Chapter 13

Always Already Theorizing … in the Field, Elsewhere, All at Once

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1. Backstory

For the past twenty years, I have been doing fieldwork in south India. When I began my graduate studies in 1997, however, and started to imagine my life as an academic, I did not expect that ethnography would be part of the design. I had mostly philological plans. I thought I would spend time reading texts composed in classical languages, initially texts from pre-Islamic Iran and later (and still today) texts from premodern South Asia. In both the Iranian and Indian contexts, early on I took an interest in literature that presents problems and treatments for the body, matters that we might classify broadly as "medical" and "therapeutic." In 2000, when I had to choose between India and Iran as the focus of my doctoral research, I chose India. Soon after my project clearly centered on medicine, my advisor, a remarkable Sanskritist with only minimal knowledge of medicine in premodern South Asia, encouraged me to study the work of a scholar who worked at the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine in London. That scholar, she said, "knew everything there is to know about Sanskrit medical texts." That scholar was Dominik Wujastyk.

I had already known several of Dominik's publications, which were (and still are) sine qua non for anyone working on Sanskrit medical literature and premodern Indian medical history. But I had never met him. So, in early September 2001 while I happened to be in London, and the 9/11 bombings in New York City delayed my return to the US, I tried to arrange a meeting with Dominik at the Wellcome Center. The meeting never came to pass, despite my best efforts, and we corresponded on email for a while. A year later, at my advisor's urging, I invited Dominik to join my dissertation committee. He accepted! From that time on, he had a profound impact not only on my dissertation, but on the future trajectory of my research and thinking about medicine in general and especially in South Asia, translation, and a host of other aspects of the scholarly life.

In 2003, I had an opportunity to go to India for a short pre-dissertation research visit. When I shared my somewhat unstructured plan with Dominik, asking him for advice about what to do and where to go, he suggested I go to Tamil Nadu to meet a well-known scholar of Ayurveda, whom I'll call "Dr. Mishra." Dr. Mishra was an ayurvedic physician, a former ayurvedic college professor, and an expert on the medical literature's "big trio" (*bṛhattrayī*) of

Sanskrit texts. Dominik said that if I wanted to visit him, he would ask Dr. Mishra to read selections of the *Carakasaṃhitā* with me. He also recommended that I consider learning Malayalam, since there was ample literature in the language that could be useful to the research I wanted to do. An ambitious and eager grad student, I weighed both of Dominik's suggestions seriously. Since Malayalam wasn't offered at my university at the time, I purchased a grammar and began learning what I could on my own. My Malayalam learning didn't start in earnest, with a proper teacher at Kerala University, until a year later. But I set off for Tamil Nadu that fall, with no credentials to speak of apart from Dominik's backing, to read the *Carakasaṃhitā* with Dr. Mishra. That stint of intensive learning in 2003 made a lasting impact on my understanding of Indian medical literature, history, and practice. When our studies ended, Dr. Mishra introduced me to some people who brought me to the neighboring state of Kerala, which has been at the heart of my research ever since (which Dominik effectively portended by urging me to learn Malayalam).

In Kerala, I formed several personal and professional connections, and I have written about many of them in detail over the past decade, most recently in a monograph called *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India*.[1] In the book's introduction, I explain how alongside the philological work of my dissertation, inspired by Dominik's advice to go to south India, a parallel ethnographic project developed. The two projects initially existed side-by-side without much crossover. But over time they became entangled, and they remain that way today. I have Dominik to thank for this "imbroglio."

The fieldwork I did between 2003 and 2017 in central Kerala among physicians (*vaidya*s) who teach and use the *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya* deeply influenced my present understanding of Ayurveda and its history. It also shaped my conception of philology in the south Indian medical context. I observed physician-teachers there cultivating a disciplinary tradition of reading and interpreting texts they culled from the *Carakasaṃhitā* that's as complex and developed as philology is understood and practiced in Europe and North America. Yet it's also different, with an independent history. It is a starting point for a study of philology in its many forms, a comparand in its own right, against which I was able to make sense of forms of philology I learned in North America and those from Europe I have studied since, types of reading, interpretation, and historical linguistics inspired by Jacob Grimm and Friedrich Nietzsche, advanced by Ferdinand de Saussure, J. R. R. Tolkien, and W. B. Lockwood, and theorized in recent times by scholars like Roman Jakobson, Sheldon Pollock, James Turner, Whitney Cox, and others. In the south Indian medical context, I came to see philology as a discipline of reading and interpreting healing knowledge derived from classical texts with the practical aim of somatic understanding and transformation. Years of observing how and learning why south Indian *vaidya*s "practice texts" has occupied my scholarship for a long time, and I am grateful to Dominik for his gentle orchestration of my research – even though, I realize,

1 Cerulli 2022a. See also Cerulli 2020: 455–457.

he surely had no such plans for, and couldn't have anticipated, what my views on Ayurveda, philology, and textual studies would end up looking like today.

As a teacher, I have also combined my philological and ethnographic interests in the classroom, and indeed the reflections in this chapter were prompted by interactions with students in a seminar I have taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison the past seven years called, "Ethnography in Asia." Discussions in this course have helped me make sense of my own fieldwork experiences *in* and preparations *before* going into the field. Since I originally arrived in the field unaware I was about to commence a sustained program of ethnographic research, I was improvising from the very start. Years later, as a professor, my students and I routinely explore improvisation as a cornerstone of participant-observation, something even the most seasoned ethnographers do in the field all the time. In 2003 and for many years later, I labored to imagine a workplan that would allow my philological program to speak to the social, educational, and political matters in the lives of the south Indians who used and taught the texts that drew me to South Asian history, medicine, and culture in the first place. Since Dominik's direction of my philological research early on set up my work as an ethnographer and teacher of ethnography, I am pleased to offer the following reflections on fieldwork and theory as thanks to Dominik and as illustration of the scope of his influence.

2. Questions about theory

In her how-to book on ethnographic writing, *From Notes to Narrative: Writing Ethnographies That Everyone Can Read*, Kristen Ghodsee offers the following admonition: "Our fieldwork and our specific case studies render our work original, but this work fails to be scholarly if it lacks dialogue with larger theoretical concerns."[2] I agree with Ghodsee's assertion, and overall I find her book very useful. Especially pertinent here is the chapter concerning the relationship of theory and fieldwork, chapter 5, "Integrate Your Theory," where she addresses *how* ethnographers blend field data and larger theoretical concerns. Many ethnographic manuals do not do this in direct ways, alas, for I have come to learn that many students are keen for precisely this kind of practical knowledge and experiential reflection from ethnographers.[3]

As I worked on my own ethnographic projects, the scholarly process of imbricating theory within stories from the field happened all the time as I wrote day-to-day, largely by trying one technique or another until something worked. In the classroom, however, many of my grad students – especially those anticipating sustained and perhaps first ever periods of fieldwork, the results of which will account for substantial portions of data in their dissertations – routinely ask for details and insights about this process. In ethnographies that manage to blend

2 Ghodsee 2016: 51.

3 Ghodsee's *From Notes to Narrative* is a clear outlier. Kirin Narayan also offers useful guidance on this matter, though less exhaustively and not as pointedly as Ghodsee does, in the first chapter of *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* (2012).

fieldwork and contributions to larger theoretical concerns into "ethnographies that everyone can read," as Ghodsee put it, how did the authors weave theory into their narratives from the field and how obvious is this process? Where does theory begin and where does it end (if it ever ends)? Details about ethnographic field-data are detected easily enough: ethnographers often explicitly tell their readers they spent X-amount of time observing and participating in such-and-such a community and location. The stories and anecdotes recounted from participant-observation reveal the extent to which authors have understood and integrated into the communities and locations they worked in and, for readers, an author's aptitude for creative storytelling usually becomes apparent fairly quickly. Fieldwork, as Ghodsee notes, enables ethnographers to make novel contributions to their fields. But how do ethnographers engage in the so-called scholarly task of telling readers (or viewers or listeners, depending on the media) about their theoretical commitments and aspirations, about the theories they espouse and defend and the larger theoretical concerns to which their work is supposed to contribute? Like many things, it depends.

At the risk of stating the obvious, we might begin to make sense of "the puzzle of theory" by posing an earnest yet seldomly asked question: Aren't we always already theorizing? I'd say, yes, we are. Whenever we are engaged in formal or informal observation (academic or otherwise) of a community of people, flora, ecologies, or urban-suburban-rural settings, don't we see things, sense and cognize them, applying our instincts, worldviews, inclinations, and opinions to everything we take in? I think we do. We always already theorize … to make sense of the worlds we inhabit and to learn new things. We theorize, full stop, without ever having to invoke Bhabha, Gadamer, Spivak, or the ideas of other scholars in the process. That said, within most academic spaces, such as classrooms and scholarly publications, conventions abound that demand more than unvarnished expressions of one's thoughts. There are disciplinary, administrative, and often self-imposed expectations in these spaces that require overt deliberation on how our thinking (and writing) about our observations fits within, contributes to, builds upon, and maybe extends the frames of thinking assembled before (and sometimes alongside) us by the Bhabha-s, Gadamer-s, Spivak-s, and other trailblazing "theorists" who help us critically assess how we perceive the worlds we inhabit and create. We give credit to those people who shaped our thinking, and in the process we establish ourselves within disciplines, schools of thought, and perhaps institutions.

Practical matters in the production of our knowledge through writing, such as the length of a study, restrict the extent to which we can elaborate a backstory and the theoretical building blocks that informed our thinking about fieldwork, the data we collect, and how we choose to recount it. A preface or introduction to an ethnographic monograph is a normal place for this type of information, for example, since it provides ample space to show an historical trajectory of our thinking and its intended future projection, whereas articles and chapters have less space for this kind of reflection. For consumers of ethnography, this kind of information might or might not be important. For me, it is helpful. I appreciate knowing the extent

to which the authors I read have deliberately chosen to engage certain problems and questions (Ghodsee's "larger theoretical concerns"), and why, as part of the presentation of their data.

Scholarship in the human sciences is not short on "how to" publications, where experts expound ways to do any number of things: write successful grants, devise research topics, revise dissertations into books, and so on. If we take Bronislaw Malinowski's opening chapter in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) as a kind of initial pronouncement on what ethnographic research entails, for at least a century there have been books, parts of books, and articles pontificating on the so-called craft of ethnography, predominantly by anthropologists and sociologists. Although I cannot claim to be close to 100% *au fait* with all the best of these manuals in recent decades, many of them (save the asterisked books in the following list – also see note 3 above) – such as, Laplante, Gandsman & Scobie (2020), Boeri & Shukla (2019), Ghodsee *(2016), Narayan *(2012), Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor (2012), Borneman & Hammoudi (2009), Goodall (2000), van Maanen (1988), Clifford & Marcus (1986), and Mauss (1967) – do not offer hands-on pointers for ethnographers to substantively lever, rely on, and create theory in view of their field-data in the production of an ethnography.

This becomes increasingly clear to me nearly every time I teach "Ethnography in Asia." Although my students are very skilled at identifying theoretical insights and contributions to scholarship in the texts we read, many, especially those on the cusp of entering the field and amid dissertating, crave concrete descriptions about the craft of writing about one's fieldwork, about the ways authors integrate theory and field data in their books, chapters, and articles. They want to know if theory predetermines the shape of the final products they are reading. They want to know if ethnographers set out to answer a specific question (or set of questions), and then decided on field sites and exercises to address that question (or set of questions). They want to know if theory organically emerges in the field, in the process of participant-observation, as a result of "being there" (à la Borneman & Hammoudi 2009) in a certain location, among a specific community, or while tracking the interactions and activities of flora and fauna lifeworlds. They want to know if theory organically develops when ethnographers piece together fieldnotes back home and write vignettes of the characters, places, and events they observed.

Perhaps, even likely, it's a mixture of all these possibilities. Every ethnographer surely has a unique approach to these questions, or multiple approaches, and I want to explore some of the ones I have encountered on my own and with my students. At the end of this chapter, I broach the question of integrating theory and fieldwork about healing practices in India, exploring distinctive cross-cultural elements in the production of ethnography.

3. The relationship of theory and ethnographic writing

For some ethnographers, theory inexorably informs the questions they bring to the field. That's the case for John Borneman. But for him, theory should not "infiltrate his fieldnotes"

because, he fears, "theoretical argumentation [can] stifle the potential insights made possible by sustained observation."[4] He describes his approach like this:

> Theory always determines what I might write down [and] therefore preselects the data. But the theory of ethnography I hold to admonishes me to be open to encounters with the unexpected and, to experience as much as possible, to allow myself to be subject to other people's desires and wishes as much as possible. *But I go to the field with questions of larger social significance*. What is the sacred? What is the political? What does it mean to be such and such a person at this time in such and such a place?[5]

Like Borneman, Julie Hemment recognizes the power of avoiding heavy theories upfront so that ethnographic data can direct the course of her ethnography. Nevertheless, she adds that at the end of the day it is the theory that has shaped the collection of her data.[6]

Envisioning a dialectic relationship between theory and data, Amy Borovoy says that in her work "[theory and data] shape each other in a fluid way. One starts with theoretical ideas or questions that come from theoretical readings, historical data, or other ethnographies. Then one's ethnographic findings shape those questions."[7] Addressing the practical side of ethnographic writing that contributes to "larger theoretical concerns," Kristen Ghodsee acknowledges that her approach has shifted over time: from, early on, a fiery attempt to foreground theoretical interventions in her writing to, in recent projects, interweaving theory and field data so that the theory is not ham-fistedly imposed on readers. For her, when theory is entwined in good stories, the final product is "readable ethnography." The challenge is to slip "the history and theory in amongst the thick description," rather than section off portions of writing devoted exclusively to theoretical discussions that might be popular at a given time or merely to illustrate the pedigree of one's thinking.[8]

These are just a few approaches ethnographers claim to use to integrate theory and data. Many of us learn tactics and methods from our teachers, by reading the work of others and, most importantly, through our own trials and errors. I was not formally trained as an anthropologist or sociologist, two fieldwork-heavy disciplines. I was trained as an historian and a philologist – who also happens to do fieldwork. When I began doing fieldwork in 2003, I learned about the ethnographic process by doing it, by observing and interviewing traditional physician-teachers of Ayurveda at a Kerala family compound called "Mookkamangalam."[9] My first decade in the field, 2003–2013, occurred alongside the completion of my dissertation and,

4 Ghodsee 2016: 57.
5 Ghodsee 2016: 52, emphasis mine.
6 Ghodsee 2016: 53.
7 Ghodsee 2016: 52.
8 Ghodsee 2016: 54.
9 This is a pseudonym. See Cerulli 2022a, 2022b, and 2018.

later, the revision of my dissertation into a book. During that time and up to 2020, I continued to observe, interview, film, and photograph the same core group of people at Mookkamangalam and other places in Kerala. Around this core, at each visit I met ever-changing cohorts of people on the scene: mostly students and patients. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted my ability to do fieldwork in Kerala, and I was only able to return after a three-year hiatus in January 2023. I continue to keep in contact with some of the students who came for Sanskrit training and apprenticeship as they move into careers within and outside the business of "traditional Ayurveda," a phrase at Mookkamangalam that usually means *āyurveda* ("knowledge for long life") as it appears in the "big trio." During my first decade of fieldwork, I did not publish much about what I observed and learned in the field.

Publications based on my fieldwork in south India started to appear in 2015, in rather small installments.[10] The full presentation of my research in Kerala and other locations in south India appeared in a book I published in 2022, *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India*. That book is about the people I met and places I went in south India, especially in Kerala and at Mookkamangalam. Admittedly, I integrated theory and data in a somewhat spasmodic manner while writing *The Practice of Texts*. On one hand, a couple chapters were steered by theoretical interventions I wanted to make: stories from the field both revalidate and challenge well-known theories about gift-giving and definitions of ritual. On the other hand, at least two chapters emerged during extensive and sustained periods of time observing educational and clinical activities at Mookkamangalam. In the process of piecing together my notes, translating conversations, and describing the various places and people I encountered, the stories I told in the book also inspired several critical considerations of larger theoretical questions in multiple fields, including medical anthropology, religious studies, medical humanities, and more (recalling Ghodsee's remark about the scholarly utility of ethnography). Daily visits by patients and lengthy training sessions of students, for example, evoke questions about doctor-patient etiquette, pedagogical techniques, and disciplines of reading. They also offer insights into forms of political resistance and acquiescence in the history of medical (ayurvedic) education during the Raj and for at least a quarter century post-Independence. Instead of foregrounding a specific theoretical query that shapes how fieldnotes appear, I discovered that relating stories first – re-reading interviews and conversations, re-visiting observations, and re-viewing photographs – in some ways echoes historical work in archives and the philological work involved in making sense of texts. Put another way, reading the field-as-text, today I have come to understand my experience in the field as an always already hermeneutic enterprise where theory informs and is formed at the same time.

In their highly original book, *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*, Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki describe ethnography as a combination of interpretive and improvisatory work, and both aspects relate to the ways ethnographers incorporate theory into their final products. They describe ethnography as a hermeneutic approach that

10 The first was Cerulli 2015.

asks researchers to read "social practices through theoretical concepts."[11] And since theory is not a thing that can be applied here and there with a one-size-fits-all approach to interpretive work, they encourage us to see it as a process that emerges and develops over time, in the field and later, when organizing and reprinting notes and transcribing and translating interviews and conversations. Practices observed *in situ* as well as the ethnographer's positionality when reading notes after the fact (sometimes years later) require a careful and flexible hermeneutic engagement. Flexibility and openness to the unexpected – rather than dogged adherence to preset theoretical ideas – makes the ability and willingness to improvise essential both to the process and production of ethnography.

Cerwonka and Malkki's view of ethnography as "improvising theory" intimates that field researchers must cultivate something like an *ethnographic sensibility*: that is, in treating theory as a field-based process critical to the production of ethnography, these scholars propose a methodology that hangs on sensitive awareness and ready responsivity that comes from experience and very little from books and lectures about techniques and strategies. An aptitude for spur-of-the-moment invention in the often irregular, always dynamic, and frequently unpredictable field of research is essential. A regular and sustained openness and adaptability to this uncertain methodological space, Cerwonka and Malkki suggest, fosters an indispensable sensibility in ethnographers that allows for improvisation in the field.

4. Improvisation and an ethnographic sensibility

It takes time to cultivate an ethnographic sensibility. Sustained experiences in the field, revisiting places and people, enduring trials, errors, and successes reveal the multi-sensorial and collective nature of an ethnographer's participant-observation. Ongoing scrutiny of one's "accomplishments" in the field divulges the impacts we have on the spaces we occupy when we observe others and events and how, at the Merleau-Pontian "preobjective" level, we affect and are affected by the people, places, and things we study simply by being present.[12] Our pre-cognitive, bodily, multi-sensory engagements with the world form what Merleau-Ponty called the "thickness of the preobjective present" (l'épaisseur du present préobjective), predating by almost three decades the idea of ethnographic writing as "thick description" that Clifford Geertz made famous (borrowing Gilbert Ryle's phrase).[13] The thickness of an ethnographic description for Geertz conveys more than just a series of events observed in the field. It delivers context-dependent meaning capable of delivering the history and symbolic meaning

11 Cerwonka & Malkki 2007: 16.

12 Merleau-Ponty 1945. Merleau-Ponty referred to a person's "preobjective" experience of the world in several ways, especially in his magnum opus, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), including un étalon preobjectif ("a preobjective standard"), ce domaine préobjectif ("this preobjective domain"), de le vue préobjective ("preobjective view"), la localité préobjective du sujet ("the preobjective locality of the subject"), etc. (see, e.g., p. 19, 94–95, 279, 309, 494).

13 Merleau-Ponty 1945: 495; Geertz 1973.

that underlines and motivates people's actions, language, and social constructions. The thickness of lived experience for Merleau-Ponty is different, but nevertheless germane to Geertz's influential postulation and any reflection on fieldwork. It underscores the mutual sensorial, pre-cognitive, and ongoing engagement of the perceived object (l'objet perçu) and the perceiving subject (le sujet percevant). Movement through the world and perception of all that is in it transpire via lived or experienced bodies in tandem with each other. By dint of one's physical presence, Merleau-Ponty suggested, even if we are conditioned by and operating alongside the mental exercises of labeling and analyzing our experiences, we take part in ongoing "vital communication with the world that makes it present to us" and simultaneously us present to it.[14]

This is an indispensable realization for the fieldworker. Just as the pre-cognitive experiences that are always already occurring inform an ethnographer's sensibility and the people, places, and things being studied, the hermeneutic side of fieldwork accentuates the need for fieldworkers not only to be open but also responsive to their sensorial entanglements, possess a keen attentiveness to them, and be willing to be affected (emotionally, intellectually, physically) by the people, places, and things they study. This back-and-forth is what John Borneman was acknowledging when, in the quote cited earlier, he said he tries to "allow [him]self to be subject to people's desires and wishes as much as possible" in the field. The next step, then, is to reflect and present those mutually formed experiences in written, filmic, photographic, artistic, audio, etc. formats.

To illustrate these two important features of what I am calling an ethnographic sensibility – mindfulness of one's presence in the field and the interpretation and incorporation of the impact of one's field-based presence in the production of ethnography – I sometimes share with my students an anecdote from my fieldwork at Mookkamangalam. Recounting this episode in the classroom can be helpful to show how a decade of visiting and re-visiting the same people and location helped me develop "rapport" and "exposure" with a specific community. The import and particular nature of the story illustrate how the interpersonal bonds I had cultivated over ten years laid bare the co-determinacy and fluidity in the relationship of perceived object (objet perçu) and perceiving subject (sujet percevant). It speaks to the need to improvise when conducting fieldwork and, crucially for my students, it also suggests that ethnographers are always already theorizing before, in, and after occupying space in the field.

I mentioned this experience in a long endnote in *The Practice of Texts*. Otherwise, I have not written about it. In brief, a planned stretch of fieldwork at Mookkamangalam in 2013 to document a cohort of students studying the *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya* was cut short by the unexpected death of the father of the teacher and my main interlocutor, Biju. A colleague and friend, Unnikrishnan, informed me that Biju's dad had suddenly passed away shortly after I left Mookkamangalam earlier that evening. When I arrived at Biju's house early the next morning,

14 "Le sentir est cette communication vitale avec le monde qui nous le rend present" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 64f.).

only about seven or eight hours after I received the news, the funeral pyre for Biju's father, not more than twenty yards from the house, was still smoldering. I suspected I would not stick around for the entire day. But Biju wanted to talk. So, we sat for a while in the room he usually teaches in, talking about his dad and how he and his mother were feeling, and what the next several days would entail for him and his family. I stayed at their house to offer my condolences and help them however I could. But ultimately my presence seemed more distracting than helpful, as the number of visitors increased throughout the day and the family's obligations grew more time-consuming.[15] I offered a short commentary on the experience in the following endnote:

> This moment was unusual for me. On the whole, I did not experience many interruptions in the field between 2003–2017 that cut short my plans. I had setbacks, of course, like not getting access to archives, being stood up for interviews or work meetings, and missing trains, as many people do. But after spending time with the same family and community during many intense periods of research, the line separating my identity as a researcher and/or friend to Biju and his family (and a few of his students) became a little blurred by 2013. It was perhaps becoming more of a hyphenated relationship, and I sometimes felt like a researcher-friend to them at the same time. The death of Biju's father was sudden and unexpected. While it naturally affected my plans for that trip to Kerala, the interruption was unimportant; there were other places I could work, and that's not what made the moment atypical and challenging. While I didn't know Biju's father exceedingly well – as you've seen, apart from this vignette, he does not appear in the book – I knew the man well enough. We saw each other age over ten years, and we both knew about personal things that transpired in each other's families. I knew Biju much better, and his mother [Priyankara] quite well, by then. Their profoundly felt loss of a father and a husband struck me emotionally in ways I hadn't experienced in the field before, and I wasn't entirely prepared for it. Unnikrishnan and I talked a lot about what this death meant for Biju and his family, for him (as a student of both Biju and Priyankara), and for me.[16]

In less than twenty-four hours, I found myself assessing what "the field" was (becoming) for me. I had been visiting Mookkamangalam across a decade at that point. I felt I knew the people there fairly well, and they knew me and aspects of my life in the U.S. But the sad passing of Biju's father, someone who had basically nothing to do with my fieldwork, occasioned me to see ethnography in a more expansive way than I had before. I suddenly had an acute awareness of the thickness of the present that existed between Biju, his family, and

15 Cerulli 2022: 167.

16 Cerulli 2022: 199–200, n. 12.

me and of the inevitable investment of my whole self in the field. Participant-observation was clearly far more than an academic exercise. I was thinking with Biju about his father. I was seeing with Biju the neighbors and family members as they arrived at the house to pay their respects. I was experiencing his grief as the embers of his father's funeral pyre slowly lost their glower. I had to improvise, yes. That's one way to put it. This unique moment in my fieldwork also underscores three aspects of the sensibility that ethnographers refine in the course of doing research.

First, *ethnography is a critical theoretical process*. Ethnographers theorize. This is true even when we begin with intent to theorize, focusing on a question that we feel lends something of significance to larger theoretical concerns. It is likewise true that we bring theory with us to the field, consciously or not, which we revise later as surprises arise from our data.

Second, *ethnography is a personal process*. Fieldwork is an intensely human negotiation occurring between personalities. Our fieldwork thus must be handled situation-by-situation, person-by-person, and moment-by-moment. When we write ethnographically, crafting thick descriptions perhaps, we wrestle less with grand agendas, and instead face "the challenge of working with care and fidelity, of writing through intercessors and other worlds, of wrestling with excess and the otherwise," as Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean wrote.[17]

Many temporalities come together in this process. There is the field and written work, of course. But the work is also part of an ethnographer's life. She typically has obligations apart from those to a community under study. "Life happens in the course of the work, as it should," Malkki wrote to Cerwonka (then Malkki's grad student), who was struggling to manage all the responsibilities that were arising in the field.[18] What's more, as I recounted in my experience at Mookkamangalam in 2013, lives of an ethnographer's interlocutors are there, too, which add further relationships and entanglements. Cerwonka and Malkki summed up the complexity of the everyday in the ethnographic process nicely:

> Ethnography as a process demands a critical awareness of the invisible social fact that multiple, different temporalities might be at play simultaneously. The process is inextricably embedded in relationally structured social lives, quotidian routines, events that become Events, the panic of deadlines, the elongated time of boredom, the cyclical time of the return of the expected, the spiral of time of returns to the recognizable or the remembered, and so on.[19]

This is all to say that fieldwork is neither straightforward nor predictable research. It's a matter of living and being in the world that is thick, sensorially rich, and oftentimes emotional.

Third, *ethnography is an improvisational practice that takes time, and it is full of trials and errors*. Despite all the how-to manuals out there, ethnography does not have a correct format

17 Pandian & McLean 2017: 6.
18 Cerwonka & Malkki 2007: 186.
19 Cerwonka & Malkki 2007: 177.

or a fixed series of steps to follow. Ethnographers are, at the end of the day, mostly self-taught. They learn principally by doing and reflecting on their experiences.[20] Ethnographic knowledge is sometimes spontaneous, acquired in specific contexts, forcing ethnographers to adjust their tacking back and forth between part and whole, between data and theory, accordingly. In this way, participant-observation resembles improvisation in jazz, as Malkki alluringly suggested (a comparison that, incidentally, I hope resonates with Dominik, who is an accomplished bass player).[21] If you are playing in a live band and responding to your bandmates in real-time (or observing, listening to, and interviewing people in the field), what do you do if you make a mistake, encounter an obstacle, or forget an important reference? Can you stop and go back for a re-do? Check a manual and then recalibrate? No. You make do and press on.

5. Conclusion: Medical anthropology, healing ethnographies, and India

As a formal institutional unit of higher education in the United States, medical anthropology emerged in the context of the Cold War during the 1950s–70s. Before that, various kinds of anthropological research contributed to what we today call medical anthropology. The nineteenth century saw anthropological writing promoting colonial knowledge systems that presented racialized anatomical and behavioral catalogues of colonized subjects: this was an embryonic form of medical anthropology that often legitimated an invasive colonial gaze via routinized surveillance. In the early-twentieth century, anthropology under the direction of Franz Boas (1858–1942) and his protégés, especially Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Zora Neale Hurston, promoted a new idea about culture that sharply diverged from anthropology's medical interventions in the previous century. As Lawrence Cohen put it, the Boasian school

> was organized around an *anti-medicine*: not a catalogue or atlas of native perversions, revealed under the medical gaze, but an incorporation of the full variety of native temperament within the ever-expanding temperamental capacity of the American.[22]

The fieldwork journeys of the anthropologist were no longer designed to impose "'medical' license to engage that which [was] hidden"; rather they became theoretical explorations "in which culture (there) offered a powerful critique of science (here)" and social norms at home.[23]

Medical anthropology went through further changes post-World War II. A shift occurred from cultural norms and temperaments to structure (and structural violence), in which the

20 Cerwonka & Malkki call ethnography an autodidactic process (2007: 182).
21 Cerwonka & Malkki 2007: 185.
22 Cohen 2012: 73.
23 Cohen 2012: 73–74.

anthropologist-cum-physician eschewed a Margaret Mead-style view of the culturalistic arbitrariness of norms and adopted a view that culture itself influences discernible psychopathologies. Notably, area studies developed alongside medical anthropology in this phase as a field for delivering civilizational explanations when cultures themselves were seen as pathological.[24] Cultures were routinely understood through a Janus-faced lens: they were potential assets to modernization when they were perceived as rationalized locations of great traditions or potential barriers to modernization when they were viewed as the pathogenic (or irrational) environments of little traditions (in the Indian context, think of the now classic categories of so-called Sanskritic vis-à-vis regional or vernacular traditions).

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, a second generation of medical anthropologists challenged the earlier focus on modernization and, apropos the study of healing in South Asia, scholars like Joseph Alter, Lawrence Cohen, Jean Langford, Mark Nichter, Gananath Obeyesekere, Margaret Trawick, and others problematized the subdiscipline's failure to investigate "traditional" medicines as fully modern. They ushered in a focus on localized medical and healing knowledge as a challenge to clinical universals (à la Mead & Co.) and the domination of professional medicine. They also emphasized historicism and the need to study the body and illness as contingent on areas of study previously not part of medical anthropological analysis, including science and technology studies, gender studies, and postcolonial critique.

Influenced as I am by recent developments in medical anthropology at the end of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first, due to my interests and training my work looks quite hybrid, mixing fieldwork, photo-ethnography, history, and critical textual studies. At the same time, the "literary anthropology" movement in North America in the twenty-first century has opened up creative vistas in ethnography that I have begun to explore in art projects, which also include creative and critical writing.[25] For me, the idea is to blur the classically imagined boundaries separating the knower and the known, to wade attentively in Merleau-Ponty's thickness of the preobjective present, and to complicate the idea that ethnographic output at once represents yet somehow also stands apart from what it represents. The goal for me aligns with Pandian and Stuart's assertion that "what is conveyed [in ethnography] is the chance for something more profound and unsettling to happen through the play of image, voice, character, and scene, a transgression of the limits of individual identity and the fixity of the reality at hand."[26] This requires a deferral of the ethnographer's all-too precious

24 Cohen 2012: 75.

25 The "Manuscriptistan Project" is a good example of the photo-ethnographic artwork I have been doing since 2015 (though it unofficially started about a decade earlier), publishing my photographs in art magazines, exhibiting the work in galleries, and writing in academic journals about the project's attempt to bring aesthetic awareness to scholarly methods and productions (e.g., Cerulli 2020).

26 Pandian & Stuart 2017: 3–4.

(and invariably specious) critical distance, to let down the scholarly guard, and *to represent (write, photograph, film, draw) with others*, intent to capture experiences, with attention to the messiness and creativity of juggling multiple positions at once, as most people do in their everyday lives.

There are good examples of the blending of theory and data in ethnographies of healing in India, and I'd like to consider one now by way of a conclusion. In the past, I have used Ron Barrett's book on pollution and illness in north India, *Aghor Medicine: Pollution, Death, and Healing in Northern India* (2008), in my "Ethnography in Asia" seminar. I like how Barrett handles the multilayered perceptions of healing (not "medicine" per se) in Varanasi. Using the Hindi categories, *dawā* ("medicine") and *duwā* ("blessing"), he illustrates the multiplicity of what he refers to as Indian "masala medicine." On occasion, the strong and energizing charisma of an Aghori healer, rather than a strict medical modality, is credited for therapeutic success in cases of skin disorders like vitiligo, leukoderma, and leprosy (all classed under the Hindustani category of *kuṣṭh*). Barrett juxtaposes the western epidemiological view that *Mycobacterium leprae* (the Gram-positive bacterium that causes leprosy, aka Hansen's Disease) is non-communicable with the widely-held view among people in Varanasi that leprosy is highly infectious, frequently leading to the social stigmatization of *kuṣṭh* sufferers.

Drawing on his prior training as a biomedical nurse, Barrett twists his professional knowledge about illness, contagion, and sanitation together with cultural and religious views of disease and purity espoused by people in Varanasi. Because his study is focused on the Kina Ram Aghori tradition, he telescopes the perceived transgressive practices of the Aghori and their period of revival and modernization between the 1960s and 80s to supplement a medical anthropological account of disease with a culturally-relative explanatory model that draws on the philosophical and religious beliefs of Aghori healers.

> Although biomedical models of etiology do not explicitly blame the patient, neither do they explain why one person and not another is afflicted with leprosy – a central feature of explanatory models in most medical systems … Aghor medicine provides this kind of explanation using the metaphysics of traditional healing, but without the blame that comes from traditional notions of pollution and purity.[27]

For the Aghori, discrimination (and stigmatization) constitutes the ultimate etiology of illness. Discrimination, Barrett argues, stems from fear of human morbidity and mortality, two entwined dreads that are ultimately managed through the Aghori's oft-perceived antinomian practices (consuming cremation ash, for example). In a final theoretical synopsis, Barrett argues for a mixture of theory drawn from medical anthropology, cognitive anthropology, social psychology, and culturally-specific anthropological models to account for the confidence in the effectiveness of Aghor healing among Varanasi's locals:

27 Barrett 2008: 102.

> Anxieties about human mortality motivate cultural models of discrimination against human morbidity. This discrimination can be seen as an illness in and of itself. By confronting human mortality, Aghor *sādhanā* is the ultimate form of Aghor medicine – a therapy for the illness of discrimination.[28]

Describing links between social humiliation experienced by *kuṣṭh* patients and research in social psychology, Barrett unearths associations between medical anthropological accounts of stigma and deviance to show how these can be localized to ethnographic data about *kuṣṭh* conditions and their treatment by Aghori healers.

While I like to use Barrett's book with students to help them see how one ethnographer attempts to blend medical anthropological theory and ethnographic data from north India, part of the pedagogical utility of the book comes from what it suggests about using theories of healing cross-culturally. Barrett's previous training as a nurse at times might be read as eliciting ostensibly incompatible theorizations and thus underscoring potential problems of merging biomedical and indigenous Indian accounts of illness into a study that can be useful. For example, when he explains Kamleshwar Baba's treatment for children with diarrhea-related dehydration, the spiritual appears reducible to the biomedical:

> [H]e gave family members the *vibhuti* ash with a generous dose of advice: 'Do not force feed the child while s/he is sick … Make sure to give him/her water that is boiled … Keep the household clean.' In this manner, *kund* and *dhuni* were vehicles for preventive medicine as well as for the blessings of Aghor.[29]

Ponder that exchange in view of a later discussion of social stigma, where Barrett argues that

> as with many other discredited medical conditions, the physical and social stigmata of HD [Hansen's Disease] are too interconnected to disentangle in a useful way. Thus, leprosy is best approached as an illness of discrimination inclusive of its physical condition.[30]

In discussions about this book with students, often questions were raised about possible theoretical inconsistencies in the ways Barrett fused biomedical and Aghori-ayurvedic explanations of what he observed at the Kina Ram clinic. We might disagree with his analyses. But rather than suggest theoretical inconsistency due to his biomedically inflected take on Aghori Ayurveda, I think his study highlights the complexity of any ethnographer's positionality,

28 Barrett 2008: 161.
29 Barrett 2008: 67.
30 Barrett 2008: 105.

which thus informs one's ethnographic sensibility, when interpreting and responding to observations in the field.[31] Indeed, in medical anthropology and ethnographies of healing, it can be particularly challenging to integrate human experience with various and sometimes conflicting ideas about health and wellbeing. Especially in the Indian context, ethnographers studying healing traditions often find it useful to draw on a range of methods and theories to understand specific healing practices, their efficacies, and their entanglements in social, religious, and political discourses.

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31 That Barrett was also a disciple of the Kina Ram Aghori at the time he conducted his fieldwork is an entirely other – no less important or fascinating – question.

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