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Contents:

Introduction
   Emily Chua and Elizabeth Kelley ......................................... 1

"An Ancient Subtle Energy Healing Art and Science for Today's Lifestyle": Qigong and the Problem of the Non-Modern Global Form
   Emily Wilcox ........................................................................ 5

"If Words Build Worlds" Redefining Youth Agency, Identity and the Contested Spaces of Public Narrative
   Eva Langman and Célia Alves-Rivière ....................................... 29

Notes on "Men, Animals, and the Law"
   Laura Nader ............................................................................ 50

Ethnography, or the Direction of Eros: A Reading of Plato’s “Symposium” and Malinowski’s “The Subject, Method, and Scope of Inquiry”
   Kevin Karpiak ........................................................................ 63

Book Review: Insurgent Citizenship
   Jelani Mahiri ......................................................................... 75
Ethnography, or the Direction of Eros: A Reading of Plato's Symposium and Malinowski's "The Subject, Method and Scope of This Inquiry"

Kevin G. Karpiak, University of California, Berkeley

Introduction

Many anthropologists have noted and sought to explore the dialogic nature of the ethnographic enterprise. Some have located the dialogic moment in the fieldwork experience itself. Such formulations have centered around the notion of 'rapport'. Others have argued that the locus of dialogue is textual. These theorists assert that the locus of dialog is in translation, especially as it relates to the problem of textual representation of the fieldwork encounter. More recent are the attempts by anthropologists to define the ethnographic project as being co-productive, along with anthropologists' informants/co-conspirators, of various forms of knowledge.

My argument is twofold: First, I argue that all three of these formulations offer crucial insights into the ethnographic endeavor. In fact, ethnographic projects can be understood to consist of all three dimensions simultaneously and necessarily. Second, I argue that an under-remarked consequence of the first argument is that such projects must inherently be dia-logic. I will argue, therefore, that they must be Plato would call erotic. They must forgo closed, overly tight analyses in order to allow the space for contradictions to encounter each other. They must, at base, be contradictory, even wrenchingly torn, experiences, texts and analyses.

The Symposium: whither the Divine

Daimōn: demon, spirit, moving between the world of men and the world of the gods

theos: god, as distinct from daimōn

erōs:: "Although we often choose to employ a certain delicate periphrasis in speaking of sexual desire and call it, accordingly, "love," we must realize that by erōs Plato refers not to love in the global sense, in which we often intend that word but to one kind or aspect of love—or rather to the intense desire which often goes by the name of love. That there does not exist in English a totally satisfactory way of expressing the exact meaning of erōs (we cannot, after all, substitute for "lover" some other word such as
“desirer”) only increases our obligation to be conceptually clear in our efforts to elucidate Plato’s erotic theory” (Halperin 1985: 164).

Plato’s Symposium begins on the road into town. Appolocorus, a student of Socrates, is hailed by an acquaintance who asks him to recount the recent happening in which the dramatist Agathon, Alcibiades and the philosopher Socrates were together at a banquet. The companion is mistaken. This was not a recent banquet at all, nor was Appolodoros present at the event. He has, however, heard of it from Aristodemus. This is sufficient for the companion, who asks Appolodoros to recount Aristodemus’ account of the happening. From the beginning, then, authorship is in question: this is a text written by Plato and inspired by Socrates in which we are only granted a third-hand account of any actual occurrences (Plato on Socrates through Appolodoros, through Aristodemus). This is far from unimportant. Whatever the truth claims being offered here, they are far from direct or unmediated. This has lead to many irritations: is Plato merely presenting a straightforward exposition of Socrates’ philosophy, or on the other extreme, is he mocking his mentor through his characterization? Where, exactly, does he stand? This seems a tricky question to answer.

Also to note: Appolodoros speaks to an unnamed companion, this companion could be anyone—even you. In that sense, the mode of writing is an active component: it is seducing4 you.

Aristodemus had also met Socrates on the road. He was in a state unusual to his character—bathed, anointed and wearing slippers. Aristodemus asked Socrates where he was going, looking so beautiful. It is to a banquet in honor of the dramatist Agathon, who had recently been distinguished with a high honor for one of his plays. Aristodemus, being a semi-familiar of the man, wonders why he had not been invited. Socrates assures him that he has been, and insists that Aristodemus accompany him to the party. Aristodemus agrees, however he arrives at the party alone—Socrates finds himself currently paralyzed by reflection in the middle of the road outside. Aristodemus assures the group that this is a common occurrence for the philosopher, and they sit down to eat.

Eventually Socrates joins the banquet, which is a bit subdued being the second such night of celebration in a row. Eryximachus suggests they play a sort of drinking game in lieu of yet more heavy drinking: each man should in turn offer a hymn to the god Eros, who he says is a curiously under-appreciated and neglected deity. All agree this is a fine proposal.

Phaedrus begins, arguing that Eros is a splendid god in that he directs men to do good. For example, a man is much more afraid to look poorly or unvirtuous in a lover’s eye than he is of death on the battlefield. Eros is thus essential for the well-being and continued virtue of the City. Pausanias follows and corrects Phaedrus. He argues that in fact there are two Erotes: one is heavenly while the other is common.
Just as no action is inherently good or evil, but only good or beautiful if done in beauty and common, vulgar or shameful if done shamefully, Eros is heavenly or common according to the kind of love it is. Vulgar Eros is directed toward women, young boys and the body. Divine Eros is directed toward the masculine, strength, intelligence and the soul. Only Eros directed properly towards these objects is divine.

Presently we are met with a disruption. So far the men had been taking their turn in order, going around the room in a circle. Following this logic, the comic playwright Aristophanes should be next. However, he has come down with an unfortunate case of the hiccups and is unable to proceed. Next to him is the respected doctor Eryximachus, who suggests a series of cures: he should hold his breath for a long time; failing this, he should gargle with water; if the hiccups are particularly strong he should tickle his nose and force himself to sneeze. In the meantime, Eryximachus will take his turn. It is important to imagine the comic Aristophanes performing these acts during the grand and sober speech that follows.

Eryximachus’ speech is shaped by his profession. Following Pausanius, he argues that Eros has a dual nature. Pausanius had not gone far enough, however. Rather than being merely a duality in the impulses or sexual desires of men, Eryximachus argues that erotic harmony and balance are fundamental principles of nature. This can be seen most clearly in three domains: medicine, music, and the prophetic arts. Each domain involves making opposite tendencies and properties in attunement with each other. The erotic principle is therefore both cosmic and healing. This argument will have thematic, if not generic, resonance with the next speech.

Luckily, Aristophanes’ hiccups are cured just as Eryximachus is ending his speech. He thanks Eryximachus and begs him not to ridicule the speech he is about to offer—a very curious request indeed for a comedian. As opposed to the naturalistic argument of the previous speech, Aristophanes offers us a type of fable. In the beginning, humans were quite a different sort of animal. For one thing they were spherical, one head with two faces, four feet, four arms and two sets of genitals. There were three sexes: those with two sets of male genitals, those with two sets of female genitals, and those with a set of each. However, due to a series of events in which humankind fell into disfavor with the gods, they were split into halves—two arms and two legs, one face and one set of genitals. This was quite a traumatic event. Even to this day the primary drive of each human being is to find its other half. Eros is the name for the desire and pursuit of this wholeness.

The comedic poet is followed by the honored dramatist, Agathon. He begins by remarking that so far a very important topic has been overlooked: what is Eros himself like? Agathon says that Eros is the most blessed, the most beautiful and the best of the gods. He is beautiful because he is young, delicate and supple. He is good because he has the qualities of justice, virtue, courage and wisdom.
It is a breathtaking paean to the god. If anyone but the great Socrates were to go next, we would surely wonder what more could be said. Socrates begins by admitting that so far he has been confused: he had thought that the point of the encomium had been to tell the truth about Eros, whereas judging from Agathon’s speech the goal seems to be to make Eros appear beautiful. Socrates asks Agathon whether there is any value that can be attributed to being true.

Agathon argues that Love is all gentleness and no violence. Socrates disagrees, or at least he argues that such a claim has a limited relationship to Truth. In that sense, Socrates shows that Agathon literally does not know what he is talking about. Perhaps that is not a problem. Agathon does not seem too reluctant to admit as much. But perhaps he and Socrates are after something different...

Socrates approves of the project to inquire into the nature of Eros himself. His method will however be a bit different. He begins with a question: is Eros the kind of thing that is in and of itself or does it need an object? Is it of something or of nothing? They agree that Eros is always love of some object. It is always a relational concept, and therefore derives its meaning by being “toward” something else. If this is the case, then Eros must be lacking in that thing which it desires (for this is the nature of desire). Eros is therefore not Beauty itself, but love of Beauty—Eros must then be lacking in beauty. Contrary to what Agathon had just argued, Eros is not beautiful or good but lacking in, desirous of these qualities. Agathon bemusedly agrees. Love is the sort of thing that requires an object. Love is therefore always love of something. This thing is something that is lacking in the Lover himself.

Socrates has established himself as an expert on love. In fact, he claims that it is the only thing he knows. This is not a divined intelligence, however: he learned it, from a particular person, the (old, ugly) woman Diotima. He begins by recounting what she taught him about love.

What to make of the fact that Diotima, who taught Socrates everything he knows about Love, is a woman? An old and ugly woman at that. Is Plato an ancient feminist? Or is this proof that Plato is really mocking Socrates throughout the Symposium? Should Socrates himself be read as using Diotima as an ironic figure, a warning to take his account with a ‘grain of salt’? Or is Diotima an oracle, to be understood as conveying a message from the gods? This last reading would suggest that Diotima herself may be a diaphanic figure.

It was Diotima who taught Socrates the bit of wisdom that Eros is always of something else. This is only the initial insight. If Eros is desirous of beauty, happiness and the good, he is lacking in those qualities and can not therefore be a god (who are by definition beautiful, happy, and good). It does not stand to reason,
however, that Eros is therefore ugly, bad or mortal. He is something in-between, a daimon. As such, he is an intermediate between gods and men. Socrates asks her what daimons do. She responds:

"It interprets and conveys things to gods from human beings and to human beings from the gods... Since it is in the middle it fills in between the two so that the whole is bound together by it... A god does not have direct contact with a human being, on the contrary every interchange and conversation between gods and human beings is through a daimon..." (Plato and Cobb 1993: 41)

Love is the kind of thing that is in-between. This type of being is called a 'daimon,' not quite a god (theos) but not human (anthropos) either. The apparent separation of the realms of the gods and human beings is bridged through the daimon. This is an extremely important point, if for no reason other than the following: that Divine quality called Truth, therefore, is not separate or alienated from the world nor the actions of men. The ladder of love does not lead out of this world, but to a capability in logos.

There are two types of lovers, Socrates explains. One who is directed to the physical and one who is directed toward thought and spirit. Both of these are forms of Eros, however the latter is of a higher form. There is, in fact, a ladder of training into knowledge of Eros: At first, one is drawn by a particular body's beauty; this is followed by a love of the beauty of all bodies; next one develops an appreciation for mental beauty; love of the beauty of customs and institutions follows; the next stage on the ladder of love is love of the beauty of knowledge. This is finally followed by the love of beauty itself. This is a very high form of love indeed.

Suddenly Socrates' former pupil, the charismatic Alcibiades, arrives with a dionysian cohort. The tone of the symposium is immediately changed. Alcibiades sits down confidently at the table next to Agathon on one side and, unknowingly, next to Socrates on the other. When he notices Socrates he is disturbed. He is invited to partake in the activity at hand, the praise of Eros, but refuses. Instead he says he will offer a praise of Socrates. He warns, however, that this praise will be True, and therefore as condemnatory as it is laudatory.

Alcibiades had not been present for Socrates' speech, and so his words acquire a hint of irony in Plato's/Aristodemus'/Appolodorus' account. Unknowingly, Alcibiades paints Socrates himself as the personification of the highest form of eros. Alcibiades imagines himself a lover scorned: in his youth (the ugly, old) Socrates had seduced him. Alcibiades had offered Socrates his body, continually devising situations in which they could be alone together, but all Socrates had wanted to do was to engage in conversation. Alcibiades does not recognize this as a form of love
Yet another irritation for readers of the Symposium has been Alcibiades' entry. If one understands the various speeches to be leading toward a culmination in Socrates' account, this ending seems rather anti-climactic, even contradictory. However the argument that Alcibiades' account highlights Socrates' duplicity and is example of Plato making an ironic fool of his master does not quite explain the fact that Alcibiades' accusations paint Socrates as precisely the daemonic Lover. Another interpretation might suggest that the Symposium could not end with the rather overarching pronouncements of Diotima. Alcibiades' account brings us once more into actual life.

A mob of revelers enter, and the banquet turns into precisely the sort of dionysian event that the original attendees had hoped to avoid. The temperate Eryximachus and Phaedrus leave. Appolodorus recounts that at some point in the evening Aristodemus fell asleep. He awoke at daybreak to find Socrates, hardly worse for the wear, still awake and arguing with Agathon and Aristophanes that it is possible for the same man to compose both tragedy and comedy. They leave and Socrates goes about his quotidian life at the Lyceum.

Plato's account of eros thus combines all of the ethnographic formulations discussed above. Eros is daemonic on the level of the text, on the level of experienced worldly practice, and as a form of knowledge. In arguing that ethnography necessarily combines all three of the above formulations, I am therefore arguing that ethnography is erotic. This is true, I believe, even in its most classic formulation. To make this point clear, I will turn, finally, to the paradigmatic example of classic ethnographic fieldwork, Bronislaw Malinowski's introduction to his monograph Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922).

Malinowski: the eros of ethnography

Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnographic monograph starts out quite dry and straightforward. He promises us that we are to learn of a little-known South Sea Islands people: of their sea-going exploits; of wars and conquests; of the singular artifacts they manufacture, and the unusual means by which they are exchanged. This last topic, the Kula, we are told is even of "considerable theoretical importance" at the same time that it is bound up in the ambitions, desires, and vanities of the people involved. But first, there is some work to be done:

"Before moving to the account of the Kula, it will be well to give a description of the methods used in the collection of the ethnographic material." (Malinowski 1922: 2)

Why must we tediously linger over such a discussion? Because the legitimacy of the truth claims being offered depend upon it:
"No one would dream of making an experimental contribution to physical or chemical science, without giving a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments; an exact description of the apparatus used; of the manner in which the observation were conducted; of their number; of the length of time devoted to them, and to the degree of approximation with which each measurement was made." (Malinowski 1922: 2)

Ultimately, what is necessary is to be able to offer an account (a logos) that links experience, knowledge, and text:

"The Ethnographer has to traverse this distance in the laborious years between the moment when he sets foot upon a native beach, and makes his first attempts to get into touch with the natives, and the time when he writes down the final version of his results." (Malinowski 1922: 4)

Suddenly a section break. A pause. A space. We are suddenly aware of the writing—there has been not only a change in footing (Goffman 1979), but in genre (Bakhtin 1986). Along with all the attendant shifts in expectations and possibilities that are imbricated in that shift, we find ourselves in an adventure narrative, complete with impossible challenges to be encountered:

"Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to the native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight... Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea. I well remember the long visits I paid to the villages during the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into real touch with the natives, or supply me with any material. I had periods of despondency, when I buried myself in the reading of novels, as a man might take to drink in a fit of tropical depression and boredom." (Malinowski 1922: 4)

This shift is not "merely" superficial stylistics nor a frivolous outbreak of Slavic romantic lyricism, it is the device through which Malinowski invests the text, the task, with meaning—it is how he makes clear what, exactly, is at stake and what he promises to offer. We find our hero in the lowest of lows, confronted by the most impossible of tasks. Failure.
What will be the sword with which we slay the dragon of cultural distance? Of intercultural alienation⁹, or modernity itself⁴⁺? None other than our trusty accomplice, Method:

"Indeed, in my first piece of Ethnographic research on the South coast, it was not until I was alone in the district that I began to make some headway; and at any rate, I found out where lay the secret of effective field-work. What is it then this ethnographer’s magic, by which he us able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of private life? As usual, success can only be obtained by a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles, and not by the discovery of any marvelous short-cut leading to the desired results without effort or trouble." (Malinowski 1922: 6)

The road before us is long and winding. We are in for some boring, tedious work. But fear not! Our trusty steed will serve us well. Method will aid us in our goal precisely by changing us, by making us a new, daimonic, subject. Method is therefore not the absence of meaning, truth, or even eros, but the very practice that enables its possibility.

This method relies upon a series of triangular relations. Firstly, in terms of the subject positions involved: the white man, the natives and “yourself”—the daimonic anthropologist (Malinowski 1922: 6-7). Secondly, in terms of the principles one must follow: one must ensure the proper conditions for fieldwork, possess real scientific aims, and follow the proper method for collecting evidence.

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| The white man ──────────── Yourself ──────────── Natives |
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This third principle (methods of collecting evidence) breaks down into yet another set of triangular relations. First one must collect evidence for a “clear and firm outline of the social constitution” (Malinowski 1922: 10). We learn that there is a metaphoric relation between this information and a skeleton. Next, an ethnographer must search out bits of data that will enable him to convey “the intimate touches of native life” (Malinowski 1922: 10). This consists of the detailed manners in which the imponderabla of actual life are practiced. We learn that this data corresponds to the society’s flesh and blood. The third and final aim of scientific field-work is to record the spirit—the native’s views and opinions and utterances. It is this realm—explicitly coded as spiritual—that demarks the ultimate dimension of anthropological pursuit.

We have returned to Platonic eros. Once again we have a ladder of higher forms, leading toward the Divine. Once again this search for the divine does not take us out of the world, but leads us precisely to engage it through logos. Once again, this exercise requires an engagement on the level of practical experience, textual representation, and knowledge.
However it remains forever precisely this, a possibility, a hope... a goal. As for Socrates, the Lover is always lacking in what he desires. What is it that we desire? There have been many others who have commented upon, critiques and revised this dimension of Malinowskian fieldwork\textsuperscript{11}; too many, perhaps, to take into account. In place of such a synthesis, I return to the text:

These three lines of approach lead to the final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight. This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him. (Malinowski 1922: 25)

What’s more...

Perhaps as we read the account of these remote customs there may emerge a feeling of solidarity with the endeavors and ambitions of these natives... In this, and in this case only, we shall be justified in feeling that it has been worth our while to understand these natives, their institutions and customs, and that we have gathered some profit from the Kula. (Malinowski 1922: 25)

Notes

1 See (Marcus 1998; 2006).

2 Or, to use another vocabulary, what Kristeva (1987) would call “hysteric”. See also: (Irigaray 2000; Cixous 1976).

3 This section borrows heavily from the translation notes of William Cobb (Plato and Cobb 1993) and R.E. Allen (Plato and Allen 1991) Plato in their respective translations of Plato’s Symposium. See also: (Liddell et al. 1996).

4 See (Barthes 1975; 1978).

5 One should read Socrates’ statements in the Phaedrus, however, if it imagined that such myths stand in opposition to Truth.

6 See (Brown 1988; Irigaray 1994)

7 William Cobb offers a warning:

“It is important to focus on the fact that this ideal lover is very much engaged in the world, practicing the virtues of ordinary life, ordering cities and households and engaging in useful conversations. The object of his love is not out of this world” (Plato and Cobb 1993: 76)

Compare this to the treatment by (Bloom 1993; 2001).
8 Again, William Cobb writes:

"Throughout the speech, Alcibiades shows Socrates, the ideal philosopher, the ideal personification of Love, and the ideal human being, as intensely engaged in the world, involved in relationships and activities that produce beautiful effects, and above all, creating beautiful and useful conversations. The lover who reaches the top of Diotima's staircase does not depart from this world: the beautiful itself is found and studied in the production of its worldly manifestations" (Plato and Cobb 1993: 81).

And R.E. Allen adds:

"So in this strange affair, Alcibiades and Socrates return each other's love. But the main expression of Alcibiades' love is in respect to the body and Socrates' is in respect to the soul and education. Given that Socrates' love for Alcibiades is real, it cannot be sexual; given that Alcibiades' love for Socrates is sexual. It cannot be real... Alcibiades portrays himself as a lover scorned by Socrates. But Socrates is in fact the true lover, who loves what is really beautiful and good, the proper object of love, instead of what only seems so. Real love seeks contemplation of Beauty, not sexual intercourse. It is Alcibiades, in fact, who is guilty of hubris" (Plato and Allen 1991: 104)

9 See (Herbert 1991).

10 See (Rabinow 2003).

11 See in particular the work of George Stocking

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