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What is This?
The cultural politics of gesture
Reflections on the embodiment of ethnographic practice

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Abstract
Ethnographers enter the field as legible signs of otherness to their interlocutors. In this article, I explore the ramifications of my personal experience of being variously ‘read’ in the course of encounters in Bangkok, Thailand, to show how a gradual process of bodily inculcation can reduce the sense of difference and partially overcome the expectations induced by phenotype in particular, leading to greater access to the protected zones of cultural intimacy (including recognition of the newcomer’s linguistic capacities). Such transitions also entail a learned increase of ease with informal modes of embodiment, as opposed to postures signaling varieties of power that are intrusive and palpably foreign to local experience. The processes of mutual recognition thus described are embedded in political relations of international as well as inter-personal significance. They thus have multi-faceted consequences for the outcomes and implications of our research.

Keywords
embodiment, cultural intimacy, gesture, personal appearance, fieldwork, language

There is a curious separation in anthropological writing between the desire to be ‘relevant’ and to speak to the big issues on the one hand, and the equally powerful tendency to focus on very small details through which, in the most interesting work, the larger perspective becomes accessible through
new and more intimate angles of vision. One consequence of this, in an age of sound bites and quick fixes, is that anthropological writing often does not get the public attention that it deserves. This results in a lack of funding that in turn reflects a general unwillingness to take seriously the ‘mereness’ of gossip, gesture, casual encounters, and ordinary things in ordinary places. Consequently, despite all the talk about diversity (which itself has become reified and singularized), anthropology’s messages of complexity and the importance of detail come across as disconcerting rather than enlightening. They raise more hackles than dollars.

For their part, anthropologists have too often failed to follow through on the realization that the detail with which they seem so obsessed can be used to speak about major public issues in new ways. They usually fail, for example, to connect the details of gesture with the management and shaping of public space. Aside from the relatively mechanistic early efforts of writers such as E.T. Hall (1959) and Ray Birdwhistell (1952) to bring ‘proxemics’ and ‘kinesics’ into a relatively unified anthropology of space, the analysis of gesture has largely become a technical, quasi-linguistic exercise with virtually no analysis of the spatial organization of power or of the role of gesture in maintaining or subverting that power and its formal structures. The occasional exceptions to this tendency (e.g. Farnell, 1995; Williams, 1997) have certainly shifted the ground. But there are very few studies that examine, except in passing, the political dimensions of meaning-making through gesture as a theme that also holds implications for the ethnographer’s own participation in social life.

Some notable studies of embodiment in its social context – for example, Wacquant’s (2004) study of the pugilist’s body and Alter’s investigations of the Indian wrestler (1992) and the Indian yogi (2004); important studies of the regimentation of bodies in national sport (notably Brownell, 1995) – establish a clear connection between ideologies of identity and embodied practice. These, however, are recognized, formal, ‘set-apart’ contexts, and the analyses are less concerned with the technicalities of how to represent gesture without reducing it to the purely verbal. The informal and often unacknowledged (though not necessarily unrecognized) dimensions of gestural interaction, by contrast, rarely seem to merit extended treatment as channels for the highly localized reconfiguration of micropolitical relations. Cowan’s (1990) remarkable study of gesture, gender, and dance in northern Greece is a truly rare exception in that she breaks down the artificial distinction between formal events and everyday interaction, as befits a study of performativity, and at the same time shows how local talk about human movement is – these are my words, not hers – an explanation rather than a translation. I borrow the term ‘set-apart’ from her analysis of dance events. She acknowledges that separation as a specifically local perception, however, and shows how in practice the forms of dance and of everyday
movement are embedded in the same ideological matrix and in a shared, everyday cultural universe.

The more informal dimensions of gesture constitute one of the few modalities that, precisely because gesture does not necessarily involve verbalization and is often quite unreflexive, usually – though not invariably – escape the censorious eye of officialdom. Dances can be banned for lewdness, for example, but it is much harder to do the same with passing movements of the hand in conversation. When gesture does fall afoul of the bureaucratic establishment, as when teachers and parents try to discourage children from gesticulating too much in conversation, its disapproved status is the clearest guarantee that it is not going to be taken seriously. Hard to pin down, despised (or at least deprecated) even by those who use it, casual gesture resists sustained analysis, although there have certainly been important and in some cases successful attempts. In this sense gesture reveals the conceptual and empirical limits of the category of ‘intangible heritage’: its very evanescence is what makes it highly resistant to cataloguing or other forms of census. But this is precisely what makes it both useful and, often, effective. In public spaces, the public micro-performance of dissent – a pursing of the lips at the mention of a dictator’s name, the wordless whistling of songs composed by a prisoner of the regime (Herzfeld, 1997: 223–6) – subtly but insistently undermines the pretensions of absolute power. It is entirely possible to walk through a piazza with a jaunty insouciance that challenges a harsh ruler’s authority, and the deliberate and monumental theatricality of that space actually enhances and even enables such challenges for those who know how to read them.

These aspects of gesture, and especially the intersections of gesture with social space, condition the production of ethnographic knowledge. They index the zones of what I have called ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld, 2005), which is exactly where most ethnographers try to be. Gesture is a way of creating intimate communication while under public gaze; the members of a given society presumably all recognize more or less the same modalities even as official discourse denies their very existence, creating a special kind of competence that lies at the heart of what distinguishes ethnography from, say, journalism. By ‘cultural intimacy’ I do not simply mean close acquaintance with a culture but, rather, the zone of internal knowledge whereby members of a society recognize each other through their flaws and foibles rather than through their idealized typicality as heroic representatives of the nation. I call this mutuality a ‘fellowship of the flawed’ – flawed, that is, in the eyes of more powerful cultural brokers or nations – and I see in it an explanation of why, against all the odds, nation-states are able to command their citizens’ loyalty unto death. People do not necessarily sacrifice themselves for some abstract form of patriotism, though they may do so on occasion and may well be convinced that this was their underlying motive...
on others; instead, it is precisely that fellowship of the flawed that elicits their deepest affect, even though most would be reluctant to admit as much.

This space of ostensibly negative value that in fact conceals deep social bonds is above all a zone of discomfort with, and largely implicit critique of, the official discourse that in turn denies and condemns everything that constitutes cultural intimacy. Imagine the IRS admitting that what made Americans good citizens was their cleverness in avoiding taxes; imagine the Greek government conceding that it was mostly the ‘Turkish’ aspects of everyday life that provided the familiar contexts of sociability even among those serving in the army. This is why it is so difficult to put the idea of cultural intimacy across to an audience more used to the formal, historically grounded theories of nationalism served up by Anderson (1983), Gellner (1983) and Hobsbawm (1990). These more macro-political accounts suffer from two basic weaknesses. First, they are repressively top-down, representing nationalism (and therefore the affect that it inspires) as the invention of well-educated intellectuals; even Anderson’s emphasis on print capitalism fails to escape this limitation, and thus to explain why it is so often the least educated classes who sacrifice themselves most uncritically for the collective good of that abstract thing, the nation.

The second problem is that these authors largely endorse an intellectualist and elitist definition of culture. They also overlook the fact that, even after independence, many nations find themselves compelled to answer for their values to a larger audience that holds them to what I have called the ‘global hierarchy of value’ (Herzfeld, 2004); the bourgeois leadership owes its domestic hegemony to a fawning emulation of the cultural, moral, and political values of more powerful countries. That hierarchy may no longer be entirely Western in inspiration, but it still carries many of the West’s cherished official moral prescriptions and emphases. Yet many people – even within powerful Western countries – would find it very difficult to live their lives according to those values, and in fact seek comfort and company with those who share their addiction to very different ways of acting and thinking. As a result, cultural intimacy often consists of ‘what everyone knows’. This is inadmissible knowledge before the court of official opinion, and thus is often conveyed in idioms that escape the textual, verbocentric, and legalistic preoccupations of bureaucracy and formal education.

It seems to me that what is needed here, then, is to shift emphasis away from a fundamentally taxonomic ‘anthropology of gesture’, or even more attractively from an ‘anthropology of embodiment’, to an ‘embodied anthropology’.3 Gesture betrays many of these dimensions to those in the know, and it is itself seen as the expression of a loose sense of self-control, at least in northern Europe. Perhaps this is why gesticulation came to be associated there with disorder, excess, and inarticulacy, and consequently received such short shrift in schools. But there are also other modalities of
self-muting that keep threatening to escape into public view. In England, for example, Jews of my parents’ generation often lowered their voices when talking of anything Jewish – not, they thought, because it was somehow dangerous, but out of a defensive and perhaps misplaced sense of tact that served to reinforce the feeling that there was somehow something negative about that identity in the eyes of the majority population. Perhaps this habit encapsulated the experience of persecution, but it also seemed to me to encourage it, or at least, disturbingly, to reproduce the conditions under which one day it might again become thinkable.

There was also an element of expressed resentment in such self-muting – echoes, perhaps, of the ressentiment that, according to Liah Greenfeld (1992), is the foundational motivation of emergent nationalisms. Such psychological terminology may, however, be misleading; the issue is less one of how people feel than of how they begin to grope toward a sense of shared identity from a space where that identity is still felt to have negative value and where only that fellowship of the flawed offers some protection from a larger disapproval and its effects.

Here Edwin Ardener’s (1971: xlv) concept of ‘blank banners’ of protest would appear to be much more useful than any speculation about motivations, whether individual or collective. People’s bodily stance may index a sense of unease with the status quo – a stance that does not amount to ‘resistance’ in the sense popularized by James Scott (e.g. 1985; see, contra, Reed-Danahay, 1993), nor even a more inchoate notion of ‘muddling through’ (Scott, 1998: 328 et passim; De Certeau, 1984; Reed-Danahay, 1996), but rather something akin to the significantly named ‘cultural cringe’ that Australians sometimes claim to perceive in their stance toward the British. Bourdieu (2004; see Reed-Danahay, 2005: 25) clearly recognized such patterns in his personal experiences of embodiment and sought an explanation of what differentiated his bodily habitus from that of Parisian intellectuals of a more traditional stripe by invoking his small-town, working-class Béarnais upbringing. While these patterns are experienced individually, they coalesce as collective, cultural phenomena that afford a measure of surreptitious solidarity. That solidarity, when verbalized, also takes the form of self-mockery.

Indeed, it is important to remember that gesticulation is framed in the centers of power as the antithesis of logic, discursive precision, and dispassionate judgment. In the 19th century, the Neapolitan ‘pantomime’ – in practice, a particularly precise mode of conveying certain kinds of message – was taken as a sign of the backwardness of southern Italians, a role that it has continued to play, at least implicitly, in much of the more popularizing ethnographic literature on the Italian south. The idea that gesture is emotive and therefore not semantically precise is itself an expression of a condescension made possible by relations of extremely unequal cultural and
economic power; it appears early in the prejudices of 19th-century British writers about southern European peoples (notably, Tylor, 1964: 37). As such, it confirms the warnings of the Italian anthropologist Franco Lai (1992) about the ways in which anthropological and local attributions of backwardness reinforce each other and thereby collude in the maintenance of the status quo.

That being the case, I would suggest that we anthropologists should pay much closer attention – as Bourdieu did toward the end of his life (see Reed-Danahay, 2005: 28–9) – to what our own gestural patterns imply. This entails focusing not only on the subjective aspects of our performances, but also on the interpretations that our informants put on these. And I would like to reinforce the point with a vignette drawn, not from my own research (to which I will turn later), but from the excellent study of gambling and risk conducted by Thomas Malaby (2003, especially pp. 134–5) in the Cretan port town of Chania. In his richly self-mocking ethnographic description, Malaby pays exemplary attention, not only to his own sensations at learning to hold a coffee tray correctly, but also to the amused but also profoundly didactic reactions of his local informants. After that I will briefly draw from my own successive experiences in fieldwork in three countries – Greece, Italy, and Thailand – in order to draw out what I see as the most important consequences for our understanding of the public sphere of being able to acquire mastery of a local gestural system. Let me anticipate the argument a little by saying that, while I do not discount the significance of mastery for its own sake and as providing access to particular kinds of information, perhaps the most valuable category of that information is experienced through our own bodily experiences of cringing and posturing by turns – something perhaps too intimate to be described before an audience of critical academic peers.

Malaby and risk in Crete

What Malaby especially draws out in his discussion of serving in the Cretan coffee-house is the way in which a whole ideology of masculine heroics in the face of risk, as well as a realistic assessment that the courageous risk-taker is more likely to succeed than the hesitant pedant, can be discerned in the management of the male body. When he was too gingerly in his attempt to carry a tray of full coffee cups to the customers in one of his favored coffee-houses, Malaby was told in no uncertain terms that this was inappropriately timid and, indeed, when he began to develop a more insouciant manner, his confidence grew and the cups seemed ever more secure. This is a world, let us remember, in which precise attention to petty monetary debts (Herzfeld, 1991: 170) and measurement in craft
production (see Herzfeld, 2004) are both signs of weakness – of a pedantic scholasticism, or rather of an anti-Maussian bureaucratic ethos, that has no place in the dangerous marketplace of male reputations. It is also a world in which a palpably inept bodily stance (kormostasia) can elicit contempt – although it is worth noting that this criticism can be, and often is, articulated in words.\(^5\)

Malaby does not in fact tell us much about the gestures that accompanied his transformation; one wishes someone had filmed the various stages of his apprenticeship, although his rich description of the subjective experience is a surprisingly powerful substitute. The gradual mastery of the body-plus-space that his movements conveyed to his customers and informants emerges with striking clarity for his readers. It also effectively conveys the way in which ideologies are sedimented in bodily practices (see Connerton, 1989), although I would argue that this is also a space in which those same practices can be performatively deployed to bring about the kinds of ideational and attitudinal change that Gutmann (1996), for example, has observed in men in Mexico City.

Malaby’s description shows that, even though what he describes is a ‘nonverbal’ scene, it is well understood – and verbalized – by his informants, for whom it is quite explicitly a test. It may well be that his presence as a tall and fairly obviously foreign young man made it easier for his Cretan informants to objectify what they found odd about his way of moving (and what one can also observe in Western European and North American students trying to learn the steps of Greek dances with an intense focus on detail – and especially on their own feet – that makes little sense to their teachers). Improvisational styles are often the space of social grace; compare the beeper-timed precision of the Starbucks production line with the complex social engagement of an Italian barista and one can easily perceive the impact of industrialization and rationalization on the gestural component of social interaction. For the anthropologist, the challenge consists in becoming aware of the rhythms of movement and their relationship to encompassing social realities. The embodiment of experience is central to fieldwork; as Jenkins (1994: 452–3) nicely puts the matter, registering that embodiment is, for anthropologists and their informants alike, ‘an adequate method for grasping the ordering of everyday life’.

For most people, rendering these processes accessible does often mean trying to put them into words. ‘Dancing history’ (McCall, 2000) takes a remarkably skilled ethnographer to recognize it for what it is, for example, and it is not easy to communicate to those who have not yet felt the connection between the body’s trajectory and the passage of collective time. The relationship between embodiment and speaking is complex, but we should not forget that words are academics’ primary medium and that we are
therefore quite dependent on them for making sense-qua-reason out of sense-qua-feeling.

Roman gesture

Let me now shift my ethnographic focus to Rome, sometimes-reluctant capital of a major European country, and capital of a country where local self-stereotypes emphasize both loquacity and the liberal use of gesture (gestualità). Rome is a place where locals pride themselves on living in ‘villages’ (paesi), by which they mean face-to-face communities with marked, highly localized cultural peculiarities. That pride – almost an affection of cultural simplicity – is a bit deceptive; it goes hand-in-hand with a remarkable historiographical sophistication that is the envy of many other Italians, an ability to link the monuments and even the minor embellishments of the historic streets with a rich and to some extent popular historical literature. Roman informants who had enjoyed relatively short school careers were nonetheless adept users of local history, in part because this was a skill that brought access to the real resources of tourism, but predominately because in Rome the peculiar form of agonistic relations consists in precisely this skill at relating one’s life to the imposing ruins and religious architecture as well as the more scabrous stories of the city’s once teeming back alleys.

At the same time, not all their knowledge of the past was expressed in verbal terms. In the course of my fieldwork in Rome I became especially fascinated by the frequency of a gesture made with hands clasped together in a syncopated up-and-down movement that expresses affectionate exasperation, resignation to the obvious and the inevitable, and a conviction that the speaker is right. Before I explain the relevance of this gesture, let me recall that especially left-leaning Romans in the centro storico tend to be fiercely anticlerical, and particularly recall the hardships their ancestors endured under papal rule; they attribute to the harshness and authoritarianism of the papal authorities their own much-vaunted tendency to compromise with power while continuing to follow through on their own real intentions.

One butcher I asked about this, a man whose communist leanings and religious agnosticism made him especially acerbic about the role of the papacy in Roman history, used it to express his feelings about the fact that ‘we’ve sent the popes into exile . . . but the pope keeps coming back, I don’t know why’ – a phrase expressed in a strong Roman accent and with dialect forms of which this man is self-consciously proud. When I asked him what the gesture was about, he did not try to gloss it with a ‘translation’ but answered: ‘The gesture? The gesture is like this, it’s a papal gesture!’ This
helpfully ambiguous response attributes the origins of the gesture to the papal hand blessing, but the fact that in everyday life it is used less in benediction than in amiable exasperation suggests that the historical claim was as ironic in intent as, under the circumstances, it sounded. I should add that I incorporated this discussion into my film on Roman men’s memories, Monti Moments (Herzfeld, 2007), because I found that the power of this gesture to bring together different contexts of amused exasperation was every bit as telling as the historical pedigree that the butcher attributed to it. Thus, one man, an electrician, uses it to express his outrage at the banks’ failure to provide loans for artisans and small merchants – the majority of the older population where I was living – and accompanies it with the remark, ‘Italy is a land of conniving idlers (lazzaroni)!’ Another man, a retired taxi driver with a remarkable appetite for historical detail and a collector of historical books on Rome into the bargain, uses the same gesture to introduce the disreputable tales that he is intent on telling me, to the evident distress of the more respectable friend who was also participating in the conversation. It seems, in other words, to have served as a subtle marker for the zone of cultural intimacy among Romans skeptical of their state and church.

Given this context, the use of the gesture about the popes, no less than its attribution to the popes, suggests that beneath the resigned acceptance of papal power to which Romans attribute their long-lived sense of accommodation to power lies a capacity for irony that can always express itself through the body, even when language must be suppressed. It would have been hard even in the most repressive days of papal rule to arrest someone for expressing his emotions with his hands! And since the taxi-driver also wished to deflate the anthropologist – me – in a humorous vein, he used the same gesture when telling his companion that ‘the professor wants to hear the criminal scandals of that time’ and that he had once used ‘the professor’s’ visiting card to get into a rather closely guarded library – he may be a fine amateur historian, as indeed anyone who saw the film would immediately see, but here was an institutional barrier that his cooptation of one figure of apparent authority allowed him to subvert. This was a multiple triumph of wit in all the senses of that word.

The nature of gesture

Gesture is often accompanied by a highly exegetical disposition. Indeed, it seems to me that it is often anthropologists who are less aware of their embodied self-expression than are their informants. An exceptional few have reported on their informants’ reactions and on their own consequent learning process. Dorinne Kondo (1990), notably, felt uncomfortable in Japan because she looked Japanese but moved like a foreigner – thereby
subverting well-established boundaries and challenging the contours of ‘place’ (in Douglas’s [1966] sense). Roxanne Varzi (2006: 113), conversely, seeing her reflected body clad in Islamic black in Tehran, baulks at the strangeness of the image of a self ostensibly conquered by a religious state ideology, but finally, cautiously, concludes that ‘certain clues cannot be ignored: somewhere in there I am’.

The interplay of framing such as clothing, phenotype, and gesture is indeed of considerable importance, though not necessarily in ways that we anticipate. (Cretan villagers speak of individuals’ profora – literally, ‘pronunciation’ – as meaning the way they ‘look’.) There is presumably also some mutual effect operating between language proficiency and the degree to which a visitor’s physical movements harmonize with those of the locals – and harmony may well be of the essence; watching Thai women awaiting the start of a community meeting fanning themselves, initially individually and then gradually with greater and greater synchronization of their movements, suggested to me that the Thai-Buddhist ideals of harmony were literally embodied here, providing a soothing backdrop to the stormy discussions soon to follow. It struck me then that, as the women began to develop more and more choreographic symmetry in their movements, they also began to ‘look’ more and more alike. They were preparing the cultural basso continuo for a space of public discourse.

But in fact I had a more direct personal experience of how language and gesture interacted through my own learning of Thai, and this offered an important insight into the ways in which the intimate access desired by anthropologists depends heavily on a mastery that in many cases is not self-consciously acquired, even though it can form the explicit topic of a discussion both locally and with colleagues. It is constrained by a politics of identity grounded more in racial than in cultural attributes and capable of producing brutally polite forms of rejection (‘where are you really from?’) that interrupt such processes of transition, as European citizens of Asian and African descent often discover – especially when they do not speak what are supposed to be their ‘native’ languages (Ang, 2001: 29–34). In this sense, the politics of phenotype limits an actor’s capacity to manage the politics of specifically cultural aspects of appearance, gesture and language included. Partial success is nevertheless feasible – but of necessity it usually remains partial, because phenotype is always lurking in the background, ready to jump forward and disrupt the pleasant experience of acceptance. On the other hand, an anthropologist should arguably always be ready to embrace the sharing of cultural traits that such conditional acceptance implies, rather than expecting to indulge in the no less prejudice-laden fantasy of ‘going native’ altogether.

When I first went to do fieldwork in Bangkok, although I had already reached a hypothetical level of proficiency that allowed me to engage with
my academic peers in (no doubt deeply flawed) Thai, it was extremely difficult to get ordinary people on the street to respond to me in that language. Given the amount of effort that as a middle-aged man I had needed to put into learning it, I was predictably somewhat annoyed by this lack of response, and would sometimes expostulate, ‘But I’m speaking to you in Thai’ – using a hand gesture that I later came to realize seemed either strange or, indeed, threatening, and that was almost certainly a residue of my Italian fieldwork of a few months earlier.6

Anthropologists might thus usefully reflect on the implications of their absorption, not of an entire culture, but – with much greater ease and proficiency than they usually achieve with language, at least in the early stages – of its incorporated aspect; if they work in more than one place, they may acquire a variegated and internally dissonant repertoire, as happened to me. My expostulatory gesture, which in Italy would have been considered expressive of a normatively theatrical combativeness, did no more good than an explosive complaint would have done – and explosive complaints do absolutely no good at all. The usual Thai response to any expression of serious anger is an impenetrably charming smile of thanks – the most effective way I have ever seen of deflecting anger back on the person who is expressing it. I felt baffled, humiliated, and stupid.

Thus discouraged after a summer of repeated blank stares and incomprehension, I returned to the United States for three months. Immediately after my return to Bangkok, to my astonishment someone asked me for directions on the street.7 And almost everyone with whom I talked now responded in Thai. I was elated, but totally astonished – until, one day some weeks later, a food vendor I knew told a woman who was passing by and expressed surprise that I spoke Thai, ‘He looks Thai too.’8 In some perplexity I pointed to my face: ‘I have a farang face.’ ‘That doesn’t matter,’ the answer came back. ‘You have Thai gesture (mii thaa thaang thai). And at that moment I suddenly became aware – discursively educated by my vendor friend – that I was trying not to stand over her,9 was using my hands in a completely different way, and was experiencing a certain amount of facial muscle ache (presumably because of the greater degree of nuanced smiling through which Thais express a range of social attitudes). I was also vaguely aware, and became much more so in subsequent months, that although – or because – this woman was arguably of lower status than I was, I was hunching myself deferentially as someone who was unsure of his ability to speak properly (the Thai cringe known as jawng-jawng)10 – an appropriate form of courtesy in that I had no desire to play the equally performative role of either the ‘bandit’ (naklaeng) or the ‘aristocrat’ (nai). Because jawng-jawng embodies a more collective, cultural cringe, much as the sullen stance of craft apprentices in Crete encapsulates larger Greek self-stereotypes of resentment and cunning, a foreigner who engages in it ends
up ‘looking Thai’ without much difficulty. It is not the stance expected of a farang.

After this experience I came to realize that ‘looking Thai’ in this sense had nothing to do with phenotype, although that is usually the first clue that triggers the assumption that one cannot speak Thai. Like many others in Thailand (or, for example, in Thai restaurants abroad), I have sometimes, in the company of East Asians who did not speak Thai, caused confusion for my Thai interlocutors by doing so. The first reaction is usually to assume that the Asian person must have uttered the words, or at least that this is the person with whom the conversation should now properly continue. When the interaction places more emphasis on gesture and voice, however, the physical face is not so much back-grounded (Douglas, 1975: 7) as relegated to a secondary level of importance, so that ‘looking [like a] Thai’ comes to convey a sense of familiarity and comfort rather than attention to phenotype.

At the time of this incident, I was regularly engaged in some evaluation work for a committee under the Ministry of Research in France. A few months after my epiphany in Bangkok, I had to go to France for some meetings of the group. I was concerned that, now that my Thai felt so much more comfortable, I would suddenly have difficulty with French instead. I need not have worried; French is a language I have spoken fluently since my teens. But I got some strange looks – until I realized that I was performing jawng-jawng in a meeting where a senior academic would normally be expected to do some haughty lip-pursing and generally affect indifference to the opinions of others. I began this unfortunate performance by entering the room with my hands pressed together in the familiar Thai gesture of de-ference and gratitude (wai), ducking my head to make sure I was not disturbing the view of those already seated. To make matters worse, I tried to offer a respectful wai of thanks to a colleague who came up to give me a book as a gift. As I recall now, it must have been a slightly panicked look in this man’s eye at this strange behavior – an astonishment that I reciprocated by wondering why he was so rudely handing me the book with one hand (and his left hand at that!) instead of both hands together – that finally got me to pull myself together. Another colleague, an old friend, was briefly put out by my unintentional (but apparently all too obvious) blanching when he came to embrace me; Thais rarely touch each other.

Now I am definitely not arguing that I had suddenly become Thai, or that I was speaking Thai particularly well. (This unaccustomed modesty may nevertheless also be a Thai verbal gesture, as is the irony that leads me to show it in the first place.) I do not think that anthropologists easily ‘go native’, simply because I do not believe that there are discrete cultures anyway. There are many anthropologists who romantically assume a pose of complete cultural conversion, but most simply accept that they are
influenced in varying degrees by the cultures they study. I was simply adding another layer to the complex sediments of cultural habitus to which my anthropological vagrancy had exposed me and in which my Thai friends had seasoned me. In my hunching and scrunching, and in my sudden and totally unaccustomed attacks of deference, I was demonstrating a no doubt amusingly imperfect command of a cultural idiom on which the least educated of my Thai informants and observers (yes, they are observers too!) could have confidently passed explicit judgment, but that was utterly puzzling to my French colleagues, heirs to very different attitudes toward the appropriate public comportment of intellectuals. I had been adapting, not without awkwardness: think of those Greek dances again, though I am told that in my younger days I could do them quite well! And note how my arrogance quotient increases when I shift the frame of reference from Thailand to Greece – I am now thinking in a different language, as it were.

More than that, in expressing deference I was substantively rejecting the role that most Thais associate with farang (white-skinned foreigners, a category that carries overtones of anti-colonial resentment but that many Thais claim to be affectively neutral). That role is one of overbearing insistence on being served and treated with deference. By showing deference myself, I was encouraging my interlocutors to be more tolerant with me in turn. That stance did not serve me particularly well in France, but in Thailand it had already begun to make my life a great deal easier and, I hope, made me less of an embarrassing burden to my kindly Thai friends.

The key to all this is, I suggest, that anthropologists are always to some extent ‘off stage and on display’ (see Shryock, 2004). They are constantly under observation, but they are not performing for a public. On the contrary, the goal of good ethnography, as I have argued in Cultural Intimacy, must always be to achieve an intimate rapport with informants. Gesture, then, is one way in which anthropologists perform their definitive task of entering the zone of cultural intimacy in a way that signals with a discretion that is only effective because it signals in a sufficiently public way that they are already privy to intimate secrets. A real mastery of the public sphere is demonstrated in the ability to convey messages clearly to those in the know while excluding others without necessarily letting these others realize that this is what is happening. When anthropologists act in this way, they are trying to get their informants to get off the stage and whisper all those intimate and slightly disreputable bits of gossip that make good, juicy ethnographic data. But it is in the nature of fieldwork that one often does not have the opportunity to get one’s informants away from the crowd. Signaling that one is a virtual insider in the midst of a public space is thus the most effective way of achieving the necessary rapport, perhaps reserving a more private meeting for later (much as a glance used to be the only basis for initiating relationships between young men and women in
southern European societies [see, e.g., Cutileiro, 1971].) Getting the
gestures even partially right in the busy market street where I lived gave me
moments of pure pleasure that compensated enormously for the months of
sheer frustration during which I was too obtuse to realize how clumsy I was
being.

Let me illustrate this point about secretive behavior in public spaces with
a very different example – from the Greek island of Crete, where coffee-
houses are pre-eminently spaces of male self-display and agonistic
confrontation. While I was working in a mountain village where the
pastoral majority of adult males were heavily invested in reciprocal animal-
rustling, creating chains of contest and alliance in relations with other
villages in the area (Herzfeld, 1985), I had made it a matter of principle
(and prudence!) to resist my sheep-stealing friends’ attempts to lure me into
going raiding with them. But when one especially persuasive character
overcame my scruples and I assented, we first went to the coffee-house for
some prior refreshment. There, he made me wait on tenterhooks until he
had decided the time was ripe – perhaps two hours later! At that point, he
made an inquiring gesture with head and hand. I replied – verbally, since
this was my habitual, academic mode – by asking whether we were in fact
now ready to go. He then tossed his head in a contemptuous, silent denial,
and we sat for a while longer. When we eventually left and I demanded to
know what he thought he was doing, he said, ‘I made a gesture (noima) to
you, but you spoke!’

The message was clear, if indirect. Verbally incontinent, I would have
made a terrible thief, and put us both at risk. In short, I failed the test of
learning to master the private mode of communication in a public space –
where, nevertheless, the fact that almost everyone else is indeed a cultural
intimate means that the risk of exposure is still very much present and
indeed contributes to the masculinity of those embarking on the adventure
(see Malaby, 2003). The simple public-private opposition fails to capture
this complex interweaving that is itself constitutive of social mastery.

But in a more general way most of us can and do learn a basic level of
gestural mastery. In that effort, willy-nilly (if we are any good at our job),
we start to move and sound like the locals. That again does not mean that
we have suddenly become local, and in some cultures and political camps
people actually resent foreigners who learn the language too well – as some
Greeks rather irritably tell me, ‘You’ve gotten into our uncharted waters.’
Language ideologies (Schieffelin et al., 1998) are an important part of the
story.

But why do we call them language ideologies? They are, rather, the
submerged culture ideologies – not those of officialdom, but the ones that
constitute what I have called the cultural intimacy that rejects official
values and the foreign presence that so often seems to be responsible for
perpetuating those values. They are the culturally intimate ideologies that people parade – on display, again – in public space. That space is their public space; the town square is a collective place of privacy, and now that, as with the piazzas of so many Italian cities, it is teeming with inquisitive and insensitive tourists, a nod and a wink would give the locals much greater purchase than the rhetorical orotundities for which these squares were originally constructed. It is no coincidence that for at least one anthropologically informed Italian student of architecture the creation of a public space is itself a form of ‘gesture’ (*gesto*) (Abruzzese, 1992: 94).

These public spaces were surely never constructed only for verbal rhetoric and grand oratorical gesticulation. The point of a theatrical space is that the audience is always present, always involved. Those fine declamatory arm-flingings must then also be read against the curled lip and raised eyebrow (or their local cultural equivalents) in the audience. And when the waiter comes toward you staring anxiously at his tray instead of nonchalantly dashing through the crowd with the tray balanced on one hand, you know, as a local, that something is wrong, discordant. You see that figure in local costume, speaking the language fluently, not being quite at one with the swelling scene. And you wonder why that other anthropologist, who evidently knows the language, is still not getting very far with it. These are public events too – affirmations of a public secrecy that only the locals really know, as they try to persuade themselves.

There are, to be sure, ways of entering into that space of collective intimacy; eliciting verbal reactions to what may in a direct sense be verbally inexpressible forms of physical motion, a technique modestly but importantly pioneered by Jane Cowan (1990: 92). But by the point at which ethnographers have gained sufficient rapport with local people to be able to get them to agree to such an exercise in the first place, they have clearly already earned a reputation for some degree of both mastery and intimacy – which in this sense are one and the same thing. The difficult part is to reconstruct the almost insidious process by which they achieved that mastery in the first place.

Here, I have attempted to sketch part of that process by reverting to a completely unapologetic anecdotalism – to the narrative gesticulation that, in our verbocentric academic world, is the enabling device for participating in our peculiar forms of what we might call ‘professional intimacy’. These forms are covert, derided, and decidedly ‘off stage’ as far as any public conversation is concerned, as the still-occasionally-rumbling negative reaction to Rabinow’s (1977) exposé of fieldwork makes abundantly clear.

Last scene: back to Rome. For Romans say of their dialect – itself a curious piece of regional rusticity in the capital city of a major economic power – that it is *not* a language, but a way of living; and that this includes a high degree of *gestualità*, of the quality of gesticulation. Mastery over the
nuances of language is something people guard jealously as the best protection against the invasion of their cultural intimacy. In Greece, this occurs at the level of the national language, which, at least until the country’s entry into the European Union and the subsequent arrival of thousands of obviously foreign immigrants who were able to learn the language quickly and efficiently, was considered too difficult for foreigners to learn. I myself was assumed either to be a spy or a Greek who was so ashamed of his identity that he did not wish to reveal it – this being in itself a remarkable illustration of the Greek version of the cultural cringe. In Italy, however, a country with a complex pattern of regional identities often at (cultural) war with each other, that level of difficulty is set, not at the level of the national standard language (fluency in which is often regarded as a mark of foreignness rather than of ‘indigeneity’!) but at the level of the local dialects. Romanesco, in particular, is locally portrayed as impenetrable, not so much for its morphology and lexicon (both of which are close to the national standard), but for all the paralinguistic trappings, gesture included, that invest it with locally salient meanings and a type of humor that is distinctive to the city.

And this is the key point I wish to make: that it is possible, among cultural intimates, to allude to precious and closely guarded cultural secrets in very public places. Rome, as the caput mundi in both the religious and tourist senses, is actually an intensely public place, its piazza the quintessence of theatrical self-display. But just as secrecy is something that must be performed in public in order for its presence to carry any social weight, as I have noted in another context (Herzfeld, 2009), so, too, cultural secrets must be bandied about so that outsiders can intuitively grasp their fundamental ungraspability. The public squares of big southern European cities are indeed the spaces of collective self-display. On that same stage, however, people can act in ways that they, and only they, are really able to interpret. Anthropologists who can persuade local people of their ability to interpret those actions correctly have done rather better than go native; they have earned admiration for their cleverness in breaking into these very closed areas at all – and thereby have set up the means of venturing still further.

This has important consequences for the practice of ethnography. Many an anthropologist has fallen afoul of the local view that outsiders cannot possibly understand such intimate dimensions of their collective social existence. To some extent, to be sure, they are right. But it is less the mastery of an official language and customs that serves the able anthropologist in seeking cultural knowledge or even aspiring to serve the goals of the population being studied; it is, rather, the ability to demonstrate obliquely – through gesture, subtle dialect usage, and quite simply knowing when to shut up – that marks the capable and canny anthropologist and replays that
Geertzian wink with something equally resistant to any kind of reductive analysis. And it is the ability to describe such moments that constitutes the greatest challenge for ethnographers today and suggests that, for all their limitations, the new digital technologies may, however partially, be able to help us capture the ineffable in mid-flight.

If on the other hand anthropologists cannot describe or otherwise convey such moments, they will not be doing much better than those bureaucratic agencies that preserve intangible heritage by rendering it tangible, rejecting the entire range of what is considered indecent or trivial as irrelevant to ‘the’ culture of a given people. We have seen that political scientists and historians have already committed this error of complicity with the managers of power, by reproducing in their models of nationalism precisely that sense of perfection that ordinary people reject in their social lives. Anthropologists must take care not to reproduce the same complicity by colluding in the ‘disappearing’ of what cannot be measured, described with certainty, or photographed. There is no point in talking about ‘indeterminacy’, as is fashionable today, if we do not recognize that there is a great deal in social life that is culturally too intimate to be reduced to palpability. (Is that process not what we mean by ‘reification’?) We must therefore be willing to accept that our writing will never offer the bare precision that official and scientistic discourses offer. It should aim to be richer than that.

Notes

1 Compare the fate of the term ‘data’ in much academic discourse; its reduction to a singular term in virtually all popular and a great deal of scholarly usage has destroyed the utility of being able to distinguish between a single datum and a generic category of data. But the case of diversity is more insidious still; it sneaks a simplification into everyday usage under the guise of an appreciation for complexity and variety.

2 See the work of Kendon (1986) and especially his partly historical overview (2004).

3 I owe this formulation to Loïc Wacquant’s perspicacious response to the conference draft of this article. I have never liked the ‘anthropology of’ idiom for quartering a discipline that has always, with equally specious logic, insisted on its ‘holistic’ scope. Some writers (e.g. Farnell, 1995) seem to me to have usefully avoided this trap by focusing their attention on ‘human movement’ (see also, notably, Williams, 1997). But very little of this work looks at what anthropologists themselves do in the field – surely a necessary move for a discipline that today lays claim to a distinctive level of reflexivity and self-awareness. One exception to the general pattern is Kondo (1990); her original and challenging study does push the analysis...
of gesture toward the analysis of inter-subjective relations between anthropologist and informant, albeit not in a particularly systematic way.

4 In some respects, this attitude resembles the initial refusal of American linguists to recognize logic in the linguistic universe of urban African Americans (see the radically effective critique by Labov [1972: 201–40]). This capacity to verbalize the significance of bodily stance belies the once pervasive scholarly reluctance to credit informants with discursive insight into their non-discursive habits, a problem that characterizes Bourdieu’s (1977: 18–19) attribution of inexplicitness to relatively undifferentiated societies and mars even Giddens’s (1984: 41–5) otherwise persuasive account of ‘structuration’.

6 It would be interesting to know whether such transferences occur because we tend subconsciously to assume semantic equivalence between the gestural accompaniments of all foreign languages even as we no less subconsciously pick up habits that actually point up the differences between the gestural systems in question.

7 Since much of what I am describing in this article did not make it into my fieldnotes but instead constituted part of the background of which it is so much harder to make oneself aware, I am conscious of reconstructing a great deal from memory. I am morally certain of the comments that I quote, at least to a very close approximation, but the temporal dimensions are considerably vaguer in my memory at this point.

8 To ‘look like’ in Thai is a phrase compounded of duu (to look) moean (like), as in English – except that the verb is both active (‘look-at, regard’; cf. French regarder, etc.) and passive (‘appears’); this usage, which reflects a common feature of sentence construction, suggests the complete mutuality of people’s gazes. These, however, are usually indirect. On one of the first occasions I managed to get an unknown Thai to accept that I was speaking Thai I asked a cleaning woman for directions to the bathroom by means of the simple expedient of beginning to speak to her before she could see me properly; when she finally realized that I was a foreigner, she had already committed herself to responding in Thai, and a short moment of surprise faded rapidly to acceptance that we were indeed, contrary to all expectations, speaking Thai.

9 To hold my head directly over hers would have been disrespectful; the head is considered the most sacred part of the body.

10 I am indebted to Montira Horayangura and Apinetr Unakul for conveying this term to me and explaining its use.

11 Once, for example, in a small Bangkok restaurant where I was a regular customer, I sat with a Chinese-American student, to whom the waiter – who knew me quite well – insisted on speaking Thai until I finally explained discreetly to him that she knew no Thai at all, at which point he suddenly seemed to become aware of his gaffe and even a little embarrassed by it.
12 As with so much else in Thailand, rules here admit of notable exceptions. Two key leaders of the community where I ended up doing fieldwork on anti-eviction protest, in which I became an actively engaged supporter of their cause and with whom I therefore developed an affectionate friendship, routinely embrace me whenever we meet after a long absence. I am not sure whether this is a concession to a *farang* modality or, as I suspect, a recasting of friendship as familial closeness paralleling the use of a kinship term to convey both respect and affection.

13 Thailand’s relationship with colonialism is complex, since the country was never formally annexed by any of the Western colonial powers. It was clearly subjugated to colonial interests in various ways, however, and the implications of this ambiguous situation are the subject of lively discussions among anthropologists and historians. See especially Herzfeld (2002); Loos (2006); Thongchai (2000).

14 The allusion to incontinence is not simply an expressive metaphor. Ethnographers (notably Campbell, 1964, a rich source on the significance of bodily comportment) have long noted the emphasis placed by rural Greeks on male self-control, sexual self-restraint being especially prized. And urinary continence is similarly a mark of masculinity; once a young and well educated Cretan friend pointed to a spry nonagenarian man who was walking along the side of the road as we were passing and remarked, with enormous admiration and apparently no sense of hyperbole or irony, that this man only urinated once a week! It is women’s alleged verbal incontinence, realized as a penchant for gossip, that makes them the weak link in the defense of family and community secrets, at least from the men’s perspective.

15 See also Crump (1985) on a very similar attitude among the Dutch.

16 The allusion is to the now famous passage on interpreting a wink (Geertz, 1973: 6–7).

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