Review: Interactive Media in Anthropology: Seed and Earth - Promise of Rain

Reviewed Work(s):

Seed and Earth by Lina Fruzzetti; Alfred Guzzetti; Ned Johnston; Ákos Östör
Peter Biella


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Interactive Media in Anthropology: *Seed and Earth*—Promise of Rain

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*Seed and Earth*. 1994. 36 minutes. Produced by Lina Fruzzetti, Alfred Guzzetti, Ned Johnston, and Ákos Östör. Available in video, 16mm, and laser disc. Contact Dr. Ákos Östör, Department of Anthropology, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT 06459-0502; aostor@wesleyan.edu.

Since the invention of interactive media technology 20 years ago, students of ethnographic film have awaited fulfillment of its promise for education and scholarship. Laser discs' nonlinear access to movies, along with keyboard and computer control over that access, permits dramatic, new intellectual possibilities for film and video in anthropology. The present essay introduces the potential of interactive technology. It begins with an overview of the characteristics of multimedia and discusses a major goal that interactivity shares with text-based anthropology: the desire to link empirical records with theoretical constructs. The essay then presents an analysis of the ethnographic laser disc and film *Seed and Earth*, shot in Bengal and completed in 1994. The allure of the film, its problems of intelligibility, and its aspiration to an interactive mode of communication are discussed. One pivotal scene in the film is retranslated; commentary on the existing subtitled translation provides an example of how the tools of interactivity can be used to enhance the analysis of ethnographic media.

**Interactivity**

Computer-based multimedia makes possible unprecedented educational opportunities for anthropology.¹ Ethnographic films that are viewed in multimedia, like films viewed elsewhere, will continue to affect viewers' sensibilities, tell important stories, and confront stereotypes and ignorance with intimate observation. More than this, however, film passages in multimedia may also be halted interactively, rescreened, rescrutinized, and reinterpreted with textual discussion. Interactive media thus integrates film more completely in the tradition of scholarship than has been possible before (Biella 1993a). It offers anthropology new ways to explore and teach.

Ethnographic laser discs and CD-ROMs perform the intellectual services that were envisioned for print-based ethnographic film companions (e.g., Heider 1972; Conner et al. 1986). Regrettably, most people who read ethnographic companions cannot experience the simultaneous juxtaposition of text and film. Ethnographic multimedia has the same goals as those that prompted the creation of text-based film companions, but multimedia is far more practical to use. With text and movie linked together on one screen, the difficult and time-consuming mechanics of locating specific instants of a film or text disappear (Biella 1995).

Discs can store enormous quantities of information, whether visual, acoustic, or textual. A two-sided laser disc can contain 108,000 individual photographs at video resolution or about an hour and a half of motion picture film with stereo sound. Under current (1996) technology, CD-ROMs can be encoded with 650 megabytes of digital information. This phenomenal wealth of information offers users, at a relatively small cost, convenient access to resources that would previously have been available only in a library.

An interactive program allows users to follow predetermined instructional pathways, created by the application's designer. Multimedia users learn not only from exposure to pockets of new ideas but also from exposure to unanticipated relationships between ideas (Biella 1994). The links themselves have meaning. In Bateson's (1970) terminology, links are a difference that makes a difference.

In much interactive multimedia, users may also initiate their own searches of data stored on disc. Search terms and synonyms, which users type in through the computer keyboard, allow them to create their own "soft links," unprecedented instant access to particular information. This capacity is more valuable for experienced users than it is for neophytes, and it offers an example of how interactive technology serves individuals at different levels of skill.

Multimedia gives ethnographers the capacity to expand their audience's understanding of filmed events: it gives viewers the ability to transcend the
real-time experience of viewing. With frame-accurate electronic footnotes, makers can link permanent textual commentaries of any length to fleeting passages of film. Hyperlinks between text and film allow makers to contextualize densely significant ethnographic recordings. Multimedia also creates a new opportunity for anthropologists to analyze and teach with films made by other scholars. In the future, interactive media will undoubtedly become part of written ethnography. The quotation and critique of films made by scholarly predecessors will become standard procedure in the discipline.

Links between text and film make another important contribution to anthropological education. They help makers contend with the visceral reactions that viewers can have when exposed to emotional and exotic recordings. Unchecked, film can insinuate in viewers an unquestioned, emotional tone: this capacity is sustained in part because film is rapid-fading, difficult to remember, and almost impossible to quote. Through hyperlinks, film’s privileged power becomes increasingly vulnerable to investigation.

Interactive media provides an intimate communication between empirical records and theoretical explanation. Its most useful lessons for anthropology may occur when alternative and even contradictory explanations are applied to the same document. Users may begin by reading a theory, then follow links to examples in an ethnographic film, then jump back to an alternative theoretical explanation. Another choice is for users first to scrutinize a film, find a point of particular interest in it, and then follow links that branch out to different theoretical discussions.

Many text-based ethnographies have used a similar strategy. Gregory Bateson’s Naven (1936), for example, explores how alternative theoretical perspectives enrich understanding of a single ritual process. Oscar Lewis’s autobiographical Children of Sánchez (1963) also provides a multifaceted perspective as siblings recall their contradictory memories of the same historical events. Lévi-Strauss’s (1969) monumental study of myths in the Americas illuminates the significance of one key myth by contrasting it with hundreds of others. From Clifford Geertz’s (1973) advocacy of thick description comes the multiplicity of voices in dialogical anthropology (Tedlock 1987). Each voice adds the intricate liabilities and wisdom of its subject position (Visweswaran 1994).

**Seed and Earth: Film and Laser Disc**

In 1988, anthropologists Lina Fruzzetti and Ákos Östör began production on a film that later involved a laser disc version. They teamed with filmmakers Al-

fred Guzzetti and Ned Johnston to film *Seed and Earth*, a portrait of Janta, a village near Vishnupur in West Bengal. Fruzzetti and Östör are tireless field-workers. They have conducted most of their research in Bengal, although not in the village of this film, which they had previously visited. Publications by Fruzzetti and Östör on religion, kinship, personhood, and legend in India are extensive. Östör also became known for the four films he coproduced with Robert Gardner, Forest of Bliss (1985) and the Pleasing God trilogy (1985; reviewed by Bertocci [1987]).

*Seed and Earth* received honorable mention at the 1995 Film and Video Festival of the American Anthropological Association for its efforts at interactive design (Blakely and Williams 1995:31). The film and video versions are monophonic, with synchronous sound and effects. The laser disc version has a second, stereo sound track on which is found a “detailed ethnographic commentary” about village life (Fruzzetti and Östör n.d.). By switching stereo channels on the disc, viewers may listen to either the narration, the sync sound, or both at once.

Östör’s apprenticeship in film was completed under the powerful influence of Robert Gardner, and the conception and design of *Seed and Earth* have strong similarities to those of *Forest of Bliss*. An impassioned and sometimes vituperative debate was waged about the latter film, and many of the arguments there are relevant in understanding the former. Rather than reopen those wounds, however, I offer Östör’s own description of *Forest of Bliss*. It gives a sense of the goals pursued in *Seed and Earth* and the extreme difficulty of their attainment:

The film is authentic in every detail, yet it does not document any social process in full. It evokes the ethos and mood of being there. . . . It is not a straight-forward, linear narrative, even in visual terms, since the unfolding of the film is broken by skilled and detailed editing which forms a cyclical pattern.

The parts of the film do not make much sense in themselves, although there are several long sequences in real time. . . . While the film does not document or instruct, it can be viewed profitably with the aim of learning something about Benares and India, about ritual, and about the ways of being human. [Östör 1994:71]

*Seed and Earth* fashions itself after the authenticity, the mood, the unwillingness to instruct, and the broken narrative of *Forest of Bliss*.

In *Seed*, perfectly composed postcard images of Janta village life follow one another, disclosing faces, cows, rice, men, women, grandmothers, prayer, and children (see Figure 1). Infrequent moments of subtitled synchronous sound punctuate episodes with different groups of people, most never to be seen again. During my first viewing of the film, I felt a sense of
of Interactivity

Computer-based instructional media usually offers far more interactive options than are available in

Seed and Earth. That laser disc meets only the lowest defining criteria of interactivity, technically referred to as “Level 1” (Rhodes and Azbell 1984:31). This level indicates that the medium may be stopped, skipped backward and forward, and replayed. It also indicates that users may select between alternative stereo sound tracks. The Seed and Earth disc is no more interactive than a videotape.

The ethnographic commentary on one stereo track of Seed and Earth has a number of problems, but lack of detail is not among them. Within the first few minutes, narrators tick off demographics, subsistence patterns, and the division of labor. A barrage of additional ethnographic facts ensues, but the lack of human context makes the information hollow. The narration follows the imagery so closely that it reflects the chaos there. In one whirlwind section, successive sentences describe the afternoon bath, clothes washed in the afternoon, women serving men before taking their own meals, and cooked rice placed on metal plates or mats woven of leaves.

The makers of the laser disc do not realize that a listening audience requires a different pedagogical strategy than a reading audience. While the ten-page narration naturally leaves many questions unaddressed, it is nevertheless too dense to be understood out loud or in one session. It is a textual document transformed without grace into an acoustic one. The listeners’ comprehension is seriously hindered because much of the narration is read without passion. Östör’s voice in particular is a dry monotone. A professional narrator should have been found.

A special problem occurs several times: when the laser disc presents a conversation with subtitles, the voice-over narration plows on regardless. It may have

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Promotional literature promises that “the complementarity and difference of gender and generation” will be revealed in Seed and Earth (Fruzzetti and Östör n.d.). In contrast to Forest of Bliss, however, the disorder never coalesces into a pattern. Despite omnipresent rice seed and earthen landscapes, the leap to gender, generation, and union does not occur. Without identifiable characters, the canvas is too vast.

Seed and Earth tries to find characters. Its narration track and promotional literature state that the film follows the lives of two families. This may be true, but it was necessary for me to view the film three times before I realized that one man was intended to be a protagonist. He appears several times, but no intellectual or narrative continuity makes him memorable. Family members pop in and out of the film (as in Figure 2), but viewers are not told their names and the family is given no story.

Intimations of Interactivity

slow, not unpleasant, disorder. I listened only to the sync-sound version first, dedicating myself to enjoying the cinematography and hoping to learn what the title of the film meant. Seed and Earth’s epigraph, similar both in style and equivocality to that of Forest of Bliss, teases the viewer without giving an answer:

Sacred tradition declares the woman to be the soil, the man the seed; all corporeal beings are produced through the union of the soil with the seed.

—The Laws of Manu, IX.33

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A special problem occurs several times: when the laser disc presents a conversation with subtitles, the voice-over narration plows on regardless. It may have
been the makers’ intention that the sync-sound be turned off when the voice-over is played, but even then subtitles effectively undermine the viewers’ concentration.

The success of interactive media for anthropology demands a graceful integration of textual scholarship and documentary imagery. On a computer screen, with a scrollable, stoppable movie and a scrollable, stoppable text, users may take all the time they need to read and reflect on annotations. They take full advantage, as do readers of books, of the fact that the printed word has enduring patience. Curiosity and scholarship require a great deal of time (Biella 1993a). With Seed and Earth’s narration track flooding out data, the laser disc loses the educational advantages of interactivity and defeats its purpose.

An Experiment in Interactivity

The absence of memorable individuals and families in Seed and Earth creates a serious problem for a film that has apparently adopted male, female, and union as its themes. An evening meal, the dinner scene, is the only time in Seed and Earth that a man and a woman actually speak to one another. It is also one of the few scenes in which the dialogue is translated. The dinner is thus given a heavily weighted symbolic role. Its selection as a pivotal point in the film may represent a lack of alternatives, a scarcity of intimate footage about male and female relations. The authors took the name of the film from an earlier essay they wrote about kinship and familial relations, and they must have hoped this scene would exemplify some of the ethnographic principles discussed there (Fruzzetti and Östör 1984). The content of the scene is not equal to its task.

My purpose in analyzing the dinner scene is to provide a more salient example of interactive ethnography than exists in Seed and Earth. My experiment would ideally be conducted by means of interactive media, but this print-based imitation at least suggests how a multimedia analysis might work. I followed a strategy that I have used in an interactive project of my own (Biella 1993b), the comparison of a new translation with existing subtitles. I asked a Bengali colleague, Bann Roy (see acknowledgments), to transcribe the original dialogue, create his own version of it in English, and provide ethnographic and linguistic commentary.

I had expected to place Roy’s expert knowledge into texts that I would link to different moments in Seed and Earth and would use as complements to the film’s existing ethnographic implications. Instead, Roy’s research problematized the implications. He raises questions of responsible translation, limits to the liberties that should be taken in editing, and minute ways that ethnographic film can mislead. Like all research technologies, interactive media facilitates particular research possibilities and not others. In the simulation of an interactive analysis here, critique of the ethnographic implications and design of Seed and Earth was clearly facilitated.

Five problems are made apparent by Roy’s close scrutiny of this section of the film. The first is a false impression, created by a translation error, that the wife is annoyed with her parents for not feeding her husband properly. The imaginary annoyance occurs when the wife asks her husband about what he ate on the road, not at her parents’ house (Subtitle F). The confusion is exacerbated by a more serious error. The translator apparently misheard Duto lok ashchho, which means “Two of you are coming,” as Kichhu lukachho, “You’re hiding something” (Subtitle H). Here the wife is made to appear even more concerned or put out by a nonexistent parental faux pas. This error gives viewers an illusion of insight and an artificial sense of intimacy.

A second misimpression concerns the wife’s apparent stridency. Although the wife jokingly calls her husband a liar at Subtitle T, her testiness is exaggerated by questionable translations at Subtitles F, H, and Q. These misemphases foster the illusion that the wife is far more “modern” than she is. The filmmakers’ decision to make this point may have more to do with their knowledge of the woman off-camera than with the actual content of this footage. Even so, the exaggeration is troublesome ethically.

The third error concerns ethnographic interpretation. The translation of the wife’s question at Subtitle S strongly implies that she wishes her husband to bring home yogurt for her. A more plausible interpretation is that the wife is asking whether her husband presented the in-laws with a gift of yogurt when he visited them earlier in the day. Such presentations are common when a man visits his wife’s parents. The impression that the wife is lobbying to receive yogurt herself is reinforced by a second misleading subtitle, also at S.

Fourth, the laser disc’s voice-over narration describes the couple in this scene as joking about “high parental expectations of the in-law relationship.” The footage does not substantiate such a description. The scene concerns the location of the husband’s meal, whether he gave a small present to his in-laws, and what he was fed by them. “High parental expectations” are not discussed. The voice-over dramatizes mundane subjects of conversation and exaggerates the significance of the scene.

A fifth peculiarity involves the fact that a second man is present throughout the dinner scene but that
his presence is disguised. He is kept off camera, reference to him in the conversation is not translated (Subtitle H), and his own words are either not translated (Subtitle I) or are allowed to be mistaken for words spoken by the husband (Subtitle S). The decision to include or exclude characters from a film is the responsibility of any filmmaker, but in this case it appears that the second man was removed in order to make the scene appear more telling and intimate than it is. Despite the presence of the second man and of the filmmaking crew, the voice-over says of the scene, “The youngest couple . . . share a moment of privacy.” The significance of the footage is again exaggerated.

These discoveries about the dinner scene, presented with greater detail in the appendix below, suggest a problematic tendency on the part of the makers of Seed and Earth. Too often the narration and subtitles treat ethnographic footage as if its significance were arbitrary: the filmmakers ignore moments where local meanings are coercive and inflexible, and replace them through translation with the impression of exaggerated significance or of significance that would be appropriate only to other footage. It is tempting to shoot anything available in an ethnographic context and then to claim that the footage demonstrates esoteric ethnographic principles. A more difficult goal, rarely attained by Seed and Earth, is to acquire pertinent footage and shape it in such a way that principles are communicated intelligibly.

The present exercise shows the advantage of subjecting ethnographic film material to the scrutiny that is routinely applied to written ethnography. Even with the best intentions, filmmakers’ judgments are subject to error. Like other serious texts in the discipline, film translations and interpretations require confirmation. In the past, no simple techniques existed to question and explore ethnographic film inch by inch. Interactive media has begun to make critiques, reviews, and follow-up studies precise and feasible.

Appendix: Analysis of the Dinner Scene from Seed and Earth

The dinner scene is a little more than two minutes long and is composed of six shots (see Figure 3). For purposes of analysis, the shots are broken down into 20 subsections labeled A through T. These correspond to the subtitles provided by Seed and Earth translator Nilanjana Chatterjee. Each subsection includes a transcription of the original Bengali dialogue (in italics) and the film’s subtitled translation for that section of the dialogue (marked with the # symbol). When necessary, the subsections also include a new translation (marked with the • symbol) and a commentary.

KEY:

Shot number
Subtitle LETTER
SPEAKER: Original Bengali dialogue.
• Preferable translation, where required.
Commentary

Shot 1
Subtitle A
WIFE: Torkari nao.
• Take some vegetables.
Translation good.

Subtitle B
HUSBAND: Torkari nai?
• Why so little?
• No vegetables?
The husband says to his wife that there are no vegetables despite the fact that she has just given him vegetables. He may be embarrassed at the small amount of food seen by the camera and not entirely comfortable in the filmmakers’ presence.

Subtitle C
WIFE: Oi tukui bhalo.
• It’s enough.
Translation good.

Shot 2
Subtitle D
WIFE: Tumi dobol bhat kheye nile? Ekbarer bhat chilo na, abar dobol . . .
• You didn’t want any: now you’re eating double.
• You ate double and you didn’t want any? Now you’re eating double.
The first part of the first utterance, Tumi dobol (“You ate double”), is omitted in the subtitle translation, perhaps because it is redundant with what immediately follows.

Subtitle E
HUSBAND: Khide peyechhe. Eto cycle kore . . .
• I was hungry. I cycled five miles.
• I was hungry . . . after cycling for so long . . .
The husband’s complete statement carries through Subtitles E and F. He says, “I was hungry . . . after cycling for so long . . . seven kilometers.” The subtitle eliminates the concept “for so long,” perhaps because it was considered redundant.

Subtitle F
HUSBAND: [continuing] . . . shaat kilo.
• . . . seven kilometers.
The husband continues speaking, simultaneously with his wife. The translator replaces "seven kilometers" with "five miles," the rough equivalent.

WIFE: [simultaneously] To rastar majhe kichhu khao ni?

- Didn't you get anything there?
- Didn't you get anything [to eat] midway?

One assumes from this subtitle that the wife is asking her husband what he was given to eat at his destination, the house of his mother-in-law. Rastar majhe, however, correctly translates as "middle of the road" or "midway." The question posed by the wife, then, does not concern food at the husband's destination, but rather food en route to it (or from it). The subtitle makes the wife appear rather strident, implying that she criticizes her mother by doubting that she fed the husband. The misleading translation here leads to more confusion at Subtitle H.

Subtitle G
HUSBAND: . . . [unintelligible]

- Yeah, I ate a lot.
- [unintelligible]

If the original translator could understand the words "Yeah, I ate a lot," which are unintelligible in the finished film, then the husband is stating here that he ate a lot of food "midway on the road," not at the house of his parents-in-law. An earlier bad translation, described in the commentary for Subtitle F, makes the wife appear critical of her parents' behavior. When the husband is now translated as asserting that he did eat a great deal, he is made to appear as though he disagrees with his wife's criticism. There was no criticism in the first place. In any case, the husband is not speaking about the in-laws. An intimate peek into an imaginary crisis is effected. (See the com-
mentary at Subtitle I for further confusions about who ate what where.)

Subtitle H
WIFE: Duto lok ashchho, tarpor shoshur bari theke.
# You're hiding something and you're coming from your in-laws' house.
• Two of you are coming, and besides you're coming from your in-laws' house.
The wife's first Bengali phrase here, Duto lok ashchho, translates as “Two of you are coming.” The film's translator apparently misheard the wife's words as Kichhu lukachho, which would mean “You're hiding something.” This error has two consequences. First, it reinforces the impression, given by the bad translation at Subtitle F, that the wife is accusing her parents of committing a serious faux pas by failing to feed her husband. This makes the wife seem to be uncommonly strident and critical. Later, at Subtitle T, the wife does seem to be strident, but it is improper to use inaccurate translations to establish this. Second, the translation error here (missing “Two of you are coming”) cooperates with the filmmakers' decision to hide the role of the second man who is present throughout this scene. He speaks at Subtitles I and S but is scrupulously kept off camera. Only repeated viewing of the scene makes his presence apparent to viewers who do not speak Bengali.

Subtitle I
HUSBAND: [to SECOND MAN, simultaneously] Rastar majhe ki kichhu. . . ?
# Did I say I ate on the way?
• Midway, did. . . ?
Although the subtitled translation here is fairly accurate, in the context of earlier subtitles it generates serious confusion. As indicated in the commentary at Subtitle F, the subtitles have not previously mentioned “eating on the way,” even though it is discussed in the original Bengali conversation. Thus, first-time viewers, who have only the subtitles to go by, are further misled. The wife is translated to say, “You're hiding something and you're coming from your in-laws' house,” and the husband is translated to reply, “Did I say I ate on the way?” A reader of the subtitles might well conclude from this imaginary exchange that the husband's non sequitur reply is designed to hide something. Why else would he say something so irrelevant? The truth is further muddled by the fact that in the subtitles his statement appears to be directed to the wife. Instead, he is asking the question of his friend, the invisible second man.
SECOND MAN: Na half rasta. . . .
# [not translated]
• No, [not] halfway there. . . .

Speaking for the first time, but not translated in the subtitles, the second man replies to his friend's question. He denies that he ate midway on the road. If the original translation for Subtitle G is correct (a point that cannot be confirmed because the audio track is unintelligible), then the second man's denial that food was eaten halfway contradicts what the husband says at G. Viewers do have legitimate reason to suspect the accuracy of Subtitle G. At Subtitle J, for example, a phrase that was not uttered is passed as a translation; at D, E, I, K, and S words that were uttered are not translated; at F and H words that were uttered are seriously mistranslated; and at K, Q, and S weak translations are made.

Subtitle J
WIFE: Ma bolchhe, “Amra kichhu korini. . . .
# My mother said, “What'll we do? . . .
Translation good. The following sentence was not uttered; apparently the subtitle translator believed that it should be included to explain something of the context.
# We didn't cook anything special.

Subtitle K
WIFE: [continuing] . . . shoshur ghorer lok mangsho khawae.
# In-laws should serve meat. . .
Translation good.
WIFE: [continuing] . . . Khair dile tahole to asthego jani. . . .
# He's coming to visit.”
• If you sent the news [that the husband planned to visit?], we would know you were coming.
The wife's words Khair dile apparently are a dialectical variant of the “proper” Bengali phrase khobor dei, “to give news.” If this assumption is correct, then the wife's subsequent clause, tahole to asthego jani, “we would know you were coming,” makes sense. The subtitle cannot address the problem of the dialectical variant and it translates the clause poorly.
WIFE: [continuing] . . . Protidin, tahole asthego jani.”
# [not translated]
• Then we know you will be coming.”
This phrase, repeated by the wife from above, is ignored by the translator. The wife here concludes the quotation of her mother's words.

Subtitle L
WIFE: . . . Tahole tumi ghumaite paro, gorie belae kaj korte hobe na.
You can sleep and lie around there. You don’t have to work.
Translation good.

**Shot 3**

Subtitle M

**WIFE:** Bhat kachcho?

# Are you eating the rice?
Translation good.

**HUSBAND:** Ar khaoa jabe na.

# I can’t eat any more!
Translation good.

Subtitle N

**WIFE:** Kheye na oiduti! Ke khafe ga?

# Eat that bit. Who’ll eat it otherwise?
Translation good.

Subtitle O

**HUSBAND:** Tumi khabe abar ke khabe.

# You will. Who else?
Translation good.

**WIFE:** Ami kahoa pete eto khai?

# I couldn’t be bothered.
Translation good.

Subtitle P

**WIFE:** Ami kahoa pete eto khai?

# Can I eat on a full stomach?
Translation good.

**Shot 4**

Subtitle Q

**WIFE:** Utho! Na boshe roe jabe?

# Get up! Don’t just sit!

- Get up! Or will you keep sitting?
The more accurate translation, “Or will you keep sitting?” is less aggressive than the subtitle. As before (Subtitles F and H), the subtitled translation here exaggerates the wife’s “modern” tendency to be strident.

**Shot 5**

Subtitle R

**WIFE:** [unintelligible] ... ki ki korochhilo?

# What did you eat at my brother’s house?

- [unintelligible] ... what did they prepare?
The Bengali word bhai, “brother,” cannot be discerned in the unintelligible portion of this sentence.

**HUSBAND:** Shudhu chira. Doi-foi hoye ni, shudhu chira.

# Only flattened rice, no sweet yogurt!
Translation good.

Subtitle S

**WIFE:** [unintelligible] ... doi kine ano ni?

# Did you bring yogurt home?

- [unintelligible] ... did you not buy [bring]?

Translator Bann Roy suggests that if the word “home” occurs here (it is unintelligible in the finished film), then it is given the wrong nuance by the subtitled translation. In all probability, the wife here is asking her husband if he brought a gift of yogurt to her mother’s home. Such gifts are commonly presented by sons-in-law when they visit the wife’s mother.

Interestingly, an earlier draft of this translation (supplied by the filmmakers) reads, “Did you bring us yogurt home?” Whereas the older version is unambiguous and probably incorrect in regard to which home is being discussed, the translation that was finally chosen leaves the matter ambiguous.

**HUSBAND:** ... [unintelligible]

# [not translated]

- [unintelligible]

**SECOND MAN:** Doi ta kom hoye gechhilo.

# We’re out of yogurt, no?

- There was a shortage of yogurt.

This poorly translated subtitle, much more than the previous one, proposes that the conversation is concerned with delivery of yogurt to the wife’s home. In all probability, it is concerned with the home of the wife’s mother.

This is the second utterance by the second man. As before (Subtitle I), his presence is minimized in the film. Only this one subtitle remains as evidence of his quick, partly untranslated exchange with the husband. The fact that the husband’s sentence is heard but not translated leaves the viewer with the impression that the subtitle “We’re out of yogurt, no?” is a translation of the husband’s words.

The second man’s carefully ambiguous expression, “There was a shortage of yogurt” appears designed to protect his friend from criticism by the wife to the effect that her husband neglected to bring his in-laws a present.

Subtitle T

**WIFE:** Tumi michhe kothha koichho. Shottikare doi ano ni?

# Liar! You did bring some!

- You are lying. Didn’t you bring some?

As in Subtitle S, the wife’s sentence here leaves ambiguous the recipient of the yogurt.

For a wife to call her husband a liar, even jokingly, in the presence of a visiting friend and filmmakers, suggests that she has an unusually strident personality. See commentaries on Subtitles F and H where her stridency is exaggerated through inaccurate translations.

**HUSBAND:** [unintelligible] ... abar doi kinechho!

# No, how could I?

- [unintelligible] ... No. How could I?
Seed and Earth:

End of scene.

WIFE looks on, smiling.

End of scene.

Notes

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1. In this essay, I follow the inelegant convention that multimedia, hypermedia, and instructional media are treated as singular nouns.

2. On the subject of ethnographic multimedia links, see Howard 1988 and Biella et al. in press.


5. Based on a filming period of “several weeks” (Morin 1995–96), Seed and Earth provides little sense of intimacy. The absence of close moments leaves the relations between men and women, as well as “the complementarity and difference of gender and generation” (Fruzzetti and Östör n.d.), abstract and undervalued.

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Coming-Out Stories: Recent Videos on Gay and Lesbian Themes

ROGER N. LANCASTER
George Mason University


Fighting in Southwest Louisiana: Gay Life in Rural America. 1991. 27 minutes, color. Produced and directed by Peter Friedman and Jean-François Brunet. Filmmakers Library, 124 East 40th Street, New York, NY 10016. (212) 808-4980. Video sales and rentals.


Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth. 1994. 43 minutes, color. Directed by David Adkin. Produced by the National Film Board of Canada. Filmmakers Library, 124 East 40th Street, New York, NY 10016. (212) 808-4980.

Self-Narrating Identities

How many coming-out stories can one person tell?

As a genre, coming-out stories are sometimes treated as an essentialist or a naturalizing discourse. From within some enclosed interior, a given desire germinates, according to its nature, and is gradually revealed to the exterior world. Latent becomes manifest, like the budding of a sprout becomes visible. Such is indeed the recurring logic of any particular coming-out story—once dislodged from its context, framed off as its own object, and thus made singular, solid, and linear in its form. Because of their conventional framing techniques, this is also the usual form suggested by coming-out narratives in film and on video, from the early Word Is Out to more recent and experimental projects such as Tongues Untied.

But what happens in the give-and-take of conversation, as people pass such stories back and forth over the course of years, is inevitably more complex. Because desire is manifold, there is no end to the stories one can tell about it. Of themselves, and to each other, people tell different stories on different occasions. Sometimes these variations reflect a shift of emphasis, a matter of shading or nuancing. Sometimes, however, the plot changes entirely—and with it, major events and cardinal reference points alter, as people are forgotten, as other events are recalled, as new arguments are made, and as different life experiences are brought to the fore.

Such variations occur not because storytellers are duplicitous or self-serving but because there is always more than one way to recount how a self, an identity,