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Pluriversal bodies: Researching care through embodied ethnography

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Abstract: *In this research note, I outline an approach to embodied experiences of care and caregiving in ethnographic scholarship on care. I describe how ethnographers of care and caregiving can use embodied methodologies, particularly through attending also to the cross-cultural differences in embodied experiences. In this research note, I bring together care research and cross-cultural embodied ethnography with my own work in Asia Pacific to outline an approach to researching care in the pluriverse – the multiple, overlapping realities of ontology, culture and experience that underpin all our lives. I draw on Annemarie Mol's conceptualisation of the body multiple (2002), Anna Tsing's understanding of awkward engagement (2005), Gibson-Graham's reading for difference (2020) and Sean Hsiang-lin Lei's research on hygiene (2014) to consider how researcher bodies might be useful in detecting pluriversal encounters in caregiving.*

Keywords: *care, China, embodied methods, ethnography, pluriverse*

Embodied knowledges of care

Embodied experiences of care and caregiving are integral to scholarship on care, and feminist care researchers have been at the forefront of writing about embodied methodologies of research in care as well as gender, sexuality, place, affect and digital experience (Grosz, 1994; Longhurst, 2001; Harcourt, 2009; Dombroski, 2011; Longhurst, 2013). Ethnographers of care and caregiving have also paid attention to embodied methodologies (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Hickey and Smith, 2020), attending also to the cross-cultural differences in embodied experiences (McKinnon and Dombroski, 2019). In this research note, I bring together feminist care research and cross-cultural embodied ethnography to outline an approach to researching care in the pluriverse – the multiple, overlapping realities of ontology, culture and experience that underpin all our lives. This commentary draws on a decade of care-related cross-cultural embodied ethnography, and finish with some reflections on how the *writing* of care ethnographies are important acts of caregiving for readers and collaborators.

Embodied experience is historically and culturally structured (Brown *et al.*, 2011). That is, place, space, culture and history all affect 'how we feel, how we perceive, and how we relate to our own bodies and the place they have in the order of things' (Brown *et al.*, 2011: 495). So what does this mean when we seek to research embodied experiences of care across culture? What does it mean to research embodied experiences of care within 'the ontological turn' that acknowledges the full ontological and cosmological reality in which different bodies are embedded and interconnected? As Annemarie Mol has so aptly demonstrated in her work *The Body Multiple*, even within a *single body* in a *single cultural context*, multiple realities are enacted and embodied through the practice of medicine (Mol, 2002). For John Law, the kinds of methods and methodologies required to investigate this messy situation of multiple overlapping realities must also be, well, *messy* (Law, 2004). And once again, he was writing within a relatively singular cultural context of what he calls 'Euro-America' – how much more is this messy truth apparent in the culturally diverse region of 'Asia Pacific'? In my experience in Asia Pacific, there is a constant

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push towards a singular world, a singular truth, a great singularity that our methods are thought to 'uncover' in this vast and diverse region of pulsating, interconnected, complicated life (see Dombroski, 2024). This 'one world-world', as John Law calls it, is a project of social construction unlike anything ever seen before. It not only demands that we all to work towards not just an ontological singularity in material sciences but also an ontological singularity in the social sciences. For Law, this is a kind of 'perspectivalism' (Law, 2004: 51) that asks us to imagine we are all just seeing different sides of the same (ultimately singular real) thing, rather than participating in the ongoing construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of realities themselves.

This latter understanding of ontological multiplicity – and its relationship to the material world – is what is meant by the term 'pluriverse' (Kothari *et al.*, 2019). Social science methods – methods through which we understand care and caregiving – are ultimately not just getting at and representing 'what is really happening' out there in care and caregiving, but are participating in the representation and enactment of care and caregiving itself (Mol, 2008). They can draw on very different ontologies of the body and of care, and produce very different sets of knowledge of care, caregiving and of the bodies caught up in those practices (Mol, 2002). Care thus, quite literally, participates in the making and proliferation of new realities (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). While this idea has been around for some time in different fields,[1] the pluriverse is a more recent concept that signals this ontology of multiplicity in a helpful way.

For Arturo Escobar, the pluriverse is a concept that helps us to 'stop burdening the Earth with the dualisms of the past centuries, and acknowledge the radical interrelatedness, openness, and plurality that inhabit it' (Escobar, 2011: 138). For the Zapatistas, it is 'a world in which many worlds fit' (as cited in Kothari *et al.*, 2019). For the writers of the book *Pluriverse: A postdevelopment dictionary*, a pluriverse refers to the range of ontologies which revive longstanding Indigenous worldviews, emerge from social movements or revisit older philosophies and traditions to ask 'what is a life worth living?' and 'what conditions allow such a thing to happen for all?', acknowledging the multiplicity and interconnected nature of the answers and 'worlds' that would allow this (Kothari *et al.*, 2019). For those of us interested in care and caregiving, the pluriverse is also about the different embodied and enacted worlds emerging from diverse practices of care in and with diverse bodies and places. Indeed, in many ways care is about producing pluriverses, if care is 'everything that is done to … maintain, continue, and repair "the world" so that *all* … can live in it as well as possible' and the world includes '*all* that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 162, rephrasing Tronto, 1993: 103).

Given all this, what kinds of methods can we use to produce care and caregiving knowledges that acknowledge the pluriversal specificities of bodies in place, the historical trajectories that have brought them there in that moment, and the interrelationships between bodies, researchers, knowledge, care and caregiving? It seems relatively clear from the outset that surveys, interviews and focus groups might not quite get at the multiple ontologies in which caregiving and care-receiving bodies are caught up in. But what else might we do? And what else might we do when such research is cross-cultural in nature? There are multiple answers to these questions, but I would like to answer with one particular response that traces its genesis through care-research, ethnography and Tsing's (2005) concept of 'awkward engagements'. Using examples from Tsing's own work on environmental care, Sean Hsiang-lin Lei's work on hygiene in Republican China, and my own work on infant care on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau,[2] I employ Tsing's concept of awkward engagements as a methodological intervention for the pluriverse.

Awkward engagements within and between bodies

Anna Tsing (1993) writes of a troubling cross-cultural ontological moment in her first book. A baby is born prematurely, and, it seems, in the Meratus cultural context she finds herself, it is not understood to be a baby as such. Rather, in the story she tells, it is something more like

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foetus – a potential human-life tragically cut short, who has no way to survive, so care is not given to prolong life in any way. When I first read this as a young mother of an infant, I found it deeply affecting. I imagined myself facing such a difficult cultural clash in my then-upcoming fieldwork. I found myself returning to this moment, where different ontologies of what it meant to be human played out in the moments after a too-early birth. Tsing's subsequent work on friction develops an alternative concept to 'cultural clash', examining how different 'universals' travel and awkwardly engage. These might be universals of the human body, the human life-course or the nature of society and environment play out in the Indonesian rainforests she works in (Tsing, 2005). Sometimes different universals have visibly clashed, as in her moment with the premature baby, but other times, they have awkwardly engaged and produced something else, a kind of progress, a friction where instead of two slippery ideas sliding past one another and never engaging, *something new happens*. Tsing gives examples of when something new happens in the environmental movements in Indonesia, where the different so-called universals emerging from different ontologies – students, Indigenous Orang Asli, non-government organisations – do not align but also do not clash. Instead, they somehow and sometimes engage productively to protect parts of the rainforest – often based on productive misunderstandings rather than mutual understanding.

Tsing writes of these productive misunderstandings as 'zones of awkward engagement', where 'words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak' (Tsing 2005: xi). In her writing, the awkward engagement is between these travelling universals, which engage awkwardly through individual and group interactions in transient zones of cultural friction, which 'arise out of encounters and interactions' (Tsing, 2005: xi). For Tsing, travelling universals produce friction in and between discourses of environment, progress, prosperity and more, and these result in different outcomes for the rainforest. Some might interpret this as a case of different people's values and understandings being negotiated in place to produce a shared outcome of mutual benefit. But this is not what Tsing is arguing. She insists that most of the time, shared understandings are *not* emerging, but that creative misinterpretations and slippages are just part of the contingencies contributing to new realities emerging.[3] She is also clear that it is not always a process of westernisation or homogenisation. While this has happened in many places, this is not *necessarily* what is always happening as different universals engage.

Another example of travelling universals of the body awkwardly engaging is the shift in hygiene practices in 1930s Republican China, studied by historian Sean Hsiang-lin Lei. He lays out the engagements between universals of the body and its relationship to place as found in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), and the emerging Japanese and Western-influenced approach to public health and hygiene (Lei, 2014). In this case, the geopolitics of the time played an enormous role in what story of the body was told, and which stories of how to care for its health collectively were enacted (Lei, 2010). Lei tells the story of Nie Yuntai, a Christian industrialist and public health reformer, who converted to Buddhism and began writing against the individualist understandings of health and bodies that were being implemented at the time (Lei, 2009). For Nie Yuntai, the kinds of practices individuals used to care for their own bodily health in the face of germ theory and tuberculosis – eating from shared dishes first, having one's own unshared cups and chopsticks and towels, having wash facilities at home – demonstrated a kind of *lack* of care for the collective (Lei, 2009). Because of a strong interconnected relationship between personal health, morality and states of mind in TCM, living in a way that prioritised individual health over collective cultural practices was thought to *result* in ill health (see Lei, 2009). In this example, the universals of the body as understood by TCM awkwardly engaged with the universals of the body as understood by biomedicine. They did not slide past each other, but engaged around the word '*weisheng*' or hygiene, enabling thinkers such as Nie Yuntai to ask those pluriversal questions 'what is a life worth living?' and 'what conditions allow such a thing to happen for all?'

In my own work in the far west of China, on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, awkward engagements featured as a way to examine what was

happening in caring for infants and new mothers (Dombroski, 2024). I was particularly interested in the universals of the body that were awkwardly engaging – usually within the same body. One fascinating example was the different understandings of how breastmilk was produced. One was informed by TCM, where breastmilk was produced by 'blood' travelling upward from the uterus along the Chong and Ren meridians, affected by flows of *qi* and blood through the body, which were in turn affected by food, seasons, illness, mental states and more (Hsiung, 1995). The other understanding also present was that informed by biomedicine, which understands breastmilk production as primarily about a supply and demand relationship related to infant suckling and only weakly linked to environment and emotion (mainly via hormones such as cortisol and oxytocin, see Dixon *et al*., 2013).

For many women I spoke to, the Western biomedical and TCM universalist understandings of breastmilk awkwardly engaged at different times in the breastfeeding journey. For example, directly after giving birth, the vast majority felt that their breastmilk would not yet be ready due to the loss of blood involved in giving birth. Yet they – and health practitioners caring for them – knew that babies sometimes did not have enough energy to latch and feed if they were not fed early enough after birth. The two universals of TCM and biomedicine awkwardly engaged to sometimes produce an outcome I felt very uncomfortable with: giving babies sugar water. Yet later in the breastfeeding journey, the two universals slid past each other, *not* engaging: the first 'month' of rest after birth informed by TCM understandings of health enabled breastfeeding to be established with very few reported difficulties and little engagement with biomedicine. Later again, the universals engaged when solids were introduced and breastfeeding challenges became apparent as mothers returned to work. The challenges of meeting the nutritional and emotional needs for good breastmilk production according to TCM, and the supply and demand requirements of overcoming breastfeeding difficulties according to Western medicine would at that time awkwardly engage to produce another form of action – where breastfeeding seemed too difficult and artificial formula seemed a better fit. This was a decision which financially benefited the corporations producing and advertising infant formula to the 'hot' Chinese market (see elaboration in Dombroski, 2013).

How did I come to notice the awkward engagements contributing to changes in infant feeding practice? While historian Sean Hsiang-lin Lei found the writings of a particular historical figure helpful in identifying such awkward engagements, for me, this happened in real time within my own body. Ethnography, as a methodology, relies on the body of the researcher being embedded in the place of research (McKinnon and Dombroski, 2019).[4] Much of what we learn as ethnographers comes through our embodied and developing sense of what is culturally 'right' or 'wrong' in a particular situation. For me, working in the city of Xining on infant care in the early 2000s, I developed an embodied sense of what was 'right' and 'wrong' with reference to my own infant, who accompanied me. I noticed that it did not feel right to put her on the floor, even though in Australia and New Zealand (where I had also cared for her), putting infants on the floor was pretty normal (Dombroski, 2011). This felt like a weird sense of being watched, my heart beating more rapidly, and a shortness in the way I spoke to my husband. It felt awkward, in a more-than-rational, unexplained way. In some way, my body had picked up local norms before conscious thought had caught up.

Equally, I felt awkward in situations where I knew something was normal, but I could not feel comfortable with it in my body. When my neighbour held out their baby grandchild over the tiled floor to urinate, then mopped it up, I understood this as rational action based on what surface was easiest to clean – a baby's clothing, an adult's clothing, a couch versus the simple action of mopping a small puddle off the floor (see discussion in Dombroski, 2015). But in my body it felt wrong somehow, like the ghost of my briskly efficient toilet-trainer grandmother lingering nearby. It played out in the way I found myself quickly whisking my daughter off the couch and running her to the bathroom, adding a higher degree of stress and pressure than my neighbour's calm acceptance of floor wee. But noting these responses in myself was part of alerting me to the fact that something interesting was going on – a cultural

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difference in hygiene and space, an embodied norm I had absorbed without question to such a degree that it was part of my hygiene subjectivity. Awkward engagement as method is not about becoming culturally embedded without question. It is more about noticing the changes in my own body as it picks up the subtle changes around it. And it is about noticing my own embedded biases and immoveable realities as evidenced in some kind of stress response. In this usage, it is not so much about studying the way in which awkward engagements between universals produce something political (Tsing, 2005) or tracing historical might-have-beens (Lei, 2014), but about using awkward engagements as a way to access realities beyond our usual ones in the pluriverse world of many worlds.

Embodied reading and writing with care

It is not only embodied cultural norms that influence what we see in place, and what makes us feel awkward – but also what we read (Roelvink, 2016). Anmeng Liu and colleagues liken reading to a pair of glasses that we put on, filtering, distorting or clarifying what we see around us (Liu *et al*., 2020). For Gibson-Graham, cultivating a beginner's mind where the researcher intentionally adopts a stance of not-knowing is part of a practice of 'reading for difference', where not everything has to be incorporated into one grand social science narrative (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In the case of infant care in the far west of China, I was consciously drawing on Gibson-Graham's method of reading for difference – but developing an embodied version (Gibson-Graham, 2020). Even out of the field, I was able to 'read' an interview transcript for difference by paying attention to my embodied reactions to what the interviewee was saying – embodied horror felt as a nausea when I heard of babies not being fed breastmilk for days after birth, a feeling of warmth and solidarity with another mother who had difficulty with a lip-tied infant, and so on.

None of these embodied responses I mention earlier are objectively representing what is 'true' or 'right', but in paying attention to the body, I was able to note moments where *something was happening*, where the universals embedded in my body and cultural context were *engaging* with others' universals embedded in their bodies and cultural contexts – sometimes in multiple contradictory ways. A careful reading then, is one in which I pay attention to the way *reading* influences what I pay attention to – and I become aware of what that means for my research projects. Through such mindfulness of our bodies and our influences, scholars become more aware of what realities in the pluriverse we are attuned to, and what we might be missing or finding difficult to understand.

Such reading with care might also influence our writing with care. For me, writing with care is about paying attention to what worlds we are building with our writing – whose voices we are amplifying, what worlds we are making more real, what narratives we build through our engagement with theory, place, participants and more. Thus, in research on care and caregiving, we can also research and write *with* care, paying attention to how we write and for whom. In the case of infant feeding in the far west of China, it was about knowing the limits of my own commitments to certain realities and letting go of the mastery and control over 'the truth' that so often accompanies my efforts to research, understand and write. It was about representing multiplicity – the felt benefits of formula feeding for families and bodies between medical traditions of the body, despite my own commitment to breastfeeding (Dombroski, 2024). Or noticing and writing the patterns of social movement and infant care that allowed for a hygiene reality where babies and spaces were kept clean without nappies (Dombroski, 2018). The other aspect of writing with care is to write with care for the reader: with clarity, interest, grace and recognition of diverse startpoints when it comes to engaging with our work. Ethnographers tell stories, and many ethnographers work hard to make those stories readable and engaging. When we combine readability with an attention to what worlds we are building (and shutting off), that is writing with care in the pluriverse.

While thinking in terms of pluriverses is relatively new in academic work, as discussed in this research note, the ideas behind the pluriverse have long been present in writing on space, place and bodies in cross-cultural contexts in Asia Pacific, and in writing questioning the nature of reality itself. In this commentary, I

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have drawn attention to a method for embodied engagement with pluriversal caregiving worlds through practices of noticing awkward engagements, and through reading and writing with care. Such mindfulness enables us to better pay attention to pluriversal worlds, to multiple realities that overlap and engage through cross-cultural interaction in place and space. The bodies we inhabit and live through affect the kinds of worlds we participate in, and it is not always fully possible to get beyond them in our research work. We can, however, take care to pay attention to what our body notices, and what worlds we enact through our writing, both ethnographic and otherwise. It is this embodied, pluriversal ethnographic practice of care and caregiving that I have attempted to lay out in this research note.

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Notes

[1] I have mainly interacted with formal versions of this idea from science and technology studies – certainly Latour and Woolgar's (1979) *Laboratory Life* is an early articulation of the idea that we as researchers participate in the 'making' of realities. But more than these formal articulations, I have grown up in places where multiple ontologies co-exist in everyday life – as a young Pākehā/NZ European in Māori environments in my home nation of Aotearoa New Zealand, and of course, in my research times on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau with Tibetan, Chinese and Hui Muslim communities (see Bum, 2024). While this is a formal academic argument, it is important to note that the ideas are of course seeded and nurtured through experience as well.

[2] I have conducted research on and near the Qinghai-Tibet plateau since 2004. Most of the specifics for this research note refer to a period of ethnographic fieldwork in Xining in 2007, but draw on subsequent visits in 2009 and 2012, and thesis supervisions in the region. Recently I published a monograph drawing on this and other work (Dombroski, 2024), which has prompted new reflections on the methodologies I developed.

[3] A theme explored in more detail in her later work, such as *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Tsing, 2015).

[4] This is less true of virtual ethnography, which I have also done. But there is still an embodied element to it – even if it is just you as a researcher hunching over a keyboard or gazing distractedly at your phone a lot more.

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