Mess, Hospitality, and the Very Hungry Caterpillar

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We can think of the projects we've heard about today as the most recent turn in a long disciplinary conversation about collaboration: how should anthropologists relate to their interlocutors in the field and at home? Previous turns in this conversation have worked to destabilize and blend all of those labels, looking for a form of collaborative knowledge-making that is—if not "authentic" in some naive sense—at least messy.

Mess is probably the closest thing contemporary cultural anthropology has to a unifying epistemic virtue: we remain obligated to enter and observe the messy situations of everyday life and we are obligated to discover that things there are complicated, eluding clean explanations. Generally speaking, we are not supposed to find unifying secret codes that might reframe apparent mess as hidden order. Our explanations are not Platonic meta-structures that dwell timelessly on the other side of an epistemic break. Rather, they are layered on to the messy social world, just more debris to hurl at the feet of the Angel of History.

Anthropologists are "messy" in the more vernacular sense, too. To take a few definitions from UrbanDictionary.com, to be messy in this sense is to be a "trouble starter," to be "all up in other peoples shit…never mindin your own business," or to be "out of control"—that is, to take an unseemly interest in the lives of others, to tell other people about those lives, to cause trouble, and, perhaps, to be a bit disheveled oneself.

These messes are opposed to visions of orderly behavior, clean distinctions, well-defined or formal methods, and, usually, durable institution-building.

So, what we have here are a pair of projects that, in pursuit of durable institutionality, are messing with the boundary between mess and its alters: What might it look like, they ask, to take on the kinds of projects that are usually animated by an animus toward mess, while trying to retain some of our field's trademark messiness?

One answer both projects arrive at comes from yet another meaning for "mess," this time in relation to food. In this sense, to "mess with" someone means to eat with them, as in the military "mess hall." In the materials for today, this relationship is most explicitly thematized for the PECE project, in terms of Derrida's writing on hospitality: the makers and maintainers of PECE are concerned with their status as hosts to a platform on which people might mess with each other. But, I also vividly recall from my time as a research assistant with IMTFI the mess of the conference hosted here in December 2011, in which we hosted, fed, and ate with researchers the Institute had

funded from around the world. While the "research" supported by the Institute happened continuously, Bill and others often described these regular gatherings-together as the key feature of the IMTFI project, in which researchers could mess together, in a glorious and educational methodological tangle.

The mess hall is a stereotypically rowdy enclave within a total institution—a space for excess and interface, at least from the perspective of those who mess within it. But that is not actually the perspective we've been working from today. Where these institutions have interlocked with another institution—the Center for Ethnography, which has created the conditions for today's mess—is at the question of how the creation of those institutions themselves might constitute a new ethnographic form, even while the messes they've hosted become digested into more conventional monographs and articles.

So the question for today is how to bring that institution-building into focus, to look at the mess *hall*, not only the mess within it, and to examine what it might mean to mess not only *in* the hall, but *with* the hall, to turn it to purposes beyond an escape valve for the pressures that mount in total institutions.

Any organizational ethnographer will tell you that you should start such a project with a pincer motion, working from the top and the bottom at once. If you want to know what an institution does, in other words, it's not enough to just listen to the people in charge. While those orienting visions can be influential, they are not determinative. So, suitably for International Workers' Day, I'm interested discussing the varieties of labor that constitute these projects, and I'm also interested in these projects as efforts to reimagine the reproductive labors of disciplinary anthropology.

You will, of course, have noted that these institution-building projects are by necessity helmed by people with well-established social, institutional, and disciplinary status. But if, as this event suggests, one future of ethnography is in the production of large-scale enduring institutional infrastructures, then in this future most of us will not be hosts, but rather hosted. From this perspective, the Derridean aporia of hospitality identified by the PECE team—to host, you must have amassed enough power to give it up—is inverted: being hosted can be empowering, but it requires you to assume a deferential position.

So, while this event frames our interest from the perspective of the hosts, *I'm* especially interested in what these changes might mean for the process by which the people hosted *become* anthropologists or ethnographers more generally. These people constitute the bulk of the discipline, by weight if not by reputation, and it is from the mess in which they find themselves that we will find whatever future anthropology may have.

Anthropologists-in-training, of course, are used to being hosted, and to passing through institutionally mandated moments of mess and filtering: proseminar dinners, IRB protocol forms, amassing readings for orals, budgeting for grant applications, and managing the ad hoc sieves created by advisors and committee members. The most ominous filter, perhaps, is the camera obscura pinhole we call precarity. Through that pinhole, few pass, but we can see the other side projected upside down on our own.

In some of today's framing, we've heard that these projects may offer alternatives to that irising pinhole. That is, these are not only intellectual advances grafted on to the far end of anthropological careers, but potentially radical changes to the whole apparatus.

So, what do projects like these portend for hosted ethnographers and their hosted ethnographies? What might they mean for the shape and rhythm of the mess that characterizes our training? As the pinhole closes, I'll turn to another metaphor.

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Lately, I've been in the position to re-read Eric Carle's picture book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* over and over again. As you might expect, the book is a thinly veiled allegory for the process by which people become anthropologists.

On the first day, the caterpillar hatches from an egg, tiny and hungry, in pursuit of food. Over the following days—which in a standard mythological interpretive move, I take to represent years of graduate training—the caterpillar eats more and more fruit. Eventually, the voracious larva turns its attention from healthy *fruit* (presumably representing seminar readings) to cooked food, eating in one gluttonous day "one piece of chocolate cake, one ice cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon." After this ravenous and unsettling first encounter with the field—where the food is diverse and comes pre-interpreted (i.e. cooked)—our messy little caterpillar ends up with a stomachache.

The next day, the caterpillar gets back to basics and eats one nice, green leaf, and after that, feels much better. Now, the caterpillar has become a "big, fat caterpillar." Full of ideas and ready for transformation, it enfolds itself in a chrysalis. Now, in our allegory, the caterpillar is ABD—it disappears for a while doing god knows what.

Two weeks later, the chrysalis breaks open, and out comes a beautiful, fully-fledged anthropologist, raising the question: what happens in there?

For most of the 20th century, lepidopterists thought that, within the chrysalis, caterpillars effectively disintegrated entirely, into a formless goo, from which a butterfly was more or less miraculously reconstituted. This extraordinary rite of passage matches nicely to the classic understanding of doctoral fieldwork and writing up: it is a transformative, solitary process, which you can't really prepare for or specify in

advance. It breaks you down, so that the material from your coursework and fieldwork might mingle and be built back up from a gloppy, non-specific mess.

Although nowadays we have more and more methods courses and attention paid to graduate pedagogy, by people like those up here, it remains the case that for many anthropologists-in-training, fieldwork is experienced more as a solitary digestion of the self than as the exercise of clearly pre-defined methodological operations.

More recently, lepidopterists have identified structures they call "imaginal discs" in the bodies of caterpillars: these discs persist through the soup of the chrysalis and become the butterfly's various body parts. As one review article puts it, "these precursor structures are called 'imaginal' as they will give rise to the adult body structures known as the 'imago.'" In entomology, "imago" refers to the final adult stage of an insect; in psychoanalysis, the same term refers to an unconscious idealized prototype of a person, typically an authority figure like a parent, whom one tries to become or avoid becoming.

By now, imaginal discs are familiar enough that scientists use them as what they call an "experimental system," to understand and intervene in the metamorphic process. *Here*, we are familiar with efforts to cast ethnography and culture as experimental systems in various related sense. *There*, using discs as experimental systems often means re-locating them in the lab to cause, for instance, legs to grow anywhere on the body the scientists want. Entomologists call this process of identifying what imaginal discs turn into what "fate mapping." Within the soup of tacit knowledge lies hylomorphic potential, but trying to manipulate these structures intentionally risks monstrous results.

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Returning the projects at hand, we can see them as collaborative alternatives to the lonely disintegration and metamorphosis of the chrysalis model of fieldwork. Both PECE and IMTFI are interventions in the goopy mess, experimenting with new, collaborative terms by which ethnographic projects and ethnographic practitioners might be created. The trick is to avoid the monsters of fate mapping while looking for newly productive configurations of our disciplinary imaginal discs.

Collaboration demands a measure of formalization, transforming the vagaries of interpretive digestion into something intersubjective and concrete. We know from plenty of work in STS that the terms by which this formalization happens can be extremely consequential and in most situations, they are usually ignored, such that the work required to formalize and the values embedded in formalisms go unremarked.

This is, I think, our disciplinary common sense regarding an earlier moment of anthropological collaboration and imaginal reconstruction—a moment in which this

institution, UCI, and the school of social sciences in particular, played a key role. I'm referring, of course, to the 1970s heyday of mathematical anthropology, and its close relatives like ethnoscience, which took on computational, formal methods with great zeal.

As Dell Hymes put it in the publication of a 1962 Wenner-Gren symposium on "the use of computers in anthropology,"

> "Our society, and the sciences adjacent to anthropology, are such that it seems inevitable that the computer will be used extensively, willy-nilly, so that the choice is only whether in the immediate future the computer will be used well or ill"

This use, Hymes suggests, would require anthropologists to become better collaborators —to formalize their data and make it systematic so that it might be compared with that of other anthropologists, and so that the computer scientists computing necessarily involved could manage it.

Since that moment, after spinning through symbolic, interpretive, and reflexive turns, cultural anthropologists have tended to be suspicious of computing and collaboration in equal measure, locating our experimental horizons within the metamorphic goo of the chrysalis, engineering new forms of butterflies. (In this model, anthropologists are still "butterfly collectors," but the butterflies are not societies— they're the successfully metamorphosed graduate students that PhD advisors can put on display.)

The rejection of that moment of extreme explicitness and attendant collaboration has been, I think, a defining feature of cultural anthropology for a long time. (I should note that while I tend to attribute this to an active choice on the part of post-ethnoscience ethnographers, others think that post-war formal moment fizzled out for intrinsic reasons: as Roger Keesing put it, ethnoscience "bored itself to death.")

A half-century later, PECE offers a variation on this story: computers and collaboration still go hand-in-hand, but the machines are now distributed servers rather than centralized mainframes, and the technical experts are not just computer scientists, but ethnographic researchers in their own right. And, in their concern for kaleidoscopic analytics, the PECE team aim at something other than what Hymes did from the early '60s: a computer-mediated anthropology oriented toward pluralism rather than unison —a platform, not a strict protocol. And, perhaps more importantly than we might realize, the results are not boring—they are not the playing out of an extremely delimited set of questions in tightly defined terms for precise collaboration, but the opening up of new epistemological possibilities.

If we take boredom as a kind of affective manifestation of latent intellectual dissatisfaction, then the production of "interestingness" matters, if this moment is to

both avoid the pitfalls of prior periods of collaboration and to capture the attention of our selves and our audiences.

In closing, I want to return to the question of hospitality and that troubled chiasmatic relationship between the host and the hosted. We have, in media studies and elsewhere, an excellent set of critiques of social media services that pitch themselves as neutral "platforms," as though all they do is provide a ground for creativity and expression. As Tarleton Gillespie puts it:

> A term like 'platform' does not drop from the sky, or emerge in some organic, unfettered way from the public discussion. It is drawn from the available cultural vocabulary by stakeholders with specific aims, and carefully massaged so as to have particular resonance for particular audiences inside particular discourses. These are efforts not only to sell, convince, persuade, protect, triumph or condemn, but to make claims about what these technologies are and are not, and what should and should not be expected of them. In other words, they represent an attempt to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them.

Both PECE and IMTFI are in their own ways platforms for research, and while PECE takes the platform moniker for itself, we can see that both are interested in exploring, not necessarily hiding, the less-than-neutral qualities of platform-hood. But PECE and IMTFI are also *hosted*, by technical infrastructures like GitHub and funding bodies like the Gates Foundation, and one of their striking features is how they try to mediate between the logics of their hosts and the logics they want to embody institutionally. We cannot know the full story of this series of hosting relationships from only one position in the chain, but need to see a nesting set of hospitalities.

Writing about ritualized hospitality in Melanesia, Roy Wagner describes feasting practices, in his special way, as "a double-encompassment hospitality chiasmus," with the messy chaos of the feast on one side and the neat order of the household on the other, such that they mutually define each other. Mess and order, for Wagner, encompass each other through the process of hospitality, drawing into question our common sense ideas about what messiness and orderliness entail.

We can find a version of this claim about hospitality and the paradoxical, productive role of hosting institutions, in one of the pre-circulated pieces for today, in which Bill and Scott Mainwaring describe the productivity of their institutional interfacing, between Intel and UCI:

> We, too, have found a kind of freedom in our collaborative endeavor, each in our respective yet ever-more conjoint institutional locations. That freedom is of a specific kind, however, and may not be seen as "freedom" in the traditional,

liberatory sense: not an unencumbering, but a re-encumbering in an explosive proliferation of plural possibilities and relations. (maurer and mainwaring)