



SPECIAL SECTION COLLOQUIUM

Anthropology as irony and philosophy, or the knots in simple ethnographic projects

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In this essay on the idea of “anthropological knots” I lay out three closely related ideas. One is that the practice of ethnography may be regarded as being also the practice of philosophy, insofar as philosophy is the pursuit of knowledge about ourselves. The second is that this pursuit of ethnography/philosophy is in its nature ironical, which means roughly that it is woven, or knotted, in the encounter of differing viewpoints, just as Socrates’ philosophical work was created in ironizing conversation between different persons and their different viewpoints. The third is that our philosophical, ironical ethnography is a performance to be celebrated; and, again, it is a performance that is woven, knotted together.

Keywords: anthropological theory, irony, philosophy, ethnography

In what follows, I explore ethnography as philosophy and ethnography as irony, quite explicitly, as a connected argument. I demonstrate the nature of ethnography as performance, however, in a different way, by letting its staged and rhetorically targeted character show through. That is, I present the argument (after this preface, that is) as a talk complete with slides.

It is true, in fact, that this essay did begin life as a talk with slides, and indeed it has long been my practice to prepare any “paper” that I give as a sequence of slides on which I improvise rather than a written text; and those slides have a particular character, namely that they are each an illustration, or piece of evidence, upon which the (as yet unwritten but spoken and heard) argument will depend for its purchase in the world of experience. This is a practice that has grown on me ever since I came to believe that an ethnographic argument can be best ordered by first setting out the examples/illustrations/evidence, those things that actually happened in the field to open my mental eyes, in an order that would allow a listener



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or reader to move with growing insight from one vivid occurrence or statement to the next. Then the work of writing or speaking is to knot together the explanatory threads that draw those details into a whole, which can be followed, as the eye can follow a complex knot, such as that of Figure 1.

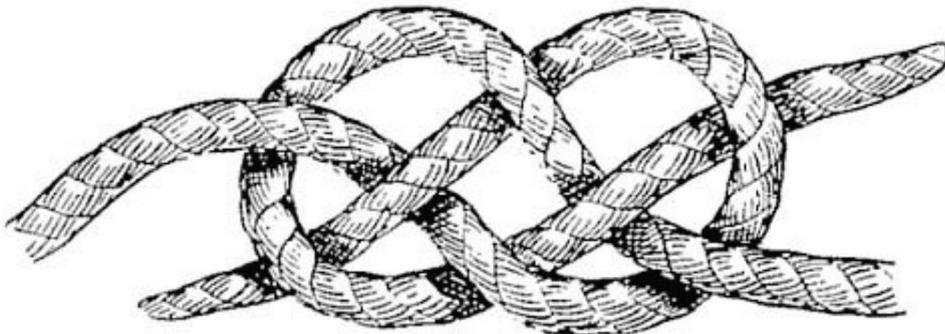


FIG. 27.—Garrick bend (tying).

Figure 1: Garrick or carrick bend (from A. Hyatt Verrill, *Knots, splices, and rope work*, n.d., <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13510/13510-h/13510-h.htm>)

I should stress, though, that this actual essay shares only some of the slides—and some of the argument—that appeared in that original talk. This is very much writing, not talking, though throughout I have tried to preserve and enhance the dialogical, interactive character that was so plainly and inescapably present in that original performance, but which might be lost or ploughed under in the apparently monological genre of an academic paper.

It is also important to recall what a knot of practices, people, relations, machines, and their technologies have met to bring these words to you, the reader. Remarkable are not just the computers and wired circuits with their algorithms, but even more so, the people who work together to support this highly mediated activity of *publishing*. And to crown the wonder, there is what you bring to this already elaborate tangle. You bring the practice of *reading*, a practice that you apply skillfully, contributing a set of experiences and abilities acquired in that further knot of practices, institutions, and technologies that we call “education.”

So what you are reading is inescapably a knotted performance, indeed a *cultural performance*, as we anthropological scientists might call it. Just as Malinowski laid down the huge hinterland to the stylized performance of handing over a necklace or armband in the *kula* ring, so we might reveal the weavings that comprise our own mediated performances.

I make these prefatory remarks not just to heighten our awareness of the miraculously interwoven character of our apparently straightforward academic doings but to make another point as well, a point encapsulated in that phrase, *cultural performance*. For the phrase can be used not just for the preliminary incantations and subsequent speechifying of a distant *kula* performance but also for our own activities. But when we use the phrase about ourselves—for example, in describing the ornate procedures of the British university exam system—it opens quite

another can of writhing knots. It becomes *ironic*, which is to say two things immediately: first, that you, the speaker, are standing aside to view the phenomenon, so now there is multiplication of interwoven viewpoints, at the very least your own and that of someone uncomplicatedly involved in the system (for more on this see Carrithers 2013 on “seriousness and irony”). And second, by the implicit comparison with other cultural performances, this performance is suddenly revealed to be contingent rather than necessary, and therefore a matter open to many possibilities, interpretations, and viewpoints.

And now on to the talk itself.

The next slide

When I started thinking about the topic of anthropological knots, I happened to be reading Alexander Nehamas' splendid book, *The art of living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault* (1998). I found that Nehamas' Socrates, among all the many versions of Socrates you might encounter, fitted both with the direction of my own thinking and with the image of knots. I encapsulated this happy harmony in figure 2, the next slide.

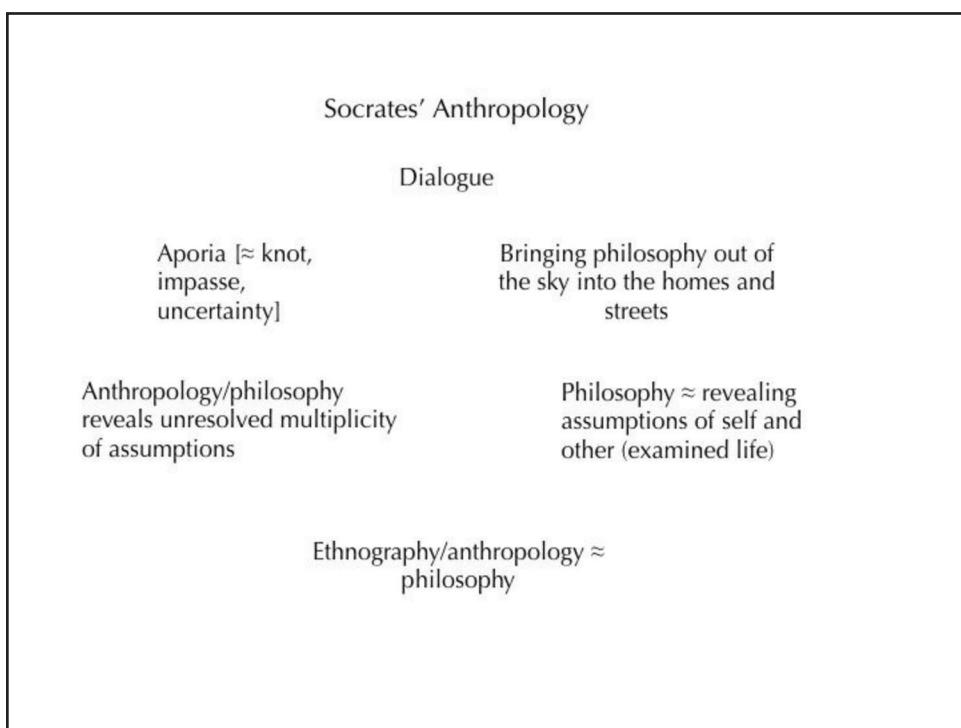


Figure 2: Socrates' anthropology

Though we only have him through writing, we can nevertheless take it that Socrates' form of thinking was best, and probably only, expressed through spoken dialogue. And dialogue, in a more general sense, is an umbrella concept for all human



expression, which after all is always *addressed*, always has a real or notional recipient and a possible response, whether laid down by granite carving or broadcast in a shout in the street at night. Anthropologists may fairly consider themselves to be notably dialogic, too, since they engage in that original dialogue, namely verbal conversation, with some parties, and in written dialogue with others, the addressees of ethnographic works.

Socrates was notable, said Cicero (I'm taking you clockwise around the slide) for turning investigative thought, through dialogue, from contemplating the heavens and what we call the “natural” world to contemplating ourselves. At present this self-contemplation has split into a huge variety of disciplines and ever ramifying subdisciplines, from those of psychology and sociology through to various versions of contemporary professionalized philosophy. Following Nehamas' and Socrates' inclination, though, I'm going to stick with the idea of philosophy as an enterprise revealing one's own assumptions, and so making for an examined, rather than an unexamined, form of life—and, for that matter, having a therapeutic purpose, clarifying sites of ignorance and error, and not just stating supposedly positive, *a priori* truths. In this sense even the most modest ethnographic report, by displaying an alternative to our own practices and assumptions, opens for us the possibility of reflecting on ourselves and on what we unthinkingly think human nature to be.

Or to put this another way (I take you another step around the slide), ethnography-read-as-philosophy reveals that on any one site—and by “site” I mean any trait that varies surprisingly across human societies, such as, say, personhood, the nature and existence of divinities, or the etiology of disease—there exists a multiplicity of prescriptions and understandings. (So here we are back with *irony*.)

But then—and this is the slide's final entry—this multiplicity amounts to an *aporia*, an ancient Greek word to mean an impasse, a radical uncertainty, or a contradiction. It is true that, as anthropologists, we commonly practice cultural relativism, such that we gaze dispassionately on the multiplicity of prescriptions and practices that may pile up on any site (personhood, divinities, etc.) and suspend judgment. But that suspension of judgment can never deliver the final word, since the membrane between us as professing anthropologists and as thinking and morally entangled human beings is always porous. Were it not, then Louis Dumont could not have written so generally and philosophically of hierarchy and egalitarianism, or Marilyn Strathern of gender. This is not to say that either of them provided a final answer on those topics, but rather that they laid bare each aporia and showed us another inexhaustible site of further fruitful puzzlement for self-and-other-knowledge.

The next four slides

The aporia I address here is a close cousin to those, but derives less from a self-and-other dialectic than from the character of our anthropological enterprise itself. Consider, on the one hand, the next slide:

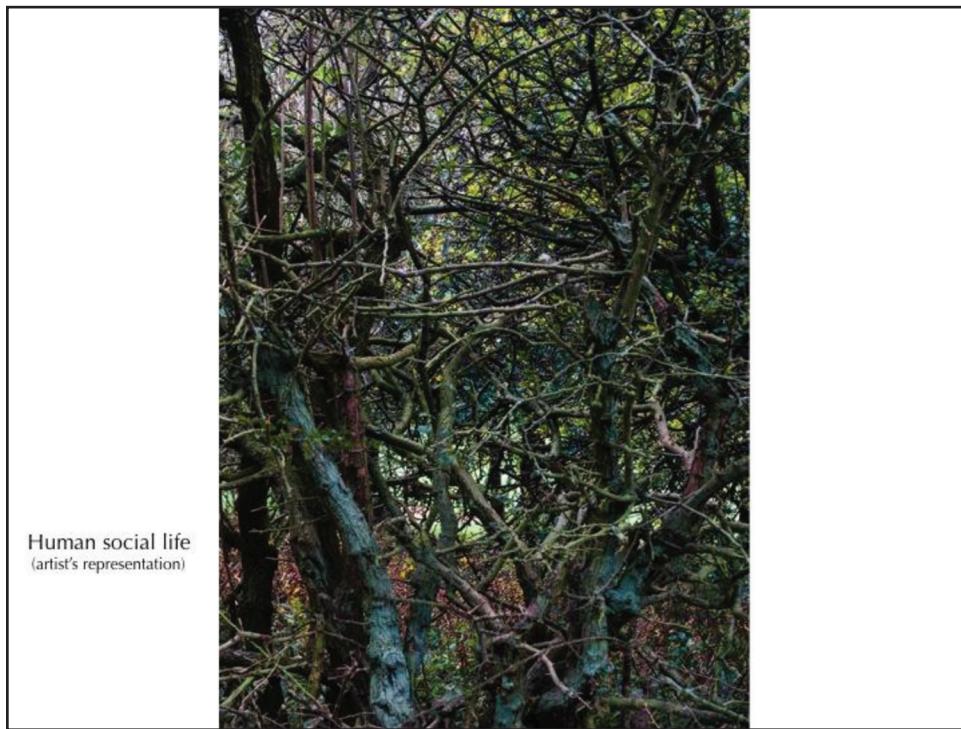


Figure 3: Our raw material: The complexity of human social life (photo © M. Carrithers)

An even better representation of the complexity of human social life would be, say, a time-lapse video of this tangle, since it would suggest as well the constant motility of our human soap opera. But in any case this is where anthropology begins, in a confrontation with some scene of constantly ramifying, developing, and differentiating understandings, encounters, and consequences.

From such a scene, then, we labor, through ethnography and further lucubrations, often called “theory,” to create an ordered and intelligible account, as we see in figure 4.



Figure 4: Anthropology’s product: An ordered account (photo © M. Carrithers)



This is a page from Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and experience: The religion of the Dinka* (1961), which I will call as a witness for excellence later. But for now I want just to note the skeleton of order he found, or fashioned, among the tangled complexity he met: the book evidently has a "PART ONE," which in turn is divided into sections, here section I, "DIVISION IN THE WORLD," and that section in turn is subdivided, starting here with subsection "i." Such explicit organization is not necessary, but some such organization, explicit or implicit, must be integral to such a work, or else it would not count as a monograph and would not have been published. And that organization necessarily appears, too, in the finer grain of the prose, being syntactically complex and maximally explicit—or at least as explicit as possible while still having a readable and portable book—in order to address a not entirely specified but in any case educated readership: a cultural performance indeed.

On to the next slide.

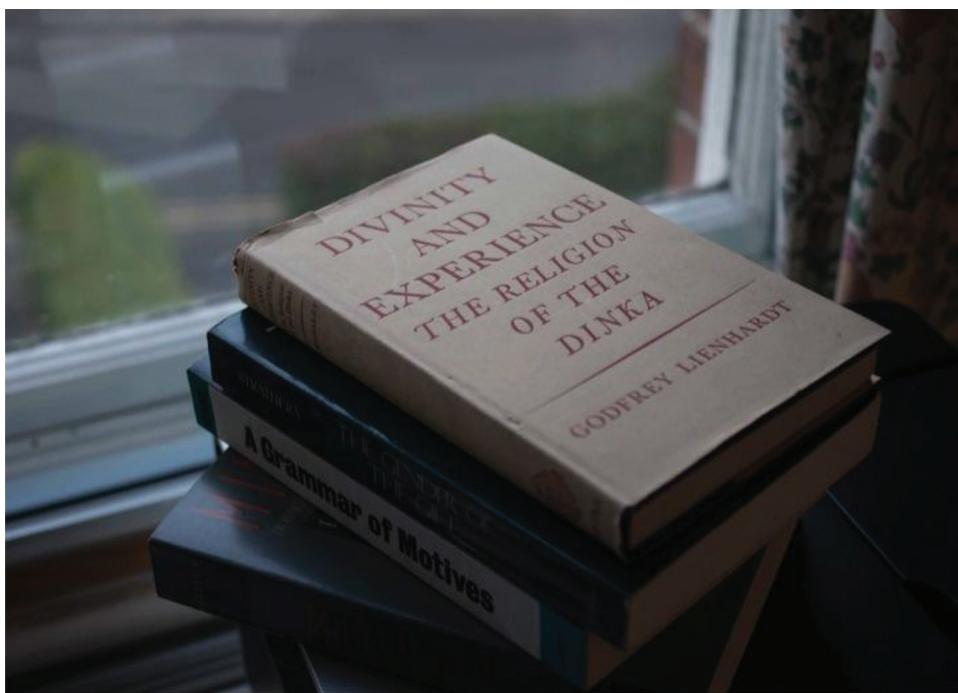


Figure 5: Knowledge for the market (photo © M. Carrithers)

I mean figure 5 to exemplify the further fate of our ordered knowledge, namely that it is then packaged as a portable commodity and sent out into a market, that is, into a company of strangers. It is true, I think, that when this monograph was first published, Lienhardt would have known personally many of those in the then intimate world of British social anthropology who purchased or read the book (or both). But through the medium of the market, and then through the medium of those other publicizing institutions, the library and the university, it would also have reached, and now continues to reach, a readership far beyond those whom Lienhardt could have known face-to-face. And, as I have stressed, it was designed for that world of

(educated) strangers, with as much hope of success as Lienhardt and the editors of Oxford University Press could manage.

What I am trying to convey is not yet the aporia I have in mind, but is rather the rough and uneven ground on which that aporia arises. On one hand, Lienhardt, like all ethnographers, faced a situation in the field whose difficulty comprised not only that of achieving a basic comprehension of fluid events and persons, but also of extending that elementary comprehension to grasp some of the order that the others, the Dinka themselves, sought to impose on situations. And he had then to find a further territory of intelligibility, hard won by thought and the discoveries of writing, to set before a company of strangers, his readership.

The final challenge of Lienhardt's situation, then, lay with the readers themselves, as suggested in figure 6:



Figure 6: Publication as engagement of the imagination

Lienhardt had labored, that is, in such a way that the readership of strangers would scan the lines and squiggles laid down by Oxford University Press and visualize an order in that original thicket of events and people that he encountered during fieldwork.

In so describing the labor of ethnography I mean to suggest how great an accomplishment it is. If we accept that visualizing or imagining is a great, or the greatest, part of understanding, then Lienhardt's ability to understand and then to open that distant world to our reading imaginations is a memorable achievement.

But if we also for a moment think of how relatively complex and vulnerable to alternative interpretations just one part of that whole arc of imagining-and-understanding



is, namely that part between the page itself and the interpreting reader, then we can also capture some of the vulnerability and fragility across the ethnographic process as a whole. Paul Friedrich put this pervasive vulnerability more generally with chilling clarity, writing that “all . . . instances [of speaking or writing], given the dialogic situation of all communication, involve some slippage or lack of fit between the intended meaning and what was understood, between what was anticipated and what actually happened” (2001: 238). Those of us involved in universities as teachers and writers will have experienced often enough how one’s intended meaning can go astray.

The aporia at last

Nevertheless, we go on operating this academic world and our discipline of anthropology with considerable confidence, based on an assumed common culture and set of skills and practices. Michael Warner put his finger directly on our Western academic culture’s central feature:

Michael Warner on our language ideology (p. 115):

Discourse is understood to be propositionally summarizable;
...poetic or textual qualities of any utterance are disregarded.

Acts of reading ... are understood to be replicable and uniform.

The development of such a language ideology has ... helped make possible the modern confidence placed in the stranger-sociability of public circulation. Strangers are less strange if you can trust them to read as you read, or if the sense of what [you] say can be fully abstracted from the way [you] say it.

Figure 7: Our language ideology (Warner 2002)

The first trait of our anthropological/academic language ideology, that it is “propositionally summarizable,” is exemplified well enough in the widespread practice of the *written examination* in the North Atlantic and Anglophone worlds. Speaking from my experience of British university examining, I can say with some confidence that we would be surprised, and suspicious, if our words were reproduced exactly in an examination; and our suspicion would turn to dark certainty if they

were reproduced exactly and without quotation marks in an essay/paper, for that would be plagiarism. So it is not just that we assume that our arguments can be summarized in different words but we also school students in the cultural performance of such summarizing-without-verbatim-reproduction.

The corollary, then, is that the “poetic or textual qualities” of our products are largely irrelevant. So long as we can make ourselves more or less understood and our prose is recognizable as academic, we are home free. And this freedom within broad limits is encouraged by the accompanying assumption that our readers (or listeners) are going to understand our discourse just as we mean it, with no deviation. We can send these, our brainchildren, out into the world among all those strangers (“confidence in the stranger-sociability of public circulation”) knowing that they will be well and properly received.

Now we have arrived at the threshold of my chosen aporia: on one hand, anthropologists communicate on the basis that what they write will be understood as planned. On the other—if we take Paul Friedrich’s dictum to heart—“all communication involve[s] some . . . lack of fit between the intended meaning and what was understood.” So our work is predicated throughout on a basis of its immediate transparency, yet it meets with unintended reinterpretation at every turn.

This is not, I think, the bad news it may appear to be. But let me for the moment sharpen even further the two horns of the contradiction. On to the next slide:

- Factual / archival
- Accuracy
- Unambiguous / univocal
- Trained and known readership
- **Positive discourse**

Figure 8: Anthropology as archive of accurate and communicable facts

Insofar as anthropology can be regarded as *knowledge*, it communicates *facts*, and from these facts our discipline as a whole can be thought of as creating an *archive* of



the variations of human organization and experience across the world and through time. The most concrete expression of such archive-like knowledge is probably the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF). But even if one does not accept the HRAF as the best model for anthropologists' achievements, still it is in part the accumulation of such information that establishes anthropologists' claim to exist among other disciplines. To that extent our knowledge is *unambiguous*. We know that there exists cross-cousin marriage in South India and Sri Lanka, and that it cannot be confused with other forms of marriage, such as those characteristic of North India. If, in our cultural performance of an "examination," I asked for the form of marriage among the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka, and you wrote "parallel cousin," your answer would be *inaccurate*. And if one were to object, as many have, that "marriage"—like other similar comparative terms—is itself questionable, then that objection itself would have to be founded in part on further information, further facts.

So to that extent, at least, we can speak of anthropology as a *positive* discipline, *positing* information and knowledge. And it is on the basis of that archival knowledge that we may challenge other disciplines—I think especially of evolutionary psychology here—and force on them the necessity to consider the sheer variety of human behaviors, a variety that we can demonstrate factually.

Now on to the next slide:

- Factual / archival
- Accuracy
- Unambiguous / univocal
- Trained and known readership
- **Positive discourse**
 - Interpretative / translational
 - Faithfulness
 - Evocative / polysemic
 - Stranger readership / varied assumptions
- **Ironic (dialectical) discourse**

Figure 9: The aporia in full

But it is possible to tell a very different story, for the notion/practice of *facts*, and of their *accuracy*, holds sway only insecurely in our anthropological imperium. Otherwise we practice *interpretation* or *translation*, and therefore are inevitably

concerned with *faithfulness* rather than *accuracy*. Whereas accuracy is in principle a matter of a true or false judgment, faithfulness is a matter of a more-or-less, of the relative fidelity of a translation to the original, of the translation's ability to *evoke* the original. Literary translators refer to the Italian saying, "*traduttore traditore*," meaning "a translator is a traitor," or better, "to translate is to betray" (thanks to Paolo Fortis for reminding me of this). On a romanticized view, a wholly satisfactory evocation of the original is never possible; but even on a more workmanlike view we still have a mighty challenge in rendering one world intelligible in another while retaining some allegiance to the first. We need to bear in mind the original practices, language, rationalities, and viewpoints alongside the provisional character of our own understanding in the field; and to that are added the possible renderings available to us in our target language and (so far as possible) the possible misinterpretations among our stranger readership. So our work of ethnography is quintessentially ironic just insofar as any of our ethnographic expressions is accompanied from beginning to end by that cloud of other possibilities and interpretations.

There you have the aporia: anthropology is necessarily positive but it is also inescapably ironic; it is necessarily unambiguous but is inevitably ambiguous.

What irony means

Now I sense among some of you, my stranger readership, discomfort about the argument so far, and I promise to illustrate concretely what I mean. But I also sense unease at my use of the term "irony," so let me first be more explicit about its meaning in this next slide:

Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a *development* which uses all the terms. Hence, from the standpoint of this total form (this 'perspective of perspectives'), none of the participating 'sub-perspectives' can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another.

(Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* 1969[1945]: 512; his italics)

Irony also arises *when events conspire*, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development...

Figure 10: Irony defined



On the next page, Kenneth Burke writes of “sub-certainties” rather than “sub-perspectives,” and I think that is more useful, so I am going to stick with that. He writes that the “resultant [ironic] certainty,” the “certainty” of the observer who considers all the sub-certainties at once, is “of a different quality, necessarily ironic, since it requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but contributory” ([1969] 1945: 513). To translate this for anthropology: all the sub-certainties among those studied, and of the ethnographer’s representation, and of the readers’ interpretations, are at play at once. It also follows that the resultant “certainty” of the anthropologist is also more a subcertainty, however assertively and positively he or she writes. For to call the anthropologist an ironic observer in this sense is not to bestow a god-like certitude on her but only to say that she stands in a particular position, which may be “above” or “beside” other positions, but in any case separated from them. And indeed a similarly ironic observerhood appears wherever we meet someone setting out a variety of characters or positions and their vicissitudes vis-à-vis one another, as happens in a wide variety of human performances, among them drama, diplomacy, philosophizing, political deliberation, historical narrative, and of course humor, whether across the kitchen table or broadcast to the world. So if anthropologists’ performance of irony has its particular flavor, it is nevertheless only one species of irony among many.

In figure 10, I follow irony in another direction as well. Burke’s definition treats it solely as an effect of someone’s artful intention (“when one tries . . . to produce a development”), whereas English speakers often cast the net to encompass unintended situations “when events conspire” to produce a development of contrasting expectations, possibilities, and subcertainties. I recently found myself reading an account of a football club manager whose current winning streak would do nothing to keep him from losing his job. The situation was designated “ironic” by the sportswriter, who thereby pointed up the contrasts between subcertainties—he was hired as a good manager, was later judged a poor manager, and now seems a good manager again. These are ironies that emerge from the fecund ground of passing time, which we sometimes call “history.” On a larger scale, the “war on terror,” as it was designated by George W. Bush, has led to a monumental proliferation of ironies, including the creation of yet more “terrorists” by the terrifying acts to suppress them. James Fernandez had his eye on such occasions, however great or small, when he observed, “irony can be expected in situations of unequal power when discourses, interests, or cultures clash” (2004: 4).

Inadvertent ironies

So we can think of *inadvertent ironies* as that rich conflicted material thrown up by the inexorable juggernaut of events, and *performed ironies* as someone’s bringing that material to awareness through an artful performance. I first use the idea of inadvertent ironies to explore the ironic fate among readers of a positively intended and nonironically assertive ethnography. And I then turn to the performed irony that characterizes Lienhardt’s exemplary ethnography.

I place in evidence *The forest monks of Sri Lanka: An anthropological and historical study* (Carrithers 1983), which turns out to have a quite illuminating history of reading. Here is something of the author's original positive assertion about the book. It was to be, he announced on page four, an "anthropological and historical study" of "*thought in action*, of the monks' various attempts to act by their precepts, to embody their ideals" [the original author's italics]. One might think that there is only one set of Buddhist ideals and so only one set of practices and institutions, but by pages seven and eight we learn that there was nevertheless considerable variation among the few hundred forest monks in the island. This derived in part from differences of circumstance, but also from the fact that "the ideal was itself complex, composed of different and to an extent contradictory models which had been laid one on top of the other in the course of Buddhism's history." So the book as a whole was dedicated to laying out the spectrum of different forest monks alongside their respective understandings of their heritage. The author meant the book to be positive discourse, dedicated to getting it right, to being as unambiguous as possible. There was an overarching purpose as well, namely that the book should not be addressed to scholars alone but should open to a wider Anglophone readership, in the conviction that readers' awareness would be enriched by contemplating these further versions of human possibility—which was his version of what anthropology should do.

Now for the most part the author was confirmed in his positivity and his certainty. The reviews of the book by the cognoscenti suggested that it was read sympathetically, and the author was then satisfied that his point had come across (and he managed to ignore those small differences of viewpoint or understanding that, from the present viewpoint, offered a certainty departing from his own). Even the howler pointed out in a review by a much-amused Sinhalese anthropologist in the United States confirmed that even where wrong, he could have got it positively right.

But the book lived a life of its own and other readers did what they wanted with it as time passed. In late 2013 I began looking into the book's fate with the suspicion that there might be something interesting there, under the heading of "anthropological knots," after all these years.

The first, minor irony that appeared was this: the author had been pleased to publish it with Oxford University Press in Delhi, for that meant that, though still pricey by their lights, some Sri Lankans could nevertheless buy it.

However, with the passage of time . . . well, see the next slide.



Largely inadvertent ironies:

From Amazon.co.uk:

The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: Anthropological and Historical Study [Hardcover]
Michael Carrithers (Author)
Be the first to review this item Note: This item is only available from third-party sellers ([see all offers.](#))

Available from [these sellers.](#)

[2 used](#) from £693.38

Figure 11: Can that figure be right? (Amazon UK, accessed January 5, 2014)

So that's what time and the iron hand of the market can do to one's intentions.

Retrospective inadvertent ironies

There were ironies, though, that touched more closely on the substance and import of *Forest monks*.

Spencer, Jonathan 1990. Tradition and transformation:
recent writing on the anthropology of Buddhism in Sri
Lanka. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*
21:2 p. 132:

What unites the work of Carrithers ... [and many other writers on this subject] is the element of personal quest which structures their books.

...the later chapters on successful forest hermitages are increasingly warm and affectionate, and the overall structure of the book, after introductory discussions, leads the reader ... to those establishments which best correspond to Carrithers' own understanding of the ascetic ideal.

Figure 12: Uncomfortable ironies

At the time this was published the author of *Forest monks* had gone on to other projects, but he still cherished the certainty that the book was straightforwardly positive, factual, and accurate, the work of an intellectually engaged but dispassionate observer—"just the facts, ma'am," to quote the FBI agent of *Dragnet*. So the view that there was a "personal quest" involved and that the author had made his own judgment about the ascetic ideal caused unease, an unease that remains through writing this essay. For there is a truth in Spencer's review, a subcertainty that turned Michael Carrithers' positive certainty into another subcertainty straightaway.

This discomfort was modified by a yet further subcertainty, one that Carrithers met among some in the world of British social anthropology in which he found himself, namely that one's task and privilege as anthropologist is to act as the final judge of what is *really* going on, what underlies the deceptive surfaces of social appearance. From that point of view, the privilege that Carrithers gave to the monks' self-assessment compromised his critical sociological apperception.

So far as I can now see, no one of these subcertainties triumphs, so Carrithers' positive and factual account must coexist ironically as one subcertainty among others. And as I write another subcertainty suggests itself, namely that the book's perspective, its "own understanding of the ascetic ideal," is deeply colored by contact with the monk of the last chapter, The Venerable Tambugala Anandasiri. Anandasiri himself stood slightly aside, to some degree like the anthropologist. He, too, had traveled with a notebook among forest and meditating monks, interviewing them and coming to know the variety of styles then existing, so that his own hermitage represented a thoroughly informed and highly reflective view of what a hermitage might be.

Carrithers might have consoled himself that, like Victor Turner's work, colored by Muchona the Hornet, his work's subcertainty is modified by that of Anandasiri (see Turner 1960). Yet that defense raises a further subcertainty: does not some dependence on a single local interpreter prejudice the anthropologist's ability to write "accurately" of a whole extended social scene? Subcertainties proliferate.

Ironies from a public of strangers

But anthropologists were not the only readers of *Forest monks*.



From an email from a former European monk in Sri Lanka:

'Your book became a vade mecum for Westerners wanting to become monks in Sri Lanka.'

Review on Amazon.com (Amazon in U.S.):

Most Helpful Customer Reviews

4 of 11 people found the following review helpful

5.0 out of 5 stars [inspired me to live a whole new life](#) April 3, 2000

By [a hat wearing cat](#)

Format:Hardcover

hello, i used to live a life of greed and confusion. now, i too, am a forest monk of Sri Lanka. thank you for connecting me to this fascinating book.

(Accessed 5 January 2014)

Figure 13: A manual for spiritual seekers

The author thought that his aim, to report on a version of human possibility, lay wholly within the bounds of ethnography and so of scholarship alone. But still this came as a pleasant surprise, as a reading that could find in those factually intended lines and squiggles on the page something of the significance that forest monks themselves found.

But there were other, even more surprising, readers as well.

From a speech by then President J.R. Jayewardene, as reported in the *Daily News* of Colombo on 4 February 1986:

This [*The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*] was a very important book. It revealed the ideas of the forest monks, their meditation, their way of life and the difficulties they have undergone in following the teachings of the Buddha. He [the President] intended to ensure that this book was translated into Sinhala and published and distributed ... so that all people could gain some knowledge about the way of life of these monks. *That was the real Buddhist way of life -- not talking politics and abusing ministers, MPs and officials.*

Figure 14: The president speaks (My italics. Brought to my attention by Kemper 1990.)

Carrithers had in fact received a letter from the office of the then President of Sri Lanka, offering to translate *Forest monks* into Sinhala. He was suspicious of this offer, so he prevaricated, and the translation was never made.

On the one hand, the forest monks did regard themselves as following “the real Buddhist way of life,” and that was largely understood among them as a contrast to the routinized practices of the majority Buddhist clergy spread throughout Buddhist Sri Lanka. The “political monks,” on the other hand, were making quite a different critique of the clergy. They held that monks should regard their role as active “social service.” This concept prescribed a benevolent engagement in social welfare and political action on behalf of the poor, ignorant, and downtrodden among the people (for more on this see the magisterial work of H. L. Seneviratne 1999). Moreover the “political” monks could find, in the voluminous record of Buddhist history, helpful rhetorical resources to guide and justify their projects, just as the forest monks did. Yet this socially and politically active interpretation of the monk’s role was hardly welcomed by Jayewardene and others among the conservative ruling elite, who turned *Forest monks* from an ethnographic report into a rebuttal within an ongoing political dispute.

So it turned out that the hopeful act of publishing *Forest monks* for a readership of the seriously curious entailed its use by unexpected others as well—for that is the nature of a public and of publication, that books go to strangers.

Once taken up in that spirit, though, the book was available to even more surprising readings. Next slide please.

From: Abeysekara, Ananda 2002. *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference*. Columbia S.C.: University of South Carolina Press. Pp. 78-80:

‘[*Forest Monks* is] ... a very influential book.’

‘...this anthropological identification and categorization of forest monks as a “reform” movement stands *authorized* by the native monks’ supposed representation of themselves ... ’

‘These, then, are the kinds of (colonial) assumptions that govern disciplinary understandings of religion and politics in Sri Lanka.’

[Carrithers’ argument] depends as much on a Western (colonial) story of secularism and progress as on an uncritical acceptance of some native discourses that ... are supposed to constitute the “real” identity of Buddhism.

Figure 15: A later generation speaks



An English forest monk in Sri Lanka wrote once in his journal that he did not want to be a brick put in upside down in someone else's wall. The Carrithers who wrote *Forest monks* would have torn out handfuls of his not yet thinning hair at this reading of his work. He would have said that "reform" was the best English equivalent he could find for some of the forest monks' self-representation, that if it was "supposed" it was not supposed by him but by them, and that there was nothing about "secularism" or "progress" stated or implied in *Forest monks*. And he would also have said that, if there was any colonizing at all to be done by his work, it was the colonizing of the West through understanding aspirations and achievements in the East.

Yet Ananda Abeysekara's reading, too, arose in the unyielding march of events and so of inadvertent irony. When Carrithers began to write in the early 1970s, his notion of appropriate style was colored by reading a wide variety of ethnographies that were written carefully to be read from beginning to end by an educated Anglophone public. He was encouraged in this, too, by a similar, if fast disappearing, style of ethnographic writing, which he happened to meet, and admire, in the person and work of Godfrey Lienhardt in Oxford, and in the writings of Lienhardt's supervisor, E. E. Evans-Pritchard. In this style one wrote to a broad readership of generalists, and the apparatus of critical reference to other anthropologists' arguments was absent, or rather, buried and implicit beneath the single-minded effort to lay out the sense and reasoning of the people discussed.

Abeysekara's is a later and different world. He wrote, I suppose, in the 1990s, to a now highly professionalized, specialized, and inward-gazing academic readership that has increasingly expected that any ethnographic detail (such as that offered so well by Abeysekara elsewhere in his book) will be thickly framed by explicit generalizing argument and a recognizable abstracting academic vocabulary—by *theory*, in other words. Increasingly it is this dense theorizing, rather than the ethnography, which is thought to create the value of the work. (In the United Kingdom it is even possible now to encounter doctoral theses in which the author has intentionally effaced most of the ethnography in the interest of theoretical elaboration.) These days publishers regard theoretical writing as necessary to make a work publishable, for such writing thereby addresses a wider potential readership—not just those researching Sri Lanka, say, but anyone researching a similar issue—even though that supposedly wider readership is cabined and confined within the narrow academic guild alone.

Perhaps this pervasive theorizing is nothing more than the historical working out of anthropology's philosophical promise. Yet for the most part such thick theorizing derives its philosophical challenge, less from the unaccountably surprising lives of the people studied, and more from playing on the work of other theorists. The consequence is that a book such as *Forest monks* can now be read, not for the challenge it may raise through the works and imaginings of its subjects but rather for whatever theoretical position it may be thought to espouse, and probably espouse wrongly.

"Irony," wrote Fernandez, "can be expected in situations of unequal power when discourses, interests, or cultures clash" (2004: 4). Western Buddhists read *Forest monks* through their discourse, that of Buddhist practitioners; Jayewardene read it through his interests, his political position; and Abeysekara read it through his

culture, or subculture, in academe. All these inadvertent ironies could become fertile ground for performed irony . . . and I see with some surprise that I have obliged in some measure, by splitting my possibly unitary person into two, namely Carrithers the ethnographer on one hand, and myself, the current commentator, on the other, each with his own subcertainty among all the others.

Performed irony

So whether she wishes it or not, the ethnographer, sitting at her desk ready to write, will find herself poised between the discourses, interests, and cultures of her field-work on one hand, and the discourses, interests, and cultures of her readership on the other. Even worse, our ethnographic craft worker confronts not only that clamor of absent-but-all-too-present voices but also an aporia, a contradiction, demanding an account accurate, unambiguous, and factual, but at the same time evocative, interpretative, and multivocal. A knot indeed.

But not a lethal knot. My message may seem pessimistic and destructive, but I mean to be celebratory. The aporia, however thorny, is also fertile and stimulating. And so I come to Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and experience*, which I regard as a model of ethnographic exposition, but at the same time of anthropological philosophizing, this latter not because it wears its theory outwardly but lets the material itself present the challenge to Our (and perhaps Their) self-knowledge. Here is the beginning of Lienhardt's performance:

Mostly intentional irony:

WITHIN the single world known to them (for they dwell little upon fancies of any 'other world' of different constitution) the Dinka claim that they encounter 'spirits' of various kinds, which they call generically *jok*. In this account I call them 'Powers'. These Powers are regarded as higher in the scale of being than men and other merely terrestrial creatures, . . . but they are not imagined to form a separate 'spirit-world' of their own, and their interest for the Dinka is as ultra-human forces participating in human life and often affecting men for good or ill. They emerge in the interpretation of events . . .

Divinity and Experience, p. 28

Figure 16: Performed irony



This passage evinces, at first glance, a tone of factual exposition. Sample question: do Dinka cultivate ideas of a separate spirit world? Answer: no. Such exposition carries on throughout the book, so we are justified—if only to that extent at least—in placing this work confidently into the archive of positive anthropological knowledge.

A closer inspection, though, shows far more going on. Consider that first sentence. It begins, “Within the single world known to them . . .” and already that otherwise superfluous “single” signals that there exist other possibilities, of a doubled or perhaps multiple world for the Dinka; for why write “single” when you are just talking about “the world”? And we then find clarification in an aside, marked off as such in parentheses: “(for they dwell little upon fancies of any “other world” of different constitution) . . .”

This is far more than just simple factual exposition. Here Lienhardt makes use of punctuation and typography to offer a larger dialogic, ironic, performance of multiple voices and perspectives, some played out, others just suggested. In the first place, the parentheses effect dramatic irony, that device by which the speaking actor, sometimes by a stage-whispered address to the audience, marks off an apparent certainty acted among those on stage from the superior and different certainty vouchsafed to the audience. Then, within that aside, Lienhardt ventriloquizes an (inferior) subcertainty, marked by the quotation marks around “other world.” We are not told, here or elsewhere, just who would be talking thus about some “other world.” For Lienhardt devotes his effort throughout to the knotty labor of finding the most felicitous way of characterizing the Dinka themselves, rather than adopting the established conceptual coinage of professional anthropology or engaging argumentatively with established professional opinions. He leaves us to infer his understanding of those other voices and how they might err. My own preference is to read him as rejecting the self-deceptive ease with which ethnographers and other, perhaps Christian, writers on religion before (and after) him may utilize terms such as “spirit” and “spirit world,” as though those words described something plain and single, however differently inflected across a huge variety of societies. And by portraying the Dinka as “dwell[ing] little upon fancies” of such an imagined world, Lienhardt shows the Dinka to be more sensible and practical than anyone talking so fluently and, yes, fancifully, of “spirits” and a “spirit-world.”

Instead, he develops a separate and distinctive vocabulary—the Dinka *jok* becomes “Powers,” and the unusual but immediately understandable “ultra-human” replaces the standard kneejerk “supernatural.” Later he will introduce the terms “Divinity” and “divinities,” which again establish a multiplicity of voices: his own, speaking as translator; that of the Dinka, speaking their own language; and that of conventional anthropological others, which would give “God” or “Spirit,” and “spirits.” And in fact this latter terminology—“Spirit,” spirits, and God—is consciously chosen in a monograph about a people closely related to the Dinka, Evans-Pritchard’s *Nuer religion* (1956), which was written with the close cooperation of Lienhardt, as Evans-Pritchard points out in the preface to his book. Though both write eloquently and persuasively in their respective books of the difficulty of finding an appropriate English vocabulary for Nuer/Dinka concepts, Lienhardt has, I think, the last word. He wrote this:

To use the word “God” in translating some Dinka statements . . . would raise metaphysical and semantic problems of our own for which there is no parallel among the Dinka and in their language. Perhaps the extent to which it would be permissible to translate [their term] by “God” is something of which theologians might judge at the end of an account of Dinka religion. (1961: 29)

You may find this summary statement tactful toward Evans-Pritchard, or not, but it does use an eloquent irony of indirection to convey a difference I once stumbled across between the “theological” and the “phenomenological” study of a religion such as Buddhism or Hinduism. Apparently such “theological” study would be from an explicitly Christian perspective and addressed to Christians, while “phenomenological” study would be, well, just the sort of thing Lienhardt did and Carrithers tried to do.

In the next slide we see how Lienhardt’s vocabulary serves two purposes at once.

When, for example, the Dinka attribute lightning to a particular ultra-human Power, it would falsify their understanding, and indeed exaggerate its difference from our own, to refer to a *supernatural* Power. The force of lightning is equally ultra-human for ourselves as for the Dinka, though the interpretation we place upon that fact is very different from theirs.

Divinity and Experience, p 28-9

Figure 17: The ultra-human

The total effect of this compacted statement is multiple. Lienhardt concentrates our minds on the difficult philosophical task of comprehending the Dinka; he forces us to confront our own experience of the ultra-human, and the character of that understanding is sharpened by both the contrast, *and* the similarity, with the Dinka understanding; and he does all this by forcing us past our accustomed conceptual language to unaccustomed words, words that gain vividness and specificity by the contrast with that accustomed language. We may choose to rest finally in our own understanding of lightning’s ultra-human power—stormy winds drive air and



water molecules past each other in clouds to produce an overpowering difference of electrical potential, and zap!—but nevertheless we are, like the Dinka, still powerlessly human as against that ultra-human.

Divinity and experience

When Burke offered his definition of irony he blithely paired irony with dialectic as different aspects of the same, namely “voices, personalities, or perspectives integrally affecting one another.” We may tend to read “dialectic” in the light of, for example, a Kant or a Hegel, where a monolithic voice lays out a monolithic and systematic philosophy. In origin, though, “dialectic” is sibling of “dialogic,” and both echo something of a Socratic practice of working toward self-understanding, however inconclusively, through the encounter of different voices over the same knotty matter . . . which is where I started.

In this sense the central chapter of Lienhardt’s book, a chapter itself titled “Divinity and Experience,” is an extended dialectic, hovering over a problem that he poses very carefully. The key is in those words of his introduction, “[the Powers] emerge in the interpretation of events.” This mild phrase foreshadows the core of Lienhardt’s dialectical/dialogical performance. For there are matters “of which a foreigner can also have direct knowledge.” These include 1) the Dinkas’ “particular physical and social environment,” 2) those events to which Dinka respond, such as illness, lightning, strife, and so forth, and 3) those “configurations of experience,” which include the Dinkas’ reaction to the events and the environment. So whereas the Dinka have not elaborated a cosmology and philosophy in the way that, for example, the Navajo have done (Farella 1984), Lienhardt is in a position to read the environment, the events, and the reactions to events in order to extract what might be called a dialectical phenomenology of Dinka experience (if you will pardon me for that monstrous phrase). And he points out that although “Powers may be as much part of the Dinkas’ total experience—as much phenomena—for them, as are the physical and social realities to which . . . we refer,” nevertheless Dinka are perfectly capable of discussing the realities of experience without reference to Powers (1961: 147).

I cannot here rehearse Lienhardt’s argument as a whole, but this sample may suffice:

[There is] a difficult question of differences between Dinka and European self-knowledge which I can discuss only inadequately. The Dinka have no conception which at all closely corresponds to our popular modern conception of the ‘mind’... . There is for them no such interior entity to appear ... to stand between the experiencing self and ... what has been an exterior influence upon the self. So it seems that what we should call ... ‘memories’ of experiences, and regard ... as ... interior to the remembering person ..., appear to the Dinka as exteriorly acting upon him... . A man who has lived ... in a place very foreign to him may think that that place ... follows him (*bwoth cok*) A man who had been imprisoned in Khartoum called one of his children ‘Khartoum’ in memory of the place, but also to turn aside any possible harmful influence of that place upon him in later life.

Divinity and Experience, p 149

Figure 18: *Passiones*

Similarly, in the next moment in that philosophical conversation, Lienhardt shows us that, where we might feel guilt at owing someone money, as though that feeling arose within us through our act of remembering, Dinka would regard that feeling as the manifestation of an external Power, instigated by the creditor. It is in this regard that Lienhardt resurrects that obsolete Latinate term, “passiones,” to capture generally those things that happen to us, those things that seize us, rather than those things that we bring about as “agents.”

So here is one sort of philosophical self-knowledge we might encounter: we, as humans, might encounter our world without an interposed apparatus of “mind,” so that what we think of as thinking we might instead experience as being worked upon. That is—or so I reenact it for myself—another way of being human than I might be. And more to the point, I can also see that my “remembering” Sri Lanka might as well be Sri Lanka still seizing me, after all these years. Or, more darkly, if I had returned from war in Afghanistan, it could just as well be Afghanistan still working on me, and not just my mind playing painful tricks.

And here is another sort of self-knowledge that rises from Lienhardt’s conversation with the Dinka: we understand ourselves through our (folk) psychology featuring a more or less complex anatomy of working parts “inside” us, and that “insideness” of our experience colors our understanding of much that impinges upon us, or seizes us, such that what we suffer (*passiones*) may be thought the fault of our own inner workings.



In these respects, but in many others as well, Lienhardt's is a deeply philosophical argument. But note, too, the aporia that runs through that argument. On the one hand, his account is based in matters "of which a foreigner can also have direct knowledge," with the implication that they can be described univocally, factually, and accurately. Or to put it another way, these are as close as a seasoned, knowledgeable, and hard-working anthropological fieldworker can come to creating raw evidence for the archive. And as I have argued at length elsewhere, we are entirely justified in treating carefully crafted descriptions of even complex social interactions as evidential in nature: such descriptions play a role in our ethnographic practice analogous to the role of evidence in many natural scientific practices (Carrithers 1996).

On the other hand—or on the other sharp thorn of the aporia—these evidential accounts form the foundation for an evocative, interpretative, multivocal, and therefore ironic meditation on Dinka self-knowledge in contrast with our own.

So there you have it: our anthropological dilemma, our aporia, our embarrassing contradiction. We have collectively agonized over this pickle for more than a generation, and we have manufactured from it a huge variety of answers or at least attitudes, none of which may seem conclusive in relation to the other answers and attitudes. But I am celebrating, and celebrating Lienhardt's work in particular, for however it may be judged by cultivated theorizing skepticism, it delivers that inconclusive self- and other-knowledge that is among anthropology's richest offerings. There will be, as the readings of *Forest monks* attests, different interpretations of what that "self" of the readers, or the "other" of the subjects, may be, and so different interpretations of what that "knowledge" may be. But Lienhardt has done as much as an ethnographer can do to lay down an illuminated path.

You may recall the slide of the tangled overgrown hedge (figure 3), which was my visual analog for social life. I now offer, as conclusion, this image for what may be made of that tangle through the skilled ironizing labors of a Lienhardt.



Well-crafted ethnography

Figure 19: Speaks for itself

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De l'anthropologie en tant qu'ironie et comme philosophie, ou les nœuds dans les projets ethnographiques simples

Résumé : Dans cet essai au sujet des ‘nœuds anthropologiques’, j’expose trois idées intimement liées. La première: l’ethnographie peut être conçue comme une pratique de la philosophie, puisque la philosophie est la poursuite d’un savoir sur nous-mêmes. La seconde idée est que la poursuite de l’ethnographie/philosophie est par nature ironique, ce qui en d’autres termes signifie qu’elle est tissée, ou nouée, à la croisée de différents points de vue, à la manière de l’œuvre philosophique de Socrate, qui fut construite en ironisant sur des conversations entre les points de vue divergents de différentes personnes. La troisième idée présentée est que cette prouesse doit être célébrée ; et nous suggérons à nouveau que cette prouesse résulte d’un nœud, d’un assemblage.

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