



Between love and culture: Misunderstanding, textuality and the dialectics of ethnographic knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the intertextual dialectics of understanding and misunderstanding in the negotiation of relations between consultants and the ethnographic fieldworker. The material for this essay draws on conversations with consultants from the Fort Apache Reservation. I will argue that the textual constructions of otherness through which consultants apprehend the social presence of the fieldworker are transformed in the fieldwork encounter. These transformations allow consultants to author relations with the ethnographer. I will also explore attempts by field consultants to understand the objective and limits of the ethnographic project by framing it in terms of locally constituted idioms of relationship. I will conclude by suggesting that the entextualizing practices of ethnography threaten to obscure the authority asserted by consultants in fieldwork conversations.

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1. Introduction

This article explores the relationship between textuality and forms of misunderstanding in the interpretation and negotiation of fieldwork dialogs that form the basis of ethnography. I will argue that ethnographic fieldwork confounds basic, culturally mediated expectations of communication, but in ways that allow for the emergence of novel, if unstable, communicative socialities. I will show how communications addressed across the borders of understood sociality to encounters with those defined by qualities of otherness creates a space for the possible (although partial) refiguration of orienting social texts, and in so doing reveal the significance of misunderstanding and discursive innovation to the interactive field in which research takes place. I will also contend, however, that such communicative socialities are compromised as the fieldwork encounters from which they emerge are inscribed within ethnographic writing and their purposes realigned according to the disciplinary dialogs of Anthropology.

The conversations and interactions recounted here took place during the approximately three years of fieldwork I conducted in conjunction with my colleague and spouse, M. Eleanor Nevins, on the White Mountain Apache Reservation in eastern Arizona. The people with whom I worked represent themselves as members of the White Mountain Apache Tribe and live in the communities of Whiteriver, Eastfork and Northfork. This paper has emerged from reflections on how and in what communicative terms was I able to conduct my field research, which had been concerned with how practices involved with what is locally identified as religious “Traditionalism” inform figurations of Apache identity. The present article orbits two related concerns. One of these is the dialectic between textual conventionality and innovation in culturally mediated responses to communicative misunderstanding provoked by the social presence of otherness—including the rather proximate “otherness” posed by the presence of an ethnographer. The other is a consideration of how the necessarily dual orientations of anthropological fieldwork pits culturally mediated socialities against one another, and the epistemological implications of this for ethnography.

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If there could be said to be a natural history of the ethnographic project (Silverstein and Urban, 1996), it could be seen as evolving from questions that emerge from an abstract consideration of texts—other ethnographies, exegeses, anthropological theories—designed to mediate the disciplinary practices of anthropology. These texts frame and inform the design of the anthropologist's fieldwork—observations, interviews, conversations, etc. At the same time all of the actions entailed by fieldwork are necessarily communicative and dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981; Mannheim and Tedlock, 1995; Rabinow, 1977), and involve us in the reciprocal navigation with our consultants of an indeterminate sociality. The talk constitutive of this fieldwork sociality becomes, finally, fodder for the re-engagement of the ethnographic project with its scholarly origins. The project disengages from the field with a new and added residuum of authority, and figures less as a set of questions but instead as claims and representations of anthropological significance. Much of the critical reflections upon ethnographic representations focus upon implications of ethnography as an authorized genre within academia for power relations between ethnographer and the persons figured as ethnographic subjects (Clifford, 1988; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fabian, 2002[1983]; Handler, 1985; Kan and Turner Strong, 2006). However, because it born in the discursive regime of academia, and extended to another, that constituted by the social and communicative relations of fieldwork, any given ethnography can also be understood as forming an intertextual nexus of two different communicative regimes. It is this nexus, and the possibilities therein, that I intend to explore blow.

Linguistic anthropologists have shown that the communicative situations constitutive of ethnographic fieldwork often confound basic, culturally mediated expectations of communication for both ethnographer and ethnographic subjects (Briggs, 1984; Basso, 1996, pp. 8–14; Hymes, 1966, 1972a; Mendoza-Denton, 2008). Briggs (1984), addressing social science interviews as communicative situations. After a nuanced discussion of the epistemological and political implications of misrecognition between subject and researcher; he proposes a process through which the latter might investigate the conventional metacommunicative cues, participant structures and social situations of her subject community so as to devise ways of asking them questions and interpreting their answers that take their communicative norms into account. Moore (2009), more broadly addressing the problem of intercultural miscommunication in fieldwork, argues that fieldworkers should endeavor to attain communicative competence so as to mitigate misunderstanding. Such work highlights the relevance of local conventions to the anthropologist's interpretation of how consultants respond and interact with them, and consequences of misunderstanding to ethnography as this is framed by differences in constitution of communication.

There is an implicit modeling by this literature of ethnographic interactions as intercultural miscommunication. An obvious remedy to the ethnographer's lack of communicative competence is, as Moore suggests, for her to acquire communicative competence in that community's conventions. This concern is reflected, for example, in how Basso has modeled ethnographer-consultant interactions in his writings on Western Apache speech practices. Basso has deployed the ethnographer's misunderstanding of his consultants' meanings and actions, and thus communicative incompetence, as a device to frame his exegesis of Apache language practices. Examples of this include his investigations of speech genres associated with the use of place names (1996), silence (1970), or stylized metaphor (1976). After depicting his initial confusion confronted with the novel usage, he then goes onto explicate the conventional interpretive criteria that he discovers, through conversations with his consultants, to apply. For Basso, the ethnographer's misunderstanding acts as an exegetical opening to the explication of Western Apache conventions of speaking.

I argue, however, that while differences of convention are an important dimension of ethnographic encounters, equally important are inventive acts addressed to the social and communicative disjuncture an ethnographer's presence inevitably precipitates. In this space of encounter not only do we see anthropologists succeeding or failing to accommodate the communicative conventions of their consultants; we also see consultants, or persons in the locale under study, making their own efforts to evaluate, interpret and engage anthropologists. Ethnographic encounters necessarily involve the discursive formation of unique and unstable communicative socialities, created in large part by the strategies field consultants employ to figure and negotiate the ethnographer's presence; an exegesis usually involved with texts of otherness. The ethnographer travels, so to speak, in an inventive and destabilizing discursive field that her very presence has a hand in making.

Another question to ask is how misunderstanding impacts the dialogic figuring of ethnography in fieldwork. Is the anthropologist a traveler moving freely between two different discursive realities, those of anthropology and the communicative relations of fieldwork; or do the questions anthropologists ask have some bearing on how the people she works with understand her presence among them? Relying on the narrative tradition of anthropology, the ethnographer expects her fieldwork to proceed a certain way. Of course, her consultants draw on their own precedents in order to digest the ethnographer's presence among them. The encounter of the ethnographer and her consultants creates an unstable zone of communication that defies easy decomposition to the certainties of conventional ways of knowing. What does it mean if the people the anthropologist work with ask questions of the questions she asks? How does the anthropologist's own project reflect on understandings of her presence, and how does the meaning of this project survive scrutiny by those to whose lives it is applied?

The clash of understandings, and attempts to grapple with the misunderstandings, that accompany fieldwork, inevitably invoke the basic orienting texts of social life. There are times when, as Simmel (1950, pp. 407) alludes to in his discussion of the "stranger," the presence and behavior of unknown persons or "others" defies stable categorical expectations. Such persons are impossible to resolve as either safe or dangerous, causing people to question basic assumptions informing social life. Recognition of this destabilized "other-otherness"—contexts in which the actual social presence of others upsets the conventional meanings more abstractly associated with them—can empower a creative exploration and alteration of the boundaries on what is understood to be conventional sociality. What this yields, I argue, is a social space where culturally recognizable

forms of misunderstanding yield to a more vexing although temporary non-understanding. And difficult though they may be, moments of non-understanding can allow for a creative refiguring of the dialog one engages in with others and the broader meanings attributed to encounters with them.

Below, I discuss a history of interactions with my closest consultants concerning disjunctures my presence and my representations of my research purpose posed for them. These discussions make use of textuality in two senses. First, basic orienting texts of social life are clearly in play; in for example, the figuring of otherness associated with the term *ndah* (of which more below). Second, our closest consultants frequently invented and recirculated destabilizing micro-texts, which commented, often humorously, upon disjunctures from conventional expectations occasioned by our presence and actions. But unlike the placenames or stylized metaphors as these are discussed by Basso, their use opened ongoing interpretive gaps (Bauman and Briggs, 1990), and disrupted conventionalized meanings. These invented and recirculated comments were deployed in an ad hoc fashion in greetings, leave-taking and conversational exchanges, constituting familiarity between ethnographer and consultants even as they threw into relief a series of disjunctures our interactions have occasioned and that continued to unfold. Utilizing a discussion of a contemporary form of public ceremonial exchange called the *Na'íees*, I argue that these textual strategies for constituting emergent socialities through the negotiation of otherness are not limited to the ethnographic encounter. Rather, they are an integral, dynamic aspect of unfolding discursive life with parallels in other quarters of the local community (for example, see Nevins, 2008; Samuels, 2001; for discussions of histories of disjuncture marked in contemporary place-naming strategies).

2. Irony and communication in ethnographic encounter

Bailey (2006) suggests that insofar as the given understanding of one party to a communication can never be perfectly shared by others, all communicative action is framed and motivated by misunderstanding. Misunderstanding is a condition of intersubjectivity; and the sequential, turn-based coordination of social interaction is motivated by it. He notes the work of theorists such as Bateson (1936), Goffman (1974), Gumperz (1992), Silverstein (1993) and Hymes (1972b) regarding the role of metacommunicative and contextualizing linguistic devices necessary to the coordination of communicative interaction. Such metacommunicative devices elicit narrative expectations that guide interaction, as well as provide inventories of conventional interpretations. Bailey also shows that misunderstanding of another order characterizes interactions where conversational participants do not share metacommunicative narrative expectations. In such cases conversational participants do not have access to the same framing “scripts” and thus stand to misinterpret one another’s talk and behavior.

Misunderstandings of the latter sort were, of course, a daily experience during our fieldwork. Seemingly straightforward conversations would take confusing turns as frames of reference were progressively destabilized and replaced in conversation. Often the metacommunicative framing of interactions was most difficult to navigate, particularly with respect to the political implications of two white anthropologists attempting to do field research in a Native American community. Early in our fieldwork M. Eleanor Nevins and I were invited to a holiday dinner at the home of Eva Lupe. This was a significant development for us, since most of her extended family would be in attendance and we would therefore be able to meet many people who we hoped would help us with our research. However, we were more than a little apprehensive about attending, partly due to the fact that the event in question was a Thanksgiving Day dinner. So as we drove down to Eva Lupe’s house, we mullied over the irony of two white anthropologists traveling to attend a Thanksgiving dinner hosted by a Native American family.

As we approached Eva Lupe’s front door, we could hear the amiable chatter inside dwindle to silence. We approached the door and paused, trying to work up the nerve to enter, when a voice from inside boomed out: “Hello pilgrims!” This, of course, caused both us as well as everyone inside to burst out laughing. And not surprisingly, this was the moment that broke the ice for us, so to speak, creating an entry and reference point for our interactions with the other participants of the dinner. While not really doing away with the sense of awkwardness that all those present felt; the “pilgrims” joke continued to present itself throughout the afternoon, and as a result our visit was accompanied by a degree of humorous conviviality. Despite the difficult historical and political framing, Thanksgiving dinner was a success due to our hosts’ ironic and clever reading of our presence and their ability to improvisationally elaborate upon it. In his account of San Carlos Apache performance styles, Samuels (2004, pp. 67–95) describes an improvisational speech style characteristic of informal group settings that he labels *yati’nlke’* or ‘throwing words around.’ To speak in this way involves taking something that was said previously and repeating it, usually with an expressive twist that alters the meaning. As the meaning of the phrase is progressively destabilized, the quality of involvement among participants is foregrounded. In the same way, our hosts recirculated “pilgrims” throughout our stay, and in doing so seized on the dissonant qualities introduced by our visit to involve us in a humorous and multi-voiced reading of our presence. By calling attention to us as “pilgrims” my wife and I were invited to laugh along with them at the ironies our visit introduced by placing these within an extended and mutually accessible framework for successive elaboration.

The Thanksgiving dinner was followed by other similar gatherings. Many had some component of comic relief, such as the time I was assigned the task of manning the grill in preparation for a big Easter dinner. After declaring “done” what people later explained to me were severely undercooked steaks, I was subsequently barred from that specific duty for all future dinners. But while I thereafter lost my status as grill chef, the story of how I “did not know how to cook steak” contributed to the

texture of my relationship to my friends, becoming something that they would tease me about. Over time I realized that moments of interaction like these did not detract from my relations with my consultants, if anything they seemed to add to them.

The labeling of my wife and I as “pilgrims” was a kind of micro-textual annotation to our more conventional figuration as non-Apache *ndah* and white people (Basso, 1979; Samuels, 2004). Our identification as pilgrims did not replace our description as either whites or *ndah*. Instead, our re-identification as “pilgrims” anchored these latter representations of otherness within the specific events of the Thanksgiving dinner I described above. As the term “pilgrims” was employed in this and redeployed in subsequent meetings, it acted as a kind of micro-textual link between the abstract, macro-textual meanings of *ndah*, or “white people,” and the historical Thanksgiving holiday, the sociability of our hosts and the specific social relations that characterized our encounter with them. Some quality (humorous or otherwise) of the term “pilgrims” as it was used in reference to us was, from the point of the dinner onwards, inextricably linked to the circumstances of our appearance at the dinner as much as it framed it within the convention meanings associated with our otherness. The same was true with regards to my identification as the person who messed up Easter dinner. It was cited not in substitution of my presence as a white man, or *ndah*, but alongside it. As was the case with the use of the term “pilgrim,” my grill-chef incompetence served as a sort of footnote to the conventional cultural text invoked to figure my otherness. Through improvisational word-play, sociality and conviviality were constructed out of the antagonism suggested by the constellation of the event, its historical meaning, and the way our respective presences played upon it.

The anecdotes above suggest a larger question concerning what such disruptions of social settings themselves mean. I have called such moments “footnotes” to or “micro-textual” links between specific moments of communicative interaction and the generalized, macro-textual conventions associated with social encounter with strangers or those who instantiate qualities of otherness. Framing macro-texts and their micro-textual appendixes are dialectically intertwined in the ongoing negotiation of social relations. They are mutually interrogating at the moment of communicative interaction, as the perspective of participants shifts between a priori and emergent interpretations of the encounter. This is particularly true in cases of interaction with those defined, in a sense, by an absence of understanding and marked by some degree of otherness. But, as Basso has shown (1979) the typified otherness posed by *ndah* is itself abstractly framed by the conventional definition of social morality and relations. So in order to explore the interaction of micro and macro-textual frames in the examination of my relations with my consultants, we have to first explore some basic assumptions implied by the conventions of Apache speaking and sociality.

3. Negotiating otherness

The person who helped me the most with this question was Eva Lupe’s son Everett Lupe, the same person who had greeted us at the door when we showed up for Thanksgiving dinner. While almost always friendly, our relationship to Everett Lupe was also marked by some ambiguity. He openly expressed his uncertainty about us, especially during the first year we were getting to know one another. On several occasions he told us that he was not sure of our motivations, and openly wondered why we were trying to get to know him and his family. Nevertheless, he worked closely with my wife and me. Speaking of the relationship, he told me he wanted to “see where it would go,” and “find out what would happen.” On many occasions Everett described his relationship to us as a chess match. Once a member of Alcheyay High School’s chess club, he explained to us that the game was useful for thinking about the care that needed to be taken in dealing with people, like my wife and me, about whom little was known. Using the analogy of a chess match, he explained to me that not only is the strength of a given piece on a chessboard defined by its relation to its fellow pieces; it is also partially defined in relation to its enemies. Our conversations regarding my research were sometimes characterized by extended 3–5 min pauses between turns at talk. Referring to a pawn in a chess match, he said: “you have to be very careful about where you put that down, it affects the whole board, and every piece.”

The significance of Everett’s “chess match” example emerges when it is situated in relation to the discourses of *bígontsǵ’*, or ‘knowing,’ and *łá’baa’ne’* (also *łichǵ’ ođagohijáh*), or ‘sharing.’ The qualities of sociality presented in these texts pervade Apache characterizations of family, as well as the metadiscursive engagement with what I have been discussing as both “understanding” and “misunderstanding,” particularly as these are characteristic of interactions with non-family and even “white people,” or *ndah*. As has been noted in relation to other Apachean, or Southern Athabaskan, groups (Basso, 1966; Farner, 1994; Nevins, 2004; Witherspoon, 1975; Lamphere, 1977), sharing, cooperation and mutual sustenance are figured as ideal characteristics of the relations between family members. Family members are represented in Apache discourse as unselfishly and unselfconsciously sharing with each other the goods necessary to well-being, which at different times might be food, money, transportation, and other household resources. Ideally, goods are shared voluntarily; and the family member receiving them “does not have to ask for anything,” as it was put to me. Relations between family members are also represented as being mediated by *bígontsǵ’*, or ‘knowing.’ Family members are often said to “know what to expect of one another.” *Bígontsǵ’* – which can be translated loosely as, “he knows it,” but which breaks down more literally as ‘with regards to 3rd pers (bi-) environmental surround (go-) completed (-n-) 3rd person subj state of psychological awareness (-ts9),’ or ‘past awareness of something in an environmental surround.’ In this case the morphological composition reflects a broader set of idioms that privilege knowledge based on experience and emphasizes the contextually specific and relative nature of truth. Knowing motivates and empowers acts of sharing, and acts of sharing provide the experiential basis of knowing.

By “contextual specific knowledge” I am referring to forms of knowing that are based on experience, or on representations that in one way or another index experience. As Basso discusses in relation to Apache use of place names and the stories connected with them, understanding is achieved through personal reflection, and one person’s understanding is rarely communicated directly except through use of metaphor and story. Understanding and the knowledge with which it is articulated is therefore largely intransitive, removing it from the context in which occurs renders it unreliable.

Contrary to some of the presuppositions entailed in Western formulations of intersubjective understanding (Bailey, 2006; see also Keane, 2008; Robbins and Rumsey, 2008), when people speak of knowing one another in the context of Apache extended families, they are not referring to a body of knowledge that they all share, nor to the idea that what one person is thinking is necessarily replicated in how they are interpreted by others. It refers to private states of reflection and understanding that result from participation in and common experience of places and events. In relation to family, the experiences constitutive of knowing are ideally defined by sharing. The knowledge that family members have of one another is not something they have in common, actually, it is better to say that it is something that they all have separately. Kin do not share because they know one other; they know each other because they share. What they do have in common comes into being through actions defined as sharing. Sharing is constitutive of family not just as a sociological fact, but also as an ongoing experience and developing state of knowledge. Sharing provides a vantage point from which to know not only other people, but one’s self as well. Family is a dynamic text that is inscribed in and through the actions of those who participate in it.

Getting back to the example of a chess match, Everett frequently explained to me that the movement of even a pawn can have effects that ripple throughout the entire chessboard, altering not just the relative positions of the two sides but even the shape of the relations between one’s own pieces. The status of any one piece on a chessboard is the function less of its own intrinsic value as pawn, rook or knight, but instead as a quality viewed in relation to the other pieces that make up its side in the competition. The relation of any one chess piece against those on the “other side” of the chessboard also has a bearing on the relations that piece has with the pieces on its own side. Similarly, a force that acts on any one person impacts every member of that person’s family as well. Those who ‘know’ that person thus perceive themselves to be affected as well.

Everett’s example of the chessboard was a discursive comment on the Apache family, but he was of course also commenting on the dilemma my presence posed to him. The division of the chessboard into two sides is also suggestive of other Apache discourse about otherness. Like the two sides of a chessboard, the boundaries of the family are formed by what is in fact its mirror image, the otherness of those who are not family. If family is synonymous with sharing and knowledge, then its boundaries are defined by the absence of these. If we take his chessboard metaphor further, then his work as a consultant with M. E. Nevins and I put him in relation with pieces from the “other side” of the chessboard, in ways that potentially stressed his relations with the other members of his family. The chessboard text was a means through which Everett was raising the question, both for himself and my wife and I, regarding who we were.

Formulations of understanding, such as the paradigm of “sharing” and “knowing” also entail formulations of its absence—that is, misunderstanding. In contrast to family members, people about whom little is known represent uncertainty and, at least potentially, threats to oneself and one’s family. People such as these have mysterious, inherently unknowable motivations. Even those recognized as *ndee*, ‘the people,’ can in different contexts be interpreted in this way. This is particularly obvious when people talk about struggles with “the other side,” an English language phrase¹ that one hears mentioned frequently in disputes between families. Conflicts like these are aptly modeled by the dialectical play between the two sides of a chess game. Just as in a chess match, relations with “the other side”—rivals, antagonistic families, political competitors—can be defined by mutually exclusive objectives in a winner-takes-all battle. Relations with non-family are usually not defined so starkly, but while people from different families are not always at odds with one another, they may not ‘know’ one another. What does mark them is an absence of circumstances of sociability, and as a consequence there exists a degree of uncertainty about them.

4. The transformation of uncertainty

Such social uncertainty can be transformed. People may be judged as unknown, but knowable, and there are social devices that act to transform the uncertainty attached to relations with strangers into a possibility of knowing. The most significant of these today is the *Na’íees*, or young woman’s coming of age ceremony. Also called the “Sunrise Dance” or “Sunrise Ceremony,” the ceremony involves a relationship between a young woman undergoing the ceremony, the *Nabíeesñ* and a woman chosen to assist her in the capacity as her “godmother” or *Na’íleesñ*. In most cases the arrangements for a Dance begin many months in advance of the performance of the ceremony, usually within a year after the young woman, the *Nabíeesñ*, has experienced her first menstruation. The planning begins with the solicitation of a *Na’íleesñ*, or “god mother.” Significantly, this person is chosen from a family that has no kin or clan connection to the young woman’s. If this woman accepts the offer to act as godmother, gift exchanges between the young woman’s and godmother’s families commence immediately.

Two weeks before the ceremony the two families each build a camp (*gotah*) at one of a number of locations appointed for this purpose. The families will then occupy these, and use them as bases of operation for the exchanges to come. During the

¹ This phrase corresponds to the idiomatic use of a constellation of Apache language features that express dialectical sided-ness, including a range of verb stems (-*dee*), post-positions (-*shǫ*), and distinctions between certain pronoun forms (difference between third person *bi/ko*).

four days leading up to the *Na'íees*, the sponsoring and godmother's families take turns providing elaborate feasts for one another. The family giving such a dinner forms a procession; and while singing four songs, marches into the camp of the other family, carrying with them anywhere from fifteen to twenty or more separate dishes. The two families dance together for four songs, and speeches are given for each family. When the dances and speeches are over, the family who has brought the food departs, except for the godmother who remains and eats with the young woman, or *Nabíeesí*. The receiving family lines up and, following the benediction, serve themselves and spend some time eating and talking together. Afterwards, the conversation among the family members often turns to the differences between themselves and the people of the other family. As they hash this out together, very often the topic of conversations comes around to the food they were offered. They will make comments to each other like: "the fry bread was just small," "the stew was salty," or joking, "did you have some of that good ash bread?"—in reference to obviously burnt ash bread.

It is important to note that while these exchanges are inevitably competitive, they are said to allow the two families to "get to know" each other (*hít daagonítsaa*). As people critically examine the items given in exchange they are also treating them collectively as a kind of text from which knowledge of the gift-givers can be inferred. For example, since young women are often recruited for making a camp's bread, bad or burnt bread can be taken as a sign that the parents of the other camp did not pay sufficient attention to teaching their young people. The various gifts of bread, freshly butchered and roasted beef, stew with barbecued corn, ham, acorn stew, mashed potatoes and any number of other prepared dishes draw similar scrutiny to the gift-givers. But despite this, the exchanges are viewed as an opportunity for the participating families to show themselves off; and many members look forward to participating. The two families also highlight their differences by calling upon a variety of place names, clan names, or names of the areas associated with them, which are chosen in order to highlight contrasts between themselves and the other family, entailing ramifying spatial and political distinctions.² During such an exchange there are usually a few members of the party presenting gifts who shout out neighborhood and family affiliation with "go Eastfork!", or "all right Diamond Creek!" as they make their way with the procession into the camp of the other family. The gifts and the spirit in which they are given comprise a discourse on the subject of how to do family right, stated in terms of the knowledge, attention and work instantiated in the objects – food and other domestic goods – employed in the acts constitutive of family.

The dinner exchanges, as well as other forms of gift exchange that also take place before and after the ceremony, can be understood as parallel enactments of the values associated with family, made visible by the members of each for their opposite number to see. And as the exchanges move back and forth across the boundaries separating the two groups, the distinctions between the participating families are relativized against one another. The reciprocity characteristic of the *Na'íees* exchanges does not directly produce relationships as much as it highlights difference in instructive ways (see Wagner, 1977), thereby creating a context in which the two families can, to some degree, become known to each other as *bidak'éh*. Also, insofar as exchange mediates difference by employing the very same items necessary to the sharing that are also understood to be the cornerstone of family relations, it militates against the kind of zero-sum combat that looms as a possibility in Everett's example of the chess game.

This is probably why Everett would never actually play a chess match against me; he was unwilling to make real that aspect of our relationship he was on guard against. If I played Everett at chess one of us (probably him, since I'm a pretty mediocre player) would have won and one of us would have lost. In such a game we would have faced each other as enemies of a sort, and given the ambiguity of the relationship we did have, this was not a connection that he wanted to draw. The *Na'íees* exchanges are like a chess game in the sense that both involve some kind of contest between two sides. They differ, however, in terms of possible outcomes. And it is also no coincidence that the various family holiday dinners we were invited to played such important roles in our relations with our hosts and consultants. Although we did not show up for these events with a retinue of kin in tow, our particularly marked otherness represented—obviously more acutely than the godmother's family in the *Na'íees*—an intense variety of the kind of uncertainty and otherness that the ceremonial exchanges characteristic of the *Na'íees* are intended to overcome. The holiday dinners provided a discursive space within which our hosts indirectly explained to us who they were by sharing with us what they would under ordinary circumstances share amongst themselves.

My wife and I returned the favor the best we could by inviting Eva, Everett and other members of their family to our house, and serving dinners to them ourselves. Such events also provided them with a space in which they could evaluate us, assessing the quality and thoughtfulness of our attempts to return their gifts of food and hospitality. So even though I "can't cook a good steak", and during one of the Sunrise Ceremony exchanges the women of the other camp put too much salt in the stew, the fact that they and I meant those items as gifts allayed some of the strangeness of their preparation. Our hosts' generosity was both a form of communication and a test, as it posed to my wife and myself a social context to reflect on, and it asked us to respond in kind. Because of the way we responded, our relationship with our hosts was sometimes described as *bidak'éh*. The *bidak'éh* orienting text, while always highlighting differences, also set these within a mutually beneficial space of interaction.

Most models of intercultural (mis)communication tend to cast understanding in terms of shared bodies of knowledge (i.e. competence), and misunderstanding as state that can be "repaired" by clarifications intended to replicate a speakers knowl-

² The place, neighborhood, or clan names used by a given family in a dance are not fixed. The magnitude of the spatial and political distance between the two families involved can impact the names chosen. If the Dance is between families from the White Mountain and San Carlos reservations, for example, wider associations like "White Mountain" and "San Carlos" come into play.

edge and intended meaning in the minds of her interlocutors. In the discourse on bigontsi and *bidak'éh*, however, understanding is modeled not on sharing a body of knowledge, but upon awareness and participation that embodies a shared history of attentiveness and familiarity. Misunderstanding, as dissonance, or failure to participate in a way that is harmonious with the actions of other participants, is accordingly “repaired” by marking (with a comment) awareness of the disjuncture, which often takes the form of humorous commentary. Our being named “Pilgrims,” and the teasing I received for not cooking the steaks properly, are some examples of such humorous commentary and repair.

Because the discourse of *bidak'éh* explicitly concerns itself with interrogation of otherness, and through this with the production of knowledge, I would suggest that it can be seen as a form of knowledge production parallel in important respects to my own ethnographic practices. Of course, *bidak'éh* and ethnography are instantiations of very different and culturally specific knowledge practices. And while it is certainly important to realize that my account of Apache otherness is constituted very differently from their account of mine, the fact that they existed together along an axis of intellectually coeval concerns was itself constitutive of the sociality that made possible our ongoing ethnographic investigations. Representation of our relations with our consultants as *bidak'éh* never really overcame the differences between them and us: we never became family, and we continued to be figured as both *ndah* and white people. But our additional figuration within the meanings of *bidak'éh* extended and complicated the interpretation of our otherness in ways that we conducive to continued interaction.

5. Culture and love: the space of translation

While it is important to recognize their similarity, the idea that *Na'íees* exchanges, and the *bidak'éh* socialities that emerge from them are a form of ethnography should not be taken too literally, as each is situated within a different field of cultural meanings and assumptions. Ethnography, after all, is concerned with the creation and accumulation of forms of knowing that are abstract and transitive; while the kind of knowing produced in the *Na'íees*, and in conversations with my consultants, is contextually specific and intransitive. However, during fieldwork these practices were coeval and together played complementary, if unequal, roles in the constitution of ethnographic dialog. Not only is the ethnographer figured in terms of assumptions about *ndah*, and in terms of “otherness;” but her project and purpose are interrogated and translated as well.

In order to elaborate on this point, I would like to discuss a series of conversations I had with Everett Lupe regarding the term “culture.” The Apache language, perhaps not surprisingly, does not have a directly equivalent term, although most English speaking Apache people used terms like “culture,” and others like “tradition” and “history.” However, ostensibly common terms such as these are better understood as what Hanks terms “border works:” texts that circulate between different communities; while carrying different meanings and pragmatic entailments for each (Hanks, 1986).

At one point Everett asked me what was entailed by my interest in “Apache culture.” I tried to explain what cultural anthropologists mean by the term “culture,” making reference to symbols, ideas and concepts of cultural relativism and constructivism. Despite the difficulties I had in explaining myself to him, he nevertheless listened politely to what I had to say. About a week later we were driving from his mother’s house in Eastfork to his home in an area of Whiteriver locally known as Chinatown, and once again we were talking about the kind of work I was doing on the reservation. Our discussion meandered from one topic to another, and just before reaching Whiteriver I brought up the “culture concept” again. After a pause in our discussion, Everett asked me, somewhat rhetorically, “can culture be love?”

At one level Everett’s comment seems obvious enough, and at first I thought of it as a sentimental statement—one’s love for one’s culture could be construed to mean something like one’s love for one’s country. But his subsequent use of the term altered my understanding of what he meant by it. Several weeks later my wife and I attended a wake held for Eva Lupe’s close relatives. There was a great deal of work that went into its preparation. Like all Apache wakes it was held outside in a specially prepared open-air enclosure. When we showed up, most of the women were preparing food for the dinner later that evening. The men were gathering firewood and adding last-minute finishing touches to the enclosure. The mood of the gathered family was muted by sadness for their family member’s passing; so there was little of the commotion that usually characterized clan gatherings. But there was also a quiet sense of purpose and activity among the people there. Everett approached us as we were standing by the door of his mother’s house. He stood with us, and together we watched the solemn preparations for the wake that evening. When I inquired about the construction of the enclosure—who had built it, how long it had taken—he gestured to the actions taking place around us and said, “this is what they mean by ‘love.’”

It is important to point out that while Everett was using the term “love” to express a sentiment, it had no saccharin overtones. “Love” here means something both emotional and purposive. The sociality of family and “love” was for him implied by the quiet, undirected and yet orderly quality to the activities of those working to prepare for the wake. The cooperative and coordinated quality of the labor was, for him, only possible through the independent mindfulness of the participants. Evidence of such coordination was found in the relatively silent and unspoken way people were working together. In Everett’s appraisal, the way everyone was working—whether this meant building the structure, preparing the coals for warming the mourners as they sit together through the night, passing around food and drink—reflected what in Apache he would describe as *daabił gozhoq*, and *daagozhYó*, the former referring to their sense of love and mourning for their departed relative, and the latter their mutual concern and “love” for one another.

The verb stem *-zhó*, around which both of these terms are built, is of central importance to Apache religious thought, as well as to conceptualizations of sociality. Other important terms based on this stem include *gozhoq*, *dégozhoné* and

dénzhónéhí, which can be translated respectively as “beauty” or “harmony,” “a beautiful place” or a context which is beautiful or harmonious, and “that which is beautiful” or “that which is in harmony.” The importance of *-zhó* has also been documented for the Navajo (Farella, 1984; Griffin-Pierce, 1992; Reichard, 1950; Schwarz, 1997; Witherspoon, 1977). Words built around the *-zhó* stem are significant to both cultures because they bring together two sets of values: those attached to the harmonious, mutually supportive interaction of sentient, animate beings, and the idea that this harmony ideally stems from their simultaneous awareness of and reflection upon the presence of others. In this regard terms like *gozhoo*, and others derived from the same verb complex, can be seen as modalities of the same values as those associated with knowledge, *bígonts’í* and sharing, *hich’í’ odaagohijáh*. The obvious difference between them is that the former foregrounds the affective aspects of social action while the latter two stand for its rational and purposive dimensions.

Consideration of terms such as these sheds some light on my conversations with Everett. He asked me if culture and love were the same because he was attempting to translate my anthropologically mediated representations into an idiom he was more familiar with. Both *gozhó* and culture have to do with principles of meaning that motivate people’s actions, and have recourse to similar imagery—and in both cases there is a relativistic and self-defining quality attributed to the significance of people’s relations to one another. Of course, from what I understand of the Apache point of view on this issue, people are said to move in and out of states of “harmony” with one another as they struggle to remain mindful of each other’s presence and the interconnected significance of family members to their own lives. Because of their own self-interested concerns they are constantly threatened with *gocho*,’, meaning “hatred,” “disharmony” and “ugliness,” all antithetical to *gozhó*.

In reflecting upon my initial misunderstanding of Everett’s meaning, I became aware that we were often attaching very different meanings to the terms we used in common, and in many situations these differences were revealed when we were discussing my work. After I tried to explain what I meant by studying Apache “culture,” Everett was able to communicate what his meaning was by employing a certain kind of metaphoric triangulation—one in which he posed “culture” in relation to a concept that was not usually associated with it, and in doing so created a new idea. In essence he was suggesting that “culture,” in the anthropological sense of it that I initially described for him, made sense of how he saw and represented his world if I could make the leap to understanding how “culture” and “love” were somehow the same. But the metaphoric space that he created with this juxtaposition created an interpretive portal into discourse that constitutes a kind of cross-cultural “alter-ego” of the more familiar anthropologically authored culture concept. The equation of these two terms also allowed him to append to the emergent interpretive space between them Apache language terms such as *gozhó* or *bidek’éh*.

Everett responded to my questions about Apache culture by coming up with his own and querying me with an equivalent idea. By drawing an equation between “love” and “culture” Everett was not answering a question posed by my research and interrogation of “Apache culture” as much as posing a framing question of his own, one that informed our subsequent conversations. The discussion of culture and love can be seen as an attempt by Everett to socialize my ethnographic investigations, and render them morally acceptable by posing to me the interpretive task of reconciling the seemingly disparate concepts of “love” and “culture.” The juxtaposition of these terms acted as an intellectual cipher designed to direct my attention away from what I understood as the conventional meaning of either term and towards what Everett wanted me to consider with respect to Apache language concepts like *gozhoo* and *bidekeh*. These terms—“love,” “culture,” *gozhó* and *bidak’éh*—did not resolve into each other to construct a singular meaning that Everett helped me to apply to some new anthropological construal of Apache culture, instead they stood against one another as points of reference for an ongoing conversation between him and me concerning, as much as anything else, the limits of our relationship to one another. Each of the conventional English or Apache language texts associated with these four terms became a micro-textual annotation to the other, and this process of annotation became the motivational basis our joint investigation not of Apache culture but of the very dialog we were participating in and our reasons for doing so.

The discourse of “love” and “culture” also reveal something about the politics of the ethnographic encounter. By establishing an equivalence, not of conventionalized pragmatic meaning but of referential relevance between “love” and “culture,” Everett was asserting a co-equal role in our conversations. His discussion of “love” has a dual intent—to respond to my interrogation of Apache “culture”—but also provide him with the experimental means with which he could extend the concepts informing the discursive elaboration of Apache sociality to a set of parallel anthropologically constituted ones. In a sense, as I was using “culture” to interrogate what he would call “love” and he was using “love” to interrogate what I would call “culture,” and in so doing he asserted a coeval interpretive authority with respect to the terms in which our conversations took place and in defining the scope of my ethnographic investigations.

6. Conclusion

The moments of interaction and encounter discussed above could be described in terms of a clash of understandings; or better yet, a clash of misunderstandings that are significant for the way they play upon the basic orienting texts of social life. Moments of encounter with those conventionally classed as “others” superimpose upon what is safe and familiar that which is alien and unpredictable in troubling ways. Even the conventional meanings of “the other,” however this social presence is conventionally understood, are rendered uncertain in the moment of encounter. The known meanings of otherness get read against the presence of real “others,” be they anthropologists or one’s field consultants; yielding a doubly ambiguous quality of other-otherness, in which the conventional expectations addressed to misunderstanding are transformed into the non-understanding of an unpredictable sociality. The micro-texts that mediate the dissonant quality of otherness and the gaps

in understanding that it exposes are, for all their uncertainties, potentially constitutive of social spaces of communication. As was the case with the holiday ironies occasioned by the visit of modern day anthropological pilgrims, the interpretive quandary presented by the encounter with “others” not only invokes conventional, established meanings, but refigures them within an expanded sociality.

The micro-textual elaborations of the usual meanings associated with others of the sort I have discussed above operate in the manner of transformational metaphors. Metaphor is commonly described as a kind of extension, where an idea, term or other representation that is commonly taken from one context is extended to and transforms another (Ricoeur, 2003). As Wagner puts it, “metaphor, and, by extension, a trope generally, equates one conventional point of reference with another, or substitutes one for another, and obliges the interpreter to draw his or her conclusions as to the consequences” (Wagner, 1986, p. 6). For Wagner, metaphor does not simply bring disparate points of reference together, it is also potentially “obviates,” or confounds, the conventional meanings associated with them (Wagner, 1981). This is cognate to what Frye (1957) describes as the “centripetal” effects of poetical construction, pulling meanings toward themselves. In order to truly appreciate the “Pilgrims” joke, you had to be there, and this is because the humor of that comment and the moment of interaction it “invented” (Wagner, 1975) is perhaps partially but not entirely deducible from a simple reading of its various textual entanglements.

A concern with the intransitive, context specific qualities of communication can be seen in idioms of sociality, such as *bidak'éh*. The extension of the term *bidak'éh* to M. E. Nevins and me by our field consultants created a space for the possible constitution but also evaluation of their relations to us. Such relations would only be possible through the refiguration of the conventional meanings associated with non-Apache, *ndah*, whites and ethnographic field workers. As I discussed above, our being identified as *bidak'éh* necessarily redefined, at least in a small way, the usual meanings associated with the term. My wife and I were not literally, or better, conventionally *bidak'éh*, we were figuratively *bidak'éh* in the sense that our relation to our hosts did not duplicate the form of relations usually associated with the term. In other words, while it is obviously the case that the relations we had to our consultants were like those normally referred to as *bidak'éh*; it is possible to turn this on its head and say that *bidak'éh* relations are, in general, something like those we had to our consultants.

Bidak'éh, as it was used in relation to us, described the relations of M. Eleanor Nevins and I with our consultants in terms of the interrogatory space of sharing with non-family conventionally associated with the *Na'íees*, but in this case applied to two *ndah*, or “white,” researchers. This deployment of *bidak'éh* relations does not denote an overcoming of otherness—as Everett suggests in his description of the chess match we always remained on “the other side”—instead, it describes an experimental discursive space designed by our consultants to investigate the plausibility of continued relations with my wife and I. This investigation was not pursued with the intent to overcome some quanta of misunderstanding, instead, it was framed by misunderstanding and explored what was possible within the communicative space thus constituted.

My conversations with Everett were framed by a similarly productive engagement with misunderstanding. By transposing the terms “love” for “culture”, Everett was not saying that the real meaning of culture is love, and he was not suggesting that I should substitute questions of affect for those of semiotics. He was only asking me to consider them together in an interpretive turn that he himself was taking in the face of a problem posed by our dialog with one another. In a sense he deployed love against culture in order to challenge my meta-textual claim to the framing objectives of our dialog; to push aside my sense of what was being discussed and make a space for his own. Into the confounding metaphoric space created by appending “love” to “culture,” Everett was also able to assert the relevance of gozho. The entanglements he was thereby composing did not resolve into one another in the same way for both of us. Instead, what he was creating was the framing hermeneutic conditions of our ethnographic conversations. This is not to say that we each always, or even frequently, understood what the other was saying. But even if the meanings we each individually took away from our conversations were different, and were deployed to different ends, the irresolvable dilemma these were addressed to invited multiple and ongoing attempts at explication and re-explication.

Here understanding inheres less in the definitional meanings to which micro-texts are ultimately assimilated and more within the establishment of a kind of communicative track record of discursive association. One possible outcome of the encounter with others is the overcoming of the dangers their presence suggests through the discursive elaboration of the encounter by those witness to it. The micro-textual elaboration of my wife and I as “pilgrims,” bad grill chefs, or *bidak'éh* proved to be conducive to the experience of convivial sociality among our hosts if for no other reason than we proved occasional comic relief to otherwise predictable family events. It is possible to see what I describe as micro-textual elaborations of established textual convention acting metaphorically, as a semiosis instantiated in the displacement of dissonant qualities onto a sense of new meanings. Micro-textual “annotations” operate metaphorically along the borders of social relatedness and therefore understanding, and as such inform the expression of emergent socialities. A possibility introduced by a visit by Simmel’s stranger, whether in the form of the person who is unknown or the errant anthropologist, is that her presence poses a possible future not reducible to the forms of social being already known. Here, the unknown is not overcome but transformed, as its potential is narrowed from a dangerous and unbounded uncertainty to the unpredictability of new meanings occasioned by an examination of what is and can be known of others.

There is an unavoidable irony to the attempt to ethnographically depict the productive role of misunderstanding. The relative and partial character of whatever “truth” that emerges from the communications with consultants is inevitably altered as it is reconstituted in ethnographic representation. This subsumes the morally and politically ambiguous space crafted through ethnographic interactions to the certainties of scholarly entextualizations, and suborns the cooperation necessary to fieldwork dialog to the authority of the anthropologist. Cultural anthropology is itself, after all, an attempt to repair

the misunderstanding introduced by cultural difference. For example I have discussed Everett's assertions of coeval conversational and interpretive authority for the purpose of elaborating a culturally different model of social relatedness. This removes the problem of misunderstanding from between Everett and myself, to the relationship of ethnographer and reader. Everett's authority, which was expressed in his various negotiations of conversation with me, is obscured by the conventions of ethnographic entextualization, which position me as the mediator of understanding and misunderstanding.

The only partial antidote to the problem of ethnographic authority is to highlight the significance of misunderstanding, both to the ethnographer's project, and to her consultant's objectives as well. The people we work with and rely on have their own reasons for engaging with us; which suggests that there is some dimension of meaning and power wielded in the fieldwork encounter that remains opaque, and will not surrender itself to anthropological metacommentary and generalization. In this regard the micro-textual redefinitions I have discussed above operate less as transformative metaphors and more as indexes pointing out the conversational mediations of the relations of ethnographic production. In addition to being epistemologically more precise, there is a further virtue in bringing indexical quality of ethnography to the forefront of an investigation of what Keane (2008) poses as the interpretive gap between ethnographic writing and terms the "semiotic ideologies" it purports to engage with and describe, particularly considering the creatively ad hoc and, at times, contested authorship of fieldwork conversation. Perhaps ethnography, situated at an intertextual nexus between academia and fieldwork communities, may occasion productive misunderstandings in both discursive fields.

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