
CONFERENCES

Track Changes: Reflecting on a Transforming World

14th Congress of SIEF in Santiago de Compostela, Spain,

14–17 April 2019

Inés Matres & Johanna Pohtinen

Around 900 delegates of the International Society of Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) chose the mecca of European pilgrimage to celebrate this year's biennial congress. The tracks that pilgrims leave in their journey were chosen as a metaphor, to reflect on the marks that humans leave behind, which are observed and analysed by our research community. The congress title 'Track Changes' refers to transformations that both the word and our discipline are facing, and to how we as its practitioners are adapting. The authors of this report each followed the thematic area that most resonated with our research: digital and creative ethnography. In this report, we offer a summary of the keynotes and a personal reflection on these thematic areas.

Cidade da Cultura, located on top of Gaiás hill, was the location chosen to welcome all participants. This modern artificial hilltop created by Peter Eisenman is a controversial place as it required the mining of part of the hill's base and because its completion was interrupted by the economic crisis in 2008. In this milieu, Susana Narotzky delivered the first keynote, *The politics of evidence in an uncertain world: Experience, knowledge, social facts and factual truth*. The experiences of struggle and precarity of communities that, as Gaiás hill, still suffer the aftermath of the financial crisis in Spain, are the evidence examined by Narotzky. These experiences counter the power of political evidence, dominated by numbers, trends and traces of fake optimism.

After a half-day of sessions, we listened to the second keynote by Tim Ingold, titled *Strike-through and wipe-out: Tactics for overwriting the past*. Filling the chalkboard behind him with sketches, Ingold showed us that any human-made gesture of elimination never succeeds in removing what was there before, as it happens when rock naturally sediments in layers forming the surface of the Earth. Before such destructive tactics, it is our task to explore that trace of life, that wiggling text or ground that survives underneath.

Someone in the audience asked Tim Ingold to talk about digital overwriting and removal, but he admitted that he had not adjusted enough to using a computer to do it. However, the digital world was addressed on the last day by Coppélie Cocq in her keynote *Digital footprints and narrative traceability / Nar-*

rative footprints and digital traceability. Cocq appealed for our ability to adapt to faster changing cultural expressions in the postdigital era. In her opinion, the catalogue of narratives produced in online spaces by communities leading on- and offline lives should be matched by a catalogue of both vintage and innovative methods applied by our community to be able to collect data and interpret such lives. This keynote consolidated digital ethnography on the SIEF map and was supported by four panels dedicated to digital worlds and online communities.

One aspect shared by these panels was that of digital idioms. Often these idioms include a visual representation of the self, but as Klaus Schönberger suggested in his talk *Protest with selfies as articulation of the common?*, we should read them beyond narcissistic practices. In her keynote, Cocq referred to digital languages becoming more visual, but not necessarily less ambiguous than earlier traditions. In addition to people's own reflection on camera, the materials collected by the presenters also included memes, animals and content accompanied by a hashtag. Researchers seldom discuss these vernacular expressions with the people who use them, and this requires us to rethink if and how we can reflect on their intentions.

The second shared aspect was the postdigital status quo, when the material ramifications of non-physical spaces are at the centre of our attention. This topic was well illustrated by talks about tourism and heritage. Kirsti Mathiesen Hjemdahl focused on promoters in the cultural sector who rely on digital channels as a form of coping with geographically challenged regions or ways to cater for certain tourists. This perspective was complemented by digital communities; some of them facilitating sustainable heritage practices, such as the amateur cottage restaurateurs studied by Sigrun Thorgrimsdottir, and others causing damages, such as those persons examined by Morgan Müller-Roux who want to master the 'art of posing alone' and revisit once remote places now crowded, which is an Instagram-related trend in travel photography.

Finally, methodological reconfigurations were also shared by some of the presenters. Lucrezia López presented a comparison between her own interpretations of the sentiments of pilgrim YouTubers and those made by a specialised sentiment analysis software (which analyses text captions automatically generated in YouTube videos), which proved very different from one another. Other presenters were tempted by the possibility to consider digital frameworks of analysis as an alternative to having to drastically limit their material. In relation to this, López's critical approach to digital methods fits the vintage/innovative paradigm advocated by Cocq.

As an afterthought, a glimpse outside this thematic area stream allowed us to identify interests common to digital, archival and heritage researchers under

the umbrella of 'tracking changes'. With a great sense of discovery, old-school folklorist Åsa Ljungström delivered a content overview of private diaries kept by a house matron who lived at the turn of the 20th century. These journals were found in an attic and are now preserved in a folklore archive as they reveal details about an extinct livelihood worth of further research. Ljungström's felt urgency to preserve these diaries and Ingold's invitation to discover traces of past life could serve as a lesson to digital ethnographers: when it comes to our materials, the Internet should not be confused with attics or archives, and we should be sceptical about the durability of digital forms of expression and of being in the world.

The panels that focused on creative ethnographies offered us discussions on at least two levels. The first was related to how ethnography and art may be co-produced and merged together. Kim Silow Kallenberg and Jenny Ingridsson suggested that creative methodologies, such as ethnographic fiction, may be used to disseminate research material and make sensory information visible, and may in themselves serve as analytical processes. After reading her ethnographic poems and crumpling them into paper balls, Ann-Charlotte Palmgren pointed out that creative writing does not necessarily make an academic text good: it makes it different.

Creative methodologies are not an innovation in ethnology: creative writing, drawing and photography have always been part of the research process. Still, there seemed to be a need to justify the use of these methods and an air of track changes: we seem to have become so used to a certain expression of academic voice that any diversion from it is seen as a novelty. Furthermore, as Cocq mentioned in her keynote, traditional stories are remoulded to fit new media, and for instance cat pictures are used to further narratives on social media. In academia, this remoulding could be the different kind of narrative from the one we are accustomed to. As it is also important to disseminate research results to people outside academia, perhaps the creative ways of doing ethnography could function as cat pictures.

The second level of discussing the artistic or creative process was through the variety of roles and tasks carried out by researchers. Namely, how to combine being an artist, an activist or a community member with being an academic researcher. In addition, the creative process itself can be analysed. Hannah Bradley proposed that art and anthropology have similarities, such as tracing patterns and getting to know them thoroughly. In the same vein, Audur Vidardóttir introduced the similarities between music-making and the academic research process: first there are the bits and pieces that later constitute a coherent work. Similarly, in both artist and activist scenes as well as in academia, there is plenty of unpaid and emotional labour that

may cause frustration and mixed feelings, which were later discussed at the roundtable as well.

Conducting research from a community member or an activist position is neither new nor exclusive to ethno-sciences. However, perhaps these perspectives are more visible today, as it is more customary now than before to have the researcher's voice present in the text. As Susana Narotzky mentioned in the opening keynote, shared experience is evidence for increased solidarity and support between people. We could extend this form of support to the ethnographer as a community member, activist and artist as well and see research that combines artistic approaches as more empathic and aiming for improving the situation of the researched community.

At the closing event and the congress dinner, Galicia was brought to us in the form of Celtic folk music and dance performances. In the closing keynote, *Agents of transformation: The role of museums in a changing world*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett presented us with a revised idea, or a track change, of the museum. Instead of being merely places for reminiscing and viewing history, museums can be part of actively relearning and creating history. By way of building and decorating a destroyed synagogue through traditional methods, traditional skills are preserved in a transforming world. In the same vein, the SIEF2019 congress gave us a glimpse of what future ethnologies have to offer, and which tracks ethnology might take, while at the same time respecting the traditions of the field.

AUTHORS

Inés Matres is a PhD student in European Ethnology at the University of Helsinki. Her research interest is to understand how digital practices transform our relationship with the past and cultural heritage, and especially how this affects younger generations.

Johanna Pohtinen is a PhD student in European Ethnology at the University of Turku. Her research interest is the Finnish kink community in addition to applying creative methodologies, such as ethnographic fiction.