

From Attention to Distraction to Attention

Considering an ADD Anthropology

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Abstract

This essay draws from a contemporary turn in anthropological theory that calls for a shift in scholarly attention away from well-defined subjects of study, towards the interwoven networks of life on earth. I reflect on some of my own ethnographic experiences in the field, and the ways in which my mind and body wandered away from my bounded field-site to consider wider ecologies, and the cosmos at large. Reaching back into my own childhood, I reflect on the politics of socializing children in western society to 'pay attention' to the human world, and avoid being 'distracted' by the biological context of life on earth. To me, this is a tragic fallacy based on a simple conflation between attention and distraction. I invite anthropologists to consider the merits of doing fieldwork with a child-like attentiveness to life at large to ensure that they remain properly distracted from the normative theoretical and methodological constructs of the ethnographic endeavour.

Keywords

Attention; Ethnography; Ecological Consciousness; Life; Ontopoetics

When people ask me what I do as an anthropologist, the question often devolves to 'isn't that the study of bones?' Of course, archaeology is an integral field within the wider discipline, but it is not what I do. In response, I often explain that I study human life in its various forms, generally in an observable, everyday context. I try to articulate that anthropology is broad, and at times abstract, and perhaps not easily reducible to a simple stereotype. The general response that I have become accustomed to saying is 'I study people, and the world is my lab.'

One thing I have come to realize throughout my six years of graduate studies in anthropology is that the boundaries between my anthropological pursuits, and my life at large, are porous. My vision of anthropology entails a conceptual and interpretive way of seeing the world, tethered to empirical observations, and contextualized against the orchestra of abstract theories that echo through my mind at any given time. For better or for worse, however, I have yet to find an internal "off" switch that allows me to remove my anthropologist hat and approach life in any way other than the one I just described. I think through theory, embrace the phenomenology of my everyday existence, and ponder

constantly about my environments and myself. I would posit that most people I have come across do this, at least to some extent.

Living life, it seems, is very much like doing anthropology. We interact with people, reflect on these interactions, formulate perspectives on various matters, and proceed to produce narratives in our minds that make complex phenomena feel more graspable. This is in essence what I feel I do as an anthropologist.

But of course, anthropology is a specialized degree that involves significant theoretical and methodological training at the graduate level. As a pre-requisite for becoming an anthropologist, graduate students must undertake an educational process in 'thinking like an anthropologist' and 'doing ethnography.' In my own approach, I have followed a Geertzian model of ethnography, based on thoughtful attention to 'culture' and the social worlds of human subjects.² Informed by Malinowski's approach to moving 'off the verandah, and into the village,' I travelled to a rural village on the Mtwara peninsula of southeastern Tanzania to conduct ethnographic fieldwork.³ My aim, following Geertz, was to explicate the intricate cultural world I was examining by immersing myself within it.

Let me pause for a moment to acknowledge the fact that I cherish deeply the ethnographies of both Malinowski and Geertz. Both describe social scenes in poetic detail, attend to everyday subtleties, and attempt to grapple with the layers of symbolic meaning behind observable phenomena. As a young anthropologist entering the field for the first time, I found their works inspiring.

But their respective approaches to doing fieldwork share in common a normative theme that permeates throughout the discipline of sociocultural anthropology: That is, an attention to the social worlds of people. Often framed by the conceptual frameworks of culture and society, there is a general tendency within the discipline towards rituals, systems of beliefs, perceptions, behavioural practices, tenure systems, social institutions, and customs. Within the field of sociocultural anthropology, these are considered things that matter to ethnographers. I would not venture so far as to say that these things do not matter, for they certainly do. But they are not the only things that matter.

What I found when I entered the field and began my ethnographic journey as an anthropologist was that I was easily distracted away from these topics. The village where I was living was surrounded by a network of mangrove wetlands, beaches, forests, sand dunes, coral reefs, farmlands, rivers, and estuaries. The geographical area was home to a tremendous amount of biodiversity, both terrestrial and marine, which immediately captivated my mental imaginary upon arrival. I found myself exploring the mangroves, wandering through forests, free diving the reefs, traversing the shoreline, and watching wildlife. I was enthralled with the countless species of birds, snakes, crabs, rodents, fish, turtles, bats, spiders, and insects all around me, most of which I had never encountered before. I was captivated by the moon and the stars at night, illuminated so clearly in the night sky over the village, given the limited light pollution in the area. I found myself 'smitten'⁴ by wildlife, and 'enchanted'⁵ by the cosmos at large. This was a feeling that I had not felt for a long time, and certainly not one that I was meant to feel in the context of an ethnographic project.

Knowing that I was straying too far from the scope of anthropology, I felt programmed to consider myself 'distracted.' I was getting side tracked from my anthropological project – from what mattered. Upon further reflection, however, I have since begun to consider the possibility that it was in fact my anthropological project that was the distraction, a consideration that I attribute primarily to my reading of the works of Eduardo Kohn.⁶ If I am to think philosophically about what matters, following Kohn, I continually arrive back at the biological context of life on earth: our collective, planetary home, shared with plants and animals alike. Contextualized at this scale, which was the

distraction? Was I distracted as I wandered into the mangrove forests, free dove the reefs, watched crabs, mudskippers, and birds? Or was I paying attention?

Of course, my sentiment runs the risk of being categorized as ignorant if I am not to mention the privilege associated with this approach. I was conducting research in a post-colonial context, and although my own ancestry is complicated (my mother was born in Tanzania), there is a wider history and political economy in the region that certainly should not be overlooked. My stance is not to suggest that these things do not matter, but perhaps that paying attention to the planetary context around us is also meaningful and important. Furthermore, my intention is not to disregard anthropological engagement with indigenous cosmologies and worldviews, which arguably have much to offer in the pursuit of cultivating a global environmental ethic. Deborah Rose Bird's ethnographic work with the aboriginal peoples of Yarralin and Lingara in the Victoria River Valley of Australia's Northern Territory, for example, speaks to an interwoven matrix of life founded upon social, ecological and cosmological interdependence of humans and other-than-human actors tied together by an ethos of care.⁷ Rather, following Kohn and others who have inspired a 'multispecies turn' within the discipline, my intention is to re-articulate the potential merits of an anthropological approach that does not focus squarely on people, but relates to immersion within the planet. I am suggesting here, following several important scholars, a form of 'ontopoetic'⁸ engagement with the biological, planetary, and cosmological contexts in which we conduct fieldwork that involves attending actively to our environments, and allowing ourselves to be affected by our interactions with the variety of life forms all around us.⁹ My personal contribution to this discourse is that we need to rethink the terms attention and distraction in the context of ethnographic fieldwork.

Attention is a complex concept. It is both cognitive and cultural. I recall an instance from this past summer, when I was sitting on a dock with some friends, near our weekend cabin in Mandeville, Quebec. I commented to my companions about how still and calm everything was. My friends agreed. Suddenly, however, I felt like something clicked inside my mind and I realized that this was a misapprehension of reality. I began to pay thorough attention to my surroundings and quickly noted that everything around me was moving. Clouds swirled in the sky, tree branches danced in the wind, and lines rippled through the water as insects and tadpoles swam below. Even the dock upon which we sat swayed up and down, and by association, our own bodies. Everything was moving, I had just been filtering it out.

By attending to something, we often render ourselves blind to other things. Reversible figures used in the field of cognitive psychology illustrate this quite well. Most of us have seen these optical illusions, which present an image that can be perceived as two different objects (often a rabbit vs. a bird). The intriguing element is that we are only able to cognitively attend to one of the objects at a time. In doing so, we are blind to the other. I believe there is something interesting to ponder in the context of attending to either human social worlds or the biological context of life on earth. I am not by any means attempting to construct a false dichotomy between the two, as the reversible figures would indicate. I subscribe more to a school of thought that conceives of humans as within nature. However, I believe it has some merit as a metaphor to suggest that by attending exclusively to human cultural worlds, we may be overlooking the complex and interwoven assemblages of life that surround and intersect them. The question to me then becomes, 'how can we apprehend the grand nature of that which is actually around us all the time?' In thinking about this existential question, I arrive at the opening lines from William Blake's poem, *Auguries of Innocence*.¹⁰ As he writes,

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

In this context, I take these words to mean the act of fostering a deep attention to the minute, observable dimensions of the planet around us and treating them with the same respect as our abstract conceptions of the cosmos at large. To me, it connotes a theory that everything is multi-scalar and interconnected.

When I consider how one could apprehend the planet in this fashion, I find myself retracing my own history and reflecting on my childhood memories of being outside. Like my anthropological way of attending to human culture through ethnography, my way of attending to the world around me was socialized into me long ago in my early childhood. Education, after all, is a layered process of socialization that occurs across the lifespan at various stages, beginning with parents, families, friends, and teachers, through to graduate supervisors, colleagues, and so on. Education is a process of enculturation that shapes how we attend to things.

As a child, I recall a sense of wonder every time I stepped outside. Through my eyes, the world was vast and enchanting. Life was everywhere, and my attention was easily divided among the various observable storylines around me. I recall spending countless days watching ants carry supplies back to their hills, observing bees buzzing from flower to flower, running through the woods, breathing in the forest air, free diving in the lake near our cottage, searching for snakes under logs, and carefully flipping over rocks at the beach near my childhood home in the hopes of spotting crabs. As a child, I was fascinated by wildlife, and for that matter, all things alive and wondrous.

But as I matured, my child-like sense of wonder with the world came under fire from cultural norms and standard ways of being in western society. In elementary school, I learned not to stare out the window and watch birds during class. I learned that it was rude to avert my attention from a human speaker when a particularly large and enigmatic moth fluttered into the room. I learned that to function within the context of the human world around me, I needed to internalize cultural norms that necessitated my social survival. Children who do not transition into this humanist version of reality are often considered deviants, labelled as disordered patients with attention-deficit-disorder (ADD). Uncooperative children become collectively pathologized to ensure that the next generation of humans continue to reify our collective abstraction. Through institutionalization and socialization, children learn to pay attention to 'things that matter.' But there is something inherently wrong in this process. Rather than foster children with heightened senses of attentiveness, such processes actually distract them from the planetary context in which we are all embedded. Rather than rewarding those who curiously peer through the looking glass into the other lifeworlds that make up this planet, we reward those who are able to effectively filter them out. 'Good' behaviour is equated with an ability to focus exclusively on the symbolic human world that we have constructed. Children who once paid attention to the planet become distracted by things that have little consequence in the broader context of the entangled networks of life on earth. And yet we consider those individuals, who are perhaps the most attentive, as distractible – what a tragic fallacy.

Through this educational process in distraction, one's child-like sense of wonder with the world begins to dissolve. By adulthood, we become people who would rather watch a film on the back of an airplane seat, than ones who excitedly stare out the window and marvel at the feat of being thousands of feet above ground¹¹. As Amitav Ghosh suggests, we have become "deranged," and in the process, our discourses about the environment have become disenchanting.¹² Notions of progress dominate our imaginaries, both individually in terms of career and capital, and collectively in terms of economic development and prosperity. And with every step forward in human progress, we seem

to become more cognitively distanced from our wider biological context. In Alan Watt's words, "as a result of confusing the real world of nature with mere signs, such as bank balances and contracts, we are destroying nature. We are so tied up in our minds, that we've lost our senses. Time to wake up."¹³

We seem to be reaching a point where our ways of being on the planet are completely detethered from surrounding ecosystems. As Van Matre describes it, "there is a malaise upon the land."¹⁴ The question that is now being brought up in contemporary anthropological literature is 'how can we re-cultivate "arts of attentiveness" to the interwoven storylines of life on earth?'¹⁵ As Tsing writes, "we are beginning to imagine an environmentally engaged humanity in which other forms of life are everywhere."¹⁶ My thoughts in this regard are that we need to remember how to see the world as children. Life is encapsulated in the micro-level moments when spiders spin their webs, when bees pollenate flowers, and when ants carry supplies back to their hills. This, to me, is the 'real' real.¹⁷

Perhaps the child within us does not disappear completely as we carry out higher studies in arts and sciences. Loren Eiseley, for instance, speaks of a ghost self from his haunted childhood that lives within him and bubbles to the surface at times of particular emotional significance.¹⁸ In taking the viewpoint of his own spectre, he construes the world around him as alive. Along these lines, apprehending the world around us stems from listening to the child within.

But learning to listen to this inner child demands that we un-learn our adult ways of filtering out the tangled reality of life on earth. In the context of the material turn in the humanities and social sciences, this means looking beyond the complex and existentially disturbing human "dream worlds,"¹⁹ forged though culture and "alienated from nature,"²⁰ for connections between self and world and all things suspended within "the indefinable country which lies between the realm of natural objects and the human spirit."²¹

This leads me to the proposal that features in the title of this essay, an 'ADD anthropology.' My suggestion is born from consideration of the need to foster new forms of attentiveness to the planet that sustains us. In thinking through my own experiences in the field, in graduate school, and throughout my life, I have come to consider the possibility that thinking about what we 'should' be attending to in the course of our fieldwork distracts us from paying adequate attention to the environments around us. This suggestion is not intended to serve as a heavy-handed, polemic critique of my own discipline, but rather a light-hearted invitation to consider how the scope of the ethnographic endeavour can be suitably broadened. If we contextualize anthropology against the backdrop of a growing need to foster a collective 'ecological consciousness,'²² then the question becomes, 'what can, and should anthropology do?'

Recent scholarship is particularly promising in this regard. Eduardo Kohn's book *How Forests Think*,²³ Donna Haraway's attention to human-animal relations and temporality,²⁴ Van Dooren's (2014b) reflections on the lifeways of albatross,²⁵ and Tsing's ethnographic accounts of the social lives of mushrooms come to my mind immediately.²⁶ Numerous other scholars have also begun to steer the humanist 'raft'²⁷ of anthropology 'beyond the human'.²⁸

My personal realization, building from this body of literature, is that so much of human life in the context of western society is contingent upon filtering out the material realities of life on earth. But what would it mean to engage in a form of anthropology where our attentions are easily divided among the multitude of intersecting storylines all around us? What would it mean to take an approach that neither produces hierarchies between social worlds, nor attends exclusively to one while remaining blind to the others? Deborah Rose Bird's work is inspiring in this regard, striving through "passionate

immersion"²⁹ to attend to the voices of animals, plants, and humans alike who tell their own stories about the world in distinct yet equally important ways.³⁰ Pushing this further, what would it mean to foster an approach based on a foundational openness to getting distracted by anything and everything? Would this undermine the ethnographic endeavour, defined in terms of an anthropologist's long-term engagement with a particular set of subjects? Or would it enrich it? This would be an approach that values getting lost in the woods, gazing at the stars at night, watching insects, talking with people, observing birds, smelling flowers, and embracing our positions within an interconnected meshwork of life on earth. It would be an approach that does not reward rushing as a simple means of completing a study, publishing a paper, and finishing graduate studies. Rather, 'foot-dragging' and 'quickenning the pace' would be valued relative to current distractions. It would be about 'going with the flow' and tuning in to the rhythm of the planet, and the self. As Watts (1951) famously explains, "the only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance."³¹ Being 'distracted' by the world, I believe, is perhaps one of the finest ways of attending to it.

Ethnography is a means of coming to know our subjects and ourselves through thoughtful immersion in the social lives of others. Perhaps in allowing ourselves to become distracted from this pursuit, however, we may be better equipped to apprehend the planet around us. By oscillating in a poetic fashion from attention to distraction to attention, we may be able to re-enchant our discourses about the environment, and rekindle in ourselves a child-like appreciation for the complex networks of life on earth that surround and embrace us.

Notes

1. Justin Raycraft is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University, with specialization in environmental anthropology and photography. He is currently supported by a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
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- 6 See in particular: Kohn, E. (2013) *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- 7 See for instance: Bird Rose, D. (1992) *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
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- ¹⁵ See the following works: Van Dooren, T. et al. (2016); Van Dooren, T. (2014a); Van Dooren, T. (2014b); Tsing, A. (2015); Tsing, A. (2010)
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- ¹⁷ See: Kohn, E. (2014) 'What an ontological anthropology might mean', *Theorizing the Contemporary, Cultural Anthropology Website*, pp. 1.
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- ²¹ Eiseley, L. (1957) 'The Enchanted Glass', *The American Scholar*, 26(4), pp. 480.
- ²² See: Mathews, F. (2017) 'Reflections on etain addey, from the deep well: The diaries of pratale farm, eyebright books, Westbury UK, 2016', *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, (13), pp. 96.
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