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"Where Are Those Lines?": Discussions About and Around Experimental Ethnography with Sky Hopinka, Naeem Mohaiemen and Deborah Stratman

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Abstract: Through an expanded introduction on the history of experimental ethnography and interviews with prominent artists, Sky Hopinka, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Deborah Stratman, this chapter considers their films and videos at the intersection of anthropology and experimental media. The chapter first highlights the historical capacity for formally innovative film and video to challenge and fragment hegemonic visions of cultural identity as well as the empirical and positivist research methodologies that produce and enforce these reductive categories. In reflections on their own work, Hopinka, Mohaiemen, and Stratman demonstrate materially engaged artistic practices that view culture as an incomplete practice, something to be built rather than represented.

Key Terms: documentary, ethnography, anthropology, experimental media, Sky Hopinka, Deborah Stratman, Naeem Mohaiemen, ethnopoetics

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In his short, archival video essay featured in documenta 14, Naeem Mohaiemen offers a meditation on *Muslim*, not as a religious or cultural identity but as a floating signifier. Weaving together multiple temporal and spatial registers, the video comprises video stills from Chris Marker films and found digital images, as well as the artist's own re-photography of broadcast news, newspaper headlines, and Mohaiemen's profile printed on a U.S. customs and borders form. *Century's Container* (2016) visualizes the rhetorical construction and the material circulation of the Muslim as an all-purpose container for "the other," a phrase that refers to a political technology of space/time that renders individuals and groups as bounded objects of meaning, as foreign, threatening and strange, yet categorically knowable. In its engagement with such representational practices, the video makes explicit an investment in anthropology's long-standing critique of these discursive conditions, including the origins of the practice within the discipline's own methods. Yet Mohaiemen extends his essay's interest beyond the deconstruction of false images, toward a tactical concern with how one can work within and resist such empty containers. His video shows how aesthetic constructions of otherness intersect with, rely upon, or challenge the physical boundaries of border crossings, the legal boundaries of representation, and global media formations as conditioning infrastructures of contemporary life. Through his formally innovative work, he makes the violence of transnational political flows as material an ethnographic object as the tangible geographies that frame them.

Century's Container is emblematic of the concerns of this chapter and the artists whose voices it features. Representing a diverse range of formal and methodological entry points, Sky Hopinka, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Deborah Stratman demonstrate shared commitments, through film and video, to the exploration of the aesthetic and political forms that shape social relations – in alternately restrictive and liberatory ways - within the specific geographies engaged by each of their projects. In framing these artists under the sign of experimental ethnography, I intend to highlight the ways that their work challenges the normalizing, and thus materializing, capacities of long-standing modes of cultural representation to pattern political realities. Ethnographic film has always been an institution of "the unruly" (Ginsburg 1988, 173), and while neither Mohaiemen, Stratman, nor Hopinka may position themselves in an explicitly ethnographic mode, bringing them together under this heading allows us to synthesize a number of historical debates at the intersection of cinema and ethnographic studies and critique. In addition, their work expresses an aesthetic rigor, demonstrating that an investment in formal experimentation should be thought of as integral to the cultural dimension of any meaningful political engagement. Partly through form, they articulate a relationship to culture as something to be built rather than represented. Before yielding the remainder of this chapter to their own reflections, I offer a brief introduction to some of the ways in which experimental cinema has historically invigorated, challenged, and been informed by ethnographic practice.

Luis Buñuel was one of the first to use cinema as a tool of deconstruction against what he viewed as the intrinsic violence of the Western ethnographic project. Emerging from the Parisian surrealist movement in the late 1920's, Buñuel signaled a desire to challenge the codes of authenticity and universal humanism arrogated by ethnographers in their interest in and description of non-Western others. Rather than accept an invitation to accompany and document the 1932

Mission Dakar-Djibouti, the first large scale French field expedition, he instead traveled to Southern Spain to produce *Land Without Bread (Las Hurdes)* (1932), a sardonic documentary portrait of Andalusian life that employs the techniques of long takes, deep focus, and descriptive voice over frequently associated with objective observation *against* the ethnographic impulse in order to challenge the truth claims associated with these conventions and the ways they allow ethnographers to savage those they perceive as savages. As the film lulls viewers into a false sense of objective engagement, it leaves unmistakable clues along the way that point to the filmmaker's real intentions. That aim, according to Jeffrey Ruoff, was to stage a "violent attack against several hegemonic institutions," (Ruoff 1988, 49) the discipline of ethnography, and Western rationalism more broadly, among them. Not only does Buñuel's proximity to the emergent French ethnographic tradition mark an early interpenetration of artistic avant-garde and the social-scientific vanguard practices, it also reveals an early understanding of what James Clifford calls "ethnographic allegory," (Clifford 1986, 98-121) that is, the recognition that the primary value of ethnographic description lies in its ability to reveal the systematic construction of the ethnographer's own culture through the rendering of foreign cultures into text. Within *Land Without Bread* is a recognition that one of the best ways to reveal the dubious ideological orientation and false coherence of Western humanism is through its juxtaposition to other cultures rendered foreign by the ethnographer's eye. Ostensibly a portrait of an impoverished Spanish region, the real work of *Land Without Bread* is to render the insolence behind the humanist mode of anthropological encounter into an aesthetic that effaces its own objective operations.

Thus, the acknowledgement of allegory in cultural representations of others comprises an integral part of ethnographic cinema's political capacity. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian invites us to read such an allegorical operation into the camera itself (Fabian 1983). As a technology of modernity, the camera represents the position of modernity when employed in an observational mode in its encounters with non-Western peoples, placing them in a temporal frame outside the historical present. Marlon Fuentes powerfully stages the confrontation between clashing temporal registers in his *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995), a nonfiction exploration of the filmmaker's Filipino-American identity organized around the fictionalized story of the Fuentes' grandfather, Marcod. An indigenous Bontoc Igorot tribe member, he was taken by Americans to St. Louis where he is exhibited for visitors in a zoological tableau. Fuentes begins the film with early 20th Century wax cylinder and 16mm recordings by U.S. colonial forces in the Philippines of the Bontoc Igorot tribe "playing primitive" (Russell 1997, 98-118). The historical record reveals that this documentation was produced by the U.S. to convince the American public that military forces should remain in the archipelago to protect indigenous peoples from the very forces of aggression and exploitation that the American presence embodied. Fuentes' reliance on fictional strategies in *Bontoc Eulogy* provocatively highlights the very fictions of primitivism projected onto the Bontoc people in the scant photographic records that exist of the tribe. In the hands of the American documentarians, the camera bore witness to the colonial state's investment in technology as an investment in a people's deliverance from the "waiting-room of history," (Chakrabarty 2000, 8) even as it doomed its subjects to never being quite modern. Fuentes acknowledges his desire to look to these anchoring historical artifacts of cultural mediation for historical reflection and memory even as he recognizes how they spectacularize the Bontoc tribespeople as authentically timeless and racialized.

Wherever a modernist narrative of progress is present in ethnographic representation, that narrative can also be inverted as one of loss. Mark Lapore's films are exemplary for the degree to which they openly and honestly wrestle with their own relation to the appropriative aesthetics of early cinema's exotic travelogues that packaged "views" (Gunning 1997, 9-24) of the global south for Western consumption. In Lapore's *Depression in the Bay of Bengal* (1996), the result of a Fulbright Award the artist received to document everyday life in the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, the filmmaker intercuts his own, long and patient observations of agrarian labor with Edison travelogue footage recorded in nearby locations eighty years prior. Trained within an avant-garde film tradition with a reputation for suppressing the camera's referential function, Lapore's compositions leave unreconciled a struggle between, on the one hand, the historical particularities of the spaces with which he engaged, mediated by his camera, and on the other hand, a desire, informed by the poetic capabilities of early travelogues and films, such as Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), to abstract and romanticize those particulars. Filtered through a poetic sensibility, Wright's film demonstrates how foreign places can be transformed into larger, organized lyrical rhythms of light and shade, movement and stasis, and the industrial and artisanal. *Depression* thematizes the failure of a poetic, earnest vision to close the gap between self and other and to disaggregate the objective gaze of early cinema from his own pursuit of a more contemplative and ethical eye.

The impulse to transcend the representational real in favor of more direct modes of expression also informs the *ethnopoetic*, a term that anthropologist Stanley Diamond describes as an inclusive "attempt to define a primary human potential" (Diamond 1974, 88). The ethnopoetic spirit appears throughout the twentieth century dressed up in various guises, from the critical utopianism of Diamond, Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg to the anti-representational expressions of Dadaist Tristan Tzara and the occasional surrealist Antonin Artaud. It is perhaps the figure of Artaud who most directly informs Maya Deren's *Divine Horseman* (1953) project, for which Deren first travelled to Haiti to film Haitian possession rituals with support of a Guggenheim grant in 1947. Like Artaud, Deren was interested in ethnopoetics as a pursuit of artistic modes of direct expression that transcend the mediating representational codes of language. And like Artaud, who located such a capacity in the non-European cultural expressions of Balinese theater and the Tarahumaras in Mexico, Deren's investment in Haitan voodoo signaled less a commitment to material cultural and its historical context in Haiti than a belief that the coherence of the individual ego can be disrupted by certain forms of bodily performance, of which possession rituals were exemplary. For reasons that are not entirely clear, Deren never completed the film that she intended to make, but her book on the project is animated by the Haitian proverb that says, "When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart" (Deren 1953, 1). Representation, like ethnography more broadly, is equated here with distance and dislocation, a form of death articulated as a separation of thinking from the body. Deren's conviction that art should put its participants in touch with the real that representational reality is a poor imitation of marks an inversion of Plato's cave myth. Here, documentary must cease to be world-representing and turn to forms of world-creating. While it is important to note the exoticism or romantic idealism that underwrites her belief in film's ability to do away with the culturally constructed Western subject, hers was nonetheless a formative impulse in the tradition of experimental ethnography, inasmuch as her quest for new representative strategies destabilized the various systems on which it depended, including the autonomy of the cinematic spectator.

In her influential book, *Experimental Ethnography* (Russell 1997), Catherine Russell considers many of these themes and films through the figure of the imaginary spectator as conceptualized in Michel Foucault's (Foucault 1977) analysis of the panopticon. The model of the panopticon allows Russell to demonstrate how enlightenment principles such as humanism and progress take on a disciplinary function in modern ethnography, a dynamic Foucault encapsulates in his well-known claim that "visibility is a trap" (Foucault 1977, 200). Russell locates an ontology of cinema in panoptic space when she invokes Walter Benjamin to argue that the emergent age of video fosters a reflexive view on celluloid films' auratic capacities in ethnographic representation. Thus, the project of experimental ethnography is to deconstruct the panoptic model of power.

Russell's project imaginatively and provocatively engages a century of experimental cinema and ethnographic film under the banner of experimental ethnography in order to rethink the role of the cinema in the historical operations of coordinated political power. Yet, in the new century, a diversification is underway, one that encompasses multiple media and reaches beyond centralized regimes of power. As the following conversations with Hopinka, Mohaiemen and Stratman illustrate, a dominant, contemporary concern with the expansive ways that global forces and earth systems interact with local arrangements has emerged, focusing on the multiplication of the contingencies that structure everyday life. One way to think the expanded concerns and stakes of contemporary visual ethnography is through anthropologist Audra Simpson's engagement with the claim for Native "visual sovereignty" (Simpson 2014, 20-28). For Simpson, such a concept refers both to the long-standing demand for Native ownership of their own cultural heritage and also to the fight for rights that extend well beyond recognition in a Western scopic regime. Here, political anthropology is less about a corrective pursuit for recognition than it is about building new intellectual, political, and material infrastructures that shun the gaze of colonial and imperial power altogether.

Through their reflexive, historical, and ethnographic outlooks, the work of Sky Hopinka, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Deborah Stratman contour the margins of contemporary anthropology. My interview with Sky Hopinka concentrates on three recent short videos, *Jaaji Approx* (2015), *Anti-Objects* (2017) and *Dislocation Blues* (2017), which bring together traditions of auto-ethnography and landscape with a commitment to thinking in new and complex ways about the infrastructures of Native sovereignty. With Naeem Mohaiemen, I engage a four-part, decade long series of film essays tilted *The Young Man Was* (2006 – 2017). Here, Bangladesh is a refractive geography for a wide-reaching series of explorations on alternative modernisms and the International Left. The material artifacts of video archives and printed matter that populate this work express a desire for challenging, recoding and recombining fluid narratives of Western historical centrality and progression. Deborah Stratman discusses *The Illinois Parables* (2016), a film in which the state of Illinois is a container that bounds a series of discrete historical events, from the great Chicago fire and floods to the murder of Black Panther Fred Hampton, Jr., by the FBI and Chicago Police Department. Provocatively confusing the boundaries between anthropogenic and natural phenomena, what immediately renders *Illinois Parables* ethnographic is its commitment to challenging the methodological and historical containers that tend to organize American cultural memory.

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Sky Hopinka (SH): I picked up a little point and shoot Sony cyber shot camera, because my friends and I were going to build a fishing scaffold on the Columbia River outside of Portland, Oregon. At that time, a lot of conversations with my native friends revolved around the fact that we weren't happy with the state of native representation. Much native cinema was geared towards a white audience, and perpetuated the sort of tragedy that was, and is, a big part of native life, whether it's alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, historical trauma, the reservation system, or the urban Indian situation. My friends and I were like, "Is this how we exist in 2010?" Building a fishing scaffold is a traditional practice that's imbued with different legalities of federal and state fishing rights. I brought my camera with me and I found the video function and decided to film my friends and I being jackasses more or less through the two or three-month long process of building it. And then I thought: "Oh I have footage, I don't know how to edit, I don't know what this is, but I'm interested in it, let's make a little documentary." Over the course of building the scaffolds, it became something we talked about, that we're not trying to explain what we're doing, we're not trying to have a bunch of title cards about fishing rights. It was just about native people being native people, and through that I made a twenty-minute short and started to submit it to festivals and it got rejected everywhere.

I was also working as a facilitator for "Where Are Your Keys?" (A Chinuk Wawa language revitalization program), traveling to different native communities around the West coast and Alaska doing workshops and I figured that I'm would try to go to grad school for film and video. I called my tribe's higher education division and told them that I was interested in going to grad school and they told me, "Oh there's a grad program for film in Wisconsin," and it seemed like a really good fit.

I got a crash course in a lot of different experimental and ethnographic traditions there. Peter Rose's work with text on screen and James Benning's *American Dreams Lost and Found* (1984) had a huge impact.

Jason Fox (JF): Can you take a step back and talk about films that excited or dispirited you at that early time?

One example is *The Exiles* (1961) by Kent Mackenzie. What I loved about that when I first saw it in 2007 or 2008 was that it just depicts young Native people in the city, living in their life. Yeah, there was drinking and yeah there was partying but we hear their voices talk about their experiences and to see them act out these experiences it felt like it blurred the line between documentary and fiction in a really beautiful way that felt really resonant with what I'm experiencing some fifty years later. It was something that gave me permission as a Native person growing up in the U.S. to not follow prescribed modes of storytelling that are about overcoming the victimization that we've experienced and rather makes a space for culture and then allows the culture and community to fill that space out. You know what I mean?

JF: And what about your engagement with the ethnographic tradition at Wisconsin?

SH: I remember the first essay in Lucien Taylor's edited collection, *Visualizing Theory* (1994), by Eliot Weinberger called "The Camera People." He gives an overview of ethnographic tradition from the early 1900's to the present, and at the end of the essay he proposes the idea of

the "ethnopoetic," and I thought it was a really beautiful sentiment. I liked the idea that I can figure out what something means to me on my own outside of being beholden to the text, but, that giving me some sort of permission or context to look at films that have been made over the last century, and to view ethnography as an ongoing, as a very new medium, as a course of study, as a very new way that is still being formulated and developed and tested, which was exciting. I like the combination of the *ethno* and the *poetic* in terms of what it means too, when people that traditionally have had cameras pointed at them, then pick up the camera. What sort of stories are we interested in telling?

JF: The term "ethnopoetic" also takes us back to 1920's Paris, and to the orientalizing and universalist, surrealist use of that term by artists like Antonin Artaud, who reportedly watched Balinese theater at a colonial exhibition and decided that only non-European art could "break through language in order to touch life," in his characteristic phrase.

SH: Yes, well, white male academics will use people of color as the other to work through their ideas, no matter how well-intentioned they are. Is a documentary when you're making a film about your own culture and ethnography when you're making one about another? Where are those lines? What is there, I know is there, my friends know is there, people from *this* community may know is there. So, what kind of shorthand can we use where we aren't concerned with explaining but rather just creating a space where there is emotion or just gestures that provide opportunities for connection outside of the didactic?

JF: The history and practice of Chinuk Wawa, and the experimental pedagogy and methodologies of the "Where Are Your Keys?" language program appear to meaningfully inform your video practice.

SH: The history of Chinuk Wawa is contested, but from what I understand, it was a slave language by the Chinook people in the Columbia River Basin pre-contact. It's renowned for how difficult it is to learn, and I don't think anyone became a second language speaker of it. But then with contact "the jargon," as it's also known, became a *lingua franca* for the French and English traders who were settling in the Northwest.

Chinuk Wawa became the language that they spoke amongst each other because they couldn't communicate for all practical purposes, and through that it developed more of an indigenous slang than Chinook Jargon as a whole. In the early 1900s, as English became a dominant language, people started speaking Chinuk Wawa less and I think that of the first-generation speaker, one of last ones to pass away was Wilson Bob in the 1980s. Various forms of documentation existed though that have helped the survival of the language by different linguists who studied it.

JF: You are describing a creole language and it sounds like there's no pursuit to resurrect some pure, original state of the language.

SH: Yeah, and that's where it gets tricky. There is a similar dynamic with many indigenous languages that are being actively revitalized. What sort of choices can we make and how is English grammar, structure, thought, effecting how we then speak this language? That's one of the things I constantly check in with my speaker about. Am I trying to impose certain ideas or

thought-structures or concepts onto this language that weren't present? At the same time, what does that mean for the development of this language where we're not sure about the next stage of that Creolization?

One of the key tenets in "Where Are Your Keys?" is that there is no translation. For example, the first and only thing that a teacher might translate is "What is that?" From there, one can then scaffold in the language and one can gain so much about the form, the structure, the grammar. The idea is that you only need ten nouns to learn a language, because those are fairly useful when it comes to being nimble in the language. The question is what is the language doing for each of these objects? In Ho-chunk, a sentence is constructed based on what it's doing. Is it sitting, standing, or lying?

Another element of the program is the relationship between a teacher and student. There are hundreds of techniques, but they are all small tools that I as a teacher can tell you as a student what I'm doing, and you can then use those same techniques on me, so that we are blurring the hierarchy between teacher and student. We have the same tools to use on one another, and then help guide each other through the learning process. It might start with "What is that?"
"That is a pen."
"Is that a pen?"
"Yes, that's a pen."
"Is that a lamp?"
"No that's not a lamp, that's a pen. Is that your pen?"
"No *this* is my pen. *That's* your pen. Do you need a pen?"

Through this I can relate to different instances of what an object is, and then build scaffolding on top.

JF: So, if we start with the pen and we go to what it's resting on, we're building out a world?

SH: Right.

JF: It sounds like you are talking about a way of de-centering the power of the teacher. That there's nothing that I need to know to know the language?

SH: That's where it gets more into the in's and out's of language, what we call chasing rabbits or chasing deer. You know which one is more worthwhile to give you the nourishment that you need. You want to try to find the ones that will give you the most mileage and then get you to the next level of understanding.

JF: I want to ask about two qualifiers in two of your titles, "anti" in *Anti-Objects* and "approx" in *Jaaji Approx.*

SH: Making *Anti-objects* got me thinking about the prefix "anti." It's still grounded in the structure and it defines by negation. It's like, "this is what something is because it isn't that." That play between language and the idea itself is deficit-based and so the thing is still part of the system that it is trying to counteract. It only has weight because it's defining itself by what it's not. Take the term "ethnopoetic." It's still grounded in ethnography, under that umbrella and

again what does it look like if it doesn't exist, if you're not thinking about ethnography, you're not thinking about traditions or forms or Robert Gardner, *Nanook of the North* (1922), or whatever else?

As for *Anti-Objects,* I had been to the Plank House a few times working with Chinook Nation or the Greater Tribes of Grande Ronde, and the Tilikum Crossing Bridge had just been built. I was thinking about these different places around Portland (Oregon), either traditional sites of villages or artifacts and how they may exist in contemporary culture. These three just aligned in a way that made sense to me. The Plank House was built on the site of a Chinookan village. The bridge is still used by the tribe to this day. It's a pedestrian bridge called Tilikum which means "people" and that felt complicated in terms of naming a place after another Indian name, and then the reservation, where people were removed to. It felt like there was a strong connection for me between what these different places represent and have the potential to represent for the community that exists, and existed, on this land as well as the one that exists now which is not of that culture or of that heritage, as well as the contemporary presence on the reservation. I use the text of Kengo Kuma (Kuma 2008) to frame it in a way to see how they exist as objects.

Each serve as a proposition to figure out how I relate to the space. The word Tilikum is one that I say often when I speak Chinook. I would say there's four objects within the video, and the recordings of Henry and Wilson being another one – you have the Plank House, the Reservation, the bridge, and the recordings, which I've viewed as objects. So how can I then stop viewing them as objects and recognize the conversation that was generated between these two men? It was really amazing to hear Wilson teach Henry words that I've learned, thinking about how I learned this word, and the person that taught me learned from Henry. It all speaks to a strong connection of the lineage or tradition of information or passing of information.

JF: And Kuma's book seems interested in doing away with the figure and ground dichotomy. There's not a standalone figure separate from historical ground. For you, I understand that the historical dimension of the piece is positioned as co-present with the objects you're filming as a way of blurring that distinction?

SH: Yes. An anti-object doesn't prescribe paths to move through spaces or move through structures. The irony is that *I am* recording my path moving through these spaces and structures, so it then serves as a documentation of my exploration of those objects, of navigating a place through history. As a document of interaction, it becomes a historical object. It becomes a historical marker. How will others refer to these or how will it shift their thinking? As a continued resistance to my own authority, it still serves as a proposition for a way to move through space. So, it's about making space, while also making space for other things to inhabit outside that space whether it's ideas or actual physical presence, sentiment, or emotion.

In terms of "approx," I'm trying to create an approximation of my dad in *Jaaji Approx*. These songs are an approximation of a relationship. These are artifacts from a conversation. In some ways I have more of a relationship to these songs than I do with my actual father and so *are* these recordings my dad? What are they? Same thing with the landscapes too, thinking about horizon lines that he may have seen and I may have seen, and is that connection, however temporally apart it is between our experiences, is that a way for me to understand who this person is? *Jaaji*

Approx is a very emotional film. I showed that to my mom for the first time and she said "that's really sad, you know?" She is privy to a relationship with my father. But I don't get that from most audiences. These landscapes or edits or talking points within the film, however they function like dialogue or text, they're also containers to be filled with my own understanding of this world, to work through an understanding of this world through an edit or through cuts or through these longer takes or songs.

The infrastructure, roads and landscapes, was part of *Dislocation Blues* too. Infrastructure is the hallmark of civilization. As I'm going down these roads, it's civilization in corporeal form. What does it look like when the roads are twisting and turning and they don't lead anywhere, when they may come and go based on the needs of the (Standing Rock) camp? That fluidity is just … it was part of the dislocation too. This camp is so fluid and so how do I locate myself into this? I came here one week and it was *this* way. Then I came here the next week and there were five thousand more people and the roads are entirely different. There are so many more tents and camps and that fluidity was a response to the needs and to the number of perspectives that were there at that moment. What does that mean for any sort of rigid idea of what culture is?

JF: You suggested earlier that there is often a divide between your work and its audiences.

SH: After I got into Sundance for the first time, I had all these different festivals emailing me saying, "Oh submit! Dear Sky Hopinka, we would love to see your film." There were tons of those and I said "ok, here you go," and I think every single one of them rejected me. *Visions of an Island* (2016) was at Sundance last year under their "environmental" programming. But *Visions* isn't filling any sort of expectation of what a native film about the environment is. At a screening of *Dislocation Blues* this week someone stood up and said "I saw the synopsis that this was about Standing Rock and I was expecting to learn so much more." The expectation of what it means to be a representative in these different worlds where there's an expectation that it is going to be about something dramatic, or historical, and when that desire isn't satisfied, and audiences ask for further questions about why is it not like this or that … Those sorts of expectations about native cinema are not the hardest thing to overcome but they're always there, That and trying not to be an informant for an audience. On the other hand, with *Dislocation Blues*, a few critiques that I've heard about it are that it's not avant-garde enough. Or, "What is this doing in *Wavelengths* or *Projections*? It's just a documentary." I want people to like my work, but it's out of my hands. Returning to the first video I made with my friends, we just make things that we want to see, that no one else is going to show. And I've been lucky enough to have my work shown.

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Deborah Stratman (DS): My family had a super-8 camera when I was a kid, so I was familiar with the medium. I took a film class in high school, and messed around making movies with friends. But I never took film seriously as a career until after I dropped out of University where my direction had been astronomy and physics, re-enrolled in art school and took a 16mm film class. I was excited to find a medium that combined optics, mechanics, chemistry, time and audio. I had a good batch of teachers back then. One of my first was Peter Kubelka, whose lectures on editing structure were indelible. He taught entirely from *Unsera Afrika Reise* (1966), which we analyzed for weeks, cut by cut.

JF: What did you take away from Kubelka?

DS: That rhythm matters. Specificity matters. That there is no necessary fidelity between any image and its "indigenous" sound. And that sound is the weld between our gaze and where it settles in the frame.

There was also a doc class with the great Chicago filmmaker Tom Palazzolo who would bring us to Maxwell Street (a sprawling outdoor flea market) and have us wander around filming. P. Adams Sitney did a course on film history that I don't recall much of beyond his commitment to cigar smoking and baseball. Shellie Fleming was the first person who programmed one of my films outside of school. Dennis Couzin was there too, a sort of outsider physicist who taught an epic class on optics and printing.

In the late 80s and very early 90s, the first filmmakers I gravitated strongly towards were, embarrassingly, virtually all white men. Sidney Peterson, Robert Nelson, Hollis Frampton, Jon Jost, Erich Von Stroheim, Werner Herzog, Bruce Conner, Robert Bresson, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky. It's an unfortunate testament to what was, and still is, deemed canonical, and the habits of programmers and teachers at the time. Thankfully, by the mid-90s I was hip to a much more diverse group of makers who continue influence me. Agnes Varda, Barbara Loden, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Shirley Clarke, Yvonne Rainer, Lizzie Borden, Jean Marie Straub & Danielle Huillet, Su Friedrich, Chick Strand…. And by the late 90s the list explodes to pamphlet size.

JF: How did Trinh T. Minh-ha's work influence your own when you were beginning to make films?

DS: It was her writing more so than her cinema, though I admire both. She is so clear about the radical usefulness of an unstable relationship between shots, between sound--image, subject--filmmaker, native--other. And how keeping these relationships destabilized insures that authority or ideology can't become entrenched because they're never permitted to be still long enough to calcify. Minh-ha was the first person I encountered who insisted the wide shot is no more intrinsically 'objective' or 'indexical' than the close-up. And the first I knew who advocated for a sort of refracted, manifold subject.

JF: My mental image of U.S. avant-garde practice in the late 1980's and early 1990's, is dominated by Tom Gunning's 'minor cinema' roster – Phil Solomon, Mark LaPore, and Nina Fonoroff, all of whose work expresses in different forms a commitment to exploring the artist's personal consciousness.

DS: I only became conscious of these works later, in the early/mid 2000s. LaPore is a poet of the hand-eye. Solomon understands the ghost universe. Their works have an inner politics. But from early on I wanted more of the accidental outside. More of the street. Some socio-political to aerate the work. That's why filmmakers like Tom Palazzolo were important to me.

JF: The term “research practitioner” has increasingly been used to refer to professors who move fluidly between research, scholarly publishing, and media making. In some ways, the title could easily refer to your process, one that is deeply informed by research in historical texts, objects and artifacts. In other ways, I guess you might bristle at the methodological approaches to knowledge most scholars are trained to honor.

DS: My works have often been interested in ways of being and knowing, but the projects rarely address those themes head on. It’s generally much more circuitous, through the ‘practitioning’ you might say. I like sifting through the artifact bins of our past, and I’m curious why we give more credence to certain modes of accounting, or renditions of events than others. But I don’t consider these moves more academic than they are investigative, obsessive-compulsive, narrativized, or simply adrift. There’s often no specific entity I’m looking for. I just wait for something to seize me with its relevance to structures or ideas I’m already mulling over. It’s a bit like thrift store shopping.

JF: Did you always assume a commitment within the Academy?

DS: Definitely not. I had no assumptions about my trajectory. Though it was clear fairly early on that I wouldn't make the best living as a projectionist, that physics would be too much math, and that I didn’t have the stamina, or maybe it’s more the ability, to compartmentalize the way I think I’d need to if I worked in the film industry. Framing teaching as working ‘within the Academy’ makes it sound like I chose that direction because I was looking for an institutional umbrella, when in its more the case that I’m drawn to teaching because of the flexing, contorting, slippery, raw, embattled, funny, inspiring social co-engineering contract each new class and set of students represents.

JF: Why Illinois? I don’t mean so much *why that state* as opposed to another one, but rather why did the state become a meaningful container that brings shape to the *Illinois Parables?*

DS: Because for me, Illinois constitutes the local. I grew up and have lived in the state for decades. There’s value to digging around right where you’re at. Even if, on the surface, or in this case *because* it’s an easy state to gloss over. The central states tend to be ignored when outsiders decide where to visit, or formulate their idea of what the States are. We get defined by our edges, New York, California, Florida, Texas. The I-states (Indiana, Illinois, Iowa) are someplace to get past on your way somewhere else. On some level, I thought if not me, then who? On the other hand, the state is just a convenient ruse. I’m sure I could have found parables in any state that functioned in the way I was looking for – that is, both particularly, locally, politically *and* allegorically, universally, metaphysically. Also, for histories that were recondite. Having limitations is always productive. It helps you find things you weren’t looking for.

JF: Watching it, I am reminded of Hollis Frampton's distinction between two ways of approaching historical experience –historical time, marked by imposing language, linearity, and causality on the past and the other, ecstatic time, marked by the feeling of lived experience. You seem driven to situate viewers in indeterminate times and places rather than clarifying understandings.

DS: Oh good. Ecstasy. Embodied time. Move through it. Go dancing. But if I'm going to work on films, then there has to be some other approach to the euphoric indeterminacy of the actual infinitely branching present. There's no calculated strategy. Just a wariness of too much equilibrium. Though sometimes the repetitive / mathematical can absolutely build to something felt and embodied. Think of (Michael) Snow, or (Paul) Sharits, or (Ernie) Gehr, who made films like chants. If I have any structural habits, I guess it's to try to deploy shifts of register when they're not expected. Which can suddenly provide a new dimension of thinking. And to make use whenever possible of absence.

JF: The multitude of lines and shapes that cut across the state – the path of a tornado, the trail of tears, and earth mounds, for example, render Illinois the site of a number of historical collisions and competing pressures. There is both a flattening and an expansion of power to register beyond the anthropocentric, encompassing the human and environmental, physical and social forces.

DS: I didn't want the 'writing' of history to be limited to words. The scoured erasure of the Tri-State tornado, the mud trampled by Cherokee exiles, the earthen evidence of a mound are all on equal footing with newspaper headlines and voiceovers. In terms of why there's both natural and anthropic forces at work in these expulsions, that has more to do with the instigating query of the film – why or how we turn to faith and technology when faced with the inexplicable, insurmountable or irrepressible. When considering stories and locations, I was looking for 'thin places', but less exclusively in the Jesuit sense, where what is *thin* is the line between logical and metaphysical, but also that between present and past. Where a kind of haunting is palpable. Where something ineffable, a force of another dimension, call it God, or sorrow, or awareness, or the burden of the past, leaks through. So, the catalyzing force might be any number of registers: social, infrastructural, physical, psychological, environmental.

JF: You use location synch sound sparingly. Where you do use it, it generally feels to me like you want the film to testify to the weight of a place without standing in for the representational real. Can you speak to this formal, or epistemological (i.e., as perhaps a gesture to keep the real at arm's length?) approach?

DS: In the first scene, you hear Ravenwolf's drum and chanting in the background before he materializes as a very small figure in the distance, approaching the camera. I cut from this to a full body medium shot, where he confronts the camera, not speaking, but with his voice on the soundtrack. On some level it's about economy, in the Bressonian sense - not to use two violins when one is enough - I'm trying to get the most meaning out of the least moves. I did the audio interview with Ravenwolf *after* he'd wandered into my wide shot. I should clarify that I did not know him. He happened to walk into the frame while I was shooting Monk's Mound. That's why in the film, I chose to have him materialize into being in the distance. It's an optical dissolve. After he was close enough, and I'd stopped shooting, we got to talking and I asked to record and audio interview. Then I asked if I could film his portrait. So those two elements, excerpts from the audio interview and the portrait are what's combined in that last shot of the sequence.

I wasn't trying to keep the real at a distance. I was trying to better represent the real, which was the fact that this man had appeared, like a gift, into my shot. A man who chooses to present himself, enact himself, align himself in such a beautiful, particular way.

JF: *Parables* doesn't make any overt editorial distinctions, between a received sense of the actual vs. the mythological. Rather, the past seems here like an absence rather than a place that can be revisited and verified, creating a feeling both liberating and frustrating for those seeking some epistemological certainty. What kind of responsibility or relationship do you have to the archival materials you engage?

DS: Not only is the past not absent, but it's the shared charge of each of us to revisit it, question how events have been recorded, question why we believe in one mode of telling over another. The viewer should consider my methodologies, just as I must the archival materials I choose to quote. Never take a telling at face value. Register its cadence, its form, its predispositions, its habits. Some are repeated more than others. Some sing, others not.

JF: On the one hand, I think of *Parables* as meditating on particular scars, or violent residues, of moments long past. On the other, many of the parables engage social and historical dynamics that are still playing out in very tangible ways – relationships to nuclear weapons/technology, indigenous sovereignty, anti-black violence by the state. I'm curious about the time signature of the "parable" for you. When do you locate these parables? In the present? In the historical or mythological past?

DS: Resolutely both. They are inextricable.

JF: Do you worry about reception? I'm thinking in particular here about the Fred Hampton section, and how that addresses a very open wound.

DS: I'm always interested in reception. But I don't worry about it. I was honestly surprised how much traction the *Parables* received. I thought it would be much too slow and, well, boring to be embraced widely. The Hampton sequence should be troubling, should be raw. Many viewers don't realize what they're looking at is a re-re-enactment. They see the black and white, the way the figures are dressed, the fact that I'm combining indexical audio with a constructed image, and conclude it is 'original.' But that's the point. The material I'm mimicking is already a construct. I re-staged the footage that Illinois State's Attorney Ed Hanrahan had staged, and which he invited a news crew to shoot, on a set built in their offices, in order to present the CPD / Cointelpro version of events. I had my actors gesture in sync with the raiders accounting of events. But I include other angles, that weren't part of their version. And of course, there are the *gaps,* the time between their enactment and mine. Between the assassinations and the tellings. Between voices and bodies. The gaps are what make the material productive, problematic, unstable.

I've lived for twenty years about five blocks from the building Fred Hampton died in. It's part of my landscape. I pass it whenever I go to my post office. When I first saw the Chicago Film Group's film *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (1971), I was very moved to learn how the Panthers opened the house to the public. This was such a radical act of memorial, to allow lines of people to move through the crime site – to witness it, in person, to pilgrimage. It's the perfect rejoinder

to what the Hanrahan generated. Those two impulses are really central to the film, and central to the problem of documentary.

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JF: Whose work provided particular inspiration or guidance when you were beginning to make work yourself?

Naeem Mohaiemen (NS): Let me narrow it down for now to the archive of the 1970s insurrectionary (and often adventurist) left. In that space, Chris Marker, forever, because of how his narration always kicks against the image record. Sharon Hayes's *Symbionese Liberation Army Screeds* project (2003) and Sam Green and Bill Siegel's *Weather Underground* (2001). Eric Baudelaire – our films on the Japanese Red Army -- *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu*, *Masao Adachi*, and *27 Years without Images* (2011); *United Red Army* (2011) -- are in dialogue. Finally, a film I somewhat love to hate – Olivier Assayas's *Carlos* (2010). That film has a frenetic reconstruction of the attack on the OPEC oil meeting– a moment only hinted at in passing in my script for *Afsan's Long Day* (2014), against a grain image of Jean Paul-Sartre with an aide later implicated in that attack. Assayas had the resources to do a full-blown reconstruction, filling in all the missing scenes that are never there in newsreel at a distance. He did so with panache, and then exploded the possibility by rendering Carlos as a testosterone caricature– not so inaccurate, but also a prevailing way out from being too threatening, in so many commercial films about this moment in the 1970s.

JF: What prompted you to enroll in a PhD program in Anthropology?

NM: There were many reasons, but the simplest one is that there was always a layer of academic research within my films; but then you work to peel that away, and leave at the end a more abstract, diffuse, incomplete exploration of the same topic. And for most of the time that was enough, and the more long-form, written expression of this research seemed unnecessary. Then in 2011, an explosive history book came out, co-published by Hurst in UK and my future home Columbia University in US. In broad sweeps, the book takes apart the case for genocide during the 1971 war that split Pakistan and created Bangladesh. It basically argues that the Pakistan army were "officers and gentlemen" and no targeted killing or war rapes happened (a unique record in the history of men at war!). I spent the summer writing a long response, based on the material I had gathered in the 1990s when I was trying to make a long film about the war. It was a form of writing I had never done before, and although I can see flaws in my approach, at 10,000 words it was the longest response to her book in English. Over that fall, I saw how effectively she used her Harvard teaching fellowship to swat away my essay, not bothering to respond to the details, but just broadly dismissing me because, I think, the byline said I was a filmmaker, so how seriously did you have to take me in that domain? That was the first incentive: that if I was going to engage in these debates, I needed to get into this academic space itself. Anthropology: because all the engaged academics I work with in Bangladesh– Manosh Chowdhury, Rahnuma Ahmed, Saydia Gulrukh, Mahmudul Huq Sumon, Dina Siddiqi, Seuty Sabur, Samia Huq– are all in Anthropology. It appeared to be a discipline invested in the melding of theory with praxis, ad a healthy skepticism about its own disciplinary history, especially the complicit role with colonialism.

JF: In the *Young Man Was series.* Sections 3 and 4 of *Afsan's Long Day* (*The Young Man Was, Part 2*) (2014) jumps back and forth across several decades, linking three geographic registers -- Germany, Libya, and Bangladesh. Your strategy, as it works through the figure of historian Afsan Chowdhury, reminds me of Jorge Luis Borges' line about Kafka that "his work modifies our conception of the past, just as it will modify the future." I take Borges to mean that by constructing a genealogy of historical influence, we rewrite culture in historical form in anticipation of a predetermined outcome.

NM: The narration in *Young Man Was, Part 2* is soaked with punctuations of conjuncture, the end of one era (the high point of Libyan internationalism) the beginning of another (unified isolation by the west). The shooting of British police office Yvonne Fletcher outside the Libyan Embassy in 1984 is the actual, sharp, end of the line, but we are long gone from Tripoli at that point. So, it doesn't show up in the story, even though that death is really the beginning of the end for Gaddafi– the Britis Police lay siege to the embassy for eleven days, the UK breaks diplomatic relations with Libya, and two years later Thatcher gives the green light for Reagan's bombing of Libya in 1986.

A formal history of this period won't be able to talk it about it without touching on several sharp milestones: the quarter of forces that reached a peak in 1979. The Iranian revolution and upheaval of the Muslim world, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the beginning of the long quagmire, the landslide victory of Reagan followed by breaking the air traffic controllers strike, Thatcher roaring into power and smashing Britain's coal unions. A proper historian would write a narrative that takes in all these events. Maybe within this commingling of tectonic shifts, the Stammheim deaths are irrelevant; but I was committed to reconstructing from faded memories I actually had, and the Baader Meinhof deaths are the ones I remember reading about; the conversion of Tripoli's only English language theater to Arabic programming is what I remember. So definitely a commitment to the memories that I can recall, even in a very fragmentary way.

When I started the overall project *The Young Man Was* in 2006, I had several problems I was trying to work through. The one that dominated was what I called the "accidental Trojan horse" – an equation where an insurrectionary left political force, if it fails to seize power, ends up ushering in an even more rightist force than that which they were trying to unseat. It's not ever, I hope, a left project to provide an alibi or channel for rightist forces, and that's why it is "accidental." Misrecognition–of staging ground, historic situation, vulnerabilities, and allies– could produce an end result that was anti or misplaced solidarity, with catastrophic results. Over time, as my project kept collecting stories, failure as a result, and the memory of failure as an affective condition–with all the rivulets of melancholy, nostalgia, and regret–came out very sharply.

Consider the experience of Peter Custers, protagonist of *Last Man in Dhaka Central* (*The Young Man Was, Part 4*) (2015). Inspired by Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964), Peter dropped out of his Ph.D. program at Johns Hopkins University and moved to Asia in search of a "revolutionary proletariat." When things went badly wrong, he was arrested along with members of an underground group, tortured, and only released due to the intervention of the Dutch parliament. Does he consider the memory of his time in jail in 1975 to be failure? The

song at the beginning of that film is a famous Lucky Akhond one from my teenage years–not Peter's early 1970s, but rather my late 1980s. It's a song in the line of "you broke my heart and one day I will make you cry," a mode of vengeful and soured love. I wanted to use it to think through the modes of forgetting, betrayal, and leaving behind that is embedded in Peter's survival while his comrades died in jail. Peter and I debated my choice of this song–one of many debates we had while making this film. He wanted to hold on to the story of the 1970s as something very different from how we talk of it now. He had not surrendered his story to the audience; he had not whispered "do as you will." And in that fierce insistence that the survivor retains the right to the tone of the story is the refusal of this framing of loss or failure.

JF: Histories can tend to look accidental in your work. Ideas in *The Young Man Was* don't travel outside of the very particular forms that host, or entangle, them: material culture, people, leaders, buildings, index card systems. Is there such thing as an overarching international left narrative, or does the narrative only gain shape for you after you locate particular historical resonances in particular forms?

NM: The exhaustive record, iteratively viewed, can suddenly produce unexpected moments of insight. Certain speeches and personas are more visually provocative–what we're drawn to, but not where the actual work is happening. The real event is the backroom meeting, where there is no camera rolling. The conversations over endless coffees and cigarettes are where decisions were made. In NAM, Bandung's Afro-Asian unity proposal is no longer dominant. Those who were wary of Soviet expansionism wanted to have their own zone of influence–NAM was also a power bloc, it was never innocent of those maneuvers. Since there was still a socialist commitment, there should have been class alliances that span all member nations. But in NAM were also the OPEC bloc countries, which were not always signaling to Socialism–so they're an uneasy fit. These contradictions come spilling out in the small, off-stage visual moments of the conference.

In one newsreel, you see Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia saying on stage, "We wish our brother, Salvador Allende, to prevail," and then we learn that Allende was assassinated four days later. NAM appears to be, in that scene, opposed to military juntas. Yet, when the impassive camera pans, there are other Latin American leaders attending NAM in full military gear! So NAM fails to take up a position that only welcomes democratic countries. This is a contradiction that jumps out in the long, slow visual record of meetings. It is not so much what is on stage, but what gets picked up as the camera roves and happens on chance encounters in a cavernous meeting hall. During the extended credit sequence, if you watch closely, you start to notice who gets up from their table to greet which leader. Also, who stands up first, and who stays sitting–these are all part of the archeology, a way to map the bodily expression of hierarchy and power.

JF: Your interest in material culture, the relationship between discourse and practice, and in repositioning Bangladesh as integral to a meaningful history of the international left has a strong resonance with Susan Buck-Morss' Hegel and Haiti project (Buck-Morss 2005). Was that a reference point for you?"

NM: A key concept for Buck-Morss is the porousness of events and actors. Thus, the Haitian revolutionaries could be viewed as fully emancipated actors participating in the same universal

history narrative– the one that European thinkers had bounded off within the confines of race and nation. This moment can be linked to Paul Gilroy's idea of porous ordering boundaries in the black Atlantic (Gilroy1993). In Gilroy's case, he argues that race or nation are inadequate as a container concept for the experiences of the African diaspora. We can now invert this and say that, after Haiti, the European universal history narrative was also dislodged from a white and/or European bounding. We have in this moment the possibility of a philosophy of history that can begin to make sense of human history, radically decentered away from a Eurocentric model, although Buck-Morss' book is after much more than a simply decentering.

On the evidence of the grim last few pages of her book, we may have begun to excavate a universal history from Haiti, but that history still contains the same contradictions of barbarism that troubled Walter Benjamin about the discourse of "civilization." We still need to find a universal history that provides a way beyond the dialectic that requires both destruction, and the search for new enemies to fight as a motor for forward motion. That urge, as we have seen, results not in synthesis, but a deadly loop of master-slave battles without end– inversion of the roles, which has happened many times in human history, is not enough to lead to synthesis.

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