Introduction: The Nexus of Anthropology and Narrative: Ethnographic Encounters with Storytelling Practices

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Cover Page Footnote
We thank the editors of Narrative Culture and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions. We also thank the participants of the original VANDA conference panel and particularly the contributors who went along on this journey of creating a special issue together. We are thankful to our students at the University of Vienna who took part in the MA and BA courses we taught on narrative. Their interest in the nexus of anthropology and narrative motivated us to write this comprehensive introduction. Thank you for your stimulating questions and engagement with the topic! Barbara Götsch is grateful for the support of the Institute of Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences. Monika Palmberger is grateful for the financial support of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF T702; FWF V681) and of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna.
Let me tell you a story," interlocutors repeatedly said to anthropologist Monika Kolodziej (in this issue) when she inquired about interethnic relations in a province in northwest China. Kolodziej tried to understand the people she engaged with: she wanted to know how they lived and what mattered to them. She did not ask for stories but found conversations in the field to be punctuated by them. She is not alone in this observation. Ethnographic fieldwork is often full of stories; it thrives on them. Practices of storytelling are foundational to sociality and sociability in a given social group. They facilitate social understanding and represent sites of identity negotiation. This special issue centers on this phenomenon and zooms in on storied encounters in ethnography and anthropology. Ethnographers come to understand the lifeworlds of their interlocutors by engaging with them physically and, more recently, also virtually. They spend this time listening, conversing, observing, and participating. In this process, they encounter narratives in different situations and of different kinds, be they polished accounts with clear beginnings and endings—life histories, political narratives, gossip, jokes, folktales, legends, and myths—or narratives that emerge in situational co-telling, where participants contribute different story
elements and meaning is subject to negotiation. This does not necessarily mean that ethnographers always engage with narratives explicitly or that these are always out in the open. Sometimes an extra effort is needed to reveal stories that would otherwise remain hidden. In some situations, stories find the ethnographer without him or her searching for them, as when interlocutors direct the researcher’s attention to stories or frame what they want to tell as a story.

As the bridge between the public and the private, storytelling is a social phenomenon. It appears across the world, and it has persisted in history. It is globally pervasive but at the same time locally and culturally situated. This tension is what anthropologists are called on to scrutinize. Anthropologists are interested in the product of storytelling (the finished story) and the practice and process of storytelling. They study the content and the “social life” of a story: in other words, the way it is (co)created and altered; the different ways it is interpreted; how it is used to create, sustain, or mock identities. They study how it contributes to the emergence and sustenance of sociality and sociability and how it relates to temporality and space. Anthropologists are interested in how narratives help individuals and groups make sense of experience; how narratives contribute to socializations into group practice, norms, or moral values; and how they help transmit ideologies, theories, or imaginaries. Finally, anthropologists pay attention to moments of silence, when narrators cannot or do not want to speak. In their analyses, anthropologists are sensitive to the context, history, and power relations that reign in a particular situation, and they carefully reflect on the narrative representations of social life, including the critical reading of ethnographic texts.

In this special issue, we take up many of these considerations. It originated in a panel held at the Vienna Anthropology Days (VANDA), which took place in Vienna (Austria) in 2018. The panel brought together scholars based in several mainly Central and Eastern European countries, who variously engaged in social and cultural anthropology as well as European ethnology. The richness of approaches and the variety of regional research traditions perceptible at the conference are also reflected in our special issue. The panel explored the pervasiveness of narrative practices in different parts of the world and the cultural and situational particularities of their emergence and character. This concern runs through the articles in this special issue. The six authors in our collection engage with empirical material derived from places as distant from each other as Finland and Yemen, China and Morocco. The scholars approach narrative in different ways. But all in some way encountered narrative in their ethnographic work, be
it historically oriented or contemporary, through textual resources, participant observation, or in interviews. As a group, we identified two different ways this happened: “stories that found us” and “stories that we found.”

The collection starts out with the former, with Monika Kołodziej’s and Barbara Götsch’s articles. The authors encountered stories when they did participant observation—Kołodziej in China, Götsch in Morocco. Interlocutors, it seemed, wanted to express something very particular through well-formulated and well-structured stories. Stories here stand out as detached from surrounding talk. Kołodziej centers her analysis on the peculiarity of the stories she encountered and possible reasons for their telling. Götsch considers one particular “polished” story that came up in a work meeting she observed and relates it to less clearly structured narrative practices co-workers engaged in at the same event. The third article, by Noura Kamal, focuses on oral storytelling in Yemen. In her research on twentieth-century Yemeni intellectual ʿAbd Allāh al-Baradūnī, Kamal stumbled on a collection of tales and proverbs. In her article she engages with these tales and the historical figure of ʿAlī bin Zāyid that they have been ascribed to. Kamal encountered stories in her endeavor to understand al-Baradūnī, but these stories also found her. Her article stands midway between “stories that found us” and “stories that we found.”

The three following articles more clearly engage with stories that were sought by the ethnographers. The authors’ ethnographic sensibilities and methodological ingenuity, we argue, helped reveal stories of the past that would have remained hidden otherwise. In Monika Palmberger’s article, certain places she visited with labor migrants in Austria triggered memories and narrations about different phases in the latter’s lives and led to reflections on their translocal attachments. Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto analyses how getting in touch with material objects like clothes and letters and the associated sensory memories led her interlocutors, former Finnish child evacuees, to share their experiences. Finally, in Duygu Doğru’s article, the stance of the researcher does the trick, so to say. In her self-reflective essay on history-telling in an Istanbul neighborhood, she describes that it was only possible for her to truly learn about her interlocutors’ experience of the past after she adapted her stance from approaching them as mere informants about the past to being interested in them as individuals in the present. In other words, Doğru paid attention to narrativity in the way residents talked about the history of their neighborhood. This is not just an observation about research ethics or the importance of the appreciation of her interlocutors; it also points to the importance of
the present in remembering and making sense of the past. When our interlocutors speak about the past, this is always inevitably filtered through the experience of the present. The way people make sense of the past and the way they produce meaning in the present are inextricably linked.

Narrative pervades virtually every ethnographic field experience and forms part and parcel of and is represented in all written ethnography. Notwithstanding its importance for anthropology, the latter is only one discipline that actually studies narrative as such. We believe this is due to the global relevance of narrative for human social life and mental activity and to the variety of contexts in which humans revel in and create narrative. The spectrum of disciplines ranges from the study of literature, media, and theater, via the study of history and politics, to anthropology, folklore, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. Today, narrative is an utterly interdisciplinary field of study. Among the many approaches—that variously involve anthropologists—the following are of particular relevance: literary narratology, oral literature and verbal art, oral history, life story research, narrative psychology (or psychological narratology), and more discourse-, performance-, and interaction-centered approaches in sociolinguistics and linguistic and psychological anthropology. While scholars of the latter are strongly interested in the practice, process, and context of telling stories, scholars of the former, especially literary narratology, are more keenly interested in the product of the telling or creation process—the story. The contributors in this special issue in diverse ways build on these interdisciplinary research traditions. Moreover, they draw on recent work at the nexus of history and anthropology (i.e., Palmié and Stewart) and on phenomenological thinking (Arendt; Jackson; Ricoeur).

Even with the variety of approaches, there is one tenet that most scholars of narrative share and that we take seriously: narratives give meaning to events and experiences (Bruner, Actual Minds, Acts of Meaning; Ochs and Capps, “Narrating the Self,” Living Narrative; Ricoeur). A list is not a narrative. But produce a meaningful link between the items on a list, and you have a story. Jerome Bruner (Actual Minds), a pioneer of narrative psychology, emphasizes the two planes of the “landscape of action” and the “landscape of consciousness” in a story-world and in narrative thought more generally. One is concerned with what happens, the other with what those involved in events know, think, or feel. Stories thus reveal the reasons behind things and grab our attention with the changing nature of these reasons and the uneven distribution of knowledge about some state of affairs.
Often something unexpected or problematic will happen, which, as linguistic and psychological anthropologist Elinor Ochs phrases it, “provides a certain frisson and focal point of interest to narration” (Ochs 271). The two landscapes are always intertwined in narrative. Stories meaningfully link what happens in terms of actions, thoughts, and feelings, and they help make sense and bring order to otherwise haphazard and chaotic events and circumstances. What is more, as famously pointed out by Hannah Arendt, narrative helps bridge social and (intra) personal meanings. It has the power to mediate between private and public and thus functions as the “subjective-in-between” (Arendt 180).

In the remainder of this introduction, we pursue four goals. First, we provide a brief overview of the role of narrative in the field of social and cultural anthropology, and we introduce our take on narrative. Second, intrigued by the pervasiveness of narrative practices around the world, we reflect on the human imagination as key to storytelling. Third, we discuss two different types of storytelling that appear pervasive globally, that consequently recur in ethnographic encounters, and that are thus also represented in our collection: narratives of personal experience as well as tales that educate, persuade, and entertain. Finally, we close with a brief introduction to the different articles of this special issue.

**Narrative in Social and Cultural Anthropology**

In this collection, we mostly dwell on narratives of personal experience, that is, accounts of or reflections on lived experience, be it with hindsight or emerging in a specific situation. Only one contribution explicitly addresses oral literature and verbal art. By contrast, in earlier anthropology the focus lay on tales and myths. In fact, the collection of folktales, legends, and myths in the romantic period in Europe preceded the emergence of modern anthropology as a discipline (see Bendix). German-born US anthropologist Franz Boas, one of the founders of the discipline, stressed the importance of compiling and translating corpora of oral literature and even served as the editor of the *American Journal of Folklore*. Bronislaw Malinowski—Boas’s British counterpart, known for establishing long-term ethnographic fieldwork—also placed great emphasis on studying tales. He famously asserted that next to the organization of a tribe and the anatomy of its culture and the type of behavior observed, a third important avenue for ethnographic fieldwork was fundamental: “a collection of ethnographic statements,
characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore and magical formulae has to be given as a *corpus inscriptionum*, as documents of native mentality" (Malinowski 24). Malinowski did not commend the compilation of tales so much to preserve them but because he saw in statements and narratives expressions of “native mentality,” which the ethnographer needed to collect to understand “how the natives think.” French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss subsequently devoted much of his energy to the comparative study of the structure of myths, which he saw as a path to understanding universals in human thought. By and large, in the second half of the twentieth century, narrative was less of a central concern in ethnographic fieldwork—at least in the European tradition—but formed an important part of folklore studies (Dorson) and literary narratology (Propp), fields that are allied to anthropology in many ways.

Since the 1980s, a renewed, self-conscious interest in narrative arose in sociocultural anthropology when the discipline was compelled to engage in (self-) reflexivity and allow for the multiplicity of voices and perspectives concerning the stories anthropologists encountered in the field—including their performative and emotional dimensions—and concerning the product of field research, the written ethnography, which ideally came in the form of an anthropological monograph. This genre often consists of integrating “stories from the field” and more “factual” information on a society or social group with theoretical deliberation. Scholars increasingly questioned traditional forms of anthropological representation, critiquing power imbalances between ethnographers and their “informants” as well as the fictional, ahistorical, and one-sided character of ethnographic texts (Abu-Lughod; Clifford and Marcus; Fabian; Fischer and Marcus; Geertz).

With a growing awareness of the social condition of knowledge production, ethnography as a text and the author’s positionality were placed under scrutiny. Among other things, this led to more ethnographies (or the visibility of the same) by scholars of the Global South and scholars who questioned earlier ethnographic accounts (Gupta and Ferguson). Another result of this “crisis of representation” in anthropology was that scholars increasingly engaged in participatory and collaborative forms of ethnography in an endeavor to allow more room for the research participants’ narratives (Lassiter). An understanding took hold that ethnographies were never merely “summaries” or neutral “descriptions” of what researchers found in the field but the result of relations of power and authority and of particular traditions of interpreting and writing about social life. Eriksen (34) estimates that ethnographies “tend to be persuasive rather than convincing” and
create “a ‘suspension of disbelief’ in the reader not so much because of the data presented but because of the author’s style and rhetoric.” Others (van Maanen; Wulff) emphasize that anthropologists also need to be seen as writers and practitioners of a literary craft. Thus, one may conclude that ethnographies are carefully crafted stories that remain (and need to remain) open for contestation.

Not only ethnographic writing but also anthropologists’ understandings of what constitutes a story or narrative in the first place have changed in recent decades. After the narrative turn in the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, with a move away from modernist master narratives, life history work and oral history became more prominent (Thompson). For the study of narrative, this meant first a turn to finished stories, not the practice and process of storytelling. Narrative was associated with stories that had a clear beginning, middle, and end and carried a clear moral stance. This conception was shared by scholars who focused on the collection of myths and folktales and by others who worked with stories that emerged in everyday conversations and reflected personal experience. This view was exacerbated by work in sociolinguistics, among others, that used storytelling as a primer for unfettered talk (Labov) and followed a narrow definition of narrative as a sequence of temporally ordered events. That temporality is highly relevant for narrative cannot be denied. But subsequent linguistic anthropological and interdisciplinary work has alerted us to the idea that this sequence may not always be so linear.

Recent work on narratives of personal experience in linguistic anthropology and on “small stories” in sociolinguistics (Ochs and Capps, Living Narrative; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou; de Fina and Georgakopoulou) argues for a “more or less” view of narrative; a view that does not discard one piece of discourse in an absolute way as being nonnarrative as opposed to another. For example, this encompasses the joint meaning making families engage in at dinner time (see Ochs et al.) or that groups at work engage in when they jointly make sense of experience, as Götsch shows in her contribution to this issue and in previous work. This perspective is more comprehensive in that it accommodates both “polished” accounts and those narrative practices that emerge in the telling, as it were, that may be co-told and co-constructed by several participants to an event and may appear quite messy in organization.

The authors in this special issue are sympathetic to a broad conception of narrative. Similar to the scholars assembled in a recent interdisciplinary volume on narrative and ethnography (Falconi and Graber, “Ethnographic Approaches” 1),
we acknowledge that there are a great variety of stories and practices of storytelling that may be approached as a varied set of narrative practices. *Narrative* and *narrative practice* in this collection therefore serve as umbrella terms for different kinds of stories, tales, and storytelling, ranging from Yemenite verbal art to the gradual conversational resolution of a dilemma. The contributors in this volume not only study the products of narration—stories—but also (where possible) the practices of storytelling and the meanings participants attach to accounts and the events they relate to. Moreover, the authors understand narrative as interpretive and agree with Mark Freeman that “in the realm of narrative, we are always and inevitably reading for meaning, knowing all the while that our accounts are destined to remain provisional” (29). Narratives, the authors hold, produce spaces in which the everyday unfolds (Fischer-Nebmaier).

The authors maintain that narratives are always co-created, either because the expectations of the audience are anticipated in the storytelling process or because stories emerge in co-creating by two or more narrators. The circumstances of the telling are important to consider here, that is, the participation framework, the composition of the audience, and the context of the telling. Narratives help tellers convey what they think is important about certain circumstances or what they think listeners want (or are allowed) to hear. In this way, narrative becomes a powerful tool for framing social life. It contributes to creating personal and group identities by meaningfully linking past and present experiences, as well as aspirations for the future. It provides ethical and moral directions and religious or political explanations of what holds the world together. In the end, the authors see narratives as “versions of reality” (Bruner *Acts*) that may in turn shape and ultimately alter reality.

Narrative thus has many facets. We follow Ochs when she explains narratives of personal experience as at once a genre, mode of cognition, and social activity and meaning making in joint storytelling as a socially accomplished cognitive activity (Ochs et al.). For one thing, narrative is a social phenomenon. After all, people like to share knowledge and feelings through stories or express themselves in narrative form. This knowledge is no longer individual but shared. The process of sharing may be a memorable social situation. For another thing, it comes in either performance or display. Finally, it is a cognitive phenomenon, as it relates to distinct ways of perceiving, understanding, and processing what happens in the world.

Narrative helps explain the world, but it also helps imagine other possible
worlds. Whether it is the recounting of a tale of fiction or an account of lived experience, narrative at once is born out of the imagination and engages the imagination. What is more, when our interlocutors in ethnographic fieldwork engage in narrative practices and when we try to follow them into their thought-worlds, both parties make extensive use of the imagination (Harris and Rapport). Thanks to narrative, we can travel to faraway places and into distant times. We “travel mentally in time and space and into the minds of others” (Corballis 101). Imagination is essential if we are to make sense of experiences in our everyday lives, and so memory (like narrative) cannot be thought of without its counterpart imagination (Pickering and Keightly). Although imagination is a creative act, “mnemonic imagination is not an entirely free agent” as Pickering and Keightly (12) put it. In the following, we reflect on the powers of the imagination and the ability to travel mentally in time and space and into the minds of others. We see these aspects as key to creating and understanding narrative and as foundational to the practice of ethnography. The authors in this issue take up these aspects in varied ways.

**Narrative and the Imagination**

To create and understand narrative, we need to be able to imagine scenarios (Corballis; Suddendorf): scenarios of how people relate to each other, what they do together, where this happens, and how what they do now is related to what they did before and what they might do next. Michael Corballis singles out three directions of the imagination that are crucial ingredients for narrative: the ability to travel mentally into the minds of others (to “mindread”) temporality, and space. In the following, we briefly reflect on these directions or dimensions and their importance for the practice of narrative.

First, stories abound with assumptions and speculations concerning the mental states of different characters. In their accounts, narrators create story-worlds with distinct characters that have thoughts and feelings vis-à-vis each other. Moreover, narrators in social gatherings carefully monitor the reactions of their audience while they tell a story. Depending on their situational assessment of the audience’s background knowledge, attitude, or patience, narrators will adapt their story, either elaborating further or trying to tell a briefer version (Duranti; see also Kolodziej, this issue, for a similar discussion). Finally, to comprehend what has
been told, the listeners need to be receptive to imagining the mind states of the characters in the story-world and the motives of the teller. In sum, the creation, the telling, and the understanding of a story demand (metaphorically) “going in and out of each other’s bodies,” as Bloch (In and Out) has it. The sociocognitive process of “mindreading,” of imagining the world from another person’s point of view, of reflecting on another person’s possible past, present, or future thoughts and feelings, is known as “theory of mind” or mentalizing (Astuti; Bloch, Anthropology, In and Out; Fonagy et al.).

At the same time, it is precisely the telling and listening to stories, the act of being enmeshed in story-worlds, that helps us gain access to the inner worlds of others. In this way, it is an indispensable tool for gaining any understanding during participant observation. Bloch reminds us that Malinowski demanded one should use the ethnographer’s mindreading ability, and thus “theory of mind” skills, as a research tool. In fact, Bloch argues, it is our only chance, “if we really want to understand the motives and understandings of others in the full complexity of ordinary life at any depth” (Bloch, In and Out 184). He maintains that, “the richness of the anthropological literature shows that this can work very well” (184). In the end, narrative and perspective taking contribute to greater intersubjective understanding (Götsch, “Reflections” and in this issue).

Second, narratives provide different temporal frames and contribute to a sense of continuity, both for individuals and for groups, from families to generations and nations (Palmberger, How Generations). For some scholars, especially those guided by phenomenological thinking, such as Arendt (see also Jackson; Ricoeur), human action and human identity are narratively structured, and ultimately narrative is “the modality through which time is experienced” (qtd. in Hinchman and Hinchman 125). Third, narrative imagination also prominently engages space. In Certeau’s words (115), “every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.” Narratives have a spatial dimension not just because they relate and link to specific places. Narratives also produce places and places evoke narratives as Palmberger shows in her contribution to this issue (see also Basso; Feld and Basso). In this sense, place (and temporality) is performative and shaped by social positions, such as class and gender (Massey). Bakhtin here introduces a performative perspective on time and space with his concept of chronotope, not accepting time and space simply as the backdrop of the story. Originally incepted for the study of literature, this thinking together of time and space is fruitful for the study of other kinds of narrative, as in imaginaries of past or future cities and
nations (Appadurai; Cinar and Bender; Doğru, this issue; Götsch, “Imaginaries”; Strauss; Taylor).

Building on these considerations, recent scholarship, such as the work of Baynham, moves away from the question of how narratives are oriented in space and time and instead asks: “How can space/time orientation be understood as constitutive of narrative action? What does space/time orientation contribute to the identity work involved in narrative?” (Baynham 123). These are also key questions addressed in this special issue, specifically in regard to life stories narrated in the context of war, displacement, and migration. In their discussions, the contributors question the linearity of chronological time and storylines “in favour of more multiple, disrupted notions of subjectivity” (Goodson 29). Displacement, emplacement, and mobility more generally are discussed in a transnational frame, and this again urges the authors to think about narratives and narrative practices beyond a sedentarist bias (Malkki; Tošić and Palmberger; see also Koskoinen-Koivisto’s and Palmberger’s contributions to this issue). Moreover, increasingly digitalized lifeworlds and new information and communication technologies add another dimension to the mobility of narratives. This makes it even more important to move away from a sedentary orientation, and calls for creative and innovative methodological thinking and adaptations (see Palmberger and Budka), such as those practiced by the authors of this issue.

In the following, we discuss two pervasive types of storytelling that anthropologists encounter in ethnographic research: first, narratives that relate in one way or other to personal experience; second, narratives that relate to other people’s experiences or are tales that belong to a canon of oral storytelling. By making this distinction, we do not wish to emphasize an a priori difference and necessary separation. After all, as pointed out by Bauman, tellers and their co-tellers may draw on a large repertoire of stories, performances, and intertextual references in the same event, including personal experience narratives. Rather, this distinction serves as a useful heuristic that may shed light on what these practices variously achieve for the tellers, co-tellers, and other participants in a storytelling situation.

**Narratives of Personal Experience**

Our collection encompasses discussions of different kinds of narratives of personal experience, including comprehensive life stories derived from life story
interviews, individual stories that our interlocutors told us about their lives, and co-told stories that we witnessed emerging in conversation. These narrative practices are important sites for the construction of subjectivity and spatiotemporal imagination. By speaking about events in their lives, individuals make sense of these events and can establish themselves as agents. This concerns the individual telling of a whole life story and the group effort of narratively reconstructing a communal experience. These renderings need to be seen as situated and context specific and are always subject to negotiations. This particularly applies to narrations by multiple tellers, where accounts and interpretations of events are challenged by other participants, but it is also reflected in individual narrations. Speaking about one’s life is thus not a mere summarizing of events, but an active reworking of them (Jackson). As Jackson puts it, storytelling makes sociality possible, but “it is equally vital to the illusory, self-protective, self-justifying activity of individual minds” (15).

As Linde points out, people, especially in Western countries, are expected to create a “coherent, acceptable and constantly revised” (3) life story that they can tell. Coherence is not only seen as a property of the life story as a meaningfully integrated text but also as a social and (intra)personal demand. Linde defines life stories as comprising all the stories and associated discourse units told by an individual over the course of their lifetime that now belong to the speaker’s repertoire of relevant or reportable stories (Linde 21). Life stories, in this sense, embody negotiations of self-interpretation and social identity and facilitate self-presentation as a moral person. Again, when we tell life stories, it is important where we are and who we are with, because the social identities expressed through life stories are locally situated (Schiffrin)—this is both in the situation of telling a story and in the story-world being created.

However, not everyone is fond of telling their life story. Strawson eloquently made this point in an essay “against narrativity,” where he differentiates between those he calls “diachronics,” who go in for lengthy accounts of autobiographical memories, and “episodics,” who do not. Bloch (Anthropology) argues that the difference Strawson observes is not so much a difference in kind but in rhetorical style. This may be personal, but it may also be cultural. After all, in many sociocultural contexts it is entirely inappropriate to dwell on autobiographical memories and share one’s feelings about them. This does not mean that the people who live in these societies do not have a sense of continuity in time or have autobiographical memories, or indeed some sense of “narrativity,” we might add. In the end,
the way we learn to tell life stories—and whether we tell such stories at all—is informed by social and cultural contexts and expectations that may differ greatly between and within societies.

What is more, some life situations, including those of war or illness, do not allow for narrating coherent life stories (see Becker; Hyvärinen et al.; Jackson; Malkki; Palmberger, ‘Ruptured Pasts’). Such experiences cause disruption of the expected life course and a loss of future perspective and therewith also disrupt the coherence of life stories. Moreover, Das speaks of the “non-narrative” when extreme violence has the potential to leave witnesses without words. Similarly, Jackson notes that in the eyes of observers, one of the most arresting things about “the stories of people in crisis, in torture, and in flight—is that life all but ceases to be narratable” (91). Jackson relates this to the experience of “a loss of the social context in which stories are told” and argues that “the very unities of space, time and character on which narrative coherence depends are broken” (91). In the case of Hutu refugees, Malkki shows that such stories are often dismissed as too “messy” and “unmanageable” (385). In this context, anthropologists have drawn attention to the importance of silences (Jackson; Kidron). Kidron, considering the case of Holocaust survivors, argues for paying attention to silent everyday mnemonic practices that constitute the living presence of the past. This recent anthropological work on disruption and silences, which authors of this special issue build on, adds an important dimension and additional complexity to the discussion of life stories and narrative and narrativity more generally.

**Tales That Educate, Persuade, and Entertain**

Next to narratives of personal experience, ethnographers frequently encounter narratives that contain a certain message. “Stories help us express particular meanings that are difficult to express through other means,” Kamal argues in this issue. Especially in difficult situations, but also in more mundane contexts when people prefer not to talk about themselves directly, interactants like to revert to telling stories about what happened to other people, sharing tales of some distant time and place, or invoking proverbs. We thus turn to “polished stories” of entertaining, instructive, or persuasive character. Rather than paint a stark contrast between telling stylized tales, pieces of verbal art, and well-told anecdotes of everyday social life, we want to look at these tales and their contexts of use together.
One of the qualities of these polished stories is that they are prone to entextualization, that is, they may get cut off from their surrounding context and still preserve their cohesiveness and coherence (Bauman; Bauman and Briggs). They can stand as textual units by themselves. As a consequence, these texts may then get inserted, “recontextualized,” in another environment. In this way, they are easily used and reused for different purposes. They can be combined with other narrative practices in the same event. In the process, tales undergo changes, as when tellers forget certain elements or purposely present circumstances in a different light. What endures is a bare “thematic core” that will remain constant or at least recognizable across versions. Jackson, for example, presents a handful of versions of the Kuranko tale of Yata, a story of “prevented successions,” which, he argues, bears resemblance to the Greek epic of Oedipus (191–226).

Verbal art is especially representative of this category. Proverbs and tales often get used and reused in different contexts. Proverbs frequently concern conflicting matters of interpersonal relations. The proverb “transfers the difficulty from a personal to a conceptual level,” says Hasan-Rokem (128), “thereby restoring equilibrium to the specific occurrence that threatens the community's traditional values.” Tales and proverbs transmit a lesson to learn. They are instructive and at times entertaining. They “educate the audience's attention” (Ingold) by pointing to certain constellations and the seemingly inevitable consequences of certain behaviors. Incidentally—or maybe typically?—they contain reflections on social relations and on the virtues of proper conduct. To the initiated, the moral of the tale is immediately clear. To outsiders, it is less so; as Ben-Amos explains, “the tales evoke a responsive chord among the listeners only if they correspond to their worldview, their aesthetic standards, and the ethical values that were partially shaped by these tales to begin with” (114). For the ethnographer, an extra effort is necessary to grasp the meaning of stories in a particular context.

These kinds of stories form part and parcel of most social gatherings and depend on a skillful performance for their success. Bauman and Braid argue that it is important to see the relation between tales and an audience in the context of interaction and highlight that there is an “accountability to an audience for a display of skill and efficacy” (107). They see the interaction between performer(s) and audience as constitutive of any performance. After all, a performer “fashions his or her performance to affect—move, persuade, enlighten, entertain—an audience and anticipates evaluation by that audience in return” (108). The audience’s reactions, in turn, have an influence on the course of the performance. For the
initiated, these stories reduce complexity. They make social life understandable by providing compelling relations between people and places, cause and effect. As eloquently phrased, “in telling a story we renew our faith that the world is within our grasp” (Jackson 17).

Overview of the Contributions

Jackson’s words are epitomized in Monika Kolodziej’s article, which reflects her fieldwork experience among young Chinese Muslims in northwest China. While studying interethnic relations, Kolodziej was time and again astonished that her interlocutors presented her with stories about events that happened to other people. Her interlocutors told her little about what they thought or what had happened to them personally but instead about what had happened to others. Kolodziej argues that this was linked to a certain communicative style she observed in northwest China that leaves much room for ambiguity while ensuring the teller saves face. The story thus helped convey a certain message. To those in the immediate local and cultural environment, the “lesson” was clear. The ethnographer had to learn to read between the lines. Kolodziej analyzes her “storied encounters” in light of work on the local notion of “face” and research on “politeness” as well as intercultural communication. Ultimately, she reflects on her field relations and the mutual ascriptions and expectations she and her interlocutors likely brought into interactions. These unspoken assumptions formed as much part of the interaction as did the spoken narrative.

Correspondingly, in the article by Barbara Götsch, which centers on project negotiations between representatives of a Moroccan NGO and a UN agency, a “polished” story features prominently. Conversation had revolved around how to go about social interventions on the ground. Both sides tried to describe and explain what they thought was a promising approach, until the NGO team leader turned to illustrating the NGO’s work ethics via a story. This tale worked: it convinced UN representatives that the NGO’s approach was worthwhile. It was the content but importantly also the skillful performance that did the trick: the audience was persuaded by the team leader’s story. He managed to grasp their attention and align their reasoning with his own. What is more, Götsch highlights the convergence of different narrative practices at the same event, namely, the polished story in conjunction with co-told emerging narrative. She argues that it is
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this convergence of different narrative practices, of a give and take in the negotiation of meaning, together with the practice of taking perspectives that in the end resulted in greater intersubjective understanding among participants at the event.

Similar to the polished story at work, pieces of verbal art are prototypical examples of narrations that carry local knowledge and moral values. As shown by Noura Kamal in her article on Yemeni popular proverbs, these short accounts provide insights into social life and cultural values that merit special attention. Along with the Yemeni poet ʿAbd Allāh al-Baraddūnī (whose work Kamal scrutinizes in detail), she argues that the tales that circulated in a particular region and among a particular group of people reveal values and motives that would go unnoticed if one only followed standard historiography.

This insight is central in the three following articles. Monika Palmberger, Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, and Duygu Doğru all show how ethnography has the potential to reveal hidden stories of the local past, stories that would otherwise remain unheard. Moreover, they show how narratives can be triggered by particular materialities and places and how this calls for innovative ethnographic and participatory methods. They draw on theories from the field of memory studies and from the anthropology of history. Palmberger’s article does so in the case of hidden histories of labor migrants in Austria. Here memory-guided city walks together with narrative interviews became key in the ethnographic inquiry. Palmberger’s article shows how narratives and places are tightly entangled. “Places first become filled with meaning through social interaction and the sensory experiences that surround them. At the same time, places shape and enhance narratives of the past. The meaningfulness of places is preserved through narration and by sharing memories of these places” (Palmberger, this issue). In the specific case of labor migration, Palmberger shows how places trigger narratives of the past, especially less publicly recognized pasts, and are produced through narratives. Moreover, Palmberger shows how, for migrants, places are likely to act as narrative devices in very specific ways, weaving together multilocal pasts that “connect new and old homes and memories of departure with memories of arrival and new beginnings.”

Life narratives of multilocal pasts are also the subject of Koskinen-Koivisto’s article, in which she analyzes one particular life narrative of a former Finnish child evacuee during World War II. This article shows how certain objects, especially clothes but also letters, become key narrative devices. The author argues that in oral history interviews, “materiality is often present in the form of material
objects,” and at the same time the “presence of material objects validates difficult, distant, and suppressed experiences and personal memory.” Koskinen-Koivisto vividly shows how stories shared by interviewees contain references to everyday materiality, which can bring past experiences alive and closer to the present and communicate affective experiences and social bonds. Ethnographers who take these narrative devices seriously, who listen carefully but also creatively adapt their ethnographic methods accordingly, may reveal otherwise hidden narratives of a troublesome past.

A difficult legacy is also the focus of Doğru’s article, this time of a specific neighborhood in Istanbul with a diverse migrant community. We learn how perceptions of history adhere to space and how historicity of this particular group of migrants can be encountered in the ethnographic present of their storytelling. Research as learning process—from oral history to an “ethnography of history”—again builds on methodological openness and creativity. During her research, Doğru underwent an important shift in understanding narratives “as being socially constructed on the one hand and moving through a past-present continuum on the other” and this enabled her to ethnographically analyze the challenges of the ongoing urban renewal opposition in the migrant neighborhoods she studied. Moreover, Doğru reflects on the ethnographer’s role as co-teller of narratives encountered in the field, which is tightly entangled with the ethnographic knowledge production. She ends her text with a plea “for conducting an ethnography of history” and argues that by “embracing various genres of stories and paying attention to the modes of their expression, it becomes possible to grasp the conflicting perspectives on and within communities.”

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