left femoral artery with a blue pen. Marks the picture until half of its lumen has gone, at more or less the height (he notes the amount of centimeters above the knee) where he's just found an impressive increase in blood velocity...If ever there were one, this is a translation (Mol 2002: 80).

¹ Of course, this emphasis on displacement owes a lot to actor-network theory, which insists on a heterogeneous world that is constantly on the move through the translation between domains.

What is most fascinating about these technocultural practices, and what makes translation a difficult task full of tensions, is that they contain their own accounts. The meaning of diagnosis itself, for example may change through the very process of converting numbers into images; in a similar way, practices to turn herbs into drugs may draw native peoples, scientists, brine shrimps, and investors into all kinds of debates about the right way of doing bioprospecting. The work of H. Verran provides a well-known illustration of this conceptual loop, showing how anthropological theories and ethnographic objects come to mutually include each other in the process of understanding alterity as a creative response to empirical questions. In *Science and an African Logic* she explores how different ways of counting coexist in practice: that is, in math classrooms and town markets in Nigeria. She tells us about ropes, rulers, cards, and also fingers and toes, among many other things used for counting, to show how Yoruba and English numbers are translated into each other. Confronted with her first, relativist, take on the issue of indigenous mathematics, she has to ask herself a series of methodological questions about the nature of translation itself.

By privileging *practices* in numbering as I told of the generalizing logics, I saw myself avoiding the pitfalls of relativism, while arguing for possibilities of plurality. In my focus on practices, however, what I failed to recognize were my own practices, specifically practices of translation. Failing to notice the extent and nature of the translations involved in my relativist telling of the generalizing logic of Yoruba numbering thwarted my intention of discovering where the difference lay and how it was managed... (Verran 2001: 19).

At stake here is nothing less than the very concept of translation, a concept that is transformed through the ethnographic tracing of slowly unfolding connections and differences concerned with counting. As it turns out, then, the practical ontologies of counting and the myriad generative tensions it brings about point to a central problem of ethnographic description: how can we, again, take differences (and similarities) seriously?

In what she calls a performative account, Verran describes how number's singularity and the various versions of its objects emerge in and through the ethnographic setting. In doing so, she goes beyond a relativist telling of cultural difference and points toward the ontological effects of translation. As she notes, "the realities that numbers objectify are multiple, incomplete, infinitely partial, distributed, and potential. Reality is no longer completed, singular, and given" (Verran 2001: 106–107). Having multiple ways of encountering numbers, this example suggests, it is the relations between such encounters that generate creativity both in the classroom and in the conceptual work of anthropology. *If ethnography is, indeed, a process of translation, it is a peculiar method that multiplies reality.*

To follow the path opened up by Verran and to develop a further argument on the methodological momentum of translational movements, we will proceed in three consecutive steps. The following section discusses some theoretical shifts in the study of radically different worlds, what is currently referred to by some authors as “the ontological turn” in anthropology². Next, we will focus on the important, but often neglected, connections between these developments and more recent methodological attempts to deal with the borrowing of social scientific notions by informants, a problem particularly pertinent in lateral ethnographies of modern expert practices. We argue that translational movements are at stake in both of these projects through their common interest in the traffic of notions between analytic tools and local lifeworlds, and their concern for bringing together anthropological and indigenous concepts in a productive way. In the third section, we introduce three particular modes in which this conceptual work feeds into or, rather, through ethnographic practice by focusing on the changing nature of *place*. Along with T. Rees, our aim here is to show how focusing on fieldwork may span the ontological and epistemological planes (Rabinow et al. 2008: 49). We explore how hybrid notions of place enable reconfigurations of the links between conceptual and empirical niches, desk and field, and self and other.

1 Inventing relations between anthropological and indigenous analysis

It goes without saying that anthropology has been occupied with translation, understood as delineating the “native’s points of view” (Geertz 1983). Even though some anthropological endeavors have ended as mere lists of indigenous categories, anthropology’s ambition has always been more than that: it has attempted to delineate indigenous ways of conceiving the world, one that relates categories and shapes the inhabited world. This could entail a tricky reflective problem, however, regarding the relationship between the conceptual devices of the ethnographer and the people studied. Attempts to list indigenous categories without any preoccupation, such as those of ethnoscience, often end up reshaped by the forms of Western epistemology onto which the indigenous categories have been mapped: consequently, it is not at all easy to clearly express conceptions that are radically different from ours. It is often the case that our own assumptions about what counts as nature or an individual, for example, slips into attempts at description that are intended to show how the concept being described brings into question these very assumptions.

² For the difference in the uses of the word “ontology”, see Gad et al. forthcoming.

This conundrum was tackled by M. Strathern in her magnum opus, *The Gender of the Gift* (Strathern 1988). Strathern's effort to delineate the Melanesian conception of personhood and collectivity sharply differs from conventional ways of depicting emic categories. Rather than attempting to describe Melanesian ethno-sociology with the aid of anthropological analytical devices, she allows the Melanesian conception of personhood and collectivity to reconfigure her own social anthropological analysis. Miyazaki characterizes her approach as follows:

(S)he made use of parallel and contrast between 'indigenous' and social analysis in her efforts not only to question assumptions behind anthropological analytical constructs [...] but also extend Hageners' analytical devices to the shape of her own analysis" (Miyazaki 2004: 5).

In other words, Strathern turns the direction of the analytical move backward by allowing Melanesian conceptual devices to reconfigure social anthropological questions about individual and society. The analytical relationship between the subject and object is symmetric and reversible here: while the anthropological analysis reveals the contours of Melanesian conceptions, Melanesian conceptions reveal unnoticed anthropological presuppositions, thus transforming the original question.

Strathern's effort stimulated further experimental consideration of the symmetry between anthropological analysis and informant conceptions. The work of E. Viveiros de Castro is particularly important here. As Strathern reshaped British anthropology's longstanding concern with individual and society through the Melanesian conception of personhood and collectivity, Viveiros de Castro folded American anthropology's concern with nature and culture into the Amerindian conception of body and spirit.³ What he draws from this parallel is a radically different conception of the nature–culture relationship (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Whereas multiculturalism assumes a universally shared bodily constitution—single nature—and diverse and often incommensurable mental worlds—multiple cultures, Amerindians conceive that humans and non-humans, jaguars and ghosts, for example, share the same spiritual quality while their different bodies bring to each species vastly different perspectives. Viveiros de Castro characterizes this as *multinaturalism*.

One has to be wary, however, of the temptation to take multinaturalism as an object to be found out there among Amerindians. Rather, multinaturalism was drawn from the relationship Viveiros de Castro created between the

³ I owe this section to the conversation with Viveiros de Castro at the international workshop held at Hitotsubashi University in 2010. The contrast between the role of British social anthropology for Strathern and that of American multiculturalism for Viveiros de Castro was made by himself at the time.

anthropological conceptual device— multiculturalism—he was equipped with, and the narratives and practices of his informants. In this sense, multinaturalism does not neatly fit the conventional contrast between etic and emic as clearly separable entities. Multinaturalism represents that aspect of the anthropological endeavor that relies on the use of relations — the relations the ethnographer creates between analytical devices and informant conceptions, between the desk and the field, between the empirical and the conceptual — in order to explore the relations that informants create in their practices. As Strathern succinctly put it, “anthropology uses relations to explore relations” (Strathern 2005: 7).

From our viewpoint these endeavors represent a significant shift in the practice of ethnographic translation from the conventional assumption of a fixed plane on which the ethnographer can locate indigenous notions to more dynamic notions that focus on transformational relations between anthropological and indigenous conceptions. Here translation can be seen as a mutual transformation of our and their conceptions through the continuous traffic of ideas.

This effort of creating—or *inventing* to borrow R. Wagner’s wording—a symmetrical relation between the analytical devices requires of the ethnographer a certain kind of responsiveness, a capacity to let the interlocutor’s conceptions reconfigure the ethnographer’s own analytical devices (Venkatesan et al. 2012; Wagner 1975). Interestingly, one can find similar accommodation in the two most far-flung corners of the discipline. Whereas the motivation of Strathern and Viveiros de Castro is to understand radically different conceptions, those who have investigated expert practices such as law, finance, and science have also been urged to take the symmetry between the analytical devices of ethnographer and her/his informant into account precisely because of the problematic affinity, rather than difference, between them.

2 Problematic affinity

Ethnographic endeavors to explore practices of modern experts such as financial traders (Maurer 2005; Miyazaki 2007), legal experts (Riles 2011), and scientists (Hayden 2003) often encounter perplexing situations where the practices of informants have already been configured by social scientific notions. For example, in her study of Fijian NGO activists preparing documents for a UN conference on women, A. Riles encountered informants who had already employed social-scientific notions such as “network” to describe their practice (Riles 2000). It was an uneasy situation for her because analyzing the NGO practice by appealing to external categories, while presenting the anthropologist’s categories as real, would render the social-scientific categories the informants employed unreal or

counterfeit. At the same time, taking the informants' analysis at face value was also problematic because it would render the anthropological analysis a simple act of replication of indigenous concepts. Her solution was to juxtapose the social-scientific and the informant usages of 'network' and delineate the twisted relation between the two. Thus, she was able to effectively illustrate the aesthetics of form inherent in the bureaucratic work of the NGO.

Riles' attempt is part of an interesting shift, typical of post-*Writing-Culture* epistemological experiments that allow for a symmetry between anthropological and indigenous conceptions. While paying reflective attention to the affinity between ethnographic and bureaucratic practices, however, Riles' approach clearly differs from the reflexivity of postmodern ethnography. In contrast to postmodern ethnography aimed at representing a dialogue between the anthropologist and the informants, Riles shows no interest in dialogues in any conventional sense. Rather, she aims to produce a certain effect that destabilizes existing social scientific notions by creating interconnections between her own analytical devices and informant conceptions.

As anthropologist B. Maurer puts it, one can characterize this analytical endeavor by its *lateral* move. Rather than resting on the hierarchical relation between the data and the theory, lateralization lays analytical language alongside the language of informants and constructs interconnections between the two (Maurer 2005: xix). In this strategy the analytical effect emerges between the two languages, which often share the same social scientific notions such as network or gift. In other words lateral analysis aims precisely at demonstrating the transformational capacity of translational movements.

Maurer's own ethnography clearly exhibits this ambition (Maurer 2005). In his study of Islamic banking and alternative currency in Ithaca, New York, he faces a perplexing situation where Islamic banking, alternative currency, and his own social analysis share the same problem of referentiality. Both the practitioners of Islamic banking, who use an alternative financial technology to conform with strictures in the Qur'an about not charging interest, and the users of the Ithaca alternative currency, which is intended to facilitate barter, often face the problem that their monetary forms—financial techniques and alternative currency—do not end up with values equivalent to those in the wider-world, which the forms are supposed to represent. Because the relationship between money and value is often seen as a typical case for the epistemological problem of the adequacy of representation to reality, the informants' problems run parallel with those faced by Maurer's in his own ethnographic endeavor. In addition, his relationship to them is made even more problematic by the fact that the

practitioners of Islamic banking and alternative currency often mobilize the very same academic literature that Maurer draws on.

Grappling with this peculiar situation, Maurer questions the role of ethnography in interpreting empirical reality. Rather than interpreting informant practices, he lays his own words and those of Islamic bankers and the alternative currency users side by side, laterally, to produce a text in which items in each list performatively destabilize the analytical moves of the others and, in so doing, reveal often-unnoticed assumptions. His attempt is truly performative in that it takes the act of reading into account and aims to enact the lateralization at the time of reading. He puts his and his informants' words and analyses alongside each other and creates, so to speak, a sort of relative motion that reveals the dynamism of translational movements of knowledges that constantly oscillate from one side to the other and intertwine with each other.

Strathern's methodological inventions and Riles' or Maurer's lateral analyses offer novel views of ethnography, different both from representational depictions of the world and from postmodern relativism (Morita forthcoming). As Maurer demonstrated, lateral ethnography is an analytical device that is able to generate an analytical effect through the juxtaposing of anthropological and indigenous notions. When Riles questions the distinction between data and theory in her fieldwork, or Strathern lets Melanesian conceptualizations reconfigure all sorts of social anthropological problems, they show, in a very literal sense, how field data gathered in the wild and theoretical explanations of the data, which are supposedly conceived in another, intellectual, realm, constantly interpenetrate in the work of the ethnographer. This argument complicates the *locus* of ethnographic practice and opens up various opportunities to rethink the relation between field and desk. Ethnography comes to involve more than portraiture of things out there, and the field itself becomes something more than an inert site for data gathering. One finds in Maurer's text serial translational movements, a constant traffic of notions between the anthropologist and his informants, along with other kinds of traffic in the shifting locations of fieldwork. These dynamic relations between the sociomaterial practices of doing and writing ethnography, as we hope to show in the next section, help to us reconsider the multiple sites of anthropological translations.

3 Re-placing ethnographic translations

One analytic payoff of lateral strategies is that they expose one of the methodological cornerstones of anthropological research: the connection between ethnographic places and concepts. Commenting on the legacy of different schools

of the ethnographic method, in a recent article L. Nader said: “These forerunners were not governed by any one doctrine and did not adhere to a single model, yet they were all doing ethnography by most people’s standards: *they went, they observed, they stayed, they returned home and wrote ethnography*” (Nader 2011: 212; emphasis added). Indicating an important link between concepts and places in anthropological writing, along with other authors of the inaugurating issue of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Nader refers to this dynamic relationship between the field and the desk as ‘ethnographic theory’.

But today a formidable challenge to the locational generation of ethnographic theory arises in the fact that both more and more fieldwork is conducted “at home” and more and more ethnographic writing takes place in the field. The fundamental anthropological question of *where* to articulate the distinctions between close and far, us and them, or small and large situates the ethnographer’s conceptual work in his/her travel *between* sites, sides, and scales. In other words, as long as different ways of knowing and being are of interest to anthropologists, intimate places of difference remain the focus of critique as well as of experimental concern. It is in this sense that we argue here that *the place of ethnography keeps translations on the move*.⁴

Whether it is a bounded site of a community study in the field, a boundary that separates political territories, or flowing “scapes” where local and global effects align, locating the *place* of analytical intervention is the generative point of origin that defines the object of study.⁵ Old and new anthropological tropes of the village, laboratory, ethnicity, and cosmos seem to connect with and act on each other in ever changing and multiple ways through the work of translation, which destabilizes relations between outside and inside, micro and macro, emic and etic, wholes and parts.⁶ From the political border between Mexico and the United States to the cognitive division between ultrasound data and anatomic images, the tracing of translational movements questions some basic notions of place—both in the geographic and methodological sense of the word.

The three vignettes that follow consider this lateral articulation of anthropological locations: *sites* that collapse the distance between universal and particular; *sides* that connect self and other, and *scales* that fold local and global into each other.

⁴ This argument is also found in a slightly different form in B. Latour’s redistribution of the local as part of his acrobatic attempt to render the social traceable. “Movements and displacements,” he writes, “come first, places and shapes second” (Latour 2005: 204).

⁵ Arguing both with and against Geertz’s well-known claim, we might say that if there is a distinctively anthropological mode of studying villages, it is to study them in villages.

⁶ It is for this reason that relationality is becoming an increasingly inventive form of doing theory in anthropology these days. For an overview on the issue see (Venkatesan et al. 2012).

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Sites. Take tropical forests, for example, one of the archetypal sites of modern anthropological science. From evolutionism to structuralism to ethnoscience, the Amazon has been both an intensively explored geographical area and a hotbed of conceptual innovation. Given its symbolic value, especially in debates about nonhuman environment, some methodological interventions into the cosmological realms of the rainforest call for a reconfiguration of the modern distinction between universal nature and local cultures. These influential accounts draw upon native Amerindian theories to argue for the generativity, and even multiplicity, of what in most EuroAmerican scientific repertoires would be referred to as universal nature (Raffles 2002; Viveiros de Castro 2003). The relevant distinction for these authors is not that between “our” cultures and “theirs,” but rather the ontological alternatives that are mediated by ethnographically grounded translations.

In a forthcoming book, *Anthropology beyond the Human: A Multispecies Amazonian Account*, based on fieldwork among the *Runa* of the Ecuadorian Upper Amazon, for example, Eduardo Kohn claims “forests think”. Rather than disregard this claim as poetics, let’s examine it from the inside. Kohn is not pressing the seriousness of such claim simply because that is what his informants have told him; he does not insist on representing the *Runa* people in any way, least of all within the confines of human language. He is trying to do something trickier than that:

The fact that I can make the claim that forests think is in a strange way a product of the fact that forests think. These two things, the claim itself and the claim that we can make the claim are related (Kohn 2011).

The stakes are higher than they seem at first. Forests provide the ethnographer with meaningful theoretical ingredients not because there are empirical accounts to be found there, but because there are initially no distinctions between places and concepts. Places can bring about concepts in their own right, just as things can do (Henare et al. 2007).

Drawing on a rich array of ethnographic materials, Kohn takes the reader into a world where human and non-human beings share the forest through what he calls living thought. Life, in this view, refers to a semiotic process of becoming—across different ontological domains—that goes beyond the symbolic. In this thinking forest, dogs dream, monkeys and monkey-hunters communicate in modes that go way beyond language, and farmers and parakeets engage in each others’ lives through the figure of the scarecrow. If the *Runa* want, for example,

their dogs to understand humans, they give them hallucinogenic drugs that turn the humans, through the dogs' own interpretations, into shamans. Kohn remarks:

Metaphoric dreams are ways of experiencing certain kinds of ecological connections among different kinds of beings in such a manner that ontological distance is recognized and maintained without losing the possibility for communication. This is accomplished by virtue of the ability of metaphor to unite disparate but analogous, and therefore related, entities (Kohn 2007: 12).

Life in the forest is essentially a sign process: a relationality that does not necessarily emerge from within the human.⁷

Of course, just as the *Runa* cannot have any certain knowledge about what dogs dream or how parakeets see the world, so had we better acknowledge our lack of an absolute understanding of human and non-human differences. Such a deficiency, however, is far from being a refusal of theoretical reflection. In Kohn's view, it is actually by admitting the provisional nature of our concepts that the distance between our world and the *Runa*'s collapses in a productive way. He suggests that following the thinking of forests will help us rediscover that generalities are real, ethnographic things; he urges us, through fieldwork deep in the forest, to locate such generalities and rebuild an anthropology that can push ahead to ask general questions about the world, such as: how do forests think? how do dogs dream?

Anthropological categories are articulated differently at different sites, but it does not necessarily mean that they remain specifically bound to those places. *They move between sites*: forests, islands, hospitals, and factories. Spatial boundedness then allows us to challenge the totalizing logics of our analytical toolkits and see our categories more as arising from creative (and sometimes critical) relations between the distant and the near. If we dare to experiment with this argument, we might gain an understanding that does not divide the world between nature and cultures, or places and concepts.

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Sides. But while the travel between sites is arguably an important mode of anthropological knowledge making, it is, of course, not the only one. Once we start to ethnographically attend to the traffic between theories and the "world," such movements draw our attention to other modes of articulating connectedness, such as the exchange between different scientific fields.

⁷ An important source for Kohn's argument is the field of zoosemiotics, or the sociocultural (i.e. not strictly behavioral) study of animal communication and representation.

An interesting collaborative project by two young anthropologists C. Zaloom & N. Schüll (2011b) offers an engaging insight into the world of emerging science; partly as a consequence of their own interference with this becoming, they discover how fieldwork sites too can diverge into opposing sides through the juxtaposition of analytical and empirical notions of self and other in joint research.

The location of their fieldwork may be geographically closer, but it not any less unfamiliar than the rainforest. Together, they set out to explore the emerging new field of neuroeconomics. As one would expect, this involved field observation at conferences, interviewing informants, that is, experts of the field, and reading as much background as possible, in this case, journal articles rather than colonial records. They soon found out that what had been hyped as the field of “neuroeconomics” was actually a debate between two thought styles concerning the biological processes that underlie human choices and calculations about the future. On one side, experimental psychologists view the brain as a single, although very complex, morphological system; meanwhile, economists, come at the problem with an analytical mindset that emphasizes the so-called ‘dual-brain model’, in evidence on fMRI images, as battling systems of emotion and logic.

Now, it would be wrong to picture an anthropologist-observer standing in the middle of all these clashing paradigms trying, for a well-rounded account, to empathetically (or symmetrically) understand both sides. First of all, there is no middle ground, no *site* of neuroeconomics to speak of. It is still in the making, and the different sides that try to make sense of each others’ claims do not necessarily share a common understanding. This means that sometimes the anthropologist, too, quite literally, has to take *sides*: she either follows the economists or the psychologists. What has been said of neuroscience, however, could just as well have been said of the discipline of anthropology: it is as fragmented as any other field these days. In previous projects, one of the fieldworkers in this research, Zaloom, had studied (the rational choice-making of) financial traders, and the other, Schüll, had recently finished work on (hyper-irrational) gamblers, which led her to neurology. So, for them, taking sides was a rather obvious collaborative method.

For example, we learn that they visited, on their very first joint fieldtrip, a neuroeconomics meeting in New York. To establish some kind of common language for the rest of the weekend, the organizers initially put all the economists in one big ballroom and all the neuroscientists into another, and each group was given two hours intensive instruction on the other’s field. The place of ethnography, if there ever was *one*, here melts into the ether, and the two fieldworkers found themselves in a non-existent middle ground—no ballroom for anthropologists—urgently needing to decide what to do. Their first instinct was

for each to pursue her own *expertise* but, after second thoughts, they decide to do the opposite and follow the same contrary paths of their *informants*: the economic anthropologist ends up learning about neuroscience, while the medical anthropologist receives a grounding in economics. One of them recalls this move in the following way:

“One of our aims that we set forth ... was [that] we would like to look at how each field translates its knowledge into the terms of the other forging a common language, that reflects very well of what [we] had to do in the process of our own research” (Schüll & Zaloom 2011a).

In other words, their collaboration came to mirror the collaboration that they were witnessing between economists and neuroscientists and they folded these two theoretical sides into their own ethnographic project.⁸

When an ethnographer explores science and technology beyond the laboratory, it may involve more than simply moving between worlds: sometimes the ethnographer has to take sides. This usually means taking the side of the *other*: minor sciences, social worlds, or suffering patients. Yet, as the above example highlights, it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine what is self and other, precisely because such identities are not independent either of one another or from anthropology; rather, they shape and inform each other through the very activities that are being described. In other words, technoscientific and other (e.g. anthropological) worlds are not only different, but they are also partially connected.

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Scales. The third vignette concerns fire and the different *scales* on which it informs anthropological inquiry. In his book, *Corsican Fragments*, M. Candea (2010) tackles the question of place in a way that upsets commonsense assumptions about the dimensions of events and about theories of ethnographic research. His study was carried out on the island of *Corsica*, specifically in a village he calls *Crucetta*. This location is part of Corsica, and consequently France, but it is also a “whole place” where Corsican and French identities clash in day-to-day tension between locals and newcomers. The problem of ethnic identity has long been a major issue in the social sciences. Candea contends, however, that most of these studies tend to separate out two poles that more or less correspond to community and nation.

⁸ “But really our project can be seen as ‘collaborating on collaboration’. That’s not something that we’ve realized at first... But it came apparent to us as we went along that our own process of collaborating on this topic in many ways mirrored the collaboration that we were looking at between the economists and neuroscientists” (Schüll & Zaloom 2011a).

Primordialism treats the relationship between land and people as an essential, that is, local, condition. Meanwhile constructivists claim, or suggest, that they are *only* political metaphors, tacitly implying a universal reality in which people and places are, of course, separate dimensions. To overcome this epistemological trap of representation vs. construction, Candea focuses on the daily practices of “doing identity” through dialects, symbols, possessions, and other markers. Watching wildfires is one such activity (Candea 2010: 69–84).

Fire is a common occurrence in *Corsica*, especially during the dry summer season. During their spread, flames make the connectedness of insiders and outsiders obvious in a rather direct manner. Catching sight of fire, the locals gather in the *piazza* to watch the fire burning their fields, livestock and, in some cases, the houses of their friends or relatives. They also see “foreigners” — some taking flight, others taking pictures from a safe distance.

This rather easily elicits a social dichotomy between insiders who *live* their places and outsiders who *objectify* it. This simple contrast dissolves, however, when considering scientific experiments to investigate wildfires. We are told that in 2003 a special research unit of CNRS (French National Research Center) started to organize experimental burnings to investigate the properties of fire, which, according to the official definition is “à l'échelle du terrain” (2010: 75). In one way or another, to study fire as an object of science that travels globally in universal physical theories, one has to experience fires, differing in magnitude, where they happen.

But why is this important? Such scaling phenomena, Candea argues, are by no means exclusive to environmental science: everyone manipulates scales in his or her own way. Corsicans on the *piazza*, to become locals, need so see cowardly gazing tourists. And, to frame their own general perspectives about the strangeness of Corsica, those gazing “foreigners” need to see “odd natives” who gather to watch their lands burning. As with fires, then, the differences between natives and incomers depends on the scale—global, local, etc.—in which they deploy themselves. The link between people and land, rather than being an ancient attachment or a modern metaphoric trope that smuggles in a “real” natural separation, is here a constant scaling of the object (fire) between local and universal truths.

Because concepts are not confined within sites, ethnographers are afforded points of entry into any kind of lateral anthropology; in this particular case, however, we find out that concepts are neither reducible to a single scale. For Candea to produce (and publish!) a description of a local event, he needs to scale it up to align with other research on ethnic identity; but to do so, he has to work it through environmental science that scales down its own universal knowledge

about nature to local experiments with fire. The scaling of concepts and the conceptualizing of scales go hand in hand, thereby collapsing the distance between native and scientific dimensions.

4 One more loop

In an ever more connected world, the perpetually shifting contexts and diversification of knowledge practices pose both moral and methodological challenges to anthropological analysis. Many of the notions that have been used to describe human diversity in the social and human sciences have inevitably been incorporated into the lifeworld of the people anthropologists work with, and this has resulted in new forms of interference and generated novel forms of differentiation. This increasing traffic between experimental and experiential worlds has prompted a greater urgency among anthropologists to explore and appreciate radical alterity by means that go beyond the conventional models of the social sciences. The emerging attention to what here we called translational movements makes a strong case for experimentation and engagement with these complex intersections that characterize the contemporary world.

As we have seen, two recent trends in ontological anthropology and ethnography of modern expertise (in particular, scientific and technological) share a common concern to reconfigure the relationship between anthropological and indigenous notions. But this critique of dyadic logic, so common in postmodern ethnography, is only part of the story we are trying to tell. As an ethnographer, invested in the method of translation, moves conceptually deeper and deeper in the field, the researcher's concepts and tropes enter into a looping movement that offers novel and distinctive sensibilities concerning the place of ethnographic work. Through these productive engagements with the very knowledge practices that constitute the object of research, writing, method, and conceptual frames are being continuously reconfigured.

In line with such thinking, which proceeds through and along with ethnographic materials, we would like to argue that translation is both a fertile ground for *doing* ethnography and also a generative tool for describing what Strathern and others have called the postplural world, where any easy grounding or context is lost, and where the multiplicity of perspectives fail to add up as a whole. In such a world, the relation between theory and practice is not a methodological point of reference, but part and parcel of the ethnographic project. As C. Jensen and C. Gad noted in their staged obituary of actor-network theory:

From a postplural vantage point, theoretical perspectives are seen to be produced as much as they are producing the world. Indeed, they seem to be

folded into all kinds of empirical matters on any number of different 'levels' (Gad & Jensen 2010).⁹

The notion of translational movements aims to shed light on these shifting contexts between anthropological and other knowledge practices. Such movements constantly blur conventional boundaries between desk and field, data and theory, and representation and intervention in an ever-changing work that ethnographers inevitably have to engage with in their pursuit of understanding and translating different worlds.

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⁹ See also Christopher Gad's article in this volume.

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