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Commentary

Intimacy through the Ethnographic Lens

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The multiplicity of meanings that have been attributed to intimacy are both a weakness and a strength: a weakness because of the indeterminacy with which the category is used; a strength because it allows us to explore the relationship between its various meanings, and through this exploration address theoretically important questions. While it is commonly conflated with sexuality, intimacy concerns a considerably broader range of aspects of human life, which only an ethnographically founded approach can help us understand. Because of its indexical qualities, intimacy cannot be understood devoid of the context that gives it meaning.

Keywords: boundary, ethnography, indexicality, intimacy, scale

Why has intimacy become the object in the last couple of decades of so much attention in the disciplines we practise and read? Is it because our intimate activities, and in some cases our very entitlement to live, are increasingly under the scrutiny of structural forces, from the state surveillance of our phone calls to the shadowing of our lives by drones? Is it because what we had come to think of as the prime locus of intimacy in our lives, namely conjugality, is now open to new definitions and regulations, such as the rapid spread of the legalization of same-sex marriage around the world? Or has a rethinking of what counts as public and what counts as private (prompted by debates about domestic violence, human trafficking and parents' entitlement to smack their children) bestowed upon intimacy an increasingly fragile and problematic quality? Whatever the answer to these questions may be, understanding intimacy has increasingly become one of the key issues of the contemporary moment, which has implications for other central issues of our times: the problem of scale, for example; that of borders, limits and the right to belong; the increasingly complex and insidious workings of power in our lives; and that of trust, danger and violence.

One of the problems one faces when grappling with intimacy is its deeply taken-for-granted nature. Widespread is the assumption that intimacy is unproblematically embedded in the private, the amorous, the small-scale and the pleasurable, and many writers have made the mistake of taking these qualities as given. For example, Anthony Giddens' (1992) widely read *The Transformation of Intimacy* (one of the first titles that the keyword 'intimacy' returns in a computer search) places intimacy right at the

centre of an exploration of what the author thinks are the ways in which modernity has shaped new forms of conjugality, while never pausing to examine whether intimacy and conjugality are the same thing or whether domestic relationships are in fact the most likely locus of intimacy in our contemporary world. These assumptions tacitly rest on a deeply problematic contrast between 'modern' individualistic and voluntary conjugality (what Giddens calls the 'pure relationship') and pre-modern domestic arrangements (assumed to be determined by material or kinship concerns), which flies in the face of a great deal of social scientific evidence (e.g., Zelizer 2005, among many others).

Queer studies have offered some of the most trenchant critiques of the unproblematic conflation of domesticity, conjugality, privacy and intimacy. It began perhaps with Gayle Rubin's (1984) exploration of the relationship between sexual normativity and power, with which she reassessed her earlier and too seamless 'sex-gender system' (Rubin 1975) and demonstrates that what counts as 'legitimate' sexuality is the product of the structures of power that regulate sexuality in its different manifestations. Scholars of sexuality have since undermined the simplistic assumption that intimacy is what we practise in our bedrooms and that the four walls of the bedroom protect intimacy from the reach of social control. Not only is the intimacy of our bedroom regulated by techniques of biopower, as Foucault (1978) memorably argued, but intimacy can also suffuse forms of sexuality that are as distant from the norms of conventional conjugality as possible. A well-known example is Berlant and Warner's (1998: 565–566) retelling of a performance of 'erotic vomiting' that they witnessed in a leather bar (location unknown, but the default context is the U.S.), featuring a twink 'bottom' wearing lycra shorts and a dog collar being made to vomit by his 'top.' In addition to satisfying queer studies scholars' signature specialty of confronting the readers with the hypocrisy of their bourgeois assumptions, the scene allows the two scholars to disrupt the facile assumption that practices and relationships that fall outside of the heteronormative order cannot be intimate, that intimacy is predicated on a well-defined public/private contrast, and that it is always nice and wholesome (although one does wonder what the person who had to mop up afterwards thought). Of course, their exploration of intimacy, like Giddens', is entrenched in an ethnocentrism that is oblivious to the fact that problems of intimacy don't only arise in Greenwich Village or the Castro.¹ Furthermore, as cultural studies scholars who are exempt from doing so, they offer no evidence whatsoever that the central affect of the performance was intimacy, and for whom and in terms of what criteria, other than stating that 'the crowd [was] transfixed by the scene of intimacy.' Yet, I suppose, the effort is of some use.

The contributions to this Special Section accomplish something radically different from these other musings, namely to locate discussions of intimacy in specific ethnographic contexts (at the risk, of course, of being branded as hopelessly positivistic), which provides a much needed empirical and material grounding for our explorations of a topic that all too often rests on self-confirming abstractions. Yet ethnographically grounded works that have showcased intimacy as either an analytic concept or as an object of enquiry (and sometimes both at once) have shown little agreement about what the beast consists of, how it should be approached and where it is located. In many ways, this lack of agreement is a strength rather than a weakness, and the juxtaposition

of different approaches in the articles gathered here is a call for reflection on how the different approaches to intimacy can inform each another.

One important structure of difference that distinguishes between different ways of approaching intimacy is scale, the breadth of the context in which intimacy operates and the nature of what this context encompasses. But scale also conjures isomorphism and mutual interaction, in that what takes place at a large scale, such as that of the state, can refract what takes place at a more modest scale, such as that of the household (e.g., Brownell and Besnier 2013; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). This is at the root of Michael Herzfeld's (2005) influential concept of cultural intimacy, aspects of identity-making processes that are reproduced at the national, regional and local levels and that mutually constitute one another at these different scales, despite the fact that they may have different moral undertones in these various manifestations. Walton (this issue) further complicates the situation in an exploration of the conflation of the cultural intimacies of different ethno-religious groups through the building of common houses of worship. In the two situations the conflation sits uneasily with another form of intimacy, namely spatial intimacy, the sharing of a common space, which works in one context but faces serious opposition in another. In both cases, however, the buildings are ostensibly designed to celebrate and promote multicultural tolerance at the scale of the state, yet the result is the erasure of difference and the silencing of politics, as is the always the case in the promotion of 'tolerance' (Brown 2006; see also Hage 1998).

Struggles over what counts as intimacy and what does not frequently morph into conflicts over borders, as Sehlirkoglu (this issue) shows. When she becomes the recipient of a male stranger's uninvited comment on her physique in an Istanbul spice market, when religiously observant housewives debate the 'proper' level of gender segregation in the household in the context of debates between secularist and religious notions of the 'natural,' or when women politicians respond to male politicians' sexist and authoritarian views on gender, reproduction and sexuality, what we are witnessing is the clash between different views about where boundaries lie. Similarly, as Maskens (this issue) suggests, suspicious Belgian bureaucrats' delving into the private lives of bi-national and 'mixed-race' couples applying for marriage licences to determine whether the couple is getting married for 'real' reasons, or just to obtain legal residency for the racially marked partner, produces boundaries in several ways at once: the boundary between a 'real' marriage and a 'sham' one; between a proper and an improper relationship; between a proper and a failed citizen; and between aspects of people's intimate lives that are open to bureaucratic scrutiny and those that are not.

Rapidly changing intimate relations in post-socialist Cuba expose the ease with which love and interest, honesty and instrumentalism, and 'we' and 'they' are transposable (Simoni, this issue). The tourists who began flooding impoverished Cuba after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Soviet support for Cuba gave rise to a whole class of people, the *jineteros*, who would 'ride' the tourists and squeeze out of them material resources and, with luck, a passage overseas. While the relationship between the *jinetero* or *jinetera* and the tourist reinforces the boundary between 'us' Cubans and 'them' foreigners, the increasing importance that Cuban women attach to men's ability to provide in determining who is a desirable intimate partner muddles the picture. '*El amor ya no existe*', a friend of Valerio laments, probably idealizing a

mythical past when intimacy was 'genuine' and love was not instrumentalized, as many others in other locations do as well, despite the fact that emotion and materiality have always been everywhere not only interchangeable but also deeply enmeshed in what people define as 'intimacy' (Zelizer 2005; Bernstein 2007; Constable 2009). Yet, in other contexts, we can understand intimacy not as a process of boundary making or of negotiation over boundaries but as the opposite, namely the intersubjective circulation of emotional essences, as is the case among low-income urban Brazilians in the state of Maranhão (Shapiro, this issue).

An aspect of intimacy that deserves great scrutiny is its inherent ambiguity: intimacy is a source of comfort and safety, but it can equally be a source of danger, unpredictability and violence. The family, for example, is idealized in probably most societies of the world as a positive institution, but it takes little imagination to realize that familial intimacy can easily become the context of violence and misery, as feminist theorists have insisted for decades, from a spouse beating up his or her spouse because he or she is entitled to do what he or she wants in his or her house, to the sexual abuse of children, most often perpetrated by close relatives. Geschiere's (2013) masterful analysis of the conceptual triangle of witchcraft, intimacy and trust in Africa and elsewhere reminds us that, in many societies, the most likely danger of witchcraft emanates from one's relatives, and that those who are most likely to be suspected of being witches are one's neighbours. After all, one cannot forget that the Maussian gift, which scholars like Sahlins (1974) reanalysed as being what takes place between close kin ('family is trust, haggling is outside', as Geschiere puts it [2013: 31]), is full of potential tension, danger and ambiguity, as Parry (1986), among others, demonstrates beautifully. Similarly, gossip, and all the misery that can derive from it, really only makes sense when the people gossiping and those whom they gossip about are all entangled in ties of intimacy (Besnier 2009).

Like the closely related notion of the private and its antithesis, the public (Gal 2002), intimacy is not a place, a sphere of activity or a kind of relationship. Rather, it is a discursive phenomenon that operates like a Peircean index: it means nothing independent of a context, but once this context has been established, it serves to help people classify, characterize and understand human activity. It is this semiotic complexity that bestows its slippery quality, but it is precisely this indeterminacy that makes intimacy fascinating as an ethnographic object of enquiry.

Note

1. I have a similar reaction to Tim Dean's (2009) fascinating but deeply problematic musings on barebacking, or voluntary unsafe sex practices among gay men, which for him is an ultimate form of what he understands to be the Maussian gift and therefore deeply affirming of interpersonal bonds. Yet he does not consider that this 'gift' may have a rather different configuration when the unsafe sex takes place in contexts where voluntariness is made necessary by poverty (e.g., Farmer 2006) and where the absence of medical care makes the gift of HIV a rather unwelcome one.

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