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BECOMING ENTANGLED

MATT HODGES

Entanglement: the secret lives of hair BY EMMA TARLO

Eeva hands over her hair quite matter-of-factly in a transparent plastic bag. A flaxen plait, irresistibly silky and elegantly coiled, reminiscent of a Victorian love token ... I find myself stuffing it quickly into the depths of my shoulder bag as if hiding something indecent. Later, when we sit down for lunch in the café of the British Library, I let it out of the bag and stroke it with the reverence it deserves, but something feels wrong. I am caressing the disembodied hair of my friend, and she is sitting opposite me, full bodied, tucking into chicken and vegetable soup ...

To hook, in the narrative sense of the word, is not always the opening gambit of an anthropological story. As professional readers of such stories we hope, at best, for something that will help place us in the scene, and evoke the themes to be pursued by the author. Seldom do such stories truly *compel* us as readers to enter the imaginative world of the text. Only rarely do they exert the surprise and pull of Tarlo's opening pages. *Entanglement* starts with an anthropologist speaking to another anthropologist – specifically, Emma Tarlo is in the company of Eeva Berglund. In the unpromising venue of the British Library café, they eat and talk about Berglund's 'flaxen plait', a photo of which, it seems, also adorns the cover of the book. Does Berglund want a last look? But she has already photographed her locks before handing them over, to be mailed to a 'Hair Embroidery Institute' in China. *She has said her goodbyes*. For Tarlo, this uncanny episode ignites a blaze of ruminations on the hair trade and the themes of her book. We learn of a similar encounter with 'Ann P.', another hair donor; a digression on L-cysteine, a protein derivative extracted from hair that is still used in making bagels; the subversive impact of the 'bob' on American mores between the wars; the distinctive texture of a Chinese hair found on a flight to Wenzhou with its 'tightly packed, overlapping cuticles'; a snapshot of 19th Century hair fetishism; before the chapter finally ends with the despatch of Berglund's package to China, posted by Tarlo the day after their encounter. 'I resist,' writes Tarlo, 'the temptation to wave it goodbye'. Indeed, it is not the last we see of it.

What manner of anthropological opening is this? An unanticipated one, within the literature. Tarlo diverges from the tropes that often govern anthropological writing so as to entangle the reader within the associative consciousness of her narrator-persona. In this opening

chapter of digressions – worthy of Laurence Sterne – we encounter the principal themes of the book: the global hair trade, its labourers, traders, its personalities, its shapes, scents, and historical roots, its cultural variations, its joys and sorrows, and its complex political economy. But we are also introduced to *Entanglement's* stylistic hallmarks. A sense of humour, to be sure, is one of them. The use of a first person narrator to structure the narrative via association (with attitude) is another. This enables shifts in time and place to mirror the logic of thematic narrative and analysis – as this particular narrator is an anthropologist, naturally – and track the globalized commodity circuit that is the book's ethnographic subject, and its historical connections. And the presence of the human face and individual experience is to the fore – a myriad of individuals and vivid characterisations pulse through the book, both historical and contemporary. The hook itself is finally resolved at the end of the text, some 400 pages later, when we learn that Eeva and Ann P.'s hair has arrived safely at its destination – where it is now on display in a glass case, beneath a portrait of the Queen. The photograph appears on the narrative's final page.

Reviews of *Entanglement* to date have focused on the startling tales and insights that Tarlo has forged from three years of ethnographic study of the global hair trade, funded by her Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship. These have appeared in non-academic forums such as the *New York Times*, the *TLS*, *Literary Review*, and prominently on the BBC. But as I was writing this review, the news came that *Entanglement* has won this year's Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing, from the Society for Humanistic Anthropology. *Entanglement* was clearly written for diverse publics – a wide audience – but it strikes a deep chord with anthropological debates as well, particularly when read in tandem with Tarlo's other publications on the topic (e.g. Tarlo 2016). It is not an exclusively academic text – far from it – but it is no less anthropological for that. It is seductive, it is entertaining, it is ethnographic and analytical, and it is troubling and dark – particularly when it zeroes in on the world of labour. There is much that could be said about its subject-matter, but what I want to focus on is the book's technique. How does Tarlo's narrative achieve its goals? And what might we take away from her literary-anthropological project?

Anthropology and 'Topological' Storytelling

What is immediately clear from Tarlo's opening is that her narrative focuses on the hair trade, and that it pursues this via linkages facilitated by a methodological *modus operandi* that echoes George Marcus's

conception of a 'found imaginary'. In an appendix on sources that caps the narrative, Tarlo signals its anthropological lineage, but holds back on the theory. The genealogy of the work is nevertheless clear to anthropological readers, if not to the wider audience it has captured. Two seminal developments arguably define how anthropologists currently *think* about space and time in the contemporary era. The first is conventionally dated to the publication of Eric Wolf's magnum opus, *Europe and the People without History*, in 1982. What once appeared as discrete and bounded could be recast as connected, in space and time, and constituted through processual networks – or 'history'. The second development is more recent, clustered around a series of publications on time and history (e.g. Stewart 2016). Even time and history, this literature argues, are culturally conceived – *culture is historical, but history is also cultural*. The ways in which we imagine the globalized history and connections of which anthropologists write are profoundly cultural (and constructed) in nature.

In the shadow of these conceptual innovations lies a further question that, increasingly, demands attention. How should anthropologists *write* about connectivity in time and space? The conceptual armoury of today's anthropology is overflowing with smart tools for unpicking the scalar workings of globalization. But the techniques we can employ to *narrate* this 'topological' world (to employ a trope of the times) are much less apparent.¹ In fact, the question still seems hardly to be asked. Yet writing, it is clear, is central to how we imagine this world to be.

Anthropologists write, but most still do not think of themselves as writers. Perhaps the problem starts here, even if we now acknowledge that writing is central to what we do. Tarlo *does* 'write', and she writes extremely well. This has not always been a capability that anthropologists have admired. But to write well requires as much thought as to analyse, and a similar degree of practice to excel.

Increasingly, anthropologists and other social scientists are recognizing that *how* we tell a story, and by implication, how a reader responds to it, affectively as much as conceptually, has a significant impact on how we think and what we know. But there are still relatively few models to which anthropologists can turn for how to write innovatively.

Tarlo's *Entanglement* takes an important step towards filling that gap. How can one evoke the entangled nature of modern temporal and historical experience, now that Wolf's confidence in Western historicism and its enthusiasm for Newtonian time has been undermined? Such a

¹ See Argenti 2016; Lury, Parisi and Terranova 2012.

story might be shaped according to a 'topological aesthetics', where the guiding principal is the cultural malleability of time, space and history. There are distinguished precedents for such storytelling, reaching back to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), with its stream of consciousness technique, or the temporal and spatial experimentation of the *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930–36) by John Dos Passos. In such works, the linear narratives of the 19th century novel are fractured and the connectivity of time and space revealed via association and juxtaposition, with the aim of illuminating human experience. But anthropologists have taken much longer to latch onto the value of literary innovation. How can one tell a story that incorporates anthropological insights into the contemporary world *and* reaches wider audiences? How can one reveal complex connections, stay grounded in the ethnographic lifeworld, and keep the story going?

Narrating Transit

Entanglement takes the reader on a journey, ostensibly Tarlo's intellectual and ethnographic research journey, although the author is in reality the invisible figure offstage who manufactures the narrator and her voyage. It is a journey in space, to India, Africa, the US, Myanmar, China, Europe, and Britain, to wig factories, hair fairs, Hindu temples, fashion salons and hair loss clinics, but also into the past, to 19th century France, Britain, and other locations. Without a single narrative present to which the story returns, it is also at times a leap into the future. The fluidity of the narrator manages these transitions, making connections pragmatically, as and when necessary to convey insight, illustration and analysis, revealing how events and moments fit together, charting the connective tissues and timescapes of the trade organically, not according to the imposition of an external schema. It is a journey in conceptual transit, in cultural passage, in anthropological navigation. An improvisational analytical aesthetic is in play, managed by a narrator who flits between narrative visibility and invisibility, to reveal both the sensuous lifeworld of her research, but also a plethora of information tapped from archival and documentary sources.

How does this operate in practice? The book is structured into 16 chapters or sections, with enlightening (but not comprehensive) notes, and a concluding section on sources, anthropological and otherwise, as indicated above. Many images, contemporary and archival, also complement and extend the text. Chapters address selected perspectives on the hair trade, each constituting a carefully weighed intervention into the subject matter, grouped under evocative and

thematic titles: 'Strange Gifts', 'Harvest', 'Tonsure', 'Sheitel', 'Combings', 'Crime', and so on. Titles that intrigue, and retain, in theme and content, anthropological purchase. 'Harvest', for example, opens with the description and analysis of 'BuyandSellHair.com', a website where people advertise their own hair for sale, which boasts of being the largest online market place for human hair in terms of the traffic it attracts, and profits it generates. The narrative then tracks back through time and space, to the hair harvests and sales of the 19th century, in the United States and France, the first of a number of quantum leaps, forward to the harvests and hair markets of contemporary Southeast Asia, back to the compulsory shavings of 19th century British prisons, across to the impact of military intervention on Chinese hair supplies to the 19th century French hair trade, the economic disruption of the First World War, the contemporary fashion for hair extensions. Along these pathways, we encounter cross-cutting themes of identity, nationalism and ethics, among others, teased out of contingent encounters and juxtapositions. The effect, by the end of the chapter, is both ethnographically immersive, in terms of evoking the human, embodied experience of these different worlds; and analytical, via accumulative insights that generate both an ethno-historical portrait of the globalized 'hair industry', and an anthropological understanding of its political economic connectivity and development. The portrait is selective, rather than comprehensive – with the narrator-persona and her 'research quest' as its driving force – and skilfully deploys a range of narrative techniques seemingly adapted from more 'literary' writing that would require a more extended analysis than I can offer here to adequately detail.

How does this associative narrative operate at the level of the paragraph or sentence? Let us focus in on another chapter, 'Combings', addressing the question of hair 'waste'. 'We lose between fifty and one hundred hairs a day', Tarlo begins, which cling to clothes or accumulate in plug holes and other unsavoury locations. 'We find these twisted globs of dead organic matter peculiarly repulsive, especially if we suspect that they are composed of someone else's hair ...' (215). The chapter proceeds with a clearly-worded account of how, in the 19th century, such waste was in fact sought after and collected in Europe, to be transformed via the wig trade into items of high fashion – indeed, we learn, for example, that the decision to cover the drains in rural Italy was reported in the *New York Times* of 1874 as an alarming threat to the industry.

This might seem amusing, Tarlo writes – in a brief passage bridging the 19th and 21st centuries – were it not for the fact that today's wig industry has exported this specialist form of rag-picking to the combs and waste

mounds of Asia. 'I am standing in the streets of Chennai', she continues, 'talking to a waste picker who is perched high on the seat of a tricycle,' who earns 1,000 rupees per kilo of hair. The narrator-persona, now back at the forefront of the narrative and in detective mode, tracks this 'obscure trade' via correspondence with anthropologist friends to Myanmar, where she finds that huge quantities of waste hair from India are being sold. 'It has taken us nine hours,' she writes, 'but we are in Pyawbwe, and we head to the home of U Han Tun,' and a memorable encounter with his mother-in-law. From there, the narrator takes us inside the factories and compounds of local waste and hair merchants, illustrated with photographs of workers untangling hairballs with needles, oscillating between first person narration of encounters with named individuals, to documentary commentary on the production process, to generalizations on the industry in Myanmar, and by extension, Bangladesh. 'It is through [this] uncanny collaboration,' she writes, 'that new life is breathed into dead hair, which will eventually complete its reincarnation when attached to someone else's head on the other side of the world'. The reader, entangled in this associative but carefully-structured tale, is left with a strong, sensual impression of this life focused on combings and hair waste as lived by tangible, named individuals; and an anthropologically-informed assessment of its historical and contemporary resonance and organization.

The narrative is characterized by an absence of jargon, vivid and concrete diction, regular alternation between scene and a generalising narrative viewpoint, a first person reflector that observes ('I wander around the village with its hand-built houses with walls woven out of local bamboo'), and processes ('I get a sense that hair is treated here as just another raw material'), while witnessing the human face of its informants ('When I ask her what she'd thought it was for before, she answers decisively, "Money!" Everyone laughs'). Nuanced transitions into and out of scene maintain the narrative momentum, hinged by the first person travelling narrator, and facilitate the reader's synthesis of the situations necessary to flesh out the trade at a local and wider level.

Writing Beyond the Citadel?

With *Entanglement*, Tarlo enters a field of towering studies such as Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, and more recently, Anna Tsing's *Friction*. Critique, in the sense of critical anthropology, is often at the heart of such works. But this 'dark anthropology' that Ortner (2016) pinpoints as a dominant and potentially restrictive contemporary trend is, in Tarlo's tales of the globalized hair trade, recast as a better-lighted world of

keenly-evoked faces. The darkness is there, often in the narrative wings, and Tarlo signals where it lies. 'The trade in human hair generally relied, and still relies, on a gap in wealth, opportunities or values between those willing to part with their hair and those who end up acquiring it,' she writes, beneath a photograph of a young girl having her shaved head covered by a traditional Breton headdress in 1900. The laborious work that goes into untangling balls of comb waste is evoked, for example – repetitive and monotonous, taking its toll on the backs, eyes and lungs of workers, but for those living in poverty, we hear, it offers a 'fragile lifeline of sorts' – as are the words of Kaan, employee of GetHair, a Turkish hair transplant company in Islington, who, on being shown photos of people sorting hair in India and Myanmar, comments how they illustrate sadly that 'we are all caught up in a capitalist system'. However, a formulaic dissection of this trade and its complex hierarchies is absent from the narrative. Is this omission a necessary compromise to reach new audiences? It appears to be the result, rather, of a conscious strategy. With Ortner's critique in mind, one might cast the narrative as firmly 'post-dark', in the sense that it assimilates such insights while ensuring that they do not overwhelm the narrative. Included are the human faces, the empowering and varied nature of involvement with the global hair trade, and many ethnographic tales of human agency, to balance and contextualise the images of lives spent unpicking hairballs or the assumed exploitation of Asian hair factories.

In this sense, Tarlo's figure of the anthropologist-intellectual is a cousin and travelling companion to Scheper-Hughes' 'public anthropologist'. Unlike Scheper-Hughes, there is no strident – or laudable, depending on one's vantage point – commitment to a 'barefoot anthropology'. But the model of the intellectual shared by both is increasingly visible in the contemporary academic world. It is also one in demand from younger generations entering the discipline, on the sharp end of social inequalities. 'Public anthropology,' Scheper-Hughes (2009:1) writes, 'assumes a particular relationship to the world. It also implies diverse practices. One is writing for the public – making our work more accessible and accountable ... This version of public anthropology involves "translating" anthropological ideas and concepts into a version that appeals to a broad public.' To undertake this kind of work, one must be a versatile communicator. One must also be writing stories that are of wider interest, and by implication, undertaking research that nourishes such tales and insights. Tarlo's reach in terms of audience is successful in this sense – and includes 'traditional' academic output, of course. Where Scheper-Hughes and Tarlo diverge is in the nature of their public and political commitment, or the extent of its visibility – or, perhaps, its nuance and subtlety. Whether this constitutes a difference of emphasis,

or a firm criterion for passing judgement on one or other, depends on the reader's own disciplinary sympathies. How should detailed information on the social organization and hierarchies of global capitalism be incorporated into 'public' narratives? Was Adorno right – that the culture industry cannot bear too much reality? Or do we have an obligation to write better of human experience – and inspire recognition and pathos, and potential change where it is needed – through the skill of our narrative technique? Who might we turn to for advice?

Here at the University of Kent, we teach a course on Anthropology and Creativity in which students can conduct fieldwork and write up their findings in an innovative literary style (accompanied by an anthropological commentary). Tarlo, visiting Canterbury in February this year to deliver a paper to the Anthropology Research Seminar, spoke about *Entanglement* to these aspiring anthropologist-writers. The event triggered epiphanies among undergraduates, largely starved (as they claimed to be) of anthropological tales that convey the texture of life as they know it, in addition to its steadfast ethnographic documentation and conceptualization. (Scheper-Hughes often excites comparable loyalties, and in her ethnographic writing, can be similarly evocative.) Once the process of anthropological learning commences, such reactions of diligent and engaged students arguably becomes a manifestation, to twist Lacan, of the subversive Real within the academic constraints of the Symbolic. (The committee of the Victor Turner Prize have now fallen into line.) What is clear, is that *Entanglement* is an inspirational addition to the anthropological writer's canon, in the form of a reflector-narrator who travels, rather than standing still, who never arrives, only passes through, but does so in an extraordinarily observant and intense passage that vibrates with the complex registers and connectivity of contemporary human experience. Tarlo is not the only anthropologist currently responding to this call. But her contribution is a notable, penetrating, and highly readable one.

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