

# Introduction

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From *berdache* to kinship, from gift to *mana*, native and anthropological concepts travel between multiple realities, the field and the desk being only two of many possibilities. This, of course, should come as no surprise since anthropology was built on the back of indigenous concepts. Our ideas are used for different ends, just like we have been using others' ideas for decades. In short, *translations are on the move*.

Referred to as the “culture shock prevention industry” by U. Hannerz (1992), the burgeoning business of making cultural difference more consumable to immigrants and other groups that have to deal with intercultural stress is a well-known example of the diffusion of anthropological concepts. Another example of this widespread deployment is the use the “gift of life” metaphor by donor families and recipients of transplanted organs (Yamazaki 2011). This inflation of anthropological knowledge has met with considerable disappointment and critique from those who pride themselves of being *the* experts in cultural matters.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The public debate around the anthropological involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is a recent and well-known example. For an overview of the controversy, see Forte (2011)

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For a long time, on various levels, translation has been a pivotal issue in ethnography. To begin with, most anthropologists are well aware of the difficulties of working with interpreters in the field and of trying to find the least harmful way of putting a foreign concept into one's own language, back home, at the desk.<sup>2</sup> Such a notion of translation is intimately entangled with the ultimate goal of anthropology to make distant ways of life comparable and comprehensible. No less importantly, to mention only two of the more obvious examples (Fortun 2001; Fischer 2012), translation is an ideal widely shared by many contemporary institutions, ranging from international development agencies and advocacy groups, to those involved in bringing the products of the laboratory into the clinic in biomedicine.

In academic writing, however, this notion of translation has been thoroughly dissected by critics from the 1980s. For instance, T. Asad suggested that for British social anthropology the metaphor of cultural analysis as translation is partly rooted in psychoanalysis and is deeply entangled with the postcolonial condition (Asad 1986: 251).<sup>3</sup> Cultural translation, as those in the humanities and social sciences have been forced to acknowledge over and over again, is inevitably political and institutional; consequently, it should be avoided or, at least, handled with much reflexive care (Keesing 1985; Pálsson 1993).<sup>4</sup> And so it was. So much so that today many anthropologists are more comfortable with the idea of cultural incommensurability and are disinclined to do comparison or translation.

Here, however, there is an interesting, and often overlooked paradox: while the anthropological practice of translating between symbolic systems has been reinvented as an important means of facilitating multiculturalism and public understanding, it has also inspired many anthropologists to more critically think about what they are actually doing. While giving due attention to criticism both inside and outside of the discipline, we need to go beyond navel gazing and actively seek innovative translation. What some regard as a thinning of anthropology is seen by others as more of an opportunity than a nuisance. At this juncture, the authors of this volume explore avenues in the ongoing dialogue between anthropology and the rest of the world.

Far from intending to impose order in this confusion or trying to overcome the complexities involved in translating differences, the authors regard being lost

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<sup>2</sup> And it is an even more challenging task for those of us who have to do it in English rather than our own mother tongue.

<sup>3</sup> The legitimating role that such a textual understanding of culture played in the capitalist transformation of Eastern and Central Europe is perhaps less widely known, but no less persistent.

<sup>4</sup> For a formal logical account on the indeterminacy of translation, see (Quine 1969).

in translation as the most instinctive and fruitful way of doing anthropology. Following E. Viveiros de Castro's lead in thinking *through* ethnography, we will suggest that it is precisely from the "felicitous equivocations" involved in translating between incommensurable scales that anthropology derives much of its theoretical inspiration (Da Col & Graeber 2011: vii).

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We are on familiar ground when we consider translation as a linguistic device that facilitates description and domination. The privileging of *text* as the irreducible ground for the mediation of experience and knowledge has been central both to the anthropological pursuit of cultural difference on the one hand, and social constructionist critiques on the other. We soon lose our sense of direction, however, when we try to give an account of practical links between different *artifacts* of interpretation. It is quite surprising, given the rich tradition of this discipline to situate cultural difference along the traveling of objects from *kula* armbands and necklaces to donated kidneys. The title of this issue is meant to underscore that this *artificial mobility* is embedded in the etymology of the word "translation," which in mediaeval Latin referred to the relocation of a saint's body from one site to another. Importantly, attending to such artificiality—or thingness—forces us to reflect on the irreducible relations between ethnography and its objects. Numerous examples spring to mind: all the weapons, figurines, and other artifacts collected by Captain Cook on his Pacific voyages (Thomas 1991); or even the Rosetta stone, an icon of modern translation ever since it was transported from Egypt to the British Library in 1802. As these examples illustrate, artifacts do not simply convey (cultural) meanings—they move and are moved by them. Given our concerns with movement and motion here, we must indeed consider how a more dynamic notion of translation can contribute to anthropological understanding. Or, in a recursive twist, we could also wonder how translational shifting affects the complex realities under study.

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This volume collects four papers addressing these questions from ethnographic as well as conceptual viewpoints. Morita and Mohácsi review the continuing effort in anthropology to reconfigure the relationship between indigenous and analytical concepts. They discuss how researchers from a variety of different backgrounds—from M. Strathern to Viveiros de Castro to B. Maurer—have proposed novel ways to locate anthropological questions ethnographically at the complex intersection

of divergent knowledge practices. Such relocation of basic research problems must involve a questioning of place, which is exemplified by three case studies from recent works.

Following this overview, H. Verran explores one of the most mundane and under-investigated ethnographic objects, numbers, and the challenges of translation they pose to the anthropologist. Starting from a discussion of quantitative data that appeared on a poster advertising a proposal for new fisheries policy for Australia, she calls attention to some crucial differences in the ways these seemingly uniform digits are composed, transformed, and transported. Through careful analysis of such numerical differences of kind and by drawing on traditional semiotic notions of icon and index, Verran demonstrates that numbers and generalization are rich and challenging ethnographic objects.

Hirokazu Miyazaki follows the individual paths of Japanese financial traders over the so-called “lost twenty years.” He shows how the notion of “arbitrage”, originally a financial technique that aroused enthusiasm among traders during the boom period, has continuously expanded its meaning to a generalized strategy to seize career and business opportunities created by the differences and gaps between Japanese and Euro-American markets, and organizations and societies at large. A longstanding communion with traders has gradually led Miyazaki to view arbitrage as his own ethnographic strategy. This paper, as well as his recently published book (Miyazaki 2013), shows how the conceptual traffic between the ethnographer and his informants produce new kinds of questions and insights for anthropological research.

In the closing paper, C. Gad discusses the methodological premise on which the previous three papers draw. The focus of his paper is *postpluralism*, a notion proposed by Strathern, whose work has inspired many of current attempts to reconsider ethnographic translation, including the contributions to this volume. Gad explores the complex relationship between postpluralism and pluralism, and argues that postplural experiments in contemporary anthropology and science studies are the direct outcomes of modern epistemologies and knowledge practices, which are based on and dependent on a pluralist framework of translation and movement.

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How does the constant shifting of contexts locate ethnographic theories in differently unfolding relations? And in reverse, how are contexts shifted and re-articulated by the effects of translational movements? In what ways are these two questions related? And what do this relationship reveal about the world we share? These problems are the analytical target of this special issue. They are treated here

not as compartmentalized problems, rather they are relations that the authors will attend to in their own specific ways.

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