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Counterfactual Ethnography: Imagining What It Takes to Live Differently

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues for the value of counterfactual narrative, and more specifically counterfactual ethnography, to anthropology at a time when the unfinished project of decolonizing the discipline has once again come to the fore and the matter of living differently has acquired new urgency in light of the accelerating climate emergency. In what follows, I will discuss some of the characteristics of counterfactual narratives, explain how they might be tailored to take more than a century of ethnographic practice into account, and offer three counterfactual ethnographic scenarios by way of illustration. Toward the end of the essay, which I hope will also serve as a beginning, I offer brief reflections on what sort of distinctive contribution counterfactual ethnography might make at a time when anthropologists have increasingly embraced the notion that a good part of anthropology's value for the wider society lies in an ethnographic record stuffed with examples of creative possibilities for what it means to be human.

KEY WORDS

Counterfactual ethnography, counterfactual narrative, speculative account, ontological turn, imaginative anthropology.

ETNOGRAFÍA CONTRAFACUAL: IMAGINANDO LO QUE SE NECESITA PARA VIVIR DE FORMA DIFERENTE

RESUMEN

Este ensayo defiende el valor de la narrativa contrafactual, y más concretamente de la etnografía contrafactual, para la antropología, en un momento en el que el proyecto inacabado de descolonizar la disciplina ha vuelto a pasar a primer plano y la cuestión de vivir de forma diferente ha adquirido una nueva urgencia a la luz de la aceleración de la emergencia climática. En lo que sigue, discutiré algunas de las características de las narrativas contrafactuales, explicaré cómo podrían adaptarse para tener en cuenta más de un siglo de práctica etnográfica, y ofreceré tres escenarios etnográficos contrafactuales a modo de ilustración. Hacia el final del ensayo, que espero que también sirva de comienzo, ofrezco breves reflexiones sobre qué tipo de contribución distintiva podría hacer la etnografía contrafactual, en un momento en el que los antropólogos han abrazado cada vez más la noción de que una buena parte del valor de la antropología para la sociedad en general radica en un registro etnográfico repleto de ejemplos de posibilidades creativas de lo que significa ser humano.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Etnografía contrafactual, narrativa contrafactual, relato especulativo, giro ontológico, antropología imaginativa.

The bankers may not know it... but the future will need the past.

(Fito Montes, on shepherding his family's century-old Barcelona pastry shop through the European debt crisis of 2009-2012. In Zuboff, 2019: 56.)

The past is the present.

(James Baldwin. In Baldwin and Mead, 1971.)

Picture yourself traveling on a train or a plane in a world where the coronavirus pandemic has not happened, to a 2021 AIBR Conference where all the participants meet IRL, “in real life,” rather than using the digital platforms so widely adopted while COVID raged. Someone takes the seat next to you. You do not flinch, recoil, reach for your mask, or feel tempted to hold your breath: remember, in this happier world, there is no pandemic. The two of you pass the time by making conversation, laid upon a foundation of polite inquiries, as the window in your row continuously reframes passing clouds or villages.

“What do you do?” the companionate stranger asks, meaning, “What do you do for work?” This opening gambit is common enough in venues where strangers of a certain age are unexpectedly thrown together, perhaps even more common if one of the interlocutors hails from North America. You reply, “I’m an anthropologist.” (Notice how I have smuggled an ancillary supposition into this speculative vignette, which invites you to adopt the garb of an anthropologist regardless of whether you would otherwise consider yourself a veterinarian or a literary critic or a plumber.) Because you know all too well that many people — anthropologists included — are never quite certain what anthropology is, or at least how to describe it, you are about to launch into an explanation when your stranger-companion perks up and announces, “I took an Introduction to Anthropology course at university. It was one of my favorite courses!” Or, alternatively, “Anthropologist? Like the ones on the Discovery Channel? You’re so lucky to go to far-off places where people live differently. It must be so exciting! I always wished I could do something like that.” Back to you, the trained ethnographer, always ready with a follow-up question: “What makes you think it would be so exciting?” “Why was it your favorite course?”

This is a simple illustration of a counterfactual narrative, predicated upon nonexistent conditions and events that never transpired. Anyone could attempt to demonstrate that the depictions in the narrative have no historical/empirical basis by marshaling various sorts of materials and bringing them forward as evidence. There was *in fact* a coronavirus pandemic underway in 2021 that left few untouched while it exploited exist-

ing fissures of inequality to decimate the poorest and most marginalized communities. The AIBR (Antropólogos Iberoamericanos en Red) Conference participants did *in fact* meet, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, but quite a few of them online rather than face-to-face, which historians or trivia masters of the future could attempt to verify using internet service provider logs, registration records, plenaries recorded on Zoom, digital traces scattered across emails and social media platforms, and so on. The chance encounter described in the counterfactual narrative could not have occurred, then, at least not in the form that it took, en route to this conference in a COVID-free world untrammelled by restrictions.

Yet although the encounter in the opening vignette never took place, *could not* have taken place under the conditions described, something can still be hazarded in the writing of this narrative about an ethnographically plausible exchange between imaginary interlocutors. The dialogue about memorable university courses and cinematic adventures echoes conversations that many anthropologists have had with strangers when they travel, even as it hints at political possibilities to be explored a bit later. In that sense, counterfactual narratives make good use of observation, historical events that *have* transpired, and contextual knowledge.

This essay argues for the value of counterfactual narrative, and more specifically counterfactual ethnography, to anthropology at a time when the unfinished project of decolonizing the discipline has once again come to the fore and the matter of living differently has acquired new urgency in light of the accelerating climate emergency. In what follows, I will discuss some of the characteristics of counterfactual narratives, explain how they might be tailored to take more than a century of ethnographic practice into account, and offer three counterfactual ethnographic scenarios by way of illustration. The first scenario considers how the results of my own first fieldwork during the 1980s with what we would now call LGBTQ+ communities in San Francisco might have been different had the HIV/AIDS pandemic never happened, and what difference that might have made for New Kinship Studies. The second scenario offers a glimpse of an alternate world of collaborative practice in which Malinowski's initial sojourn as an ethnographer in New Guinea was not solitary in the least, but rather profoundly shaped by friendship, in ways that set the stage for a more interdisciplinary future for ethnographic research which almost came to pass. The third scenario suggests what training a counterfactual lens on your own ethnographic work-in-progress might bring. Toward the end of the essay, which I hope will also serve as a beginning, I offer brief reflections on what sort of distinctive contribution counterfactual ethnog-

raphy might make at a time when anthropologists have increasingly embraced the notion that a good part of anthropology's value for the wider society lies in an ethnographic record stuffed with examples of creative possibilities for what it means to be human. What can the singular temporality of the counterfactual add to recent attempts to use anthropologies of the future, alongside more classic sociocultural comparisons, to help people imagine what it takes to live differently, *elsewise* or otherwise, as they forge new solidarities, grapple with persistent inequalities, and attempt to ward off ecological catastrophe?

At Play in the Fields of Counterfactualism

Counterfactual narratives begin with a foundational presumption that departs from a settled understanding of what has (or has not) “really” occurred — for instance, a coronavirus pandemic — but that is just the start. Embedded in most counterfactual narratives are what-if questions. What-if questions are incitements: incitements to investigate the difference that tweaking one particular element in an assemblage of existing, verifiable conditions might make. Some what-if questions are understated, some are politically potent, but all enlist a type of ethnographic curiosity, an attention to detail that puzzles over how things hook up, usually in the pursuit of a more capacious understanding. The stakes in a what-if encounter with a companionate stranger on a train or a plane might turn out to be trivial, or not. If the companionate stranger in the opening vignette were to reveal themselves as, say, another anthropologist, a well-placed politician, or a community activist, rather than as an enthusiast waxing nostalgic about a course once taken at university, a future collaboration might develop in the course of the narrative that could lead to all sorts of things.

When I was growing up in mid-twentieth-century Chicago in the United States, it was quite common to hear adults describe childhood development as divided into stages organized by interrogatories. Like little journalists, children were said to frame “what” questions first (“What’s that?”) as they learned the names for things, then move quickly through the locators (who, when, where) and on to the more insurgent questions: how and why. The influence at the time of popularized versions of Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development was palpable. The “how” stage often proved comical or nonsensical. (Parent: “It’s time for dinner.” Child: “How?”) The “why” stage seemed interminable to parents, testing the limits of their knowledge and allowing resistance to infiltrate the quest for understanding. (Favorite aunt: “It’s bedtime.” Child: “Why?”)

In a sense, the children were asking not only journalistic but good ethnographic questions: How do people around here make arrangements to eat? Why do people follow the quotidian dictates of a machine called a clock? My own parents claimed I had extended the standard litany by adding “what if”: What if the sky only *looks* blue? What if my grandfather’s brother, Uncle Willard, had come home from the war instead of relocating to Plot 44, Row 44, Grave 19 in Epinal (Vosges) Cemetery in France? What if we could eat the poisonous red berries on the bushes outside our house without dying? What if my father had planted bushes with berries we *could* eat? Would that have made him a permaculturist dedicated to creating edible landscapes before his time? On and on it went: what if, what if, what if? It drove my parents mad.

Counterfactual narratives put this facility for posing what-if questions to somewhat better use by mobilizing additional suppositional questions to explore paths not taken. Suppose the conquistador Hernán Cortés had never been born. What might have changed for people living in the Americas? Imagine that locally generated electricity with direct current had triumphed over centralized alternating current and all cargo ships now had solar sails. What else would have changed in relation to these developments? What if governments had not deregulated and privatized healthcare in a wide swath of countries and awarded track-and-trace operations to for-profit enterprises, at considerable cost with little oversight? How might the coronavirus pandemic have played out differently? The speculative answers to such questions can give way to previously unimaginable developments when spun out into the length of a narrative.

Although both counterfactual narratives and speculative futures traffic in speculation, at first glance, the two might seem temporal opposites. Counterfactual narratives direct the inquisitive gaze of “what if” backward rather than forward, along a timeline that nestles reversals in well-established historical conditions. The train and the plane in the counterfactual narrative that opens this essay are historical technologies, integral to the setting though scarcely marked, whereas if I were mapping out a speculative future, I could easily evoke a futuristic orientation by describing some ingenious mode of transportation, yet to be invented, on which the two strangers meet. The characters in a counterfactual narrative will never take up residence on a supercontinent called the Stillness, like the ones in N.K. Jemisin’s superb *Broken Earth* trilogy, a speculative fiction destination without any geographically documented referent. Yet these genres are not always in tension. Counterfactual narratives rapidly unfold by moving on from an opening counterfactual premise to explore how things might have turned out differently, which has implications for

whatever was still to come. Indeed, many a counterfactual has issued from the desire for a survivable future, more equitable, less laden with grief. The profound moral and political implications of iconic counterfactual questions such as “what if Hitler had never come to power?” could not be clearer.

Any inquiry into conditions that are not, but might have been, creates opportunities to learn more about sociality and interdependencies in the world before what-if. In that sense, fully developed what-if scenarios have an affinity for some of the virtues claimed for ethnography: an attunement to difference and what makes a difference, close inspection of the relationship between material conditions and social relations, a talent for unsettling and denaturalizing what people already think they know. Now we are edging closer to more explicitly analytic applications of counterfactuals and applications more amenable to research.

In *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction*, literary critic Catherine Gallagher offers a formal definition of counterfactual discourse, “whether analytical or narrative [as] premised on a counterfactual historical hypothesis, which I define as an explicit or implicit past-tense, hypothetical, conditional conjecture pursued when the antecedent condition is known to be contrary to fact” (Gallagher, 2018: 2).¹ The “what-if” clause conveys that antecedent condition. Gallagher argues that to be convincing, a counterfactual hypothesis must venture probable consequences. When thinking about the shape that counterfactual ethnography might take, I am less concerned with probability than Gallagher, especially given the way that probability relies upon a peculiarly statistical conception of humanity.

Anthropologists have tended to spend much more time on *possibility* than *probability* as they explore the incalculable diversity of viable ways that humans have cultivated belonging, bid for power, passed the seasons, and understood or misunderstood one another here on Earth. Might counterfactual ethnography provide some creative inspiration for tackling the momentous challenges that now confront those same humans, especially when skillfully devised to foster a sense of possibility in near-worlds? Might it even serve as an antidote to political resignation of the type that can so easily insinuate itself into daily routines sculpted by creep-

1. This past-tense hypothetical distinguishes counterfactual discourse from other forms of speculative scholarly practice, such as Shange’s “heterotemporal study,” which draws on science fiction as well as the work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (Hardy, 2015) to situate itself “between the present durative tense of Black survivance and the future perfect of abolition” (Shange, 2020: 9).

ing authoritarianism, the expansion of surveillance, and rampant ecological destruction?

Shadowing every what-if question in a counterfactual narrative is an abandoned, unrecognized, or forsworn possibility. That possibility doubles as a reminder that social arrangements as they are could have been otherwise, and someday will be again. That reminder, in turn, when elaborated into an analytically oriented narrative, encourages close inspection of the conditions under which one thing leads to another, as well as scrutiny of premises about inevitability and the things one takes for granted. In the examples given above about coronavirus and *conquistadores* and sailing ships, the question is not necessarily what *would* have happened differently, but what *could* have happened differently, and with what sociopolitical implications. If only X had done Y, or Z had never happened, the speculative world laid out in a counterfactual narrative might have become a materially realized world, the kind of world that humans are fully capable of collaboratively building.

What Could Counterfactual Ethnography Look Like? A Speculative Account

History, philosophy, literature, and even science have all played in the fields of counterfactualism for some time now. Historians who want to help readers question the inevitability of well-established political, social, or economic outcomes have long availed themselves of “what if” scenarios (Bunzl, 2004; Maar, 2014). Philosophers have debated whether or not counterfactualism should be considered a form of thought experiment, of the kind already used to expose unwarranted assumptions (Menzies and Beebe, 2020). In the mid-nineteenth century, James Clerk Maxwell enlisted the figurative efforts of a molecule-sorting demon to help him work out the laws of thermodynamics. Einstein used “what if” scenarios, garbed as mental experiments, to help evaluate the status of other scientists’ truth claims. (What if there was a box filled with light? What if a single photon had escaped from it? [see Rovelli, 2014:19].) Psychologists have teamed up with philosophers to adopt counterfactuals as a method suited to achieving a better understanding of causality (Hoerl, McCormack and Beck, 2012). Political scientists have set about distinguishing plausible from implausible counterfactual propositions (Tetlock and Belkin, 1997). And speculative fiction, of course, has raised many a windmill on the chimerical foundations of the way it never was.

All the more striking, then, that anthropology, which has nurtured so many forms of experimental ethnography and made denaturalization its province, has scarcely participated in either the generation or the analysis of counterfactual scenarios. Why should this be so? And supposing that anthropologists were to become interested in taking the counterfactual in an ethnographic direction, what might that kind of ethnographic impulse look like, and what might it offer as a way of writing anthropology for our times?

When social anthropology began to come into its own in the early to mid-20th century, most of its examples of how to live otherwise emphasized elsewheres rather than elsewhere. Initially heralded as “the study of man” — a problematically gendered, deceptively atemporal designation — anthropology made it its business from the start to highlight the diverse modes of practice and belief that had emerged from universal human capacities. But it did all this by reaching for an ethnographic present, in real-time, or as synchronously as could be accomplished given the time-delay built into passage by steamer ship and the long duration of expeditions.

A certain sense of chronological time and momentous historical developments — especially “modernization” and “urbanization” — did underwrite those inquiries, of course. Discourses of the vanishing framed many early instances of fieldwork as social salvage operations directed at ostensibly disappearing peoples who were, *in fact*, often fighting the genocidal operations of settler colonialism in ways that scarcely figured in the pages of ethnographies. (As the title of one of Menominee poet Chrystos’s [1988] collections put it back in the 1980s: *Not Vanishing*.) A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s (1933) *The Andaman Islanders*, like other monographs from that era, adopted a tacitly historicized temporality of colonial “encounter” that managed to leave the ethnographic present tense undisturbed by relegating Indigenous periodizations such as “the time before dogs” to footnotes at the bottom of the pages.

Space and time also became conflated when ethnographers regarded the people they studied as representatives of a deeper past. Think about Robert Redfield, who pictured anthropology stepping into the breach between history and contemporaneity in a lecture from the mid-1930s with the title, “Anthropology: Unity and Diversity” (Redfield, 1936-37). Even he had a habit of treating the farthest-flung villages in networks of Mexican market towns as indicative of the way things used to be, rather than as entirely coeval participants in the network of economic exchanges he was studying (Redfield, 1956).

Since those days, many anthropologists have stopped writing in the ethnographic present, all too cognizant of the way it withholds history from communities, regions, and societies (see Wolf, 2010). Historical anthropology has come into its own. The ontological turn has given what used to be called ethno-temporalities a makeover. Shiny new anthropologies of the future have set about “visioning” and basking in the glamor of futurism more generally (Willow, 2020). Science fiction, in the hands of a gifted anthropologist such as Donna Haraway (2013), becomes allied with what she has called “speculative fabulation,” in which worlds issue from a temporal rift produced by nonexistent circumstances, but without any pesky, historically contingent, counterfactual foundation.

So it's not as though sociocultural anthropology carved out its bailiwick and decided to leave critical reflections on time to the historians, or for that matter, to the philosophers. Time has once again come to the fore theoretically in social anthropology, scrutinized with the kind of passion last seen a century ago during the evolution versus diffusionism debate. Yet all this resurgent interest in diverse temporalities, linear and nonlinear, has generated relatively little interest in counterfactuality or historically locating the subjunctive, their equally visionary and adamantly inquisitive cousins. Again: why?

Perhaps anthropologists have felt little need to resort to historicized “what-if” scenarios in order to work their denaturalizing magic because it is so easy to reach into the grab bag of ethnographic investigation to pull out a counterexample and use it to take issue with sweeping generalizations about mystical entities such as “human nature.” Why appeal to a counterfactual imagination when there are ethnographically documented instances already to hand to counter claims that we must resign ourselves to racism or punishing work hours or capitalism's deficiencies because there is no alternative to living just as we are? Why take the trouble to draw up a counterfactual elsewhere — a non-occurring historical antecedent — if human elsewheres and otherwhises are so freely available?

Be that as it may, counterfactual ethnography offers something unique: a chance to research socialities and happenings that people agree never existed, by considering how they are firmly tethered to socialities and happenings that did. No “elsewhere” offers this route to understanding. Whatever the reasons for the current state of the dominant temporalities that inhabit ethnographic writing, I hope to make a case for the importance of what *might* occur if anthropologists were to begin posing more counterfactual what-if questions.

The material for working up any counterfactual ethnographic scenario comes from the “thick context” provided in lavishly detailed eth-

nographies that anthropologists and our methodological allies in other disciplines have already produced. As with counterfactual history, the focus of a counterfactual ethnography remains on the particular incident or condition being negated. All the better to understand what unrealized powers lie in human capacities and what forms of solidarity might have been — and perhaps might yet be — developed rather than attenuated.

In “The Lure of Possible Futures: On Speculative Research,” Martin Savransky, Alex Wilkie, and Marsha Rosengarten argue that a speculative sensibility can be cultivated, particularly in disciplines that have not much honored it, in order to lend itself to the project of research (Savransky, Wilkie and Rosengarten, 2017). One way to begin cultivating that sensibility is by developing counterfactual scenarios. The next section introduces three counterfactual scenarios in response to an open invitation to write counterfactual ethnography. Each suggestively draws on different types of historical and ethnographic material to take the concept in a new direction. These scenarios are not meant to represent some comprehensive typology of what counterfactual ethnography is, or could be, but rather a set of preliminary forays into working with a novel concept. Because each scenario by definition incorporates a counterfactual antecedent, they collectively lay the groundwork for an interdisciplinary alliance between anthropology and history quite different from what the term “historical anthropology” usually encompasses.

Counterfactual Scenario #1: New Kinship Studies Skips a Beat

This first scenario demonstrates how to counterfactualize a key historical condition that prevailed during a period of fieldwork that underwrites an already published ethnography. In this case I am working with a book that I myself have published, but it need not be your own: any ethnography will do.

What if HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus, had never taken hold in a human population? What would such a deceptively simple counterfactual have preserved, altered, and swept away? There would certainly have been no HIV/AIDS pandemic occurring at the time I conducted my first field research in San Francisco in 1985-86. Imagine restoring in a single counterfactual instant all those foreclosed possibilities for longitudinal fieldwork with the many people who died after I interviewed them. What would have changed for me, as an ethnographer, if so many of the people with whom I worked at that time had not been lost? What would have changed for me personally, and thus for the kind of ethnographer I became, if the place in which I learned to be a practicing anthropologist

had not been steeped in a very particular sort of grief? What difference would it have made for the accounts and the arguments that appeared in the pages of *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, the book in which I wrote up the fieldwork results (Weston, 1997)?

From this set of questions, it is not too difficult to build out a counterfactual world in which the San Francisco bathhouses that had thrived as a hub for gay male socializing and erotic connection remained open. In this scenario there was no struggle between those who branded bathhouses as epicenters for virus transmission and community members who portrayed them as places to learn about safer sex. Likewise for the well-documented fight to change the English acronym PWA (People With AIDS) to PLWA (People Living With AIDS), to emphasize a lesson we still haven't learned: that a deadly virus brings with it things of great consequence for living, and the greatest concern is not always and everywhere death. From this scenario emerges a world that lacks the cooperative and political alliances lesbians forged with gay men in North American cities in response to the gravity of the pandemic, as they rose to the challenge of doing the needful, be it feeding someone's pet while they were in hospital or lobbying government and pharmaceutical companies to act. From a single counterfactual premise, most subsequent collaborations disappear between people who originally worked together on issues related to HIV/AIDS. So does a range of artifacts, including the colorful stickers of masked wrestlers in *lucha libre* costumes that helped convince kids to join the fight *contra el SIDA*.

And there is more. In counterfactual ethnography, things do not just counterfactually persist, like bathhouses, or disappear, like friendly neighborhood lesbians offering to walk your dog in a gesture of compassion and solidarity. Clearly the chapter in *Families We Choose* called "Parenting in the Age of AIDS" would have to be reexamined, along with its findings about how a growing understanding of HIV and its transmission affected established relationships in the community. Without HIV, would lesbians who wished to parent biologically have continued to ask gay male friends to become sperm donors, instead of renouncing the practice? Very possibly. Would there still have been a lesbian baby boom in the San Francisco of the 1980s? Perhaps not. But why not?

In that "Parenting in the Age of AIDS" chapter, I contended that the rising interest in parenting among lesbians at the time occurred "in a lived context that presented contrasts between life and death as something much more than a cognitive opposition of transcendent categories" (Weston, 1997: 183). The cultural opposition between life and death would still have been there. But without a cataclysmic development like

AIDS that witnessed scores of young people suddenly dying before their culturally allotted time, would the relationship between demographic changes in parenting and awareness of mortality still hold? This is how a counterfactual highlights connection and offers an opportunity to reassess the validity of a line of argumentation.

Having contemplated remainders and absences, a speculative exercise in counterfactual world-building like this can go on to draw on ethnographic material to consider what sorts of possibilities might reasonably have opened up with the counterfactual premise in place. How would the plot have changed? Here the scope for counterfactual narrative expands. If a researcher is so inclined, for instance, they can craft a counterfactual ethnography with an eye for political possibilities.

In the future that emerged without the decimation that HIV/AIDS visited on queer communities during those years when there was no treatment in sight, what else might have happened? Without the affective pull to solidify ties of belonging in the face of their suddenly inescapable evanescence, “gay marriage” might not have come to dominate activist organizing and eventually the headlines. Kinship talk might not have become the order of the day. Alternatively, “families of friends” might have received more social emphasis relative to couples, parenting, and attempts to mend relationships with families of origin as people got sick (see Bradway, Freeman, and Weston, in press). All this, in turn, might well have affected the place that *Families We Choose* assumed as an ethnography in the pantheon of books associated with what came to be known as the New Kinship Studies within anthropology. After all, many of the book’s conclusions and points of emphasis would have changed. Like any counterfactual ethnography, this one, once elaborated, would provide insights into relationships as they did “in fact” unfold, at a time when tens of thousands embroidered sequined wishes onto the AIDS Quilt in one last monumental love letter to those who had walked on.

Counterfactual Scenario #2: The Ethnographer Never Rides Alone

The second scenario counterfactualizes a key element in an event that transpired during the formative years when anthropology emerged as a discipline: Malinowski’s wartime exile/internment in New Guinea. That sojourn, which marked the mythic birth of *The Lone Ethnographer*, would transform field methodology and the requirements for qualification as an anthropologist. Like many counterfactual scenarios, this one is also shadowed by political and moral questions.

For class discussions about popular perceptions of anthropology and its relationship to colonialism, I have sometimes screened a clip from “Bronislaw Malinowski: God Professor,” part of the 2008 television action series, *The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones*. In that episode, Malinowski appears as a fatherly character who dispenses wisdom and snippets of ethnographic observations about yams when Indiana, a colonial-era action-seeker, magically washes up on the beach in front of Malinowski’s New Guinea hut. Students who know little about Malinowski or the scandal that ensued after publication of the racist passages in his diaries still often first learn of him as “The Father of Anthropology” who pioneered the method of extended immersive ethnographic fieldwork.² But what if?

What if World War I never happened and Malinowski was able to continue the island-hopping style of research that had “in fact” landed him first in Ceylon, then in Papua? This what-if erases Australia’s refusal to allow Malinowski, as a subject of an enemy power (Austria-Hungary), to return to Britain when war broke out. He would never have had the forced option that Australia gave him in 1914 to conduct research on an island for years and years until hostilities ended. Alternatively, what if World War I had happened, but Malinowski elected to go back to Europe with his friend and fight when he had the chance (he did have the chance), rather than remain in Melanesia in what amounted to a bespoke fieldwork internment camp for the duration of the war?

But wait: what friend? Isn’t Malinowski supposed to be the epitome of the Lone Ethnographer? You mean he didn’t go to Melanesia alone? He took a friend along to the field????

Indeed, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), later to become famous for his innovative theatrical scripts and avant-garde provocations, “in fact” accompanied Malinowski from Britain to Calais to Colombo to Papua, before returning to Europe to enlist in a military regiment after he and Malinowski had a falling-out. Malinowski had invited Witkiewicz to accompany him on his research trip partially out of kindness, and partially out of a conviction that a proper anthropological investigation required a photographer. The kindness was an attempt to help Witkiewicz through a difficult period after he had argued with his fiancée and the fiancée committed suicide. The conviction about properly equipped anthropological research was nurtured by Malinowski’s mentors, W.H.R. Rivers and Edvard Westermarck, who had flourished during the golden age of expe-

2. There are other plausible candidates for the post, but Malinowski for various reasons was the one who was canonized.

ditions, when teams of disparately trained researchers traveled together to locations such as the Torres Straits.

Malinowski lost the visual expertise and company of his friend after the two quarreled, the war began, and Witkiewicz decided to lend his talents to the Imperial Russian Army. Suppose, however, they had patched things up after a falling-out that was but one of many on record, and Witkiewicz had stayed. Anthropology might have moved on, as it did, from the age of large expensive expeditions yet continued to unfold as a collective, multidisciplinary endeavor. In this counterfactual instance, the legend of the Lone Ethnographer is no more.

Given the kind of person Witkiewicz was, with his irreverent takes on artistic conventions and politics of the day, what might have changed during these crucial years for ethnographic practice if the friendship had persisted and he had remained with Malinowski in Papua? Witkiewicz was, after all, the same writer who would go on to publish plays about his island sojourn, edgy scripts that were scathingly critical of the colonial order. He delighted in pranks and was not above indulging in a little counterfactuality of his own, on display in this bit of dialogue from one of his plays, “Metaphysics of a Two-Headed Calf” (Witkiewicz, 2015: 98):

Patricianello: Oh, that’s how it is, is it? So I’m to assume that it never took place?

Mother: What?

Patricianello: Your death, and everything that happened in New Guinea.

Mother: But of course. I don’t exist for you anymore. What more can a Mother do for her son than to stop existing for him as a Mother?

Witkiewicz also gave the occasional acerbic nod to speculative futures. These lines come from the same play (2015: 97):

Mirabella: In this new life of ours in the desert, I dare say you’ll drink up all my blood once the water runs out, Patricianello.

Parvis: We’ll see what happens. Death isn’t as difficult as you might think. Especially if it’s death for no apparent reason.

Now further suppose that during three counterfactual years of late-night conversations in a Papuan hut shared by Malinowski and this artist-writer, the two had an idea. They decided to try flipping the footnotes and the body of the text in one of the ethnographic accounts that

Malinowski set out to write. Recall that early ethnographies, written primarily in the ever-ever tense of the ethnographic present, typically sent readers to the footnotes (occasionally the introduction) to learn how colonialism was affecting Indigenous people. It was mainly in the footnotes of *The Andaman Islanders*, for example, that A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1933) informed readers that the officials running the British penal colony in the archipelago had herded Andamanese in the vicinity of Port Blair into “Andaman Homes,” where they lived quite differently than they had done before. As I mentioned earlier, it was also in the footnotes that he explained that Andamanese had their own way of marking the period before the arrival of Europeans, which they called “the time when there were no dogs, *Bibi poiye* = ‘Dog not’” (1933: 36). A collectively designed ethnography in which Witkiewicz and Malinowski flipped conventional notions about what constitutes supplementary material and what belongs in the text could have highlighted and historicized the impact of colonial incursions on the people anthropologists set out to study.

What would have been the implications of this shift? Early anthropologists might have been more prepared to recognize conjectural elements in their own presentist accounts, rather than being so quick to identify speculation with the historical inclinations of the older generation of diffusionists and evolutionists who had trained them. How many of the claims Malinowski and cohort tendered about rules, norms, functions, and structure depended on testimony about bygone ways of living offered by people in complicated conditions of colonial subjugation, incarceration, and imaginative resistance! Syphilis, land grabs, measles epidemics, and forced labor had already played havoc with that schematic world of mother’s brothers and moieties. On the other side of the time before dogs was the creative survivance of the time with dogs, when the coalition of groups known to Europeans as the Great Andamanese found an important place for dogs in their lives and took them hunting.

The line between the early ethnographer’s voiced synchronic question — “How do you X?” — and its shadowed histories — “How did you do X, back in the day?” — was never bright. Even ethnographies set adrift in the timeless ethnographic present were infused, on a close reading, with conjectural histories and speculative futures. How will you get back to doing X, assuming you want to get back to doing X, assuming there are enough people left to form clans when the epidemic ends, or assuming the British stop bombing your cattle?

In the Malinowski/Witkiewicz synergy scenario, an early provocation — an experimental ethnography, if you will — alters the trajectory of ethnographic methods by replacing the Lone Ethnographer with a much

more collaborative venture. The two create a radically altered ethnographic record with different affordances for the descendants of the people in New Guinea with whom Malinowski worked, people whose dailiness would otherwise have been shoehorned into functionalist analyses largely evacuated of history. Anthropology develops into a discipline both profoundly colonial and decolonizing from the start, the political fractures that divided its early practitioners more evident, with space for research grounded in friendship as well as the occasional husband-wife team. It becomes more difficult to codify anthropological fieldwork as a practice that edits out Indigenous research collaborators in order to be construed as a solitary interlude in the ethnographer's life.

Counterfactual Scenario #3: Now This Way, Now That

The third scenario counterfactualizes ethnography as an aid to writing it.

This time, imagine a book-length ethnography you have yet to write, or an ethnographic account you are just getting around to writing. Then imagine two chapters or two vignettes side-by-side, the first featuring an analysis of something drawn from your days of participant observation and interviews, the second a counterfactual rendition of whatever you set about analyzing in the first place. How could you use the counterfactual to highlight possibilities and the scope that is always available for meaningful action? What might you learn about sociality and interdependencies, as you originally observed them, by playing in the fields of the counterfactual? What alternatives open up in the process? This time, take your time. Build and analyze a counterfactual ethnography that far exceeds the brevity of these instructions.

All three of the counterfactual scenarios I have presented emphasize linkages that a purely spatialized frame such as “local/global” or an exclusive orientation to the future would have missed. You will have noticed that none of them are fleshed-out narratives, but merely prompts and sketches. The next step would be to elaborate them into full-fledged ethnographies. That, in turn, requires thick context, drawn not from speculation or conjecture, but from what can be empirically or archivally researched. In each ethnographic case, a counterfactual premise departs decisively from what happened historically, but that counterfactual premise must do its imaginative work by holding steady key elements of what actually transpired.

In the first scenario, with no HIV/AIDS pandemic, HIV/AIDS-focused groups such as Queer Nation and ACT UP would disappear from the pages, but other groups active in the 1980s such as Gay American Indians,

Dykes Against Racism Everywhere, and the samba troupe Sistah Boom would still be organizing the hell out of the San Francisco Bay Area. In the second scenario, despite their identification with the avant-garde, both Malinowski and Witkiewicz would remain men of their class and their time, born in Poland, traveling on limited funds rather than in grand colonial style, prone to expressing boredom and racist sentiments in their journals whenever their island adventures did not strike them as sufficiently exotic. In the third scenario, as you attend to the inevitable plot twists that a counterfactual introduces, the significance of certain details that you might have passed over becomes more apparent and you attend to possibilities you might otherwise have scarcely discerned.

Another Retrospective World Is Possible: Missed Ethnographic Insurgencies and Political Futures

Counterfactual narratives, Catherine Gallagher observes, “tend to be used in contexts where historical understanding aspires to be consequential in the world” (2018: 4). Being of use and being of consequence: this has also become a very anthropological preoccupation, in response to the demands of conscience and the demands of funders. Anthropologists eager to decolonize their syllabi may have largely consigned writing in the ethnographic present to the dustbin of history, but the use of ethnography to astonish, inspire, and tantalize readers by dangling the prospect of alternative ways to live is still very much with us.

Think of Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2011) call for an anthropology of the otherwise. Or the way that Anna Tsing (2015) draws on anthropology’s stash of “back of beyond” frames to situate her mushroom pickers “at the end of the world” before she recenters them at the heart of a quest for “the possibility of life in capitalist ruins.” Or the recent ethnographic interest in “traditional” technologies such as Kalahari sip wells and Bolivia’s *waru waru* irrigated agriculture for their value in adapting to climate change (Weston, in press). Or Anand Pandian’s attempt to fulfill anthropology’s “radical promise” by reworking ethnographic methods “to trace the outlines of a possible world within the seams of this one” (Pandian, 2019: 2). Even the most future-facing ethnographies that explore prospects for living differently take inspiration from already-existing or once-existing elsewheres and elsewhens. Somewhere, somewhen, humans practiced those practices, inhabited those cosmologies, and stepped into ontologies so artful yet diverse.

What does counterfactual ethnography add to this mix? By conjuring speculative scenarios out of carefully researched, socioculturally informed historical contexts, counterfactual ethnography arrives at something fictional, but only just. Counterfactuals produce not so much alternative visions as “instead” accountings: when one element fails to materialize historically, or materializes speculatively in another form, other things rise in its stead.

Like counterfactual history, counterfactual ethnography underscores contingency. Unlike historical fiction, it relies heavily on fieldwork and on uninstantiated possibilities that were always there. And unlike speculative futures, its narratives train an ethnographic gaze on things that, if they had transpired, would *already* have ushered people into a different world. It is important to note, however, that the relationship between possibilities opened and possibilities foreclosed may turn out to be as much about suffering and survivance, grief and structural violence, as the rosier prospects evoked in many futuristic anthropological reflections on alternative ways to live.

Not all possibilities are what Leibniz called “compossible,” meaning that not all possibilities can coexist. Sometimes impossibility happens because possibilities are logically inconsistent, but sometimes it is because they turn out to be impossible in cosmological or material terms (Brown and Chiek, 2016). Counterfactual ethnography, in the very sumptuousness of its anthropologically informed detail, also provides a way of getting at what makes certain ways of living differently compossible, but not others. It may be *possible* for police in the United States to refrain from pulling people over for Driving While Black and Driving While Brown, but it may not be *compossible* for that practice to stop while so many institutions persistently reproduce racial inequities. A counterfactual ethnography that stages a world in which death by traffic stop never becomes the terrifyingly quotidian possibility it is now would consult a host of ethnographies to determine what else would have had to change to make such a premise plausible: Laurence Ralph’s (2020) *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence*, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús’ (2019) “The Jungle Academy: Molding White Supremacy in American Police Recruits,” Savannah Shange’s (2019) discussion in *Progressive Dystopia* of how well-meaning reforms go astray, and more.

Although counterfactual narratives have been around for quite some time, they gained new prominence in the early twenty-first century against the backdrop of contentious political debates in which people disputed facts and scientific findings not only in their particulars but too often categorically. Not since the emergence of the concept of fact in early mod-

ern European legal history and its migration into the domain of science had the fact drawn so much attention and sparked so much controversy. Headlines mourned the demise of fact-based reasoning and marked the proliferation of technologically enhanced “deepfakes” that allow altered images to be mistaken for originals. Professors who used to offer lectures on “the invention of the fact” hesitated to do so in these altered political circumstances, worrying that students would perceive attempts to historicize the notion of a fact as a bid to undermine all truth claims. Michiko Kakutani’s *The Death of Truth* vaulted onto the *New York Times* best-seller list in the wake of polemics such as *Do Facts Matter?* that pondered the corrosive effects of “misinformation” on democracy (Hochschild and Einstein, 2015; Kakutani, 2018).

In this political climate, counterfactual ethnography stages a double move of great importance. The counterfactual needs the factual in order to set up its distinguishing contrasts. Each of its what-if scenarios embraces and reaffirms an allegiance to knowledge attested by evidence. At the same time, counterfactual ethnography insists on the importance of going further by placing the production of knowledge in the kind of intricately researched context that facts (and their even more context-deprived spawn, factoids) typically screen out.

As the COVID-19 pandemic abates, there will be many more opportunities to sit down next to companionate strangers who explain how they loved taking anthropology courses for the panoramic possibilities those courses painted. Yet somehow, they did not know what to do in any practical sense with what they learned. After all, their own circumstances were so *different*. They hadn’t figured out how to connect their own ways of life and possibility to other modes of world-building that may have seemed far-off and required shared understandings. But what if — *what if?* — counterfactual ethnography can provide an imaginative bridge to people’s own near-futures, by giving them a tool to explore what is path-dependent and to identify latent possibilities?

In an exquisite elegy called, “Living in a World That No Longer Exists,” Curtis White, writing from the vantage point of his seventies, observes, “In the age of climate disruption, plague, and looming nuclear disaster (the Doomsday Clock moves imperceptibly forward each year as if in one of Zeno’s paradoxes), even the concept of ‘future’ feels like something from a lost world. ‘Concern for the future?’ we ask. ‘What future?’” (White, 2020: 69). Perhaps, in its recent turn to excavate possibilities for a future, anthropology, ever true to its colonial roots, is mounting one last salvage operation, but I would like to think otherwise. Not vanishing,

then, but searching for ways to bring along the ancestors and all the many paths that trail behind. A refusal to extinguish some while others live.

Let's suppose — to return to the prescient words of James Baldwin and Fito Montes — that the past is the present and the future needs the past.³ Then running parallel to today's legacies of genocide and bondage, to the inequities and the fights for survivance that followed in their wake, are counterfactual socialities that lead to different speculative outcomes and a better understanding of how things relate. At the heart of counterfactual ethnography are unrealized yet *once realizable* forms of political possibility, responsibility, and connection. Extinction, capitalism, carceral regimes, and military-industrial complexes no longer appear so inevitable. This is why counterfactual ethnography offers an antidote to resignation.

Things that never happened have shaped the present as surely as any path that brought you here. In contrast to the ambulatory encounters analyzed by James Clifford (1997) in his book *Routes*, or the bus trips I described in *Traveling Light* (Weston 2008), counterfactual ethnographies trace routes where the anthropologist stays in motion because the routes go to places where the bus and the plane and the oxcart never stopped. To enter these non-occurring worlds ethnographically, guided by the what-ifs that mark their junctures, is to train an imaginative eye on how possibilities and interdependencies work, rather than on speculative dreams or utopian vistas. Safe journeys.

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3. All the while realizing that even this supposition incorporates a counterfactual, since not all societies have historicized time and arranged it linearly or embraced time as an abstraction.

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