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"Our Doing and Undoing": Anthropological Encounters and the Cultural Limits of Narrative in Lily King's *Euphoria*

ABSTRACT Lily King's novel *Euphoria* (2014) reimagines the 1931 American Museum of Natural History Expedition to the Sepik River in New Guinea, centring on the professional and romantic dynamics among fictionalized versions of the historical anthropologists Margaret Mead, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson. This triangular constellation has garnered significant attention from reviewers. In addition, *Euphoria* has attracted interest from anthropologists due to its exploration of the discipline and its ethnographic methods. This paper examines the allegorical potential of King's novel, which not only alters the names of the protagonists but also changes key factual elements of the expedition. Using various textual techniques, such as characterization, narration, and evocation of implicit readership, the novel captures different shifts in the field of anthropology's history. While exposing the entanglement of science with colonialism and the ways in which ethnography is engaged in 'doing and undoing' subjectivities, lives, people, and cultures, *Euphoria* also grapples with the conventions of the adventure romance. This paper argues that the novel's dual commitment—to advocating a postcolonial perspective while operating within the Western literary marketplace—prompts discussion of the cultural limits of narrative. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt and Sara Ahmed's critique of ethnographic texts, which often prioritize the agency of their knowing scientist subjects over the presumedly unknowing, indigenous 'objects' in anthropological encounters, this paper analyses *Euphoria* to acknowledge both the relevance of contemporary fictional reconstructions of historical scientific expeditions but also the complicities stemming from culturally specific scripts.

KEYWORDS anthropological encounter, ethnographic text, expedition narrative, Margaret Mead, the Pacific

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"What is wrong with women? […] Why do they buy into these cultural stereotypes? Worse, why do they perpetuate them? Are they not aware of the dominant female role in the hidden tribes of the Amazon? Is Margaret Mead out of print?" (Garmus 2022, 238).[1] The scientist protagonist in Bonnie Garmus's bestselling novel *Lessons in Chemistry* is exasperated with the women around her. She finds them at fault for collaborating with, rather than resisting, the patriarchal status quo in 1960s US-America and for ignoring female scientists' efforts to unleash the potential of female power in indigenous cultures in order to empower women in Western cultures. Here, and elsewhere, anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978) and her findings about female adolescence, sexuality, and cultural roles have become a staple for female empowerment and cultural constructivism. The goal of this paper will not be to reconstruct the significance of Mead's work but to ask what such (re)constructions reveal about the specifically Western contexts in which they are undertaken. What can literary narratives that use Margaret Mead as metonym—standing in for certain dilemmas in retrospectively reassessing anthropological research and its history, its practices, and its effects—contribute to understanding the ways in which ethnography and ethnographers are engaged in 'doing and undoing,' in making and unmaking subjectivities, lives, people, cultures?

Based on a reading of Lily King's *Euphoria* (2014), which fictionalizes the historical 1931 anthropological expedition to the Sepik River in New Guinea with a Margaret Mead-inspired female protagonist, I will show that a discussion of this and other contemporary scientific expedition narratives can contribute critical reflections to an overarching debate about science, gender, and postcolonial narratives. As contemporary science novels, equipped with a characteristic "interdiscursive and meta-discursive dimension" (Kirchhofer 2021, 111), these narratives are in dialogue with distinct scientific disciplines but also exhibit their own culturally specific gaze. Literary and cultural representations of female scientists and explorers, at times fictionalizing historical figures such as Mead or inventing entirely new characters, effectively and importantly reimagine the role of women in science. Contemporary science novels such as Rachel Joyce's *Miss Benson's Beetle* (2020), which sends two female explorers in search of the eponymous insect on an expedition to New Caledonia in the Pacific in the 1950s, or Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder* (2011), which substitutes

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the Conradian *Heart of Darkness* constellation of male protagonists in the Congo with female scientists in the Amazon, exude an acute awareness of the history of scientific collaboration with imperialist interests.

At the same time, novels with female scientist protagonists in post-colonial settings vary in the extent to which they pay attention to a differentiated account of specifically white female empowerment, at times celebrating female pioneership or sisterhood, in the laboratory or in the field, concomitantly with a neocolonial bias. As in Garmus's protagonist's evocation of "the hidden tribes of the Amazon" alongside Mead's name, the rewriting of the tropes of scientific knowledge production bears a certain risk of perpetuating, rather than refuting, the colonial myths of white, male, heroic scientists and adventurers. Scholars of neo-Victorian fiction have already noted the trouble with reimagining character constellations and settings reminiscent of the colonial adventure romance and its penchant for the figure of an innocent naturalist explorer (e.g. Boccardi 2016). In her examination of female rewritings of the topoi of exploration, Ann Heilmann views the work of specifically "feminist counter-narratives of nineteenth-century science" critically, as they "interrogate historical conceptualizations of racial and gendered hegemonies" but ultimately "do not overturn conventional dichotomies" (2014, 92). The problem to which I would like to draw attention does not rest with the individual female protagonist involved in scientific discoveries or the individual literary celebration of female scientists. I am interested in the novels' position between representing and communicating science, on the one hand, and the allurement of the literary marketplace, on the other. In spite of the often highly reflected intercultural ambition and goals, I will argue, the positionality of these narratives carries certain cultural scripts.

In particular, *Euphoria*'s retelling of Mead's historical scientific expedition contributes to a body of texts which revisit the female anthropologist, anthropological fieldwork in the Pacific region with its methods of ethnography and participant observation, and the history of expeditionary practice in general. The novel participates in the reassessment of the potentially controversial female anthropologist's findings and their aftermath. Among others, the title of anthropologist Esther Newton's essay collection, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay* (2000), attests to Mead's status as cultural icon and heroine of US-American liberal positions against sexism, racism, and homophobia. Yet Mead's work has also provoked professional criticism. In *The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983), New Zealand anthropologist Derek Freeman refuted her method and results. His critique prompted ethnographers all over the world to take sides in this so-called 'Mead–Freeman controversy,' resulting in camps of

defenders and critics of Mead's work, but also of Freeman's own approach and conclusions (e.g. Orans 1996). Despite well-grounded and authoritative attempts at clearing her name in public and popular scientific accounts (e.g. Horgan 2010), Mead's legacy continues to polarize. According to James Clifford, both anthropologists cast Samoan life as "scientific projects" and, thus, end up representing two sides of the same coin: "Mead and Freeman form a kind of diptych, whose opposing panels signify a recurrent Western ambivalence about the 'primitive'" (1986, 102–203). Crucially, the 'Mead–Freeman controversy' not only seems to have a strong gender bias but its setting and relevance are specifically Western.

Indeed, *Euphoria* resides in a long and often problematic tradition of artistic and literary constructions in which scientific interest—often commingled with sexual and colonial needs—rather than an interest in the local cultures takes centre stage. 'Outsider' perspectives on the 'south sea' region from Captain James Cook's travel accounts to Herman Melville's 1846 novel *Typee* to Paul Gauguin's paintings have produced imaginations of a paradisiacal Pacific, which are often reproduced rather than repudiated in ethnographic writing of the twentieth century, including Mead's own monograph *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and subsequent publications. Tellingly, what these writings have in common is a conflicted desire to learn about as well as from what is perceived as primitive or pre-modern—more so, what is first constructed as primitive or pre-modern, then appropriated and finally destroyed; all in the name of preserving and accumulating. Such imaginations have been countered by scholars in postcolonial and Pacific studies (e.g. Hau'ofa 1993; Keown 2004) as well as by 'insider' perspectives that seek to deconstruct them by 'writing back,' such as the works by Albert Tuaopepe Wendt or Sia Figiel. Her novel *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) explicitly takes up Mead's construction of young women in Samoa as sexually promiscuous, as well as Western critiques of the anthropologist's conclusions, in particular the ensuing nature / nurture debate embodied by the 'Mead–Freeman controversy.' Here, the young female Samoan protagonists perceive the findings of the "palagi" anthropologists as stunningly disconnected from the girls' lives and their actual, individual and differentiated experience of sexuality: "What else are they telling you at Samoa High School? That a man can fly to the moon and have sex with moon people?" (210). *Euphoria* does not satisfy a reading through such a postcolonial lens searching for a reversal of perspective or a sidelining of scientific controversies in the manner of Figiel's novel.

What, then, constitutes the value of engaging with this and similar contemporary scientific expedition narratives, given their perspective as outsiders? A reading of such novels is significant, as scientific expeditions

are an ongoing practice of knowledge production. *Euphoria* and other science novels focusing on expeditionary encounters engage with studies of the long and continuing history of Western practice of excavating, extracting, and appropriating local resources and knowledge in the name of science. Even if they do not themselves provincialize Western perspectives, they help to make visible the cost of one-sided knowledge production. Sara Ahmed criticizes the use of such techniques of knowledge as part of a practice of learning *about* and learning *from* the 'Other' in the context of ethnography as "creat[ing] the stranger in the familial in order then to destroy it" (2000, 58). At the same time, these novels are part of a long history of representing and marketing of such stories—be it through fictional or non-fictional travel accounts—effectively establishing, spreading, but also critiquing the formation of the scientific explorer myth, famously debunked by Mary Louise Pratt (1992). The performance of and the struggle with their own epistemological and economic complicities contribute to the discussion of discipline-specific blind spots and culturally specific narratives, exposing the need for a pluralization of perspectives. With its own narrative turn in the 1990s, anthropology continues to embrace the dialogue with literary writing (cf. Starn 2015). In her reading of *Euphoria*, anthropologist Diane Losche reminds us that novels can offer a specific way of knowing:

> The interesting point for anthropologists is that the novel form presents a challenge to ethnography, a form of writing that is based on the notion of the objective rendering of culture. To do this there is a radical separation of subject and environment and the anthropologist is sidelined, but if we take these novels seriously, this isn't really possible. Novels, to a greater degree than ethnographies, allow a rendition of the intermingling of subject and environment. (2019, 185)

In this respect, *Euphoria* speaks to scholars who favour polyvalence and show that knowing through ethnography is not the only way of knowing (e.g. Teaiwa 2010).

Drawing on this scholarly and literary discussion concerning both fictional and non-fictional expeditionary narratives, I argue that *Euphoria* sets out to be a narrative of cultural limits but, read with a focus on its performance of the expeditionary narrative's gaze, it may, in effect, sensitize its readers to the cultural limits of narrative. The novel reflects on and exposes the colonial gesture of its 'knowing' scientist protagonists and the 'undoing' of the allegedly 'unknowing' anthropological object but, nevertheless, sits uncomfortably in a tradition of Western scientific expedition narratives

focusing the attention on the 'doing' of the subjects of scientific knowledge production. While the text condemns the extractive and destructive nature of scientific expeditions, it also follows this pattern with a male, explorer-type narrator who tells the story of the expedition in hindsight. Couching his recollections within an expedition narrative, he re-semanticizes all participating characters, locations, events, and findings as part of the expedition. His narrative shows a prototypical circular trajectory of expeditionary work (Auguscik 2019, 53): from an institutional and financial context in the metropole to transit and supplementation to establishing a main base to exploring, researching, and extracting, and, finally, to bringing the results back to the metropolitan setting. The novel distances itself from his and other ethnographers' gaze, even begins with and ends on moments of a potential reversal of perspectives, but eventually struggles with the circular trajectory of an expedition narrative positioned in the Western literary marketplace. Through comparisons and juxtapositions, the text gently nudges its readers to see through its characters' complicity by performing, rather than overcoming, the problem that agency continues to rest exclusively with the Western protagonists. In the subsequent analysis, I will approach *Euphoria* in three steps: first, I will pay attention to its multilayered allegorical dialogue with the discipline of anthropology and specifically ethnography,[2] inspired by Diane Losche's reading of King's novel. Second, drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on ethnographic writing and Mary Louise Pratt's critique of the natural explorer, I will analyse the novel's character constellation in view of the formation of anthropological 'subjects' and their construction of indigenous people as ethnographic 'objects.' Finally, I will examine how the narrative voice affects the novel's approach to representing anthropological encounters and moments in which observation is potentially reversed.

Euphoria as a Historical Science Novel: Allegorizing the History of Anthropology

Inspired by the triangular love relationship between the historical anthropologists Margaret Mead, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson and their collaborative research of the people on the Sepik River in New Guinea in the early 1930s, *Euphoria* focuses on the legacy and entanglements of their personal and professional relationships. While this biographical

2 Following Sara Ahmed, the focus of this paper will be on ethnography-based anthropology (2000, 57–58).

interest and theme of romance has attracted much attention in reviews,[3] the novel has yet to garner interest in academic literary and cultural analysis. Meanwhile, it has been taken up by anthropologists who recognize descriptions of practices and methodologies, institutional and discursive contexts known and experienced by them, and thus the specific ways in which this text is in dialogue with their discipline.[4] In his conference paper "On Ethnographic Cruelty," João de Pina-Cabral briefly praises the novel for its authentic "representation of the fieldwork situation of Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Reo Fortune" (2015, 6). In more depth, Diane Losche, herself a student of Mead's, reads *Euphoria* alongside other fictional accounts of anthropologists in the Pacific in search for representations of hauntedness. She argues persuasively that, in King's novel, it is the anthropologists rather than the village inhabitants who are "haunted in the sense of unfinished business" (Losche 2019, 187). Overall, she is especially interested in the dialogue between novels and her discipline.

In this section, I argue with Losche that, in addition to its biographical interest, *Euphoria* examines the conditions and the effects of anthropological research in the Pacific more generally and offers itself for an allegorical reading. In her comparison of contemporary anthropological fiction, Losche shows some initial reservations regarding the authenticity of the novel's representation of the Pacific islands, yet she recognizes its observations about anthropological practice: "it speaks to things that concern anthropology, the problem of how to describe a society while being aware of the difficulties of interpretation, of 'seeing' clearly" (Losche 2019, 180). The novel, indeed, proves to be in dialogue with an ethnography-based anthropology. It places the ethnographic method centre stage and ties anthropologists as "complex scientist characters" (Kirchhofer and Roxburgh 2016, 167) to the problems they try to solve in the field, thereby showing that anthropologists are not 'outside' the field but must be taken into the equation. King's fictional anthropologists—Elinor or Nell Stone; her husband Schuyler Fenwick, known as Fen; and their colleague and soon-to-be love interest Andrew Bankson—are complex characters with quite different trajectories than their real-life counterparts. In contrast to Margaret Mead, who would divorce Fortune to marry Bateson in 1936, with all three

3 See, for example, the title of Wendy Smith's review in the *Los Angeles Times*: "Anthropologists Find Love in Lily King's novel *Euphoria*"; or Camilla Gibb's review in *The Guardian*: "*Euphoria* by Lily King—The Colourful Love of Margaret Mead."

4 On "recognition" in scientists' readings of contemporary science novels, see Kirchhofer and Auguscik (2017).

enjoying long careers (as well as changing partners) well into the 1970s, the novel ends with Nell's death as a result of spousal violence and Fen's subsequent disappearance from the public eye, leaving only Bankson to tell the story of their encounter and its personal and professional consequences. I propose that the novel's use of artistic freedom to alter critical outcomes of the expedition, along with its representation of the anthropologists' constellation and narrative choices, lays the groundwork for discussing varied and historically evolving approaches to ethnographic encounters.

Euphoria employs various textual levels to represent different historical phases or shifts in the evolution of the discipline: (1) its early development in the 1920s and 30s; (2) a reflexive turn in the 1970s and 80s; and (3) a contemporary postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist theory-based anthropology. These phases correspond to three textual structures in the novel: (1) at the character level, the three anthropologists and their expedition in 1931 stand in for a strong ethnographic interest in Pacific populations in the first half of the twentieth century; (2) at the narrative level, the narrating voice retrospectively reflects on the expedition and its aftermath in the 1970s; and (3) as a text published in the early twenty-first century, the novel encourages its readers to critically engage with its historical settings while maintaining a distanced contemporary perspective on its characters and narrating voice.

First, on the level of character, the text enforces a connection between the characters' scientific approaches and their specific subjectivities. With the influence of Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski at the threshold of the twentieth century, anthropology undergoes a paradigm shift from a biological to a sociocultural field. This shift was popularized in Margaret Mead's ethnographic writings about Pacific cultures in the first half of the twentieth century and is experienced by King's characters. The young characters in their late twenties stand in for the state of a developing discipline, "a nascent, barely twenty-year-old social science" (King 2014, 33). Their romantic triangle represents a small community of white anthropologists: a disciplinary triangle of the academic metropoles of New York, Cambridge, and Sydney, as well as a juxtaposition of the British (social) and the American (cultural) schools of anthropology. All three characters come from different schools with specific approaches to the notion of culture, but they also share particular predispositions to exerting the then still novel ethnographic method of documenting another culture from within through the method of participant observation. At the core of their encounter with one another, as well as with the ethnographic 'Other,' are their debates regarding the possibility of gaining access to other cultures and the effects of observation. In their dialogues and in their

written accounts, they explicitly reflect on their position as observers, on how their subjective observation changes both the conditions that they observe and the results they draw from their research. However, as Losche also remarks, the choices they make as well as decisive blind spots—even failures of observation—prove destructive for them, their relationships, and especially for those who are observed.

Second, on the level of its narrative structure, the novel is in dialogue with anthropology's reflexive or postmodern turn from Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) to James Clifford's *Writing Culture* (1986). English anthropologist Andrew Bankson's homodiegetic account is conscious of the impossibility of objective interpretation, of anthropology's construction of its objects of analysis, of how much ethnographic writing reads like a description of the anthropologists' own problems and desires. Again, however, he is partisan in choosing which memories to include and which to name in passing. Inspired by questions posed by his 'biographer' and looking back retrospectively in the 1970s at the crucial moments of his career, Bankson remembers the expedition in New Guinea in the early 1930s, when he joined the anthropologist couple Nell and Fen in their field work researching the Tam. Both on the professional and the personal level, their encounter seems to promise the eponymous euphoria. However, his retrospective narrative reveals that this collaboration and, specifically, his own involvement has also had devastating effects: his romantic involvement with the couple has contributed to, rather than preventing, Fen's colonialist theft of a sacred object, as well as the deadly consequences for his native informant and his wife. More so, Bankson's anthropological knowledge has led to the deaths of 300 unnamed indigenous people of the Olimbi village when he shares his knowledge of their whereabouts with a military operation. Even the scientific results of the collaboration between Nell, Fen, and Bankson, a universalist conceptual framework for explaining human and cultural differences, or a map of cultures they call the Grid, we learn, will subsequently come to be misused in order to legitimize fascist and racist theories, exactly at cross-purposes to the young scientists' hope of finally understanding or decoding cultural differences, ultimately exposing the effects of 'epistemic violence.' The novel shows that it is not through ignorance but through the formation of knowledge, specifically ethnographic knowledge, that the harm is done, reflecting Edward Said's argument that the "strength of Orientalist discourse" is not in consequence of a lack of knowledge but in result of "a system of knowledge" (2003, 6).

Clearly, the novel self-reflexively rereads historical anthropologists and negotiates these two shifts in the life of their discipline: on the level

of character, with Nell's (a.k.a. Mead's) fieldwork, in the first half; and on the level of narration, with Bankson's reflections from the second half of the twentieth century. In addition, as with all historical fiction, one may ask about the relationship between its moment of publication and its historical setting: how does it speak to contemporary anthropologists and their problems within the novel's own twenty-first-century context, one in which anthropology continues to question its complicity with the imperial project using the methodologies of feminist and postcolonial studies (cf. e.g. Visweswaran 2015)? What can a reading of *Euphoria* as a "historical science novel"—with a specific relationship between its present and its reconstruction of a past (Schaffeld 2016, 170)—offer to anthropologists now? Or, for that matter, what can it offer to literary and cultural critics who grapple with questions of colonial complicity of their own discipline, which has been strongly infused by the thinking of anthropologists in what is known as the 'cultural turn'? In view of its narrative structure, one might argue that *Euphoria* does not deliberately denounce the complicity stemming from its narrator's choices of remembering and romanticizing, nor does it sufficiently pluralize its perspective to extend beyond the Western anthropological subjects. As a result, one might ask to what extent this text is closer to the modernist perspective of its fictional setting rather than performing a postcolonial reversal more suitable to the moment of its publication (see Doyle 2010).

Building on Losche's interpretation of the anthropologist characters as short-sighted and overly focused on observing 'the Other,' so much so that "they fail to see themselves" (2019, 187), I would argue that, paradoxically, they are actually overly preoccupied with themselves and each other. In fact, Bankson's story is circling around his immediate community of anthropologists (as well as the community of anthropologists at large) almost to the point of parody. The effect of a narrative which is largely taken up by Bankson's account is that the text, too, remains mostly interested in the anthropologist characters. And yet, the choice of a homodiegetic narrator does not preclude a critique which includes that very source of speech and knowledge. While the novel is symptomatic from a postcolonial perspective, reflecting the persistence of a focus on Euro-American concerns and dilemmas and employing the ethnographic encounter to address these issues, it also exposes, as I will demonstrate below, the limitations of its ethnographer characters and narrator. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's analysis of ethnographic texts and Mary Louise Pratt's description of natural explorers in the 'contact zone,' I will show that *Euphoria* lays bare its characters' use of various techniques of knowing ethnographic 'objects' with the goal of constructing themselves as anthropological 'subjects'.

Observation and Self-Observation in the Formation of Anthropological Subjects

Taking *Euphoria* seriously as a science novel and a scientific expedition narrative, this section will bring into focus in what ways the novel participates in the production of scientific knowledge. Specifically, through the lens of Sara Ahmed's critique of ethnography as a technique of knowing and Mary Louise Pratt's unravelling of the myth of natural explorers and their subjectivity in accounts of anthropological encounters, I will show that the representation of anthropologist characters in the novel displays the features of anthropological practice and discourse. Ahmed's critique will be beneficial to discussing the implications and problems that arise from the ethnographer characters' use of various techniques of knowing—for example, when friendship masks method in specifically female accounts—for their formation as anthropologists. In her study of "strangerness," informed by a postcolonial feminist perspective, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Ahmed defines the stranger as "not *any-body* that we have failed to recognise, but *some-body* that we have already recognised as a stranger" (2000, 55). Instead of thinking of the stranger as an actual embodied person, or of universalizing strangers, she urges us to rethink "how identity is established through strange encounters" (6). Understanding anthropology as a study of strangers, she proposes a discursive analysis of the discipline and, specifically, of ethnographic knowledge as cultural translation: "the translation of a strange culture into the language of ethnography, the language of the one who knows" (58). For Ahmed, the ethnographic encounter is a complex practice marked by "exploratory and accumulative discourse" (59). As participant observers, ethnographers turn strangerness into knowledge and become "professional strangers," differentiating between knowing subjects and unknowing objects (60). Hence, ethnography comes into being as "*the transformation of the stranger from an ontological lack to an epistemic privilege*" (60; emphasis in original). In her reading of ethnographic texts, Ahmed references Pratt's study of "the personal account of fieldwork experience [as] 'a recognisable anthropological subgenre'" (68). In Pratt's argument, the natural explorer and (mostly) his initially seeming "anti-conquest" stance ultimately has a no less complicit function in the colonial project than the conquest-oriented imperialist subjects. Her description of the reflected but ultimately implicated voice behind the ethnographic account will help me to read the specific constellation of the two male characters (1992, 7).

By the time Nell, Fen, and Bankson meet at a Christmas celebration at the Australian Government Station in Angoram, New Guinea, in 1932,

they each have had their share of entangled personal and professional experiences. They have achieved various degrees of initial ethnographic success in the form of publications, or in Ahmed's words, in translating strange cultures, and are variously equipped with institutional backing and finances to engage in this expedition. But they are also broken individuals with broken marriages, broken family life, and, tellingly, broken specs. King's protagonists share an experience of difference that constitutes a characteristic prerequisite for their career paths. While they come from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, they have in common a white Anglophone Western upbringing; they are all traumatized by early losses of loved ones; and they fail to live up to the expectations of their surroundings. As outsiders in their cultures of origin, they learn to observe the societal norms that constrain them. As a result, they develop a longing for a radical departure from the restrictions of civilization. This position as observant participants in their own cultures paired with the desire to seek out other, better-suited cultural models in order to learn about and from them is fundamental to their work as participant observers and, as I propose, to their formation as anthropologists. Crucially, what they hope to find is something that they can bring back to change their discipline, their culture, and their place therein: an object, a theory, a narrative of social structures that would liberate them. In this, the novel follows the circular trajectory of a scientific expedition narrative, or as Ahmed notes in relation to ethnographic knowledge, "the writing of strangerness must *return home*" (2000, 59; emphasis in original). While the anthropologists claim "to document these oddball cultures in the nick of time, just before Western mining and agriculture annihilates them" (King 2024, 95), the novel puts the inequalities of power-knowledge on a scale alongside cultural appropriation, theft, and extraction to the point of destruction. Hence, the first rule of the ethnographic method, "observe observe observe" (55), is echoed in the similarly repetitive practice: "typing typing typing" (156).

The possessive relationship between the ethnographers and their 'objects' pervades the anthropologist characters' conversations and their exchange on techniques of knowing. When Bankson tells her of a Tam woman who will not be interviewed by him after a traumatic experience with white people, Nell reminds him of his place and the possibility of solving the situation with a "formal amends ritual" instead of more "salt and matches" (King 2014, 44–45). Clearly, Nell is shown to be more knowledgeable and more creative than Bankson in setting up her interviews. Indeed, much of Nell's well-meaning but ultimately possessive position in the field can be read through Ahmed's critique of feminist ethnography. Similar to numerous ethnographers in the twentieth century, Nell

repeatedly employs the possessive pronoun in the recurring phrase "her tribes" (2) to describe the communities she studies. Even when the sentiments of the Tam turn against the anthropologist intruders and Bankson urges her to leave the island, she insists that she cannot simply abandon them because "[t]hese are my people" (225). While Nell, too, uses occasional bribes such as sweets or crayons, her main technique in the field is that of gaining "trust and friendship" (Ahmed 2000, 65), as she notes in her diary: "I think I have made a friend. A woman named Malun" (King 2014, 76). Problematically, as Ahmed explains, "the discussion of friendship conceals the ethnographic relation, which is based on the (re)production of strangerness" (2000, 66): "One gets closer to the host culture, one makes friends with strangers, in order to transform that friendship into an expert technique" (67). As Malun becomes a "mothering friend" (King 2014, 127) and Nell steps into the position of not only learning about but also learning from her, there is, with Ahmed, an "apparent reversal of power relation between the professional stranger and the 'group of stranger women'" (Ahmed 2000, 70). Yet, in both her exigent but possessive tone and in her emotional but strategic relationships, the subject of the point of reference remains the ethnographer.

This double role of observer and student who is "learning to be them" culminates in another "technique of knowledge," critically described by Ahmed as "hybridisation," "a way of almost becoming the stranger in order to approximate the being of strangers through knowledge" (Ahmed 2000, 71). Rather than studying the people along the Sepik River, Nell's husband Fen is repeatedly described as aiming at becoming one of them: "His interest lay in experiencing, in doing. Thinking was derivative. Dull." (King 2014, 107) Fen desires to possess and use a sacred, phallus-like object known as "the flute" (39) for the purpose of professional aggrandizement and to upstage his wife whom he envies for her institutional and financial support. In order to reach his goals, he is prepared to simulate same-sex desire in a pretence of teaming up with Bankson and to symbolically and literally throw his informant's and his wife's bodies overboard. Presumptuously, Fen claims that not only is he the rightful owner of the object but that he was able to steal it unbeknownst to anyone due to an "invisibility charm" (182) that he had, ironically, learned from a previously studied Pacific community, the Dobu. The trust gained and used is proof of the characteristic co-optation and re-semanticization of spaces, materials, and subject positions in terms of their part in and relevance for the expedition. In this respect, Fen's technique of 'going native' does not seem to oppose but, rather, expose the ethnographic techniques used by Nell and Bankson.

The third anthropologist's personal characteristics similarly merge with his professional life and his use of techniques of knowledge. Andrew Bankson's tendency to self-doubt translates into a heightened reflection of his practice, which earns him praise for his monograph from his teacher, who "claimed I was the first person to ever admit to having limitations as an anthropologist […], to being tricked and duped and mocked" (King 2014, 34). Ahmed might recognize this form of explicit failure as having its own tradition in ethnographic discourse as "the knowledge of that which the ethnographer fails to know," resulting in the paradoxically productive opening up about the limits of knowledge: "Such an ethnography of failure still belongs to the ethnographer" (2000, 72). Bankson is least comfortable with the ethnographic method but reverts to no less dubious "traditions of the old sciences" (King 2014, 84): "English structuralism & head measuring & ant colony analogies" (91). At the same time, this passivity also makes him "an excellent theorist" (142) and willing to learn from Nell: "May I observe you with them?" (188). Eventually, this learning from Nell, as much as his learning from the Olimbi men, proves destructive to the very objects of acquired knowledge—expanding the category of objects of knowledge to Bankson's female anthropologist colleague.

Like Nell, then, the two male characters share the combination of personal and professional entanglements. In comparison to Nell, however, the consequences of the male characters' personal and professional decisions are shown to, at once, be more detrimental but also come with fewer repercussions. At first, the two men are characterized as opposites—the sensitive, liberal, non-intrusive, even effeminate Bankson and the insensitive, violent, hypermasculine Fen. Eventually, however, in a move reminiscent of Pratt's critique of the naturalist explorer as the protagonist of "anti-conquest," a type of narrative characterized by "strategies of innocence […] constituted in relation to older imperial rhetorics of conquest" (Pratt 1992, 7), they are revealed as equally problematic. While Fen is clearly responsible for theft and murder, Bankson's guilt rests on his betrayal of an entire tribe in a moment of "scientific prostitution" (King 2014, 37) and the "misappropriation of [their] theory by the Nazis," which he tries to stop but which inevitably "only enhanced its popularity" and on which he has built his career (256). As this would destroy the suspense related to Fen's crime plot, we do not ever get his perspective apart from a short note which he leaves for Bankson, disclosing not only his knowledge of the other man's feelings for his wife but also implicating him in the larger scheme of theft. And yet, it is Fen who exposes his rival's hypocrisies, reminding his interlocutors and the reader that the Englishman does not like to link the study of anthropology with more obvious exploitative activities such as mining:

"Bankson doesn't like it when the colonists talk about where money comes from" (232). Through juxtapositions of direct and indirect characterization as well as through the reinforcement by analogy and contrast between Fen and Bankson, the novel makes such connections visible.

The mutual observation of the three anthropologist characters and their preoccupation with one another peaks with the arrival of a book manuscript by yet another colleague which thickens the plotlines of romance, crime, and scientific "breakthrough" (King 2014, 233). When the three anthropologists read and discuss the theoretical propositions in *The Arc of Cultures* by Nell's former lover, Helen Benjamin (a fictionalized Ruth Benedict), offering new perspectives on their own culture and personality and challenging many of the discipline's presumptions and representatives, the reader becomes an observer of the anthropologists at work. Indeed, the novel's title refers to this euphoria of conceptual discovery, and climaxes when the protagonists react to Helen's ideas. Nell defines euphoria as "that moment about two months in, when you think you've finally got a handle on the place" and it "feels entirely yours" (50). Yet the novel suggests that it is through the connection with other anthropologists, as well as through the exchange of theories with yet another anthropologist's writing, that they experience a euphoric scientific breakthrough. In the moment of heat—the text discursively connects the "fireworks" of sex and ideas in this fertile scientific threesome (177)—they develop a theory that attempts no less than the mapping of all personalities, tribes, and cultures, which promises to change their careers and their discipline: "We believed we were in the throes of a big theory. We could see our grid in chalk on university blackboards. It felt like decoding. It felt like liberation." (191) To sum up, what emerges from this analysis of the novel's character constellation through the lens of Ahmed and Pratt is that the central trajectory of a coming-to-knowledge is enabled by the reflection about, rather than use of, the ethnographic method. Moreover, this knowledge production is reserved exclusively for the ethnographers.

Anthropological Encounters and Reversals of Observation

In the previous section, I have shown that the formation of the anthropological subjects in *Euphoria* goes hand in hand with both the construction but also the destruction of their 'objects.' In the following, I want to develop this idea further. The novel does not just reproduce but lays bare its protagonists' myopic gaze and concealments of power relations and thus opens

up a possible space for engaging other perspectives of knowledge. With the appearance of the third anthropologist, Andrew Bankson, the community of two—Nell and Fen's marriage and research team—is changed thoroughly, as is the novel's narratological makeup. At the end of its first chapter, the text abruptly moves from an extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator with Nell as character focalizer to Bankson's homodiegetic account. At first sight, Bankson's retrospective reflections seem motivated by his "biographer," who repeatedly asks him about the provenance of the Grid. More generally, this interest in the personal and scientific outcomes of the expedition mirrors a Western audience outside the novel's worldbuilding, a readership invested in the novel's biographical focus on "[t]he love lives and expeditions of controversial anthropologists Margaret Mead, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson" (*Publishers Weekly* 2014). Yet *Euphoria* is more than the writing of one subject of ethnography. The text we read competes with other possible narratives: Bankson's tale is neither a direct response to his biographer, nor can it be reduced to the scientific results surrounding the Grid and their publication in the scientific journal *Oceania*. Apart from his narration, the changing perspectives—Nell's diary, Helen's letter and manuscript, letters between the three anthropologists, letters from Bankson to his mother, Fen's note to Bankson—are textual proof of their mutual observations and amount to more than the interview itself could offer. This pluralization of discursive spaces is an important feature of science novels but they, too, have cultural limits.

In the remaining part of my paper, I will show that the novel both reflects on and criticizes the pitfalls of asymmetrical power relations at the core of the ethnographic process, but—especially with the centrality of Bankson's narrative—also risks to prioritize readers' satisfaction with the plot of romance. In this regard, the knowledge extracted from this expedition, as well as the potential knowledge extracted from the expedition narrative, finds a discursive place in Western metropolitan settings and is driven by needs that have their origin in these settings. In extension of various instances in which *Euphoria* uses comparisons and juxtapositions, perhaps the most striking aspect—but also strikingly underemphasized in the novel—is the reaction of the indigenous characters towards the white anthropologists. Drawing again on Ahmed and Pratt, I would like to make this point more prominent in my analysis of the few but significant moments in which a reversal of perspective is hinted at in the novel. Towards the end of her chapter on strange encounters in ethnography, Ahmed comes to ask about possible reversals of the power relations of subjects and objects of knowledge: "what of the possibility of the stranger, who is the object of his knowledge and recognition, coming

to know?" (2000, 73) Indeed, read closely, the indigenous characters in *Euphoria* often prove better observers than the professionals. Bankson's own informant, Teket, sees through Fen's lies: "he scoffed at the idea of a white man thinking he could be invisible" (King 2014, 243). Similarly, the kitchen boy Bani realizes long before Bankson the nature of Fen and Nell's violent marriage when he notes, "he break her" (245). Still, we only ever get glimpses at the indigenous characters' skills of observation and their reaction to the tremendous violence which they witness as well as endure. In this respect, *Euphoria* loses sight of their knowledge and their survival. Its main focus remains with the ethnographers' practices of 'doing and undoing.' In its hinting at the possibility of reversal, however, as well as in its final pages, the novel makes space for an encounter between the anthropologist characters and the indigenous characters in the sense of Pratt's analysis of the "contact zone" (1992, 4), where both sides potentially gain agency by incorporating the other as part of their narrative. Ultimately, the novel does not reverse but performs and discloses the ways in which the observed characters are 'allowed' such space for the sake of proving the existence of a culturally different perspective. Thus, the observed characters become the medium for the working through of issues on the part of the observers.

Importantly, the few mentions of an indigenous reaction in *Euphoria*—by way of actions, communications, and cultural absorption, or what Pratt describes as the phenomenon of "transculturation" (1992, 6)—suggest the impossibility of understanding these 'strangers,' of knowing what they know. The many encounters between anthropologist and indigenous characters described are framed by two moments which end in hostility and which the Western characters repeatedly fail to understand as originating in reaction to their commingled colonial interest. In the beginning, Nell focalizes a hostile farewell from the Mumbanyo who throw bobbing objects, possibly heads, after them. This initial flight is mirrored at the end of their stay with the Tam, when all three anthropologist characters have to leave hastily after Fen steals the phallus-shaped artefact and gets his informant killed. Later, when Bankson returns to the Tam once more to hand over farewell gifts from Nell, the novel explicitly unpacks the ignorance of another Western character when he utterly misreads the reactions of the Tam, unaware of their previous experience with white people: "not the most hospitable tribe, are they?" (King 2014, 246). His obliviousness reflects Bankson's initial failure to identify with other white people and their crimes. More so, the repetition of what at first may seem like a lack of hospitability exposes the ethnographic encounter as the reason for an—after all—justified violent reaction.

Where such encounters do not end in hostility in *Euphoria*, they end in laughter. The novel's ambivalent oscillation between its critique and its prioritizing of the Western characters, their tragedies and expeditionary trajectories, is especially reflected in the characters' discussion about the differences between but also their preferences for certain kinds of stories and art over others. When Bankson first takes the married couple up the river to look for "a tribe" that would "appeal" to both their interests of study (King 2014, 62), Nell is adamant that they must not have "[w]eak art" (63). Later, when Bankson visits his colleagues, falls sick from malaria and is nurtured back to health by them, they discuss "Western stories compared to the stories told here" (139). Nell remembers that, fed up with "their pigman creation myths and their enormous-penis myths" (139), she once retold the story of Romeo and Juliet in the Solomons. Much to her surprise, the indigenous audience reacted with laughter at Juliet's death: "They […] thought it was the funniest joke ever told." (140) Nell and Bankson marvel at the failure of the audience to understand irony as tragic: "Tragedy," Nell explains, "is based on this sense that there's been a terrible mistake" (140).

This meta-literary comment prompts the question of the kind of story the novel itself prioritizes. When Bankson attempts to commit suicide before he first meets Nell and Fen, he is rescued by two Pabei men. They pull him out of the water, advise him not to go swimming with stones in his pockets, and leave him behind, with "loud belly-shaking guffaws of laughter" (King 2014, 17). What or who is their laughter directed at? Is this a sign of not understanding the tragic circumstances? Does the novel read Bankson as a tragic or comic character here? The anthropologist, once more, is infantilized, "an oversized child," for whom these "[g]rown-ups […] didn't have patience" (17). Here, the novel seems to be unsure of to what extent it is his failed attempt that can be understood as tragic, or if the tragedy, in fact, is based on the mistake of these two men to have rescued Bankson and thus enabled the tragedy to unfold. In Bankson's narrative, this possibility is one that the anthropologist overlooks, slipping into complicity and out of responsibility, ready only to account for a curated list of mistakes. Surely, Bankson's account of his failure to rescue Nell or prevent the massive destruction of the Olimbi village is orchestrated as tragic. But whose tragedy is this? Nell's, the Olimbi men's, his own? While Bankson does not hold back on the depth of his remorse, there is a crucial difference between how much space and how much shame he is prepared to spend on his involvement with Nell and Fen and the guilt of causing havoc to the people constructed as objects of anthropological observation. This textual ambivalence can be read as the novel's contribution, if not to a reversal between subjects and objects of observation, then to the Western

protagonists'—and perhaps also the text and its implicit reader's—investment in a particular kind of tragedy.

A key moment in the novel, at once rejecting the Western perspective yet still problematic within the tradition of Western scientific expedition narratives, revolves around Nell's "ethnographic dream" (Pratt 1986, 31; Ahmed 2000, 68). During her initial attempt to understand the all-female *minyana* ceremony, Nell is denied access to the women's quarters, becoming the object of ridicule. This incident is narrated from her perspective as an outsider: "It was silent as she climbed down, but when she was five steps away the house exploded with laughter." (King 2014, 110) When she eventually gains access, her previous lack of success is framed as part of an "ethnography of failure" (Ahmed 2000, 72), further compounded by Bankson's narrative. In Bankson's account, Nell's participation in the ritual is recast as preparation for their first sexual encounter. Nell's access to the ceremony is tinted by her professional curiosity, while Bankson's romantic and sexual investment adds another layer of re-semanticization. This passage highlights the problematic exoticization and sexualization of the women's ritual for the gratification of a white, heterosexual couple.

This movement of hinting at the potential of a more even-levelled 'contact zone' but then diverting attention from the 'Other' to the 'self' is repeated in the final paragraphs of the novel and my final close reading. Towards the end of his career and decades after Nell's death and Fen's disappearance, the now much older anthropologist narrator finally overcomes his qualms about ever visiting the US and follows an invitation to an event which marks the anniversary of their breakthrough. During his visit to the American Museum of Natural History, Bankson comes to a sudden halt when confronted with the exhibit of a death mask. He stops to admire the art of the Tam: "In the socket of each eye was a small oval cowrie shell, underside up, the long slit with its toothed edges making an excellent likeness to a shut eye with lashes" (King 2014, 257). The encounter suggests the potential of embracing the chance to look into these eyes even if only reconstructed by shells, gesturing to the negotiations of a potential exchange of gaze offered in canonical modernist representations.[5] For

5 In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe's attention is captured by the gaze of "a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" (2006, 60) who becomes the object of his male, colonialist gaze before she insinuatingly responds with a look that is immediately filtered by his assumptions marked by the words "as if": "She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance" (61). In the final sentences of Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, the text negotiates the agency of the eponymous leader of a slave rebellion by lending his character a final, if posthumous, chance at looking back at

Bankson, the situation does not play out in a mutual exchange of gaze, nor in an acknowledgement of the reversal of observation. Noticing a button among the cowries used to ornament the eyes of the death mask, his attention is redirected to his romanticized, even sexualized memories of Nell: "Caught in the holes of the button were tufts of pale blue thread. I forced myself on to the next display. It was only a button. It was only a bit of thread. From a wrinkled dress I had once undone" (King 2014, 256–57). In other words, Bankson looks at the indigenous artefact, but all he sees is Nell. The literal undoing of the button is reminiscent of his complicity in Nell's death. After all, in a note to Bankson which he was not to receive in time due to her premature death, she decides in favour of the new relationship and reflects on her relationship with Fen using the same words: "Strange how a ship was our doing and now our undoing" (247). It is her tragedy, and by proxy his, not the destruction of the Pacific people that Bankson emphasizes and that the novel makes visible but also reiterates in its final sentences.

The button is crucial to my reading of the complex mutuality in progress here. The mask shows that the Tam have appropriated the button for their own practice. In accordance with a reconstruction of anthropological encounters as a two-way street—Pratt's reading of cultural absorption as "transculturation" (1992, 6), as well as with Ahmed's question about possible reversals of "coming to know" (2000, 73)—the novel's indigenous characters have incorporated this bit of Western leftovers into their cultural practice. By contrast, the presence of the mask in the museum shows the extractive anthropological practice of collecting and exhibiting. Bankson does not recognize the ambivalence and uses it to negotiate the degree of closure in his narrative. In this and other moments of such navel-gazing on the level of character and narration, does the text follow its narrator in prioritizing the idiopathic empathy for Nell over the heteropathic empathy with the Pacific people? Does it reproduce Western imaginings of the Pacific for a contemporary Western readership and even commingle sex and scientific knowledge with the needs of storytelling and the literary marketplace, or does it expose its characters' and even its readers' complicity and their interest and investment in its Western characters, its

the gathered onlookers, and by extension, at the Western reader: "Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of the mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gazes of the whites […]" (2002, 102).

Western narrator, and his choices of storytelling? And what is the risk of wanting to have it both ways?

It has been the aim of this contribution to show that by doubling the circular trajectory of the expedition, as a scientific expedition narrative situated in the Western literary marketplace, *Euphoria* ultimately cannot but tell the story as a tragedy of its Western protagonists. In spite of the anthropological ambition to account for cultural difference, there are inevitable cultural scripts at work here. Not only does the novel describe the formation of the anthropological subject as complicit in the creation of 'objects' of study and their destruction, but also itself struggles with a position of complicity. In this regard, "the sexual economy of [colonial] desire" (Young 1995, 90) in Bankson's narrative is mirrored in the novel's marketing with blurbs describing it as "the briefest, purest euphoria" (*Publishers Weekly*), as "taut, witty, [...] a love triangle in extremis" (*New York Times*). In my reading of *Euphoria* as a scientific expedition narrative, one which both follows the generic patterns and critiques them, it is this commingled interest which the novel exposes but also performs. I have argued that *Euphoria* highlights what its characters and narrator cannot see, sensitizing its readers to be wary of their navel-gazing. As a bestselling science novel, it contributes to contemporary discussions in anthropology, in particular to questions of doing ethnography in the field as well as to the thin line between living up to the needs of the Western literary marketplace and troubling the interests of its readers. In its struggle, then, the novel may also offer its readers a reminder that neither learning *about* nor *from* will go very far if it is done by concealing the (scientific, colonialist, or sexual) interest of the knowing subject. Recently, and specifically in relation to the challenges faced in a time of anthropogenic climate change, various publications have spelled out how the (Western) metropoles—in fact, how the world—can and needs to learn from indigenous practices (cf. e.g. Wall Kimmerer 2013; Yunkaporta 2019). What this reading of Lily King's *Euphoria* can contribute to such discussions of epistemic encounters is a bearing out of the complex mutuality between the narrative representation of cultural limits and the cultural limits of narrative.

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