Speculations and Survivals:
The Fabulation of the Future and the Untimely Persistence of the Past

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A Memory

1 A small island in the North Sea, sometime around the turn of the twentieth century:

Then there were the “Gyro” nights. I wonder if such a thing ever takes place in any other of our islands . . . each of the smaller boys got a long bundle of simmons [ropes made from straw, heather or rushes] and got it lit and so had a torch. This was to entice the ‘gyros,” the hobgoblins [. . .] The “gyro” was just one of the bigger boys with a mask on [. . .] He might have on some grotesque headgear, then some woman’s garment about the body, and about the legs he would have some loose simmons tied round his waist by a piece of rope [. . .] Of course, we had to run for dear life, and sometimes when we did run at our best we were caught and just received as many strokes as the “gyro” was pleased to give us. (Drever 1923: 70)

2 The author, John Drever, writing in 1923 in the Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society, is recalling his own childhood on the island of Papa Westray (or “Papay” as it is usually known locally), current population around a hundred, the second smallest and second most northerly of the inhabited islands of Orkney, an archipelago lying nine miles north of Caithness on the coast of Scotland. What Drever describes combines elements of a game of chase and of cross-dressing performance involving masks and improvised costumes, assembled from an assortment of found items. Drever notes that these games took place only in February, toward the end of winter, and that at this otherwise dark time of year it was not unusual to see the fields above his parents’ house brightly illuminated by the fire brands carried by the younger boys. Drever’s published account is separated by more than a decade from the events it describes. The intervening years had witnessed, most conspicuously, the First World War, when many of Orkney’s male population perished while serving in the British armed forces. The war has been widely interpreted by historians and folklorists as a moment of cultural loss in Orkney, marking the disappearance of a range of popular customs and
observances, and indeed Drever’s article affords the last recorded eyewitness account of the Gyro Nights and their attendant games.

3 Until, that is . . .

**Papay Gyro Nights**

4 Fast forward to a photograph taken in 2016 showing a group of masked and costumed participants in what turned out to be the final iteration of Papay Gyro Nights, a festival of contemporary experimental, multi-media, and performance arts held annually every February on Papa Westray since 2011.

Papay Gyro Nights, 2016

![Papay Gyro Nights, 2016](Photo by Tsz Man Chan)

5 The festival was the creation of Sergei Ivanov and Tsz Man Chan, two artists, born in Kyrgyzstan and Hong Kong respectively, who had moved to Papa Westray from London in 2007.¹ They had set up a studio in a rented house at Tredwall near the southern end of the island, and their daughter, Snædis, now aged thirteen, was born in 2010 in the hospital at Kirkwall, the principal town on Orkney Mainland, the largest island.
If the festival took its name from the Gyro Nights described in Drever’s account, it drew part of its inspiration too from other seasonal masquerade traditions, associated with midwinter or the end of winter, documented across the North Atlantic region, and carried, it has been suggested, by the Norse voyagers who began to settle in Orkney, Shetland, and, later, the Faroe Islands and Iceland from the seventh century onward. Like the Faroese Grýla (a name deriving from an Old Norse word meaning “giantess” or “ogress”), many of these involved a titularly female figure, usually played by a male performer, with a costume fashioned from “elements such as animal skins and horns, straw, seaweed, fish guts, a dress or skirt, in some cases a wooden phallus, and (in more recent iterations) store-bought plastic masks” (Gunnell 1995: 160-19; 2007: 298-301, 309, 318-19).
For all its explicit referencing of folk tradition, however, the Papay Gyro Nights Art Festival was anything but an exercise in revivalism. As the 2011 festival website announced:

Against reconstructing what is gone and almost forgotten, the Festival is a reflection on the folktale, the island’s landscape and heritage, as well as an interpretation of tradition and ritual, through new developments in art and architecture [. . .] During the festival the island is transformed into an art space and artworks are screened and exhibited in old farm buildings, the boathouse, workshops, ruins, and the open landscape. (http://www.papaygyronights.papawestray.org/)

Participating artists were invited to create site-specific works or to display existing works in ways that responded to the singular materiality of the island setting, not least by drawing inspiration from the composite, combinatorial figure of the gyro.
My own involvement in Gyro Nights began as a curious spectator, attending the first iteration of the festival after a chance sighting of a flyer during a visit to Kirkwall, Orkney's main town. I wrote a short piece based on my responses to some of the featured artworks and sent it to Sergei and Tsz Man. We began to correspond via email, and I visited them again the following summer. Over the course of that and subsequent meetings we became friends and my role in the festival became increasingly that of an active participant as well as an observer. I gave readings and talks, screened a video installation piece based on my research, and took part in collaborative lecture-performances in Papa Westray, Bergen, the Faroe Islands, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.

Then, in March 2017, Sergei disappeared. He was last seen alive at around 10am on Monday, April 3, 2017. Tsz Man and Snædis were away visiting family in Hong Kong at the time. Sergei was seen walking, camera in hand, toward the south of the island, where he had been photographing the shoreline. He was reported missing by a neighbour six days later. A search by police and coastguards found nothing. It has been suggested that in all likelihood he fell and was swept into the sea, although no body has been recovered as yet, and Orkney’s notoriously fast-running inter-island currents make it unlikely that one will ever be found. Under Scottish law he cannot be officially declared dead until seven years have passed. Suddenly, abruptly, a figure who, along with Tsz Man and Snædis, had played an increasingly important role in my life was gone. With his disappearance the latter-day Gyro Nights of Papa Westray that had been a focus of my research and writing came to an end too, seemingly consigned to the past as definitively as their early twentieth century namesake.
Survivals

It is surely no coincidence that since Sergei’s disappearance I have found myself increasingly preoccupied with a concept from anthropology’s own not-quite-vanished past. The concept is that of “survivals,” formulated by one of the discipline’s founders, Edward Burnett Tylor, in his 1871 work, Primitive Culture: “These are processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved” (Tylor 1958: 16). Tylor adds that such practices “often date back to the habits of hundreds or even thousands of years ago” and his examples, many of them drawn from the Europe of his own day, include household decorations, children’s games, proverbs, and a variety of masked and costumed performances, often associated with particular times of year such as midwinter, the beginning of Spring, or the harvest, and often involving the wearing of animal attributes such as horns, fur, feathers or a tail. If Tylor’s influence during his lifetime was such that anthropology was sometimes referred to as “Mr. Tylor’s science,” he himself has increasingly assumed the status of an anachronism in relation to more recent anthropology, seldom cited in current scholarship and mentioned only in passing in textbooks as the exponent of a unilineal theory of social evolution, holding that all human societies can be understood as developing, albeit at different rates, in accordance with a uniform and predictable sequence of stages. When discussed at all, the concept of survivals has generally been characterized (and usually dismissed) in the same terms. Michael Herzfeld, for example, writing in 1987, criticized what he referred to as Tylor’s “unabashedly Eurocentric doctrine,” in which survivals were simply (as he put it) “cases of arrested development in a broadly universal pattern of evolution” (Herzfeld 1987: 9-10). As C. Nadia Seremetakis remarked at the time, however, (and as I have since come to think as a result of my involvement in Papay Gyro Nights), such a verdict may be too peremptory and clear-cut (Seremetakis 1991: 11). Is there not something disconcerting, something downright weird, about the contemporary persistence of the phenomena referred to as survivals – about the fact that they appear to be in the present but not fully of it? After all, if there are such things as survivals, then social evolution can hardly be said to be a one-way street. Far from resembling a straight line, the time of survivals seems discontinuous and out of joint, marked by strange reversals, uncanny repetitions and phantasmatic returns, suggesting the co-existence and overlap of multiple temporalities and perhaps of multiple worlds.

It is this uncanny, untimely aspect of survivals (rather than the stadial theory of social evolution with which Tylor is so often identified) that has appealed also to two of Tylor’s most notable latter-day (re-)readers: anthropologist Carlo Severi and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. Both call attention also to the importance of Tylor’s influence on Aby Warburg’s lifelong researches on the Nachleben, or afterlife, of images from pagan antiquity in the art of the European Renaissance, and his shorter lived explorations of the ceremonial dances and iconography of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona (Didi-Huberman 2002, 2017; Severi 2015; Warburg 1995, 1999). Didi-Huberman argues that in both cases Warburg was attentive less to the significations of images than to their unruly vitality and their untimely persistence – an energy in constitutive tension with the imperatives of form to organize and render intelligible.
The renewal of pagan antiquity that Warburg sought to trace in the art of the Renaissance was less a matter of the transmission of recognizable form or conceptual content than of bodily affects, gestures, movements, and metamorphoses (expressed through what Warburg calls Pathosformeln), a process of transmission, in other words, that had as much to do with difference as with identity (Didi-Huberman 2005). Survivals testify that, as Didi-Huberman puts it, “the present bears the mark of multiple pasts” – pasts, moreover, that manifest themselves in the guise not of resemblance or simple continuity but of transformation and displacement (Didi-Huberman 2002: 63, 2016).

An Island Transformed

13 The early twentieth century torchlit pursuits described by Drever, which gave their name to Papay Gyro Nights, and the similar costumed performances recorded in the Faroe Islands and elsewhere, might seem like so much grist to the mill of the Tylorean-inspired survivalist ethnology dismissed by Herzfeld, behaviours persisting by force of habit, the onetime ritual or religious significance of which has long since been lost. The temptation to understand them thus is no doubt underscored both by the fact that Papa Westray, and Orkney as a whole, is an environment densely marked by material after-traces of the past, including several of the pre-eminent Neolithic archaeological sites in the British Isles, and by the etymologies of the names Gyro and Grýla, evoking as they do the giants who, in the cosmogony sketched out in fragmentary form in the surviving corpus of Norse Eddic poetry (first written down in the thirteenth century), carry powerful associations with the creation of the universe, identified as a time of elemental flux, prior to the appearance of the more familiar, anthropomorphically conceived gods of the Norse pantheon and their human worshippers. Nonetheless, I want to propose that the Papay Gyro Nights Art Festival’s self-consciously speculative appeals to these putative antecedents can be more suggestively aligned with the more complex and nuanced reading of survivals proposed by Severi and Didi-Huberman. Belonging fully neither to the past nor the present, survivals seem to embody an equivocation between being absent and being present that speaks not only to Sergei’s still unresolved fate but also to the themes of the festival.

14 The aim of festival, as Sergei and Tsz Man described it to me over the course of our many conversations, was to stage a series of encounters: encounters between islanders, participating artists, and visitors; encounters between the present, a conventionally folkloric figure from the island’s past, and the literary and mythological associations condensed by the latter; and encounters between artworks in a variety of media and the distinctive materiality of the island setting, including the archaeological record and the dynamic interplay of land and sea. Rather than seeking to restore an unmediated connection to the past through straightforward identification or the assertion of unbroken continuity, the festival articulated a relationship to the past that partook as much of difference as of resemblance. The gyro and her Faroese and other counterparts were invoked as processual, metamorphic figures capable of scrambling apparent contraries (land and sea, human and animal, male and female), just as the artworks, performances, and other events drawing inspiration from them were presented within the ritually circumscribed space-time of the festival that sought self-consciously to differentiate its own mode of being from the more predictable, habituated, or
institutionalized forms of presence that characterized much of life on the island during the remainder of the year.

During the festival the usual round of island activities continued uninterrupted – farmers farmed, fishermen fished, children attended school, the community store opened for business as usual, boats arrived at the pier to offload passengers and cargo, and flights between Papa Westray’s narrow airstrip and Kirkwall Airport continued to take off and land twice a day – but something else was happening too. Other presences made themselves felt – images, stories, masks, performances, installations – hay lofts and abandoned buildings became exhibition or performance spaces, torchlight parades and bonfires illuminated the night. The assigned functionalities of island’s physical environment and built structures were overlaid with other possibilities. Here are a few examples: Oslo-based artists Andrea Bakketun and Christian Tony Norum created a series of in situ works in an abandoned farmhouse and its outbuildings. Some of these took the form of minor additions – a small painted sign, or a painted canvas left to billow like a sail in the wind. Others were more conspicuous, such as a two-metre-tall structure in the interior of the house, made from transparent, inflated plastic, and illuminated by sunlight pouring through the windows and through several holes in the roof. British digital artists Genetic Moo (Tim Pickup and Nicola Schauerman) filled a garage space with computers, projectors and sensors to create a digital ecosystem – “a microworld on a microisland”, as they described it – including looped footage of tides, along with lichens and other island life forms, projected on four walls and capable of interacting both with itself and with visitors to the space. Brendan Colvert, an artist based on the neighbouring island of Sanday, executed a series of what he called “gyro marks,” small paintings on slate that were displayed, more or less visibly, at locations across the island. Hong Kong performance artist Frog King (aka Kwok Mang-ho) transformed an empty classroom in the island’s school into a combined studio, installation, and collaborative workshop, where artists, islanders, and visitors, adults and children, came together to hang out, talk, dress up in costumes, play, and make art. The effect of these interventions (as a number of islanders and visitors remarked) was one of finding oneself in a place at once familiar and strange.

Photo by Stuart McLean

Genetic Moo (Tim Pickup and Nicole Schauerman), Microworld, Papay Gyro Nights, 2014

Photo by Stuart McLean
Like the Kuna shamanic chants so meticulously analysed by Severi (where the presence of the locutor is compounded through self-referentiality and cumulative repetition, creating a mimetic double capable of voyaging to and interacting with the spirit world), the festival performed a work of ontological complexification (Severi 2013: 207-228). Things, people, and places could be themselves and not-themselves, could become
other, not in the sense of discarding one identity for another in linear fashion but through a superposition or layering, not least of temporalities, including the twenty-first century present, the early twentieth century, pre-First World War past of Drever’s memoir, and the mythic antecedents more distantly evoked by the name Gyro Nights itself. It is, however, significant, I think, that many of the artworks featured in the festival made little or no explicit reference to the traditions of North Atlantic folk performance referenced by the festival’s name – nor indeed were they expected by the festival’s organizers to do so. Artists participating in the festival were asked not to produce representational copies of the figure of the gyro but to respond creatively to the metamorphic, combinatorial potentiality that she (?) manifests. The artworks, in other words, were so many metamorphoses of a figure of metamorphosis. The past that the artworks sought to engage was not that or historical or antiquarian scholarship. It was not locatable on a quantitatively calibrated timeline but partook rather of something more elusive – a quality of pastness as pure generativity akin to that evoked by Warburg’s *Pathosformeln*, or the metamorphic, pre-cosmological vistas of the Eddic verses. Distinct from any conception of the past as merely the bygone present, this is what Bergson and, later, Deleuze would call the past as “virtual multiplicity,” subsisting adjacent to and always in excess of the actuality of the present. Understood thus, as Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, the past itself becomes a source of dynamism, newness, and futurity (Grosz 2004: 178).

Survivals and Futures

Suffice to say, this differs too from the narrowly exclusionary conceptions of history, identity, and belonging associated with developments taking place contemporaneously with and subsequent to the five year run of Papay Gyro Nights: the resurgence of far-right ethno-nationalisms across Europe (and beyond), Britain’s (though not Scotland’s) vote in by a narrow margin in June 2016 to leave the European Union (“Brexit”), the increasingly strident anti-immigration rhetoric of the Reform UK party and of groups like the Britain First and the English Defence League, and the election in December 2019 of a right-wing Conservative government under the leadership of Boris Johnson (who has since resigned from public office, although at the time of writing the party he led continues to govern). The names may be different but in each case the promise involves reconnecting with a selectively shared past (white, Anglophone, titularly Christian, etc.) and the restoration of an eclipsed national greatness, to be achieved not least through the more stringent regulation of national borders – “taking back control” in the words of the Brexiteers’ favourite slogan (or, of course “Make America Great Again”).

The creation of two emigré artists to a remote island that itself bore witness to an eight-millennia-long history of human migration, Papay Gyro Nights was an experiment in collectivity of a very different kind, informed by a vision that was as much cosmopolitical as cosmopolitan. The festival brought the outside world – or at least a part of it - to Papa Westray, including artists from the countries of the European Union, and explored unexpected affinities with other places, sometimes very distant ones, like Hong Kong, initiating dialogues and collaborations across nation state boundaries, oceans, and continents. It was a collaborative venture in the most expansive sense, involving artworks in a variety of media, artists, islanders, visitors,
along with the island’s long-term and transient other-than-human residents (cattle, domestic animals, seabirds, seals), the built environment, physical geography, and the vicissitudes of tides, wind, and weather. It drew its name and inspiration from a figure composed of materials variously found and manufactured, from land, sea, and shoreline, who was herself already more than one, already a heterogeneous and unstable collective, a collective not readymade (like ethnonationalism’s nations) but always in the making, and as such constitutively open to an outside, to everything lying beyond itself. The past on which Papay Gyro Nights drew in conjuring into being such a collective was a source not of continuity, stability, or reassurance, but of disruption and displacement, of metamorphic potentiality and matter-energy pushing against the constraints of legible form. It was not a guarantee of sameness but a power of difference, an incitement to experiment, to unleash minor histories and trajectories of becoming. Absence and presence shed their distinctness here, undercutting both reactionary nostalgia and the uncritical affirmation of progress. Such a past – the past of survivals - can neither be definitively lost nor straightforwardly restored in its fullness. Perhaps this is why it continues to speak to me so powerfully of my missing friend and of the festival he hoped to found. Is Sergei really gone? Will the Gyro Nights of Papa Westray, past and present, ever truly come to an end? This is also, I think, why Mr. Tylor’s notion retains an untimely urgency and salience for the fabulatory art of survivals that is anthropology.
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Books and articles


Website

NOTES

1. For a more extended description of the festival and some of the featured artworks, see McLean (2017: 165-263).
2. A remarkable record of such practices in contemporary Europe has been produced by the French photographer Charles Fréger, to whose work Sergei introduced me (Fréger 2012).

ABSTRACTS

What role might an engagement with the past continue to play for an anthropology oriented toward the imagining and enacting of alternative (more just, livable, sustainable) futures? I approach this question via a “speculative memoir” of my own involvement in the Papay Gyro Nights Art Festival, held on the island of Papa Westray, Orkney (2011-2017). Founded by two emigré artist-curators (from Kyrgyzstan and Hong Kong), and featuring a range of contemporary artworks in a variety of media, the festival sought to engage elements from North Atlantic storytelling and performance traditions to explore alternative forms of collectivity, premised not on reactionary nostalgia or ready-made criteria of inclusion and exclusion, but on an open-ended and experimental engagement between pasts and presents, humans and other-than-humans, including the singular materiality of the island setting.

Quel rôle un engagement avec le passé peut-il continuer à jouer pour une anthropologie orientée vers l’imagination et la mise en œuvre de futurs alternatifs (plus justes, plus vivables, plus durables) ? J’aborde cette question par le biais d’une mémoire spéculative de ma propre participation au festival artistique Papay Gyro Nights, qui s’est tenu sur l’île de Papa Westray, dans les Orcades (2011-2017). Fondé par deux artistes-commissaires émigrés (du Kirghizistan et de Hong Kong), et présentant un éventail d’œuvres d’art contemporaines dans une variété de médias, le festival a cherché à engager des éléments des traditions de narration et de performance de l’Atlantique Nord pour explorer des formes alternatives de collectivité, fondées non pas sur une nostalgie réactionnaire ou des critères prêts à l’emploi d’inclusion et d’exclusion, mais sur un engagement ouvert et expérimental entre le passé et le présent, les humains et les autres que les humains, y compris la matérialité singuli ère du cadre de l’île.

¿Qué papel puede seguir desempeñando el compromiso con el pasado para una antropología orientada a imaginar y poner en práctica futuros alternativos (más justos, habitables y sostenibles)? Abordo esta cuestión a través de una "memoria especulativa" de mi propia participación en el Festival de Arte Papay Gyro Nights, celebrado en la isla de Papa Westray, Orkney (2011-2017). El festival, fundado por dos artistas comisarios emigrados (de Kirguistán y Hong Kong) y en el que se presentaron diversas obras de arte contemporáneo en distintos medios, trató de incorporar elementos de las tradiciones de narración y representación del Atlántico Norte para explorar formas alternativas de colectividad, basadas no en una nostalgia reaccionaria ni en criterios prefabricados de inclusión y exclusión, sino en un compromiso abierto y experimental entre el pasado y el presente, los seres humanos y los no humanos, incluyendo la singular materialidad del entorno insular.
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