# CREATING HYPERTEXT ETHNOGRAPHY
## REFLECTIONS ON A WORKSHOP IN TALLINN

• MIKHAIL FIADOTAU •

*Introduction*

The following is a brief report and a reflection on a workshop entitled *Does ethnography have to be linear? Experimenting with hypertext ethnography*, which I organized on December 12, 2015 as part of the inaugural event of the Baltic Anthropology Graduate School at Tallinn University, Estonia.[1] The six-hour workshop brought together seven participants (mostly Master's students) from three Baltic universities: Tallinn University, University of Latvia, and Riga Stradins University.

The aim of the workshop, as follows from its title, was to encourage the participants to explore alternative formats of presentation and provoke a discussion on the potential use of nonlinear narratives to the discipline of anthropology. In addition to being practice-based, the workshop was exploratory in nature, its resulting 'lesson' being emergent rather than pre-programmed.

*Workshop overview*

An increasing number of academics are becoming interested in various alternative formats of presenting scholarly knowledge, ranging 'from hypertext and Web sites to films and video games' (Taylor 2009). In anthropology in particular, more mainstream conferences are starting to include film programs and experimental laboratories. That said, some possible alternative formats have still largely gone unnoticed.

One such format is hypertext: a 'text composed of blocks of words <...> linked electronically by multiple paths' (Landow 1997: 30). In anthropology, hypertext and hypermedia (hypertext which incorporates audiovisual media) are of course not entirely unheard-of: consider Hundley's pioneering *The Bard on the Digital Porch* (n.d.) and the *Kommunalka* project by Utekhin et.al. (2006). Wood (2011) provides an in-depth analysis of hypertext ethnography as a nascent genre and reflects on his own experience of creating one, but the ethnography itself seems to no longer be accessible online.

By and large, however, hypertext is not a format anthropologists often employ. And yet, it possesses a number of unique attributes that open up intriguing possibilities. To cite the description of the workshop itself:

> The non-linearity of hypertext means it has the potential to capture the complexity and multi-layered character of culture and experience better than a linear account. Navigating through hypertext can also evoke the dynamics and cyclical patterns of human thinking. The interactivity allows the reader more agency, making ethnography something that they can explore or even construct within given constraints.
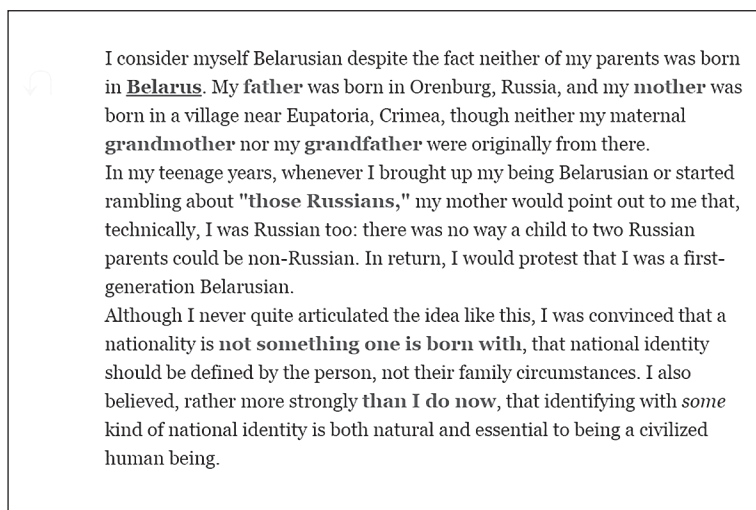
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> I consider myself Belarusian despite the fact neither of my parents was born in **Belarus**. My **father** was born in Orenburg, Russia, and my **mother** was born in a village near Eupatoria, Crimea, though neither my maternal **grandmother** nor my **grandfather** were originally from there.
> In my teenage years, whenever I brought up my being Belarusian or started rambling about **"those Russians,"** my mother would point out to me that, technically, I was Russian too: there was no way a child to two Russian parents could be non-Russian. In return, I would protest that I was a first-generation Belarusian.
> Although I never quite articulated the idea like this, I was convinced that a nationality is **not something one is born with**, that national identity should be defined by the person, not their family circumstances. I also believed, rather more strongly **than I do now**, that identifying with *some* kind of national identity is both natural and essential to being a civilized human being.

Figure 1: 'Me and My Belarusianness', a Twine autoethnography made by the author for a graduate course in anthropology of migration.

The practical aim of the workshop was to verify these assumptions about hypertext's potential by asking the participants to create a brief hypertext ethnography of their own.

After a brief introduction, I acquainted the participants with Twine, a hypertext creation tool known for its simple syntax and intuitive interface. Twine produces interactive stories that can be navigated by clicking at highlighted phrases, which take the reader to other passages.[2] I asked the participants to read through a number of Twine narratives, including *That Sinister Self*, a story about a teenager's struggle with her self-esteem and body image which has an almost autoethnographic ring to it. I then explained the basics of Twine syntax and asked each participant to devise a concept for a short hypertext ethnography that they would work on for the remainder of the workshop. Some of my suggestions included an 'autoethnography of a brief yet meaningful personal experience', a 'brief ethnographic account of your university/work environment', and 'an "impressionist" ethnography of a travelling experience'. The last suggestion in particular seemed to resonate with the participants, with three of them deciding to document their experiences of travelling abroad, their foci ranging from going through airport security to the concept of 'home' and being in a 'foreign' place. Two participants chose to convert their existing field notes into hypertext form. One of the resulting hypertexts was an account of interpersonal and status relationships at the author's workplace; the other offered a glimpse into the author's fieldwork conducted in the border town of Valga and her desire to document the cultural heritage found amid the seemingly humdrum life of small Estonian and Latvian towns.

*Results and questions*

While it was not possible for the participants to produce a full ethnographic hypertext given the limited time span and the impromptu nature of the workshop, their engagement with Twine did yield readable, if unfinished, hypertexts and provoked reflections and questions.

All participants testified that they had found the experience meaningful and could see how hypertextual presentation could benefit some ethnographic accounts. One participant, a visual anthropology student, revealed that he had discovered many parallels between ethnographic film-making (his medium of choice) and hypertext creation. Another opined that hypertext creation could in fact be a useful exercise to help students structure their linear writing better.

Several participants mentioned the dual feeling of empowerment and additional responsibility resulting from dealing with non-linear structure. Unlike writing a conventional paper, where the structure is to a large degree pre-determined and the content is 'shaped, pruned and reworked to fit the form' (Rolfe 2006: 308), working on a hypertext entails carefully planning a structure that is coherent, easy to navigate and, most importantly, benefits the narrative.

A related question concerned the need to impose limitations on the reader's agency: 'What if the reader wants to click on a word I have not made clickable?' Our jointly formulated answer was that, like any narrative, hypertext is constructed. As such, its structure can be challenged by the reader, but the responsibility for designing the constraints within which readers operate is ultimately the author's. Rather than a drawback, this is a fundamental attribute of any mediated narrative.

After the workshops concluded, we were asked to share our findings with other participants in the event. One member of the audience voiced his concern that the increased freedom of navigation that hypertext offers its readers can lead to the author's losing control over the interpretation of their text. The ensuing discussion concluded that *any* text can be interpreted differently and even read in a non-linear way (by skipping parts or reversing their order, for example). In this sense, hypertext only brings to the fore qualities already inherent to textuality in general. This does, as mentioned above, entail additional responsibility on the author's part to structure their work meaningfully.

A more practical question touched upon the scarcity of venues for disseminating academic work in non-conventional formats such as hypertext, as well as a general lack of acceptance for experimental forms in academia. I pointed out that some venues are available (for example, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* welcomes interactive submissions), but they are indeed few and far between. Perhaps the only way to deal with this is to create more ethnographies that justify their use of non-traditional media, in the process habituating the academic community to the existence of such works.

The discussion wrapped up. While the workshop only left us with tentative findings and no definite conclusions, it at least demonstrated that hypertext as a format is not incompatible with ethnographic research, and that it has a potential which needs further investigation and demonstration. These, I am hopeful, will materialize in due time.

## NOTES

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[2] For an in-depth analysis of Twine's properties as a storytelling tool, see Friedhoff (2014).

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