

# THE COMPOSITION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

How do anthropologists write their texts? What is the nature of creativity in the discipline of anthropology? This book follows anthropologists into spaces where words, ideas and arguments take shape and explores the steps in a creative process. In a unique examination of how texts come to be composed, the editors bring together a distinguished group of anthropologists who offer valuable insight into their writing habits. These reflexive glimpses into personal creativity reveal not only the processes by which theory and ethnography come, in particular cases, to be represented on the page but also supply examples that students may follow or adapt.

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# THE COMPOSITION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

How Anthropological Texts  
Are Written

*Edited by Morten Nielsen and Nigel Rapport*

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# Introductory



# ON THE GENEALOGY OF WRITING ANTHROPOLOGY

*Morten Nielsen and Nigel Rapport*

## Introduction

This book is about the composition of anthropological texts. It is about the concrete arrangement of ethnographical data and analytical reflections as textual accounts written by anthropologists for a wider audience but mainly for other anthropologists. And, therefore, the book is also about creativity and about transformations – from experience to texts of different kinds.

There is often an arduous and intense process involved in giving shape to a text, which requires of the author a particular sense of loyalty to the material. Based on ethnographical data collected over extended periods of time and under conditions that are by their very nature uncontrollable, through the textual account, the author seeks to advance empirical and analytical insights with broader relevance to an academic community. This is an intricate process that moves between different levels of abstraction and makes use of different expressive and rhetorical techniques in order to transform one type of information into another. For, while ethnographical data by itself may contain enormous complexity and richness, it may not lend itself as an expressive vehicle for articulating those insights – analytical, comparative, theoretical – that the author also seeks to advance.

Depending on the particulars of the research project as well as the preferences and work habits of the individual researcher, ethnographical data may be gathered in the form of handwritten notebooks, photocopied documents, books and images and audio and textual files available from the computer or stored in the ‘cloud’. It therefore falls upon the author to develop a textual form that is loyal to the empirical data while also allowing for analytical reflections that engage with, expand upon or even challenge widely held academic assumptions. To do so is a creative accomplishment. Something is given form that is no longer entirely similar to or even the sum total of the elements that went into its making. This book is an examination of this creative and transformative process.

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There is, we will argue, a specific character to the writing of anthropology. The composition of an anthropological article or chapter is not the same as the writing of a literary or historical or psychological or natural-scientific or journalistic or even sociological one, because it is informed by a disciplinary history and a disciplinary sense of what ‘data’ and ‘writing’ and ‘evidence’ and ‘authorship’ entail. *The idea of this book is to bring a unique kind of scrutiny to how individual anthropologists write, the point being to compare and to teach.* The book offers a new way of thinking about writing, and writing about writing, which represents both a pedagogic guide and a critical examination of the creative process.

### The minutiae of writing

Clifford Geertz reminded us a while ago that what we do as anthropologists is first and foremost to write (1975:19). It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that what we do the most continues to be what is arguably also the one aspect of our academic practice that is hardest to capture the nature of. How do anthropologists *actually* write? In particular, what goes on from the moment ethnographical data have been gathered as fieldnotes until an anthropological account is presented in one of the many written forms available today (journal article, book chapter, monograph, blog, commentary, etc.)? These are questions that we began to ask ourselves several years ago when Morten Nielsen was the postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies, University of St Andrews (which Nigel Rapport had founded and [then] directed). During our weekly lunch conversations, we would often end up discussing the status of anthropological writing and the particulars of anthropological writing – or the lack thereof. For, while writing is widely acknowledged as being crucial to our academic enterprise, the minute practices of *actually* producing academic texts are less frequently examined.

To be sure, writing an anthropological text can be an intensely abstract endeavour that casts the author into hitherto unknown philosophical terrains. But it is also a slightly more mundane affair of ordering an assorted set of data and producing an account that documents its genealogy. It is the latter aspect of writing anthropology that we wish to unpack in greater detail: What do our peers concretely do to their ethnographical data, we have wondered, in order to compose anthropological accounts? Nielsen is a firm believer in the wonders of qualitative software programs for coding and ordering ethnographical data, and he continues to use these when composing more analytical anthropological texts on the kinds of effects brought about by social interaction – such as digression, distortion and temporal reversals (see Chapter 9). But from Nielsen’s ongoing conversations with colleagues, it is apparent that this technological approach may be less than widespread. Conversely, Rapport has tended to order his ethnographic material according to the individual other who first impressed it upon him and the moment of its performance: who said or did what when. To move from ethnography to analysis is then to hope to establish a broader and deeper appreciation of individual informants and how their world-views and life-projects impact upon others in their environments



(the anthropologist included). Philosophical, psychological and literary sources are borne in mind when making this move from ethnography to analytical text, so that Rapport might benefit from wider disciplinary understandings of how the human individual exists and how he or she ('Anyone') might be represented on the page.

We have asked ourselves similar questions regarding our peers' composing of anthropological accounts and their engagements with other kinds of academic texts, other forms of information: Do anthropologists write in the margins of book pages? Do they summarise the content of journal articles on separate documents? Might some anthropologists even organise their material in 'slip boxes' (*zettelkasten*) following the file card system invented by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann? And, most importantly, how are these reflections and summaries, only some of which are written down, practically connected to the ethnographical data and given the form of an anthropological account? Inspired not least by Nietzsche's genealogical approach that was 'gray, meticulous and patiently documentary' (Foucault 1984:76) – while also bearing in mind that Nietzsche insisted that one must 'mistrust all systematisers and avoid them: the will to a system is a lack of integrity' (1979:25) – our objective has been thus to unearth the mundane minutiae of writing anthropology – and to trace the creative transformations that this process entails.

### The irreversible transformations of writing anthropology

Writing anthropology not only requires a particular sense of loyalty to the material, it also enforces upon it, we argue, a series of irreversible transformations. If we consider ethnographical data as the corpus of empirical information that is available to the author at the moment of writing anthropology, it does not necessarily have a determinate form. Indeed, while most anthropologists tend to write up their findings, say, as fieldnotes or transcribed interviews, crucial empirical information may also be accessible through informants' diaries, online video clips, archival documents, material artefacts, audio recordings and so on. By the very act of writing anthropology, then, it is automatically assumed that these different forms of ethnographical data can meaningfully be contained by one singular 'carrier' of information, namely text. In order to compose anthropological texts, we rely on the semantic properties of the text to articulate with clarity those qualities that we see as particularly important in the ethnographical data – and which we are capable of expressing through the medium of text. The question to be asked, however, is whether anthropological writing is simply a question of transmitting information from one semiotic medium to another. For while the transportation of ethnographical data from one medium to another is unquestionably a precondition for writing anthropology, it seems to us that the qualities of the ethnographical data that end up in the text are fundamentally different from those that may be associated with the 'original' medium. In other words, whatever qualities we ascribe to the ethnographical data in the form of, say, fieldnotes or a material artefact, the moment we transport these to a text, they turn into something else entirely.

Obviously, it is not built into the material fabric of a malaggan sculpture that it can productively serve as a comparative vehicle for examining the workings of time and memory in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere (cf. Küchler 1987, 1988). This is a quality that may be activated by the anthropologist by making relevant juxtapositions between strategically selected analytical and empirical components. The crucial point is, however, that the potentials for functioning as ethnographical data are not something that emerge by realising what the empirical phenomenon affords (Gibson 1979; Ingold 2000) – as if these were simply waiting for the anthropologist to discover. Rather, *the capacity to function as ethnographical data is an effect of the transformation that occurs when empirical information is transported from one medium to another*. The analytical efficacy, we might say, for theoretical generalisation and ethnographical comparison is an effect of the mutations that empirical information undergo as the author seeks to compose a convincing anthropological account. Or, to turn the argument on its head: The only empirical phenomena that *cannot* potentially be used as ethnographical data when writing anthropology are those that remain equal to themselves.

This also means that writing anthropology is always more than a relationship between empirical phenomenon and text that as ‘apt illustration’ (Gluckman 1961). If empirical phenomena undergo irreversible transformations in the process of composing an anthropological account, something still remains that differs from its later manifestation as textual representation. And it is by way of this ‘remainder’ that the written composition is invested with a particular kind of vibrancy or unresolved tension even, which seems to push the anthropological account beyond the semiotic modality of the text. Indeed, one wishes for the reader of the final anthropological text also to see beyond it and to have evoked for him or her an echo of another, alien modality of human performance (Tyler 1986).

### Entextualisation and creativity

It can surely be imagined that some forms of ethnographical data ‘resist’ the transportation between different semiotic modalities and so lose their anthropological efficacy. One may therefore ask what it is that enables *some* empirical information to be detached from its context and inserted into that of the anthropological text but not others. Taking our cue from a recent body of scholarly work on speech acts and discursive performativity, we define the transmission and translation of empirical data from one semiotic modality to another as a particular form of ‘entextualisation’ (Babcock 1980; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Keane 1995, 1997, 2013; Urban 1996). Processes of entextualisation occur when texts and speech acts can be treated as phenomena that seem to transcend the particular circumstances of their enunciation or writing without losing consistency and significance (Keane 1995:107). As Babcock tells us, both written and oral discourses have a capacity for displacement in order to become ‘object[s] to [themselves], to refer to [themselves]’ (Babcock in Bauman and Briggs 1990:73). Even ordinary language has metalingual (or meta-discursive) properties, which objectify the speech act or text by making it its own

topic. Still, while metalanguage guides interlocutors with characterisations of what is going on (Keane 2005:72), it is not drawn from an inner catalogue of subjective thoughts but, rather, from a shared vocabulary that is used when one is reflecting on one's own actions *to* others (cf. Rapport 1993, 1997).

We will thus argue that it is through processes of entextualisation, where ethnographical and analytical data are rendered detachable, that they come to *irreversibly* differ from themselves (cf. Nielsen 2013a; 2013b). *In order for empirical information to acquire efficacy across different semiotic modalities, say, as recorded interview and as anthropological text, some metadiscursive indicators are removed or underemphasised while others are added.* But, crucially, this is also what makes them shareable. By removing certain contextual indicators and by reducing the amount of necessary information that the reader must know in order to process transported data, the more portable and potentially sharable it is (Kockelman and Bernstein 2012:344–345). In this regard, *the result of having transported empirical and analytical data from one semiotic modality to another is probably better understood as a response to and not as a replication or imitation of its prior manifestation.* The 'original' empirical information is used as catalyst or stimulus but for articulating a different narrative, whose efficacy derives from the built-in tension of difference between the former and the latter.

Through anthropological writing, then, ethnographical data and theoretical reflections are stabilised in a form that is markedly different from their earlier manifestations. And this intricate process is, we will argue, what is at the heart of what anthropological writing is about.

Moreover, as we learn from the contributors, this is a meticulous process that requires a certain mastery of academic skills and a capacity to maintain focus and an overview of huge amounts of data during long work hours. But it is also what uniquely characterises the creativity of anthropology, we think. If a creative process is one of combining or juxtaposing things and ideas directed by will or intent and whose outcome is marked by novelty (Leach 2004:152), then writing anthropology is probably as creative as our discipline gets. It is through the often seemingly unlikely juxtapositions of ethnographical data and analytical reflections that our disciplinary boundaries are creatively transcended and new insights are produced about what being human is all about.

## The objective of this book

The 'writing culture' debate (Marcus and Clifford 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Geertz 1988) opened up the topic of anthropological composition to intense scrutiny and has itself become the object of much commentary (Rapport 1994; James, Hockey and Dawson 1997; Zenker and Kumoll 2010). Was anthropological writing objective? Was it ethical? Was it disciplinarily distinctive? The intent of the present volume is somewhat different. Every professional anthropologist writes – whatever their stance on 'writing culture'. How do they go about it? What is the precise process whereby anthropological experience (whether of the field or a set of data or an anthropological argument or a political-cum-moral stance)

gets translated into text? In his introductory textbook, *Social Anthropology* (1982), Edmund Leach memorably described social anthropologists' purpose as 'gaining insight into other people's behaviour, or, for that matter, into their own'. 'Insight', he went on, 'is the quality of deep understanding which, as critics, we attribute to those whom we regard as great artists, dramatists, novelists, composers (...). Social anthropologists are bad novelists rather than bad scientists' (1982:52–3). Since the 1980s, much ink has been spilt by anthropologists in an effort to improve their attitudes towards their own writing – even if not the quality of that writing itself. But two things in Leach's description remain challenging. First, that our objective is insight: a 'deep understanding' of human nature and practice such as we accrue archetypically from great 'artists'. Second, that insight into the anthropologist's own behaviour is as much a boon as insight into others': 'The human condition is, after all, something both share and is the very precondition of anthropology as a science. Because of a common, universal humanity and individuality, the individual anthropologist is able to go anywhere among his or her human fellows, enter into relations and hope to learn how it might be to be another individual human being in another human life. It is not solipsistic, then; to inquire into how anthropologists write is not narcissistic or self-indulgent or a decadent distraction from a 'proper' focus (*pace* Sangren 1988:423; Barnard 1988:174; Gellner 1992:7), if the aim is to extend possibilities of understanding the *human* writer: 'Anyone' as writer of meaningful texts. 'Writing' and 'text', here, are to be understood as referring less to a technique of communication than a mode of thought and of being in the world. To 'write' is to attempt to reflect on and give meaning to experience: by writing we can understand a separating of experience from reflection upon it (Stock 1983:531). Such writing is the special preserve neither of certain cultures and times (literate versus non-literate), nor of certain social classes and occupations (professionals versus workers) (cf. Berger 1979:6). As Victor Turner observed: 'There were never any innocent, unconscious savages, living in a time of unreflective and instinctive harmony. We human beings are all and always sophisticated, conscious, capable of laughter at our own institutions' (cited in Ashley 1990:xix). Writing is a meta-experience: the considered ordering of experience and the conscious production of meaning. Such writing is a human universal (Rapport 2014). 'Text', here, too, need not merely refer to the technique of writing on a page. More broadly, text can be allowed to stand for 'any body of data, in any sorts of units, which in the eyes of an observer appears systematised and thus conveys information' (Boon 1973:10). It might be composed of words – on a page, in the head, in a song – but 'text' could equally refer to musical notes, daubs of paint, religious icons, habitual behaviours, institutional officiations; hence, 'sentences, stories, parades, carnivals' (Bruner 1983:12).

'How do they write their anthropological texts?' the contributors to this volume have been asked to reflect on and recount. The question contains a number of others: 'How does one represent as text what was first experienced as non-textual?' 'How does one represent in text on the page what was first experienced as spoken text, or as the collaborative text of a social exchange?' 'May one represent in text

on the page more than an expression of the subjective phenomenology of the individual author?’ Essentially, ‘Is it possible to know the presence and creativity of the individual anthropologist in his or her textual composition?’

In *Works and Lives*, Clifford Geertz analysed the writings of four prominent anthropologists – Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Edward Evans-Pritchard and Claude Lévi-Strauss – and compared how these authors imparted their own identity and very personal signatures to their texts. What anthropologists do, by and large, Geertz reasoned (1988:140–6), is write, and in these writings the responsibility (and the credit) of authorship cannot be displaced, however much of a burden it becomes. For these writings are ‘fictions’: constructs in which one form of life is represented in the categories of another (the writer’s own); constructs which attempt that greatest of metaphysical leaps – into the perspectives of other people. Anthropological writings, Geertz claimed, are works of the imagination, which belong to the romancer who dreamed them up.

*Imagination, dream, romance, fiction* still do not sit easily in a fund of terms of anthropological self-description. We do admit to the individualism of the pursuit – how the history of the discipline is a history of individual names (cf. Kuper 1978) – and we admit to the importance of particular genres of writing – how the history of the discipline is a history of the routinisation of particular relations between the writers and readers of fieldwork reports (Strathern 1987). We grant that anthropological writing may displace existing analytical categories and extend viewpoints so that the world is apprehended anew (Strathern 1988:10–19). Finally, we allow that ‘a sociocultural system’ is a *method* of scrutiny rather than an *object* of scrutiny, and that this category of representation of ours may indeed obviate the phenomena it purports to describe (cf. Wagner 1975). But we are still loath to accept the individual creativity that this writing represents and the imagination, the ‘romancing’ or ‘dreaming’ (Geertz), which it calls for. To write an anthropological text is to rewrite, to textualise, social realities – and disciplinary reality. When Malinowski, Benedict, Evans-Pritchard and Lévi-Strauss use particular genres of writing – fieldnotes, articles, monographs – to write up their ethnographic experiences, Geertz urged, their work is great in its individuality: distinct in its style, personal to their lives. It entails, in Georg Simmel’s terms (1971), these individual writers appropriating the conventional genres of their discipline in the project of their own self-expression. In their practice, the cultural forms and social relations of anthropology – as of the settings of the ethnographic research – are personalised and transformed: given meaning, brought to life, within the particular contexts of individual lives. It can be defined neither by the field experience nor by the disciplinary genres which preceded it. But Malinowski, Benedict, Evans-Pritchard and Lévi-Strauss are not particular in this, not unique.

### The format of this book

In this book, a number of contributors, both established and reputed, and those newer to their vocation, have been invited – requested – to reflect on and to lay

bare the exact process by which word comes to follow word in a particular anthropological text that they have written. This book should be a *methodological tool* for 'students' of anthropology – a kind of instruction manual of contemporary practice – as well as a *theoretical and practical exploration and creativity* of interest to the professional reader.

Honesty and generosity are key to the success of the enterprise; the contributors should agree to elucidate a process of creativity that is normally private and personal. It is also a process that might have become habitual and also second nature; self-awareness is, then, also a key factor in the success of the venture. Can the contributors bring to consciousness the precise means by which they create a written text albeit that ordinarily such self-consciousness might stymie the act of writing?

For this reason, a particular format was devised for the volume. Each contributor would have some 7,000–8,000 words at their disposal. Of this, a smaller half ('Text') should produce or reproduce a piece of anthropological writing – a part of a possible chapter or article, or a small essay in itself. This, to repeat, could be an existing piece of writing or something produced on purpose for this exercise. Then, the larger half of the wordage ('Commentary') would be spent by the contributor explaining in detail how and why the previous text came into being as it did: how the writing came to achieve the final form it did. In one important case, the Text and Commentary would be a collaboratively written venture – instantiating the common practice of joint authorship in anthropological projects – so that we might also explore how the experiences of writing jointly manifest a distinct dynamic.

If Text presents an anthropological construct, then Commentary is a kind of deconstruction allowing the reader to approach closely enough the workings of the creative process that they may espy the production as distinct from its effects. The deconstruction of Text concerns style as well as content. What were the aesthetics of sentence construction, of vocabulary or syntax or rhythm, that were espoused? Depending on the nature of the Text, then, its deconstruction as Commentary could entail an 'archaeology' of sources and influences that stretch back days or years. It might also concern a political position, a personal ambition, an anthropological regionalism or theoreticism. The deconstruction could include marginal scribbles that took place in another book or the quotations and 'ideas for writing' from a commonplace book that the contributor keeps in a desk drawer. In other words, 'how the Text came into final being' itself contains an open-ended phenomenology. This is part of the volume's intent: *What are the contexts and the limits of the material on which anthropologists draw in their writing?* Whatever the nature of the Text, however, the Commentary should offer as precise an instruction and specification as the contributor is able to give concerning the technical history of his or her act of writing.

This is what we requested of our contributors. How they responded, you will find below. We preface each chapter with a precis of its contents, and we return to a comparative assessment of the contributions in the book's epilogue.

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# Texts with commentaries



# 1

## Editor's introduction

Veena Das's chapter is a meditation on the thoughts, emotions and flashbacks of memory that went into writing her TEXT: a commentary on Nayanika Mookherjee's book *The Spectral Wound*. Das shows how the constraints of length and genre helped her to narrow down questions proliferating in many directions, to ask: May we think of experience as having a conceptual content? In her COMMENTARY, Das traces what Gareth Evans called 'grains of experience' in the ethnographic moments when unbidden thoughts suddenly well up in women's recounting of experiences of rape. Das finds affinities in these accounts to her own fleeting encounters with violence. These resonances cemented for her an argument about how experience clings to thought. Thinking becomes dethroned from its sovereign position as the moment of judgement and becomes part of the flow of life.

How do the aesthetic and the ethical become one in the textures of memory? Several moments of Das's past, otherwise dispersed, become simultaneously present in her reading of Mookherjee's text. The force of the descriptions and images of the raped women return Das to scenes of her own childhood, particularly to the ways texts of different kinds came into her life. Flashing resonances with myth – the woundedness of the women, whose husbands knew them to be faultless, yet were unable to not fault them; the figure of Rama, the mythical hero who expels his wife Sita even though he knows her to be faultless – are all equally searing moments of pain for Das. Finally, instead of resolving how different texts that she loves might be woven into a synthesis, she simply lets these texts find each other in her writing.

# THE LIFE OF CONCEPTS AND HOW THEY SPEAK TO EXPERIENCE

*Veena Das*

## Commentary 1

In the light of the provocative question the editors of this volume posed to its authors—*viz.*, what were the actual processes that went on in the writing of a text—I have chosen a recent short commentary, entitled “The Life of Concepts and How They Speak to Experience,” that is to be published in the online journal *Somatosphere*. The text takes up Nayanika Mookherjee’s (2015) powerful book *The Spectral Wound*, which I had read and admired greatly. Yet, the book also gave me an opportunity to try out some ideas on questions that were perhaps implicit in the book. I asked myself whether one can come to the understanding of concepts through some other route than the classical one of assuming that concepts are about the intellectual procedures of comparing, abstracting, and moving from the particular to the general. I had been claiming in much of my writing that there was no sharp boundary between experience and concepts—that experience clings to concepts rather than being eliminated in the process of generating purity of thought. I had been invoking a number of passages from Wittgenstein and the devastating counter-examples he gives against the idea that concepts have a bounded definitional structure (Das 2015). In Mookherjee’s book, I had before me a subtle rendering of the experience of a number of women who were raped by soldiers of the Pakistani army during the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Mookherjee’s descriptions were subtle and sensitive to the texture of life (and death)—the voices of the women had not been deadened by repeated recitals before human-rights organizations or truth commissions. The nationalist discourse of Bangladesh reframed the women who were raped during the war as *birangona* (war heroines)—thus, not as stigmatized, impure women to be shunned but as heroines to be embraced.. Their violation was rendered on the model of heroic sacrifice, putting them on a par with the sacrifices made by the male freedom fighters. Mookherjee thought of their presence in the national

media and in left-liberal discourse as “spectral,” locating this concept within Derrida’s notion of “the trace.” The experience of real women, she wrote, had to be evacuated in order for the birangona to function as a national figure. I asked myself: Is there an underlying assumption here that in the cases of women in the village of Enayatpur, who had only been able to speak in fragments, we are witnessing *the flow of lived experience*, while in the discourse on the birangonas valorized in the national media, *experience had been evacuated* to generate a purified representation? Was the first capturing “lived experience” and the latter “concept formation”?

In my original commentary on Mookherjee’s book, I formulated my puzzle as follows: “In debates on testimony and trauma the discussion ranges around the polemics of speech and silence but how about the specificity of the grains of experience?” The expression “grains of experience” had stuck with me from Gareth Evans’s (1982) posthumous book *Varieties of Reference* as well as from its delicate elaboration in a recent book on concepts by Jocelyn Benoist (2010). The problem of reference had become engrossing because, while I had a healthy distrust of correspondence theories of truth, I could not simply turn away from such issues as *what it is for our words to be world-bound* (Das 2015). Nor could distinctions between the sign and the index suffice, for even when context was not linguistically marked, I took from Wittgenstein the idea that the whole of our language is context bound and yet our access to context can be easily lost, putting a world itself in jeopardy. It was in the process of engaging these kinds of issues that I became quite obsessed with an intriguing remark in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* on the harmony between thought and reality: “The agreement, the harmony, of thought and reality consists of this: if I say falsely that something is *red*, then, for all that, it isn’t *red*. And when I want to explain the word “red” to someone, in the sentence “This is not red” I do it by pointing to something red” (Wittgenstein 1966 [1953]: para 429). Also on page 14 of *Investigations*, there is a remark: “Could one define the word “red” by pointing to something that is not red?” It took me more than a year to understand something of the importance of this remark, partly by working through Charles Travis’s (2000, 2006) two books on thought’s footing and partly by the dawning of the realization that any simple notion of correspondence between thought expressed in propositions and parts of reality might well be discarded. But this only makes the question of *how thought finds a footing in the world more pressing*. Harmony here, then, from Wittgenstein, does not lie in correctly specifying the referent of a concept but rather in understanding that when I point to something as “not red” to explain the concept of red, I am in that space where the possibility that *it could be red* is there; however, if I pointed to a number and said “that is not red,” I would be thrown out of this harmony. Concepts, on this view, are about claims over the real, but they operate in the realm of possibility as much as the realm of actuality. This much I now understand, and I could also use the idea to decipher some of the most intriguing of Wittgenstein’s remarks on James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*: I could argue that there is a difference between “mistakes” and “errors” on the one hand and “superstition” on the other, the difference having to do with understanding the space of possibility. (The elaboration of these thoughts still awaits publication after more

than two years of having been submitted, but it will, in time, see the light of day [Das forthcoming].)

## TEXT

For now, the point is that as I read and re-read Mookherjee's book over a stretch of time, I felt I was ready to tackle an issue that Evans had articulated. I knew I would need to keep returning to this issue, but the very limits within which a commentary is written gave me the incentive to put my swirling thoughts and emotions on paper, in some way to control my own wildness. In the commentary, my observations now took the following shape:

In his highly influential work on concepts, Gareth Evans (1982) proposed that the content of experience is non-conceptual—only when one has shifted from experience to *judgment* based on that experience has one moved from the non-conceptual to the conceptual content of experience. Taking his example from colors, (to stand in for other kinds of perceptual experience) Evans argued that the conceptual ability to recognize colors, as when we know what is red, green, or burnt sienna, is not enough since this naming and the capacity it represents is coarser in grain than the finer shades and details of our color experience. Thus, for Evans, there is something in experience that evades description in terms of conceptual content. This notion of the non-conceptual content of experience is tied to two different thoughts that might be interrogated. The first is that concepts are by definition abstract entities rather than concrete or empirical ones. (Despite the grudging acknowledgement by philosophers of “empirical concepts,” these are placed at lower levels of thought than say, “categories of understanding.”) Second, it could be questioned if a concept is embodied *in a word*, rather than in everything that goes on in the world with that word and others like it.

I then went on to take examples from Mookherjee's account of the fragments of testimony that came out in the course of everyday activities during her interactions with the women. I wrote:

At another time Kajoli recalled how even as she was being raped by the military, she was thinking about whether she would lose her entitlements to rice and clothes in her conjugal home—a theme repeated in a number of other accounts in which unbidden thoughts about future losses come looming even as a woman is being violated and perhaps is even facing death. Rashida recounted that “When I was being raped I thought my life was over (...). I thought that I had been married for just a year, so my husband may not keep me at home, may not give me rice and clothes” (p. 111). In these statements we find years of experiences of women: the rendering of the precariousness of a woman's life in her natal and conjugal home due to fights between

co-wives, the hostility of in-laws, stories of abandonment and the importance of sexual chastity, becoming distilled in that episode of the specific violation.

Consider the sentence: “Even as she was being raped by the military, Kajoli was *thinking*.” Here, thought is not something done in the atmosphere of a philosophy lesson but within the thick of experience.

It is accounts such as these that have led me to acknowledge that there is something terribly wrong in assuming that there are distinct moments to experience: some in which we simply live and feel, and others in which we think. There is a wonderful way in which Jocelyn Benoist summarizes this view: “*gôtez ou pensez.*”

In my own work on sexual violation during the massive violence of the Partition of India, I had described stories as acquiring a footing in the real through being embedded within a field of force made up of swirling words, other stories, gestures, and much else (Das 2007). But there is also one particular experience that might stand as my personal tribunal through which I can put to the test the idea that *feeling and thinking are not separated*. Many years ago, a man, probably in the midst of a psychotic episode, broke into my house when I was alone and tried to strangle me. I talked him out of it, but all along my one compelling thought was that I did not want to die groveling and begging for mercy. So when Kajoli and Rashida speak of the way thoughts came unbidden even as they were facing such terrible violation, I feel that they offer an insight into the nature of experiential concepts that could be garnered from thought experiments in philosophy, but which carry far greater weight for me coming from the mouths of women who are offering their “extreme history” (*chorom itihās*) to the anthropologist.

Yet it is strange that I cannot say if I am able to decipher how *experience clings to thought* in these accounts because I had puzzled over these questions in Wittgenstein and Evans, or whether Wittgenstein and Evans began to make sense in the light of the realization that such issues appear outside textbooks too—they are not simply academic games. I do know that my confidence in my response was greatly strengthened by reading what women like Kajoli and Rashida were able to articulate.

But let us now say that I have been able to find some peace on the question that concepts do not have, or for the most part do not have, a definitional structure. Of course, I do know that under certain circumstances placing a boundary around a concept might be required, for example, in a court of law that might simply decree that a pigeon is a predatory bird, treating pigeons as pure legal objects (as Bruno Latour [2010] mentions in his book on law); or, in a Euclidian space when we can say without any ambiguity that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But this “muscling down” of concepts to a region of the real—whether this real is related to legal spaces or mathematical ones—holds true only for that region. Outside the French administrative courts, the pigeon is not treated as a predatory bird; similarly, if the concept of distance itself changes, say, in a topological space, then the definition of the straight line, too, disappears. Thus, despite the tendency of many anthropologists to demand definitive definitions as a condition for building theory, we know that these classical notions of concepts have been put

under considerable pressure for several decades now. Worries that now haunt me, after writing the Mookherjee commentary, are of a new kind. Let me elaborate.

## Commentary 2

In my graduate classes, and in some recent writing, I have evoked Cora Diamond's (2008) compelling reading of J. M. Coetzee's fictional character Mrs. Costello, who is wounded by the thought of people eating animals—animals she can imagine as companions. Diamond calls this the "difficulty of reality" and the "difficulty of philosophy." The rawness Mrs. Costello feels, what she is not able to comprehend, is how people could go about their ordinary lives as if nothing were amiss. I think there is a strong formulation here that it is not our concepts that help us overcome what is recalcitrant in reality but rather such simple things as the exchange of glances in which the other is recognized. The issue for Mrs. Costello, after all, is not that of the rights of animals as a generic category but rather that she can imagine some animals as her companions. In some of her other work, Diamond argues that literature (rather than philosophy or social science) captures much better such questions as the depth of our denial or recognition of the other. As she says, "I cannot choose what weight it shall have that I fail you or betray you, or that I on some occasion look at you but with a look that leaves you a mere circumstance and not a human being. Levi and Tolstoy show us, then, the shape of certain possibilities in human life" (Diamond 1988:265).

So, if concepts are entities that wander around in the uncultivated gardens of possibility, then I wonder if the kinds of thoughts I admire in Diamond, and also in the writing of Stanley Cavell, which, in all honesty, gave me back my taste for life, are a critique of concepts as such or *specifically* of concepts under a certain picture of thinking? Wittgenstein includes in his examples of concepts the entire repertoire of words, gestures, and sounds through which the entire unstated background of our lives are evoked. He calls this the *natural history of mankind*, a history that might be expressed in such ordinary expressions as that we have "things at hand" (because we are the kinds of creatures who have hands), "seeing red" (because our color concepts make us think of emotions as having color), and so on. So, then, the challenge for me is to see that even when concepts seem very crystalline as they become embodied in words—"honor," "shame," "proper name"—they belong to thought because they are mobile, can move from one context to another, stitching and patching disparate contexts, and not because they have abstracted some general properties of the entities under examination. Yet, because a concept cannot be stretched indefinitely, the process of mastering it is also the process of mastering where its limits lie. Some concepts (like some rules) will tolerate much flexibility and others will not—but that is precisely how we learn to live with concepts rather than just using them in some rarefied processes of organizing our experience. These issues are the swirling thoughts and emotions that went into my writing the above text and, in turn, generated new questions that are not likely to be resolved any time soon, if ever, but in relation to which I took some steps forward in my own thinking.



### Commentary 3

It also happens that I am an avid reader of Sanskrit texts, both for the immense pleasure they give me and for an ambition I nurture to make them appear as offering modes of reasoning within our contemporary anthropological or philosophical concerns. Yet, if I take two steps forward in these directions, I seem to move back several steps; every time I try to do something more bold, like shout out how our conceptions of what is “sameness,” what is “substitution,” what is to understand the figures of grammar as both aesthetic and logical figures,<sup>1</sup> I shrink back, intimidated by the astonishing scholarship of some of the Sanskrit scholars, not only in English and French but also in Hindi and Bangla (of languages I read while acutely aware of my ignorance of the scholarship in German, Italian, Malayalam, and Tamil). One day I hope to show how much my thought has been shaped by these texts. But what I cannot do at the level of general theoretical discussions because of a certain timidity, I can perhaps do through examples. Mookherjee’s examination of the birangona and her critique made me think that perhaps I could bring in my reading of the Bangla and Sanskrit texts to bear on the question of the raped or abducted woman.

This is how the issue found expression in my commentary on Mookherjee’s book. An instance is when Kajoli was shouting across the field one day to tell her ten-year-old son to come home because of a brewing storm. As Mookherjee describes it, she suddenly said: “I was caught in a *toofan* (cyclone) and *apnar bhai* ... (referring to her husband) ... wasn’t even at home during the event” (2015:110). Mookherjee glosses this reference to the storm as a weather metaphor (“Kajoli let a reference to the rape and her husband’s absence that day trickle out through a weather metaphor” [ibid.]). But what seems to me to be significant here is the long aesthetic tradition in Sanskrit and Bangla of rendering sensory experience of dread, foreboding, fear, as openness to impressions from the world in the form of the sounds of thunder, lightning, and rumbling of clouds.<sup>2</sup> It seems possible, at least, for one to think that what Kajoli is telling is not simply a “lived experience” (though it is that too) but an experience that contains a conceptual content that is concrete and empirical and yet belongs as much to thought as to what the body has come to forcefully know. I am not suggesting that the use of the weather imagery makes Kajoli consciously put her experience in terms of the aesthetics through which the scene of abduction was rendered in poetry in Sanskrit or Bangla, but that what she does with this experience finds a footing in the world through an imagery that she can evoke.

Mookherjee draws on a large visual archive as well as public performances and discussions in the media to make a persuasive case for the argument that within a logic of representation, the imagery of the birangona at the national level manages to “remember” the war heroine as a national figure on condition that she can be disappeared through death, suicide, insanity, or departure for India in the case of Hindu women. In her words: “The real person of the birangona thus having exited, the account brings back her haunted specter to feed the national imaginary” (Mookherjee 2015:182). Without denying the power of this argument, I was interested in a side question: Where did the affective imagery of the birangona emerge from?

Again, by sheer happenstance, in my early teens I had been quite interested in Hindi and Bangla literature (and continue to be so.) Though I had not read the 19th-century poetry and plays produced on the birangona within the national fervor of an anti-colonial movement, I had read and often recited the heroic poetry produced by women poets such as Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, and I was very attached to the figures of Rani Laxmi Bai and Begum Hazrat Mahal, who were the inspirations for the later emergence of the figure of the birangona. These memories surged, making me look again at the poems of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and leading me to formulate the idea that even though the figure of the birangona gets transformed from the heroic to the abject, there is a background in the kavya tradition that gives the figure affective force. Would Diamond's notion that sometimes our concepts are simply not in line with our experiences—because the background conditions under which they made sense at one time have disappeared but the language continues—apply to the resurrection of this figure in the Bengali media in the newly independent Bangladesh? The lines that concluded these kinds of thoughts read as follows in my commentary:

It might perhaps be interesting to see its (the birangona's) double edged character—it claims a footing into the aesthetic tradition in Bengal even as it evacuates the particularity of the experiences of women who end up bearing the burdens of having been muscled into becoming its referents.

I end up, then, with the tentative suggestion that amounts to accepting Mookherjee's analysis and critique of the figure of the birangona *and* hoping that in the future, scholars might look more closely toward concepts of aesthetic emotion as elaborated in Sanskrit or vernacular languages. The disquiet in the figure of the birangona as Mookherjee portrays it is that it seeks to *typify* the experience of being raped and thus occludes the singularity of such figures. Some of the kavya literature does that too, as many classical anthropological texts did as they rendered the particularity of experience through very coarse general concepts. In the best expressions of the kavya theories of emotion, however, the typification is almost always peeled away. Thus, although a figure like Rama, the protagonist of the epic Ramayana, is often seen as an exemplar whose fate it is to be reinterpreted over and over again—the 12th-century dramatist Bhavabhuti's Rama expresses his love for Sita, the wife he abandoned, in one way, while the great poet Kalidas (1985) expresses it in quite another way—no one would confuse Bhavabhuti's Rama with that of Kalidas." It is this difference that allows *the grains of experience to be retained in the character*, so that despite bearing the same proper name and following the same plot line, these two figures could never be merged into one.

There are many conversations of this kind that I have in my head from the milieu of my early teens, when we could spend hours debating if Rama really loved Sita or just followed the script of a dutiful husband. Recently, I was amused to see Gary Tubb, a Sanskritist of exquisite sensibility,<sup>3</sup> pose the same question for Kalidas's Rama ("Does his Rama love Sita?"). Tubb writes:

But what is more striking in the Raghuvamsa is that the affection shown by these kings toward their wives, and depicted so movingly in such verses as Aja's lament for Indumati, is almost totally absent in Kalidas's treatment of Rama, a character who in the hands of other Sanskrit poets such as Bhavabhuti is credited with the most elaborate and vocal yearnings for his missing Sita.

(Tubb 2014: 81)

I felt I wanted to reassure Tubb that while Kalidas's Rama does not cry and lament his losses, or faint at the memory of Sita, as many other poets will make him do, the following verse from Raghuvamsam (which I write from memory) should be proof enough of his love. This is the verse that comes when Lakshmana (Rama's younger brother) comes back from the forest after abandoning Sita there and recounts to Rama how Sita had cried aloud, like the chakrandi bird separated from her mate, when she thought Lakshmana was now out of the range of the sounds of the forest:

*babhāva rāma sahasā savāshpah tushārvarshiv sahasra chandrah  
Kautīnabhiten grhānīnraṣṭā nā tena vaidehasuta manastah*

*Suddenly Rama was with tears much as the moon is  
that rains down the hail  
For fear of scandal,  
by him, she was banished  
from home  
the daughter of Videha  
(who) from the heart, could not be expelled.*

If I were to interpret this verse well, I would reflect on the analogy with the moon that becomes itself covered with the snowy sheen it rains down (my teacher Mrs. Sundari interpreted this analogy to mean that his eyes were brimming with tears that remained unshed); also on the fact that Rama dared not take the name of Sita any more but could only evoke her as Videha's daughter; and again that nowhere is agency ascribed to Rama, for in using the instrumental case for him, Kalidas makes the expulsion of Sita simply a cowardly act taken by a man who is driven by fear rather than the act of a righteous king. There was certainly some resonance that I found between these scenes of abduction and expulsion and the accounts we read in Mookherjee's book of husbands caught between the fear of ignominy and their love for their wives who had faced such brutality.

These thoughts on aesthetics and grammar are not new to me—they inform my writing in all kinds of devious ways—but I cannot get enough of a grasp on these thoughts that are like sediments of memories when the pleasure of the text was everything.

Nor can I offer any tight connections between what goes on in one's life when one writes or reads and the kinds of writing or reading it produces. But I do know

that *my sense of the affective as it clings to concepts comes from those longings that go beyond a particular text or a piece of writing*. So does my conviction that the issue is not whether our concepts grasp or touch a region of reality correctly; the important thing is to realize that *concepts must be led to a place where they are at home*. Wittgenstein's formulation that our task is to "lead words home" reveals not only how a notion like the birangona might become spectral but also how, in making their everyday life, people struggle to move out of the grip of the ghostly into that which can give the concept a ground to stand on.

## Commentary 4

Although I proceed to provide references to the books that I have cited, these texts functioned for me in different ways than a scholarly apparatus would if the enterprise of writing was a purely rational undertaking with no emotional content. As a final example, I wanted to find a place for Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on "Experience"—which acts as both the grave in which the name of his dead son "Waldo" is buried, and a womb from which concepts that are more quotidian than the universal categories of, say, "time" and "space" are produced. But though Emerson's essay is crucial for understanding the relation between concepts and experience, I could not find a place for it in my commentary on Mookherjee because I wanted the experiences of the women in her text to stand out and not become a background to other issues.

## Notes

- 1 I leave for now the expression 'figures of grammar' without further explanation, but in the *kavya* texts, as also in texts on hermeneutics and logic, grammar provides figures of thought.
- 2 I am bracketing for now a discussion of how aesthetic genres moved between Sanskrit, Persian, and the vernacular languages in the early modern period.
- 3 Though as I revisited a couple of his essays, I felt some crudeness in his translation of *ha dhik* or *dhik* as 'hell with' rather than the old-fashioned 'woe to'. The physiognomy of 'hell with' is just not in tune with that of *ha dhik*.

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# 2

## Editor's introduction

What is a preface, Kirin Narayan asks, as opposed to a foreword or an introduction? Laying out a threshold that invites a reader into a book, what might a writer learn? In her chapter, she assembles all existing available versions of a preface to her book, *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills* (2016). In Commentary: 1 she reflects on what a preface accomplishes within the composition of a book. In the 'Pre-texts', she assembles ten prefaces framed by the circumstances of their writing and the responses of readers. Fragments of the ten prefaces surface in the final published form. Finally, in Commentary: 2 she reflects on the process of writing honestly, for oneself as much as for others, as itself a form of everyday creativity. A preface might end up veiled behind a foreword or bypassed by a reader who starts into a book from another direction. Yet the process of composing and recomposing a preface, Narayan argues, is of great benefit to a writer. In refining a preface as the entry point to a text, a writer can discover and articulate what might make a book worth reading.

# TEN PRELUDES TO A PREFACE

*Kirin Narayan*

## Commentary: 1

Before Word there was WordPerfect. And before that, WordStar. My fingers clicked their gymnastic way through assorted WordStar commands as I composed field-notes on the thick, heavy laptop that I had carried with me to Kangra in 1990. Even as I wrote notes, I sensed the distant, misty presence of the book I would someday write about women's songs in this Western Himalayan foothill region. After encountering a particularly self-assured ancient singer, I even experimented with writing a few paragraphs in the guise of a possible introduction. A few years later, when I had glimpsed a sequence of chapters—stretching like a Himalayan mountain range on a clear day—I started seeking the best vantage from which to represent a book to readers. I began writing versions of a preface.

In this essay, I reflect on the making of the preface for *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills* (Narayan 2016). Across ten years, between writing and rewriting chapters, I also tried my hand at ways to artfully present the book to readers. Since prefaces are supposed to be written last, perhaps I am an eccentric in returning so often to the crafting of a preface. Yet I have found that for each of my books that carries a preface, writing that preface is a both a way to remind me of my own intent and to imaginatively engage with a potential audience. For even if written last by an author, a preface is assumed to come first for a reader—or at least that disciplined reader who starts with a book's opening page.

Just what is a preface? For me, a good preface offers a concise, tantalizing preview of the pages ahead. For my family memoir, *My Family and Other Saints*, I unabashedly titled my preface "The Hook." The book's first words are, "In 1969, when my big brother Rahoul was fifteen, he decided to drop out of school and go live with a guru" (Narayan 2007:1). *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* starts with "Preface: Alive in the Writing." The first line reads,

“When words gather together with energy, other places, other people, and other voices stir in a parallel life” (Narayan 2012:ix). Which potential words, I wondered, might I find to most effectively start a preface that conjured up women singing together in Kangra and showed why readers should care?

In *The Book of Prefaces*, a marvelous and quirky collection of prefaces written through time, Alasdair Gray starts out his own preface by quoting William Smellie (who had edited the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*). Writing the preface to *The Philosophy of Natural History*, published in 1790, Smellie had asserted with an encyclopedist’s knowing authority, “Every preface, besides occasional and explanatory remarks, should contain not only the general design of the work, but the motives and circumstances which led the author to write on that particular subject” (Gray 2000:7). Interestingly, having quoted this prescription, Gray blithely diverges from it, as though to immediately illustrate the flexibility around genre: Certainly, he uses his own preface as a space to explain the rationale and design of his book of prefaces, but he holds off until the postscript to recount the interesting tale of his own motives for assembling all these prefaces and the circumstances of the book’s making. To Gray, the preface is rather “a verbal doorstep to help readers leave the ground they usually walk on and allow them a glimpse of the interior.” This liminal space, then, allows a reader to pause and consider before entering a book. As Gray observes, prefaces advertise what is to come, articulate positions as challenges, and, in addressing implied readers, signal who these readers might be and what the book offers (2000:7).

Now, how is a preface different from a *foreword* or an *introduction*? Gray groups these genres together, also mentioning other forms of beginnings that “prepare the reader for the following without being essential to it” (2000:7) such as the more archaic *prologue*, *proheme*, *introductory*, *apology*, *design*, and *advertisement*. In contemporary conventions, a foreword is usually written by someone else, particularly someone important who can guarantee the book’s worth to the reader; a preface, in contrast, tends to be written by the author in a more personal voice. In terms of pagination, a foreword and a preface both are grouped in the front matter with page numbers in lower-case Roman numerals, again suggesting a liminal space before the actual book has begun. With the *introduction* begin a book’s formally numbered pages. For more details on all the parts of a book and also their flexibility (for example, how acknowledgments can be part of a preface or a separate section in their own right), I refer readers to the authoritative *Chicago Manual of Style*, which is now also available online. I mention these distinctions for, as it turned out, they became relevant to the fate of the preface whose incarnations I will now present.

The earliest preface I can find is from a decade ago, from a period of research leave taken as I sought to take stock of the book I had been trying to write. Poking about through computer files, I can find at least nine additional beginnings. I assemble the first lines or paragraphs of all these extant versions, organizing these sequentially with a note on the date of creation and file name as found on my current Mac desktop, with the laptop adding in a few extra examples. (Of course, this is only the date of the file’s creation, as I couldn’t possibly count how many times



each example was actually rewritten and revised.) In each case, I attempt to recall what the logic underlying the choice of opening might have been.

Tracing this lineage of openings marked as prefaces in word-processed files, I'm bracketing off underlying layers of composition. If I were really intent on the archeology of my own writing, I could go through all my fieldnotes—some from those old WordStar files, now translated and retranslated into other formats, some more recent—and look for the first germs of ideas in quotes or descriptions. Legion old envelopes and scraps of paper carrying scribbled ideas would also carry traces of earlier beginnings, but these have long since been recycled. Or I might pull down journals from across the years and painstakingly read through different entries handwritten in ink on smooth paper, trying to glimpse private musings that inspired preface writing. For this essay, though, I keep all these possible backstage rehearsals out of sight and stay with versions written with imagined readers in mind.

As I present these ten preludes to a preface, I also try to reconstruct the circumstances and the conversations that surrounded these different versions. While I listen with grateful attention to all comments on drafts, for a preface in particular I am so overly sensitive about how a reader might respond that even friendly critique can send me back to the computer to revise or even to open an altogether new file.

## Pre-texts: Ten preludes

Here is the opening paragraph of the first preface to *Everyday Creativity* that I can find on my current desktop, preserved across computers and the transition from WordPerfect. (A slightly different version of this, from a day later, appears on my laptop).

### 1. September 19, 2006, “Start”

At 15, I should have been accustomed to being a spectacle; after all, I had been trailing along after my energetic American mother my entire life. But being a teenager and moving away from our Bombay home to wander, rootless, had only ratcheted up my mortification. On our first appearance at a community-wide celebration in the Himalayan foothill village where we planned to spend the summer of 1975, I wished I could hide. The celebration, complete with a feast, was for the Mundan or first haircut of the eldest grandson of a widely respected schoolmaster. If I stayed away, I would miss out on lunch.

Even as we neared the courtyard, I heard women's voices joined in song. Women sang in an almost hypnotically repetitive melody, voices streaming together unevenly, so that sometimes one spurted, leading in a burst of melody before others joined in, or another voice trickled off last. Entering the enclosed space of the courtyard, I glimpsed many women through an open door. They sat on the floor, cloth *dupattas* covering their heads in a sea of assorted color.

What's happening here? Arrival tropes are common at the start of ethnography, following on earlier conventions of travel writing (Pratt 1986). My first attempt at a preface draws on this convention of arrivals, but with a twist. Rather than the lone ethnographer adventurously setting off for the field, a self-conscious teenager slinking behind her mother finds herself dragged into a sociable space that's yet to become an arena for fieldwork.

In 2006, I'd been struggling for years to write a book on Kangra women's songs and also to establish which genre to write the book in. I had first heard songs at that village-wide feast in 1975, and my mother moved to a Kangra village in 1978, making this one of my homes. I had intended to write about songs in a dissertation but didn't; returning from a year's fieldwork in 1991, I had instead collaborated with a Kangra signer and storyteller on a book featuring all the folktales she could remember, along with our discussions on their meaning. I wrote articles on songs and was diligently preparing to write the book when Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold's *Listen to the Heron's Words* was published. I lost steam. How many books on village women's songs in North India did the world need? How could I make fresh what I had exhausted myself by writing in articles to gain tenure? I instead donated the fieldwork on songs to an invented anthropologist and tried to write a novel, which has never found a publisher. I also pursued other projects, and in 2002 I returned to Kangra for more fieldwork that I hoped would give a new frame to what I thought of as "The Kangra Song Book." ("Haven't you finished your PhD *yet?*," singers asked.)

2002 was also the year that my father died and that my husband spent a month in the hospital. Sitting in the intensive care unit, watching for steady illumined signals from machines, listening to the hiss of oxygen, I thought long and hard about where a life's experiences went when bodies themselves were so vulnerable. I had a sabbatical to write my scholarly book on songs, but I ended up assembling stories about my family in a memoir, *My Family and Other Saints*. By the fall of 2006, the memoir was off with reviewers and I had sketched the outlines of a newly revised book on songs. The memoir ends when I am 14 and have left the family house with my mother; it was in the summer vacation in 1975 that we came to stay with friends in Kangra. Continuing with the same memoir voice to recollect the village celebration where I had first heard songs, I was accepting that if I were to write the book that had been my challenge for years, I would need to retell this partly as my own story.

I tried hard to reenter the book on songs. I even wrote a full draft, but it felt flat. I was using the frame of metaphors from within songs to structure the book, but I couldn't really figure out why cosmopolitan readers would care to connect with the village women I had met and the imaginative worlds they opened for me. I felt a sense of reciprocity to vibrant women singers in Kangra who had educated me, and a sense of honor to uphold the trust of a growing list of institutions and granting agencies who had supported this research and its phases of writing. The manuscript I'd pulled together felt dutiful but uninspired. I couldn't muster the conviction to polish this for review.

At the same time, I was increasingly teaching classes and workshops on ethnographic writing in which I wrote along with the participants. This next preface began in one of those classrooms as we experimented with using all our senses in descriptions. I returned to the celebration in 1975 where I'd first heard songs.

## 2. October 8, 2008, Preface

Fragrant with cardamom, glistening with ghee, sweet tangerine-colored rice arrived on our leaf plates from the scooped bare hands of servers. Women's voices continued chorusing from the open, carved doorway, as servers rushed along the lanes between the long strips of sacking on which we sat cross-legged. On the other side of the courtyard, in a different wing of the old adobe house, the Brahman Pandit had been chanting when we arrived. Feast, songs, chants—all this was to celebrate the *mundan*—or first haircut—of a cherished eldest grandson in this large extended family.

I liked the auspiciousness of starting with the sweet rice. But was I getting to the songs quickly enough? I took a long detour to write a book about writing, emerging from courses and workshops I'd been teaching about ethnographic writing, as well as thinking about techniques in memoir and fiction. When I came back to the Kangra Song Book, I couldn't stop myself from messing again with the preface. This time I brought the singing women forward and introduced my own presence, not just looking in through the door but looking back across the years.

## 3. February 3, 2011, New Preface

Earlier, as we sat cross-legged out in the courtyard, I had watched the singers framed through a carved doorway. I remember this image, even as it is overlaid by many similar moments from across the years. Women were clustering close on the floor, the shapes of their heads traced with swathes of color. They seemed to sing as one body, even as their voices streamed together unevenly: sometimes one spurted ahead, leading in a burst of verse before others joined in, or another voice held a note to trickle away last. The melodies flowed forward, swirling into the same patterns with an almost hypnotic intoning repetition.

Quite pleased with this description embedded into an unfolding story, I exchanged the first 30 pages or so with a friend who was writing a similar ethnographic book about a traditional artistic form. There is no bigger gift than a close and engaged reader, and I was eager to hear her response. Unsure of myself, though, I was also very impressionable. When my friend passionately critiqued my opening as self-absorbed—I shouldn't begin with myself, she argued, but with the people whom I was writing about—I started afresh with a quote from a singer. The singing women, as seen from the courtyard, migrated instead into the introduction.

The quote that I chose for a new beginning was drawn from a conversation I'd had when I'd returned to Kangra and was explaining the book's form to one of my mentors. As both the singers and I had been inexorably growing older since 1975, I found that I was no longer just focusing on themes in songs, or the structure of a book, but also on the different ways that women described what the practice of singing brought to their lives. Here, I used a pseudonym (*sangit* means 'music') for the white-haired friend who was instructing me.

#### 4. May 20, 2011, Preface

"Singing brings happiness to the mind," said Sangita Devi, glancing with now-diminished vision towards a binder of song texts I had transcribed in the Devanagari script from the local mountain dialect. We sat in the front room of her retired son's house in a Kangra village, for after years of working in a factory in Calcutta, he had returned to the valley and built this cement home by the main road. The family had moved here, leaving behind the adobe house down cobbled byways in the village's interior. When I'd visited Sangita Devi years before, we had sat on hand-woven mats on an earthen floor. Now we rested on chairs with a coffee table before us.

With this new opening, I was immediately honoring others' words and ways of thinking, while acknowledging my own presence. I was still moving between time periods, starting at a more recent moment that acknowledged a history of earlier association. As the book delayed in taking form, Kangra had also been changing irrevocably, and with every visit home, I saw I would have to find new ways to express that whatever I once thought was ethnographic description was rapidly becoming a vanished past.

As I've mentioned, I'd been structuring the ethnography with the metaphors embedded within songs and also metaphors about songs. Songs were likened to plants, growing from the earth upward to a final tip that might also promise the fruits of singing. Visiting India, I was excited to talk with Professor Mahesh Sharma, a historian with roots in Kangra, whose mother is also a singer. I was inspired to try out the beginning of the book in tandem with the beginning of any song.

#### 5. June 17, 2011, Beginnings

"What's the *dhak*?" I heard women ask, heads bent together, as they conferred on what to sing next. The *dhak*, I soon learned, refers to the song's opening words; also this describes the base of a plant—the area where a stem emerges from earth to light, becoming visible above the tangle of hidden roots.

But did I really want to explain the structure of the book before readers even knew what the content was? I liked those words, but I decided to move them elsewhere and I returned to the opening words on happiness, translating these afresh and dropping the pseudonym. Following singers' assertions about what songs brought

to their lives, I was glimpsing that that could connect me with wider anthropological conversations about happiness. I also had learned that singers who didn't care about obscure articles I might write were adamant that their own names be used for a book. "Sangita Devi" was revealed by her true name, Subhadra-devi Pandit. Here is a rewrite of the same passage from a year earlier.

### 6. September 15, 2012, Preface

"Singing makes the mind glad," said Subhadra-devi Pandit when I visited her in hopes of inspiration to bring together this long-delayed book. Thick white hair tied back in a braid, pale pink *dupattā* looped around her head, she gestured toward a purple file folder containing songs I'd previously gathered from many women, including her, in the Himalayan foothill region of Kangra, Northwest India.

"So what all do you have there?" she asked. In past years, I could have handed her the folder, but now she had lost much of her vision. Other changes crowded in around us in 2007. Previously, we would have sat cross-legged on the hand-woven round rice-straw mats in her adobe home along a cobbled path in the village's interior; now we sat on chairs in the cement house that her son, retired from a city factory, had built along the tarred main road.

I stayed with that preface for a while as I worked on polishing up other chapters of the book. Soon after my husband and I moved to Australia in 2013, I was invited to participate in an event in Stockholm honoring my friend Paul Stoller, who was receiving a gold medal for his contributions to anthropology from the King of Sweden. The event's focus was on wellbeing, and as I wrote a paper, I saw how perfectly the theme of wellbeing fit the book, broadening happiness. I had just been teaching a seminar on the anthropology of creativity, and I understood too how singing was a form of informal creativity that enhanced wellbeing.

I also listened afresh to tapes as I worked on polishing chapters. I came across one segment I had never transcribed that poignantly expressed the sort of solace that singing could bring to difficult and socially constrained lives, and also how singing was one among many forms of everyday creativity open to women. Choosing this passage to start the book, I was also influenced by a new friend in Australia who had confided her sorrow over several miscarriages even as we talked about women's forms of everyday creativity. My friend is a widely read person with a doctorate in a different field so I trusted her eye as I imagined a larger interdisciplinary audience.

### 7. December 19, 2014, New Preface

*I learned my songs and other things from my mother. She sang a lot. Whenever there was a wedding in the village, people used to forcibly take her off to sing. We have all these different rituals and customs, and she sang all the songs for them. Every kind of ritual has different songs—like today is for Dandoch, the Tuber Goddess, with various songs. She sang all kinds of songs. I just learned a little here and there but she sang so much more.*

*And then at the time of Divali people draw mandalu designs in the courtyard. She drew these patterns so beautifully that that everyone in the village would come to look. If there was rain, she covered these up with a tarpaulin so the colors wouldn't disappear. Then she uncovered them after the rain. Sometimes round, sometimes long, and all the village people used to come to admire them.*

*She was a woman who'd been given sorrow. Ten children of hers had died. She was a woman who'd been given sorrow, but she passed her days. She passed her days and then she died. I learned just some of her songs—not all. Before, it was a question of that age to not learn, to be absorbed in play, to be absorbed in school, to not want to learn songs. If she'd been here till now we could have filled all her songs ....*

I started by putting this quote in regular font but receiving the file by email, my mother objected. A reader, she said, might mistake these words as describing her. I moved to italics, and my mother said that this was hard on a reader's eyes. I tried indenting that long quote, but this looked odd on the page. So I set aside the preface for a while as the rest of the book took form. When I sent the book manuscript to the University of Chicago Press, I added a few introductory lines.

### **8. June 9, 2015. Preface**

Through the years, many women in Kangra villages have told me about what songs bring to their lives. Among the most moving of these commentaries on the value of songs and of singing, though, was from a daughter looking back at her mother's life. Sitting on a low bed in the shadows of an inner room, Veena Dhar said:

I learned my songs and other things from my mother. She sang a lot. Whenever ...

This is the version that reached reviewers. I also bound this version of the manuscript and carried this with me to India. Catching up with my mentors in different villages, I explained my choices and assembled last requests they might have for a book's form. In the city of Chandigarh, Mahesh Sharma also kindly offered more comments on the manuscript. My mother, who had been patiently reading versions since the very start, looked over the book once more and informed me that the preface in general was "fine, but it lacks charm." Lacks charm??! I had been trying so hard that clearly I had become too plodding and earnest. How does one recreate charm if it's gone?

The reviewers sent their reports, the book was accepted for publication, and on my return to Australia, I re-entered the manuscript for another round of revisions. Neither of the reviewers had said anything about the preface's charm, but my mother's comment was still ringing in my ears. How could I find a fresh voice? I remembered an intriguing conversation with Mahesh Sharma about etymology and wrote this up as a possible new beginning to my supportive friend in Canberra. "May I ask for your astute reading?" I asked by email, "Would you want to read forward from here? It's a question of a hook—and establishing a voice." But already I was unsure, for I added, "I can also use this section later on in the book."

### 9. July 28, 2015, Lahtrota

*Me-you, mine-yours*: in Kangra, a valley at the base of the Northwest Himalayas, your own self and another self come together in the compound word, ‘*lāhtrotā*.’ *Lāh* for self, *trotā* for another. When women sit knee-to-knee exchanging confidences or singing songs about difficulties in married lives, they are “doing *lāhtrotā*.”

I first learned this word in 1990, when I was beginning a year of research on women’s songs. I was staying with my mother who had lived for twelve years in a ramshackle house with no plumbing but expansive mountain views. I’d known Vidya since our first visit to Kangra, before this became one of my homes and before she had married into a nearby village. Wry, lanky and with a delightful eye for absurdity, Vidya had observed my induction into anthropology and my attempts to combine local connections of affection with systematic fieldwork. She now indulged me by allowing me to hang around her home with a notebook.

My kind friend read the two pages and wrote comments on them, and we went for a walk at the banks of glittering Lake Burley Griffin, talking the concepts through. But I was already deciding that the section on *lāhtrotā* should instead go into a chapter on women finding playful companionship through song.

One morning, I sat down at my altar and asked myself what I most cared to transmit as the very essence of the long labor of working with women singers. Institutionally, the program into which my husband and I had been hired was undergoing a restructure, and our own livelihoods were at risk. I saw how even attempting to write was also a way to lift oneself beyond oppressive day-to-day worries. I first wrote some thoughts in my journal, then typed them up as yet another possible preface.

### 10. August 12, 2015, Be More than a Sum

To be more than a sum of daily tasks. To carry skills that summon illumined space from within. To extend spaciousness into and around the relentlessness of responsibility. To find comfort in crushing circumstances. As I listened to women who enjoy singing in Kangra, a valley in the Western Himalayas, I slowly realized that I was not just learning about songs. I was also learning how creativity can brighten and ease constraints in even the most painful of lives.

For years, I had listened to Veena Dhar singing at the instigation of Jagadamba Pandit, her charismatic mother-in-law. “Sing, dear, sing (*gā, adiye, gā*)” Jagadamba Mataji liked to coax the women around her, sometimes even suggesting a particularly memorable song by its first line, while I listened in with my recorder. But it wasn’t until two decades after we first met, that Jagadamba Mataji energetically urged all her daughters-in-law in residence to “fill up” my tapes with their life stories and Veena told me her own mother’s story. Veena’s songs that I had appreciated for their melodies, poetry, and

stories, came into focus also as a practice that had been key to her mother's emotional survival.

The book then went on to retell the portion of Veena's mother's story quoted in earlier versions. But was I being too preachy? I gathered my courage to ask a friend, known to be a brilliant and exacting editor, if he might read this too. He returned my pages circled, striated, and annotated in red ink. He told me I was using too many words. All those dead babies, he said, did not make for a particularly uplifting start. He was particularly withering about my use of the word "space." As he pointed out, in neoliberal education-speak, "space" had come to mean the very opposite of spaciousness: Instead, activities are circumscribed in "the research space," "the education space," "the leadership space" and the like.

Chastened, I tried to figure out how to reclaim my own bemused voice, a voice that might carry the charm that my mother asked for and that might also reach beyond institutional confines. I went back again to the first moment of encounter, even though the story of how Ma and I arrived in Kangra now starts off the introduction. Here, then, is the preface's finished form.

### **Text: Finding form**

*Inside the carved wooden frame of an open doorway, women are singing. They sit cross-legged, crowded close, heads covered in bright swatches of color. Their voices pour together in wave after wave of repeating melody. No claps, no instruments measure the flow. Sometimes a single voice streams forward before others join in, sometimes a voice holds a note after others have retreated into silence. Then the song once again rises, gathering voices around the words.*

Who is that young girl listening from the courtyard outside? I shade my eyes against the midday sun, peering at myself, just fifteen years old. Amid rows of cross-legged guests with leaf plates on the ground before them, there sits Kirin, a self-conscious city girl. She can't understand the mountain dialect yet, but she longs to know what the women are singing about. She thinks she hears the names of goddesses and gods. She thinks the songs might carry stories. This is the first feast she has attended in Kangra, at the base of the Western Himalayas. She has no inkling that three years later, her mother will move to this village and they will attend many more celebrations that involve women's songs. She hasn't yet formally met anthropology or folklore.

But the singing draws her.  
And she listens.

★ ★ ★ ★

"Singing makes the mind glad," said Subhadra-devi Pandit when I visited her home a few villages away and three decades later. She sat on a sofa, gazing toward the



folder of songs I had selected to use in this book and that I hoped to confer about with her. Her thick white hair, parted in the middle, was tied back in a braid, and a gauzy pink chādru was looped around her head. Though she was almost eighty and increasingly frail, her voice was strong and melodious. Singing in the local mountain dialect, she moved across notes and sounds with limber certainty. Speaking either the local dialect of Pahari or else more formal Hindi, she developed an amused, almost teasing tone: her sentences carried festive, scalloped edges as they looped upward toward delighted exclamations or fluttered into laughter. My periodic reappearances had always seemed to entertain her.

Gesturing toward my file folder containing songs, Subhadra-devi asked, “So, what all do you have there?”

In past years, I could have handed her the folder, but now she had lost much of her vision. I set down my pen and began leafing through song texts that I’d selected for different chapters. Subhadra-devi listened with a faraway inward look and a smile.

When I mentioned “Chandrauli,” the woman beautiful as moonlight, Subhadra-devi laughed, eyes still staring off into the mid-distance, but bright now with sparkle. I had recorded this song at the wedding where we’d first met in 1991, and Subhadra-devi recalled how a group of us had sat together, enjoying the winter sun during the break between rituals. But she couldn’t recall how the song began.

“What was the *dhak*?” Subhadra-devi asked.

The *dhak* is the base of a plant, where it emerges into visibility from the earth; this term also refers to the opening line of a song. After the first shoot of a *dhak* is located, the song can grow through collective memory, verse after unfolding verse to the song’s final point or “head” (*sire*)—like the tall tip of a plant.

“Give, Rukman, give me your form, I want to change my looks,” I read aloud the Pahari words from the file before me. We had landed straight into the company of Hindu gods and goddesses, with dusky blue-skinned Krishna requesting the loan of his wife’s physical form so he might disguise himself as a woman. For Subhadra-devi, though, this song began from a different point: gathering makeup in preparation for Krishna’s cross-dressing. She started singing in a soft, high voice, amusement bubbling between her words: “I summon peddlers from many countries; I want containers of eyeliner.” She continued singing forward across verses, her version sometimes merging with, sometimes diverging from, the text before me.

Verse after verse, Subhadra-devi sang toward the part of the story that she said she and fellow singers didn’t like to sing when unmarried girls were present; verse after verse, she continued onward to Krishna using his powers of illusion to stretch the night with Chandrauli across six months. Then, like so many other singers through the years, Subhadra-devi indulged me by answering my questions about particular words and retold the underlying story.

In Kangra, as in many other villages across India, women’s group singing is thought to bring good fortune to happy events. As a gift of goodwill, singing affirms relations with the celebrating family, and so women feel obliged to show up for rituals that involve songs. Many women might gather, but only some women,

like Subhadra-devi, know the appropriate songs and lead the collective singing. For them, being a singer isn't an established professional role or a burdensome social duty. Rather, this is seen as a "*sukinni*"—a pleasurable personal interest (akin to the Hindi/Urdu word *shauk*). Song enthusiasts describe their songs as "*pyāra*"—both adorable and adored. Singing, they insist, is a means to cultivate states of mind that might rise beyond the confinement of routines, disappointments, and irrevocable events. Singing is so effective that one returns to it again and again.

Taking pride in a polished literacy unusual for her generation, Subhadra-devi described the gladness created by singing as "*prasannatā*," a Hindi word with Sanskrit roots that also means "clear, bright, pure" and connotes pleasure, delight, contentment, well-being, even benevolence. Though she no longer had the energy to attend song sessions across the village, Subhadra-devi emphasized how she continued to draw on songs. "People used to call me for weddings, for birthdays," she recalled. "Even now, sometimes, lying around, I sing a little. All kinds of unhappy thoughts can come into the mind. But with songs, your mind goes in another direction."

I remembered how, soon after we first met, Subhadra-devi had playfully described singing as a kind of "addiction": like alcoholics who craved a drink, and tea drinkers who longed for tea, a singer needed songs. "The more you sing, the more you have to sing," she explained. "One song comes out after another song. However sad we are, whatever has happened in our lives, when we sit to sing we're happy again."

★ ★ ★ ★

When women described all that songs brought to their lives, I reflected on how I might work their words into my writing about them. Women who identified as singers usually assumed that I shared the same enthusiastic predilection for singing—else why would I be so interested in songs? Subhadra-devi had assured me, "When you know songs, you'll be singing these when you're alone. Cooking, washing, walking, whatever you're doing, you'll be singing some song." Though I love music and can usually carry a tune, I will confess to working with these songs more as an admiring outsider than an equally fervent singer. I enjoyed translating the songs, learning the stories they carried, and conversing with singers. Gradually, I grasped that the zest with which women related to songs as a resource for living might connect to my own life too: as a form of everyday creativity.

I insert the word "everyday" to shake "creativity" loose from a widespread association with innovation. In presenting Kangra women's connections with their songs, I want to highlight the everyday creativity that can emerge even in activities that might appear routine and even insignificant. Since singing requires only the voice, song offers a form of creativity accessible to people who might not control or own much else. Under the tutelage of Kangra singers, I learned how the very act of pulling a shared song from memory is a creative act: words and a melody must be reconstructed, whether led by an individual or pieced together in a group. Imaginatively appropriating available cultural knowledge, a singer brings tradition

and community into conjunction with her life, and also adds her distinctive mark to the song in performance.

As I became attuned to the ways that songs enhanced lives, I began to notice friends from diverse backgrounds—in Kangra and elsewhere—tweaking skills and realigning informal knowledge nurtured for pleasure. I became more aware of how I too seek out small acts of making something distinctively mine in everyday life: whether through combining words on the page, trying out ingredients for recipes, assembling outfits, or stringing sequences of beads. I observed other domains in which people displayed what in Kangra would be called their “*sukinni*”—arenas of personal interest for which they choose to cultivate knowledge and skills, different from the social roles by which they are usually recognized. Following Kangra women singers and their songs through this book, I celebrate this kind of everyday creativity that may not carry value through institutions, commoditization, or acclaim, and yet remains a form of well-being and even happiness for individuals and their immediate community.

★ ★ ★ ★

Since I first began hearing Kangra songs in 1975, literally hundreds of songs have flowed toward me from uncountable numbers of singers (for at big crowded ritual events I often lost track of how many women were together singing into the recorder). Different song genres came into focus as I grew older along with singers. Which genres, I wondered, might I highlight in a book? I thought of connecting songs to lives by following fifteen singers who indulged my request for their life stories. But in this diverse group, from six different villages and a cross-section of castes, how could everyone get equal weight? With all the disorienting transformations to rural ways of life in the valley, which moments in the long association would I describe? I have written in different genres too, and as I tried to discern how I might best make the imaginative world of songs intriguing to distant readers, too, I wasn't sure if I should write an ethnography, a memoir, an interconnected series of life stories (or a “we-moir”), or even a novel featuring a fictional anthropologist to whom I'd donate this research. I worked on song translations, I wrote articles, I gave talks. I wrote other books instead. I continued to visit my mother and friends in Kangra, and I kept puzzling.

*[From here, I go on to explain how I did end up organizing the book: through “Metaphors of the sprouting, flowering, and fruiting of plants [that] pervade rituals intended for lives to flourish, “green and full” (harā-bharā), and for the fecundity of families and lineages. I write about what makes the book different from prior articles. And then I try for a last paragraph that brings in the central theme.]*

I hope through these pages to not just have described songs in relation to lives in one changing region of the Western Himalayas, but also to have affirmed the small, easily overlooked ways through which we might assert ourselves as more than the

sum of daily tasks and unrelenting responsibility. Amid the sense of cataclysmic inequality and destruction that today surrounds so many lives, I've wondered—is it a sort of misguided privilege to carry on about everyday creativity? Many singers after all have had difficult lives, and singing did little to change their external circumstances. Yet, they have taught me how everyday acts of beauty-making can help establish an inner way around or through hardship. I hope to present aspects of such everyday creativity in a way that any reader might recognize: gaining skills to establish one's own stamp on received practices; companionably messing about and playing with materials; finding the comfort of inner escape even in difficult times; and opening oneself to a sense of possibility.

### Commentary: 2

Long ago, when I was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley, I worshipfully approached a visiting scholar and told him how much I'd admired his book. (I actually admired more than his book). He told me how when he looked at his own book, he saw the patches and the seams, the rigging together and the awkward joins. At the time, I heard this admission as further evidence of his unassailable greatness, combining brilliance, wit, modesty, and so on. But by the time I'd finished my dissertation I knew exactly what he had described. For a writer, even a finished book can still seem provisional: a stitching together of multiple, sometimes arbitrarily chosen, pieces with the hope that to others this patchwork will appear as crafted, intentional design.

Remembering those words as I undertook this archaeology of the opening words of my assorted prefaces to a recent book, I see how every beginning has been repurposed. Whether stitched into the latest extended preface or joined into subsequent chapters, all those different attempts to explain the book's essence have come to use. I have learned too how writing itself is a form of everyday creativity: a place to meet oneself and try to understand the world through the arrangement of words. Bringing the processes of writing into focus, we might consciously reclaim the space of creativity that can seem squashed by an undue focus on outputs and adding lines on a curriculum vitae.

Is this obsession with trying to get a preface right simply a symptom of my own ways of reading? Reading practices vary between readers and also for the same reader across genres. I suspect that my preferences have been shaped by reading fiction, where openings (which aren't prefaces) most powerfully lure a reader into a book's parallel reality. Many academic friends, though, confess to starting scholarly books with a quick flip to ascertain the conversations invoked in the bibliography or the networks revealed through acknowledgments. I was recently copied into an email exchange in which one scholar was advising another to move all key orienting material out of the preface and into the introduction of her book manuscript. The friend proffering this advice wrote that neither she nor her students ever read prefaces. Never read prefaces?! I was stunned. For whom had I been writing all those prefaces to the book I tried so hard to get right?

My long labor of love ended up as *Everyday Creativity* placed with an Ethnomusicology Series titled “Big Issues in Music” that is published by the University of Chicago Press and coedited by the distinguished ethnomusicologists Philip V. Bohlman and Ronald M. Radano. As a series editor presenting this book by an anthropologist to a potential audience of ethnomusicologists, Philip Bohlman wrote a generous and beautiful foreword. He starts with the reproduction of a Bengali painting depicting the physical embodiment of a raga named Todi: a beautiful young woman, carrying a stringed instrument with two gourds through a flowering forest, extends her hand toward one of the two eagerly listening deer by her side. “Foreword: Todi in the Forest of Song” now graciously welcomes readers, and the book’s first words are: “How lovely are the songs that accompany Todi as she enters the forest depicted in the rāgamāla painting opening this foreword!” (Bohlman 2016:ix). My own “Finding Form” follows after.

I recalled advice given to me a long time ago by Swamiji, the holy man whose stories were the center of my dissertation and first book. “You can’t escape action,” Swamiji had said. He went on to turn his teaching to writing: “If you write, don’t do it with the expectation that this will make you a great scholar. If you’re writing, then just write well. Don’t worry about whether this will be of use to you. It will be of use to someone at some time” (Narayan 1989:207). Regardless of whether a reader might find a preface useful, I am reminded how composing and recomposing a preface can help an author bring clarity to the long process of writing a book.

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# 3

## Editor's introduction

Nina Holm Vohnsen's chapter starts (TEXT) with sections from her article 'Labor days: A non-linear narrative of development', parts of which also features as the prologue to her book: *The Absurdity of Bureaucracy: How Implementation Works*. The text consists entirely of what she terms 'ethnographic snapshots' edited into a montage of incidents, reports and narratives from her fieldwork focusing on Danish labour market politics. In TEXT, she strives to let the reader in on her persuasion that what results in the overwhelming absurdity which characterises a heavily bureaucratised area of political intervention (such as labour and employment) is in fact a myriad of uncoordinated attempts to make individual lives and political interventions meaningful. In her COMMENTARY, Vohnsen then explains how she sought to find a genre of writing which would develop this analytical message while also writing 'against conclusion'; that is against the idea that the world may be accurately analysed in any straightforward, chronological manner. As a way to achieve this she identifies the ethnographic snapshot: the dispensation of beginning, middle and end, and the cultivation of contradiction.

# WRITING AGAINST CONCLUSION

*Nina Holm Vohnsen*

## TEXT

### Labour days:<sup>1</sup> An empirical montage from Denmark

#### *Hard work*

On the first day of May, when the sun beats down on a central street in the city and burns my hand as it reaches for my lukewarm iced coffee, still semi-sedated by sleep (my hand could, for instance, easily have knocked something over had the table not been empty except for the sticky substance – perhaps dried-up beer – that reflects the sun back from the rough wooden table), on such a day, the air is stagnant and the street has a distinctive smell. I noticed it as soon as I stepped out of my front door in the middle of the afternoon, the sun having long worked on the multiple dried puddles of juices, whose creation and death this street witnesses every night. Resuscitated, they now appear sticky, sparkling, glittering, and they release odours that mix with lotions and perfumes, car exhaust and evaporating asphalt: the sweet and spicy concentrate of human, sun, and city.

#### *Your own words*

In the municipal office where citizens' rights to sickness benefit are evaluated, citizens who are called in for the initial meeting often have only the vaguest idea about the meeting's purpose. What they *do* understand is that they are going to be checked out. This is why you frequently see citizens arrive with special handbags or briefcases where they have collected all the different pieces of information they envisage might be needed to *prove* their illness to the caseworker. For the same reason, when they rummage around in their bags for some specific piece of paper, it often happens that medical journals, prescriptions, official letters, and little cards

with scribbled appointments with physical therapists or psychologists spill onto the floor or out on the caseworker's desk. The caseworker will try to stop this presentation of evidence: 'Just tell me in your own words why you are not at work.' If this is requested of a person of non-Danish nationality, the following almost invariably occurs: The citizen says (for instance in Polish, Russian, or in broken Danish), 'Why, because I am sick!' upon which he or she resumes the rummaging for evidence to confirm this circumstance. Perhaps a sick note or alternatively a direct phone number to the doctor is brought to light and offered to the caseworker. Then the caseworker might say something along the lines of: 'Yes, I know you are sick, that's why you are here today, but explain to me what it is about your illness that makes you unable to go to work.' If, on the other hand, the citizen guesses what the caseworker is driving at, the conversation might move forward more smoothly.

### *Much obliged*

On the Danish National Labour Market Authority's (*Arbejdsmarkedsstyrelsen*) webpage, you could in the early months of 2010 read the following under the heading 'sickness absence' (*sygefravær*):

If you are absent from work due to illness for a longer period of time, you can get support from your municipality to help you regain your ability to work and return to the labour market as soon as possible. You are also eligible for economic compensation in case of absence due to illness in the form of sickness benefit [*sygedagpenge*] . . . . If you are absent due to illness for more than eight weeks, the municipality will send you an information form that you must return within eight days. Subsequently, the municipality will summon you to a follow-up conversation or call you up no later than eight weeks after your first day of sickness absence. The purpose of the conversation with the municipality is to assist you in keeping your job and your connection to the labour market. . . . It is your obligation to participate in the municipal follow-up.

*(Arbejdsmarkedsstyrelsen 2010, my translation)*

Since the summer of 2009, municipal caseworkers in Denmark have had the option of referring citizens who receive sickness benefit to other organizations which specialise in programmes aimed at shortening the period of sickness absence by keeping the citizens 'active' while they are unable to work. In the spring of 2009, before these new rules were included in the law on sickness benefit, a controlled trial (*'Active – Back Sooner'*) was carried out in order to test central elements of the amendments to the law. During the trial period, citizens who received sickness benefit and who had certain birth dates were randomly drafted for an obligatory offer of a programme of activity for ten or more hours a week. These offers of activity could be, and were in several cases, outsourced to private employment agencies. The activities could consist of physical exercise, applying for a job or writing CVs,



or classroom sessions guided by psychologists or medical doctors with the aim of reorienting the sick citizens' understanding of their current situation and causing them to go back to work more quickly than they otherwise would have done.

### *The privilege*

If you are ill and you get referred to a private employment agency that specialises in 'sickness benefit package solutions [*sygedagpengepakker*]', the goal of your referral might be 'to train for stable attendance'. If you have been away from 'the ordinary labour market' for a long period, the mere task of showing up every day at 9 AM can prove challenging. It certainly poses a challenge for the researcher – myself – and few are the days on which she makes it on time. While this has no immediate consequences for the researcher, this is not so in the case of Irene. Irene is not there voluntarily and might lose her right to sickness benefit if she does not show up. These are the main differences between the researcher and Irene: In the fall of 2009, the researcher is 28 years old and fit as a fiddle; Irene is 59 and suffers from diffuse pain, a metabolic disorder, and a case of diabetes that has recently taken a turn for the worse. With the exception of three years, the researcher has been enrolled in different sorts of education since she was five; Irene has been working full-time in restaurants and shops since she left school aged 15. The researcher is paid a salary; Irene receives sickness benefit. That is why it is the privilege of the researcher to stroll down to her local coffee bar, *Nosewise*, on a given Wednesday at 10:15 AM to have a coffee and a late breakfast; while Irene, for the *n*th week in a row, must sit in the private employment agency's computer room and work at her curriculum vitae or play Minesweeper until her pain gets so severe she might be allowed to go home.

### *Piss and coffee*

In a different street in the city, a man is sitting in a particular spot on the ground. He is embracing his knees while his entire slovenly being trembles. He is sitting in the exact spot where a public urinal stood until recently. The penetrating and nauseating smell of decades of pissing has impregnated the surroundings to the extent that I have to hold my breath when I pass on my bicycle even half a year after its removal. Sitting in this specific spot is this young man – junky, thief, or whatever else might explain the presence of the equally young but, in contrast, sparkling, clean policemen who stand in a circle around him. A sorry excuse for a citizen sitting in the middle of a puddle of piss that spreads around him between the cobblestones and forms channels that run toward the doorway of the local pub, forced by the slight tilt of the street. Not far away, if you turn right just after the National Bank, on the other side of the bridge separating the former military bastion at Christian's Harbour from the Royal Dockyard and Copenhagen's commercial centre, sits a big square building. Above the building's entrance is a large stone section into which the word *Overformynderiet* was chiselled decades ago, the popular meaning of which is akin to 'super-patronizing'. The fact that the National Labour Market Authority

resides here seems especially appealing to the Danish sense of self-irony and causes many knowing looks to be exchanged by visitors and employees alike. To the extent that this building can be said to possess a smell, it must be the vague scent of a civil servant's perfume, or maybe the bitter odour of filtered coffee, or the particular smell of large quantities of paper gathered in one place. The sound of a pair of well-dressed and determined medium heels and a discreet but rhetorical knock on a door. This is where the most recent version of the law on sickness benefit was drafted. [...]

### *Overdose*

Today in the Municipal Jobcentre, caseworker Ida has just decided that she wants to get a motorcycle driver's license. In her office, a woman pulls down her blouse and points with her right index finger toward the place on her left chest where, instead of a breast, we now see a topography of scarred skin. In another office, caseworker Marie, who at this moment in time still does not know whether she is finally pregnant, just manages to prevent a man from pulling down his trousers. Instead he now inches the tight jeans leg up over his knee in order to prove the existence of a scar from a wound from the knife he intended for something completely different and work-related, but which cut a 10 cm line from his knee up along his inner thigh when large sacks fell on him as he unloaded a lorry. At the fifth office down to your left, a woman cries furious and humiliated tears in Ian's office as she understands there is no way around it: She will have to tell this young, unfamiliar man why she, who has been able to take care of herself for 60 years, now suddenly cannot. Ian himself just buried a friend. Overdose. [...]

### *Barriers*

When the municipal caseworkers refer a citizen to a private employment agency, they need to fill out an electronic form that serves as the contract with the private employment agency. On this form, the municipal caseworkers must indicate what the purpose of the referral is. This is what a 'purpose of referral' might look like when the private employment agency receives such a contract from the municipal caseworker:

'The barriers need to be broken down.'

This is how a conversation between the researcher and the privately employed social worker might then sound:

Researcher: 'Is that all you know when the citizen is referred here?'

Social worker: 'Yes, that is a typical contract. And then you might wonder why they want to pay for a 13-week programme without specifying which barriers they intend us to "break down."'

### *Shrubberies*

At the private employment agency called ENGA, team-leader Marianne found herself overwhelmed by the grotesqueness of the fact that she and her colleagues had for a moment seriously discussed whether to lay out shrubberies in their yard in the hope that the homeless people and vagabonds whose work-ability they were sometimes commissioned to assess would remain at their property. The discussion had been a response to the fact that the employees had noted that these people repeatedly got their applications for early-retirement pensions rejected on the grounds that the applicant had participated ‘too little’ in the work-ability testing for the caseworkers to have sufficient grounds for assessing their ability to work. The employees at ENGA felt compelled to react to the circumstance that those worst off and who were not even able to attend the work-ability testing, those who, in their professional opinion, lived up to the criteria for early retirement pension the most, were, by the same token, cut off from receiving it. It seemed that whatever they did, it would lead to an absurd situation: a continuation of the present practice if they did nothing; an equally absurd condition if they were to build flowerbeds for the vagabonds to sleep in – while they documented that building.

### *A helping hand*

During those first months of my employment in the municipality, I struggled continuously with the numbers I had to report to Statistics Denmark. The report on the delivery of ‘personal care and practical assistance’ proved to be a particularly tough one. The data system could not extract the numbers we needed, and nobody had mastered spreadsheets beyond the simplest commands and sorting. Apart from that, dead citizens had still to be removed from the files, and we knew that people who no longer received any kind of help continued to figure in the system as well. What lent an additional touch of fiction to the exercise was that Statistics Denmark required that we indicated the total amount of time for which each citizen received such services. Unlike most other municipalities where services were granted in minutes (for example, 45 minutes of cleaning a week), in this municipality, people were granted specific services (cleaning the floor, watering the plants) regardless of the time it might take to complete them. I called up Statistics Denmark and explained the situation on more than one occasion, but it was not an option to hand in an incomplete form. Furthermore, some boss further up in the municipal system had been to a meeting at which our municipality had been singled out as one out of only three that had still not reported our numbers; the pressure to make sure our numbers were in before his next meeting had travelled down the system from manager to manager until, finally, I was the one presented with the task of getting it done. I also received emails from employees in Statistics Denmark who were themselves under pressure to get the statistics out before the end of the year. Finally, one of my managers took me aside and told me to make up some numbers that were not too far off those we had reported the previous year. [...]

### *19 per cent*

Wednesday, 10 June 2009: On the front page of *Politiken*, one of the largest Danish national newspapers, you can read that Danish social workers break the law on a daily basis. The subheading clarifies that one out of two social workers is unable to live up to the legal requirements on a regular basis. The question posed by the Danish Social Worker's Union to its members on behalf of *Politiken* was as follows: 'Have you been able to live up to the guidelines for your social work as defined by the law within the past three years?' A pie chart shows that 49 per cent responded that they did, 32 per cent responded that they did not, and 19 per cent did not know. In the text, you are given the additional information that most of the social workers indicate that these breaches of the law happen on a daily or weekly basis. The journalistic angle on the story is the increasing workload in the public sector and the unfortunate incidents that happen due to a general lack of time for processing cases. [...]

### *Success*

Eventually, when I handed in the last sheet to Statistics Denmark, it felt like a victory. It mattered less that the calculations should have been based on a specific week in March and that it had been necessary for me to base my calculations on a random week in December. It mattered less that it was fictional, as we did not grant people a 'time slot' but a service – meaning that I eventually had to make up numbers based on my own assumptions, such as: 'It probably takes ten minutes a week to water plants twice a week.' It mattered less that I had spent two months, off-and-on, plus my colleague's time, to create this fiction. It mattered less that both my colleague and I *knew* that our files were incomplete. What did matter was that I was finally able to conclude the task that had been haunting our unit and that had caused problems for our management and for Statistics Denmark. I received much praise for my handling of the task, and from then on, all kinds of statistical charts landed on my desk.

### *Irene*

'And by 'system' I guess I mean all the people who, unknown to me and without having ever met me or spoken to me, make decisions that affect my life in tangible ways.' [...]

## COMMENTARY

### **Finding the genre that best communicates my insights**

Between December 2008 and January 2010, I carried out a research project that focused on the planning and implementation of a piece of Danish labour market policy called (crudely translated), *Active – Back Sooner*. During 2009 I studied

various instances of planning and attempts to carry out the plans, as these took place in three different organisations: an office in the Danish Labour Market Authority (then a sub-section of the Ministry of Employment), a team in a municipal job centre, and a unit in a private employment agency that had won a tender put out by the municipality. The project was designed as a controlled trial, and it targeted a randomly selected group of recipients of sickness benefit. Its purpose was – at least initially – to establish whether or not referring people to some kind of activity while they were on sick leave would shorten their period of sickness absence and enable them to return to work sooner than they would have otherwise. This was in the interest of the ministry, since employers were reimbursed, anno 2009, for each day their employees were absent from work after the eighth week of sickness absence.

I ended up studying the project by coincidence. I was interested, at a more general level, in understanding the mechanisms by which organised attempts to plan a future and to bring about a specific development, in my experience, always seemed to fail. The period I had set aside for fieldwork corresponded perfectly with the implementation phase of the project *Active – Back Sooner*. As I turned from researching to writing, the predominant emic themes I found in my material were that everyone – from caseworker to policy-maker to recipient of sickness benefit – would talk about the *absurdity* of the employment system, while they were all, also, heavily engaged in trying to manipulate things back into a form that made sense to them.

When writing up my thesis, and later the book that resulted from the research (Vohnsen 2017), I wanted to find a way of narrating events that communicated and supported this double ethnographic insight: that everything people did made perfect sense when regarded on its own premises, but that this ‘sense’ was of a highly unstable nature. When regarded in the context of other attempts to make something meaningful take place, the ‘sense’ dissolved into the overall ‘non-sense’ of absurdity which all my informants spoke about. I decided that I would try to recreate for the reader, in the text, the conditions for arriving at this insight: that policy implementation cannot, in real life, be bracketed off from the wider political, organizational, and social context in which it takes place. The argument that ‘Context matters’ and ‘It all depends’ are trivial to the extent that they have become ignorable; they have been reiterated to death. Yet the cognitive and agentic effects of navigating, as a practitioner, in a contradictory and fragmented environment are crucial to how implementation happens. Therefore, I wanted to write a text that moved ‘understanding’ from a merely academic appropriation of my argument to a literary mode in which the reader would be equipped with sufficient knowledge that the argument or insight would become theirs and, thus, both more convincing and less easy to treat with the casual disregarding of the banal.

I included in this text (as above) all that which, in the policy-making world and the world of casework, is blocked out as being ‘beside the point’ or irrelevant, but which *de facto* destabilizes the plans and decisions made there. To write this text, I made use of three principles: First, I tried to recreate some of the bubbles of sense

people inhabited for shorter or longer periods of time; second, I edited the text so that there would be no obvious plot or progression in the text; and third, I wrote and edited the text bits so that they would be self-contradictory and/or contradict each other. In what follows, I will try to explain why these seemed like the relevant principles by which Text should be written.

### *Bubbles of sense – ethnographic snapshots*

I thought of the ethnographic examples I chose to write about as ‘bubbles of sense’; they were examples in which a particular logic or purposefulness was articulated, and they tended to have a limited lifespan in that the meaning they articulated tended to burst upon inspection. Each of my bubbles captured what seemed to me illustrative of something important and apparently disconnected, hard to put into words. John Van Maanen (1988) has called this mode of ethnographic writing ‘the vignette’. I came to think of it in photographic terms, as ‘ethnographic snap-shots’, because my then partner was a photographer, and we often spoke about the many similarities in the way we worked. The photographic snapshot had the same qualities as the situations I was trying to capture: seemingly caught in passing, a documentation of a situation soon dissolved and soon forgotten by the people involved, yet anything but random. Like the photographic snapshot, the written one is selected among hundreds possible; it is edited to draw our attention to things deemed by the editor (not the people in the shot) to be important. A snapshot delivered a sensuous and intuitive knowledge hard to translate into words, yet deeply connected to, and in dialogue with, a professional tradition: For the photographer, it was about composition, aesthetics, about light and lines and people being positioned in the perfect way; for me, it was about moving as close as possible to the tipping point between the truly irrelevant and the significant or consequential.

### *No beginning, no middle, no end – montage*

As a genre that might accommodate the lack of plot or progression I found to be characteristic of the labour market system, I chose montage. Yet it was a deliberately different montage to the one defined by Sergei Eisenstein (1994), the Russian film maker. He saw intellectual montage as a technique of juxtaposing (in the case of film making) visual shots in order to elicit a specific intellectual meaning. An example of such intellectual montage might be Eisenstein’s *Strike*. In this film, he interleaves his main story line, in which a fleeing crowd of people is being pursued and beaten by the military, with shots from a slaughter house in which a cow is being put to death. With this application of the montage technique, Eisenstein suggests we might interpret of the violent event as one in which ‘the system’ treats ‘the people’ as if they were livestock to dispose of. Had the main story line instead been intersected by cross-clips from the birth of a child or from a ballet, the suggested interpretations would have been different; perhaps the bloodshed involved in transitions and new beginnings, or the careful and aesthetic orchestration of a military intervention.

In Eisenstein's form of narration, one line of shots constitutes the main story line while other shots are placed at key moments to suggest parallelisms intended to lead the spectator to consider specific interpretations of the events portrayed. However, in the attempt to write about the complexities of labour market politics, it would be misleading to present the field as having, to quote American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, 'leading characters, minor characters, significant details, that it has lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end' (1973: 209). In other words, to present my ethnography as a linear forward-moving narrative with a clear focus would be to impose upon it a useless analytical construction; useless because it would not be in accordance with how things happened.

The quotation above comes from Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday* (1973). In the book, we seemingly follow one afternoon in science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout's life. But the narrative digresses from Kilgore's dealings endlessly. While our focus remains – out of the corner of our eye – on Kilgore, the narrator's display of psychological insight is evenly distributed between all persons in the book – no matter how tangential they are to Kilgore's thoughts, experiences, and actions. Hence, we get the life story of the waitress who serves Kilgore drinks in the bar where he sits. We get the life story of a painter whose picture happens to be hanging on the wall behind him. And we get the thoughts of Vonnegut himself as he observes his characters.

*Breakfast of Champions* was the main source of inspiration for the way I set out to write my version of an intellectual montage. By using Vonnegut's writing technique, in which he breaks with the skewered attention normally paid to major and minor characters in fiction, as my model for writing the prologue to my book on labour market policy, I found a way of dispensing with a narrative based on a leading argument and explicit story line. Instead, I wrote a piece where nothing was allowed to be cast aside as irrelevant or 'beside the point' if it might have a bearing on the way policy is transformed into social life.

I wanted to apply the montage technique precisely to work against the stable and unanimous interpretation that Eisenstein's work aimed to perfect. My aim was to communicate the immense sense of working in a contradictory environment – which my informants expressed – rather than to drive forward towards a conclusion. I tried to replicate this sense of contradiction in the text by pulling what might have been considered as background information or minor details to the forefront of the analysis and placing this information at the same analytical level as the primary object of investigation (the specific project whose implementation I examined). My aim was to give to each ethnographic snapshot in turn the role of text and context, figure and ground, centre and periphery.

### *Cultivating contradiction*

Montage is a well-established genre in anthropology. Michael Taussig has applied it in *The Nervous System* (1992) to capture the way 'the State' might both repulse and attract us; Marilyn Strathern has applied it in *Partial Connections* (2004) as a way of

reviving comparison as an anthropological core project after the relativistic turn of the 1980s; and Nigel Rapport has used it in *Transcendent Individual* (1997; also 1992, 1994, 1999) to describe the heterogeneous nature of individual social lives. Despite their differing objectives, the basic principle shared by these authors' accounts is that the portrayal of any situation might lend us a perspective through which to look at and wonder about other situations. What I identify in these works, and in my own, is the sense that anthropological writing must be more than a question of presenting a convincing argument, and analysis more than merely presenting different perspectives on the same reality; the ethnographic montage is an analytical approach that demands we accept and cultivate ambiguity and contradiction.

With this writing strategy, I also wanted to distance myself from the two trends in policy studies that dominated the field at the time: Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose's governmentality studies (2008), and Bruno Latour's science and technology studies (STS) (2010). Miller and Rose had proposed an approach in which analysts are encouraged to explore the circumstances under which certain aspects of a population come to be politically interesting and singled out as being in want of political intervention: They place at the centre of analytical attention the discursive aspect of human practice. This approach was helpful for examining how the conditions were established for regarding sickness benefit as an area of intervention in Denmark in 2007–2009, and how certain ideas about sickness and health sneaked into the public and political debate. It was, however, not informative or helpful when the aim was to understand the concrete practical effects of *Active – Back Sooner*; the discursive aspect of human life has a tendency to gloss over ambiguity and to dissolve in speech or writing the contradictions found in practice. Nor was their suggested approach informative of the messy details and obstacles inherent to the implementation of development projects or of the never-ending and often self-contradictory decision-making my informants found themselves struggling with.

In 'The Making of Law' (2010) Bruno Latour, on the other hand, claimed to have written a context-free, 'zoom-free' monograph – invoking only those practice-near details needed to allow the reader to follow him in his analysis of French administrative law. If his and my approach at first resembled each other with our shared attention to the minute details of casework, the difference is to be found in the result and the focus of attention. Latour's analyses are, as in the case of the analyses of Miller and Rose (2008), beautiful and convincing: well-rounded. My interest was different, and I regarded this tendency with which everything 'adds up' in both Miller and Rose's and Latour's analyses as more indicative of the editorial temperament and theoretical aim than of the phenomena they study. If Latour wanted us to see how translation takes place – by tracing the transition of knowledge from one place to another, as he does most beautifully in his essay 'Circulating reference' (1999), I wanted the reader to see the disruptions, the surplus, the excess, the rejected.

### *Anthropological critique, or writing against conclusion*

As I wrote my book on the absurdity of bureaucracy, I thought a great deal about the role and character of anthropological critique. People, both journalists and



policymakers and other academics, had described my PhD as ‘highly critical’ or as ‘a powerful critique’. This surprised me, since it had at no moment been my intention to write a critique of the things I had observed. I feel pretty sure that nobody will in any moment in my thesis or later in my book find either an implicit or explicit judgement of mine or a favouring of one informant’s perspective or explanation over another’s. Whether I have succeeded I cannot be sure, but this at least was my intention. Yet people kept referring to my descriptions and analyses as ‘critical’. I thought I would use this opportunity towards the end of this chapter, therefore, to confront the question of ‘critique’ and to share my reflections on *what* – if my work and writing really *is* critical – precisely *is* critical about it.

In his article ‘Is good policy unimplementable?’ (2007), David Mosse contrasts his own analytical approach with the dominant trend he identifies in current studies of policy and development. He calls this latter the ‘critical perspective’. In David Lewis and David Mosse’s edited book *Brokers and Translators* (Lewis & Mosse 2006), they call it ‘the deconstructive approach’. These ‘critics’ or ‘deconstructors’ can be summed up as the large number of contemporary sociologists and anthropologists who write within a more or less Foucauldian analytical framework, often by way of Nicholas Rose’s analyses of governmentality. They tend to portray policy, writes Mosse, as ‘a rationalizing discourse concealing hidden purposes of bureaucratic power or dominance, in which the true political intent of development is hidden behind a cloak of rational planning’ (2007: 453). Mosse discards this view as an ‘ethnographic blind alley’, and I am prepared to join him in this. It is *as* insensitive to the practicalities of political negotiation and drafting of policies as it is to the contradictions and messy practicalities of translating such policy into action. The most disappointing example of this type of literature, to me, is Tania Murray Li’s *The Will to Improve*. I had bought the book based on its wonderful title and had been looking forward to getting a view into the daily life of the development agencies that operate in Indonesia where she works. Yet despite its title, one does not encounter in the book *any* of the people supposedly possessed by the will to improve. Instead she relies on analyses of documents and of the outcome of development schemes. In other words, Li totally bypasses the practice of planning, the practice of writing development projects, and remains content with rehearsing the same old ‘governmentality analysis’, devoid of any insight into people’s actual, and presumably differing, wills to improve.

What David Lewis and David Mosse provide us with instead is the description of two separate realms of practice: that of ‘consultancy and political negotiation’, and that of practical policy implementation. Each is portrayed in a loyal and non-judgemental way in its own terms. This is the sort of analysis I aimed at producing in my book and by way of writing techniques such as the ones sampled above in Text. I have striven to write descriptions that move between different perspectives and practices constantly and which, every time they move, remain loyal in focus to the different agendas and perspectives involved. This sort of analysis – ‘zigzagging’, in Rapport’s appellation of this comparative method (1994) – offers no critique, but it is no less critical.

And this is the difference I want to highlight and use for my purpose – the difference between *delivering a critique or passing judgement* on the one hand and *providing an opportunity for critical thought* on the other. This is a difference between setting out as an analyst to de-mask and debunk on the one hand, and setting out as an analyst to destabilize conventional thinking on the other. But if the latter approach moves beyond the discursive tradition *in the end*, it does so by picking up a well-established and widely used ethnographic principle – namely that of juxtaposition. And in doing so, this approach is a direct heir to what George Marcus and Michael Fischer in 1986 called ‘anthropology as cultural critique’. ‘Anthropology,’ they wrote, ‘is the use of cultural richness for self-reflection and self-growth’ (1986:ix). They took cultural critique to be an *exploration*, one ‘which plays off other cultural realities against our own in order to gain a more adequate knowledge of them all’ (1986:x). This it achieved exactly, they argued, by seeking to disrupt ‘common sense and make us re-examine our taken for granted assumptions’ (1986:1). Juxtaposition, then, is the act of placing two, until then separate, things next to each other. In this sense, it is not only an opposite to a ‘conclusion’; it is the destabilization of the concept of a conclusion for the purpose of enriching it.

Juxtaposition does not direct the reader’s reaching a conclusion; it tries to stall it for a bit by its embrace of contradiction or multiplicity. This technique of juxtaposition is found in some of the most famous literary writings on state policy and bureaucracy that, with great ease, accommodate the contradictions of this world. In George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), for instance, we learn how war is peace, how freedom is slavery, and how ignorance is strength. In *Brave New World*, again, Aldous Huxley (1932) demonstrates that rationality is insanity and insanity is rationality; he carefully shows us that the care a society shows for its individuals is a violation – but also that a violation in its own terms might be an act of care. Such contradictory insights have always been at the heart of the anthropological endeavour, and they are not relativistic insights. They are situated perspectives on a complex reality that *cannot* be exhausted by any *one* account, by any *one* theoretical framework, or by any *one* storyline or narrative.

In the spirit of this tradition, I aim not to write *critique* but rather to provide an opportunity for *critical thinking* – in other words, what the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1955 [1949]) has defined as ‘thought engaged with a problematic having *still not* arrived at a conclusion’. An anthropology that embraces contradiction and multiplicity is not only true to the human individual and social life; it is also a fruitful and critical way of practicing the two core principles of our discipline: comparison and contextualization. The ‘critical’ in such an approach lies in the process of *exploring* and not in the theory or in the end-product itself. In other words, how I aim to be critical is not in my own writing but in the thought of the reader who seeks a conclusion of their own.

## Note

- 1 This text consists of sections of the prologue to my book *The Absurdity of Bureaucracy. How Implementation Works* (Vohnsen 2017). The prologue is in turn an adaptation of a chapter published as Vohnsen, N. (2013), “Labor days: A non-linear narrative of development”, in Suhr, C. and Willerslev, R. (Eds), *Transcultural Montage*, Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford, pp. 131–144.

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# 4

## Editor's introduction

Bjørn Enge Bertelsen's chapter presents excerpts from his article 'Effervescence and ephemerality Popular urban uprisings in Mozambique'. This is an analysis of instances of violent popular protests occurring in Mozambican cities in 2008 and 2010, arguing, specifically, that these intensely political events were 'rhizomic' in their organisation. Drawing on both Deleuzian notions of the rhizome as a form of political order as well as Durkheim's notion of effervescence, the article sought to challenge conventional notions of African postcolonial political orders and protest. In his COMMENTARY, Bertelsen reflects, firstly, on the coming into being of the above TEXT as an explicit challenge to certain visions of Africa and politics, particularly those basing themselves on universal visions of politics, poverty and the postcolonial subject. He describes also how the particular acephalous and open-ended form of the riots was forged and fuelled by constant digital interventions—in the shape of, for instance, text messages – and how this impinged on the writing of TEXT *and*, more profoundly, upset notions of linearity. It led him to see fieldwork material as vibrant, anthropological temporality as open-ended, and the discipline's authorship as non-singular. Crucial to his argument is how anthropologically composed texts may be more properly seen as mere freeze-frames: artefacts cut out from messy and multiple temporalities.

# COMPOSING TEXTS AND THE COMPOSITION OF UPRISINGS

## Notes on writing the postcolonial political

*Bjørn Enge Bertelsen*

### TEXT

*Excerpts from 'Effervescence and Ephemerality: Popular Urban Uprisings in Mozambique' (Bertelsen 2016a).<sup>1</sup>*

When we walked down the streets and tore into the shops and took what we wanted – it was fantastic! We also controlled the roundabouts and bridges – chasing the police off. And we went to the police station, shouted and sang. They [the police] had to hide. They were afraid! It was fantastic – it was popular power [*poder popular*] all over again and we organised everything ourselves. We could do what we want and everyone was happy!

A month after Chimoio's urban protests on 1 and 2 September 2010, this is how a 22-year-old man excitedly described them to me while I was carrying out fieldwork. Many elements are contained in this typical quotation, but worth noting are the emancipatory, collectively egalitarian and festive elements of what its participants referred to as *o greve*—'the strike'. Indeed, the self-organisation, the takeover of state infrastructural space and the fervour of networked mass mobilisation are central aspects of the strikes that have repeatedly challenged Mozambican state sovereignty in recent years. The strikes thereby seem to challenge Jean-François Bayart's famous claim (1993) that the African state is rhizomically constituted in that it relies on extensive, dynamic and changing networks that lie beyond and below the reach of its formal domains. Contra Bayart's claim, the 2010 strike was preceded by similar events in 2008, calling into question a reading of the state as incorporating fully powerful rhizomic domains. The scale of the 2008 and 2010 strikes was such that they encompassed both the urban spaces normally associated with sovereignty and engaged rhizomic networks and

capacities beyond the reach of the Mozambican post-colonial state. What is more, the strikes were frequently characterised by a festive atmosphere of upheaval, creativity and collectivity – traits that Durkheim, more than a century ago, identified as key to dynamics of not only ritual and sociality but also of historical rupture and politics:

There are periods in history when, under the influence of some great collective shock, social interactions have become more frequent and active. Men look for each other and assemble together more than ever. That general effervescence results which is characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs . . . Changes are not merely of shades and degrees; men become different. The passions moving them are of such an intensity that they cannot be satisfied except by violent and unrestrained actions, actions of superhuman heroism or bloody barbarism.

*(Durkheim 2008 [1915]: 210f)*

Taking the Mozambican strikes as conforming to his notion of ‘great collective shocks’, this article approaches these events as irreducible to the oft-applied label of ‘food riots’. The following argument presents the sovereign formations of African states neither as necessarily emanating from an imagined or spatially defined centre nor as a formation based on the control of rhizomic domains, as in Bayart’s argument. Instead, it explores how the Mozambican political order has been involved in recurring confrontations that have produced unsettling effects, which ultimately underscore the contested and partial nature of post-colonial sovereignty. It analyses the ways in which such sovereignty has been ephemerally appropriated by novel political formations, such as the popular uprisings, as well as how lateral, egalitarian and digital dimensions have been integral to their trajectory and articulation. Finally, such formations are frequently experienced as effervescent, festive and carnivalesque events by their participants.

### **Text messages, unrest and trans-African political fears**

At a Southern African Development Community meeting in April 2011, the chair of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, Zambian president Rupiah Banda, warned heads of state: ‘If there is anything that we must learn from the upheavals going on in the northern part of our continent it is that the legitimate expectations of the citizens of our countries cannot be taken for granted’ (quoted in Zhangazha 2011). President Banda’s warning came after southern Africa experienced the effects of protests following a text message that went viral in neighbouring Mozambique during mid-August 2010:

Mozambican – prepare yourself for the great day of strike [greve] 01/09/10. We will reclaim the rise in prices ☺ in electricity, water, rice, public transport and bread. Send to other Mozambicans.<sup>2</sup>

Displaying the ubiquitous emoticon, this text message may seem innocent enough, and the Mozambican authorities seem to have regarded it as such. Nevertheless, early on Thursday, 1 September 2010, following a shutdown of public transport, large numbers of people poured onto the streets of the capital Maputo; similar events occurred in the cities of Beira, Chimoio and Matola. The Maputo crowds were engaged in a popular uprising rather than a conventional ‘strike’; however, burning heaps of tyres as barricades on main roads and overturning vehicles, the participants succeeded in blocking key roads into and around the city centre for two days. Despite heavy-handed police intervention, including the use of live ammunition and tear gas (which killed 14 people, including young children), the two-day strike witnessed widespread looting of shops and warehouses, which especially targeted food staples, such as rice and cooking oil (CIP 2010).

As can be discerned from the text message copied above, an apparently unknown source called for a national ‘strike’ (*greve*) on 1 September 2010; subsequently, people flooded onto the streets of Mozambican *bairros*. A young man whom I talked to in January 2013 recalled these events:

There was singing and dancing everywhere – on the roundabouts, in the streets! Some were drinking. Many were singing ‘Guebuza is a thief’ [*Guebuza – ladrão*]. Many of my neighbours participated. People I did not know also. Many also took things from the stores that they wanted. It was good!

The alleged thief referenced here was Armando Guebuza – the current president of Mozambique and leader of Frelimo. Soon, however, the ‘street party’ aspects of the strike were supplemented by multiple forms of physical protest and violence primarily directed at two urban dimensions: the spaces and domains of the state and objects of wealth. Underlining the carnivalesque and uncontrollable elements of the 2010 strike, a woman in her mid-20s from Bairro Maxaquene C, a low-income, high-density part of Maputo, told me:

The strike [*greve*] is called *xitereka* in Shangaan.<sup>3</sup> *Xitereka* is better than calling it *greve*. It means a state of disorganization – where everyone could do what they want. *Xitereka* was a good thing. It showed Frelimo that we do not like them. That they make things too expensive and that it is dangerous to keep all the nice things for themselves only. So we marched to the places with these things.

The strike (or *xitereka*) involved the targeting of certain state spaces: Early on the first day, many main roads leading to Maputo’s city centre were filled with large crowds – young and old, men, women and children – who descended on passing vehicles. Attacks on vehicles soon gave way to the construction of large barricades of burning tyres, which made it perilous to try to pass by car; those who attempted it were pelted with stones, bricks or other hard objects. A vast number of supermarkets, shops and large warehouses were also invaded and ransacked.

The popular uprising lasted two full days, crippled the Mozambican capital and prevented urbanites from getting to work from outlying *bairros* using minibuses. By the time the events subsided during the afternoon of 2 September, the Mozambican government had brought in two measures beyond the largely failed attempts of violent crackdown and dissuasion through public announcements. Firstly, it backed down and claimed there would be no price rises, thus awarding the participants a victory in these terms. Secondly, it is widely believed the government managed to coerce the two dominant telecom companies – Vodacom and the national company Mcel – to shut down or seriously impair national text messaging services (AFP 2010). This shutdown effectively meant a halt in the spread of information among participating groups and individuals.

### The rhizome of the strikes

Since protesters sent text messages using ‘pay-as-you-go’ SIM cards purchased from informal street vendors, it was almost impossible for the government to identify senders or receivers. Until after the 2010 strike, 95 per cent of mobile phones users in Mozambique used such street-bought SIM cards with no obligation to register their details. The lateral spread of text messages reflected the organisational dynamic of the popular uprisings: There was no apparent hierarchical structure in the form of a recognised leadership that endured, as would have been the case had this been a ‘strike’ in a conventional sense of being organised by a trade union.

In a context in which the two dominant political parties were perceived either to have retreated from politics (Frelimo) or to have lost their traction (Renamo), the strike’s speed and lateral egalitarian organisation assumed significance. At one level, therefore, the dynamic of the popular uprising resembled what Deleuze and Guattari (2002 [1980]: 358) call the *rhizomic form*:

Packs, bands are groups of the rhizome type, as opposed to the arborescent type that centers around the organs of power. That is why bands in general, even those engaged in banditry or high-society life, are metamorphoses of a war machine formally distinct from all State apparatuses or their equivalent, which are instead what structure centralized societies.

In this sense, the form of the band – which resembles key aspects of the lateral and fluctuating form of an insurrectionary popular uprising – exhibits the unsettling potential inherent in rhizomic social and political orders that also reside beyond the reach of the state.

The strikes’ instant, acephalous, rhizomic and ‘band-like’ features notwithstanding, the protesters also, if ephemerally, occupied key state spaces and infrastructural points, including bridges, roundabouts and main roads. This particularly affected Chimoio’s *bairro cimento* (‘cement city’) – the city centre, which comprise zones of business, wealth and the state. Crucially, this temporary isolation of the *bairro cimento* had its corollary in the spatial dynamics of lynchings, which have occurred regularly



in Chimoio and other Mozambican cities in recent years (Bertelsen 2009). These events resulted in people perceiving there to be a police presence only in the *bairro cimento* while some municipal authorities were seen to condone lynchings in the poor *bairros*. As an effect of these processes, the lynchings have been distributed in a centrifugal manner to urban spaces that are peripheral to the Mozambican state.

The dynamics of the strikes indicate a similar spatial dimension but with a centripetal force: Rather than impoverished *bairros* being abandoned by the state, it was the *bairro cimento*, the very space of the state and wealth, that was unsettled and targeted. In such a way, the infrastructural insignia of state control were disordered and re-inscribed and sometimes directly attacked – as in the case of Chimoio’s main police station and police cars. The participants engaged, then, in a form of spatial re-negotiation of the state apparatus. That the 2010 strike unfolded in particular spaces was expressed in February 2013 by a *chefe do quarterão* (neighbourhood leader) from Bairro Maxaquene B:

Good people were silent and did not participate. But the strike [*greve*] only happened where there were things. Here [in Maxaquene B] we have nothing. So here nothing happened. But in other places, ah, a lot! War comes from the stomach, you know. People need work and things.

Reflecting this critique indirectly, other interlocutors who had been participants commonly held that their actions would provide some form of redress for what they regarded as illicit accumulation; if the state and business elite were perceived to have merged and to be increasingly wealthy, why should people be barred from taking part in these riches?

Such direct action against those perceived to be wealthy, greedy and powerful underlines the clear political dimension that the popular uprisings have for the participants. However, it also indicates that Mozambicans are neither pacific nor uninterested in politics – despite having experienced gruesome civil war violence, an onslaught of neo-liberal reforms dismantling state services and being continuously under Frelimo rule since 1975. On the contrary, because the higher echelons of state power have become gradually less centred on *o povo* (the people), and as the vision of socialism retains only rhetorical vestiges of its former self, by engaging directly with state agents such as the police, people address (and actually redress) in practical terms the sources of their marginalisation and poverty. A young, unemployed man I interviewed in Chimoio in August 2011 revealed the frequently commented upon relations among cost of living, the elite and the police:

I participated because I wanted to destroy the shops that are selling everything at a very high price. We went to the police headquarters [Primeira Esquadra] as well. There we threw great many rocks at the buildings and all the policemen ran to hide inside. From there they fired their guns but more in the air than directed at the population. We went to the police as they are not resolving problems and cases there. If you [are a criminal and] have

money, you are released right away. If you do not have money to pay the police, you will stay there and get heavily beaten.

As the young man indicated, the strikes unfolded in particular urban spaces and had specific targets. In Chimoio, this included recent symbolic and material domains of exclusion and immoral accumulation: the Chinese and their shops. These were targeted alongside stores owned by Mozambicans of Indian descent. An important backdrop for such targeting is that Mozambican newspapers have repeatedly exposed the fact that members of the Frelimo elite part own large companies otherwise controlled by Chinese people, people of Indian descent and other non-Mozambicans. For my interlocutors, such affinities and connections between Frelimo and 'big business' made these shops natural targets during the strikes: Attacks on them were construed as appropriating the visible riches of the party and on what was perceived to be its betrayal of *o povo* for its own benefit and that of foreign interests.

A simple 'eat the rich' interpretation is, however, too crude in this context; in Maputo, stalls and small shops owned by Nigerians were also targeted to some extent, while Chimoio market stalls (*banca fixas*) owned by Somalis were looted and razed to the ground. These people – Chinese, Nigerians and Somalis – are not only regarded as successful businessmen at the expense of Mozambicans, they are also widely believed to control the drugs trade and to be involved in vehicle theft and robberies. In Chimoio, Somali stalls in large informal sprawling markets can hardly be seen as representing the party in power. In addition, and reflecting local politics and civil war memories, the stalls of people from the northern Mozambican city of Quelimane were looted and burnt. Thus, it would seem that the participants' understanding of their marginalisation was in part shaped by the kinds of xenophobic political dynamics to which Mozambican migrants have been violently subjected at various times – in South Africa in 2008, for example.

### **'Now they are afraid of us': The strikes as exuberant and unsettling**

The fervour of the Mozambican strikes and their ludic and festive elements may not be explained fully either by invoking political instrumentality or by arguing for them as blindly reflecting crude economic necessity. Although the ethnographic and historical contexts described above differ greatly from Chimoio and Maputo in 2010, similarities do exist in terms of how the popular uprisings involve dynamic forms of egalitarian collectivity exhibiting a politics of exuberance. Arguably, these elements are contained in Durkheim's notion of effervescence as integral to great revolutionary or creative periods. Parkin (2007: 246) understands Durkheim's notion to be necessary if we are to appreciate the force, volatility and dynamics of the (insurrectionary) crowd:

In other words, effervescence, like the crowd, is inherently ambivalent emotionally, able to switch moods through a combination of internal and external

dynamism. Inscribed within the bodily constitution of the crowd, then, we have in effervescence the potential for schismogenesis, expressed as their bodily embrace or violence and always sheer physical energy.

This notion of effervescence aids our understanding of the sense of thrill and empowerment that is important to my interlocutors' experiences of the riots. My interlocutors strongly emphasise this excitement, which occurred as they engaged in running battles with police, as they participated in looting and as they attacked or appropriated spaces associated with the state. Such multiplicity in terms of relations between the state and its population has also been argued by Mbembe (2001), who emphasises that the post-colonial state cannot be fully grasped in familiar dichotomies such as repressed/repressors or resistance/power. Instead, Mbembe asks us to analyse the playful and the carnivalesque in epistemologies and practices of power, in which 'those who command and those who are supposed to obey are so entangled as to render both powerless' (Mbembe 2001: 133).

However, the enmeshed nature of the two (often indiscernible) categories does not necessarily end in spirals of simulacra or mutual disempowerment and, again, the strikes as they unfolded are cases in point: Beyond the violence perpetrated by the Mozambican state in trying to quell the popular uprising, many policemen actively participated in barricading the streets and, in particular, in the looting of warehouses and shops. This dynamic of carnivalesque, effervescent and transgressive upheaval was also expressed by a male interlocutor whom I interviewed in October 2010. He is atypical in being a police officer with the national force who joined the participants during the first day of the 2010 strike:

The strike [*greve*] was like a big party [*festa grande*]. You know, we are poor. And we have been for a long time – the end of the war changed nothing. The *greves*, they are like we are saying 'Now they are afraid of us!' It is a good feeling – they can now feel some of our fear. And we get to take something back from them – from those that are connected to the party, to the criminals, to the business. They fear us now.

There are several fascinating aspects to this account, the most striking being that as a police officer – far too often regarded as a mere state agent – he participated in the strike. The second significant aspect is that the form of popular uprising can be seen as one of the only ways in which people can interact with what they identify as the post-colonial state: its agencies (the police, for instance), its wealthy elite and the objects and domains of its power (roads, infrastructure, telecommunications). Crucially, the strikes harboured and actualised the potential for confronting and appropriating aspects of Mozambican statehood and the riches of its domains, spaces and agents. A new form of egalitarian political collectivity emerged, informing (and informed by) memories and experiences of emancipation that were contained in what became a general expression: 'Now they are afraid of us!'

## COMMENTARY

When does one *know* that a certain theme, a certain *problematique*, should be subjected to textual and analytical capture – that the moment is ripe and right for the composition of a text? Is it during fieldwork, when one realises something new is afoot, perhaps witnessing certain events that makes one think that there are actual transformations going on in that (pliable and plastic) excerpt of reality we call ‘the field’? Or is it later, when one, at least physically, has withdrawn from ‘the field’ pondering the impressions, jottings, loose thoughts, digital images (i.e. what we have learnt other disciplines call ‘data’) and searching for patterns and, instead, one has an epiphany and a hitherto unknown, unseen and unrealised analytical trajectory emerges? Or are the emergence of anthropological texts more murky affairs altogether: born not so much out of moments of pure creativity in academic chambers nor as attempts to capture fleeting effervescent fieldwork moments but instead as long-term, recursive processes informed by stubborn analytical convictions and philosophical ideas, starts and stops in processes of fieldwork reflection, involving the idiosyncrasies of the nominal author, as well as the academic and editorial guardians of the publishing venue to which the text is to be submitted?

These three avenues belie, of course, the myriad other ways in which anthropological ideas coalesce into texts. However, when writing TEXT, the starting point for me was, precisely, how my orderly overview of Mozambican politics was effectively being perforated by constant text messages and a barrage of various forms of stories and images being presented as news on WhatsApp, Facebook and so on – all of which preceded, endured during and continued after the *greves*. The effect of these digital incursions on my cell-phone and computer was one of epistemological destabilisation: I experienced suddenly having my own (more or less) carefully constructed political cosmology of Mozambican political subjectivity and order if not shot to pieces then appearing in a strange hue, disfigured, mutating. At once what I knew about African political mobilisation and strong one-party regimes had to be rethought; for, what was the basis for Mozambican politics, after all, if such powerful forces as the *greves* could wax and wane recursively outside established political domains? How could I make sense of the convergence of people on the streets, their actions and their relation to the digital realm? And what did such convergences reveal about post-colonial politics?

### Presences of the present, or the sheer messiness of field and time

TEXT may be seen as an attempt to address these latter questions. However, the linearity of TEXT – any text – will necessarily eclipse the non-linearity of its making, the stochastics of its becoming and, if you will, its congealing into a stable form. A text is but a freeze-frame and, paradoxically, becomes an image, an anthropological composition, one might argue, that is simultaneously lodged in time through being published at a certain date, as well as seeking to take in various

presents – what Ricoeur (1988[1985]) would have called the presence of the past, the presence of the present and the presence of the future. This tension between the technical format of linearity, sequence and situatedness – what is effectively the spatio-temporal fixity of any anthropological text – and, conversely, its purported openness to multiple presences fuel many (anthropological and non-anthropological) authors' struggles with creativity, including ambivalent sentiments towards own published texts. This theme is, therefore, also a recurrent feature in anthropological reflections on messy fieldnotes that are sometimes also sprinkled with drawings, graphs and cut-outs, attempting to capture ethnographic reality and the particular present the anthropologist is writing from and within (see, e.g., Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2013). As Taussig eloquently notes in his lucid little book on fieldwork and anthropology, 'time in a fieldworker's diary is oddly recursive. It moves ahead like a train, day by day or one entry to the next – that's for sure – but when we read and reread our diary, we are bound to another time that, like Proust's *memoire involuntaire*, unexpectedly opens onto new worlds when two slabs of time, two quite separate moments of time, are for one reason or another juxtaposed' (2011:50).

The messiness of anthropological fieldwork diaries and the multiple temporal presences lying beneath and behind the paradoxes of TEXT return to me as I sit in seemingly calm Chimoio, central Mozambique, in March 2017. Here, I take in both recent acts of war and violent clashes (see, also, Bertelsen 2016b) – and, perhaps more so, relate to the constant flow of text messages, WhatsApp messages, Facebook rumours. Very often taking the shape of political jokes, satire or crudely formulated threats and malicious gossip, these serve as constant reminders that the seemingly stable political landscape is volatile – challenged by speculative graphics, false (or not) calls for action, Photoshopped images of elite figures engaged in unmentionable sexual acts or depraving activities of sorcery or, quite commonly, texts presenting themselves as news bulletins with various forms of dramatic updates on battles between government troops and the opposition or spectacular escapes from Mozambican maximum security prisons. Attempting to reflect on TEXT in March 2017 amidst such digital incursions, I am reminded of how the already messy nature of time and field was intensified by the *greves* in two ways:

First, as seen in TEXT, the prefiguration of the popular uprisings in text messages and perpetual and wildly differing reformulation by digital means indicates how its very temporalities are transmogrified, elongated/condensed or re-sequenced by technological devices; as vehicles for generating and opening events, these text messages served me as a crucial *connector* to the field as well as a *transformer* of ethnographic data, rendering my material fluctuating, expanding, contracting and, crucially, vibrating with potential to undermine the propensity to impose linearity.

Second, I am also reminded that the phantasmagoric space (Kapferer 2002) fueling the *greves* in 2008 and 2010 is still intensely present, generating, if not calls for new *greves*, then working, subtly and not so subtly, to unsettle, to doubt, to establish the circulation of subversive and grotesque stories or, to use Ferme's classic expression, to look for, expose and even generate 'the underneath of things' (2001).

But I am getting ahead of myself – fast-forwarding to the temporality of COMMENTARY and not the emergence of TEXT and its composition. So, let us turn to this.

### TEXT: Aims, audiences and authors in present retrospect

My immediate interest in the theme of TEXT came from multiple fieldworks in the central Mozambican city of Chimoio and the southern capital of Maputo from 1998 onwards, including during 2008 and 2010, the years of the *greves*. What struck me during these latter fieldworks was an *intense* preoccupation with politics – here – under the state apparatus and accumulation of wealth. Such encompassing interest in politics from my interlocutors, who were all belonging to that great majority of Mozambicans one conventionally could label ‘poor’, clearly overshadowed popular reporting from African contexts in general; in these, post-colonial subjects are commonly represented as utterly unorganised and disinterested in politics, reflecting age-worn and constantly recycled clichés, racialised and others, about Africa and Africans (see Wainana 2006 for a classical exposé).

Reflecting on the reasons for this glaring mismatch between representations of African politics and the ethnographic realities of Mozambique, at that moment of puzzle I also found myself inspired by what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro later identified (in the context of the so-called ontological turn – see also Bertelsen and Bendixsen 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) as the great potential of anthropology, namely to work ‘as an anti-epistemological and counter-cultural, philosophical war machine’ (Viveiros de Castro 2015:2). To me, this implies that anthropology is a critical discipline, in its most profound and encompassing sense, through scrutinising and challenging hegemonic knowledge systems – refusing to produce apodictic certainty. Although not, obviously, appropriating all the props of a full-fledged ‘anti-epistemological and counter-cultural, philosophical war machine’ – a task that seemed quite daunting at the time (and at any time) – I did, when attempting to connect my notes and the events of the uprisings, find myself in the period from 2010 to 2015 reviewing visions of purportedly African political systems of hegemony and patrimonialism.

Such reflection was also prompted by the simultaneous occurrence of and interconnections between various uprisings, riots and unrest in places as disparate as Egypt and Malawi (see e.g. Badiou 2012). Furthermore, novel forms of unrest challenging the conventional confrontational style of politics of resistance became significant – like Brazil’s so-called *rolezinhos*. These were spontaneous and digitally organised mass incursions of black youth into white, middle-class shopping malls – destabilising their racial and social order through sheer mass presence (Pereira 2014). *Rolezinhos* and the proliferation of African forms of protest occurred to me as instances where the global South transcended long-standing anarchist and communist Left strategies of political resistance (see also Ngwane *et al.* 2017; Obadare and Willems 2014).

A third impetus for my re-thinking was the problematic tendency to assume a state-centric language in media coverage of the *greves* where participants were

labelled 'rioters'. Such coverage effectively assigned these to a subject position external to politics and served to delegitimise this form of politics of the poor altogether. Here, I also drew on inspiration of a more scholarly kind, namely Africanist Jean-François Bayart's influential work on African political regimes. TEXT delves into some of the substance of Bayart's position about politics within the African context, but suffice here to quote from the preface to the English edition of one of his books to underscore his (to me) non-Africa-centric approach to politics: 'I can admit it now that in the end *The State in Africa* is less a book on Africa than an essay on the theme of Fullness and Vacuum in politics, a theoretical and comparative essay for which Africa is the pretext and provides the empirical material' (2010 [2006]:lxxxii). Using Africa for, simply, extracting empirical material to feed a universal and state-centric theoretical model of politics struck me as particularly problematic. Reacting to Bayart, in TEXT I sought therefore to grasp a form of popular politics that could neither be captured by the state-centric term 'rioter' nor be subsumed to be guided by a Bayartian 'politics of the belly'. I hoped to do so in a way that both made sense of, as well as retained the force and intensity of, the uprisings as these were enacted, as well as their digital laterality, global interconnectivity and profound temporal un-endedness.

TEXT addresses these aspects quite concretely by establishing various qualities of the uprisings, such as their festive and transgressive character, the ways in which their dynamic drew in a vast register of people (including state agents), and how they were directed at both appropriation of goods ('looting') and attacks on (and occupation of) state spaces and institutions. But TEXT also reflects their peculiar organisation or, rather, how they were un-organised; with no apparent leader, organisational body or formalised ideological cosmology guiding action, as an anti-statist formation, the *greves*, paradoxically, were nevertheless intensely political. Put differently, TEXT attempted to eclipse Africa as a 'pretext' and instead to convey a post-colonial political situation arising from actual, violently enacted acephalous mass mobilisations but which did not conform to hegemonic scripts models of either African politics of resistance and control (à la Bayart) or to Hobsbawmian visions of cycles of politics of protest and co-optation (1965 [1959]). Of particular concern to me when starting to write TEXT was also to, broadly speaking, challenge letting these politically significant events and their multiple, digital, effervescent and recurring dimensions be reductively labelled 'food riots'. This concern was also one imposed on me from the outside, so to speak: When I was writing, I was again flooded with text messages, WhatsApp texts, Facebook updates and so on that called for new *greves* and redefined and revived those conventionally labelled as past – in effect constituting a digitally mediated pluralisation of both time and the post-colonial possible and generative. It therefore became clear to me that the labelling of these as 'food riots' entailed a depoliticisation par excellence. But more than this, it was a form of primitivisation drawing on fantasies and fears of presumably violent African masses, which effectively involves a denial of political forms that are not encompassed by the hegemonic system comprised of the postcolonial state and transnational regimes of NGOs, law and humanitarianism (see also Buur 2009; Obarrio 2014).



It was precisely this context of *generativity* and *recursivity*, *fleetingness* and *headlessness* (in the sense of no leader) that made me think of the classic Deleuzian vision of the rhizome: a modality of power that is external and inimical to statist forms of control, territory, procedure, law, rights. For me, the atemporal or multi-temporal world of the *greves* constituted an expansive rhizomic state or order where the post-colonial object being became suspended and where notions of becoming emerged in its stead; a world of reverberation, openness and laterality where the dry, French toolbox of Deleuze not so much entered this world as oscillated between writing, reflection and the empirical; a kaleidoscopic vehicle providing openings rather than imposing closures, strictures, systems.

In TEXT, I therefore appropriated and redeployed Deleuzian approaches to power to establish the very idea of a form of politics of an Open (Agamben 2004) – in order also to dismiss what one would call totalitarian visions of power: sovereignty as pervasive and all-encompassing, state control as resting in a body that comprises an always already totalising entity transcended above the fray, or in visions of the post-colonial political as necessarily understood in state-centric terms (see also Buchanan 2008). As I have redeployed its optics, more than a system reducible to Foucauldian regimes or Weberian ideal types, Deleuzian visions of politics is one of emergence and possibility, of becoming and surprise and, indeed, of the carnivalesque and festive that also characterised the *greves* of Mozambique.

TEXT, therefore, attempts a form of anthropological analysis of post-colonial politics that does *not* shy away from the very substance, modality and messiness of the *greves*: It presents a politics *involving* uprising and destruction, violence against the perceived Other (Chinese, Indian, non-local) and attacks on police stations. To the extent that it is possible – given the fixity and linearity of texts – I aimed to install in TEXT at least an opening towards the unruly, messy politics of the *greves*. Therefore, TEXT also portrays politically oriented Mozambicans as *not* contained by epic (statist) imagery of heroic liberation involving attacks on uniform repressive structures and their agents – as in more classic accounts of resistance and liberation. Rather, TEXT intends to imbue, perhaps, a darker form of politics comprising currents that are un-amenable to political ideologies of the political party form and un-subsumable to imperial politics of humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or the global template of civil society.

As these unfolded, the *greves* violently reverberated across state spaces only to fold back into the populous domains of the poor, in the *bairros*. The participants themselves also underwent a metamorphosis as the *greve* subsided, transmutating back into their non-riotous selves, as policemen, domestic servants, peddlers of stolen and illicit goods, famers, housewives, pupils, the unemployed, the marginalised. This crucial aspect, however, illustrates a form of politics that also *deviates* from readings of Deleuzian politics as pure generativity: Conversely, the *greves* may be approached *not* as tangents of creation but of destruction (through consumption and appropriation), *not* comprising a genesis of a new order but signalling the impermanence of transformation, *not* illustrating pastoral nomadism of the romantic kind but constituting a disruptive, indiscernible and erratic form open to violent



impulses (see also Culp 2016 for such a recent and overtly negative reformatting of Deleuzian political philosophy). It is, perhaps, towards such a horizon of Africa as both a generative as well as a destructive terrain that Goldstone and Obarrio (2016:17) also gesture; calling for an Africa that is ‘untimely’ – that is *in the way*, that is upsetting stable and stale epistemologies of politics and domesticated possibilities – they emphasise this is crucial to ‘thinking and writing about Africa otherwise, to apprehending it in such a way that the questions we have grown accustomed to asking about the sub-continent might be subjected to the shock of other responses posited by different voices.’

Working on TEXT in a similar vein, I attempted to map, as accurately as I could and drawing on multiple conversations with my interlocutors as well as official reports, actual movements of *greve* participants and sites of control and contestation in the cities of Chimoio and Maputo. In practical terms, this meant taking conventional paper maps and inscribing onto these the loci of intense struggles with police, where looting had taken place, which parts of infrastructure was seen as taken over. Thereafter, I pieced together narratives, knowledge of spatial intensity, text messages and other digitally disseminated utterances and so on, so that an alternative non-state-centric urban geography could emerge – the space and state of the *greves*.

Finally, I arrived at a draft manuscript text – which, of course, only vaguely resembles TEXT. This is so as the composition of a text – as of anthropology itself, one could also add – always involves cycles of recomposition and, even, decomposition. Put differently, the speech genres in which we are enmeshed as academic authors make both the linearity and fixity of texts quite relative (see also Bakhtin 1981) and, as established by anthropologists several decades ago (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Crapanzano 1991), writing, authorship and representation are inextricably and problematically connected. However, my concern here is more pedestrian and not so much informed by the post-modern fear of assuming authority but more concretely the ghostwriters or, at least, authoritative voices crowding the screen and mind of the anthropologist–composer of texts, namely, the peer reviewers of journals. Their presence in the creative spurts and stops that characterise the emergence of TEXT are of a kind that is doubly traceable and untraceable: While being thanked in the “Acknowledgment” section or in a note for a particular point assures some visibility, a more untraceable impact is left in the text itself where the person *recomposing*—or ‘revising’, as it is commonly called—usually sees herself or himself as arguing against the peer reviewers and, sometimes, even the editor of the journal. For the strictures of academic writing do involve considerable penumbras of authorship and, during the composition of TEXT, it dawned on me that I was not the sole author of it; the ‘I’ of the authorship was not so much a fiction in the sense of ‘the author is dead’ in a Foucauldian sense as it was a recognition of the creative process being one involving *multiple authors*, such as peer reviewers, editors, people at workshops, friends – even the computer reddening phrases that I have cooked up, the intensity (in numbers) of which seems to convey a sense that the computer has reached its own ‘riot threshold’ – this time against the creative process

being carried out by the author of COMMENTARY. In that sense, TEXT and the process of its (unstable and unended) composition and emergence does, at some level, strangely resemble the *greves* and the form of the rhizome.

More generally, there were several instances when I worked on the uprisings – in the physical field, when sitting elsewhere and communicating with interlocutors and when writing up – when a particular and peculiar feature of the composition of anthropology dawned upon me: There is, in a sense, a continuous double folding back of time and events both in anthropology and in the ethnographic settings themselves. This doubling derives, I would like to think, from the fact that when working on dramatic, rupturing events, it can be seen that these are never totally over but linger on in various ways and registers. In the fieldwork context of Mozambique, this means that not only are there rumours about new uprisings constantly being disseminated; moreover, the event of the uprisings *themselves* are seen as un-finished and continuing, through re-interpretation, through sharing new details, through imagining and construing new dimensions. Similarly, as an anthropologist, I return to these events that are, unlike TEXT, unmoored from the temporal flow and where novel openings emerge within my fieldwork material – as well as through its continuous re-working by Mozambicans.

Deleuze has noted that events work on two tangents of time – that of *Chronos* (conventional, linear time) and *Aion* (that which is unfinished, continuous and open). It strikes me, when reflecting on anthropological compositions, that anthropological writing conforms to such a vision of the perpetual event – TEXT exemplifying such an eventual offshoot, springing forth, one might say, from the openness of Aion of the event. The composition of anthropology thereby mimics or, better, doubles, reflects and emerges from the event in an attempt to not only *capture* temporal dimensions of field events but also to generate novel configurations of thought about what it means to be, for instance, a post-colonial subject.

### Postscript, again

DING! My fieldwork phone – a ten dollar Alcatel – chimes metallically, beckoning me to look at a text message in March 2017 in Chimoio. It contains another rumour – this time about the murder of the daughter of a former president of Mozambique having supposedly been orchestrated. The plot is complex, and it takes the space of five consecutive text messages to allude to the relevant and powerful occult relations between politics and business, desire and death, outrage and apathy. The text messages in a sense cut up and re-compose events of the past – in this case, that of a much-publicised murder. They are incisions into the texture of the present and effectively reconfigure its features, the events only nominally being of the past, now unfolding, refolding.

Reflecting on writing while reading the messages in Chimoio in 2017, I realise that the eventual work that is done by the text messages is similar to the labour of anthropological writing; cut up in pieces, like the text messages, arguments are made, events are folded and repackaged; the parcels are, in a statal fashion, intercepted

by editors and reviewers and incisions are made, probing and transforming their contents. While text messages in twenty-first-century Mozambique seemingly may have multiple authors and senders and anthropological texts seemingly only have one, the forging of the latter involves incision, discipline and resistance – tentatively conveying the open nature of anthropological time. Anthropological texts are, therefore, compositions that are necessarily unstable and, quite often, fraught with tensions, stoppages and lateral connections. Much like the post-colony and its effervescent politics, TEXT is therefore situated in the penumbra between event and representation.

What can be gleaned from COMMENTARY – as well from TEXT – is that academic writing hardly resembles Romanticist visions of composing where, one can imagine, a surge (or consecutive surges) of creativity and energy generate harmonies, melodies, even symphonies brought into being by a single composer-genius. Instead, writing in its anthropological and academic guise is multiple rather than singular, is sedimentary rather than segmented and sequenced. It is an open-ended freeze-frame cut out from multiple temporal flows rather than the epic of lore or grand novels. Plural in origins, the composition of TEXT involved forays into the matter from various composers – peer reviewers, interlocutors, computers – forging it and taming it but also inscribing new elements where the formal author at times become a ghostwriter, a hostage to openings and closures, much like one swept away by the effervescent currents of the *greves*.

## Notes

- 1 While retaining selected key aspects of the original article, these excerpts comprise edited and deleted sections, including omission of references from TEXT and bibliography.
- 2 Forwarded to me by a Mozambican friend, the original in Mozambican Portuguese.
- 3 Shangaan is the dominant language in Southern Mozambique.

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# 5


## Editor's introduction

Thomas Hylland Eriksen begins his chapter (TEXT) with an extract from the final chapter of his 1988 book *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity*, an exploration of the dynamic relationship between ethnicity and national identity in Mauritius. Originally part of his M.Phil. (Cand. Polit.) dissertation, this section discusses the politics of language, the cultural grammar of independence celebrations and the funeral of the first prime minister of Mauritius, a small, ethnically complex island state which was (and indeed is still) busy inventing a postcolonial national identity. The subsequent COMMENTARY discusses the difficulties of 'writing up' an ethnographic description and analysis, as opposed to 'writing down' fieldnotes. Notwithstanding the possible merits of the TEXT, the COMMENTARY is critical: The 55-year-old Eriksen argues that the 25-year-old Eriksen clearly chose the easy way out, by analysing the public events and publicly available documents, rather than using data from observation and conversations with informants. The young Eriksen failed to provide a thick description of the Independence Day celebrations, although the data were available. Translation from observed behaviour to ethnographic text is, all other things being equal, far more difficult than producing a synthesis and analysis of already existing texts. So, when supervisors tell their students, upon returning from the field, to start 'writing up some ethnography', the difficulty involved should not be underestimated.

# PUBLIC RITUAL IN MAURITIUS

Thomas Hyll and Eriksen 

## TEXT

The extract below is taken from the book *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity* (Eriksen 1988, pp. 170–178, footnotes omitted). 

Certainly, the unusual ‘variety of traditions, races and languages’ present in Mauritius is potentially a source of national pride. This is manifest in Mauritian behaviour vis-à-vis foreigners (shared meaning as *us-hood*, cf. pp. 142–144 below), in tourist brochures etc. In actual social situations, however, multi-ethnicity is conventionally felt as a strain rather than an asset.

Some intellectuals (e.g. D. Virahsawmy 1983) are in favour of some form of *pluri-culturalisme mauricien*, notions of tolerance and diversity, as a shared system of representations. The natural vehicle for this ideology is, according to Virahsawmy, Kreol:

It is necessary that this language liberates itself from Eurocentric domination and develops new lexical fields in order to be able to express the spiritual, moral and cultural values of all the ethnics in Mauritius.

*(Virahsawmy 1983: 4)*

Whatever its merits, Virahsawmy’s enduring engagement in favour of a national ideology of tolerance has won little popular support. Is this because an all-encompassing tolerance entails loss of own ethnic identity in Mauritius? For if a Christian accepts Islam as normatively equivalent to Christianity (i.e. he ceases to feel that his own religion is superior), then he must theoretically cease being a Christian as it no longer represents true truth.

In practice, however, it is far from impossible to reconcile tolerance with religious faith. To begin with, it should be remembered that it was a Christian priest, Henri Souchon, who, at the height of the 1968–9 unrest, took steps to create a

practical mutual understanding, chiefly between Muslims and Christians, through 'oecumenical' religious celebrations combining diverse forms of ritual. Still today, Souchon deferentially visits others' places of worship, engages in open dialogue with Muslims imams and Hindu pundits, and encourages others to do the same.

On the popular level, '*Sakenn pe prie dan so fason*' ('Each prays in his own fashion') is a common proverb of tolerance, encountered in virtually every ethnic. Religion, rather than itself being the foundation of ethnic animosities, in this way functions metonymically as an identity tag, a symbol (of something different). This 'something different' is chiefly, as argued in the previous chapter, a particular *way of life* (meaning) embodying – among other things – a real, potential or imagined collective *strategy for careering* (utility) couched in ethnic terms. Insofar as the ethnics remain culturally and socially distinctive, no *pluriculturalisme mauricien* can get beyond statements of a rather programmatic nature; at the same time, this ideology presupposes that they do remain distinctive.

Virahsawmy's strategy of Mauritian pluriculturalism (which has had some influence in post-independent Mauritian politics) can be located to a *higher logical level* (in a Russellian sense) than the individual ethnic strategies: it attempts to arrange the latter *within* its own compass. It is an ism which has isms as its subject matter. As long as ethnicity is partly reproduced as *competition*, there is therefore a practical contradiction between this 'order' (of universalism) and the 'species' (of particularisms) it seeks to encompass.

The first of the two cases presented below is an attempted application of a form of 'pluriculturalism' as a national ethos. The second case, on the other hand, represents an attempt to transcend ethnic identities altogether, replacing ethnic symbols with national ones.

### *Independence celebrations in the plural society*

During Independence celebrations in March, 1986, a number of 'composite cultural shows' were performed in local community centres. I was present at one such show in the village hall of a large, ethnically diverse village. The show encompassed two Sino-Mauritian entries, two Tamil contributions and one Telegu, one European song, three performances representative of the Creoles, three each by Muslims and Marathis, and four entries in Hindi or Bhojpuri. The programme was printed in English, and the opening and ending speeches were held in Kreol.

The aim was to display and encourage 'unity in diversity'; among other things, one wished to accustom spectators to the traditions of ethnics other than their own. In a word, these shows (and similar events occasionally taking place) strive to give significance to metaphors of 'organic wholes' composed of incongruous elements but fused in the common destiny of the Mauritian people; that is, the whole (the show) signified something qualitatively different from its parts (the separate performances). In the terminology of systems theory, we might say that a composite cultural show propagates subjective perceptions of being integrated on a higher systemic level – from communal to national identity. Now, Mauritians

are already – and have been for some time – participants in the same economic system although their positions and degree of participation to a great extent have been ethnically determined. Independence celebrations, like Ramgoolam's funeral (below) but unlike the MMM and associated trade unions, are intended chiefly as *redefinitions of cultural reality*. If such events are successful along these lines, people will accordingly redefine their cultural universes and modify their models for action (although patterns of social action itself are more inert than their models and thus may remain unchanged for a while). An individual defining himself as being a member of a nation rather than of an ethnic in a particular context, will then modify his representations relating to politics, economical relationships, marriage strategies, friendship etc. – and then proceed to modify his patterns of action.

It is not given that this strategy should be successful, even on the abstract level of folk representations. For one thing, the concept 'unity in diversity' represents a contradiction in terms to many Mauritians. National unity can be taken to imply loss of distinctiveness (identity), whereas remaining distinctive precludes national unity. Further, the practical reproduction of ethnic personal networks (in matters of say, work, marriage and friendship), is still believed to 'pay off' as long as the wider social context (offering 'incentives and constraints') remains unchanged. The two, ethnic identity and ethnic action, cannot, therefore, be done away with by means of certain cultural policies. When the channels for – and meaning of – successful careering are changed, however, new representational and actional patterns necessarily result.

### *Ramgoolam's funeral*

Sir Seewosagur Ramgoolam (1900–85) was Mauritius' prime minister during the first fifteen years of independence. A Hindu from the numerous Vaishya caste, he led the Mauritian delegation during independence negotiations in London in the mid-1960's. During the election campaign in 1967 he led the pro-independence parties to a narrow victory, and he is popularly considered as the man to whom Mauritians owe their political independence. Ramgoolam was a clever politician, cunning in the art of compromise and surrounded by an aura of wisdom and fairness. He earned the respect of many non-Hindus when persuading the leader of the anti-independence bloc, the eloquent Creole Gaëtan Duval, to join his first government (cf. e.g. Simmons 1982:191–2).

In 1982, his Labour Party lost the general election to the MMM–PSM alliance, and Ramgoolam, disappointed, reluctantly accepted the post of Governor General (an occupation independent Mauritius oddly has retained). Now he, the political loser, received the pity of his opponents and was simultaneously in a position to stay aloof from petty quarrels. Although bitter with the electorate, Ramgoolam thus spent his last years consolidating his reputation as the wise man of the *nation* Mauritius.

In December, 1985, Ramgoolam died. He was by then acknowledged by virtually every Mauritian as the founding father of their nation – indeed, he had become



a 'myth' in his own lifetime in the sense that his unpopular or mistaken judgements were rarely mentioned publicly; until Sydney Selvon's recent biography (1986), even non-commissioned biographies of Ramgoolam were testimonies to his never faltering glory. Not all of them were written by Hindus.

The ceremony accompanying the cremation of Ramgoolam's body, therefore, had to be one relevant for every Mauritian. We shall go through it in some detail.

The news of Ramgoolam's death was brought on radio and television on December 15 and in the newspapers the following day. In advertisements, citizens were encouraged to show their 'Chacha' (Hindi for teacher) a last honour in assisting at the procession leading to the garden where the ceremonial cremation of the corpse was to take place already the next day (December 17, 1985).

The procession started from Ramgoolam's home, a colonial mansion at Réduit which was also used as the residence of the Governor General before Independence. *Une queue interminable* of people filled the courtyard. At noon, the yard was considered full, and newcomers were denied access by the police. A Hindu religious ceremony next was conducted, immediately after the arrival of Ramgoolam's son. At least two of the pundits performing came from Ramgoolam's native district in the north of Mauritius. The *tatri* (a stretcher decorated with flowers) was brought outside and the corpse placed on it by close relatives of the deceased.

The journey towards Pamplemousses began towards 1:30 pm. Heading the procession, the police corps played Chopin's *Marche funèbre* as Réduit was left. The *tatri* was placed in an open military vehicle, accompanied by policemen on motorcycles and followed by local luminaries in motorcars. Those not possessing their own means of transport, would travel by bus to Pamplemousses if they wished to witness the incineration of the body.

Huge crowds of onlookers had gathered on pavements and balconies as the cortege passed through the urban centres of Rose-Hill and Beau-Bassin, the industrial estate Coromandel and the capital, Port-Louis. Throughout, the audience threw flower petals onto the *tatri*. Notably, churches on the itinerary rang their bells in approval of what was principally a Hindu ceremony.

In front of Ramgoolam's former residence in Port-Louis, the procession took a brief pause while the orchestra played a work by Händel and repeated the performance of Chopin's Funeral March. Upon reaching the Gardens of Pamplemousses at 5:30 pm., the *tatri* was placed onto the funeral pyre. Members of the police and paramilitary forces paid their last respects, as did high officials and foreign guests, as flower petals rained from helicopters. There was still a huge audience present.

Ramgoolam's son was dressed entirely in white, whereas most of the others in the front row (the Interim Governor General, Speaker of Parliament, Chief Judge, Doyen of Diplomatic Corps and certain foreign guests) wore Western clothes.

Finally, Ramgoolam's son went through the last motions strictly according to Sanatanist Hindu tradition; eventually setting fire to the funeral pyre.

The religious parts of the ceremony, then, did not at a single point deviate from tradition nor from the rules laid out in authoritative Sanatanist texts. Orthodox Sanatanism is still the largest Hindu denomination in Mauritius, but it

is by no means a majority religion. Unlike in e.g. multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, there is no pan-ethnic, nationalist or humanist alternative to religious burial available in Mauritius. (And in any case, resentment towards Hindus has little or nothing to do with Hindu religious practices.) The acknowledgement of the churches has been mentioned; there is by and large a spirit of religious oecumenism in Mauritian religious organisations.

Important elements in the ceremony seen as a whole, nevertheless, transcend ethnic boundaries. Most striking, perhaps, was the choice of music to accompany the procession. In choosing music of two European composers rather than have the police band play Indian funerary music (which is not as impossible as it may sound: similar things have happened before), the administrators lifted, as it were, Ramgoolam's person above the Mauritian everyday reality of petty skirmishes to a higher, more universal sphere; this could be interpreted as meaning the level of humanity *tout court* but was, more likely, intended to give symbolic content to pan-ethnic Mauritianism. Classical European music is not very popular in Mauritius; it belongs to nobody's real or fictitious traditions (excepting perhaps increasingly marginal segments of the Franco-Mauritians) and can therefore easily be accepted as neutral by the entire nation. The national anthem, which sounds much like any other national anthem, with lyrics in English written by a Francophile Creole poet, was, of course, also played at Pamplemousses.

The very visible parts played by the police and paramilitaries (*Special Mobile Force*) was not exclusively due to security measures. Uniformed rank and file had a highly prominent place both at Réduit and at Pamplemousses. Now, neither the police nor the SMF have a very strong position in Mauritius, compared with larger nation-states. The 500 men who make up the lightly armed SMF, which is the closest the state comes to having an army, are virtually never involved in violence; their most important duties are peaceful (guarding, fire extermination, diving). Nobody perceives the threat of a military coup d'état as being relevant. Therefore, the police and SMF alike are fairly popular with the Mauritian population. Although there are inevitably rumours to the contrary, neither of them is dominated by one ethnic group. In thus displaying their uniformed and armed, the state representatives informed people that law and order was being maintained on a national level, and that this was done in a just way, not according to ethnic belonging (uniforms are identical).

With respect to clothing, an important vessel of ethnic demarcation, we have already noted that few high representatives of the state wore traditional Indian garb. Perhaps their wearing European-style suits was too obvious to be noticed, but had the prime minister (a Hindu) turned up in anything but a suit, people would certainly have taken account of it.

The form itself of the funeral, a long procession leading to a climax, is familiar to the majority of Mauritians. In February every year, the Hindus celebrate their Maha Shivaratee feast in marching to a small sacred lake; while the Creoles in turn have their Père Laval pilgrimage in September; both annual events similar in form to Ramgoolam's funeral.

Had the ideological atmosphere been more *tiersmondiste* or anti-colonialist in Mauritius at the moment of the funeral, some might have reacted against the unwitting perpetuation of colonial symbolism in the decision to have the procession start at the Governor General's castle and end in the Gardens of Pamplemousses, the latter founded by Labourdonnais. However, this did not happen, and anyway, alternatives would have been hard to come by: Mauritius has no pre-colonial history, and its post-colonial one is very short. Choosing sites, situations and historical persons associated with colonialism as symbols of nationhood conveniently overcomes problems of ethnically-specific symbols, although the solution cannot be permanent.

It is also a matter of interest that the most prominently placed foreign guests were (providing *L'Express* got the details right) the representatives of India and the South-Western Indian Ocean (Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar and Réunion). The latter four are universally considered to be close neighbours, also in a non-geographical sense, but India is seen as an important ally only by roughly half of the Mauritian population (i.e., the Hindus); commodity exchange between the two countries is negligible, and geographically, Mauritius is if anything closer to mainland Africa. In placing the Indian representative in a position superior to that of say, the French and British representatives, Ramgoolam's origins were emphasised in a fashion perhaps unfortunate to nation-building, but significant in showing the Hindu ethnic's anxiety to maintain good links with India.

The Kreol language, a potential force of unity, was not used throughout the event. In different contexts and by different speakers, Hindi, English, French and Kreol were employed; compromise being the only viable solution as long as the Mauritian population is divided on the language issue. Interestingly, the mother tongue of many of those opposed to Kreol as a national language, is Kreol (cf. discussion below).

Like in the previous case (the 'composite cultural show'), the meaning-contexts consciously produced during this event aimed at redefining cultural reality toward shared, national meaning. But the *content* of the respective propositions differed. While the funeral defined Mauritianity as a quasi-religious, self-sustaining cultural system independent of the underlying mosaic, the definition inherent in the cultural show depicted Mauritianity as being identical with the mosaic itself (seen from a bird's perspective). As already noted, the former strategy is the more viable theoretically, given the relevant parameters of Mauritian culture and society.

## Commentary

Although it appears near the end of a book, this excerpt from a monograph chapter, based on my Oslo University Cand. Polit. dissertation from 1987, was the second published ethnographic text I ever wrote (the first being an article written during fieldwork). The Cand. Polit. programme, abandoned in 2003 as a consequence of the Bologna Accords (thus replaced with a two-year MA), entailed a full year of fieldwork and typically resulted in a dissertation in the region of 200–300 pages. There was no formal upper limit.

Upon returning from fieldwork, we were usually advised by our supervisors to begin by 'writing up some ethnography' rather than starting with a theoretical discussion or a methodological reflection. If all else failed, our teachers might say (as would I, a few years later, when I began to supervise students myself), we could begin with the section on history, which was considered plain sailing, based, as it was, on secondary sources. At least, our supervisors were not in the habit of fixing our eyes in a steely grip while asking: 'So you're back from the field; well then, what have you found out?'

Although the subversive winds of postmodernism and postcolonialism had already been blowing for a few years, a certain inductivist bias held sway at our department, and starting your intellectual explorations with an ethnographic description was widely considered a sounder and healthier procedure than the rationalist tendency to begin with theoretical assumptions or a superimposed analytical framework. 'Try to find out what makes them tick,' my supervisor said on the eve of my Mauritian fieldwork. 'Try to listen more than you ask,' said another of my teachers, the occasionally sphinxlike Zen master Harald Eidheim, known mainly for his sophisticated analyses of Norwegian–Sami ethnic relations. He should know. Even when he lectured, he barely spoke, quite unlike the novice anthropologist who was party to his advice.

Upon returning from the field, loaded with reminiscences, fieldnotes and photos but also with a rucksack full of newspaper clippings, pamphlets and miscellaneous local publications, I therefore expected to be told to 'write up some ethnography'. So, having made the journey from my tropical paradise to the cold and miserable Norwegian winter in February 1987, suntanned, eager to start writing and infatuated with the complexities and paradoxes of Mauritius, I went down to the barracks where the Oslo Department of Social Anthropology had been temporarily housed for more than 20 years and knocked on my supervisor's door. An Africanist who had previously worked with Max Gluckman and at the University of Salisbury before being evicted by Ian Smith's racist regime in 1966, Axel Sommerfelt came from an academic family. His father Alf had been a rather famous linguist and an early interpreter of structural linguistics, and Axel carried out his supervision with the kind of gentle, pipe-smoking persuasiveness that comes with easy confidence. A political anthropologist, Sommerfelt shared my interest in the problems of social cohesion in complex societies and had first-hand experience of top-down projections of national identity in newly independent countries. Both before and after fieldwork, we had some great discussions about the relationship of ethnicity to nationalism and the politics of boundary-making, and Sommerfelt gave me references to, and anecdotes about, the Manchester School and their associates in Southern Africa. However, like our other teachers, he couldn't quite tell me how to go about writing an academic text, although he was adamant that the ethnography had to come first. Writing ethnography turned out to have the same 'sink or swim' quality, as did fieldwork itself. It was a black box, a mystery. Although we had been trained in ethnographic methods, it had been made clear to us that fieldwork is always a personal experience, non-scalable and unique just like the worlds we studied.

No how-to manuals were available to us at the time. *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) had been published during my fieldwork, but I did not read it at the time, which – retrospectively – is just as well, since its message of subversion and deconstruction would not have been helpful for a graduate student trying his hand at writing ethnography for the first time.

Following the first meeting with Professor Sommerfelt, I sat down in front of my *Osborne I*, a computer that had cost me the entire student loan for a semester. Marketed as portable, it was lamely joked about as a ‘luggable’ computer, and it had never been an option to carry the monster down to the Indian Ocean. Its word-processing software, *WordStar*, fondly remembered by writers and academics of my generation, might seem basic, even primitive from a 21st-century perspective. It had few formatting options and no graphic interface, and the computer itself was equipped with two floppy-disk stations and no hard drive. Yet it represented a huge improvement over the typewriter it had replaced. The word processor, even in its simplest form, enabled nonlinear thinking and experimental writing without the pain of having to rewrite everything from the beginning, crumple sheets in exasperation and fiddle with tiny bottles of Tipp-X; most importantly, with a word processor at your fingertips, you didn’t have to know where your text was going. In fact, you didn’t even have to think five words ahead, allowing you to improvise as fluidly as a post-bop jazz musician. The significance of the word processor for the process of writing must have been studied comprehensively (although I am unaware of any authoritative text on the subject). I belong to the generation that had personal experience of the transition and can report back that it felt enormously liberating to make the move, as I did around 1984, from the typewriter to an early incarnation of the personal computer. On the other hand, in my experience, the computer works less well for jotting down ideas and coming up with new ones. The total nonlinearity of the paper-and-pen assemblage seems more conducive to associative creativity than the restricted nonlinearity of word processing. Perhaps the notepad is to the word processor as free-form jazz is to post-bop.

There are several stages involved in writing up ethnography, and they are all excruciatingly difficult. The first stage, the translation of observation to fieldnotes, is perhaps the worst. Verbal information is easier to deal with, although it, too, naturally, has to be edited and beaten into shape. However, describing your observation of an event in words is a creative process, and no two anthropologists would describe the same situation in identical terms. So already at this stage, the reductionism entailed by scientific description sets in, the richness of experience is lost and the verbal description risks becoming a pale, vaguely unsatisfactory reflection of that which it describes. This inevitable reduction can be compensated for in various ways – through exceptional writing skills (rare, but far from nonexistent in anthropology), a flair for multifaceted metaphors or conceptual pyrotechnics or through a strong, convincing analysis.

Moving from field experiences via fieldnotes to polished text has its rewards but often leaves me with a feeling of sadness and embarrassment; there always seems to be an element of travesty involved. For this reason, it is a source of great comfort when informants tell you that they have skimmed your work, and it comes

across as reasonably fair and truthful. Naturally, the problems involved in translating between experience or observation and text are not unique to anthropologists, but unlike most other academics, we have invested a great deal of symbolic capital in claims of authenticity, detail, depth and contextualisation.

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I realise that I'm dithering, procrastinating, hesitating, reluctant to confront the text I wrote nearly 30 years ago. At a cursory glance, the text doesn't look all that bad. For all its shortcomings, the dissertation (later book) of which it forms part was probably the best anthropology my 25-year-old self was capable of producing. The section reproduced above, central to my interests at the time, concerns the relationship between ethnic (or communal) belonging and national identity at the level of the imagined, supra-ethnic or polyethnic, community. Almost inexplicably, I must have been unaware of *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983) at the time, although it had already begun to make its mark on the incipient field of research into comparative nationalism. Neither had I yet discovered A. P. Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Cohen 1985), which had just come out. Both of these books would have been very helpful in giving the analysis of national symbolism a sounder theoretical foundation. However, I could rely on Gellner (1983) for a robust and useful theory of European-style nationalism, juxtaposing and contrasting it with the ethnic pluralism characteristic of Mauritius, which could in turn be illuminated theoretically through the legacy of Barth (1969), which was compatible with Gellner's theory of nationalism, although it neglected the state and focused on boundary processes rather than the institutional production and reproduction of nationalism.

Having spent most of the preceding chapters discussing the significance of ethnic identity and organisation for Mauritians, emphasising that ethnicity has elements both of utility and of meaning – it is social, but also symbolic – this final chapter, of which the above section forms part, discusses to what extent the continuous ethnic boundary-making observed in so many realms of Mauritian social life, from work to marriage, could be made compatible with a shared national identity. In a later section, I discuss the potential of Kreol, the language spoken by nearly all Mauritians; transnational events such as international sport; and the colonial legacy as possible sources of a shared Mauritian identity. The section reproduced here, which to me seemed to condense much of the argument of the book, contrasts a national identity based on cultural pluralism with one based on supra-ethnic symbols and practices. Although this duality had been practised in Mauritius since independence 18 years earlier, the possible contradictions it entailed had largely been ignored. So I felt that I had something to say, not just to the academic community, but also to Mauritians. But how to say it? And where to begin to 'write up' the ethnography?

I chose the easy way out. Ramgoolam's funeral took place in December 1985, soon after his demise, but my fieldwork did not begin until February 1986. In other words, I was not present at the ritual described in some detail here. In fact, I don't

think I even knew that Ramgoolam had died before I arrived in the island. (Keep in mind that there was no Internet back then; if you wanted to read the latest editions of *Le Mauricien* and *L'Express*, you actually had to be in Mauritius.) The description of Ramgoolam's life, death and ostentatious state funeral is, accordingly, based entirely on written sources and the recollections of people who were either there or who were just Mauritians affected by the death of their *Chacha*. There was no participant observation. How I wished, having realised the significance of this funeral for the topic of my thesis, that I could have begun fieldwork – and what a flying start it had been – just a couple of months earlier! I could then have started with the description of Ramgoolam's funeral, which might have swelled into a full chapter, in a manner akin to the way Gluckman introduces his famous story about the new bridge in Zululand:

'On January 7th I awoke at sunrise and, with [Chief Deputy] Matolana and my servant Richard Ntombela, who lives in a homestead about half-a-mile away, prepared to leave for Nongoma, to attend the opening of a bridge in the neighbouring district of Mahlabatini in the morning, and a magisterial district meeting at Nongoma magistracy in the afternoon' (Gluckman 1958 [1940]: 2).

There is no doubt that Gluckman *was there*, and I emphatically was not. On the other hand, Boas never observed a potlatch party first-hand (the practice had been banned years before his arrival), and Leach never actually saw the transition between *gumlao* and *gumsa* among Kachin. A great deal of excellent anthropological writing and analysis is not based on participant observation. Yet the amount of detail provided by Gluckman, impossible to obtain without having been there physically and crucial for the analysis, was unavailable to me. I couldn't tell who was tittering, jeering behind other people's backs, behaving in disrespectful and subversive ways and, not least, *how* certain people were displaying subversive attitudes (if they did). The versions of the funeral made available to me seem, with the hindsight of three decades, to have been highly stylised. The detailed and voluminous newspaper reports (I had access to the archives of the main newspapers) described the objective features of the event, such as who was seated next to whom, what music was played and where the procession went for the cremation. Reminiscences from informants were either of a very general nature (of the generic 'he was a great leader, and he will be missed' kind) or somewhat polished and simplified stories about the solemn ambience, the weather or even about the feeling of becoming Mauritians through shared grief. I did nevertheless note that few Creoles had much to say about the cremation of the Hindu politician Ramgoolam, although nobody spoke badly of him.

So, instead of delving into the sumptuous meal of conflict and intrigue and people speaking *sotto voce* about the alleged ethnocracy, or gerontocracy, or even corrupt governments over which Ramgoolam had presided, I had to make do with a plate of cold leftovers.

Luckily, as it turned out, Ramgoolam's funeral was the largest, most comprehensive and most fully publicised event that had taken place in the island since independence, and the newspaper coverage was massive. I had access to the full programme of the event and three comprehensive, lavishly illustrated reports



of the ceremony as it unfolded. The writing-up was easy. I knew what I was looking for – the formal, state-centred depiction of the Mauritian nation – and found it. The case was exemplary of a state ritual and could easily be connected to the previous example in the book (the ‘composite cultural show’) and the next (the ambiguous position of Kreol in Mauritian national identity). Yet it almost felt like cheating, since I had not been there physically. Obviously, this was not ethnography proper, but a second-hand account and analysis of a past event already described by others. Comments and statements made by informants barely made their way into the text.

Moving backwards through the text, we come to the short narrative about the ‘composite cultural show’ at Independence Day. In this case, I was actually present and could have made a thick description of it. Alas, rereading the description now, it strikes me as superficial and skeletal. Why didn’t I include anything about the audience, their small-talk during breaks and after the show; why was there nothing about choreography or the social backgrounds of the performers, or even a breakdown of the audience by age, gender and ethnicity? I had taken voluminous notes on all these aspects and more but did not use them. Why?

At the time of Independence Day, I had been in Mauritius for a little over a month. It had not been my initial intention to study ethnic relations and nation-building, but rather to do an ethnography of the Creoles, an ethnic group that had not been described by an anthropologist before. The other large community in Mauritius, the Hindus, had their ethnographer in Burton Benedict (and more were to come later), but the Creoles, of mainly African and Malagasy origin, had been ignored. I duly moved into a Creole village on the south-west coast and began to make myself acquainted with everyday life among the villagers. However, although this endeavour would have been perfectly feasible (I even wrote a short article, in the middle of fieldwork, on Creole kinship and personhood as a legacy of slavery Eriksen 1986]), I redefined the project early on. Following my supervisor’s advice about looking for ‘what it is that makes people tick’, I soon discovered that issues to do with ethnicity were something of a national obsession in Mauritius, and not only that, but ethnicity also turned out to be a key to understanding social, political and economic processes as well as being a fundamental dimension of local life and everyday discourse. People you met soon began to speak of themselves relationally and comparatively *vis-à-vis* the other communities. There were complaints about communalism but also pride in diversity and peaceful coexistence. At the time of the Independence celebrations, I was about to shift my attention from the Creoles to intergroup relationships but had not yet taken the decision. So although I took comprehensive notes at the event, where I was joined by a couple of my new friends from the coastal village, my main interest lay in the way Creole culture was depicted on such an official occasion, since the Creoles had lost out politically and were economically disadvantaged. As it turned out, there seemed to be little of interest to report on this score. All the ‘cultures’ represented at the show were presented as equal partners in the creation of the Mauritian mosaic; there were no intimations of hegemony or subordination.



My friends from the village, who had probably come along to do me a favour or in the expectation that I might stand them a drink, nevertheless said something interesting (over a beer, later in the afternoon). They both insisted that Creoles were oppressed and subordinated – they got no good government jobs; the land reform known as *le petit morcellement* had turned thousands of Hindus into land-owners but hardly any Creoles; and they were subjected to abuse and discrimination from the police, which was dominated by Hindus. Cultural shows of this kind, they claimed, were just window-dressing meant to give the impression that all ethnic groups were equal in this so-called multicultural paradise.

Why did I not use this kind of material in the account of the composite cultural show? I was probably too keen on developing the argument about the two concepts of nationality operating in Mauritius simultaneously, and yet this snippet of ethnography, collected over a cold beer in the humid heat of the rainy season, would have added depth and life to an otherwise pretty pedestrian and lacklustre description. Rereading the text again makes me realise that so much more could have been done about the Independence Day celebrations of 1986, but I cannot have been properly prepared for the subject, even when writing the dissertation that explicitly dealt with the relationship of ethnicity to nationalism.

There is a lesson to be learnt here. The text reproduced above consists of three parts. The first part introduces the subject by reference to two important public figures at the time: Dev Virahsawmy, a left-wing intellectual and cultural radical, who favoured hybridity and generalised creolisation long before these terms became fashionable in cultural studies; and Père Henri Souchon, who thought religious differences to be at the root of communal conflict and encouraged tolerance and mutual respect by going into mosques and temples. While Virahsawmy advocated mixing, Souchon was an early proponent of interculturalism. In the book, this brief section follows a general introduction to the study of nationalism, in turn preceded by a quotation from the section in *Ulysses* (which, incidentally, I read in the field) where Leopold Bloom is being harassed by The Citizen, an aggressive and unpleasant kind of Irish nationalist, for not being quite Irish enough, since he is a Jew. My brief introduction to the kinds of nationalism available in Mauritius describes *le pluriculturalisme Mauricien* as a possibility, although its dilemmas are commented upon (but again, far too briefly), followed by the two short examples above. Thought-provokingly, it is not possible to determine, by looking just at the ethnography, which of the two events was described by an eye-witness and which was based on secondary sources. Clearly, some more attention to detail and the actual behaviour of people present at the cultural show would not only have added meat to the bare bones but could also have been used to contrast the image of the nation as projected by the state and the divergent interpretations – of the nation and of this particular depiction of it – among different members of the audience. Adding some of this material would also have strengthened the general argument concerning the tension between universalism and particularism, or nationalism and ethnic hierarchies, in Mauritius.

There may be an easy explanation for why I did not dive into my fieldnotes and tell some more stories about the ways the spectators experienced and commented

upon the cultural show: The stylised, general summary is much easier to write than the meticulous, detailed ethnographic narrative about a stream of events involving different people saying and doing different things, smells and sights, clothes and food, sounds and ambience. I wasn't up to it at the time. Had I been told to do so, I would nevertheless have expanded the section on the cultural show to include ethnography proper. This would not only have made the argument more convincing but would also have enabled me to develop a more sophisticated argument about national imagery as an attempt, usually – as in this case – only partly successful, to give people who otherwise have little in common the feeling that they belong to the same abstract community. The cracks in this state edifice would have been made visible through the various disparaging comments made by some of the people present, the conspicuous absence of whites and underrepresentation of Creoles, the demonstrative smoking at the back of the room and so on. The colourful display of multiculturalism, I might then have argued, did not so much exacerbate fragmentation through its emphasis on difference (which is often argued in debates about multiculturalism) but rather came across, to the Creoles, as hypocritical; a kind of branding, you might say, for a nonexisting product.

There are other shortcomings in the writing as well, or perhaps missed opportunities. The most glaring omission, apart from ethnographic richness, is a theoretical discussion connecting the ethnography and discussions about Mauritian nationalism to contributions elsewhere. Although I do discuss theories of pluralism and ethnic diversity elsewhere in the book, there is no engagement with the philosophical debate between communitarians and liberals, to which this study of ethnicity and nationalism in Mauritius might have been a contribution. (In all fairness, I engage with some of this literature in later works about Mauritius, such as Eriksen 1997.) In conclusion, the text reproduced above would have been better if I had spent more time and effort on it.

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What have I learnt – and what can others learn – from a reexamination of this attempt to write ethnography from a novice anthropologist? A possible lesson is that by telling students that the most difficult part of anthropology is doing fieldwork, we may have diverted attention from an equally demanding part of the 'craft of social anthropology', namely the skill of writing a good, convincing and perhaps persuasive text. This does not concern mere writing technique or the construction of a plot; it is about overcoming the distance between ethnography and text, allowing the richness and complexity of the former to shine through the latter without losing the direction of the argument on the way. A good ethnography is a multilayered text that lends itself to slow reading because it gives a glimpse into a different world, which only slowly comes into focus. I am not concluding that ethnography has to be written slowly, only that any initial impulse to get it over with quickly should be resisted. Had I been in less of a hurry, I might have written the above text as a palimpsest, adding new sediments with each pass of the hands across the keyboard. Returning to my earlier reflections about

the impact of word processing of writing, it may be argued that used in this way, the new writing technology does not only add speed but potentially also depth to writing, if used in the right way.

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It may have been about a year after the publication, in the modest 'Occasional Papers' series of our department, of *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity* that I got my hands on Geertz's then brand new *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Geertz 1988). Although Geertz was critical of the then current post-modern or textual orientation of cultural anthropology, his hermeneutics had inspired it, as this book shows. Consisting of essays about four major anthropologists, it does not focus so much on their intellectual achievements as on their literary style. Through his eloquent ruminations on Evans-Pritchard's paradoxical 'blinding clarity', Lévi-Strauss' 'oblique, removed and tensely tenuous' relationship to the cultural realities he describes, Malinowski's 'I-witnessing' and Benedict's way of producing 'Aesopian commentaries' on her own culture (Geertz 1988: 21–23), Geertz reminds his readers, possibly inadvertently, that much of his own reputation rests on his persuasive power, his way with words, his inimitable ability to produce complex and often convoluted arguments with breathtaking exuberance and a verbal elegance which may well be unparalleled in the anthropology of his time. Wishing to distance himself from the excesses of postmodern relativism while simultaneously defending a moderate textualist position (it *does* matter how you say it, but that does not mean that what you say is irrelevant), Geertz's book shows how it can be done. Although he is the most cited anthropologist of his generation, Geertz's literary style does not seem to have been emulated by many. This is how it should be. In writing, whether it is poetry or ethnography, each has to search for their own voice, not someone else's.

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# 6

## Editor's introduction

The TEXT for Anthony Cohen's chapter is taken from his book *Whalsay* (1987), and is intended to illustrate issues involved in writing simultaneously for three distinct audiences: anthropologists and cognate academics; policy and decision makers at various levels of government; and the people of Whalsay themselves. Cohen tried to do this by minimising the intrusion of theoretical argument into the narrative, and replicating the process through which ethnographers learn to make sense of the societies they study. Without being prescriptive about style, the author would challenge anthropologists to write accessibly while also doing justice to the complexity of the society and subjects in question. Anthropological writing entails disciplined reflection on experience, and raises questions about how to deal with experience which may be extraneous to the field of study. *Whalsay* was the product of 12 years of continuous fieldwork, and COMMENTARY reflects on Cohen's experience of finding it increasingly difficult to describe accessibly the richness and complexity of the community as he came to know it ever more profoundly.

# WRITING WHALSAY

## Reflections on how, why, and for who anthropologists write

*Anthony P. Cohen*

### TEXT

The excerpts that follow are taken from the book *Whalsay: Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island Community* (Cohen 1987).

#### ***A trip to the front* [pp. 48–51]**

The essence of Whalsay's struggle for survival is its continuing ability to wrest a living from the sea. The fishing grounds are the ever more complicated battleground in which the enemy is not so much the fish, nor even the weather. It is provided by other, less predictable adversaries: international politics, regulations, unfair foreign competition, the inanities of government policy, the fisheries protection officer, fluctuating interest rates, and human (especially skipper) fallibility.

It is a Sunday night, early in June 1975. The wind is blowing at Force 6 from the north-east, a bad *ert* (direction), with several more days of gales forecast. At this time of year the fish are inshore, and there is no lee from a north-easter along which the boats can work. Perhaps this accounts for the somewhat subdued atmosphere as the fishermen gather at the pier, and swiftly disperse to their respective boats. The crew of the *Langdale* arrive singly. Barely greeting each other, each man goes straight to his own task without a word of instruction ...

The *Langdale* is presently *tripping* (selling her catch in Aberdeen or Peterhead) and it is assumed that it will take most of the week to *get their trip* – to catch sufficient (approximately 350 boxes) to make the journey south worthwhile. I ask the skipper (Arthur) where we shall be going. He says he does not know. He obviously has alternatives in mind, but is not yet prepared to commit himself. As soon as we have left the pier James John (the mate) comes into the wheelhouse and asks Arthur where he is headed. Again, the skipper replies that he does not know: he will have a

look at the water south of the Sound, and see. He eventually steers to the north and enters the discussion being held over the ship-to-ship radio among various Whalsay boats about likely locations ... Everyone rehearses his indecision in a formulaic 'I dinna ken where tae bloody go. I dinna ken *avaa*' (at all).

The skipper's problem is not just the weather. In the early summer the fish are inshore, within the three-mile prohibited fishing zone. If the boats are to catch anything at all they will probably have to second-guess the fisheries protection vessel which is patrolling nearshore waters in an attempt to forestall such 'poaching'.

Predictably, we make for Balti, off the north-east coast of Unst, Shetland's most northerly island. (The skipper and the mate) notice a boat fishing along the banks off Fetlar, and joke about calling up the fisheries officer. Much of the radio talk about the officer is conducted in code so that he will not be able to understand. He is referred to as *da gnuelli* (the ghost) ...

By midnight the skipper is ready for the first *shot* ... They fish without a break for the next twenty-five hours, until 1.00 am on Tuesday morning. James John (the mate) and Lowry, the engineer, take respectively starboard and port side duties, setting and hauling the heavy steel trawl doors. They make sure the net and warps are paid out, and hauled, without snagging, and thus ensure that the catch comes aboard, is unloaded, and the net shot again with the least possible delay. The long fishing day is a repeated cycle of shooting the net, trawling, hauling in the catch; then shooting and *dragging* (trawling) again, while the catch from the previous shot is gutted and sorted on deck. Willie boxes the fish, salting, icing and stacking it in the hold. The men eat a substantial cooked breakfast. But for the rest of the day, until we tie up in the small hours, they eat only snacks of crackers, biscuits and cheese. In the middle of Monday night, as we head for Baltasound pier, Barry prepares the main meal, huge pots of soup and stew.

The last two hauls have brought forty boxes, and these have still to be cleaned. Everyone lends a hand, including the skipper. They grade the fish for size as they are gutted, sorting them into different baskets which are then washed and emptied down the shoot into the hold. After all these hours of continuous labour in heavy seas the pace of work does not slacken, and the care taken over it does not diminish. 'What a life, boys', muses Barry. 'Yeah, it's a great life, if you don't weaken!' Just as he is serving up the meal, Willie comes up from the hold to announce the total number of boxes for the day. One hundred and forty-six. A good start. Barry's banquet is eaten in a relaxed and quietly jovial mood. Tommy, soon to be married, is teased about dieting. James John, shortly to become a father-in-law, is encouraged to reconcile himself to a sedate middle age. The banter is gentle, and indicates collegiality rather than intimacy. The meal is finished by 3.15 a.m., and the crew retire to sleep.

Six hours later, James John and Tommy, taking the day's first watch, and the skipper rise and immediately cast off from the pier. The rest of the men stay below, asleep, until making the first shot at ten o'clock .... Then they are all on deck once more, and fish continuously until 1.30 on Wednesday morning. 'A short day,' says Barry, but it has been poor fishing. The wind has not eased at all, and the sheer

physical effort of maintaining one's balance on deck over a long period, although instinctive to the men, is nevertheless tiring. The prolonged sparse tows are frustrating and boring. The day's work has netted only fifty boxes. The contentment of the previous night has disappeared. Tonight there is an edge to the conversation. One of the men mocks a Whalsay skipper for his navigation, recalling an occasion, now long past, when, making his first *trip* to a Scottish market port, he found himself in another harbour altogether. The skipper's brother, himself a skipper, has to take his boat to Scandinavia for repair in three weeks' time. 'He mebbe better start now.'

A Fraserburgh boat has tied up alongside us. Two of the *Langdale* men remark caustically on the slowness with which her crew gut the catch: 'One aald bugger does twartree sneuklins at it afore he gets his knife in. They'll still be here *da morn's mornin'* (tomorrow).'

### ***A football match [pp. 188–91]***

Whalsay are to play Unst away in the semi-finals of the Parish Cup. The party leaves Symbister on Saturday afternoon aboard the fishing boat *Fortuna*. The team is accompanied by twenty people who are close relatives of the players, officials of the club, or just interested spectators ...

The party lands at Belmont, and is taken by bus to the pitch at Burrarfirth. The passengers look avidly at the passing countryside, trying to identify landmarks and speculating about who might occupy the crofts we pass. When we arrive there is some critical comment about the absence of changing facilities 'fer da boys', 'no like wir groond', though the indignation is possibly tempered by enjoyment of the opportunity to make such unfavourable comparisons.

Most of the team are closely related to each other by kinship or marriage, and a number are crew mates. At its core are four brothers, two of their first cousins, and two close affines. During the match the spectators make encouraging noises, although with three exceptions (two officials and the mother of one of the players) they are undemonstrative. They comment quietly to each other, but there is no criticism of the Whalsay players. Much is made of 'how well they do' considering they spend all week cramped into fishing boats, without the opportunity to practise or to exercise. One of the club officials, noted (and satirised) for his eagerness to make himself prominent at public gatherings, strides officiously and noisily along the touchline, bellowing at players and referee, and worrying loudly about half-time refreshments and a meal afterwards for the players. His Whalsay companions seem to shrink away from him in embarrassment.

The Whalsay team play below their best form. Bungled chances, miskicks and obvious sluggishness elicit only sighs of 'aye, aye' from the supporters. Some mutter wistfully that the players do not seem to be as big or as strong as those of former years. However, they eventually win 3–2 in extra time, to general satisfaction, and bottles of whisky immediately appear as the entire party makes its way back to the coach to drive to the Baltasound Hotel for refreshment. The earlier sombreness has entirely dissipated: players enjoy the congratulations of their supporters, and



laugh over their own mistakes. The talk is of a spree, rather than of fishing, and they pleasurablely anticipate the allotted hour in the pub.

On arrival this conviviality is abruptly punctured by the noisy official who tries to divide players and officials from the rest of the party, insisting that he made catering arrangements only for the former. This causes acute discomfort among the entire group. There is a feeling that it would be quite unacceptable to make such a discrimination, but how can the situation be remedied? Who could take the initiative, and how could they do so without showing up their officious and insensitive colleague? After some indecision and uncertainty the landlord comes to the rescue. Of course all can be accommodated, if they would not mind waiting a little? Everyone puts £1 into a kitty, to pay for the extra food and drink. The earlier jovial mood is restored, albeit with some figurative head-shaking over their delinquent compatriot.

The bus journey back to the *Fortuna* is spent in ribald high spirits, with the Whalsay party accompanied by some Unst men. The boat leaves Belmont pier with the skipper clanging the bridge bell, and much good-natured banter shouted between hosts and guests. Most of the company promptly disappear below to the cabin for the serious business. By the time we reach Symbister, only a handful are sober.

News of the team's victory elicits only mild expressions of approval. Some interest is shown in the performance of the younger and more inexperienced members of the team; but the established players are not singled out for discussion. It may be that the football team is seen as being too heavily oriented to a single (kin-based) segment to be regarded as representative of Whalsay as a whole.

## COMMENTARY

*When did language and meaning divorce each other and decide to go their separate ways?*

*(Atkinson, 2015: 507)*

One of the most accomplished writers in the anthropological literature, Clifford Geertz, posed the oft-quoted rhetorical question and supplied its answer, "What does the ethnographer do" – he writes' (1975: 19). He was obviously correct, but in this instance, uninformative – he himself described his pronouncement as 'a less than startling discovery' (ibid.). Writing is integral to most scholarly enquiry. Greatly to our collective benefit, Geertz reflected publicly and prolifically about anthropological and other writing, not least on the topic that has engaged numerous anthropologists over many years: how the nuances and subtle techniques of anthropologists' writing contribute to the authority of their texts. The reflective literature on this subject is now vast and is just one expression of anthropologists' fascination with their subject. In this essay, rather than reflecting further on the cleverness of the discipline and its practitioners, I want to focus on the process of my own writing of the book from which the excerpts above are taken; also,

to broaden the discussion, to question the very *raison d'être* of anthropological writing – and therefore of the nature of anthropology in the contemporary academic world. I do so from a position of semi-detachment. Since 1997, my published output has been modest in volume. Initially, this was due mostly to lack of time and energy arising from other commitments. But as time went on, I found I also had an increasing sense of distance from my previous intense, even passionate engagement with the subject. Since I retired in 2009, I have been content to read, and felt blissfully liberated from the compulsion to publish. But during the 12 years I spent prior to that as a full-time dean and then university principal and vice-chancellor, I seemed to be writing continuously: writing about all sorts of university subjects and matters; writing that, of necessity, had to be intelligible across the whole disciplinary range of the university, as persuasive and unambiguous as possible. Combined with my earlier extensive experience as an editor of academic symposia, this strengthened one of my biases: I become very impatient with needlessly complex writing.

It seems to me inappropriate and presumptuous to be prescriptive about the *style* of anthropological writing. After all, great and seminal anthropology embraces a wide diversity of styles. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* has always seemed to me to a fine literary work as well as being one of the greatest books in anthropology's canon, so different from the flatness of the prose of Fortes, his close and brilliant contemporary. The exuberance of Geertz's writing is in marked contrast to the terseness, the severe economy of Fredrick Barth's earlier publications (see Eriksen, 2015). The paradigm case for me is Marilyn Strathern, one of the most influential anthropologists of my generation, who has spoken frankly about her own painstaking struggles as a writer (see e.g. Strathern, 2015: 244–45); her style is not easy, but it is fundamental to the originality and subtlety of her argument. There is no easy equation between outstanding work and seductive writing, but convoluted writing, which is the product either of insufficient effort and thought or of a misplaced ambition to impress, has no virtue and is counter-productive. I shall argue here that anthropologists have a responsibility in their writing to try to communicate beyond their own narrow academic circle.

What might be a *distinctive* element of anthropological – or, more broadly, ethnographic – writing? There are at least two different kinds of writing entailed in anthropological research: fieldnotes, which are private and written entirely for the benefit of the ethnographer; and later text, written essentially for a readership that is unfamiliar with the people who are being described, interpreted and analysed. The movement from fieldnotes to text is problematic. Whatever else ethnographers inscribe in their field notebooks, the fundamental requirement is for the ethnographer to try to record as precisely as possible what he or she sees and hears without the embellishments of interpretation and analysis, in so far as these can be avoided. In this respect, fieldnotes are like raw data. The more familiar the ethnographer becomes with the field, the less need there may be to keep recording and sense-making separate, but the essential distinction remains: The fieldnote is the raw material that will later be carved or sculpted into shape in the text.

During my research career, it was rare to see anyone else's fieldnotes, not even one's students'. The practice of depositing fieldnotes for future reference and use by other scholars was then almost unknown. One would no more intrude into another person's fieldnotes than into their personal diaries or correspondence.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent text – thesis, book or scholarly paper – was how one elected to make one's work publicly available, all too often at the cost of intelligibility and literary style. What was pristine in the field notebook often became obscure or questionable in the text. When I wrote *Whalsay*, my authorial intention was to try to minimise the obvious disjunction between fieldnote and text, principally by trying to reproduce in the book the transition from naiveté to mature understanding, which is hopefully what is accomplished through fieldwork. Was this an artifice, a conceit? Of course; all public writing is. But I tried to lead the reader on a path from ignorance to comprehension by interspersing description with analysis, in so far as possible, however, keeping them discrete in the text, to the point at which, in the penultimate chapter of the book, I invited readers to make sense for themselves of a final series of ethnographic vignettes. Whatever else may be entailed in its composition, the anthropological text is the product of reflection on what one has experienced in the field and recorded in one's field notebook. But – and here lies the most intractable philosophical problem for anthropology – it must inevitably also entail more general experience from the ethnographer's life (Cohen, 1992). The problem, of course, is how to discipline, contain and qualify this extraneous experience so that it does not intrude into a cultural field to which it may be alien or inappropriate. The proposition that it can be excluded seems to me untenable, for without it what one senses, experiences, must remain meaningless. In much anthropology, the cumulative area literature provides a base on which to test the appropriateness of experience and reflection, but the body of anthropological work on Britain and comparable societies was very slight, and so I did not have the benefit of a substantial comparative literature.

Writing as a medium and method of disciplined reflection on experience seems to me the essence of what we try to do in anthropology, and it is how I see the very different kinds of work of those with who I have associated myself most closely. But it is hardly exclusive to anthropology. The American liberal sociologist C. Wright Mills, in his manifesto to sociology graduate students, urged them essentially to elide their personal experience with their research. For Wright Mills, this elision, expressed in writing, was a matter of 'intellectual craftsmanship', which he enjoined students to undertake continuously (Mills, 1958).

By the time I finished writing *Whalsay* in 1986, I had done fieldwork there for 13 years. The research was conceived in 1972 to examine the impact on a buoyant but obviously remote Shetland island community of the development of the North Sea oil industry. At the very least, I expected the imminent technological innovations and economic changes to impact on Whalsay's traditional industries: fishing, crofting and knitting. Obviously I did not know what the nature of this impact would be, nor could I do more than speculate about what more general consequences for Whalsay culture and life might follow. When I

conceived this project, the development of the oil industry in Shetland was in its very early stages: Nothing had yet been built; the transformation of Shetland's infrastructure was still being planned, and it seemed like futuristic fantasy. None of Shetland's roads, all of them single tracks with passing places, could even accommodate the construction machinery that would be required to build the huge base and refinery at Sullom Voe; the massive topographical reconfigurations of Lerwick Harbour and Sullom Voe, which would be required for the creation of the exploration and production service bases and the tanker terminal, were still the subjects of fevered speculation, as were the demographic implications of the project. How many people would have to be brought in? Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? Where would they live? What effects would they have on Shetland's indigenous population then of 18,000? This was a society whose population had halved since the mid-nineteenth century, but which, in the face of huge economic adversity, isolation and marginalisation, had found the means to endure, with a very strong sense of independence, and the cultural resources – language, skill and lore – that went with it. How would these survive a cosmopolitan invasion of powerful people, the world's oil majors and their affiliates, who knew nothing of Shetland and would want to know no more than the necessary minimum? I hoped to follow the development from this very early stage past the entire construction phase and beyond the firm establishment of operations. I eventually ended the research 17 years later.

Various anthropologists had done 'before and after' or discontinuous or periodic studies of their fields, but I was then unaware of other continuous fieldwork projects like the one I hoped to accomplish, and I did not know what difficulties to anticipate. The major problem which eventually presented itself to me, and which underpins the present chapter, was how to write about it. This took me by surprise. While I never wrote with great fluency, nor was I one of those academics who agonised about writing. When I had just finished my first fieldwork in Newfoundland, my mentor, Robert Paine, imposed on me the discipline he and Fredrik Barth had used successfully with postgraduate students in Bergen and required me to write three substantial seminar papers in quick succession over the first two months following my return from the field. The merit of this became apparent to me; in due course, I used the same practice with my own students, and I began to write papers on my Shetland research even before I had completed the initial 18-month phase of fieldwork. But as I returned to Whalsay twice each year for the subsequent four years, and thereafter at least annually, and kept changing my mind about what I had thought were my settled views, and came to know people better and differently, it seemed to be increasingly beyond me to capture in prose their richness, their complexity. I felt my writing skills were just not adequate to the task. I wanted to illustrate and convey the striking contrast in Whalsay between its internal complexity and diversity and the ostensible solidarity and homogeneity which it presented to the outside world, a difficult task to accomplish. For example, the seemingly routine behaviour of the *Langdale's* crew, described above, masks the tension among them arising from the fact that it was a new unit, a merger of two previously separate crews brought about by economic and technological change

in the fishery, and which also meant that James John, previously a skipper and now mate of the merged crew, was no longer master of his own boat. These kinds of tension were pervasive in Whalsay life, and the triumph of the community lay in managing and containing them.

Further, I was determined to write *for* Whalsay people, as well as about them. I wanted my work to be accessible to them, and that implied a rather different discipline than writing just for an anthropological readership. In my account above of the football match, I hint at the implication of the team in the segmentary divisions of Whalsay society. In the book, I used kinship diagrams to assist my argument, but with accessibility in mind, I had to try to temper and present this familiar anthropological theme so it did not overwhelm the narrative.

As well as trying to write as intelligibly as I could, I also decided to involve my informants in the composition of the text. Ethnographers who work in fields relatively close to home,<sup>2</sup> and especially those marked by a very high rate of literacy, have always had to be aware that their published work was likely to become known in the field. The ethnographer's work, the impression it conveys of local people, would become the subject of local discussion. That is common now, but it was much less so 40 years ago. I had taken the decision at the very outset of my research not to fictionalise the community in any way, and I referred to the community and to my principal informants by their real names. Disguise would have been pointless. So sensitivity to what could possibly be taken amiss or might be misinterpreted was a key consideration. I decided to share drafts of parts of the book with the people described in them and invited them to tell me if they found anything offensive in what I had said. In addition, two of my Whalsay friends read the entire text. In the event, I was asked to consider changing only a single word. One of the people who looms largest in the book had had a very brief career as a fisherman, which, following most local accounts, I had described as 'inglorious'. But he wanted people to know that, whatever they may have thought to the contrary, he regarded it as the most glorious time of his life.

A problem I faced in writing about Whalsay would be familiar to many anthropologists. I felt that *no interaction, no utterance could be taken at face value*. It all entailed complexity. And yet the ethnography would become impossibly convoluted and tedious if I tried to incorporate into my description of events all of their many nuances and subtleties. Anthropologists find their own tactics and devices to cope with this problem, and they have been widely recognised to be theoretically contentious. I decided to intersperse the predominantly descriptive accounts with interpretive commentaries, while continuously trying to caution the reader that within Whalsay discourse, the authority of particular interpretations is regarded as questionable – depending on who was speaking, about what and to whom. I insist in the book that my interpretation is just one such version, but there is an element of disingenuousness here. On the one hand, I modestly deny the authority of my version; and on the other, I deploy authorial means of claiming it.<sup>3</sup> I could expose this contradiction – and I think I did so – but I certainly could not resolve it. In the end, it has to be up to the reader to decide whether or not the account is convincing.

### ***Why do we write? Who are we writing for?***

This question really cannot be separated from the larger issue of the nature of academic work and higher education. One could hardly overstate the extent of the change they have undergone during my involvement with universities since the 1960s. I spent most of that time employed in so-called 'research intensive' universities, first in Canada, later in England at Manchester and then in Scotland at Edinburgh. Throughout much of that time, I shared the sense of most of my colleagues that our public funding understated the importance of our work. But there was little explicit discussion about what its importance actually was. The doctrine of 'academic freedom' pre-empted any sustained attempt to hold universities to account for what they did. In the early 1980s, the UK government began its (continuing) baleful attempts to tie the allocation of funds to the appraisal of research quality, a matter which has since grown into the monstrous periodic audit now known, without irony, as the 'Research Excellence Framework', and which, on the last occasion, sought to measure in qualitative terms the 'impact value' of academic research. We have come a very long way – and not a wholly virtuous one – from the principle which informed university work throughout at least the first half of my career: that 'knowledge is a good in itself' and that, therefore, any sceptical questioning of its value or utility is illegitimate.

But, of course, that was not to say that all knowledge is of equal value. My personal uneasiness about the assumption of academic entitlement dated from my research apprenticeship in Newfoundland, then the poorest and least developed of Canada's ten provinces. The infrastructure was still rudimentary; annual unemployment averaged 25 per cent; poverty was rife; and the rural population was largely dependent on welfare. Those of us at Memorial University's Institute of Social and Economic Research who were doing research within Newfoundland and Labrador itself were deeply conscious of the social context of our research and of our responsibility to contribute, if we could, to its improvement and development. I have no doubt that social anthropologists everywhere shared this view with respect to their own social fields, even if the terms *engaged anthropology* and *anthropological advocacy* were not yet used. But it did not obviously sit easily with the more detached view then held in the social sciences and humanities in British universities. The predominant attitude was of disciplinary introspection, of professionalisation, of cognate subjects scrabbling and competing with each other for the decreasing stock of resource. And this detachment sometimes became reflected in the way anthropologists wrote and in their sense of audience. With notable exceptions, neophytes (including me) wrote convoluted, unnecessarily complicated prose in often inaccessible language and wrote to be read mostly by each other. They wrote for internal recognition and esteem. If some of us hoped that policy makers and practitioners would engage with our work, we expected them to do so on *our* literary terms.

My final university appointment was to lead the creation of a university which addressed itself explicitly to social need, and which assessed all of its work in terms of its social relevance as well as its academic quality. This is a posture which complements, rather than denies, the value of more purely 'academic' work. But it

obviously has to communicate with as much clarity as it can muster with relevant professional, policy, service and commercial interests in society. It must be intelligible and engaging, and that calls for a kind of writing which is not universally practised in our discipline.<sup>4</sup> When I began to write about Whalsay 40 years ago, it was with a sense of such admiration, even reverence, for this astonishingly resilient and skilled society that I wanted my readers to appreciate it similarly. Above all, I wanted it to be appreciated by those people in political and policy positions who had great power over this society and yet knew so little about it. And so I determined to try to write about it in as accessible a manner as I could while also trying to satisfy the need to meet the requirements of anthropological argument.

It is not for me to say how well I succeeded. As I re-read my book to write this chapter, I of course became painfully aware yet again of its flaws and of the dated nature of its argument, substance and style. The book was composed in such a way that readers who did not want to bother with the more theoretical discussions could simply skip them, without detriment. As I said earlier, my priority was to get as close as possible in my prose to the experience recorded in my fieldnotes. The most important aspect of my fieldnote writing was that, like most colleagues, I did it as soon as possible after the events they described, usually the same night, and never more than a day later. As many others have observed (see e.g. Sanjek, 1990) fieldnote writing is hard work, and has often to be done when the ethnographer is very tired. That was certainly my experience. But as time went on, I found I was able increasingly to train myself to compose notes mentally even as I was engaged in conversation or observation. Indeed, I reached the point at which I felt oppressed and haunted by my notebook: I would visualise its lined pages even in the most absorbing of circumstances. They kept me sober when I was downing substantial quantities of whisky on a spree, and they partially detached me from the heightened emotion of deaths and funerary rites.

My anxiety about whether I could write well enough to do justice to the community never left me. But eventually I decided I had to accept my limitations and just do the best of which I was capable. I think this is an inhibition familiar to many anthropologists. Few of us are blessed with great literary skill, but we have to keep working away at it. My Whalsay friends had little idea of what to expect from the book, but they made clear to me that they did want me to write it, and I felt a responsibility to do it, and to do it well, not least as a meagre token of gratitude for the friendship and support Whalsay people gave to me and my family. Many anthropologists will have felt similarly. In those days, the societies we studied were highly vulnerable and needed to be understood and represented through anthropological writing which was tantamount to a kind of advocacy.

Whalsay folk were and are highly competent: innovative fishermen, expert in the most modern technologies and well versed in the contemporary economics of fishing. But their livelihoods were actually, or were felt to be very largely in the hands of people – bureaucrats and politicians in Edinburgh, London and Brussels – who were at the other end of the expertise spectrum. They were regarded in Whalsay as ignorant, bungling, indifferent and insensitive to local knowledge and needs – but powerful. The excessively centralised politics and media of the United



Kingdom still do not well accommodate the remoter parts of the state. A large part of my motivation for writing was to add my own small voice to those advocating for those distant but brilliant communities, but with the particular perspective of an anthropologist. Therefore, the discipline I tried to observe was to produce a highly readable text which would satisfy the rather different requirements of my Whalsay friends, my anthropological colleagues and relevant people in government or other relevant positions of authority.

Was this a misplaced ambition? Possibly; politicians and bureaucrats are disinclined to take note of views and information which complicate their prejudices. Within academic anthropology, the book got a generally favourable reception, in so far as it was noticed at all. There was still only a relatively small audience within British anthropology for work on Britain. My close friends and colleagues liked it, and I still regard it as the best of my books. Indeed, it had a perverse effect on my career, because I doubted if I would ever be capable of that kind of fieldwork effort again, or of writing a better book, and knew I would not be satisfied with doing either less well.

In Whalsay, apart from my close friends, who said they had liked the book and that I had done the community justice, there were approving comments, made quietly. That was as much as I could have hoped for. But as I returned to Whalsay each summer for several years afterwards, it was always with the sense of regret that I had not been able to write better. Apart from my limitations as an anthropologist, I was simply not a good enough writer – deficiencies one can only try to overcome in the future. There is an inclination to regard the substance of academic writing as consisting of propositions which are valid for all time. When I was a postgraduate student and poring over the foundational texts of anthropology and sociology, it struck me even then as strange that a work such as Durkheim's *Suicide* should be taught for its methodological naiveté, rather than as a brilliantly prescient piece of late-nineteenth-century scholarship. I do not care to have to defend now work I wrote more than 40 years ago – as if I have learnt nothing since. So I have long consoled myself – and tried to console my students – with the thought that what we write at any time is, at best, provisional and obviously subject to disproof or, at least, to significant revision.

Fine professional authors practise impressive disciplines of writing: long and regular hours spent daily at the desk; the willingness to discard successive drafts, indeed the drafts of entire books. As I matured academically, I tried to take more seriously the discipline and the craft of writing. In my earlier years as an academic, the pressure to publish was real, but in the United Kingdom at least, was less formal than it is now. A major book in the humanities might take years to nurture; an article could be crafted through the best part of a year. The advent of periodic research appraisals and the management tactics that developed with them changed all that. Now academics anxious about tenure or about promotion had to focus their minds on the minimum number of publications over a given period required to comply with the rules of the exercise; journals were ranked; symposium chapters disregarded in favour of journal articles; and the big book, or the long-gestating book, became a liability rather than a virtuous contribution to knowledge. When we bemoan the relative scarcity of great books in our subject



over the last 30 years, perhaps we should bear in mind the baleful policy context in the fashioning of which we have been complicit. One of its consequences seems to me, perhaps impressionistically and from my position of semi-detachment, to have been that some younger scholars again became a little less scrupulous about their writing, a little more prone to indulge in the latest polysyllabic jargon – a kind of private language for those professionally in the know.

But at the same time, some anthropologists also seem happily to have broken free of these parochial concerns. Not surprisingly, given the scope of its interests in society, anthropology was drawn upon by specialists of other academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and stood increasingly at the forefront of attempts, where appropriate, to bring multi-disciplinary perspectives to bear on social issues. That, hopefully, is where anthropology stands today and is why a concern with writing, as represented by the present volume, is so important and timely. If the practitioners of other subjects are to appreciate the potency and subtlety of anthropological research and thought, then we have to be able to communicate it clearly and, if possible, attractively. So increasingly, anthropologists are having to master the arts of clarity and persuasion.

Two related caveats. First, it would be absurd to insist that all anthropological work must be easily accessible. Anthropology is difficult. It is a way of thinking, in particular, a way of thinking about those things which people are inclined to take for granted in their own lives – how they relate to other people or to objects, events, beliefs; about their feelings for things which they do not ordinarily make explicit because they have no need to. As Marilyn Strathern pithily suggests (1992: 7 and *passim*), it is about making the implicit explicit; about making the unfamiliar nevertheless intelligible, even rational. That may not always be accomplishable in simple and elegant prose. Likewise, and fortunately, there are always scholars who seek to take anthropology into new territory – in the context of the present volume, I think particularly of Nigel Rapport's distinguished exploration of individual creativity in cosmopolitan society (e.g. 2012 and 2016) – and who have had to resort in this experimental, ground-breaking work to the use of ideas and terms, often drawn from other disciplines, which may themselves be unfamiliar to anthropologists.

Secondly, I do not suggest that all anthropology should be of obvious relevance to public policy or be capable of 'application' or that we should be squeamish about more purely 'academic' work. As we know, anthropology is good to think with, but, if its ideas arise in the context of the study of medical practice or art or legal argument or religion or whatever, we do surely need to try to communicate with non-anthropologists who also specialise in these fields, or else we risk just talking to ourselves.

### ***And, to conclude ...***

One final reflection. Whalsay was written during the academic year 1985–86, years before I began reluctantly and hesitantly to use a word processor. Like all my previous work, it was written and then revised in longhand, before I typed up the manuscript in the first of two typewritten drafts. The extent of revision entailed

in this process was much greater, more rigorous and more fully thought through than in any writing I subsequently did on a computer. I was satisfied at the end of the whole process that what I had written was what I intended to write, and that I had done it as well as I could, if not as well as I had hoped. I think this was probably the only occasion on which I have felt that during a writing career of nearly five decades.

## Notes

- 1 There are some exceptions to this general rule, perhaps most notably Barth's 'completion' of Robert Pehrson's monograph on the Marri Baluch, published under Pehrson's own name following his tragically premature death (Pehrson, 1966). In the United States, much otherwise unpublished work used to be held in the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University. But these were regarded with scepticism by British anthropologists, an attitude said to have been reciprocated by the director of the HRAF, George Murdock (Kuper, 2015:102).
- 2 I have never accepted the notion of anthropology 'at home', because it seems to me that by the very nature of their inquiry, anthropologists can never be regarded as being 'at home'. The novelist Rabih Alameddine makes the very same point about writing as such: 'To write is to know that you are not home' (2015: 195). But see Chevalier (2015) for a comparison of anthropological work on France and Britain.
- 3 This was then a preeminent concern in contemporary anthropology (*inter alia* Clifford & Marcus, 1986).
- 4 Many anthropologists, not least my Edinburgh colleagues, mastered this art in providing professional advice to development agencies and governments and judicial forums of various kinds. It has now become less exceptional as, happily, anthropology has spread beyond the academy to play an increasingly prominent role in non-academic institutions. This makes it yet more important that anthropology does not hide behind linguistic obscurity and endlessly qualified propositions, or it will risk becoming pointless and easily ignorable.

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# 7

## Editor's introduction

Nigel Rapport's chapter begins with two extracts from his book, *I am Dynamite: An Alternative Anthropology of Power*. The book explored the relationship between self-consciousness – an individual's awareness of their life, its direction and project – and that individual's control over their life. The book argued that when launched into life-projects with sufficient momentum, the human-being-as-projectile had a greater possibility to elude others' designs: individuals embody the power to make their own circumstance. The first extract, below, examines this idea in the context of the life of the celebrated British painter, Stanley Spencer, and how his artistic fulfilment related to the nature of his social world. In his COMMENTARY, Rapport explains how TEXT came about, what it intended to achieve and to what it gave rise. COMMENTARY recounts the evolution of an anthropology whose concern became less 'ethnography' than 'alterography' or 'anthropography': Rapport's subject came to be the individual human being, and how individual experience spoke to the unity of human nature. Humanity expresses itself in individuality, Rapport contends, and over and against the otherness of individual embodiment the anthropologist may set species-wide human capacities universally shared. To be an individual human being – to be Stanley Spencer – is to inhabit a discrete body in common.

# WRITING A COSMOPOLITAN ANTHROPOLOGY IN RECOGNITION OF ANYONE

*Nigel Rapport*

I've always been drawn to this miniature expanse: one person, the individual. It's where everything really happens.

*Svetlana Alexievich (2016:24)*

## TEXT

The two excerpts that follow are taken from the book *I am Dynamite: An Alternative Anthropology of Power* (Rapport 2003).

### ***(i) Stanley Spencer's metaphysic of love [pp. 206–11]***

I have argued that Stanley Spencer (1891–1959) used his art both to *prescribe* a general metaphysic for earthly life and to *describe*—reflect, correct and redeem—his own life in particular. But what can I say, finally, about the relationship between Spencer's artistry and the control he was able to exert over his life? Did his consciousness of his creative vision, his self-belief and life-project, enable him to live his life on his own terms: to control the course his life took? Certainly, he was happiest when he felt able to reconcile the two, life and vision. But this was not always easily the case. He suffered in the First World War, and with the regimentation of the army; he suffered the loss of his first wife, Hilda, and rejection by his second, Patricia (Figure 7.1); he suffered from the parochial and censorial atmosphere in English public life which left him frustrated at having to justify a frank depiction of self-exposure and visionary-sexual fantasy, and routinely very short of money; and he suffered from the dispersal of his paintings, a dependence on patronage and an inability to secure any for his grander projects (only since his death have his paintings sold for millions of pounds). And yet, it seems that such was the power of Spencer's personal vision that he was able to reconcile life and artistry despite these



**FIGURE 7.1** Stanley Spencer and Patricia Preece (centre) outside Maidenhead Registry Office on the day of their wedding, 1937, accompanied by witnesses Dorothy Hepworth and Jas Wood. Courtesy the Archive of the Stanley Spencer Gallery, Cookham.

sufferings and thus to sustain his life-project. Hell, Spencer once suggested, must be existing in a state of unimaginativeness, and imperviousness to ‘spiritual’ vision. Surrounded by the imaginary world of his art and writings, this was something he never suffered; he lived his art and was happy to do so.

Perhaps this is easiest to see in his relationship with Hilda. Hilda was probably the person to whom he felt closest in the world; in her he saw the same mental attitude to things as himself. Hilda became his great ‘hand-holder’ and affirmer, the one who secured him and grounded him so that his imagination and emotion were stimulated. Indeed, his whole philosophy of love grew out of his love for Hilda and at one point Spencer felt that any autobiography of his called for contributions from Hilda too: a hotchpotch showing ‘both our journeys’ (cited in Collis 1962:181). Nevertheless, Spencer’s ‘self-intense’ nature led him to turn his relationship with Hilda into something spiritual: his love for her was sublime as much as it was earthly—and became more so. ‘Hilda was the love I felt for what I looked at’, Spencer wrote: ‘She was the smoke coming from the factory chimneys. I want and need her in *all* my experience’ (cited in Pople 1991:453). It was impossible for him to separate Hilda from his vision, her presence in it seeming ancient and primordial. Yet, if his love united him with Hilda then it united him equally to all creation and to ‘God’: all affirmed his existence and his art.

Increasingly, Spencer found himself and Hilda to be incompatible living partners, moreover. Their preferred lifestyles drew them apart and their actual worlds were private ones; each could only approach the other from their respective projects. Indeed, it is arguable that Spencer found he could live with Hilda happily (and love her memory) only after their divorce (cited in Pople 1991:174,195):

*Hilda:* ‘You are too much of an artist to have satisfactory relations with any women. That is the price you have to pay for your genius’.

*Spencer:* 'In spite of all I feel for you and my need for you, somewhere in me is an absence of love. I never have fulfilled love for another'.

Hilda became his phantasm and her image was more lovable than her person. '[It is] incredible', he concluded, 'that you exist in the flesh!' (cited in Collis 1962:127).

There was also the Patricia-question. Spencer at one stage wanted them both, Hilda: spiritual, domestic, thoughtful, considerate, sincere, complex, gauche, circumspect, intense; and Patricia: sophisticated, sexy, socially connected, elegant, stylish, vivid, lively, direct, forceful, superficial, teasing and opportunistic. The laws of England may not allow him two wives, but he would have two all the same; he would behave as he felt proper, irrespective of how others did.

Marriage was a private matter, he remonstrated, whatever the law said. Hilda and Patricia each gave him something necessary but different for the development of his artistic vision. He could be passionate, sincere and wholehearted to both.

But Hilda retreated, and then Patricia did too. Which left Spencer and Hilda continually writing and reading letters to one another to mediate their mutual loss (exchanging letters had been their favoured form of communication and love-making from the start). But as Hilda withdrew from his everyday life, Spencer found himself progressively able to idealise the figure 'Hilda' represented. Her awkward personality could be made increasingly to conform to his artistic needs and to a position in his paintings' imagery; she joined the pantheon of personalities, real and imagined, contemporary and Biblical, with which he populated the private world of his paintings. She is found there playing the role of youthful confidante; or else of comforting mother-figure looming over a wondering Spencer like a form of protective covering. Having 'lost' the real Hilda through divorce and then death, Spencer developed their spiritual union where she acts as his ideal companion, Madonna and alter ego. Their erstwhile dialogue (or monologic meetings) is now a self-dialogue which Spencer maintains within himself. Similarly, his paintings of Patricia are not of her real-life person but of the essentially imaginative fulfilment Spencer derived from her, the mystery he experienced in his feelings about her.

It might be argued that in constructing lovers (and others) largely in terms of his own imagination, Spencer's artistry served him primarily as a means to find refuge from his personal difficulties: that the imaginary world of his art grew as his life's frustrations did, a compensatory means of vicarious living, justifying his actions and fulfilling his dreams. Support for this view could be drawn from Spencer's own words: '[M]y desire to paint is caused by my being unable—or being incapable—of fulfilling my desires in life itself' (cited in Robinson 1994:68). Furthermore, some of Spencer's most poignant representations of domestic perfection—recreating his own marital harmony of the 1920s—were painted whilst estranged from Hilda in the later 1930s. Does this not show that his artistic vision soared as his real-life relationships plummeted?

This is not the conclusion I would draw, however. Spencer's artistry was not as strategic or mannered as this. Taking the measure of the person which this chapter has appraised leads me to say that Spencer's art did not compensate for his life: it was the fulfilment of his life-project.

One's individual self, one's real spiritual self, Spencer was fond of claiming, is present everywhere. One way he explained this was by saying that it was because one was part of God, and wherever God was you were too. Another way was by saying that he, Spencer, was capable and desirous of absorbing everything in the world into himself: to find himself to be a 'treasure island'. This was what an individual's 'artistic' nature amounted to. His creative impulse, Spencer elaborated, was all-embracing, and he possessed a voracious enjoyment in looking at the world, dreaming it and re-creating it. He wished for people to be there when he wanted to unburden himself but then for him to be left alone in order to 'live my inner self' (cited in Collis 1962:154). As his biographer concludes, however much Spencer himself might have dallied with the trope of being in need of mothering, he was a fond self-reliant, and he gained a fierce, wild, self-sufficient happiness from painting alone and in the 'impregnable castle of his imagination' (Collis 1962:197). Spencer had all that was necessary to him; nothing he really needed could be either taken from him or given to him.

This is not to say that Spencer's artwork did not also bring him direct comfort and immediate solutions to his life's set-backs. Nor that a desire for unity missing from his personal life found consummatory expression in the coherencies of his artistic design; and nor that in his paintings he was able to make connexions with people and places that brought him a cathartic satisfaction if not joy, even ecstasy. It is to say, rather, that Spencer determined to be an artist, a creator of worlds, first and foremost, and this was something with which his non-artistic projects in 'real life' had to come to terms: 'It has been my way to make things as far as I am able to—fit me' (cited in Robinson 1976:21). The art and artistry were paramount and it was thus that Spencer became his own man. And more: '[I am] a new kind of Adam, and joy is the means by which I name things'. Spencer was a Christ-like prophet to himself ('Painting with me was the crowning of an already elected king' (cited in Pople 1991:86)), whose message of love sat uneasily alongside English reserve but would one day be acclaimed the truth. He had been able to realise in paint a spiritual redemption of the entire everyday world. He had made a sacred presence something really knowable: his art revealed people, material objects and practices to be transcendent of the merely physical.

This was also why Spencer was so chary of any suggestion of influences on his work. His vision, his self, his appetite, were unique to him, and his responsibility: his creation was pure. 'I know of nothing that I have ever done that I could say I did as a result of the love of God or because authorised by Him' (cited in Collis 1962:184). His ambition too was great. He was aware how, in the words of the critic (and wife of the Director of London's Tate Gallery), the 'almost frightening candour' with which he revealed his originally perceived world, 'without reserve', had created a personal iconography which challenged every contemporary English aesthetic norm (Rothenstein 1945:16). He described himself as in danger of becoming 'smug' on success (cited in Bell 2001:30).

Stanley Spencer, I would say, personally embodied the existential power to figure the world in his own image. In transposing his Lovers and friends and himself, the



village of Cookham, Port Glasgow, and other British and European settings, into the imagined worlds of his figurative art, he was able, and happy, to displace, represent and re-place the whole world. To paint was, through the space of his canvas, to achieve union with his world. And in this union, and this world, everything phenomenal might be overcome, rescued and redeemed: everything past and present, everything agreeable, disagreeable and mortifying, misfortuned, friendly and tragic. Everything was absorbed, memorialised and transcended by an artistic, imaginative re-conception of reality ‘in the land of me’ (cited in Pople 1991:396).

### ***(ii) Existential power and the violence of society [pp. 259–61]***

What do I say, finally, about the book’s questions: about the relationship between self-consciousness—the individual’s awareness of their life and its direction and project—and an individual’s control over that life; about the balance between what Alfred Schütz called “‘in order to’ motives’ as against “‘because’ motives”? ‘Self-centredness’, I have proposed, self-knowledge and self-motivation, enable the individual to resist deflection in their life-course, to react against external pressures, and hence transcend what is beyond themselves—a wider milieu of given conditions, social, historical and cultural—and inhabit an environment coterminous with one’s own world-views and life-projects. Do the lives of Friedrich Nietzsche’s, Ben Glaser’s, Rachel Silberstein’s and Stanley Spencer’s, as case studies, bear this out? Yes and no. ‘Yes’ inasmuch as the meaning of what is external to them is not given and has no essential identity: the individual decides what these conditions (words, norms, people, objects, actions) portend. ‘No’ inasmuch as the individual can be forced into taking account of, and attempting to make meaning out of, certain conditions which are directed at him or her. If he or she is arbitrarily imprisoned or ghettoized, tortured or maimed, infibulated and married off, herded into a concentration camp and gas chamber, then such things are not to be ignored and may be fatally debilitating. But, still, they are experienced within the life-world of the interpreting individual.

It is in this way that I understand Jean-Paul Sartre’s summary: ‘the secret of a man is (...) the limit of his own liberty, his capacity for resisting torture and death’ (1947:499). Between circumstance (social institutionalism and structuration, cultural tradition and normativity) and individual there always exists an ‘internal relation’ (Winch 1970:107). External conditions impinge on the individual’s life-world, but there is no necessary, direct, singular or essential effect that they have within it. Their significance remains subjective; or differently put, the objective nature of apparently ‘given’ conditions is something subjectively construed (and individuated.) This is what enables individuals to assert a claim to humanity (concerning both themselves and others) even in the most dehumanizing of situations. To recall Primo Levi, even the appalling, nihilistic conditions of the Nazi Lager (death camp) come to be subjectively experienced, and can be said to become objectively distinct in each experiencing. This is why, as Michael Jackson (2005) has formulated it, individuals are not themselves reduced to nothingness even when their capacity to

affect the external world has been rendered negligible: even *in extremis*, individuals are responsible for constructing and reconstructing a reduced world in their imaginative interpretations of it. This is their ‘secret’, the extent of their ‘liberty’.

The characterization of individual lives—Nietzsche’s, Glaser’s, Silberstein’s, Spencer’s—that appear to have been lived ‘in order to’ that I have been employing as trope throughout this book to form my argument concerning life-projects and existential power brings me to this conclusion. There are no “‘because’ motives’ in human lives because the affecting conditions and circumstance only take shape, only become particular things with particular effects, when particular individuals apprehend them: claims to act ‘because’ of something external to the individual self are instances of ‘bad faith’ (Sartre). There is, however, a kind of ‘nihilistic’ violence that would deny the individual *any* space to exist and would threaten his or her bodily integrity—such as the murderous regime of the Lager. Powers exist external to the individual that can force themselves on an individual’s attention, force a reaction—however subjective or idiosyncratic, or imaginative, or constructive, or negatory, that reaction might be. Individuals are always responsible for their acts of interpretation, for the ways their lives become meaningful, but violent others have the power to force such acts upon them—or else to kill them and make any further acts of interpretation impossible.

What I was seeking in this book in privileging “‘in order to” motives’ and denying “‘because” motives’ was, in part, an escape from the relational *a priori*: the claim common in social science that identity is consequent upon ‘playing the vis-à-vis’—intention is always comparative—and everything is always ‘beside itself’ (Boon 1982:230–1); nothing can arise *ab nihilo*—from the ‘nothing’ of the monadic self, from the singularity of the individual body-in-its-own-environment—and be ‘self-existent’ (Emerson 1981:95). It seemed to me that this was precisely wrong. However mysterious-sounding, matter and meaning, consciousness and intention in human life *did* well-up from within the body of the individual (and from there alone), and that it was a crucial issue for social science to accommodate this truth. Individuals were the possible sources of gratuitous, ‘free’ meanings, and were instrumental in putting these into effect in the world. Existence really did precede essence (Sartre), and the power of existence was continuously to give rise to essence: to absolutely new things and identities that had no necessary relations to what had been before.

I stand by this thesis still. I accommodate myself to Schütz’s distinction by urging that a confusion lies in the use of the term ‘motive’. Distinguishing “‘in order to” motives’ from “‘because” motives’, as Schütz does, suggests that here are two phenomena of the same kind; but they are not. ‘In order to’ is a description of an intentional and embodied consciousness in the process of making meaning; ‘because’ is a description of power external to that embodied consciousness which may be responsible—in *extremis*—for forcing acts of meaning-making upon it or denying the future possibility of such acts. ‘In order to’ and ‘because’ do not originate in or relate to the human being in the same way, then. There can be no ‘because’ motives because acts of meaningful interpretation are the preserve of the individual;

'because' is the (possibly nihilistic) "'in order to" motive' of another. Individuals do what they do in accord with the logic and the development of their world-views: in accord with the ongoing history of their intentional activity-in-the-world, the history of individual organism-plus-environment that their interpretations take forward. They can be forced into making an interpretation—others can force their attention upon them—and through force they can be denied interpretation—others can maim or kill them, or subject them to gratuitous acts—but *individuals cannot be not forced into particular meanings or motivations*. These remain a personal preserve: there are no 'because' motivations.

Moreover, when launched into their life-projects with sufficient momentum, when 'darting to an aim' (Emerson 1981:152), the individual-human-being-as-projectile has a greater possibility to elude others' designs. Individuals embody the power to make their own circumstance.

## COMMENTARY

*Ethnography* is perhaps a misnomer for the gathering of anthropological data. I would find *altero-graphy* and *anthropo-graphy* more accurate, certainly. It has been the inscription of my experience of other human beings (or *another*) with which I have been concerned, and how this otherness speaks to the unity of a human nature. It has not been with the writing-up of 'a people' or of 'peoples', with the ways in which symbolic collectivities have been invented and regulated: 'the Nuer', 'the Comanche', 'Muslims', 'the working class', 'women'. I gather data on human otherness: on what is other to me in my customary life.

This is intrinsically a subjective undertaking, taken from a particular point of view. Experiencing otherness entails exchanging homeliness for what I find unhomely, whether physically or emotionally or intellectually, or a combination of these. *Alterography* is the aspiration to write *of and from* a different perspective: a different me, whether that is a human being (or beings) domiciled in New Guinea; or another part of my home country, Britain; or another part of my home town, St Andrews; or another part of my home street; or another part of my corridor at work; or even another part of my own house. Indeed, alterography is even to write of a non-customary, unhomely, version of myself: the person I would be were to believe in God, or to be female, or to have been born in Nazi Germany. All of these concern the perspective of another human being, another individual embodiment: My anthropology is to inscribe such otherness, to write of and from this unhomely perspective. This is a subjective undertaking also because my evidence does not exceed my own experience. I possess my particular bodily perspective on the world, but I possess nothing else with the same knowledge or certainty. I make connections sensorially with what lies beyond my body and I interpret the results of those sensory encounters. I am connected symbolically, also, through language, and I endeavour to interpret the results of these symbolic encounters equally: What do these words and gestures mean to their protagonists? But there is no certainty in the world of otherness, no knowledge such as the individual human being has of itself. I would experience otherness, but I have no objective

vantage point, no objective means ultimately to exceed my own self. Imagination is key, then (Harris and Rapport 2015): Do I imagine this to be a possible, viable, practicable manifestation of human otherness?

It is, moreover, a biological class of phenomena that I would write about: the human being, a specific kind of individual embodiment. My humanity and my individuality must provide clues to my inscription of otherness. All is united in its humanity and its individuality. To be a member of the species is to share certain universal capacities. To be an individual human is to inhabit a discrete body in common: It is to effect—operationalise, substantiate—universal human capacities are instantiated in individual ways. There are ontological foundations of our being: We inherit common, species-wide capabilities (and liabilities); our lives are lived in effecting those in ways determined to a sizeable extent—and to a far greater extent than any other animal—by our histories of individual embodiments and by personal interpretations within those embodiments. To be human is to be individual. Far broader and more fundamental than *ethnos*, the symbolic enculturation and structuration of a collectivity, my disciplinary concern is with *anthropos*: the ontological nature of a human condition. *Anthropography* is a subjective enterprise, but its subject matter has a real nature and an essential character; there are universalities to human being and its individual embodiments.

What, then, of human society and culture? To be human is also to live a life among others—or otherness, better—social, cultural and natural. One looks out upon otherness, upon what is other than the self and other *to* the self—unhomely. Further, the human being finds itself situated *by* otherness—the object of attention of other living things (from microbes to pet animal to ‘family’ and ‘community’ members): the defined object of cultural-classificatory schema; the directed object of social-institutional procedures. But being the *object* of others’ attention does not fundamentally affect the nature of a human—*subjective*, individual—being-in-the-world. Symbolically, one may live among others, but ontologically, one remains one’s individually embodied—discrete, indeed unique, and finite—self. However much the individual may participate in ‘phantasies of groupness’ (Laing 1968:81), affiliating with certain others—working, praying, loving together—by virtue of shared symbologies or merely habitual physical alignments while differentiating from other others, an underlying ontological truth remains: It is individual human beings who differently and uniquely reach out sensorially and symbolically beyond their bodies and *make subjective sense*—form relations, formulate plans, maintain habits *from particular points of view*. The ‘phantasies’ of identity that are constructed alongside or beyond or between the individual and the human—societies and cultures, ethnicities and nationalities, classes and religions and genders—do not undercut these truths and are not to be confused with them or privileged relative to them. ‘We are all human (...). Don’t take more specific classifications seriously’ (Gellner 1993:3). Our nature is human and individual; however, we might see fit to clothe this, situationally, in fictions of social and cultural identity.

Alterography and anthropography give onto what might be termed the *cosmopolitan anthropology* of discerning the relation between our species wholeness (or *cosmos*) and its individual embodiments (or *polis*). I endeavour to imagine

the perspective of other human beings in order to distil the essence of a common humanity and to understand the freedom and also the limits with which that essence might be individually put into effect and lived. Humanity at any one time might be said to comprise the sum of all the living individual points of view. The ideal *anthropography* would be the inscription of all individual world-views in existence and a synthesis of how all these world-views impinge and impact on one another, intentionally and accidentally; the ideal *anthropology*, meanwhile, would be the analytic (comparative and theoretic) account of how this might develop an understanding of human nature (cf. Maclver 1961).

My TEXT is concerned with trying to write of the perspective of Stanley Spencer, and how his painterly life-project—his stubbornness, his charisma and his iconic status—came to colour his relations with his wives Hilda and Patricia. TEXT also concerned how this might be analysed, not only in terms of individuals' 'life-projects' but also their 'existential power' and leading of lives 'in order to'. It is not possible for the world of otherness to impinge on the individual body to the extent that it acts 'because of' interpretations and determinations beyond itself. But let me now offer some context: how, as a piece of writing, TEXT came to be; what it precisely intended; and to what it, in turn, gave rise.

### *How did TEXT come to be?*

The line of argument taken in *I am Dynamite* had its origins in a first anthropological fieldwork that I undertook in the rural farming (and tourist-focused) dale of 'Wanet' in north-west England. Working primarily as a farm-labourer for Doris and Fred and a builder's mate for Sid (and also as a waiter in Hattie's restaurant), I came to appreciate the way in which, beneath the cover of the common symbolic forms of daily exchange, individual villagers were set apart in worlds whose features, identities and meanings were of their own creation. It was as if each occupied their own cultural space while conducting social relations with one another by virtue of words and behaviours that were intrinsically ambiguous; the symbolic was subject to interpretation that was individual, personal and private in nature. Doris and Sid talked past each other, regularly and routinely, in the everyday words and behaviours they shared in their habitual exchanges, fulfilling in the process views of the world, of themselves and of each other that were radically different. There was a sense, moreover, in which Doris and Sid and others were set apart from themselves. For each did not only inhabit *one* world-view but several, and in each not only was the environing world different but also themselves too: as if different people, speaking with different voices, holding different values, with different expectations. When different individuals conversed together, then, the effect was chaotic: not only Sid and Doris, say, talking past each other—using the same words and behaviours to mean subtly different and often incompatible things—but Sid and Doris also talking past themselves, as different versions of themselves followed each other across the space of the exchange, within the 'same' symbolic forms. In short, within the seemingly small and homogeneous social setting of an English village, those born and bred there, as well as those newly arrived retirees,

second-home owners and tourists, occupied not one culture but a plethora. A multiplicity of private contexts collided as individuals construed world-views and life-projects that owed their nature and their content not to what was externally derived or imposed—by way of community or class, discourse or habitus, socialisation or enculturation—but to what was personally and individually invented.

This research was written up as *Diverse World-Views in an English Village* (1993). But it also precipitated another issue: This being the nature of social reality in Wanet, how was it best represented? In *The Prose and the Passion: Anthropology, Literature and the Writing of E. M. Forster* (1994), and pondering the consequences of the Writing Culture Debate—and how it might sanction anthropology to represent the social, the cultural and the individual in such a way as to do justice to life's complexity, diversity, ambiguity, distortion, personalism and depth—I considered the samenesses and differences between 'anthropology' and 'literature'. Definitions of the latter—and especially of the novel as a genre—often emphasised how what was key was a respect for the individual case, as in the quote from Alexievich, or here from E. M. Forster (1972:66): 'I have no mystic faith in the people. I have in the individual. He seems to me a divine achievement and I mistrust any view which belittles him'. How, then, might the case of literature—in particular the oeuvre of the 'literary documentarist' such as Forster or Alexievich—and an appreciation of literature allow anthropology better to come to terms with the subtleties of its own data? The key was an appreciation of the creativity of authorship, both that of individual research subjects who made unique lives for themselves and that of the writers—whether 'anthropologists' or 'litterateurs'—who sought to transmute an experience of individuality into crafted accounts that embodied an authentic experience of otherness. Anthropologists, equally, might write so that the content *and* the structure *and* the style of their texts were direct emanations of their experience of particular others 'in the field'.

A next fieldwork took me in the Canadian city of St. John's, capital of Newfoundland. How do people belong to a city, coming to be part of habitual exchanges? The anonymity of strangers was striking after Wanet village. As with Wanet, however, there were interactional routines: things it was customary, engaging and legitimate to say and do in public. One of the prominent and popular themes concerned 'violence', I learnt; the word appeared frequently in the media, in pubs, at the university: domestic violence, violence around drugs and drink, the violence of (nuclear) war. 'Was Newfoundland becoming more violent?' the radio phone-in programme would query. 'Was the milk of human kindness running dry in Newfoundland?' Violence was a metaphor: a negative other against which it seemed all in St John's could set themselves; something urban strangers could exchange to promote a sense of cultural community. 'Mainland Canada (and the USA) threatens us with the shock of a new (violent) incivility; we must unite in urban and urbane companionship against this.' But the situation was also more complex. From city-wide clichés held in common—'Isn't drug-related violence awful?'—individual strangers would develop with particular others particular elaborations of the common phrasings when they would (repeatedly) meet one another in the pub or the university or the hospital or the dance class or the court

of law. 'Bill' and 'Jim', say, would develop a 'talking-relationship' between themselves based on clichés of 'violence', but they would also come to include variable layers of personalism and complexity particular to their relationship; violence as cliché would give onto subtleties of exchange such that Bill's and Jim's conversational routines became unique to them. Furthermore, when Bill's 'talking partner' was not Jim at the pub but Mary at work at the hospital, then how *they* would personalise or particular the common St. John's clichés about violence would be different again, even to the extent that Bill might find himself contradicting what he and Jim would routinely agree upon. In short, *Talking Violence: An Anthropological Interpretation of Conversation in the City* (1987) examined the way in which a city might amount to a phraseological community, subtly layered so that areas of widespread agreement might give onto greater and greater depths of particularity that pertained to how individuals expressed themselves before specific others at specific times and places.

But did this urban exchange ever add up to mutual understanding, however many words talking partners like Bill and Mary came to share with each other? If Doris and Sid—lifelong neighbours in Wanet—could talk past each other with such facility while appearing to agree ('Wanet locals are the only ones with rights to this land') then why should strangers in St John's manage any differently? My intuition, for both situations, was that, as enunciated by Charles Baudelaire (2014 [1887]): 'If, by some mischance, people understood each other, they would never be able to reach agreement.'

The following fieldwork took place in the Negev Desert, in Israel, and the new town of Mitzpe Ramon. I was now a 'new immigrant': an 'Anglo-Saxi' (English-speaking) Jew alongside other such from Canada, America, Britain and South Africa. We found ourselves a small part of a small population (1000) in a town that had yet to become viable, whether socially or economically. Mitzpe Ramon had been built in the 1950s to house some of the immigrant Jews recently expelled from Arab countries who might thus help populate this empty landscape and 'create the fact' of a Zionist presence on the long desert road between the cities of Beer Sheva in the north and Eilat in the south, but in the late 1980s, the town Ramon still had the feel of under-development. Apartments had been built for 6000 residents, alongside a shopping precinct, an industrial zone, parks, a library and a museum. But the Moroccan immigrants originally housed there had long since decamped for larger urban centres. So why did we few 'Anglo-Saxim' find ourselves there? My study concerned the narratives of migration that we told one another when, for instance, we met under the aegis of AACI ('Americans and Canadians in Israel') events. We shared life-stories of individual progression. Rachel: 'I was a ceramicist in Boston; at my divorce it made sense to invest what I had in a new beginning in the place where I could hope now fully to express myself: as democrat *and* Jew, as artist *and* political citizen'; David: 'Why retire to Phoenix when Mitzpe Ramon offers better social services, cheaper rents, good weather and a Jewish life—even if it is a matter of teaching Middle-Eastern Jews how to run an efficient bureaucracy and state.' My study followed the Anglo-Saxi immigrant as he or she crafted a path for themselves through new physical and social



environments while maintaining their sense of self and self-purpose. Negotiating bureaucratic hurdles, linguistic barriers, political stalemates, chaotic ethnic (and even religious) diversity and belligerent Arabs, what resources did they have to call on to progress their individual life-projects? *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement* (edited with Andrew Dawson, 1998) and then *Reveries of Home: Nostalgia, Authenticity and the Performance of Place* (edited with Solrun Williksen, 2010) brought together studies that focused on individual senses of being at home in the world. Given that movement was so foundational of the human condition—not only the prevalent physical movement that saw individuals routinely shifting their environments on a possibly global scale, but also the ubiquitous movements that accompanied the individual body breathing, seeing, acting and generally extending its life in time and space—what did ‘being at home’ mean, and how was a sense of home achieved?

‘People generally make a kind of “home” for themselves wherever they are and whatever their work which enables the important human elements to reach into and pervade in the form of mysterious atmospheres of a personal kind the most ordinary procedures of work or place’ (Stanley Spencer, cited in Pople 1991:415).

### **What did TEXT intend?**

And so, *I am Dynamite: An Alternative Anthropology of Power* (2003). Like its predecessor, *Transcendent Individual: Towards a Literary and Liberal Anthropology* (1997), the book set out to take stock theoretically of what the fieldworks in England, Canada and Israel had revealed empirically. The emphasis I had made on the complexity of the social sphere and the diversity of personally created ‘cultural’ meaning had had to confront social-scientific nostras concerning social-structural determination and cultural homogeneity. Also, explicit reference to power seemed missing from my portrayals: ‘The fine power of a culture (...) does not, so to speak, merely fill brains in roughly the same way, it fills them so that they are alike in fine detail’ (Sacks 1974:218).

I would use four individual lives to which I felt drawn: Stanley Spencer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rachel Silberstein and Ben Glaser, my deceased step-father. Two famous, chronicled lives; an informant from my Israeli fieldwork; and a family member—I had known them all in such different ways but I admired them alike; *Dynamite* would provide a social-scientific accounting of the four such that ‘existential’ power manifested itself alongside the ‘structural’ power of social institutions and cultural traditions. Each human being exists as a discrete metabolic organism, a ‘centre of energy’ (Bateson 1973:126), responsible for achieving a viable relationship with all that lies across the integument of its own skin. The energy and the relationship in the case of the human animal importantly concerns an intelligential centredness: Each human being is responsible for making sense, of a self-gratifying kind, of an enviroing world, and for determining lines of action within it. Again, in the human case, the enviroing world is significantly symbolic (as well as natural), meaning that each individual centre of energy determines the sense it makes of the symbolic forms and behavioural routines in which it finds itself socialised and



immersed. The individual decides upon the nature of institutions and traditions as they affect him or her; the individual *inhabits* the sociocultural in a particular and discrete way, *animating* these forms and practices by the meanings they carry for them and their intentions towards them. Even *in extremis*—even in the Nazi death-camp—up to that point when the individual was physically damaged to the extent that they could no longer interpret the environing world, each was empowered to make their own sense: ‘It must be remembered that each of us, both objectively and subjectively, lived the Lager in his own way’ (Levi 1996:56).

Through Stanley Spencer’s words and images and the recorded details of his life, for instance, I tried to imagine the ways and extents to which he can be said to have exerted the existential power to ‘inhabit’ the social institutions and ‘animate’ the cultural norms of his day such that he fulfilled his own life-project. Did Spencer remain ‘his own person’—undeflected, undistorted in expression? Can I get close enough to Stanley (and to his wives Hilda and Patricia) to practise my ‘alterography’?

A commensurate understanding of ‘power’ figured in a further fieldwork project that saw me working as a hospital porter in a large Scottish teaching hospital (Rapport 2008a). With skills primarily to do with physical stamina (transporting patients and body parts around the sizeable plant), the porters found themselves as a group (some 150 men) at the base of a hierarchy that empowered (and financially rewarded) the doctors and higher managers above all. And yet, in their own eyes, the porters were the hospital’s most significant actors. Only they had the knowledge to put the hospital site together as one conjoined physical unit. More crucially, only they knew how to live as men: how to inscribe a proper proportion between work and play in the working week; how to have fun (skiving, joshing, drinking, playing football, having sex); how to spend money; and how to retain dignity in the face of institutional demands—not to sell oneself cheaply to an institution that would determine where and when and how one lived and worked. Only the porters seemed able not only to appreciate how life and death, health and sickness visited all alike, making all equally human, fallible; but also to be playful in the light of life’s vicissitudes. Constance Hospital was a large work-site but a small part of an environing urban, home environment. When Roger wrote and sang his ‘heavy-metal’ songs, when Robbie got involved in a street fight, when Arthur and Wardy told the nurse in Ward 25 to ‘Fuck Off’, when Bob tried to steal a computer from the management block, all put the institution of Constance Hospital in its proper place in their lives. It might wish to violate their senses of self, of manliness and honour, but singly and jointly they enacted that (existential) power to maintain an authentic authorship and authority in their lives; they stayed ‘well’ according to their own lights.

If the individual—the hospital porter, the visionary artist, the prisoner in Auschwitz—directed themselves along a course of sense-making with sufficient energy or force of will—fulfilling its own world-views, pursuing a life-project of its own determination—would it not achieve that momentum that would protect it from the designs others might place upon that life? The structural power by which a sociocultural environment endeavours to define and categorize, channel and contain that individual life is existentially rebuffed.

### *To what did TEXT give rise?*

Fieldwork in England, Canada, Israel and Scotland, working as a farm-labourer, urban stranger, new immigrant and porter, led me to want to specify what or who my subject was. Whom had I tried to get to know? It was *Anyone*, the universal, individual human being. Irrespective of the 'accidents of birth' (Nussbaum 1996:133) that placed human beings in different social, cultural, historical and natural environments, there was a nature that underlay superficial differences of language and custom, of socialisation and enculturation. The subject of anthropology, to my mind, was to know what it was to be human—understanding universal human capacities—and equally to discern how individual human lives substantiated these capacities in unique ways according to the existential power—the acts of interpretation and decision—of each unique and finite individual organism (*Human Nature as Capacity: Transcending Discourse and Classification*, 2010). A 'cosmo-politan' anthropology focussed on the dialectic between a global, species commonality (or *cosmos*) and individual differentiations of these in particular emplaced lives (or *polis*).

Further, to recognise the life-force, the 'I', that characterised the life of Anyone—that uniquely embodied perspective on the world—was also to recognise how precious such a life was, how beautiful. Was there not also a moral duty to achieve social (political and legal) recognition of that individuality so that it might more easily fulfil its potential for self-creation and self-expression? In *Anyone, the Cosmopolitan Subject of Anthropology* (2012), I argued for a threefold rubric to such a cosmopolitan anthropology. First, anthropography: to inscribe the ontological nature of the human and how it might express itself. But then, too, to advocate for those moral arrangements—social, cultural, political, legal, educational—whereby Anyone might best flourish, globally; equally, to deny those totalising and collectivising arrangements that would violate the freedoms of an individual life and limit its potential according to the 'despotism of custom' (Mill 1963[1859]:194)). And again, to experiment with ways to best represent the human and the individual. How might the universalities of the one and the particularities of the other both find their way into an anthropological 'text'? One precisely parsed the objectivities of the human; one subtly evoked the subjectivities of the individual. What might the novelist (E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf), the poet (Philip Larkin, Stevie Smith), the autobiographer (Primo Levi, W. G. Sebald), the critic (George Steiner, John Berger), and the artist (Stanley Spencer, M. C. Escher) not teach the anthropologist about representational technique?

In *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity* (2002) and *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality* (2012)—in both cases in discussion with Vered Amit—I considered the political nature of this scientific, moral and aesthetic project. To recognise Anyone was to afford the individual actor space—physical, social, cultural, emotional and intellectual—in which to come into his or her own. It was to practise a form of mannerly social engagement, or 'politesse', which combined recognition with distance; one did not presume to know or claim to need to know more about Anyone than that here was an individual human life; no more specific

categorization was necessary or legitimate. Anyone was to be protected from 'category thinking': that politics of identity that subsumed the individual within symbolic classes and communities—nations, ethnicities, religions, genders—and claimed to know the individual's essence and to have the right to direct that individual life-course. At the same time, one did recognise that here was a life to be included in the human-social realm: to be protected from violation by others; to be nurtured to that point of maturity at which he or she could assume full responsibility for their own self-projection and gratification. Such capacity for self-authorship was an aspect of our human ontological commonality. How else one symbolically defined and culturally affiliated oneself were ideally matters of voluntary association and personal choice. Legally, Anyone was the recognised entity, as citizen of the polity, and not those communities and associations the individual might (or might not) join. As personal practice, Anyone recognised their personal uniqueness, finiteness and preciousness; Anyone reflected ironically on the course of their life, their habits and customary practices; Anyone considered the extent to which they satisfied their senses of self, their values, virtues and ambitions.

### *Envoi*

There is a moment I remember, upon returning from my first fieldwork to the university (at Manchester) and telling my doctoral supervisor, Anthony Cohen, that I felt I knew what I wanted to write about: complexity and contrariety. Social life was not characterised by the reproduction of patterned relations, whatever may be the conventional wisdom concerning system and function, structuration and institutionalism, discourse and habitus. Social life was more often chaotic, multiple, inconsistent, farcical; it was a muddling through, turning on the radical distinction between appearance and actuality. And I remember Tony Cohen's complicitous grin.

Human beings meet on the surface of themselves; they see one another's faces; they are affected by one another's actions; they engage in common practices, perhaps; they even make love. None of this translates necessarily as mutuality or understanding. None of it brings closer or makes transparent the mystery of personal selfhood or reduces the individuality involved in making sense, in leading a life, in animating the common forms of social and cultural exchange: 'When two people do the same thing, it is not the same thing' (Devereux 1978:125). The mystery and the misprision defines our moral situation: We recognise the faces of strangers for their humanity, but we can only guess at their individual identity (Rapport 2015).

These are such insights as belong to a long tradition of humanistic scholarship—to which anthropology is heir. Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote two centuries ago:

Language assumes its final distinctiveness in the individual. Upon hearing a word, no one thinks precisely what the other does, and even the smallest difference ripples, like a circle in water, through the whole language. All understanding is therefore simultaneously a non-understanding, all

mutual agreement a moving apart in thought and feeling. The way in which language is modified in every individual shows humanity's power over it.

(1995:59)

Language has its norms, Humboldt went on, but humanity exercises a creativity and freedom relative to them. And he concluded, more mysteriously:

For there may rise in the human being something which no reason could find in any of the preceding states (of humanity, language, and culture) and one would misunderstand the nature of language and misconstrue the historical truth of its development and change, if one was to exclude the possibility of such unexplainable phenomena.

There is an unpredictability to social exchange deriving from the tangential and 'distorted' ways in which interactants may be influenced by each other's words and behaviours. Equally, there is a 'gratuitousness', a radical freedom, to how each individual exists relative to himself (Rapport 2008b). The individual human body, as a metabolic and intelligential organism, has a singular, historical life and an abidingly creative point of view, but from moment to moment, an individual may interpret themselves and the world around them in distinct ways. I might distort the trajectory of my life, its intentionality, just as others might distort my sense of myself (Rapport 2016).

But responsibility remains individual. By means of his art, Stanley Spencer wrote, he discovered that he could 'always have [his] own way': 'There was nothing that I wanted that I could not have from art' (Tate Gallery Archive). My writing Spencer and others is ultimately my writing myself—developing personal world-views and extending a life-project, finding words and crafting sentences—and nothing feels quite as appropriate.

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# 8

## Editor's introduction

Helena Wulff's chapter begins with an essay (TEXT) that draws on her ongoing literary–anthropological study of diaspora fiction writers: their work in Sweden is, she argues, diversifying the country from within. The essay engages with the work of both Pooneh Rohi, born in Iran, who is a new voice, and Jonas Hassen Khemiri, of Tunisian background, an established writer. In addition to writing fiction, they both sometimes contribute journalism. By uncovering often cruel experiences of racism in an adoptive country which boasts an inclusive policy yet has an expanding anti-immigration party (the Sweden Democrats), diaspora writers have an impact on political and cultural debate in Sweden, also because they take on the role as public intellectuals. In her COMMENTARY, Wulff describes the genealogy of TEXT as part of the recent preparations for a major multi-disciplinary research programme on world literatures at the University of Stockholm that was funded in 2016. She then explains how TEXT came about. It goes back to her intellectual history, founded during her upbringing, when she first became a habitual reader; and later to her education in comparative literature and anthropology, which eventually would make her an anthropological writer. Inspired by her research on the ballet world – where desire and technique are key for creativity to spring up – Wulff suggests that this meeting of technique with desire is the case in anthropological writing as well.

# DIVERSIFYING FROM WITHIN

## Diaspora writings in Sweden

*Helena Wulff*

### TEXT

With the growing diasporic populations in Scandinavia, a young generation of writers is emerging. In Sweden, a traditionally homogeneous country,<sup>1</sup> “diaspora writers” and their work are now diversifying the country from within. Here I explore the work of two writers at different stages in their careers: Pooneh Rohi (2014a), born in Iran, is a new voice, while Jonas Hassen Khemiri (2003, 2006, 2011), the son of a Swedish mother and Tunisian father, is an established writer of novels and plays. Both Rohi and Khemiri sometimes also write journalism. They grew up in Sweden and are native speakers of Swedish. By uncovering often cruel experiences of racism in a country that boasts an inclusive policy yet has an expanding anti-immigration party (the Sweden Democrats), and also because they take on the role of public intellectuals, diaspora writers are having an impact on political and cultural debate in Sweden. I should say that my research in this field has just started.<sup>2</sup>

Before digging deeper into the diaspora writings, let me do some conceptualization. Diaspora writings accentuate issues of the changing role of the nation-state, ideas of home and homeland, and thus the definition of diaspora itself.<sup>3</sup> In response to the explosion of the academic use of diaspora, Vertovec and Cohen (1999), in their substantial review, identify four types of diaspora: diaspora as “social form,” “consciousness,” “mode of cultural production,” and “political orientation.” And Rogers Brubaker (2005: 13) reminds us that “rather than speak of ‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices.”<sup>4</sup> Literary scholars have also discussed different definitions of “migrant” or “diaspora” literature in the Swedish context (Behschnitt 2007, Wendelius 2002, Gröndahl 2007; Nilsson 2010, among others).

In my research, which this essay draws on, I refer to diaspora literature as literary work dealing with the migrant experience written by the so-called second-generation writers in Sweden.

In 2014, an anthology of recent journalism on racism in Sweden (Mohtadi and Mavi 2014) attracted attention. It exemplifies diaspora and migrant writers' impact on public debate as they act as public intellectuals. One of the articles in the anthology is a palpable case in point: Jonas Hassen Khemiri's (2013a) open letter to Beatrice Ask, minister of justice at the time, which first appeared in the major Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter* in March 2013. This is diaspora as political orientation, which obviously is Khemiri's major stance. Having been shared 180,000 times, the article broke the record for the most-shared Swedish text on the Internet ever. It reached about 15 countries and was translated into a number of languages. In the United States, it was published in the *New York Times* as "Sweden's Closet Racists" (2013b). The first lines were phrased as an invitation to the blonde and blue-eyed minister of justice:

Welcome to my body. Make yourself at home.  
 From now on, we share skin, spine and nervous system.  
 Here are our legs, which always want to run when we see a police car.  
 Here are our hands, which always clench into fists when we hear politicians  
 talk about the need for stronger borders, more internal ID checks, faster  
 deportation of people without papers.

The *New York Times*' version of the letter continues:

And these are our fingers, which recently wrote a very public letter to Sweden's justice minister, Beatrice Ask, after she went on the radio to defend racial profiling of passengers on Stockholm's subway.<sup>5</sup>

She also went on television to defend racial profiling in an intensified effort to find undocumented migrants. But then it stopped. I personally still remember, vividly and with utter dismay, the police blocking the exit of my subway station, a wall of tall men dressed in blue uniforms, and how they moved aside as I—a "white" Swedish female—approached, opening a gate for me to get out. This did not make me feel any better.

Is this then unique to Sweden? Why would fiction and journalism that address new issues of the abuse of power, stereotypes, and physical looks in Sweden matter in the United States with its generic diversity? Or anywhere else?

Writing about migrant writers from a literary point of view, Rebecca Walkowitz (2009) suggests that they "address their work to communities of various scales." An understanding of the production and circulation of migrant literature in and from Sweden thus includes a consideration of when diaspora writers aim for translation, the social and textual process of translation, and the politics of untranslatability, as recently discussed by literary theorist Emily Apter (2013: 2) in relation



to world literature. Aware of translational incommensurability, Apter's agenda is yet a "deprovincialization of the canon and the way in which, at its best, it draws on translation to deliver surprising cognitive landscapes hailing from inaccessible linguistic folds."

The complexities of cultural translation are, of course, integral to anthropology. Here, the issue also calls for an examination of how fiction is transposed to other genres, which is especially frequent in Khemiri's work as most of his six novels have been turned into films or plays. The novella *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012) [*I Call My Brothers*], says Khemiri in an interview, "is a story about a main character trying desperately to act normal and the more he tries the less efficient he is." The play has been staged in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Germany and in New York (by theplaycompany NYC) at the New Ohio Theatre Off-Broadway in the West Village. In the promotional video for the New York play, Khemiri explains the origin of the story:

We had like a failed suicide attack in Sweden [a car bomb which only killed the bomber] back in 2010. And after that attack there were a number of people in the city who felt suspicious even though they had nothing to do with this crime. My initial reaction was that I wanted to call my brothers and I wanted to give them advice on how to handle a society full of fear, of stereotypes or clichés or ideas of the other.

Two points in connection with the New York staging of *I Call My Brothers* are useful replies to my question about why this play might matter in the United States. According to the director Erica Schmidt, the first point is that, just after she had read the manuscript, the bombing of the Boston marathon took place; the second point is that not only has Stockholm racial profiling of people walking down the street or going by subway, so also has New York City with the so-called "Stop and Frisk" (as has London, where it is called "Stop and Search") approach, which urges police officers to stop and question pedestrians and frisk them for weapons—this is at least how this effort has often been conceptualized. In relation to the issue of cultural translation then, the global success of the work of Jonas Hassen Khemiri has nothing especial to do with Sweden or any kind of interest in Swedish contemporary life but can be understood as a local variation on the global themes of terrorist crimes and racial profiling. As to the New York version of *I Call My Brothers*, the director explained that it was set in the city: "This is a play happening here, right now, in this moment, in this room, with these people, in New York City!"

Pooneh Rohi (2014b) too, is active as journalist, to some extent. In her newspaper article "And they call me stranger" ("Och de kallar mig främling"), she writes (in Swedish):

I am an involuntary Swede. I have no choice. This is my country, this is my language (...). Without Sweden I am homeless. I cannot chose, cannot change. Am too old and stiff. And yet you call me stranger every time you talk about those you actually should call by their real name: racists.

Rohi's article circles around the idea of home in terms of homelessness, and the designation "stranger." A stranger is also what the protagonist in *Araben (The Arab)* (2014), her first novel, is feeling like as he leads his lonely life in snow-covered Stockholm smelling of ice, a city where he moved decades ago from Iran. For the Arab is actually Persian; again, the issue of physical looks is at stake as he is taken to be an Arab in the Swedish context. This Pooneh Rohi identified as an indication of racialization when I met her for an interview. Pooneh Rohi herself has a middle-class background and is now a PhD student at a university in Sweden. For my interview, she went on:

Racialization concerns everyone who looks different. The first generation and those who were born here. There will absolutely be a movement. Many of us came about twenty years ago. It will be a very political movement of people who share this identification. Our parents were treated incredibly badly. We were not at all as much. Now their children, us, who have the language, we have the codes, we are now in the social elite, we are educated ...

Incidentally, there is a notion that middle-class, second-generation Iranians "continue" the interrupted careers their parents had in Iran, as they in many cases have been confined to menial jobs since they arrived in Sweden.

The Arab, the protagonist in the novel, lives in an empty apartment and sometimes has a job. Sweden is not home to him; he is homeless in his heart. But there is another protagonist in another story in the book that is told parallel to the one about the Arab. It is about a young woman who is so well integrated that people think she was an adopted child. She has succeeded so well that, together with her Swedish boyfriend, she is looking for an exclusive apartment. Her childhood memories from Iran have taken the form of a mirage from the past, a fading scent of salt from the sea, or so she thinks at first. Later in the novel, her longing after "that part of the room that is invisible in the mirror" (Rohi 2014a: 77) gets stronger. Sweden is more home to her than to the Arab, but it is not completely home either. Eventually, the Arab and the young woman meet—not only are they related, they are in fact father and daughter. Incidentally, the two parallel stories that finally merge began as separate short stories; this Pooneh Rohi told me when I asked her about the writing process for the novel.

Looking back at how the definitions of diaspora and diaspora writings accentuate certain aspects in my research thus far, I was struck by the pronounced political orientation in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's work, while the idea of home versus homelessness was obvious in that of Pooneh Rohi. It did not take long, however, before I realized that Khemiri also can be said to investigate home and homelessness, and a political orientation is certainly evident in the work of Rohi, especially in her journalism. Importantly, it was not until I met her for a long interview—which was a pilot interview for this study—that I learnt about the force of her political engagement. Khemiri and Pohi clearly share a concern with the consequences of

how we might see ourselves and how others see us, whether that is about what we look like or who we are.

On a methodological note, the fact that Pooneh Rohi is a PhD student, has studied comparative literature, and especially appreciated discovering postcolonial literature, means that she and I are partly in the same academic discourse. In line with much contemporary ethnography, this is thus research with the anthropologist's counterparts and colleagues (Holmes and Marcus 2005, Ortner 2013), a fact that is changing fieldwork strategies as well as anthropological writing practice.

A few years ago, I was invited to participate as a speaker with Jonas Hassen Khemiri on a panel at Stockholm University organized by anthropology students on "Ethnography and Fiction: A Conversation."<sup>6</sup> Now I conceptualize this, and other social events where I meet the writers and plan to do participant observation with them, in terms of Sherry Ortner's (2013: 26) idea of "interface ethnography": "most relatively closed communities have events where they interact with the public." Just as in my previous study on writing as craft and career among contemporary Irish fiction writers (Wulff 2012 and forthcoming), literary festivals such as the renowned Gothenburg Book Fair and the recently established Stockholm Literature, as well as activities at The Swedish Writers' Association, are among the interface events for this research. I also rely on in-depth interviews. As expected, I am keeping up with new diaspora writings, both fiction and journalism, and I follow some of the writers on social media. Theoretically, the study draws on ideas by Howard Becker (2008): on art worlds as social worlds, including the dynamics of the publishing market and the media.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri introduces himself as a Swedish writer, but how is his work advertised by his publishers? How are diaspora writings selected for publication? Here, the making of a diaspora writer's career (in its varieties) raises issues of competition and collaboration, breakthrough and reputation (cf. Bourdieu 1993), as well as gender and class. One final analytical point before I close: In his book *An Accented Cinema* (2001), Iranian media scholar Hamid Naficy engages with the expanding film genre that focusses on experiences of expatriation in the West by Third World filmmakers.<sup>7</sup> These films are "accented" as they combine voices from the cinematic traditions with voices from exilic and diasporic traditions. In the process, accented films open up new perspectives to a mainstream audience. This is exactly what diaspora writings are doing in Sweden. And while the writers discuss diversity through fiction and journalism, they also diversify the country from within.

### COMMENTARY 1: The making of an anthropological writer

The above text is the outcome of three strands from my upbringing and education that now fuse in my anthropological engagements: literature, ballet, and migration. An early reader, I devoured fairy tales and eventually European classics. My parents also read a lot to me and my brother. The fact that our mother preferred to read stories to us rather than clean the house made a lasting

impression on me concerning what matters in life (cf. Cochran-Smith on the making of a reader [1984]). Another defining feature of my upbringing was that I danced classical ballet intensely for 17 years but had to stop abruptly because of an injury. Later, I returned to the ballet world as a fieldworker to do a study of ballet as a transnational occupation (Wulff 1998). I was burning for ballet, but also for books. Now I conceptualize my upbringing as one of assembling cultural capital. My first subject at university was comparative literature. I already knew I wanted to write and do research, but I was disappointed by the lack of social theory in the Department of Comparative Literature at Stockholm University at the time, in the 1970s. After detours into philosophy and French, I finally found anthropology, and things fell into place; after two weeks, I knew I was aiming for a PhD in anthropology. It would take some years, but eventually the fieldwork for my PhD took me to South London and an inner-city area. I was researching young black and white teenage girls and issues of friendship and ethnicity. The black girls were born in England to parents who had immigrated from West Africa and the West Indies (Wulff 1988, 1995).

After completing my PhD, I was teaching and enjoying it. But I was craving more research and writing. There were emerging discussions on globalization and transnational connections in anthropology and on occupational cultures. The Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University was a forerunner in this. So one evening, in my kitchen, it dawned on me that I could do a study of dancers. Not only were they a case in point as a transnational occupational culture, but my previous experience of dancing would be useful. This I realized then, and with time I would note, that virtually all anthropological and sociological studies of physical activities such as dance and sports were conducted by scholars who used to take part in these activities or learnt them while in the field. Those of us who are involved in such activities all know that there is an understanding in the actual practice (Wulff 2008a,b). Coming back to the ballet world as a fieldworker turned out to be a revelation. Having struggled with two conflicting sides of my personality, the artistic and the intellectual sides, that did not match, I found that they suddenly did, as I had found how to make use of both of them (Wulff 1998a)! This revelation was also a release of a true research orientation. Since then, I have focused my research on expressive cultural forms: the social worlds of dance, literature, and visual culture.

I did two consecutive major studies of dance. After finishing the one on ballet as a transnational occupation, I went on to do a study of dance in Ireland in terms of memory and mobility (Wulff 2007). While fieldworking in Ireland for this study, I was, of course, aware of the great canon of Irish literature, not least from my father's explications of his favorite Irish authors during dinner conversations when I was growing up. It is often said that serendipity plays a leading role in fieldwork and that we should allow it to. Follow the flow.

Here is what happened: I was in the leading book shop in Dublin, Hodges Figgis, during my fieldwork for the dance study. Browsing, I saw a novel titled *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. I had never heard of her, nor did I know how to pronounce her name. But the book looked promising; it was

about a group of teenagers who went to an Irish-language school in the west of Ireland in the summer of 1972. As a part of learning the Irish language, they also learnt Irish dance at a *céili* (dance gathering), which is at the center of this coming-of-age story. Impressed by the style and the story of this award-winning novel, I conducted an interview with the author. It took some networking, via dance interlocutors, to reach her, but eventually I did. It turned out that her (now late) husband was Swedish. Eventually, Éilís and I became friends. She was my key interlocutor in my next study, the one on writing as craft and career in Ireland (Wulff forthcoming [a]).

As I was finishing that study, and because I had done it and thus had some expertise in the anthropology of literature, I was invited by Stefan Helgesson, professor of English at Stockholm University, to join the steering committee of a large-scale program proposal on “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics in World Literatures,” which he was planning to submit to The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. So there I was, working with literary scholars at Stockholm University, finding it incredibly inspiring. I should make it clear that these literary scholars have a special interest in anthropology, and I (and the other anthropologists I have recruited to the program) have an equivalent interest in literary studies. This mutual orientation is the basis for multi-disciplinary collaboration—something that otherwise can be a bit of a culture shock, with turf tensions.

This is thus my intellectual biography until now, and the backdrop for how the above text was composed—at least some of it. Writing this commentary, I am aware that I select what to include and phrase it according to the genre and stipulated word count of this chapter. Some circumstances are too personal to mention, others too complex. In any case, the essay is the first published text emanating from my study of diaspora and migrant writers in Sweden and their work in the Stockholm University program on World Literatures. As it started this year, in 2016, I have just about begun my research, as a 10 per cent part of my work load. My participation in the research program will increase during the coming years up to about 30–40 per cent. Like many, if not most, active anthropologists in the twenty-first century, I juggle research, teaching, and administration, and this impacts on how I find writing time. I am expected to attract as much research funding as possible to my department. In addition to the project on diaspora writers in Sweden, I am thus also involved in a cultural heritage project on “Collecting Social Photos” based at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm. I teach one course on “Communication and Aesthetics” each semester, and I do some student supervision. My administrative load is light. It consists of duties as deputy head of department, stepping in for the head now and then, writing some departmental reports, and so on.

In order to be able to perform all these tasks of such different natures, my schedule has to be well organized. There is not much leeway for improvisation. This is the way I work: I plan every week in great detail, about six months in advance, often longer. I set aside full days and weeks for writing. For a standard academic text, I plan to write about 500 words per day, unless there are long chunks of ethnographic description, in which case I can reach 1,000 words in a

full day. When I have an important deadline looming for a book chapter, a journal article, or a conference paper, let alone a whole book, I decline all invitations, from conferences to personal references, even though references are a tricky issue. I get requests for references every month, often several. There are times when I write two references in a week for colleagues in Europe and the United States who are applying for jobs, promotions, or research funding. One thing I can control, though, is when and for how long I check emails or look at Swedish Television's news site, with breaking news updates, or spend time on Facebook (the only social media where I am active). I reduce these activities to twice, or perhaps thrice, daily on a writing day.

## COMMENTARY 2: Out of desire and technique springs creativity

Kristen Ghodsee's *From Notes to Narrative: Writing Ethnographies that Everyone Can Read* (2016) is "a passionate plea for accessible ethnographic writing" (Wulff forthcoming [b]). It is a writing manual primarily for doctoral students but also for senior scholars who can still improve their writing. The book is built on a passion for writing, which Ghodsee, anthropological writer and blogger, conveys convincingly. This is especially salient in the chapter "Choose a Subject You Love," as we indeed live for many years with our writing subjects. This fits very well with my experience of returning to the ballet world as a fieldworker, which I described above, and the momentous decision that, from then on, my research was going to be about expressive culture and aesthetics.

In relation to this, two points from my research in the ballet world in the 1990s are useful for an understanding of how my anthropological writing happens. The first point was an agenda statement by the American choreographer William Forsythe, who was director of the contemporary ballet company Ballet Frankfurt in Frankfurt-am-Main at the time. When I asked him what qualities he was looking for in a dancer when he made his selections for Ballet Frankfurt, his was a robust reply: "desire and rigour" (Wulff 1998a: 29, see also Wulff 1998b). The desire that Forsythe talks about is, of course, the same quality that Ghodsee has as a writer and wants to evoke in other anthropological writers. It is not a coincidence that both Forsythe and Ghodsee refer to strong engagements as driving forces in their respective lines of work—strong engagements are necessary for artistic and academic pursuits, not least because they depend on persistence. A choreographer and a writer continue until the dance and the text are finished. But there are inevitably hurdles on the way. Even a seasoned writer will experience moments of anxiety, minor or major, with every piece short or long; with books, there will be many such moments. When they turn into a more serious state, they can be identified as writer's block. As Ghodsee says, writer's block is a widespread state, but there is no one strategy to get out of it. We all have to develop our individual writing routines that tend to change with different phases in career and family commitments. I need, again, hours and hours in front of me to fill with writing and then revising. While I stay in front of my screen for as long as I possibly can, I do take essential

breaks when I go for a swim or a brisk walk. This is always productive. During those physical activities, precise formulations come to me. Movement liberates the thought. Still, the amount of time needed in front of the screen has to be taken seriously. Writing takes a long time. And deadlines make us finish. Still, it does not seem to have occurred to most of us that aiming to submit a book chapter or journal article *before* the deadline is actually what works best. It is wise to leave a time buffer for life's contingencies and thereby avoid any stressful "dancing on the deadline" (cf. Rozental and Wennersten 2014).<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, when I interviewed Roddy Doyle, a prolific Irish writer who is probably best known for the novel *The Commitments* (1987) (which has been made into a film as well as a musical show in London's West End), I asked how he handles writer's block. His reply was quick and firm (Wulff forthcoming):

No. There are times when things are not going well. I just write through them! If I weren't working particularly well—I keep writing. Later I read through it, if I see it's a bit messy, some of it you can use.

Writing through writer's block is what I do, too. That way, I do not really get it either. I have never believed in fretting about writing. Just do it! Inspiration will come as I write, and before long I find myself inside my *writing bubble*. It keeps happening that this second stage makes me so unaware of the world around me that I have forgotten to pick up the laundry from the washing machines in the shared laundry room in the building where I live; or, even worse, left a pot of water for my tea boiling over. The key to successful writing is to start writing routinely, even, as Roddy Doyle says, on a bad day. An individual writing ritual also depends on mere materiality, at least for me. Some writers are oblivious to their surroundings and just continue to write, no matter where they are, whether on a plane or in a noisy café. I need a quiet room and a desk of my own that I can return to, where I keep my writing gear laid out around my laptop: an alarm clock to keep track of time (especially when my writing is going slowly and I must not stop too early), a note pad for making new notes, pens (mostly blue but also green and black for different categories of notes), the *Random House Webster's Dictionary*, piles of books and papers, fieldnotes, and an external disk drive made of shining steel for security copying.

Writers need breaks for recharging while staying in the mood of the emerging text. Now I am not thinking about physical activities, but other activities we do as gratifications between *writing bouts* such as listening to music, calling a friend, or even leaving the house to go shopping ... Such activities can easily turn into procrastination, though, if not monitored carefully (cf. Rozental and Wennersten 2014). The Internet is certainly a great danger here. I mentioned social media, but there is also gaming, which, even on a low level, can be disruptive. Getting side-tracked while searching for something online is probably common (students tell me) and thus has to be avoided. My mother had her priorities right: Reading stories to us children was more important than cleaning the house. It not only made me a reader; in the long run, it also contributed to my trajectory toward



becoming an anthropological writer. Reading is a prerequisite to writing. Some people are unable to write if the room or flat or house is not spick and span, while for others cleaning and putting things in order around the house is a way of thinking, of sorting a piece of writing. Roddy Doyle keeps a rather regimented writing schedule, he told me. In the morning, he writes for a couple of hours in his study in the attic, then he watches the BBC's football page, then he writes some more, has lunch, and writes some more, but stops in time for his children to come home from school (Wulff 2016, forthcoming [a]).

So, this account of the importance of strong engagement for writing was the first point from my research in the ballet world that is useful for an understanding of how writing happens. The second point goes back to how a dancer is evaluated in the ballet world. Every single dancer, choreographer, ballet director, and critic I interviewed and observed, during almost two years of participant observation in the ballet world, said and behaved according to the idea that what is at stake is *technique* and *artistry*. Both qualities are necessary in a top dancer. Without technique, there can be no artistry for a dancer; indeed, most significantly, artistry grows out of technique. There are dancers who are exceptional technically, but this is not enough to be ranked as a top dancer (Wulff 1998: 104, forthcoming [a]). This notion of technique and artistry parallels how the writing process happens: Writers also have to learn a writing technique to do with style and structure (enabled by the writing routine I discussed above). Ghodsee (2016) develops techniques from creative writing further, such as how to write about people, place, plot, and dialogue, which are central in ethnographic writing as well. As anthropological texts are expected to be composed by a combination of ethnography and theory (albeit in many different ways and with different proportions), Ghodsee (2016) has a chapter called "Integrate Your Theory," wherein she acknowledges that some anthropologists choose field according to theoretical interests, while others include it in the background of the research and it is less present in their texts.

There is one more pivotal parallel with ballet. Rehearsals are in studios with mirrored walls. The mirrors are meant not only to show the dancers how they look when they do their steps, but also to provide them with opportunities to learn what a certain combination of steps *feel like* when they are finally executed in a precise way. This is how the steps, the technique, of ballet productions are learnt. When the dancers know the steps and the premiere is approaching, a curtain is drawn to cover the mirrors. Now the dancers must forget what they look like in the mirror, forget the technique. I have described this moment in terms of how dancers "move from technique to artistry; it is in a sense the moment when they start to dance. Liberated from the mirror, their steps become more expressive" (Wulff 1998a: 8). Later, on stage, with the response from an audience, the dancers tell stories through their dance. This is when they might reach into a feeling of flow (Csikzentmihalyi 1975). Not that it happens in every performance, and rarely during an entire three hours performance, but occasionally a special zone of new artistry is created. Among writers, anthropological and others, this artistry is, of course, our creativity. My argument is that the process is the same: Out of desire and technique springs a writer's creativity (cf. Wulff forthcoming [a]).



### COMMENTARY 3: The genealogy of the essay

Preparations for the program proposal on World Literatures had started in 2012 and continued until 2015, with text seminars, small workshops, and a couple of bigger conferences at Stockholm University. I even got to go to the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association in Toronto, Canada, and to present a paper in a literary anthropological session. Going back to an early idea I had when I was still in my first field, researching ethnicity in an inner city area of South London in the 1980s, I was considering the possibility of doing a project on migrant writers and their fiction in Britain. I identified a timeline of three generations of writers and their work that represented different phases of living in London as a migrant—different levels of integration. It was a joy to return to *The Lonely Londoners* ([1956] 1985) by Samuel Selvon, originally from Trinidad. I quoted the novel in my PhD thesis and was even in touch with Selvon asking for permission to do so. In the middle on the timeline, I put *Fruit of the Lemon* published in 1999 by Andrea Levy, and the last and third stage on the timeline was *NW* (2012) (meaning the postal code of North West London) by Zadie Smith, who had her breakthrough with *White Teeth* (2000). But there were the logistics; the literary world, even that of migrant writers, in London is big and sprawling like the city itself. It would be unlikely that I could do anything worth calling anthropological fieldwork. So I changed track and turned my attention to diaspora writers in Sweden instead. It did not take long after I had started reading the fiction and journalism of the latter that I realized that this project would not only be feasible, but also intellectually most rewarding. Even though there are literary festivals in many places now across Sweden, this literary scene is on the whole enacted in Stockholm. I was aware of the political paradox in Sweden, in that it that prides itself on being an inclusive nation, welcoming migrants, yet the anti-immigration party is growing. Alas, I was to learn so much more about my own country, such as what it is like to look Mediterranean or Asian or African. With the recent refugee crisis, and the huge number of newcomers to Sweden, my project is even more urgent. But it would take a while before I got going.

It was in December 2013 that I first sat down to design my project on diaspora writers in Sweden, one of 26 sub-projects for the program proposal. I was allowed an abstract of 650 words. This may seem short, but it still holds as the gist of my project—and it is the point of departure of my “Text” here. We put an enormous amount of work into the program proposal, including budget details, travel costs, and, not least, publication plans. The proposal was rejected. But we were (curiously) encouraged to reapply. So we did, this time after organizing yet another conference where all potential participants were present. This did result in a proposal that was, as requested, more integrated. While waiting for the next result from the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, which would take almost a year, I presented the essay as a paper at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association and at the Swedish Anthropological Association, slightly tweaking the title and the approach in line with the different session topics. I was also invited to give a seminar on my planned research in the Transnational Migration series in my department and at the Centre for Languages and Literature

at Lund University. I thus expanded my conference papers and, again, changed the title somewhat.

In my monthly Writing Anthropology Workshop for Stockholm Master's students, I assign the article "Anatomy of an Article: The Peer-Review Process as Method" by Neha Vora and Tom Boellstorff (2012: 581–582).<sup>9</sup> Vora was editorial assistant and Boellstorff editor-in-chief of *American Anthropologist*. As they say in an article for this journal, "there should be effective engagement both with the data (ethnographic or otherwise, as in an archeological analysis) and with the relevant literatures and debates." This applies to most anthropological texts. Looking back at how "Text" was composed, then, I included data in the form of materials from my pilot interview with Pooneh Rohi, quotes from fiction and journalism by Rohi and Khemiri, *YouTube* clips of Khemiri and theater people in New York, the play *I Call My Brothers* by Khemiri that I saw in Stockholm, and my own embarrassing experience of racial profiling in the Stockholm subway. The relevant literature consists of a backdrop of literary studies of migrant and diaspora literature in Sweden, which, together with anthropological and sociological studies of diaspora, contribute to the debate over the concepts of "diaspora," "the diasporic," and "migration." Theoretically, "Text" is also organized around Howard Becker's idea of art worlds in relation to this literary world as a social world where the publishing market and the media are crucial—yet this is only mentioned in passing, which is one indication of the early stages of the research. Bourdieu is there (with a writer's reputation and competition), albeit hidden in brackets, leaving considerable room for later expansion. As expected, I include a section on world literatures, especially the debate on untranslatability by literary theorist Emily Apter. I end "Text" by way of an analytical thought on the notion of "accented cinema" as suggested by Iranian media scholar Hamid Naficy, which is illuminating for my research, but, again, to be developed further on as I get more data. Accordingly, I account for planned methodological strategies such as attending literary festivals and other literary events that Ortner (2013) has termed "interface events," as well as conducting in-depth interviews. As a way to show my credentials, I mention that I did this in "my previous study on writing as craft and career among contemporary Irish fiction writers." There are traces of the research application in "Text," also in the form of questions that I look forward to exploring during the coming years.

It goes without saying that I also look forward to spending more time writing up my research. And as I mention, finally, I will have the writers in the study in mind as some of the potential readers of the texts I shall write in future years.

## Notes

- 1 There is an indigenous, very small Sami group of about 20,000 in the North of Sweden. The total population of Sweden is about 9.6 million.
- 2 This refers to the abstract for the executive session "Writing Diaspora and European Imaginaries: Engaging with Anthropology's Interlocutors," which Deborah Reed-Danahay and I organized at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., 3–7 December, 2014.
- 3 Avtar Brah's (1996) concept "diasporic spaces" has also been used quite widely.

- 4 This is a literary anthropological study that is a part of the program “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics in World Literatures” funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, RJ) 2016–2021.
- 5 This was referred to as the REVA project, which was short for *Rättsäkerhet och effektivt verkställningsarbete* (“Legal security and efficient implementation work”), a collaboration between the border police, the migration board, and the correctional treatment system.
- 6 This title, as well as quotes from interviews, fiction, and journalism in Swedish, have been translated into English by the essay author.
- 7 I am grateful to Shahram Khosravi for suggesting this reference.
- 8 1. The Swedish book *Dansa på Deadline: Uppskjutandets Psykologi* (2014) by Alexander Rozental and Lina Wennersten deals with procrastination. In English, its telling title would be *Dancing on the Deadline: The Psychology of Delaying*.
- 9 Writing Anthropology Workshop is a popular course that was created by Anette Nyqvist, who, not least because of her background in journalism, has a special interest in writing. See also Nyqvist (2016).

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# 9

## Editor's introduction

Morten Nielsen's chapter focuses on the often tense and always unstable relationship between ethnographical data and theoretical insights in the process of writing up an anthropological account. The chapter is divided into two sections: It opens with the full article 'Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism' that was published in *Social Anthropology* in 2010 and continues with a commentary that traces its origin. The article explores forms of social relatedness among residents living in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique. Based on the idea that reciprocal encounters create distances rather than approximation, the article introduces the notion of 'contrapuntal cosmopolitanism' to designate the production of viable (reciprocal) distances in unfamiliar milieux peopled by important but also capricious others. In the COMMENTARY, I discuss how I developed these analytical ideas through a provisional levelling out of scalar differences between ethnographic data and theoretical arguments. In this and all other writings, I access ethnographic and theoretical material as coded data using a software programme for qualitative coding. This establishes a provisional – and highly visual – conceptual assemblage of otherwise detached information, which appears as if on the same level of abstraction. Defining this approach as 'dialogic aesthetics', I outline the methodological benefits and challenges of working with ethnographic data and theoretical insights based on their aesthetic suitability for making provisional connections irrespective of scale and level of abstraction.

# DIALOGIC AESTHETICS

## Notes and nodes in analogical software coding

*Morten Nielsen*

### TEXT

TEXT is the full article ‘Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism: Distantiation as social relatedness among house-builders in Maputo, Mozambique.’ It was published in *Social Anthropology* 18(4): 396–402 in 2010.

From the mid-18th Century *Encyclopédie*, we learn that a ‘cosmopolitan’ is ‘a man without a fixed abode, or better, a man who is nowhere a stranger’ (Diderot and d’Alembert 1751–65:4, 297 in Cheah 2006:487). Although this conceptualisation might indicate an equivalence to rootlessness, we should, Cheah tells us, rather imagine a form of belonging that ‘involves the transcendence of the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country’ (2006:487). In short, as a particular form of social sensibility, cosmopolitanism refers to, and here I cite Fardon, ‘a capacity to reach beyond cultural difference’ (2008:238). Based on this initial reading, an imminent analytical task would obviously be to identify those cosmopolitan capacities which enable individual agents to rise, so to speak, above their ‘proximal categorizations and identifications of nation, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, locale and so on’ (Rapport 2006:24). Still, an increasing number of people are cast in worlds which fundamentally lack a fit between the material interconnectedness brought about by intense global flows and the degree of formation of non-local solidarities (Tsing 2005; cf. Hannerz 1987). The global society so important to cosmopolitan writers seems to lack behind, as it were, the rapidly expanding flows of material and economic resources and so our objective might perhaps be phrased differently. Let me again return to Fardon, whose ethical considerations regarding the unstable political environment in Nigeria might serve our purpose here as well. Fardon thus asks, ‘[w]hen is it reasonable to anticipate people will embrace fallibilism and pluralism? When, most basically, can they *afford* to do so?’ (2008:250, emphasis added).

In this article, I wish to rehearse one analytical argument which can be taken as a tentative response to Fardon's pertinent question. Based on prior and ongoing ethnographic research in peri-urban areas of Maputo, Mozambique, I shall explore forms of social relatedness which have as their cosmological and, indeed, ontological premise that the universe is only partially illuminated and so social interaction *ipso facto* occurs in a world that is both unknown and potentially dangerous. As I will show, reciprocal encounters are therefore based on distance rather than proximity. Although people acknowledge the crucial importance of social others, it is equally important to maintain appropriate distances in order to avoid awakening unwanted desires. I will consequently introduce the notion of *contrapuntal cosmopolitanism* to designate *the production of viable (reciprocal) distances in unfamiliar milieux peopled by important but also capricious others*. Before venturing into the ethnographical account, however, let me briefly make some initial remarks on the notion of the stranger in contemporary cosmopolitan writings.

### ***The stranger***

According to Kant, a global cosmopolitan order needs to be founded on a universal law of hospitality allowing us to 'venture out as strangers and sojourn in other territories' (Werbner 2008b:2). It is thus 'the right of a stranger', Kant says, 'not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory' (1968:213–216). Within contemporary cosmopolitan studies, Kant's emphasis on transgressing the distinction between stranger and friend continues to hold sway although emphasis has shifted towards the multiple ways that local agents connect and establish senses of belonging to multiple and only partially known places (Josephides 2003; Werbner 2008a). What I find of particular interest in these recent studies is the ubiquitous emphasis on what Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* calls 'the kindness of strangers'. According to Cheah and Robbins, it is consequently through momentary attachments between strangers in a field which is 'less than kin or friendship but a good deal more than polite or innocent nonrelation' that 'intellectual order and accountability' is introduced in the new world of international civil society (1998:3, 9).

Surely the continuous attempts at carving out supra-local domains capable of establishing momentary equilibriums between counter-acting social forces have had significant regulatory effects on a global scale. And in this regard, the imagery of the 'kindness of strangers' undoubtedly captures the essence of these political ideals. I remain sceptical, however, whether there is any mileage to be gained from using the concept as an all-embracing analytical trope when exploring different forms of cosmopolitan sensibilities. First, although people everywhere live global lives, in many instances they are coerced to do so by displacement and upheavals. In other words, the very impetus for venturing into unknown territories is based on enforced distance to the familiar rather than voluntary approximation towards the new. Such recalcitrant global encounters are perhaps best understood as what Clifford calls 'discrepant cosmopolitanism' which avoids 'the excessive localism of

particularist cultural relativism, as well as the overly global vision of a capitalist or technocratic monoculture' (1997:36). Second, when occupying 'strange lands' (pace Werbner 2008b:2), recognition of the other is frequently based on hostility rather than hospitality (Fardon 2008:240). It is thus my contention that although cosmopolitan sensibilities are part and parcel of any social fabric, they frequently arise through distance rather than approximation. What we need to explore, then, are *the multiple and heterogeneous ways that differently positioned agents produce viable distances in unknown territories by which to engage in potentially beneficial exchanges*. Let me therefore now turn to an ethnographic account from Maputo, Mozambique, in order to unfold how relatedness arises through imitation and distantiation. I start out briefly outlining key features of social cosmologies in Southern Mozambique before presenting an extended case study.

### ***Social cosmologies in Southern Mozambique***

According to widely shared cosmological beliefs in Southern Mozambique, the archetype for the physical world is a cosmic plane of immanence where all elements exist as pure movement in a chaotic open whole. In order properly to inhabit the physical world and thus extract benefits from disorder, it is consequently of paramount importance to organize the chaos and establish durable distinctions separating the inhabitable from the uninhabitable; order from chaos, e.g. through propitiatory rituals, house-building and everyday cleaning of land (*limpeza*) (Nielsen 2008:132–136). Still, despite continuous efforts at manipulating counteracting forces, they might backfire at any moment. All phenomena contain both constructive and destructive potentials and it is always uncertain whether they operate in beneficial or malevolent ways (West 2005:78, 193; 1996:25).

When the world is structured by crucial but constantly counteracting forces, social relationships tend to be equally ambiguous. To people in Southern Mozambique, the source of their agency is located outside themselves in their relationships to people and things in the surrounding world. Although the counterpart might at some future point reveal itself to be detrimental, people are essentially what their relations to others make them be, whether this other is a close relative, an inefficient state official or a deceased ancestor still asserting some form of dominance. However, these reciprocal ties might at any time backfire leaving the initiating agent exposed to the intrusive strategies of others. For many Mozambicans in the Southern region, then, everyday life signifies continuous latent exposures to capricious forces beyond their control. Like the Soweto 'world of witches' so vividly described by Ashforth (2005:69), life is built on a 'presumption of malice' where one has to assume that anyone with the motive to cause harm *will* cause harm. Indeed, not everything is known and what is known is that power works in hidden and often capricious ways. Or, put somewhat different: although chaos is a precondition to order, it constantly threatens to circumvent its momentary equilibrium.

From this admittedly sketchy outline of social cosmologies in Southern Mozambique, let me now turn to an ethnographic case study of how local agents



cast in an unstable urban environment manage to produce viable distances to important but potentially malevolent others, before concluding with some remarks on the notion of contrapuntal cosmopolitanism.

### *The administrator's house*

On 31 October 2001, the Maputo Municipality authored the demolition of five cement-houses in Mulwene, a peri-urban neighbourhood on Maputo's northern periphery. The buildings had apparently been erected without proper building permits in an area reserved for an old people's home which was projected to be constructed shortly. A local community chief had informally sold off land within the reserved area and now 22 families were occupying irregular plots while hoping to be allocated formal use rights. According to residents living in the area, the projected construction project would cover less than a third of the reserved area and so they would most likely be allocated use rights to the plots they had been occupying illegally.

In 2000, Mulwene became the centre of public attention when it served as resettlement zone for the disaster victims after the devastating flooding which hit Mozambique during the first three months of the year. Realising the opportunities for creating a neighbourhood from scratch, the Maputo Municipality soon decided that the hitherto only partially occupied neighbourhood should be a 'model neighbourhood' (*bairro modelo*), with all the 'requirements that constitute adequate habitation', i.e. stable road net, functional water system and land parceling in accordance with a fixed set of urban norms according to which legitimate residents would acquire use rights to 15 × 30 metre plots in which cement houses should be located three metres from the boundary line towards the street. However, given overall administrative weaknesses created through failed socialist schemes after Mozambican independence in 1975, followed by the more recent adoption of neo-liberal economic policies, Mozambique has proved completely incapable of realising such ambitious visions. Thus, newcomers currently access land informally through local chiefs and civil servants who are bribed to parcel out land irrespective of its lack of a legal basis (Nielsen 2007b).

The forceful removal of the illegally erected houses seriously affected senses of security among residents in the area reserved for the old people's home. Fearing that their homes might be demolished, all plans of building cement houses were either postponed or completely abandoned. Despite the insecurities surrounding informal occupancy in the area, however, one impressive building project was initiated. In March 2005, the current administrator in Urban District 3, Victória Ussene, had apparently allocated a huge piece of land informally to the administrator in Marracuene who wanted to build a house for his mistress. I visited the site shortly afterwards, and it was indeed apparent that a construction project had been started. Sacks of cement were piled up and several local bricklayers were busy mixing sand and cement while erecting the first layers of a fence to surround what was at least a 30 × 30 metre plot. Shortly afterwards, the area was inspected by the local community

chief and an architect who registered all residents and measured the section of the area already inhabited. During the next two weekends, they parcelled out two blocks consisting of 16 plots (15 × 30 metres each) which were subsequently allocated to the residents who had previously occupied irregular pieces of land in the area.

### ***Interlude: The production of distance***

Before proceeding with the empirical account, we need to make a brief analytical digression in order to properly unfold key components of what I initially defined as *contrapuntal cosmopolitanism*. Let me start with Werbner's succinct statement that 'cosmopolitans insist on the human capacity to imagine the world from an Other's perspective and to imagine the possibility of a borderless world of cultural plurality' (2008b:2). In this sense, a cosmopolitan perspective is a way of coming to terms with difference in contexts of diversity; and, as I will argue, this is particularly so in relation to contrapuntal others. Seeing the world from an Other's perspective obviously entails an imaginary point of view from where one's own position is visible and, equally important, exterior in relation to the former. There is so to speak, a quantitative distance between self and other who remain outside and thus irreducible to each other in order for reciprocal exchanges to occur. If we take as a premise that any distance implies two end-points, or positions if you like, between which there can be established series of exchanges with unique rhythms and velocities, it logically follows that one's capacities to act are coextensive with the distance produced between self and other. In a nutshell, *the individual positions – or perspectives – are produced by the distance between them rather than vice-versa*. This is essentially what I take to be the key feature of contrapuntal cosmopolitanism and in order to substantiate this idea, let me once more return to the socio-cultural universe in Mulwene. As I will argue, informal housebuilding projects can be seen as a particular form of contrapuntal cosmopolitanism which produces viable (reciprocal) distances in an unfamiliar milieu peopled by important but also capricious others.

### ***Standing in the shadow of power***

I visited the area originally reserved for the old people's home in June 2005 when the architect and the community leader were about to complete the parcelling out of the two blocks. Outside the administrator's building site, I met Reugénio, his nearby neighbour, who was living in a two-room reed-hut with his wife and three children while saving up money to build a cementhouse. 'We're not worried anymore', Reugénio assured me with a smile. 'With the administrator here, they can't throw us out. Now, we want to build real houses as well.' Indeed, during the coming months, residents in the area commenced building projects in the plots parcelled out by the architect and the community chief. As Reugénio later explained, although the presence of the district administrator from Marracuene was considered as a potential threat to their continued occupancy, his construction project also cast a legitimizing light on their hitherto informal settlement. The building project

was undoubtedly ‘on the margins of the law’, as Reugénio eloquently put it, but it indicated how secure occupancy might be achieved. Hence, it was Reugénio and a small group of residents who contacted the architect through a local community leader and paid him to parcel out the area so that the two blocks were laid out in alignment with the district administrator’s plot. According to state and municipal agents, the informal parcelling-out of the area did, in fact, transform the status of the residents. Whereas previously they were considered as illegal squatters who could be removed by force, they were now defined as potentially legitimate residents. As the head of the urbanization department at the Maputo Municipality argued, if people were occupying parcelled-out plots adjacent to an administrator’s building site, they had to be legitimate residents. Furthermore, considering the missing administrative capacities, informal occupancy in Mulwene was frequently legitimised provided it adhered to the urban ideals associated with the initial aspirations of creating a ‘model neighbourhood’, i.e. cement houses located three metre from plot limits in 15 × 30 metre parcelled-out plots. We might therefore argue that the parcelling-out of the area near the administrator’s house established an appropriate distance to potentially malignant others. Seeing themselves from the perspective of the state, Reugénio and his fellow residents knew that the only way of creating a secure future in an unstable social environment would be to align themselves with those forces (i.e. the administrator’s building project) which were equally desirable and dangerous. Put somewhat differently, by parcelling out the area, the residents were making themselves visible in order to disappear in the eyes of an erratic other without which social existence in the city would be impossible.

### ***Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism***

If, as Beck argues, a cosmopolitan perspective is grounded in a negotiation of and with otherness (2002), then, surely, this must include elements of ‘reflexive self-distanciation’ (Werbner 2008b:18) whereby individual agents momentarily seek to position themselves as their primary contrapuntal other. Through this perspectival displacement between self and other, a social distance emerges which demarcates, so to speak, the scope for reciprocal interactions. In this regard, I find Robbins’s argument that ‘actually existing cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance’ (1998:3) particularly pertinent. In this text I have thus been guided by the idea of seeing cosmopolitanism as attachment at a distance. I have argued that the idea of the ‘kindness of strangers’ has limited analytical purchase when studying local cosmopolitan encounters. Rather than focussing on social approximation, I have suggested that we explore how people distance themselves from others and through that distance establish viable reciprocal relationships. As I have furthermore outlined through the empirical case study, this approach is particularly appropriate when exploring social life in unknown milieux peopled by potentially malevolent strangers, such as district administrators and local community chiefs. Indeed, in Mulwene, house-building activities can be seen as creative attempts at producing viable distances in a partially illuminated

socio-cultural universe where capricious forces constantly threaten to circumvent any momentary equilibrium. To paraphrase Corsín Jimenez, house-building is here 'a matter of finding the right balance between the visible and the invisible elements of social life' (2008:180) which will hopefully open towards reciprocal exchanges with important but also potentially dangerous others. When the group of informal residents consolidated their occupancy by contracting an architect to parcel out the area, they were not merely imitating the workings of power. Rather, they were communicating in a widely shared aesthetic language in an attempt to enforce upon a recalcitrant world the need to recognise their position as unique but also at a viable distance from important others. As a reflection of what I have called contrapuntal cosmopolitanism, it is a kind of perspectival displacement where the individual agent makes him- or herself available in a form which can be recognised by the other. In order for an agent to elicit an effect from an Other, he or she must consequently manifest themselves in particular concrete ways (Strathern 1999:259), and in the socio-cultural environment in Mulwene, this is equivalent to building cement houses in parcelled-out plots.

Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism is thus about finding the appropriate distance to capricious others through ideational, communicative and physical media so that reciprocal exchanges can be realised without simultaneously being attacked by malevolent or greedy counterparts. Although highly volatile and exposed to shifting socio-political agendas, it is through such forms of contrapuntal cosmopolitanism that people living on the fringes of the Mozambican society manage to engage with important but also capricious others in unfamiliar social milieux.

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## COMMENTARY

In the preceding text-piece, I engaged in a discussion about the status of the 'cosmopolitan stranger' through a case study, which outlined how social distances are produced in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique. It was, in other words, the ethnographic data that opened towards a critical examination of an abstract theoretical figure. In this commentary, I focus on how this analytical approach was developed and made its way into the text-piece.

### *Notes and nodes*

In order to examine the figure of the 'cosmopolitan stranger' through my ethnography, it was crucial to bracket the distinction between individual levels of abstraction. As I will outline, this was done through a provisional levelling out of scalar differences between ethnographic data and theoretical arguments.

I access my fieldwork data as coded information. All my ethnographic material is categorised using a software programme for qualitative coding (Nvivo 11 for Mac), which allows me to group notes, interview transcriptions, photos and sound-bites together, for example, as case studies or loosely defined thematic

taxonomies. In order for me to structure my data chronologically, each document or file that is imported to the software programme is given a name corresponding to the date it was originally made. Hence, when I categorise a whole document or a smaller piece of a text, say, as ‘belonging’ to the group of data pertaining to the case study about the administrator’s house outlined in the text-piece above (these groupings are called *nodes*), it is automatically inserted in a consecutive order, so that when the particular node is printed out, I get a chronological account.

There is no coherence or closure to the way I code my ethnographic data. I think of the different nodes (thematic and case-based alike) merely as momentary entry points that allow me to continuously mould or shape my material in multiple and often contrasting ways. I will, for example, print out and compare two different nodes (say, the grouping of data that makes up the case study about the administrator’s house and a thematic one regarding the production of social distances among residents in Mulwene) in order to imagine new argumentative lines cross-cutting both, and this will potentially lead to the creation of a third node (or the deletion of a previous one) (see Figure 9.1).

Parallel to my coding of ethnographic material, I have taken extensive notes for nearly all texts I read, and these are organised on my computer in thematic folders. In the past, I have used these notes as tools for returning to (and remembering) the lines of arguments I wished to engage with in my own texts. In fact, I find that I rarely re-read the original article or book, relying instead on my written notes, which come to serve as a kind of textual proxy. Still, as the number of notes increased, I became equally frustrated about spending excessive amounts of time searching for the correct notes. Basically, I thought, it required too many unprofitable readings of notes in order to locate the right one. I therefore started coding all the notes I had taken for books and articles exactly as I had previously done

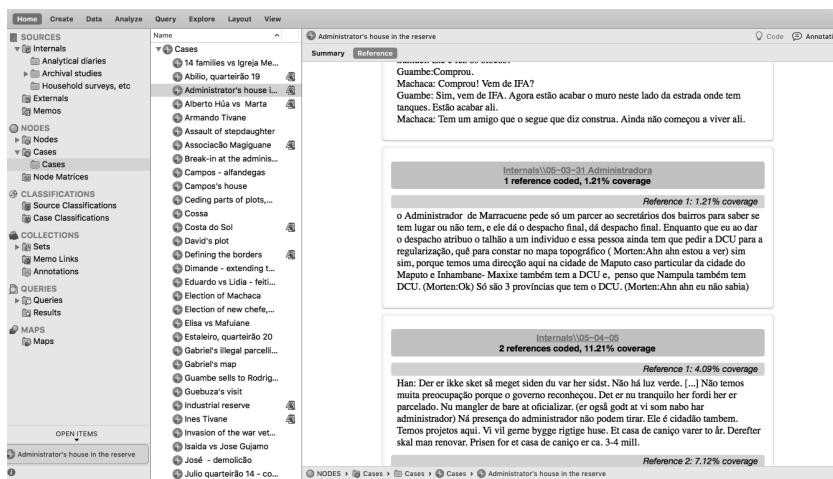


FIGURE 9.1 N-Vivo screen showing fieldnotes and interview excerpts regarding the administrator’s house (the case study used in the text-piece above) coded as a node (column to the right). The middle column shows titles of other ethnographic case-studies as nodes.

with my ethnographic material, that is, importing individual documents to N-Vivo and categorising my notes as nodes. To take one example, under one taxonomic tree that I defined as ‘cosmopolitanism’, I have three individual nodes (‘conceptual genealogy’, ‘cosmopolitanism and the nation-state’ and ‘the stranger’), each of which comprises pieces of text cut from my original notes to books and articles (see Figures 9.2 and 9.3).

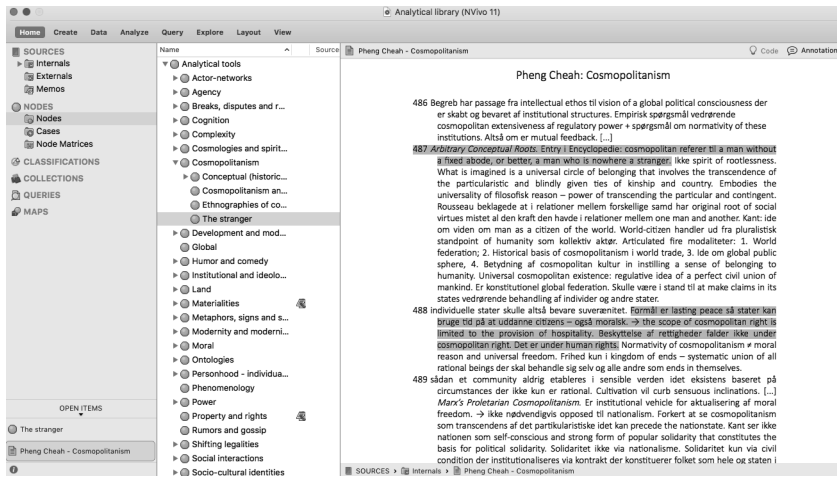


FIGURE 9.2 N-Vivo screen showing notes for the first pages of Cheah’s article ‘Cosmopolitanism’. The highlighted sections are those coded as ‘the stranger’ (see Figure 9.3).

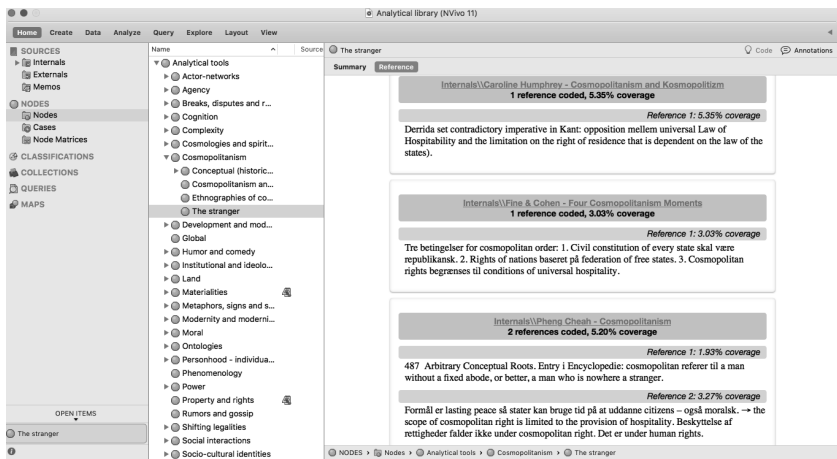


FIGURE 9.3 N-Vivo screen showing the node ‘the stranger’ where notes from Cheah’s ‘Cosmopolitanism’ can be seen together with notes for other texts coded in a similar way.

What I found after having commenced coding ethnographic data and text notes in a similar manner was that the distinction between their individual levels of abstraction were momentarily bracketed. Although the ‘cosmopolitan stranger’ is undoubtedly an abstract figure – that is, in an analytical sense, detached from everyday social life – this difference is eliminated by the coding procedure. A node is a fragmented constellation of information that condenses longer strings of arguments to a series of assertions. Consequently, the pieces of information that end up in the individual node will invariably lose their connection to the textual context (i.e. the notes for a particular book or article) from where they were cut. Although, at a later stage in the analysis, this connection needs to be re-established, its momentary absence allows for analogical connections to be made between arguments, ideas and ethnographic data that would otherwise remain unnoticed. As preparation for writing the text-piece above, I printed out the node comprising all ethnographic material regarding the administrator’s house and the node on the ‘cosmopolitan stranger’. Each node comprised approximately six to eight pages, and by printing two pages per copy, I could physically overlook all the material at once. It was consequently possible to make immediate *visual* connections (rather than merely intellectual) between detached pieces of data which might not otherwise be associated. You might argue that this exercise prioritized the aesthetics of information rather than its status in relation to a coherent string of arguments. Still, by initially bracketing connections to their conceptual or ethnographic context, each piece of information was measured (or scaled) only by its capacity to be articulated with other pieces of information within the immediate frame set by my objective with the text. And, as I will argue, the sheer visibility of having the printed nodes next to each other allowed for connections to be made without distinguishing levels of abstraction or prioritizing the possibilities for either deductive or inductive assumptions.

In sum, treating ethnographic data and text notes alike has allowed me to approach my material from multiple different perspectives without giving privilege to any one in particular. I will therefore argue that this kind of qualitative coding may fruitfully be considered as a heuristic tool for making any theoretical assertion or data piece function as an experimental premise for the analysis of particular themes. In the coming section, I go on to outline how this approach opened towards an analysis of the ‘cosmopolitan stranger’ based on ethnographic studies of the production of social distances in Mulwene, Maputo.

### *Ethnographic scaling*

As I read through and took notes for articles and books on cosmopolitanism, it struck me that the notion of the ‘stranger’ was an interesting recurrent theme, and so I made it into an N-Vivo node and coded all text-pieces that could somehow be related to it. According to a number of authors writing on cosmopolitanism, a true cosmopolitan ethics is rooted in the Kantian law of hospitality, which stipulates the need for kindness towards individuals venturing out as strangers to ‘sojourn in other territories’ (Werbner 2008b:2; cf. Cheah 2006:488; Fine and Cohen



2002:143). However, when thinking about social life on the outskirts of Maputo, this Kantian understanding of social relatedness seemed to be quite problematic. As many residents told me, Mulwene was a community composed of strangers, who were forced to live together as flood victims after the devastating flooding that hit Mozambique in 2000. And in order to survive socially in this unknown territory, it was crucial to establish appropriate distances to important others who might otherwise attempt to draw unwanted benefits from one's momentary openness. Thinking about this, I returned to my ethnographic data and located a node about the production of 'social distance' in Mulwene, which I printed out and placed on my table beside the node on the 'cosmopolitan stranger' (see Figure 9.4).

From only a first reading of the coded material, a confrontation between the 'cosmopolitan stranger' and local ideas about social distance in Mulwene seemed like an idea worth exploring. I highlighted particular phrases and descriptions from my fieldnotes that emphasized the contrast: Alcobias (a local resident) saying that friendships in Mulwene were based on particular interests and that 'people only want what you can give and after that they'll send you away'; Nelson (my friend and assistant in Mulwene) telling me that 'those who have something to hide don't speak up'; and Paulo Litsuri (a local resident) claiming that 'everyone's against me; there's a lot of wrongdoings being done in this community'. One of the final text-pieces coded as 'social distance' was cut from a particular case study regarding an illegal invasion of a plot by Alberto Manjate, a local bricklayer, and when reading it I was immediately reminded of how I came to focus on social distances in Mulwene. In fact, my encounter with Manjate did, indeed, constitute a unique 'ethnographic moment' (Strathern 1999:6) which came to guide my ongoing studies of social life in Mulwene and consequently also my approach to writing the text-piece under discussion. Let me therefore briefly describe this crucial occurrence and its analytical repercussions.

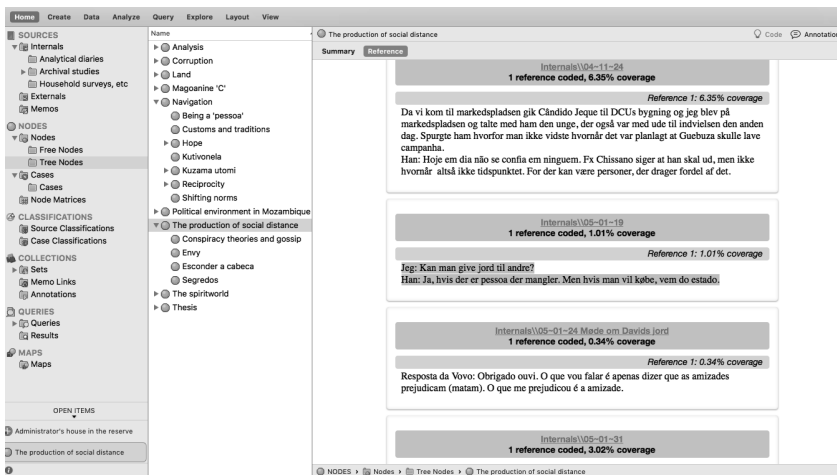


FIGURE 9.4 N-Vivo screen showing the node on the production of 'social distance' in Mulwene.



According to Strathern, it is at certain 'ethnographic moments' that the already known may be transcended by establishing new connections between 'the understood (what is analysed at the moment of observation)' and 'the need to understand (what is observed at the moment of analysis)' (1999:6, 12–13). Strathern recounts the first time she saw mounted pearl shells in Mt. Hagen (Papua New Guinea) 'slung like pigs from a pole being carried between two men, who were hurrying with them because of the weight, a gift of some kind' (op.cit.:8). Although she did not know it at the time, the transactions with pearl shells would come to guide Strathern in her analysis of Papua New Guinea Highlands social life. Images like the aforementioned came to crystallise, so to speak, the 'ethnographic moment' that enabled Strathern to explore the intricate systems of prestations and alternations of perspectives between donors and recipients in Mt. Hagen and elsewhere.

I know precisely when my own 'ethnographic moment' occurred: 11 April 2005. I had been doing fieldwork in Mulwene for more than eight months, focusing predominantly on disputes over land rights while trying to understand the social-cum-aesthetic dynamics of local house-building processes. Beginning in March 2005, I had followed a particular case in which a local bricklayer, Alberto Manjate, was claiming rights to a piece of land he had apparently been allocated informally by a community chief in return for building the latter's house (Nielsen 2014). Unfortunately, the same plot had also been allocated to a school teacher through the Ministry of Education, and so Manjate would most likely lose not only access to land but also the possibilities of building a durable cement house for his wife and three children. Up until that point, Manjate and his family had been living in a small reed-hut he rented from his aunt, but given the prospect of acquiring his own land, Manjate had told his aunt that they would leave within a few weeks (and she proceeded to sell the plot where her nephew had been living). Hence, realising that he and his family might soon end up being homeless, on 10 April 2005, Manjate invaded the disputed plot and immediately proceeded to make his presence visible. I visited Manjate on 11 April 2005 and it was, indeed, apparent that he had been active. Along the left side, a small two-room reed hut had been erected on a stamped raised platform held in place by a row of cement blocks. Starting a few metres from the boundary towards the street, a rectangular furrow had been made reaching approximately halfway across the plot, and cement blocks had been placed on all its edges. After a guided tour around the plot, we sat down to discuss the recent events. I asked Manjate about the intentions with the furrow that looked as if it were the initial step towards making foundations for a cement house. Manjate shook his head. 'I really didn't start making the foundations to build a house. [...] I made the house so that they will give me another plot. That's the only way to do things here in Mozambique'. After a while, Manjate had to leave for a meeting with the local community chief, and I followed along. When we reached the entrance, we could see a white four-wheel drive Toyota crossing the square. Manjate stopped and followed the car with his eyes. 'Is it them?' Manjate's question was suspended in mid-air without a proper addressee. I replied by asking who he thought it could have been. Manjate resumed walking before

responding. 'I don't know'; his voice was barely audible; 'someone who's coming to resolve my problems'.

In several of my writings about social life in Mulwene, I have focused on the potentials of construction projects for making house-builders socially visible among peers, community leaders and state officials (Nielsen 2007a; 2007b; 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2017). I have consequently argued that people who occupy land illegally may come to acquire status as legitimate residents, provided that they build cement houses in parcelled-out plots in accordance with officially sanctioned building regulations, for example, regarding building materials and the location of the house within the plot. In that sense, Alberto Manjate was making himself visible by digging out a furrow three metres from the boundary line towards the street. It was, in a very concrete way, a physical manifestation of how legitimate building projects were made and thereby also an indication of his potential status as proper resident. His hopeful question ('is it them?'), posed while looking at the white Toyota passing us at the square, may fruitfully be interpreted from this perspective. Having just dug out the furrow for a cement house, Manjate believed himself to be properly positioned in order to be seen by some (unknown) authority who would resolve his problematic situation. In my analyses of this and similar cases, I have argued that house-building projects serve as aesthetic media for creating appropriate distances to important, but also potentially malignant, others, such as civil servants and community leaders. Simply put, by building a house in a parcelled-out plot, one that corresponds to the official norms regarding urban regulations, the house-builder's illegal occupancy will most likely be informally accepted by state and municipality. And indeed, Manjate's strategy was successful. After a series of prolonged meetings and debates, Manjate was allocated use-rights to a 15 × 30-metre plot nearby, where he continues to live with his wife and three children.

The incidence at the square constitutes for me a crucial 'ethnographic moment' that still informs my thinking about social life on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique. When examining relations between civil servants, community leaders and residents occupying land illegally, I am continuously drawn back to the square in front of Manjate's house where I first caught a fleeting glimpse of the potentiality of house-building *as* potentiality (i.e. as a potent power of transformation). As an instant image of the problematics of social distance, it has become a qualitative scale, so to speak, against which I gauge other ethnographic material. Hence, subsequent analyses of case-studies on disputes over land rights have evolved through continuous considerations of the ways in which local residents seek to position themselves at appropriate distances from important but potentially dangerous others (see also Stasch 2009; 2011). As a 'scaling format', I have assessed to what extent people emerged in the field of vision of others *while moving away*. In other words, a specific focus on the production of social distances through house-building projects has allowed me to speculate about a peculiar kind of inverse reciprocity where counterparts become (partially) visible only as they are distancing themselves from each other. The oddity being, of course, that social distance might be equivalent to physical proximity.

Returning to the writing of the text-piece above, the categorization of ethnographical data as 'social distance' is, as I have just outlined, an outcome of a

prolonged analysis where I have explored various overlapping facets of social life in Mulwene. In a sense, the conceptual condensation of ethnographic material as a node is a kind of 'eclipsing' of the former by the latter. As Gell tells us, that which is eclipsed remains 'present in the content of whatever is foregrounded. A view of the sun in eclipse is still a view of the sun, not the moon, though it is the moon one sees' (Gell 1999:62).<sup>1</sup> Hence, the eclipse of ethnographic material by the node 'social distance' condensates a complex social dynamic as a singular analytical image. And it was in this eclipsed form that I could then proceed to make an explorative confrontation with the abstract figure of the 'cosmopolitan stranger'. Thinking about how social distances were made in Mulwene, I returned one last time to my coded ethnographic material and located the catalogue of case-studies. Browsing through the list, I tried to find the appropriate one which would productively articulate the production of social distances. From reading only the title ('The administrator's house'), I remembered the process and already at that point decided that it might serve to connect the description of social distances in Mulwene with an analysis of the 'cosmopolitan stranger'.

Summing up, it is my argument that the provisional levelling out of scalar differences between ethnographic material and notes for books and articles through similar processes of qualitative coding is what allows me to explore different themes from multiple and often contrastive perspectives. We may therefore imagine that theoretical assumptions are approached recursively, as it were, through particular ethnographies. Hence, in order to engage in an intellectual discussion about a cosmopolitan anthropology, I (imaginatively) placed myself firmly at the square in front of Alberto Manjate's house. Put somewhat differently, I knew from the outset that the production of social distances (as a concrete ethnographic phenomenon) should function as the qualitative scale against which to plot the discussion about cosmopolitanism. The ethnography served as the analytical argument for engaging with a theoretical debate rather than vice-versa.

### *Dialogic aesthetics*

Surely, notes are not literature and nodes are not notes, and so it might be argued that cutting up already condensed notes removes any meaningful correspondence to their origin. I will nevertheless argue that the material *as nodes* resurfaces in a radically different aesthetic form, which cannot be equated with its origin (say, a transcribed interview or a journal article) (see the introduction to this book). By conjoining bits and pieces of information in a conceptual assemblage (e.g. the node 'social distance'), a new and, indeed, very unstable constellation of meaning(s) emerges in the intervals between different components. Each excerpt is in itself too condensed and fragmented to convey a homogeneous content, so they overlap and borrow meaning from each other through the momentary connections established by the node. The methodological benefits of coding data as nodes is perhaps best understood, then, as a 'dialogic aesthetics' established between authors, themes and ethnographic data. Given the detachment from their prior context, each element acts as a singular assertion which is measured only by its capacity to connect with others, a capacity which is, however, always

defined by *other* singular assertions. In other words, a fragment of coded text may be connected to any other based simply on its aesthetic suitability when evaluated using the latter as scale.

As might be apparent by now, any written text I produce is filtered through my archive of coded material, which functions as a kind of analytical encyclopaedia built by traces of my entire catalogue of ethnographic material and books and articles I have read throughout the years. One might ask, then, what does *not* end up in the archive of coded texts? What is the filtering mechanism allowing certain pieces of information to emerge as nodes? Although these questions seem like the pertinent ones to ask, they are based on the premise that a node somehow equals a coherent content which, I must emphasise, it certainly does not. Given the fragmented nature of coded data, individual nodes lack internal cohesion. What they do, however, is to allow for tenuous connections to be made between pieces of text based simply on the immediate (and visual) aesthetic impression of an analytical assertion or a fragment of ethnographic material cut from their context. The outcome is a tentative framing of a particular theme, an 'analytical prototype', if you will, which invariably undergoes numerous transformations as the writing process progresses.

Surely, this usage of ethnographic data and theoretical-cum-analytical literature may seem counter-intuitive when compared to conventional academic approaches to writing. As a heuristic device for igniting a writing process, it does, however, have certain advantages. First, it allows for a momentary exteriorization of the intellectual thinking process. Simply put, by seeing the pieces of information, which go into the overall arguments of one's text grouped together in conceptual assemblages, new connections are forced upon the material. Obviously, it is subsequently crucial to probe the suitability of these emerging associations by relating each piece of information to its already established context. Second, through the visual associations, the material (both ethnographic and analytical) is squared and any difference in abstraction is momentarily bracketed. It thus becomes possible to engage with the material from any possible entry point. This does *not* imply that all arguments perforce have to be assessed using the same analytical scale through and through; it merely suggests an initial experimental encounter with the material based on a dialogic aesthetics rather than reference to pre-defined inductive or deductive assumptions.

## Note

- 1 The eclipsing of strings of arguments is a conventional anthropological manoeuvre, e.g. when we want to speak about reciprocal exchanges in Melanesia by condensing a complex social phenomenon to a single phrase.

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# 10

## Editor's introduction

Dominic Boyer's chapter traces the evolution of his collaboration with Alexei Yurchak on the 'American *stiob*' project (2010). This sought to translate an analytic concept originally developed to help identify a genre of ironic performance that flourished under late socialism for use in contexts of late liberalism (in which similar kinds of ironic performance began to appear in the early- to mid-2000s). As Yurchak explained in his book *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, 'stiob was a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor. It required such a degree of overidentification (...) that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two'. Boyer explains (COMMENTARY and TEXT) how he and Yurchak used *stiob* to probe the over-formalisation of liberal political culture and political communication which helped create conditions for the spread of ironic practices of inhabiting exaggerated caricatures. Boyer argues that identification of what he and Yurchak came to term 'American *stiob*' also helped to reveal the increasingly threadbare capacity of (neo)liberal political epistemology to engage the world around itself. Much as late socialism had retreated from engagement with the world into formulaic ideology before its collapse, neoliberalism experienced a similar 'performative shift' in the 2000s in which endless ideological repetition saturated political communication, pushing political sincerity into the arms of satire. Analysing his conclusions in the context of a political environment now dominated by the likes of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage, Boyer discusses how 'American *stiob*' both predicted today's crisis of liberalism and underestimated the darkness and strength of the antiliberal wave that would follow.

# COMPOSING AMERICAN *STIOB*

*Dominic Boyer*

## Commentary and text

To adapt something Tom Waits once said of his songcraft, anthropological insight often has meager beginnings. A hunch, a slight puzzling, an observation or moment of recognition that happens, often quite serendipitously, to ramify. In the case of “American *stiob*,” I recall the moment clearly. I was reading Alexei Yurchak’s marvelous book *Everything was Forever until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* in preparation for a graduate seminar I was teaching at Cornell University on “European Socialism and Post-Socialism” in Spring 2006. In Chapter 7, I encountered the following passage:

We will use the slang term *stiob* to refer to the ironic aesthetic practiced by groups such as the Mit’ki and necrorealists. *Stiob* was a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor. It required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two. The practitioners of *stiob* themselves refused to draw a line between these sentiments, producing an incredible combination of seriousness and irony, with no suggestive signs of whether it should be interpreted as the former or the latter, refusing the very dichotomy between the two.

(2006, 249–250)

Katie Stewart writes about those affective moments when something “snaps into place” (2007, 5), and this was one of them. But to understand why this passage was so affectively resonant, it is worth recalling that early 2006 was something of a golden era for ironic aesthetic practice in popular culture in the United States.



The country was halfway into the second presidential term of George W. Bush, dispirited by 25 years of neoliberal (post)political consensus, mired in unending conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and governed by a political regime that routinely lifted pages from the playbook of authoritarian propaganda machines (with the eager assistance of its unofficial Department of Agitation, Fox News). Meanwhile, Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* had emerged as a rare channel of political insight and sincerity, despite being broadcast on the Comedy Central channel, and was becoming a go-to news source, especially for many younger Americans. In late 2005, the architects of *The Daily Show* had spun off *The Colbert Report*, in which Stephen Colbert inhabited the role of a Fox News-style populist opinionator and made terms like "truthiness" part of American political discourse. What we often forget today is that in those early years of *The Colbert Report*, Colbert rarely broke character. He never sought to explain what the purpose or message of his performance might be. It worked because his audience already knew the caricature he was climbing into four nights a week; we had an unspoken understanding of the form of political performance he was ironizing, and many of us shared the sense that that form was already to some degree self-caricaturing. Colbert's concentration on political form helped to bridge ideological differences; indeed, early academic scholarship on *The Colbert Report* revealed that viewers from across the political spectrum found the show funny and thought that Colbert's political sympathies, deep down, corresponded to their own (LaMarre et al. 2009).

We in the audience may have felt we recognized what Colbert was doing, but there still wasn't really a term for the kind of ironic-satiric practice he was pursuing. Through its character/caricature work alone—let's call it *charicature*—it was something beyond normal "deadpan" humor. Which is why I was so delighted to discover Alexei's book. *Everything was Forever* contained precisely the analytic language I was looking for to capture the kinds of performative occupation of US authoritative political discourse that were taking place in 2004, 2005, and 2006. I was not actively researching this discourse, but perhaps at some level I recognized parallels between what was happening in US political communication and the media system of the German Democratic Republic that had been a focus of my dissertation research (Boyer 2005). Alexei and I also didn't know each other at that time, but we met not long after in 2006 when he visited Cornell to give a colloquium talk. I'm sure I expressed my admiration for his book at that point, but from what I can reconstruct of our email correspondence, we didn't discuss any kind of collaborative work until later in the year.

For the 2006 American Anthropological Association meetings in November, I wrote a paper that used Alexei's discussion of "hegemony of form" and *stio*b to help analyze a former East German satire magazine, *Eulenspiegel*, that had gone on to create an interesting satirical profile for itself in the unified German public sphere. I was interested in particular in *Eulenspiegel's* "faking actions." In one action, at the height of the Mad Cow panic in Europe in early 1997, *Eulenspiegel* dispatched a team to travel from farm to farm in northern Germany pretending to represent an international group of experts on "Mad Chicken disease." Remaining in character for hours, or days in some cases, they interviewed farmers

as to whether their chickens were exhibiting any “irrational behavior.” In another, *Eulenspiegel* satirists persuaded several figures from the former East German civil rights movement to pose for larger-than-life plaster bodycasts for a supposed planned “Heroes of the Revolution” monument. I was struck by the testimony of *Eulenspiegel* journalists I had interviewed that this satirical method was something that had occurred to them before 1989 but which state surveillance had prevented them from achieving. In the conclusion of my paper, I turned then to Alexei’s work and wrote:

Yurchak argues that *stiob* overidentification plays precisely on the overidentification with form already present within the public culture of the gerontocratic party-state. Yet, it is not so unlike a subgenre of *stiob*-esque satires that have recently become very popular, for example, in U.S. television from *The Colbert Report* on cable news journalism to *South Park* on children’s cartoons to *Da Ali G Show* on hip-hop, fashion and postsocialist alterity. In this respect, I’m tempted to say that *Eulenspiegel*’s early 1990s satire anticipated something in late capitalist public culture rather than simply imitating it. The point of connection it seems to me is less satirical foresight than the fact that the increasingly centralized ownership, production and distribution patterns of western mass media since the 1980s have generated a certain commercial discursive hegemony, more extensively heteroform to be sure but only slightly less pervasive and recursive, than what we find in the mass media of late socialism. In this sense, the current trend of hyperidentification with forms as locus of irony or satire finds a remarkable premonition in late socialist satire. *Überholen ohne einzuholen*, [We overtake without catching up] as the SED [East German communist party] used to say.

In an email to Alexei sent shortly after the conference, I attached a copy of the paper, explaining that “it contains a little homage to your work on satire as well as an idea (contained at the end) about how your analysis of socialist hegemony of form could be refunctioned to analyze nonsocialist contexts as well ... I’ll pitch this idea to you again when we talk later this week.” I don’t recall exactly what we talked about that week, but by early June 2007, we were already referring to “our project”: an effort to transport the analytics of Alexei’s work on late Soviet socialism to the contemporary American context. By September 2007, we had resolved to write up a short version of the argument for *Anthropology News* and to produce an essay-length version of the project as a keynote for the 2008 Soyuz meetings at Berkeley. Alexei had already written up his brilliant “Lenin was a mushroom material” earlier in the year. In October, on Halloween no less, I suggested to him the title of “American *stiob*,” a play on the image (and ethos) “American Gothic,” but also to capture our sense that while the ironic/satiric practices we were finding in the US media bore some family resemblance to late Soviet *stiob*, we could not claim that it was exactly the same phenomenon. Later, after the article’s publication, we were swamped with communications from friends and colleagues who brought further *stiobesque* performances across the world to our attention, which

opened the possibility of further lines of inquiry as to what the distinguishing features of “Italian *stiob*” or “Icelandic *stiob*” might be. In the latter case, a tip from a student led me to discover Iceland’s anarcho-surrealist Best Party and the ludic politics of comedian-turned-mayor Jón Gnarr (Boyer 2013).

Alexei and I debuted an informal version of our project at the Council for European Studies meetings in March 2008, which was titled “The Hypernormal Kinship of Late Socialist and Late Capitalist Media,” and then we presented the first full version of “American *stiob*” as the keynote at Soyuz in April. The subtitle at that point was “On the hypernormal kinship of ironic aesthetics in ‘late socialist’ and ‘late capitalist’ media,” but most of the major analytic moves in the later article were already in place. We glossed the argument of the lecture as follows:

In this talk, we expose and discuss a certain uncanny kinship between the modes of parody and political detachment which flourished in socialist public culture in the 1970s and 1980s and those sentiments which appear to be becoming increasingly mainstream in the United States today. What we hope to illustrate is not a one-to-one correspondence between these modes as though there were some kind of modern path dependency encompassing both socialism and capitalism. Rather our argument lives more at the level of institutional and ideological formations. What we argue is that the highly monopolized and normalized media institutions and circulatory channels of late socialist public culture anticipated, in remarkable and perhaps unexpected ways, contemporary trends in American media and public culture as well. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that analogues to the ironic modalities normally associated with late socialism have recently become highly intuitive and popular in the United States as well. We call these analogues ‘American *stiob*’ to accentuate our sense of their family resemblance and common origins.

Rereading the Soyuz talk now, it seems to me that we had worked out the ideological and media analysis in rough form—indeed, we essentially stitched together our already existing paradigms, which was expeditious but also reflected our balance of contributions to the project. It is also clear from the lecture that we had essentially worked out the case study material that we would need to anchor the argument, even though we had not developed our ethnographic perspective in much detail. The major difference between the Soyuz edition and the later published article was that we framed the project very much as a stock-taking of “post-socialist studies” a decade and a half after the collapse of Soviet socialism and as an effort to imagine what lessons socialism could still teach a world now evidently wholly in the throes of (neo)liberalism. The introduction to the keynote stated:

We are interested in what critical capacities the study of socialism and its aftermath still offer anthropology of the contemporary. This question has, we feel, a particular urgency for those of us weaned in the 1980s and 1990s on the study of Eastern European state socialism and its legacies. For, to put

it bluntly, Eastern European postsocialist studies has a vanishing object. Or, perhaps more accurately, the framing of contemporary Eastern European lifeworlds in terms of “postsocialist transitions” seems to have a vanishing analytical payoff. We suspect that many of you may share a discomfort or exhaustion with the postsocialist paradigm as well, perhaps because of its typical interpretation of the years 1989–1992 as an extinction event in which one world system (capitalism) absorbed another (socialism), perhaps because of its praxiological language of production and consumption, perhaps simply because you find that postsocialist analytics of temporality and discontinuity limit attention to issues of continuity, spatiality, discourse, practice and so on. There is obviously a historicity to our discomfort. In the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Cold War, it made perfect sense to frame the study of the contemporary in terms of a transition “from” socialism “to” something else. The evolving geopolitics of the new millennium have meanwhile pushed forward new concerns like globalization, financialization, liberalism, security, and ethnic and religious conflict, all of which have come to dwarf the politics of transition in the schematization of the contemporary, perhaps in some cases unjustly. At the same time, socialism has not gone quietly to the grave. Neoliberalism (whatever that may be) has, almost inevitably, catalyzed the reinvention of its ancient sibling, just as any call for autonomy also summons the fact of relatedness. But the frontlines of “neosocialism” do not appear to lie in Eastern Europe, rather in states like Venezuela, China, and Bolivia, or in international social movements.

This was also, in essence, the intervention we proposed in our short August *Anthropology Newsletter* piece (Boyer and Yurchak 2008). The postsocialist studies framing perhaps feels a bit parochial now given the article’s subsequent uptake, but it was (and I would say is) quite meaningful to us. Both Alexei and I had invested substantial energy into understanding the logics and lifeworlds of late socialism—and he, of course, had lived it!—and we were concerned that this area of scholarship not gradually drift toward becoming of purely historical interest rather than retaining its robust anthropological and comparative significance. This was a crucial motivation in the design of the project. And I think that we might have left it there had not the warm reception of the keynote and subsequent discussions with colleagues made us think that we should develop the paper further and try to publish it. We spent much of the summer of 2008 sending drafts back and forth as we sought to elaborate various elements of the project, all the while reacting to new stioob material that began to appear, especially in the context of the 2008 US presidential campaign.

At this point, a comment on our intellectual division of labor is necessary. Really, the analytic apparatus of “American stioob” is all Alexei’s. Hypernormalization, hegemony of form, performative shift, stioob itself—these are all categories he developed prior to our project. I think my modest theoretical contributions were simply (a) the recognition of how his categories could be mobilized as “portable analytics” (Boyer and Howe 2015) for use beyond late socialism; and (b) a

schematization of how the ecology of political communication in late liberalism could become overformalized and self-citational in ways analogous to the situation under late socialism, despite its very different political and media institutions. I contributed as well some historical work on the ideological and institutional dimensions of late socialist media systems. But, credit where credit is due: Alexei did the lion's share of the work on the ethnographic front. Not only did he draft the late socialist case material but he also became such an avid fan of Stewart, Colbert, and *The Yes Men* through the project that he ended up drafting those sections of the manuscript too. Indeed, the only regret I have about how the project ultimately came together is that Alexei really deserves first author credit.

By August, most of the individual elements were in place, but we needed to stitch everything together smoothly, to make sure that the argument was firmly tied to the ethnography, and to make sure we had the argument articulated in the way we wanted it to be. Through a happy coincidence, both Alexei and I were living in Washington D.C. during fall semester 2008. So we were able to meet for several long editorial sessions in which we worked to finalize our article manuscript. We always met at a café/bar/bookstore called *Busboys & Poets* at 14th and V. I have very fond memories of those conversations. For one thing, they were remarkably detailed, careful, and patient. Beyond the work of assemblage and smoothing, we actually ended up debating particular sentences and phrasings for long periods of time. I can't recall the details of those conversations now, but I remember coming away from them with a new appreciation for the semantic precision that Alexei brings to all of his work. The conversations also absorbed the *terroir* of our environment, the powerful energy and sense of purpose that inhabited that space and time, magnified by the fact that *Busboys* had already become something of an epicenter for progressive political action and performance in D.C. Just a block from the thriving and diverse U Street corridor, on a street richly decorated with iconic Obama Hope murals and posters, it felt like a particularly anticipatory space. Change of some kind was coming after the long hard grind of the Bush–Cheney regime and its wars and authoritarianism. I think many of us on the Left felt more than a little euphoric that autumn.

*Busboys* was vibrant and filled with animated conversations, but even so, we were a couple of academics doing scholarly work. We sat, we read, we talked, we wrote. Alexei and I had both written books about late socialism, but we had written different kinds of books. Although we shared much in our analytics, we also had distinctive takes of our own. I would say that Alexei is both more linguistically inclined and talented than I am—some of our most intense and fascinating conversations concerned the semantic nuances of specific words and how best to construct particular sentences. He has an extraordinarily well-developed semiological approach to his subject matter that both confirms and disconfirms certain aspects of my more phenomenological approach to socialist ideology and life-world. Where Alexei centers his focus on the discursive aspect of socialist ideology and its unplanned “mutation”—one of my favorite terms of his and one that I still frequently borrow—toward hypernormalization after Stalin's death, my thinking on ideology focuses more on how the life experience of intellectuals is projected

into their epistemic forms (Boyer 2005). Together we constituted a kind of multi-attentional assemblage in which those different perspectives could play off and interilluminate each other. But I think anyone who looks closely at “American stيوب” will find less a synthetic analytic approach and more a mosaic patterning where two different ways of thinking have been juxtaposed, so that when one steps back, a common project and argument becomes visible. That common project was, as we formulated it in the first full draft of the article:

In this article, we highlight and discuss a certain uncanny kinship between the modes of parody and political detachment that flourished at the margins of Soviet and Eastern European socialist public culture in the 1970s and 1980s and similar aesthetics and sentiments which appear to be becoming increasingly mainstream in the United States today. What we mean to illustrate is not a direct correspondence between the institutional and epistemic formations of late socialism and those of late liberalism in the contemporary West. Rather we show how late liberalism today operates increasingly under discursive and ideological conditions similar to those of late socialism, and we argue that these conditions are contributing to the development of certain analogous political and cultural effects. Specifically, we argue that the highly monopolized and normalized media conditions that characterized the political culture of Eastern European late socialism anticipated current trends in western media, political discourse and public culture. We show that analogues to the ironic modalities normally associated with late socialism have recently become more intuitive and popular in places like the United States. And so, we argue that to understand contemporary late liberal ideology and political culture in the West, deeper comparative ethnography of socialist ideology and political discourse will prove a remarkably helpful conceptual resource.

That draft was completed only a few days before the presidential election on November 4. I drove back from teaching in Ithaca, and it was obviously a landslide long before I arrived in D.C. after midnight. I found Cymene and Alexei and Alexei’s partner Melanie tucked into a back corner of Busboys where it was standing room only, and a celebration to end all celebrations was in full swing. We wandered out in a glorious daze and on U Street cars were pulling over to the side of the road, opening doors, blasting music, inviting anyone nearby to come and dance. It was like a World Cup victory in Brazil, something completely outside my life experience in the United States.

The next day, in the exhausted delight at our object of analysis’s collapse, we sent the manuscript for “American stيوب” in to the journal *Cultural Anthropology* (CA). The review process took somewhat longer than we had hoped, but in October 2009 we received reports and a conditional acceptance from CA’s editors, Kim and Mike Fortun. The reviewers were generally very supportive of the project, but they also offered insightful criticism, which led us to refine and clarify the argument in several places. One point of dissatisfaction for one reviewer was the causality we attributed to media’s role in late liberal hypernormalization:

I also wasn't fully satisfied by the 'news media have become less diverse' answer to the question why. There have been so many changes to the news media and how we get news that I'm not sure that a single cause-effect relationship suffices. I'm also still craving a political explanation. There was the Clintonian axiom, that if you want to beat the Republicans, you have to move to the center. By doing so, you lessen the gap between the voters on the right and yourself and capture more of the middle. But then there is no political Left. That's the Nader line: no difference between Right and Left. So the parody is parodying the collapse of American political difference. This is not original, and I'm not even sure that it explains American *stiob*, but I wonder whether the authors could at least consider a political argument? ... My own personal take on what Colbert and Stewart are doing (and I don't really watch Stewart much and have never seen a whole Colbert program) is mocking Republican speech, which is so rife with oxymorons ('compassionate conservatism'), nonsensical neologisms (remember 'affirmative access?'), false claims ('Mission Accomplished!') that it invites parody. [Ok, ok, the Democrats do this too, but I'm not sure they do it to the extent of the Republicans. And the Republican response to Democratic political discourse is not parody, it is Rush Limbaugh. It is talking points. It is "death committees". It is "palling around with terrorists" and "risking American security." If American *stiob* is the response to media consolidation, why is the response so different depending on whether one is red or blue?]. To me this is a political story, and potentially also the story of the Republican downfall.

In our view, this was a reasonable line of counterargument but also one that we had already anticipated when we looked beyond how certain media and political arrangements had contributed to late liberal hypernormalization and toward a more fundamental ideological rupture within liberal authoritative discourse after its constitutive Other—late socialism—nearly disappeared from the global stage in the aftermath of the events of 1989–1992. We couldn't deny, of course, that the rightist political establishment was both a vivid example of, and obvious target for, the kind of performances we were terming "American *stiob*." But our argument was ultimately that hypernormalization and performative shift was evident across the political spectrum for a combination of ideological and institutional reasons. Still, the ideological dimension of the argument had clearly become too muted in the mix. So, in the revision process, we sought to build its signal strength. The following paragraph was one that we rewrote extensively (new text is in **bold**) in order to better proportionalize the argument from the outset:

If we have **managed to** persuasively demonstrate a kinship between aesthetics and practices of parody that were popularized in the last decades of Eastern European state socialism and current trends in political parody and satire in the West, then the pressing question is, of course, why? In this final section of the article, we offer a brief analysis of **two sets of conditions under which the political discourse in the contemporary**



**West and in late socialism is produced -- the “internal” ideological conditions under which the structure political communication is produced and the “external” institutional conditions under which political communication is rendered and mediated through various channels. These two sets of conditions, we believe, explain the uncanny family resemblance between the phenomenon of hypernormalization of political discourse in the West and in late socialism and the consequent emergence and popularity of stيوب in both contexts as a reaction to that hypernormalization.**

The other main concern raised in the peer review was more difficult to address. Two of the three reviewers had problems with the term *stيوب* as the gloss for the phenomenon under investigation. One reviewer challenged the term’s familiarity in Russia and wondered whether it could actually be made to travel effectively to other ethnographic contexts:

My main issue with this paper is probably is not fixable: I don’t love the word *stيوب*. It’s obscure in Russian; it is not a word in wide use, and when it is used (on Russian internet humor sites, for example) it rarely seems to be employed in its ‘correct’ original meaning as a parody involving super-straight caricature. It is of course totally obscure in English; the only context in which most scholars of Russia know this word is from Yurchak’s 1999 piece in Barker’s *Consuming Russia*, from his other articles, and from his book. Because of this, I fear that the concept won’t have a great deal of ‘traveling power,’ I find myself wishing there were some other word that would capture this phenomenon, more memorably, to give it more long-term traction. Try as I might, though, I can’t come up with such a word, and I recognize that the whole structure of their argument may make it critical to use this terminology.

A second reviewer echoed the portability concern but added that the whole premise of focusing the piece on “*stيوب*” seemed to suggest that this was a parochially postsocialist studies intervention instead of something with broader reach:

I wondered whether American *stيوب* was the best title. I wonder whether a more straightforward title about political parody (along with a re-ordering of the parts as above) would capture the attention of more readers? This is such great stuff, I’d hate to see people miss it thinking that it was written for handwringing postsocialists rather than the rest of U.S. (us).

Alexei and I had a serious discussion about this criticism but decided, in the end, that “*stيوب*” was too central to the analytic apparatus of the essay not to forefront it. I confess I personally felt rather attached to the “American *stيوب*” title and had come to identify the phrase enough with the project that it would have been difficult for me to agree to change it. Alexei, meanwhile, as I recall, was quite



critical of the idea that *stiob* was obscure in Russia and convinced that it was a term that would travel well at least in former socialist countries. Of course, there is no way to know now whether a different title would have generated a larger or broader readership for the essay. But it seems to have been read and appreciated by some outside postsocialist studies as well. There is now a “*stiob* international” page on Facebook with several hundred participants. And, for what academic analytics are worth, according to Google Scholar, “American *stiob*” is my most cited publication.

So, with all these preliminaries in mind, the part of the final text of “American *stiob*” that I would like to reproduce here is the conclusion (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 211–213), which today resonates tragically well with the global crisis of legitimacy for late liberalism and with the rise of populist authoritarianism in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere:

### CONCLUSION: STIOB AND THE POLITICS OF OPPOSITION

In the introduction to this essay, we suggest that our project emerged from the study of postsocialist transitions. However, it should be clear by now that the phenomenon we are really investigating is a recursive normalizing tendency within modern political ideologies and public cultures that cuts across the analytics of socialism–liberalism and pre–post. This phenomenon can and should be linked to other aspects of modern “social hypernormalization”—that is, the recursive normalizing tendencies evident within other areas of social experience ranging from technology, to commodity production and circulation, to the organization of social space and built environments, to the forms of life and knowledge associated with modes of specialized labor, and so on—to explore the rich life of hypernormalization beyond late socialism. But even without this broader contextualization, we find that the study of late-socialist political culture and the aesthetics and practices of parody that emerged within it offer a fruitful, critical lens into the constitutive paradoxes and mediations of contemporary Western political culture, of which American *stiob* is an excellent example.

The cases discussed above, both socialist and liberal, share important characteristics: they perform overidentification with the dominant form of media and political discourse and they use official state, party, or corporate media to complete their performance, to publicize their interventions, and to confirm their caricatures. The outcome of these acts is also comparable: they all expose authoritative discourse’s reliance on form, precisely because they do so, so to speak, “from within” the ideological field they are targeting. Although we find that *stiob* performs important critical work, sometimes with far-reaching political effects, it does not fit a common understanding of resistance or opposition.

The politics of opposition usually presupposes that resistance and critique are best served by challenging the language of authoritative discourse directly. The common procedure is to locate and expose deception and deformation

in authoritative discourse and then to speak “truth to power” through the presentation of a counterexpertise (perhaps through an appeal to objective “fact,” perhaps through the persuasions of argument). However important and successful the politics of opposition may be, they have trouble exposing those “unspeakable” features, assumptions, and relations within authoritative discourse that cannot be recognized and described “from within,” in the language that this discourse makes available. We consider hypernormalization to be just such a feature of political ideology, an investment in discursive form that is so constitutive of authoritative discourse in the first place that it cannot be described from within its own language. The politics of opposition—which is at root a conflict between different modalities of political expertise—is unable to get critical traction on the discursive formalization that is part of political expertise itself. To expose hypernormalization then, a different kind of critical intervention may be necessary—one that focuses on breaking the frame of perception and on causing a sensorial rupture, making that which is invisible and unthinkable, suddenly recognized and apprehended. We feel that *stiob* is one type of political engagement that is capable of such an intervention and we see potentially important lessons in it for political activism and social movements operating in the late-liberal environment.

Jacques Ranciere argues that an effect of sensorial rupture can be achieved in aesthetic acts—by deploying simultaneously two incommensurable sensorial regimes: one, according to which we usually perceive the world of things and relations, and another, in which things suddenly stop making sense, become estranged from habitual perception, and are seen under unexpected and previously unthinkable angles. Such critical action, argues Ranciere, affects us on two levels simultaneously—on the one hand, it produces a familiar and understandable form of political signification; on the other hand, it produces experience that resists signification, creating “a sensible or perceptual shock.” The negotiation between these two opposites—between the readability of the message and its radical uncanniness—may result in a political outcome for the audiences that experience it, which Ranciere calls “a re-distribution of the sensible” and that amounts to a radically new way of seeing, thinking and describing the world.

There are contexts when pure opposition may be inefficient, counterproductive, or impossible; and when another politics takes center stage. As we described at the outset, the parodic genre of *stiob*—based on overidentification with the dominant form of discourse and its performances—is an example of an alternative aesthetics and practice of political critique. And now it is drawing attention to important trends in the media and political cultures of late liberalism. We do not know yet whether American *stiob* will produce significant political effects let alone whether it could ever become the basis of a new, more familiar politics of opposition. But, we do know that it retains remarkable family resemblance to the *stiob* interventions that originated during late socialism in Eastern Europe; and, we also know that

in that context the aesthetics and politics of *stiob* contributed significantly to the disenchantment of the dominant discourse and thus to socialism's sudden and spectacular end.

That last sentence haunts me. One thing I don't think we had fully considered in the heady days of 2008 was that the disenchantment and decay of late liberalism would open the door to virulent authoritarian populism instead of the progressive alt-global populism we had hoped for. Douglas Holmes's brilliant work (2000) on the rise of European integralism was out there, but a great many of us underestimated its prescience. Here we are in the final weeks of 2016 facing questions about the resilience and viability of liberalism in what Andrea Muehlebach has so aptly termed "the time of monsters" (2016).

I find it telling that although Alexei and I have been toying with the idea of writing a sequel to *American stiob* for years now, it was only during the 2016 election campaign that the discussion became serious. Alexei has been interested in the *stiob* renaissance that accompanied the Putin era for some time. And I likewise have been reflecting on the state of authoritative discourse in the Obama era, which brought a certain earnestness and realism back to political discourse—a realism that made the Bush-era *stiob* seem increasingly irrelevant and out of touch. At the same time, it appears in retrospect that Obama might well be viewed as a last gasp of liberal political sincerity or as a different kind of political performance—the impossible gymnastics of seeking to reconcile progressive liberal principles with neoliberal globalist trade policies and the technoimperialism of drone strikes. The last eight years of US politics have been dominated above all by polarization and paralysis. At the time I am writing this paragraph, news cycles are dominated by anxieties about the meaning of Trump's election, about the sinister influence of Russian hackers and fake news, about the mainstreaming of antiliberal values, about the arrival of a "post-truth" era, and so on.

In the end, although it does seem to me that "American *stiob*" was very much a product of its historical moment, it does seem like an apt and perhaps even urgent time to return to investigating the hypernormalization of late liberal political communication and what might emerge from its ruins. And so there will be a sequel to "American *stiob*," even if I anticipate that its tone will be more tragic than comic as befits our times.

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# 11

## **Editor's introduction**

The chapter by Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul Rabinow and Trine Korsby is an exercise in collaborative thinking and writing. The exercise begins with Max Weber's judgement that 'zones of inquiry' are formed through the conceptual interconnection of 'problems'. The authors take up this objective relative to a series of 'objects of inquiry': they narrate the manner in which a zone of inquiry, focused on problems, stemming from inquiry, might be forged collaboratively. The chapter is written in three broad movements: First, 'objects of inquiry' are narrated in an initial sequence of TEXTS; second, in a sequence of COMMENTARIES, the authors seek to draw out the conceptual operations and abstractions through which 'problems' could be shared; third, they test the abstracted problems relative to their objects of inquiry in a further sequence of TEXTS and COMMENTARIES. The chapter thus puts into motion an assemblage of heterogeneous objects, practices and concepts, and shows the narrative forms through which conceptual interconnections could be tested.

# IN THE WORKSHOP

## Anthropology in a collaborative zone of inquiry

*Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul Rabinow and Trine Mygind Korsby*

### Commentary 1

What are the movements, transformations and techniques through which inquiry is given form and expression? Whilst this volume, *The Composition of Anthropology*, is, in the main, focused on the work of individuals turning experience and thinking into writing, our contribution takes up an adjacent, yet kindred, concern: How is collaborative thinking and then writing exercised relative to individual fieldwork or inquiries? Rabinow and Stavrianakis have previously analysed the movements of turning collaborative field inquiry—the shared experiences of such inquiry, indetermination, and discordance—into a collaboratively written narrative (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013). Here, we focus instead on the manner and aims of collaborative thinking and writing relative to heterogeneous individual inquiries and projects. Our concern is to look in detail at the process, in writing, through which distinct topics and problems can be connected. In such an endeavour, we are following a long-standing social science maxim, one that, nevertheless, has received, in our judgment, insufficient methodological and textual attention:

It is not the ‘factual’ interconnection of ‘things’, but rather the conceptual interconnection of problems, which forms the basis for zones of inquiry. A new ‘science’ emerges where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discerned which open up significant standpoints.

*(Max Weber, [1904] 1922: 166, our translation)*

Max Weber’s essay ‘“Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy’, published in 1904, contains within it the above methodological orientation. His deceptively imperative stipulation actually poses a complex and serious challenge for anthropological inquiry, a challenge that demands both conceptual and affective invention. What is striking in Weber’s formulation is his indication that the endeavour

of giving form to a scientific practice, and to a space or zone to enable such a practice, including the shaping of its limits and ends, depends on the capacity for inquirers to be clear about the kind of conceptual operations which they can and should perform in order for problems to interconnect.

A second, crucial point is that the interconnection of problems that underlies the domain in which inquiry proceeds requires a point of view. Following John Dewey, and the Dewey scholar Tom Burke, we name this practice of self-consciously adopting a point of view *operational perspectivity*. Burke adopts the term to indicate how Dewey avoided the charge of subjectivism while simultaneously refusing the quest for decontextualized objectivism; rather it demanded that the inquirer explicitly adopt a position and orientation that they could articulate and defend (Burke 1994: 107). This 'second-order understanding', to use Niklas Luhmann's concept (Luhmann 1995: xxxiv; Rabinow 2008: 64–6), was designed to enable the inquirer to discern the significance of the interconnection of problems on which inquiry is based; that is to say, to inhabit a position within such a zone.

Although Dewey's term helps to counter the charge (or the mis-understanding) of subjectivism as a danger to serious inquiry, it must be modified so as to include the invention not only of a conceptual 'point of view' but equally to include the crafted adopting of a stance, or *Haltung*, to use Bertolt Brecht's term: an attitude towards the practice of inquiry in a specific zone of problems (Jameson 1998: 21–36; Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013: 31–45).

But what is a 'problem' for anthropological inquiry? And how then can inquirers interconnect problems, conceptually, in such a way that such interconnections give form to zones of scientific work, in our case reasoned and warrantable claims pertaining to human being?

Positively and pragmatically stated, *a problem is an indetermination/question, or a trouble/discordance, which arises in the course of inquiry into a phenomenon*. A problem is thus also an outcome of, and not only the starting point for, an inquiry; to be an inquiry, there must be some question, trouble or concern, no matter whether sharply delineated or blurrily sketched. One could say that a problem is an *object* of knowledge grasped in an interrogative mood.

John Dewey reserves the term 'object' for 'subject-matter', insofar as it has 'been produced and ordered in settled form by means of inquiry; proleptically, objects are the objectives of inquiry' (1938: 119). Thus reciprocally, 'objects' are also the results of and not only the starting points of inquiry. We might say, following Weber, that the work zone of inquiry is delimited by the interrogative moods in which such objects can be grasped and then interconnected.

What is important to underscore here is that objects and problems arise in *situations* of inquiry, and thus necessarily prime attention to the process, to practices in formation, to configurations of practice in time, rather than attention to people and things in a given state. To paraphrase Burke, a problem is a mood for understanding experience of indetermination/discordance 'as situated' and not 'situations as experienced' (1994: 37). Such a definition of problems thus obviates the reductive question of whether a 'problem' is 'objective' or 'subjective', since it is the outcome of the experience of an inquirer as situated. A problem is thus neither

a problem uniquely in the eyes of the inquirer nor uniquely on the side of those being inquired into. A problem is an ordering of an indetermination or discordance in a situated experience, thus involving multiple participants and elements, grasped under an interrogative mood.

The traditions of social science that have attended to manners of studying 'local' practice in motion, and to inquiry in situations, are many and heterogeneous. What has been missing, however, are efforts to ask by what conceptual means the problems raised with respect to objects grasped from, or abstracted from, situations of inquiry can be interconnected and given form. Typically in social science, these kinds of operations are called *generalizing* and *comparing*. The question under interrogation here, then, the second-order problem, is that once a problem or a set of problems have been grasped from within an inquiry, what to do?

What to do, moreover, if one seeks to configure the objects and problems that emerged in one inquiry, with objects and problems that emerge in another, especially if one has decided to avoid a mode of generalization and comparison rooted in the use of (pre-given) categories of action or things, relative to which individual elements are organized, or out of which comparisons can occur? How to compose a multiplicity of conceptual interconnections between problems which have to be drawn from multiple inquiries?

Finally, how to discern the significance of the points of view opened up by the work of interconnecting problems and the veridictional claims that such interconnections make possible? This essay endeavors to respond to these questions and takes as its orientation the claim that *thinking about the significance of the point of view established on the interconnection of problems can be put to the test by the endeavor to interconnect problems which are themselves abstracted or drawn out of objects which have been grasped from within heterogeneous inquiries.*

One could of course test Weber's claim within a single inquiry, asking how the zone of work of a single inquirer is given form by the capacity to conceptually interconnect problems with respect to objects of inquiry. Our orientation, however, stems from a normative notion that scientists (should!) work in communities of practice, which (should!) depend on the testing of claims to validity and claims to significance relative to others who could be said to work in the same 'zone'; a space of problems which are not only mutually intelligible but *create a conceptualized domain of objects and problems.*

We thus proceed in three movements, following the distinction introduced by the editors between 'Text' and 'Commentary': After this orienting commentary, which sketches our problem of composition, the first movement is towards the composition of three TEXTS indexing three problem areas within three distinct inquiries. These three TEXTS are written with a point of departure in three objects, selected in order to encapsulate elements of what seemed to be at stake in each of our inquiries. The second movement is to provide a second COMMENTARY describing and analyzing how we produced such compositions. The third movement is then perhaps specific to the collaborative aims of our endeavor, to demonstrate in a second series of TEXTS what has been drawn out of and reflected on through COMMENTARY on the first series of TEXTS.



Our strategy for exiting a simple distinction between TEXT and COMMENTARY is not a deconstructive double reading (Derrida 1967: 227) but rather a Deweyan logic of inquiry. Our contribution thus endeavors to instantiate the aims it describes, namely, to answer the question of how, through collaborative text-making, we may diagram a shared problem space in which the three individual inquiries can be interconnected. The overall sequence is thus COMMENTARY-TEXTS-COMMENTARY-TEXTS-COMMENTARY. As such, we insist on the distinctive character of our contribution not as a reflection solely on the *technē* and creativity of writing, relative to an experience, but of the relation of *technē* in writing to the relations between subjects who wish to use those *technē* in a collaborative fashion in order to inhabit a shared zone of problems. As such, the COMMENTARY becomes the node and the means through which we reflect on the process through which we sought to turn heterogeneous individual observations into a collaborative composition. In this way, the third movement is the moment at which a putting-to-the-test-in-writing (of cases and concepts [c.f. Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2016]), can be undertaken with respect to our aim to produce a conceptual collaborative zone of composed objects and problems. As we will make clear in the (brief) concluding COMMENTARY that parallels this introductory one, our effort is a starting point, rather than a fulfillment, of an endeavor to pose directly Weber's challenge of naming the conceptual operations that underpin the interconnection of problems within a collaborative zone of anthropological work.

## TEXT 1: Attractiveness | accentuation in sex work

### *Trine Mygind Korsby*

My object is a bottle of pink nail polish owned by a sex worker in the industrial city of Galați in eastern Romania, where I have conducted fieldwork among sex workers and pimps, some of whom have been convicted as human traffickers. The pimps and sex workers work towards taking their business abroad, where larger amounts of money can be made than in Romania. Galați (in Galați County, the third poorest county in Romania) (Pop et al. 2003: 18) is thus primarily a site in which they prepare for transnational pimping and sex work, as well as a landscape they can return to when business abroad fails. People used to travel to Galați from all over the county to work at the steel factory, but those days are over, and today the tendency is to leave the city to go abroad rather than migrating to it.

The ability to beautify oneself in specific ways and to shape one's body into a particular version of itself is an important business element for both the pimps and sex workers. Here I have chosen to focus on the bodywork of the sex workers. For them, the art of manicure in complicated patterns and a multitude of colors is central to the production of the 'right', attractive, sex-worker body.

Attached to the bottle of pink nail polish is a picture of a female hand with well-manicured nails – a picture taken by one of my informants, Tatiana, on her cell-phone camera. Her nails are long and well-polished, and on her nails is a beautiful pattern of flowers in black and white – different on each nail. Tatiana is

an interesting case since she is the only female pimp in my research, and she has the ability to move between the bodily expressions respectively of pimp and sex worker. The bodywork Tatiana performs is trickster-like, since she is able to move in and out of categories as well as combine these categories. Taking a point of departure in the object of nail polish and the picture of Tatiana's hand, I am interested in the production of the forms, aesthetics, and bodies of transnational pimping and sex work.

I have wondered why some scholars have analyzed sex workers' putting on of makeup as an act of 'putting on a mask', as if the act of beautification is an act of covering a singular, 'authentic' self (e.g. Castañeda et. al. 1996; Jeffreys 1997) – an analysis which I did not find reflected in my own empirical material. (There is thus a problem of politics, which was drawn from my object of nail polish and manicured fingernails.) Instead, I have been pushed by my material to see the beautification process of both pimps and sex workers as acts of accentuation; ways of accentuating and bringing forth particular parts of a body – and in this way creating a 'hyper'-body – which is believed to be successful in transnational sex work and pimping. The formation of this hyper-body is created on several levels; the configuration of the 'right', attractive body is about how the body is decorated, but it is also about how the body acts together with – and reads the desires of – other bodies. Bodily formation is about the posture of the body and what it extracts in other bodies.

## TEXT 2: Gesture in dying

### *Anthony Stavrianakis*

I have been endeavoring to inquire into the practice of voluntary assisted dying in Switzerland. Since 1982, a variety of organizations have been established in Switzerland so as to assist people who are suffering to end their lives. Although heterogeneous in terms of whether they assist only Swiss nationals and whether they charge fees for assisting with suicide, one common characteristic beyond their associative organizational form is the technical means through which life is ended: a lethal solution of barbiturate either ingested or injected through an IV. Since beginning this project, and as our continuing collaborative work with Trine Korsby and others unfolded, Paul Rabinow has consistently pushed me to clarify the stakes of (and reasons for) engaging in such a practice. A crucial element for clarifying the stakes of the project turns on how I think I can take up such a practice as an object and problem for inquiry: namely, by focusing, in part, on the gestures made available in such a practice.

I thus seek to take up the manner in which life ends in assisted suicide by observing gestures in scenes of dying. More specifically I will attend to arrangements of gesture, attitude, and discourse. Why focus on such arrangements as an object in an inquiry about assisted suicide? It is a way to avoid engaging in inquiry in discursive, deductive, and argumentative terms, as though I could know in advance and by right the standpoint from which I could give such an inquiry its significance. If one

seeks to understand the ethical quality of these practices, as I wish to do, one must first find a way to avoid being blocked in such inquiry by moralizing discourse, which pays no attention to what is done and how it is done. As such, I think that one of the important elements by way of which this practice makes a 'difference' in relation to the available repertoire of moods, modes, and practices of dying is gesture. Key to such a difference is the signification as well as indetermination in gesture within this manner of ending life.

For 'functional' reasons, those who end their lives through a lethal overdose of barbiturates, either drunk or administered through IV infusion, sit down or recline. These are postures that contrast starkly with the repertoire of postures in which most people die in hospital, namely, lying down. Moreover, being able to control the timing of death permits a degree of arrangement of the *mise-en-scène* of dying. One particularly elaborate example I have heard of during the inquiry was of a Swiss woman who wished to die in her garden, in the sunshine of a summer's day, surrounded by family, her friends, and her rose beds. She had her bed moved outside for the occasion. More common is an arrangement either on a couch or bed in which a person sits upright or reclined, with usually at least one friend or family member sitting or standing next to them, holding parts of their body, usually the hands, the feet or the head, and the 'accompanier' from the association also touching them.

Of course there are repertoires of gestures of compassion, lamentation, and dignity in the hospital. Nevertheless, the last day of life in hospital often means supporting the body through techniques and care as the person lies on their back or side, assisting vital functions to slowly break down. In the course of many different forms of dying, there are gestures of care and compassion, by loved ones and medical staff. Assisted suicide practices, as those within and outside of the associations all insist, do not have a monopoly on 'dignity' or on 'compassion'. Nevertheless, gesturally, assisted suicide provides something specific: a space for the possibility of being held, during dying, in a position and manner that adherents qualify as freely chosen and dignified.

### TEXT 3: Late style in the arts and anthropology

*Paul Rabinow*

Shifting my focus from the biosciences to the art world has been a gradual and sporadic process. This process, this stammering exploration, was motivated in part by a sense of stasis in the cultural and political dynamics of the worlds of post-genomic sciences; equally, it was motivated in part by a sense that ultimately my real objective was to rethink and remediate anthropology. As the current form of the latter discipline, however, seemed caught up in discursive and identity politics or attempts to rescue tradition, my wager was that the route toward that ultimate object and problem required yet another detour so as to better discern and conceptualize a practice that might serve to address the true topic—*anthrōpos* in a contemporary mode.

I completed a monograph-essay ostensibly about the German artist Gerhard Richter through which I attempted to test, rectify, and remediate the conceptual

repertoire concerning what we have been calling ‘the contemporary ethos’. A key aspect of the work was an attempt to understand the contemporary not as an epoch but rather, following Michel Foucault’s proposition about modernity, as an ethos. In order to pursue that line of reflection and possible inquiry, a life-long attraction to the work of Paul Klee beckoned as a means of thinking about whether a contemporary ethos might be identified during the height of modernism in the arts and not only in its wake, as was the case with Richter.

For a number of reasons, intellectual and personal, that project stalled. One day I recalled Theodor Adorno’s short 1937 essay ‘Beethoven’s Late Style’ and the related and extended reflections on artistic style in Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, a book for which Adorno had been the musical consultant. Adorno’s concept of late style suddenly seemed to illuminate a period of Klee’s painting (1933–40) that has received comparatively less scholarly attention than his earlier work. This relative inattention was due in part, it seemed to me, to Klee’s change of style during this period of exile from Nazi Germany as well as a time of his enduring a hardening of the hands and lungs that would eventually kill him.

Klee’s production during this period of time was prodigious. His paintings were significantly less immediately accessible in their compositional experiments and their use of color as well as their general tonality. There was no linear maturation culminating in the kind of ripeness and wholeness that has been seen to characterize Henri Matisse, for example, during a period of time when his health declined. Klee invented qualities of challenging invention out of a deep familiarity with the conventions of modern painting, a mastery that Klee had honed in his pedagogic writings and artistic practice during his years at the Bauhaus. That mastery turned, in his time of exile, into an aesthetic that seemed to me to correspond in broad terms, at least initially, to Adorno’s concept of late style.

I asked myself who else among those creators whom I admired and with whom I had sufficient familiarity complemented this preliminary understanding of Klee’s late style. It seems to me that Michel Foucault and Gerhard Richter did not develop a late style: Foucault died in a period of great transition in his thinking and self-formation that, had he lived longer, might well have led him to a whole new turning in philosophy; Richter had been experimenting for decades with a contemporary mode that continued to occupy his enormous inventive talent. Musing and snooping around my own history, the work of John Coltrane came into view. Coltrane died of liver cancer at age 40; he had worked ferociously at understanding and mastering dimensions not only of jazz but of twentieth-century classical music as well. After his famous apprenticeships with Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, Coltrane invented a series of new styles. He continued experimenting with form until his untimely death.

## Commentary 2

Through a series of experiments with web-based technology, over the last 10 years, we have been endeavoring to invent forms and tools for collaboration—specifically,

the conceptual interconnection of problems—in anthropology. The latest iteration is an ongoing collaboration with the Poetic Media Lab at Stanford (<https://poeticmedia.stanford.edu>).

Our initial engagement has centered on rethinking and retooling collaborative digital annotation technologies. This engagement has been consequent upon the invitation by Amir Eshel and Brian Johnsrud for Rabinow to present his explorations of the ‘contemporary’ at Stanford University and to explore shared interests in digital humanities [20 May 2015]. Johnsrud is the chief architect of a web-platform called ‘Lacuna’ (<http://www.lacunastories.com/about/>). Lacuna had originally been designed for pedagogical purposes. Our aim has been to redesign the tool for use in collaborative inquiry (<http://contemporary.lacunastories.com>).

We had limited success in initially conducting collaborative inquiry when using the tool at a seminar scale (September–December 2015). Whilst the annotation platform has proven useful in pedagogical settings, we discovered a number of blockage points for using it in collaborative inquiry across ten or more individual projects (disciplines ranging from English literature to architecture): insufficient familiarity with the specific inquiries and, more importantly it seems to us, uneven familiarity with the distinct conceptual repertoire used in order to think across the inquiries, a repertoire which had been developed by some participants but was new to others (<http://contemporary.lacunastories.com/content/terms-engagement>). Furthermore, there was indetermination about the kind of conceptual operations (‘intellectual instrumentalities’, as Dewey would say) that could make possible the interconnection of problems of inquiry.

Consequently, we decided to scale back the ambitious scope of the undertaking and to proceed in a more step-wise fashion. We needed a prototype and testing ground. Korsby, based at Stanford, and Stavrianakis, based at the CNRS France, set themselves a brief: to begin by uploading one or more objects onto the platform and to then meet on Skype to think through each object from the point of view of the other, asking what problems they indexed. The two objects we picked out are presented in Figure 11.1.

In our discussions, we discovered that merely the fact of the objects being chosen as one condensation of a problem for inquiry seemed to make them into potent objects for further thought. These were not ‘empty’, random objects, but objects that had – for several reasons – caught our curiosity, and which seemed to capture something important about our cases, which we felt should be explored. Initially, the discussion of these two objects then led to a specification of certain parallels at the level of the factual interconnection of things in the projects: body work – hands; circulation of moral claims about that body work; configurations of subjects within the situations that these objects index. Korsby and Stavrianakis met four times on Skype (fortnightly), talking through different ways in which their objects could be engaged, and pushed to specify the problems invoked:

How are the relations among those who take part in and sustain a practice rendered problematic? Based on that question, relational triangles were produced out of each object:



FIGURE 11.1 Uploading a first set of objects.

*For Korsby, the key relations are those among: Sex worker | Pimp | Client.*

*For Stavrianaki, they are those among The Accompanier | The Accompanied | Third Party (Family or Friends).*

How do moral discourses get sustained about what happens through and in these triangles? External moral discourses tend to use binaries to sustain claims about what happens, binaries that are not absent within the practice but are minimally less clear cut: Dignified–Undignified, Dirty–Clean, Regulated–Unregulated, Legal–Illegal, Reversible–Irreversible, and so on.

How are commonplaces in moral discourses sustained and how are they undermined?

How to take up the obviously gestural and physical aspect of the objects we picked out?

These working sessions were preparatory for a workshop that we organized for the week of June 20–24 2016, in which Korsby and Stavrianakis would present what they had done to Rabinow, Johnsrud, and Ph.D students working with Rabinow in Berkeley, key among whom are Roy Fisher (Biblical studies), Noam Shoked (architecture), and Valentia Rozas Krause (architecture).

The workshop had as its goal to continue thinking through the manner in which these heterogeneous objects and problems could be interconnected. Having given a brief overview of the objects we had developed and begun to juxtapose, we asked Rabinow to begin narrating an object from his nascent inquiry, and he begins to narrate preliminary observations concerning what has been a longstanding interest in the work and life of Paul Klee. Rabinow was moving toward a problem domain: ‘Late style’—a concept drawn from Adorno’s work on Beethoven—in Klee and in John Coltrane, arranged with respect to possible counter-cases: Richter and Foucault.

Although incipient, a sense was building that between the three inquiries, at very different stages of development (one a 10-year inquiry resulting in a Ph.D. thesis; one a ‘second project’ very much in mid flow; and one a nascent study amidst a life of anthropological exploration), we would be able to find conceptual points of contact to specify, as well as be able to hone and interconnect, our problems.

We decided to try a ‘Studio’. The Studio ([anthropos-lab.net/arcstudio](http://anthropos-lab.net/arcstudio)) is a modest and generative web-based tool that we have previously found highly productive as a preliminary manner of organizing and composing materials (Figure 11.2).

The first step was to put up the Weber quotation with which we began this essay, as well as our preliminary objects. Rabinow, on being asked to provide an image to arrange with the two already selected, went to get one of the massive volumes of the *catalogue raisonné* of the late works of Klee and opens the book at *Wohin? Wo? Woher?* (1940). Rabinow contextualized the focus on ‘late’ Klee with the fact that Klee was ill at the end of his life with a severe form of scleroderma.



FIGURE 11.2 Organizing and composing materials.

Moreover, the interest in intensities of late style among Klee and Coltrane was then connected to a problem of late style in the human sciences: of the ratio of invention to convention within a life of anthropological inquiry. Such stylization, Adorno's concept helps us to understand, is resolutely non-psychological, but nevertheless returns us to the question of forms of life and creation.

Over the course of several days we then each further specified our problems. Stavrianakis refined his concern with gesture in dying with respect to an anthropological indetermination about its signification. The practice of assisted suicide often affords the mobilization of significations whose meanings are, for those who participate, 'obvious': for instance, the signification of the term *dignity* among those who participate. Fieldwork, however, indicates that such clear signification is often accompanied by indeterminations, in thought and practice, which prepares a ground for ethical work of those involved.

Korsby, in turn, specified concern with the affective intensities of the relations amongst pimps and sex workers, as well as the intensities between the anthropologist and the object of study. The problem honed pertained to what she would come to specify as the plasticity of body forms and practices within relations of force, power, and politics.

We return to a basic premise that neither 'nature' nor 'culture' can operate as overarching anthropological categories to provide the standpoint of significance for how we might interconnect our objects and the problems they make visible. We contend that a plausible and intriguing candidate term to orient the interconnection of our inquiries is a very basic and open anthropological parameter: manners of living, *bios*, or how a human being inhabits somatic life.

In what follows this COMMENTARY on the first set of TEXTS, therefore, we re-narrate our objects in light of our collaborative discussions about the character of the problems they raise and in light of the possible anthropological pertinence of such problems. Preliminary to such narrative testing, during our collaborative discussions, while working through and interconnecting our three objects, we were able to identify a set of parameters connected to *bios*, for a zone of collaborative narrative testing.

We named this set of parameters by way of two interconnected vectors of work: Within the workshop, there was the practice of arranging these three objects, and there were the problems that they made visible, adjacent to each other within the Studio. Such work made clear that we needed terms with which to parameterize the space in which these objects and problems could be interconnected. We named five terms that in our discussions were generative of resonances and dissonances between our projects: *Mängelwesen* | *Technē* | *Bios* | *Épreuve* | *Haltung* (defined later).

The activity of naming parameters within the workshop was inflected by another temporal vector: the decade of work that Rabinow and Stavrianakis have carried out together, with others, developing and refining concepts for the anthropology of the contemporary (Rabinow et al. 2008; Rabinow and Bennett 2012; Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013; 2014; Stavrianakis et al. 2015). This longstanding engagement has resulted in numerous discussions and texts revolving around the concepts of *technē*, *bios*, *épreuve*, and *Haltung*. The concept of *Mängelwesen* was proposed as an addition to the concept cluster. Reminding ourselves of the



historicity of the concept work we are engaged in testifies to the interconnections between the conceptual trajectories of all participants and the objects in question.

It is important to note that other potential parameters were discussed as well, such as *Nachleben*, *kairos*, and *Pathosformel*. These are interesting concepts with which we could discuss our objects, but they did not, at this stage, provide an open ground for the interconnection between our objects, nor did they satisfactorily inflect our objects, which meant that we moved on to test other parameters.

Up until this point in our collaborative work, we had thus made the following movements:

- 1 Cases Objects
- 2 Objects Problems
- 3 Problems Concepts
- 4 Concepts Parameters

In order to further describe how this process unfolded, especially with respect to the moves from problems concepts parameters, we offer below narratives of the three objects and how the parameters came into play in all three. It should be noted that even though the above delineated set of moves portrays a smooth, separated, and linear process, the parameters did not appear at an exact time. Rather they appeared through the motion of our discussion, and some of the parameters were mentioned in the very beginning of our discussion, simply as soon as we started narrating our objects to each other. The above movement is not a fixed method but designates the motion we created within a shared workspace. Furthermore, the parameters appeared from or in connection with concepts (such as plasticity and late style), which implies that parameters do not stand alone; they should be regarded as part of a process. It thus follows that we were not able to identify and thus separate them as parameters until having gone through the other steps of the work, clarifying the connections and differences between respectively cases, objects, problems, and concepts.

Before returning to our three objects, let us briefly present the parameters that serve as a ground for our narrative composition and testing:

*Mängelwesen* (German): 'Being which is lacking', or 'insufficient', was the philosophical anthropologist Arnold Gehlen's definition of human being.

*Technē* (Greek): Art, skill, craft; way, manner or means by which a thing is gained; a set of rules, system or method of making or doing.

*Bios* (Greek): Life, not animal life (*zoē*), but mode of life, manner of living of human beings.

**Épreuve** (French): 'trial' or 'test': We take the term from the *sociologie des épreuves* developed in the 1980s and 1990s as counterpoint to Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of fields.

**Haltung** (German): 'Posture, stance, style, manner, attitude, composure.' *Haltung*, a term we take from Brecht, makes visible the significance of a specific occasion, or turning point, which is much more than mere timing.

Let us at this point also note that the goal of our practice and of identifying collaborative instruments such as objects and parameters is not to ‘align’ our three cases with each other or impose a ready-made analytic grid. Rather, the practice aims at creating a working zone of proportionality, a new compositional ground, which generates connections and makes available points of view on these heterogeneous materials when put in connection with other elements. The parameters that were generated evoked a ‘movement’ in all three projects, but it also follows that some parameters are more generative for some objects than for others.

One way to look at what we are doing is that we identify propositions crafted in relation to one situation—in John Dewey’s idiosyncratic sense of the term, albeit at different scales—and then remediate these propositions for use as a specific kind of concept: intellectual instrumentalities for guiding reflective processes during inquiry in given situations. The challenge then is to *use* them in different situations. By so doing, one is abstracting from their hermeneutic specificity (the situations in which and about which they had been forged) and, through the operations of deduction, producing a new conceptual form. Consequently, the challenge is this: Can compelling interpretive propositions rooted in specific situations and contexts—the inter-relations of things—be made into conceptual equipment for quite different situations without resorting to the leveling of theory that turns instances into examples?

#### TEXT 4: Paul Klee and late style

##### *Paul Rabinow*

*The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth.*

—Theodor Adorno, ([1937] 2002: 564)

*[Subjectivity] was constituted when the bios ceased being what it had been for so long in Greek thought, namely the correlate of a technē; when the bios (life) ceased being the correlate of a technē to become instead the form of a test of the self (épreuve de soi).*

(Michel Foucault, [1982] 2001: 466)

These two quotations provide an unexpected framing for approaching the late work of Paul Klee. For many years, I had been attracted to and intrigued by the paintings of Klee; more recently, I have been considering how to approach his oeuvre in our distinctive anthropological manner. The idea of doing justice to the vast, multilingual corpus of art history and criticism that exists (and grows by the year) was daunting. Furthermore, the terrain and formulation of the topics and questions that have concerned those engaged in scholarly disputation were not

directly the ones that drew me. Reading (once again) the short Adorno essay on 'Beethoven's late style' catalyzed a possible conceptual connection: whether and how Klee's late work could be re-conceptualized starting with Adorno's analytic frame of late style.

Klee did have a distinctive, chronologically late period (1933–40) when, by all accounts, his style underwent significant changes. In 1933, with the rise of the Nazis, Klee had been forced to leave Germany (accused of being a Jew and a degenerate). Further, by 1935, he had begun to suffer from scleroderma, a hardening of the skin in the hands. His artwork from that point onward certainly underwent transformations. The problem: Does it make sense to conceptualize these transformations in his late work as 'late style' in more than a simple chronological sense (cf. Klee 2003)?

The Foucault quotation has intrigued and bewildered me from the first time I read it over 15 years ago. Embarking on the exploration of Klee's work, the terms Foucault had grouped together – *bios*, *technē*, and *épreuve* – seemed like they might be made to illuminate Klee's late work and late style, if such it be. I now believe that this trio of terms is providential for approaching the work and labor of Klee's artistic practice as well as providing conceptual tools for developing one manner of understanding the contours of a contemporary anthropology and *anthrōpos* today.

The Adorno quotation is strikingly applicable to Klee's late work in that his paintings show traces of history, his own and that of decades of modern painting: the motifs, the figures, the color palette. One can immediately recognize these late paintings as those of Klee; they are somewhat familiar, yet disconcertingly veering off into the unfamiliar. At first blush, one would be hard pressed to name a linear line of development in Klee's work as concerns any of the above qualities. Yet, again, there is much that is familiar here from a vast and varied heritage of his own paintings, but they seem less illuminated, less compositionally polyphonic (Klee 2011). Compositionally and in tone, they are a departure, disrupting but not utterly abandoning the principles that Klee himself had defined in his Bauhaus courses and lectures. Certainly, there is no 'mere delectation' [*Vergnügen*, *Genuss*] in these paintings (perhaps there never actually was in Klee's earlier work), except that he had often been dismissed by critics as tending toward or even crossing over into 'decoration,' 'childlessness,' and the like, qualities that were diminished, even ridiculed, by critics attached to what they took to be the purity of modernism or, for that matter, expressionism (Anger 2002). As to classical harmony, no one would associate Klee's work from 1935–40 with the achievements of Jean-Baptiste Chardin (1699–1779) or Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825).

Perhaps, seemingly closer to the bone, would be Adorno's use of the term 'furrowed' [German: *furche*]. Perhaps even 'ravaged' [Verb: *verwüsten*, *verheeren*, *plündern*. Noun: *Zerstörung*, *Wüten*.] And yet, Klee's 'style' is not like that of Anselm Kiefer, for whom these verbs and nouns readily describe the substance or surface appearance of his work, if not ultimately its style. One leaves Klee's late painting with less dramatic and less intense feelings. If there is an allegory at work in Klee's paintings, its historical reference is distant and perhaps ineffable.

The tableaux' affective state is much more pathos—at least in the French sense—than tragedy (in the German). Additionally, there is a hint of the comedic, in the double sense of the lightly humorous tone of much of Klee's earlier work as well as that of the momentary resolution, even in some cases, an agreeable comity. As to irony, understood as distancing, colored by tones of disdain or complacency, there is none.

Klee remained the modern painter working in his studio. There was nothing directly collaborative or collective in his practice. He worked, driven no doubt by his own daemons. We will never know with any assurance what those daemons were, as Klee wrote and said little during this extravagantly productive late period. Perhaps all we can say with assurance is that Klee felt something was incomplete, even deficient, and strove relentlessly to discover what he needed to do about it.

If we will never know 'why' as concerns Klee's late paintings, we can speculate at a distance as to the 'how' or the 'what'. Or better, if we move from the things themselves to the conceptual interconnection of problems, we might get some insight into the relentless forging and testing of a significant new standpoint or point of view. In order to venture into this uncharted territory, we are fortunate to have the guidance of Foucault. The fact that Foucault's claim was obviously not intended for this type of case actually provides a further test of its strength and limits. Putting Foucault's claim to the test, moving from its mode of long-term generality to a specific instance – from a proposition to an equipmental concept – provides an opening for exploring its pertinence to illuminating the trajectory of Klee's late work and late style.

It is entirely plausible to characterize Klee's Bauhaus years as dedicated, at least in part, to the invention and experimentation with compositional *technē* (Boulez 1989; Geelhaar 1972). His pedagogical investments and his reflective art practice were the core elements of his *bios*, his crafted way of life. Throughout his career, Klee revisited his work, at times even re-organizing the catalogue he systematically maintained as he reworked older paintings. This technique was a practice that enabled him to see different potential in his prior work. Upon his exile to Switzerland, he embarked once again on this practice of re-visiting and re-organizing his creative work. In exile, Klee returned to the corpus of his Bauhaus 'fundamental research'. Recent critics observe how rather than constituting a methodical return, after 1937, trace elements from works such as 'Notes on Pictorial Creation' reappear in his pictorial vocabulary (*Hopfengart and Baumgartner 2012*).

In the last exhibition he was able to organize, in 1940 at the Kunsthau in Zurich, Klee decided to exhibit only works from this late period, much to the consternation of the gallery owners, as these works were enigmatic and dark:

He pitted the abundance of his current artistic creativity against his debilitating physical condition, and he was determined that these last works should be seen not as a conclusion but rather as a new departure leading into a future beyond death.

(*ibid*)

Adorno, in his own enigmatic manner, wrote: ‘Art is the semblance of what is beyond death’s reach’ (2002: 327). At stake here is no longer the subject or subjectivity but a topic about which Klee’s daemon most certainly had things to whisper in his ear.

## TEXT 5: Endings

### *Anthony Stavrianakis*

[W]hat we are in search of is the category of the Neutral insofar as it crosses language, gesture, action, the body, etc. However, to the extent that our Neutral defines itself in relation to the paradigm, to conflict, to choice, the general field of our reflections will be: ethics, that is, the discourse of the ‘good choice’, or of the nonchoice’, or of the ‘lateral choice’: the elsewhere of choice, the elsewhere of the conflict of the paradigm.

—*Roland Barthes ([1977] 2007: 32)*

Through our collaborative discussions, I have found it pertinent to connect the object of ‘gesture’ in dying with a problem of signification, one that is well oriented by Roland Barthes: that the narrative and form of control expressed in assisted suicide on the one hand endeavors to determine the signification of dying in advance, proleptically – a death with dignity, a good death, a choice – but nevertheless, on the other hand, resists complete determination, requiring a listener to the story of the death or a family member’s experience and recollection of their grief, to give it a form (not to say to complete it, once and for all). The form of the practice, and the signification for self and others, it could be said, is not a correlate of a technique (*technē*), but rather becomes a site of narrative testing (*épreuve*).

Barthes aids the anthropologist who is in search of an ethos and manner through which to grasp and test the simultaneous imposition of meaning and its disruption by way of his accounts of ‘desire for the Neutral’: an ethical category (i.e. pertaining to excess and deficiency in practice and the formation of judgments of practice) that assists the observer to grasp at once the meaning imposed and that which accompanies, and perhaps even undermines, the ‘paraded’ or imposed meaning.

In thinking about the ending of life and its gestures, the incompleteness of *anthrōpos* (its *Mängelwesen* condition) could be taken up with a narrative mood of tragedy and the limited efforts to intervene: the limits to the *technē* and technologies of such efforts to manage the ending of life, with irony. Such combination of moods of irony and tragedy, referring to the deficient condition of *anthrōpos* and the limited *technē* available, is something I have often observed during fieldwork with home palliative care teams, especially where the person who is dying is treated as an object of intervention and not as a subject, principally because the person is often in a liminal state of consciousness between presence and absence.

By contrast, with respect to those undertaking assisted suicide, since they are very much active participants in the arrangement and conduct of dying, the moods

that suffuse the practice are closer to those of *comedy* and/or *pathos*. Narratively these moods are ways of forging a ‘point of view’ or an orientation toward the scene of action that forges a relation between the reader relative to the writer and that which is told in *both* the time of the telling and the situation described in the time of the told. The temporal hiatus of participation can be given form through different narrative moods. Tragedy primes the incapacity of those narrated for self-affectation in their historical/temporal situation, which, when effective, provides a simultaneous identification and splitting of the narrator and (hopefully) the reader with the time of the told. A comedic mood, by contrast, offers the possibility of a temporary resolution primarily through the capacity of those narrated for self-affectation and thus for temporary reconciliations relative to the breakdowns and indeterminations that make up lives.

Through our discussions, it became apparent that indetermination about the signifying character of gesture in assisted suicide could be taken up relative to the ethical stakes, and ethical indetermination, of the meaning of salvation, particularly the pre-Christian conception of ‘*sōzein*’, the present infinitive active of the verb ‘to save’, or ‘with a sense of motion to a place, to bring one safe to’. Such a term has deep layers of determination and indetermination when taken up in the present, relative to concerns for the signifying elements of gesture, and their semiotics, in the wake of ten centuries of Christian iconography of gestures of compassion and lamentation.

The wager is that such a narrative orientation is able to better grasp the relation between the *technē* in play, the manner of living (*bios*) specific to those who undertake assisted suicide, and the narrative tests for all those involved, the anthropologist included. Crucially, however, this does not rest at a level of simply reproducing the narratives of those who participate, to then forge, for example, a proximate tragic sympathy, or aloof protective irony, with respect to their accounts.

Rather, for me, the semiotic mode of engagement that is most appropriate is to acknowledge that the semiotic ‘commitments’ of those who participate (i.e. a first order narrative engagement), such as the claim to ‘dignity’, are part of the situation but cannot be said to be determining it, thus opening a space of semiotic and ethical ‘neutrality’. What is intriguing about the practice is precisely the admixture of signifying elements and, equally, of affects (comedy/pathos/lamentation/leisure), which leave room for indetermination and temporal narrative transformation – revisiting the past or projections into the future.

## TEXT 6: Plasticity and object bodies

### *Trine Mygind Korsby*

It makes us uncomfortable to come across ethnographic contexts in which men or women – it is usually women – appear to be treated as objects.

—*Marilyn Strathern (1984: 162)*

Insofar as the feminist debate is necessarily a politicized one, our common ground or field is thus conceived as the practical contribution that feminist scholarship makes to the solution or dissolution of the problem of women. Because of the nature and constitution of the debate, any piece of scholarship must occupy a position on this issue: there is none that is not a viewpoint, that does not either contribute internally to the debate or externally oppose its premises [...] To present an ethnographic account as authentic ['these are the conditions in this society'] cannot avoid being judged for the position it occupies in this particular debate. By failing to take up an explicit feminist position, I have, on occasion, been regarded as not a feminist.

—Marilyn Strathern (1988: 28)

Entering the field of transnational pimping and sex work in Romania pushed me into asking how I – as a female, Scandinavian, feminist anthropologist – could analyze and enter a field where the valued and sought-after body is the feminine object body. Strathern writes that because of the discomfort of experiencing female bodies as objects, we as researchers in our analyses become focused on denying women's object status by pointing to their acting as subjects and persons (1984: 163). So how to take the female body seriously as an object and explore what it contains without resorting to dichotomies of active–passive or agency–no agency? How to move beyond merely dismissing this kind of body as a body produced out of oppressive, patriarchal structures? How to pursue these problems and still maintain a feminist standpoint? Or rather: how to open up new standpoints that can be characterized as feminist, maintaining a curious, critical, and 'para-systematic' mode of thinking (cf. Strathern 1988: 22–40)? Thinking with Rabinow's project, one could ask: What would late style in feminism look like?

My interest concerns the different forms that bodies in transnational pimping take. I am interested in what a successful body is, for transnational sex workers and for transnational pimps, respectively. How are these bodies produced, and what are their aesthetics? My point of departure is to approach the object body by looking at its capacities and relationalities and to investigate which effects and affects this kind of body extracts from other bodies (Coleman 2009; Korsby 2015). Exploring these questions would enable me to examine the domain of skills (*technē*) of transnational pimping, as well as investigate how dominant or persistent bodily forms are, over time and context, within specific manners of living (*bios*): specific both to the historicity of these lives and to the historical conjunctures in which they find themselves.

The persistence of bodily forms is interesting to explore in relation to two levels within my fieldwork: Firstly, I have since 2007 followed a group of Romanian women who are former sex workers and who are now officially identified by the Italian state as minors who are victims of human trafficking. I have followed these young women in their paths out of sex work into other work domains, into marriages in Italy, and for some of them back into sex work again. Secondly, I have observed how current pimps and sex workers in their everyday lives move between domains where different bodily expressions are required and celebrated. Often

the women would change their appearance according to the setting they were in (church, school, family life, the sex industry), but some aesthetic expressions, which were especially valued and central in one setting – such as well-manicured, creatively decorated fingernails – could not easily be changed to more appropriately fit into the school or home scenery, and their nails therefore remained colorful and decorated whether the women were with a prostitution client, visiting relatives in the countryside, or in school.

Based on my observations in the field, my point of departure is to regard the body as both a relational and transformative entity. However, I have often wondered how far bodies can be stretched. What are the limits to their transformation and multiplication, and how should this eventual bodily obstinacy be approached? Which traces are left in the body? How to interpret that several of the women who moved into new work domains, such as hairdressing and cleaning, kept experiencing colleagues and bosses who approached them in ways that suggested that their bodies were open to their touch and advances – actions that were appropriate when working in the sex industry but not in a cleaning company?

Not only is body work for achieving the right aesthetics central to a successful business, but what work is and what it entails is also a central theme in the many inter-generational conflicts about ‘real’ or ‘appropriate work’ [*muncă adevărată*] that I have observed among my informants and their parents, and others from the older generation (in their 40s, 50s, and 60s). On the one hand, the older generation celebrated work as hard manual labor, which they themselves had engaged in at the local steel factory during socialism. This clashed with their children’s attempts at an illegal ‘quick fix’ abroad, which could possibly and abruptly generate large sums of money for the individual – the opposite of the everyday, monotone, stable, collective kind of work that Ceaușescu’s socialism afforded. But on the other hand – and despite the illegal nature of this kind of work – the older generation also respected and understood the urge and attempts of the younger generation to creatively ‘get by’ [*a se descurca*] in a situation of severe unemployment and lack of possibilities in Galați (Korsby 2015: 41–75).

In the workshop, the other participants suggested the concept of plasticity to try to capture this process (*plastikos*, the Greek root term, means *formable* or *moldable*). The concept of plasticity seemed relevant for investigating the different aspects of self-transformation through different kinds of work. Firstly, work on the aesthetics of the body in order to be successful in a particular line of business, refers – among other things – to a break with traditional, manual forms of labor (e.g. through well-manicured fingernails). Secondly, this kind of bodywork plays out in the setting of a post-socialist industrial city at the margins of Romania, at the margins of the European Union (EU), confronted with a relatively new reality (year 2007) of travelling freely to work all over the EU.<sup>1</sup> It seemed generative to pursue the process of formation of workers and consumers and their manners of living (*bios*) and to ask which kind of work on the self is required in this particular historical moment.

In the workshop, we tried then to further think about plasticity as a concept in relation to my project, and the concept of *Mängelwesen* was proposed. Like plasticity,



*Mängelwesen* points to the transformable capacities of the individual and the incompleteness of forms of life. *Mängelwesen* orients us to plasticity to the degree that human beings are incomplete creatures, and in relation to others are able to adapt. The incomplete body is thus a hyper-relational body.

The *Mängelwesen* concept highlights relationality and a reaching outwards, but the geo-political historicity of a *Mängelwesen* condition also encompasses a certain frustration. Since joining the EU, many Romanians have travelled abroad in the hope of making money and improving their life situation, and Romanian migration figures have been among the most rapidly growing in Europe in recent years (Anghel 2013: 1,4). However, despite the hope for better life circumstances abroad, entering the EU was a disappointment to many of my informants, who expressed frustration over the present situation of unemployment and incongruities between incomes and costs of living, and they blamed Romania's political leaders and the EU at large. This created a longing and nostalgia for 'old times', referring to Ceaușescu's rule, when most of my informants were small children. They talked about how socialism provided housing, jobs, and stability for everyone. However, this nostalgia was often challenged by the older generation who reminded their children of some of the downsides of Ceaușescu's rule. In this way, many of my informants, as relatively new members of the EU family, were left with a double disappointment of – as well as a double longing for – both socialism and capitalism. In this context, the successful female object body, which masters its own incompleteness and plasticity and reads and acts upon the incompleteness of other bodies, is simultaneously shaped by both political disappointment and desire.

### Commentary 3

No factual element alone provides the objects of our inquiries with a form to demonstrate significant points of adjacency – yet such a form must be invented such that products of inquiry can be accounted for in their facticity. Our endeavor to assemble these objects and projects of anthropological inquiry within a shared, collaborative zone of work sets as its objective the challenge of showing the pertinence of bringing these heterogeneous objects into what should be called 'relations of exteriority'. They are clearly exterior one to the other, but finding a form for them in writing, and reflecting on how we put them in relation, indicates the possibility at least of identifying significant relations among and between them.

To that end, we have sought to name the precise strategies, both technical and conceptual, that we used in the service of the interconnection of problems and the collaborative process of discovering the dissonances and resonances within a zone of problems. Instead of moving between text and reflections on the writing of that text, our process involved developing a tripartite movement in which writing of texts and reflection on processes of thinking through the writing of texts, were weaved together in three levels, demonstrating a process of abstraction, deduction and testing of the use of a text in relation to other texts. We therefore moved between (i) text generated from field inquiry/observation; (ii)

conceptual abstraction from text; (iii) and testing of abstracted terms in narrative forms. Consequently, the texts that we have presented are far from 'finished' textual analyses of our material but rather what we have considered to be analytically potent instances and objects, which we then have wished to develop in adjacency with other instances and objects.

We followed Weber's orientation in drawing out conceptualized problems from these objects, whose interconnection might aid us in forming the basis for such a shared zone of work, giving a sense of mutual significance by way of parameters for collaborative anthropological inquiry. Here was the openness and indetermination of manners of living, the openness and indetermination of human life as an incomplete kind of being, and the multiplicity of tests that such openness can provide for different forms of life—and the endeavor by anthropologists to grasp their significance.

Consequently, we have created an assemblage, a matrix of heterogeneous objects, practices, and concepts. The assemblage is the product of our collaboration, an assemblage created out of inquiry into other assemblages. We could have selected different problems and objects, connected to the 'same' factual elements, and thereby produced a different assemblage. We thus recall Manuel DeLanda's counsel when he wrote that

The identity of any assemblage at any level of scale is always the product of a process [...] and it is always precarious, since other processes [...] can destabilize it. For this reason, the ontological status of assemblages, large or small, is always that of unique, singular individuals.'

(DeLanda 2006: 28)

We are now in a position to wonder: What kind of process are we engaged in, and what kind of assemblage have we produced? At the very least, following Dewey, the assemblage of these heterogeneous objects opens up a new field of objectives, the topology of which could be characterized. How to proceed with inquiry at that level is the challenge.

## Note

- 1 The chance for Romanians to travel freely came with the overthrow of Ceaușescu. In 1989, international travel from Romania was liberalized, and the dream of going abroad after decades of control of mobility became attainable. This possibility was increased by Romania being granted freedom of movement within the EU in 2002 and even more so after it gained EU membership in 2007 (Anghel 2013: 4, 8).

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# Epilogue



# WRITING THE HUMAN

## Anthropological accounts as generic fragments

*Nigel Rapport and Morten Nielsen*

### A chimera

What issues have been raised by these different contributions? We have asked a collection of anthropologists to reflect on their writing practices: What has been the focus of their concerns? These turn out to be diverse:

- How does one arrive at an object of study? How to know that one is discerning something and what one is discerning? (Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul Rabinow and Trine Mygind Korsby)?
- How does one conceptualise in relation to empirical experience? How discreet – as phenomena, as forms of life – are ‘concept’ and ‘experience’ (Veena Das)?
- How does one write in such a way as to allow for optimal openness and creative experimentation in the interplay between ethnographic data and theoretical insights (Morten Nielsen)?
- How does one write in such a way as to do justice to the particularities of the empirical case study while at the same time recognizing those human and individual universalities which any case will illustrate and to which the empirical case is to be theoretically aligned (Nigel Rapport)?
- How does one write in such a way that the nuances of the empirical material are not lost in the desire to achieve a coherent analysis (Thomas Hylland Eriksen)?
- How does one write so that the absurdities, the non-connectedness and the multiplicities of social reality are conveyed to the text (Nina Holm Vohnsen)?
- How does one maintain an authentic relationship between one’s writing and one’s fieldnotes, and between both and the parlance of one’s informants (Anthony Cohen)?
- How does one begin? How to write in such a way that the transition from nothing to something – from one’s own experience of other-than-this-text,

and from the reader's experience of other texts to this one – feel seamless (Kirin Narayan)?

- How does one achieve the state of mind, the work regime, whereby one can be assured of consistently being able to produce text, and for that text to be consistent with what was produced before (Helena Wulff)?
- How does one write in such a way as to take into account the historical specificities of the context in which one is writing – and so link the text to broader socio-political circumstance (Dominic Boyer)?
- How does one write in such a way as to allow different, fractured, and ill-coordinated temporalities to co-exist within one anthropological account (Bjørn Enge Bertelsen)?

The diversity of these concerns and their fundamental nature nicely evince the range of anthropology as a discipline, its ambition and possible perspicacity, but also its chimeral nature. ('Anthropology is a chimera or it is nothing', Ray Abrahams once proposed, amid a debate concerned with anthropology's paradoxical status as a generalising science whose methodology entailed a subjective craft (Ingold 1996:41). How 'chimeral', precisely? Because anthropology would know what it is to be human, and to write this knowledge, while the self-consciousness, the capacity for reflexivity and irony, of human being means that 'the human' is a moving target:

- To write the nature of the human is to change that nature's inexorable becoming. To write the nature of the human is to endeavour to step outside the situated character of that knowledge.
- To write the nature of the human is to corrupt a nature that is always particularistic in expression and beyond generalization and stereotypification.
- To write the nature of the human is to suggest that language is commensurate with experience and adequate to experience, and that that experience is of a coherent, non-random or chaotic quality.

A small book of 11 brief contributions concerned with the writing of anthropology would seem to raise questions about the discipline's very *raison d'être* and feasibility.

### **'You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.'**

Citing a famous line from Samuel Beckett (1958) is not intended to make the situation of anthropology into a melodrama. The issues surrounding anthropology's chimeral nature – as a hybrid figure, a seeming contradiction-in-terms – are profound, certainly, but they are also quotidian, even banal. I mean that we keep writing. We deal with the apparently intractable difficulties of producing adequate and authentic texts by writing about them. And this in itself may be instructive.

It was René Descartes's discovery that while the concept of infinity was a well-established and even commonplace one, the concept actually *transcended* our human capacity to comprehend it. We have named and brought within a horizon of



thought something that exceeds our capacity to think it. We have an unmasterable relation to infinity: The concept contains more than can be humanly thought or conceptualised. It is the case, Descartes concluded, that we can humanly imagine states of being, or forms of being or levels of being, that we nevertheless cannot comprehend or apprehend. The ‘transcendent’ nature of anthropology was something that we addressed (in passing) in the introduction. We described processes of ‘entextualisation’ – turning experience into written text – that seemed to transcend the particular circumstances of their composition. And we described the seemingly unlikely juxtapositions of ethnographical data against analytical reflections as creatively transcending the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology and producing possibly genuine insights into the nature of human being (Rapport 2010). To return to transcendence here and to lay claim to that concept for anthropological writing is to say that our written texts might *point beyond themselves*, might open up spaces of genuine knowing *in spite of themselves*. In the same way that the concept of infinity – a quotidian usage – contains within itself insights that transcend the limits of our understanding – and so points beyond itself in profound ways – so might anthropological writing, writing that is on one level and for so many reasons (as above) impossible and incoherent, transcend its nature.

### Generic fragments

The Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (such as Heraclitus and Pythagoras) gave us the model of the ‘fragment’ as a piece of work defined by its incompleteness (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988). As it is broken off from a larger whole, the fragment comes to imply other parts, sections or segments even when these are absent or have ceased to exist. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, however, the German Romantic writer Friedrich Schlegel challenged the idea that a textual fragment was simply the discursive debris of a lost whole. In a famous phrase, Schlegel argued that ‘[a] fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine’ (1991:45). While such texts do index (or even ‘eclipse’ Gell 1999) a multiplicity of voices, subject positions and inter-textual connections, they also come to exist as unique singularities, which articulate their own self-contained and almost monadic horizons. In this regard, the fragment is a fundamentally paradoxical figure, which ‘combines completion and incompleteness within itself’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988:50). It suspends the totality of which it was once an integral part but without forming a new and coherent entity in and of itself. Not unlike a cinematic montage that is composed by juxtaposing different framed images-in-movements cut off from their narrative structure (Nielsen 2013), the fragment is liberated, as it were, from a pre-given whole and presented alongside others without assuming an implicit order.

This collection of eleven diverse contributions has encouraged us to consider the anthropological account as a composition of fragments. As ethnographical material is turned into text – entextualised – it undergoes a series of irreversible transformations that are crucial for the making of a meaningful account. While it

may not be completely detached from its previous form, the relationship between the two becomes increasingly blurred. Indeed, to paraphrase Maurice Blanchot from his reflections on textual fragments, we may argue that ethnographic material is written up as a series of ‘unfinished separations’ (1995:58). But it is precisely by way of these dynamic and always pulsating intervals between ethnographic data and anthropological account that texts come to point beyond themselves. Descriptions of ethnographical phenomena will index, say, a sociocultural milieu, a number of interacting actors and a given set of practices occurring over time. This is the *extensive and metonymic* way in which an anthropological account points beyond itself. But it does also convey a broader horizon that is, paradoxically, buried even deeper within the text. In order for an anthropological account meaningfully to articulate the complexity of an ethnographic phenomenon, it is by necessity composed as a strategic reduction of that to which it is referring. Irrespective of the author’s mastery of prose or the scope and magnitude of the published work, the written text is always less than its subject matter. But because an anthropological account is composed as an assemblage of ‘unfinished separations’ that traverse conceptual gaps, analytical lacunae and descriptive absences arising in and through the process of entextualisation, the reader is invited to stitch together new aesthetic configurations of significance. This is the *intensive and metaphoric* way in which the anthropological account points beyond itself.

Let us therefore consider the anthropological account as a *generic fragment* by itself: The anthropological text becomes a fragment the moment it is written. But the process of entextualisation is also a way of fixing an ethnographic truth, as it were, by subtraction and detachment. The text will invariably represent social life as somehow universally concretized, as if beyond particular circumstances and subjectivities. And it is in this instantiation, we might argue, that empirical phenomena become always less than themselves: The text articulates a social reality as it might be but which only exists as anthropological account. As such, the dynamics of social life come across as a fundamentally unfolded or eternally emergent reality.

But this is also why anthropological texts have the capacity to take the reader beyond the confines of their own conceptual domains. By immersing ourselves in the reading of anthropological accounts, we are provisionally offered the perspective of an ethnographic subject that is ‘universal but limited’ (Laruelle 2011:245). While an indexical connection is maintained to the ethnographic phenomenon, the generic but inherently fragmented commonality that is established with the text allows the reader to invest other conceptual domains with its properties. Indeed, as generic fragments, anthropological accounts fold themselves around other conceptual domains – without annihilating their specificity either.

### Literary insight

One of Edmund Leach’s later provocations was that the purpose of social anthropology was ‘to gain insight into other people’s behaviour, or, for that matter, into their own’. ‘Insight’, he elaborated,

is the quality of deep understanding which, as critics, we attribute to those whom we regard as great artists, dramatists, novelists, composers (...). Anthropologists who imagine that, by the exercise of reason, they can reduce the observations of ethnography to a nomothetic science are wasting their time. (...) Social anthropologists are bad novelists rather than bad scientists. (1982:52–3)

‘Bad’ in the sense that we could do better were we to admit the fanciful nature of our enterprise and embrace the true qualities of our writing. (From Samuel Beckett again: The artist realizes that the creative task is to ‘find a form that accommodates the mess’ [cited in Graver and Federman 1979: 218–19].) Leach elaborated: The anthropologist treats the material of his or her empirical observation as if it were part of an overall equilibrium—and so makes the description that of a coherent phenomenon. ‘All I am asking’, Leach innocently suggests, ‘is that the fictional nature of this equilibrium should be frankly recognized’ (1954:284). And again, ‘culture’, Leach contended, was ‘an ill-defined, redundant category’, which, over the years, had ‘done little to clarify but much to confuse’ anthropological thinking:

I have always taken the line that, in ethnographic writing, cultural differences, though sometimes convenient, are temporary fictions. (...) As anthropologists we need to come to terms with the now well-recognized fact that in a novel the personalities of the characters are derived from aspects of the personality of the author. How could it be otherwise? The *ego* that I know at first hand is my own. When Malinowski writes about the Trobriand Islanders he is writing about himself; when Evans-Pritchard writes about the Nuer he is writing about himself.

(1989:137)

To be ‘better’ anthropologists, we learn from Leach, and to aspire to genuine insight, is to come to a true understanding of the nature, the quality, the source and the subject matter, of anthropological writing. Our concepts – such as ‘culture’ or ‘structural equilibrium’ – may be fictions and our claims to otherness more honestly mediated through the prism of self. We might find our concepts and our claims ‘*convenient*’ for a time, but ultimately they are to be outgrown. It is this temporal or processual quality that may be further addressed here. We write – it is our quotidian practice – but then we might take a more honest, reflective, ironic stance vis-à-vis that writing if we are to accede to its more profound depths and gain insight – and allow it to transcend itself, point beyond itself.

### The process of anthropological composition

We have asked contributors to reflect on their writing from a point and a time beyond it: to provide Commentary on a prior Text. What is revealed? How are the *conveniences* of the time now to be transcended? All of our contributors have

honestly admitted how they might have done differently, how what was written came about contingently—this was not the only way to entextualisation—and how the writing is a moment in a continuing train of thought. Anthony Cohen (1992) has used the word *provisional* in this context, conveying the sense in which the empirical research carries on beyond and through its textual iterations. To write provisionally is to write while recognizing the imperfect and temporary nature of any entextualisation. Whatever may be the claims of the piece of writing—to produce an object (Stavrianakis, Rabinow and Korsby); to produce concepts (Das); to effect transitions (Narayan); to effect consistency (Wulff); to maintain authenticity (Cohen); to retain nuance (Eriksen); to convey the absurd (Vohnsen); to account for historical context (Boyer); to capture non-linear temporalities (Bertelsen); to link the empirical with the universal (Rapport); or to open up the anthropological account for optimal connectivity (Nielsen) – whatever the writing’s claims, we come to find that these claims point beyond themselves. *The ultimate function of the act(s) of writing, we might say, is its transcendence. And it is the particular substance of the writing – its focus, issue, question, problem, and its particular conceptualization and structuration – that opens the space for its specific transcendence.* One writes anthropology and one gains insight by virtue of the particular way in which that writing comes to be seen to be provisional – and is seen beyond, overcome.

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