

Thinking on borrowed time... about privileging the human

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It is possible to detect a sense of foreboding in the vibrant, engaging papers assembled here, an ominous sense of dread as the birds fly off and calamity seems imminent. First written for a conference in the spring of 2017, they convey a mood one might term post-millennial, a consciousness of endings and uncertainties – not merely as regards the condition of the late liberal world, or the queasy proliferation of signs reminiscent of fascisms past – almost the same, if not quite. They also convey an ever more audible panic about the future of planetary existence itself. What kind of anthropology, what sort of theory could possibly take the measure of such a moment, could probe the implications of what Adriana Petryna (below) refers to as “life on borrowed time?” What philosophical, ethical, affective commitments can proffer a plumb-line when conventional anchors of truth seem seriously adrift? Might it be, asks Robert Desjarlais (below), that at the present moment, “to anthropologize is to learn how to die?”

Arthur Kleinman, in whose honor these essays were written, can perhaps be seen as a scholar for whom the hour has always been late. For he has long urged his colleagues, to pause and take stock, to vex themselves with “what really matters,” what they should care about amidst the clamor of scholarship as usual (Kleinman 2007). “Care” in that sense is a calling, an interpolation, a summons to feel concern. Like

Martin Buber's participatory intimacy¹, it is also a praxis of empathetic engagement, an impetus -- in the face of inequality and affliction -- to secure, sustain, and heal. In fact, there is an expanding academic preoccupation, at present, with "care" -- "care of the self" (Foucault 1990; Gulløv 2011), "care of the environment" (Weiss 2018), -- even "revolutionary care" (Karakus n.d.). The word has become almost synonymous with ethical action itself, this at time when older infrastructures of nurture and protection are in question in much of the liberalized world; when 'who cares?' has become rhetorical question, one that measures diminishing expectations of welfare, mutuality, kinship. Might the renewed preoccupation with care and suffering, phenomena that Kleinman places at the "core of human experience everywhere," provide a means of attunement in precarious times, a focus for political critique, a site where theory-making can find a footing? Can these age-old metaphysical markers -- vulnerability and finitude -- once again offer a plumb-line when what once served as anchors of truth now seem seriously adrift?

To be sure, the tangible sense of urgency and unsettlement perceptible in these papers captures the *Zeitgeist* of their day, a time when the yardsticks of sustainable social and ecological order seem increasingly unreadable. But is this feeling something unprecedented? Anthropology, after all, has *long* been preoccupied with human life at its limits, in places where mainstream civil values lose purchase. It has long devised ways of taking the measure of worlds on the wane (Lévi-Strauss 1961). In this respect, it has echoed the Romantic strain inherent in Euro-modernity itself, its enduring

¹ "I and Thou: Philosopher Martin Buber on the Art of Relationship and What Makes Us Real to One Another," Maria Popova, *Brain Pickings*, 18 March, 2018;

obsession with certainties lost, with time “lapsing,” ever receding into history (Pfau 2010).

In fact, since its inception, anthropology has provided a counter-discourse within mainstream Western thought. It nurtured a deconstructive impetus – a sense of the relative nature of value and truth – a long time before more explicit philosophical debate explored the unstable relation of text and meaning in the 1960’s, or urged acknowledgement of the Eurocentrism of Theory and History (all in the upper case). It is this inherently subversive potential, perhaps, that has often triggered anxiety about anthropology among authoritarians, early and late². Only recognized as academic discipline in its own right in the early twentieth century, it has exhibited an enduring preoccupation with its own demise, with the challenge of pursuing a method at odds in many respects with the epistemology of the established social sciences (Leach 1961:1; Worsley 1970; Jebens and Kohl 2011). For like the people it has studied, anthropology has in many ways been out of joint with the dominant telos of modernity, with what Kosselleck (2004) called “*Neuzeit*,” the accelerating forward movement toward progress

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/07/24/martin-buber-i-thou-love/> accessed 11 February, 2018.

² In 2011, Florida Governor Rick Scott argued that there was no need for more anthropologists in the state, and that taxpayers’ money would be better spent on giving people science, technology, engineering, and math. And in October 2018, the Polish Minister of Science, Jaroslaw Gowin, signed a new law, the Constitution of Science, declaring that ethnology and anthropology were no longer independent disciplines, but part of the study of culture and religion. “Erasing Polish Anthropology”? Goździak, Elżbieta M., and Izabella Main, *Anthropology News*, 7 December, 2018; <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2018/12/07/erasing-polish-anthropology/>, accessed 8 February 2018.

and possibility. Instead, the discipline took a side-step, insisting that, at least for “non-Western” societies, the past was not actually past, not definitively behind us. Embodied in “tradition” and the “customary,” that past was present in the present – in the “ethnographic present” or the “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (Koselleck 2004:239). Modernity, by this definition, existed at the intersection of multiple time scales, unevenly empowered. For the temporality of the primitive was other to the telos of World History. From the latter vantage, the kind of “time out” attributed to non-European peoples was a function of the fact that they were actually “out of time,” doomed by a relentless rationality that turned difference into sameness. Anthropology struggled to arrive at a perspective capable of viewing such difference less as evolutionary anachronism than a poignant reminder of the frail virtues of human diversity -- for the survival of “small-scale” societies seemed already to be at a tipping-point. The discipline nurtured a sense of urgency and elegy, one that long predates our current preoccupation with life on borrowed time, although to be sure, there was more concern with documenting and classifying the infinite variety of these discrete, fragile worlds than in exploring more directly the forces that imperiled them – like their entanglement with the vectors of empire.

This fascination with peoples existing in the shadow of doom links anthropology to the sensibility of existentialism; also, to the “rise of the clinic” as described by Foucault (1973), for whom modern empirical truth found its touchstone in the certainty of death, the body on the slab, the black border that marked the limits of life for those born into a Godless world. In this sense, at least, anthropology has always been “medical”– just as for some, like the nineteenth-century physician and anthropologist

Rudolf Virchow, medicine was always a social science.³ As the ‘comparative science of non-Western society,’ anthropology drew, in its early years, on the organic analogy – on the ideas of anatomy and physiology -- to imagine the structure and functioning of simple, holistic systems, and the symptoms of social health and pathology (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Together, these systems stood in poignant contrast with the war-torn polities of Europe, serving as models of timeless, “pre-modern” order, of an equilibrium lost in the Faustian bargain made, by the West, with the forces of progress.

The homogeneity and order emphasized by functionalist accounts of simple society were idealizations, of course, sustained by suppressing the signs of change, crisis and engagement with the wider world. The salvage ethnography conducted to document dying languages and vanishing cultures was committed to conserving diversity, alive or dead; to that end, its practitioners often quite intentionally excluded the presence of the historical forces that linked “tribal” peoples into more ramifying networks of contact, exchange, and governance. The complex, multidimensional articulations that joined small-scale economies, geographies, and temporalities and more encompassing, rationalizing regimes of value, space, and time, sutures that creolized colonial life-worlds, were obscured. Hence the long-standing debate about “time and the other” in anthropological description, and the charge that ethnographers make “schizogenic use of time,” that they refused to make their subjects coeval with themselves or accord them of historical agency (Fabian 2002:21). Hence, too, the riposte that a commitment

³ See Richard Wilkinson, “Politics and Health Inequalities,” 7 October 2006, *The Lancet* 368 (9543): 1229-1230; [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(06\)69501-9/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(06)69501-9/fulltext), accessed 28 December, 2016.

to take seriously the temporal understandings of others, the distinct ontological realities they live by, is a cornerstone of the ethnographic method. Lévi-Strauss (1961:45) famously mused on the conundrums this raises:

“[E]ither I am a traveler in ancient times, and faced with a prodigious spectacle which would be almost entirely unintelligible to me and might, indeed, provoke me to mockery or disgust; or I am a traveler of my own day, hastening in search of a vanished reality. In either case I am the loser...for today, as I go groaning among the shadows, I miss, inevitably, the spectacle that is now taking shape.

Caught between two antithetical dramas, two lived horizons, one “ancient,” one “modern,” the ethnographer can comprehend neither. For if difference is truly other, it resists translation and comparison; and if not, if the traveler is able to comprehend something of the other’s enchanted spectacle, it opens the door to the instability of culture, along with the violence of reduction, appropriation, and worse (cf. Rachwal 2017:98-9). Faith in the translatability of universal truth goes along with the psychic unity that is a *sine qua non* of anthropological humanism. Although so, too, is the working assumption that “people are the same the whole world over, except where they are different,”⁴ a productive yet irresolvable paradox, at once epistemological and ethical. Vincanne Adams (above) reminds us of its recurring salience when she ponders the implications of our enduring readiness, as a discipline, to decipher the mysteries held sacred by others, even when they insist that those things are by nature inscrutable.

⁴ Nancy Banks-Smith, on the landmark BBC anthropological series, *Face Values*; *Guardian* (UK) 21 July, 1988; https://todayinsci.com/B/BanksSmith_Nancy/BanksSmithNancy-Quotations.htm, accessed 2 March 2019.

Many would argue, of course, that Levi-Strauss' dilemma was a figment of a dualist, ahistoric imagination. The link between the worlds he so lyrically separates is more prosaic, a product of the "storm of progress" (Benjamin 1969:261-2) that engulfed non-European societies with the onset of capitalism and empire -- an onslaught in which the colonized came to figure as primitive foil, as *camera obscura* to the civilized West. Anthropologists have been the "inside-outsiders" in this process, forever wrangling with the use and abuses of cultural difference: with the would-be virtues of relativism and ontological estrangement, the dangers that this position masks subordination and racism. Thus the critique leveled by advocates of anthropology-as-political-economy (e.g. Wolf 1982): that the failure to include Europe's others within its horizons of modern world-making has deprived them of History, eclipsing their enmeshment in the expanding world capitalist order. Yet those approaches have been faulted, in turn, for turning history into a commodity, for giving it a phantom objectivity that homogenizes culture and society, suppressing the fragmentation, disruption, and magic that is palpable in human affairs.⁵ More castigating still has been the backlash from theorists of culture, their perspective has recently radicalized by the so-called ontological turn, who insist that we acknowledge the thoroughgoing alterity of alien worlds as their inhabitants apprehend them: worlds seen as ensembles in which persons, animals, things, powers all hold equitable status, for example. Rather than distinct representations of a single, shared universe – as presumed by an older, comparativist

⁵ Michael Taussig, "History as Commodity: In Some Recent American (Anthropological) Literature," *Critique of Anthropology*, 1989, 9(1); <https://tac091.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/history-as-commodity-in-some-recent-american-anthropological-literature.pdf>, accessed 12 January 2016.

anthropology – such distinct ontologies should be treated as alternative realities *in and of themselves*, challenging Western axioms to the core, and disrupting Cartesian ways of knowing, along with anthropocentric understandings of agency. Here ontologists join actor-network theorists and post-humanists, who call for the “symmetrical” treatment of human and non-human forces alike as actants, thus to “deprivilege” the species whose deluded sense of primacy has endangered planetary life as a whole (Latour 1993; Haraway 2007).

Ironically, one might argue that, in its founding commitment to cultural relativism, to human unity-in-diversity (Stocking 1984:4), anthropology was striving for a kind of symmetry long before the term was invented. As the most humanistic of the social sciences, it was preoccupied with devising a conceptual vocabulary, an analytical horizon capable of grasping all modes of social existence, not least those that lacked the hall-marks of modern “civilization,” even humanity. As a consequence, it developed an unusual epistemological awareness, an openness to reflexivity and philosophical argument that lent itself to theory-making beyond the grid of scientific positivism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). The end of colonialism, at least as a formal system, would shake the foundations of the comparativist project, disrupting the framing binaries – west and rest, “hot” and “cold” – and discrediting the models of discrete, self-perpetuating societies and cultures they authorized. Now “old societies” would become “new nations” (Geertz 1963), set on an inevitable trajectory, the quest for development, that would sooner or later converge with the chronos of the modern world system. The Third World, in short, was bequeathed a form of “second-hand time” (Alexievich 2016), a telos of modernization borrowed from the First, that required its

peoples to fall in step with the international liberal order – just as that order itself was being undermined, at its center, by a new, deregulating political economy that was global in scale.

Indeed, as late-twentieth-century corporate capitalism has increasingly freed itself from state regulation, it has promoted a division of labor that is ever more translocal, rendering national borders more porous, and disrupting the territorial bases of institutional forms in the Keynesian welfarist societies of the midcentury. Whole populations have been cut off from the kinds of labor, livelihood, and protection that once bolstered the architecture of proletarian life, futures, and social belonging. The periodic crises inherent in capitalism – and its disruptive urge to open up new frontiers for extracting value from human and non-human sources alike – have been digitally enhanced, accelerated, and intensified on an escalating planetary scale. The multiple, intersecting trajectories of production, extraction, ecology, and governance that have resulted challenge received liberal models of space, time, politics, and history (Petryna; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003), and abet the increasing capacity of corporate power to capture the political process, privatizing the commons and undercutting democratic representation and redistribution. Widening disparities of wealth, viability, and security in erode popular faith in existing political action and the plausibility, even in their Western heartlands, of liberal conceptions of community, law, and citizenship. In fact, from the margins those conceptions appear to be little more than the trappings of elite advantage and disenfranchised populations seek ways to secure benefits – often by authoritarian, ethno-nationalist means -- for their own kind in environments marked by growing scarcity, patronage, demagoguery -- all of which mock the promise of global *laissez*

faire. In popular politics, art, and culture, in the North and also the South, darker, more disjunctive visions of rogue capitalism and bandit survival spring to life. It is a world whose manifold, mutating, obsessively-mediated character resists analogical models, two-dimensional geographies, or liberal vocabularies. It is also an environment that challenges the diagnostics of an earlier social science, a “conjectural paradigm” that aimed to link the visible signs of human action to deeper truths, rules, and regularities (Ginzburg 1983:87).

How then, *can* anthropology hold itself accountable, in some measure, to such a moment? If, as I have argued, the discipline has long courted estrangement, long grappled with epistemological angst, long sought to conjure meaning against the hard edges of despair, it might be expected to have a special aptitude for such times of challenge, for the ‘horizoning work’ (Petryna) called for as we confront life lived in multiple temporalities, on awkward scales, at the brink of the abyss? To return to a core theme of this collection, can an anthropology explicitly focused on injury and suffering offer a special purchase, a moral compass (Adams)⁶ in history’s unceasing storm?

There certainly has been no absence of debate on these issues in recent years. One response has been to focus on issues of crisis and emergency, less as self-evident markers of salience, than as complex performative events, always already embedded in historical and political force-fields of varying scale. As is widely noted, the declaration of emergency, like calling the crisis (Roitman 2013), is a recurrent feature of the modern

⁶ Adams uses the term in a slightly different sense.

condition, drawing attention to points at which disruption – sudden threat to life, health, property, governance, environment – is held to endanger order, normality, the real (Keshavjee above). Emergencies declare imperatives, demand intervention, often call for suspension of normal regulation. They also make claims, in the breach, about what really is real, what truly is salient – whose existence actually matters. Calling the crisis is a communicative act, like proclaiming an ‘epidemic’ – which, as Jones insists (below), is always as much a political and discursive as it is scientific event. Epidemics carry connotations of acute, contagious diseases (of smallpox, plague, Ebola), an association invoked in polemical talk of epidemics of suicide, gun violence, sexual assault (Jones below). To call an emergency is usually to minimize the role of wider antecedent causes and structural entanglements, thus to prioritize a discrete and urgent problem. This turns on the presumption of a universal register of humane response (Buber’s ‘participatory intimacy’) one that ensures empathetic resonance and moral interpolation that transcend distance and difference.

In implying a temporary abeyance of regular routine, declarations of emergency also create another kind of borrowed time – an interval of suspension in which urgent ends legitimate what are otherwise contentious means, means that often mask the play of broader interests (Greenhalgh below) and ignore slower structural causes and effects. Emergencies can enfranchise bold acts of care and healing across otherwise obfuscating borders, but they can also authorize imperious interventions, along with dubious projects of rescue from politically trumped-up dangers. Indeed the politics of emergency, the effort to transcend the law in the name of emergency as exception is

often a matter of significant political dispute: witness the furor over Donald Trump's declaration of a national emergency on the US southern border in February, 2019, putatively "warranted by an invasion of illegal immigrants spreading crime and drugs." #FakeTrumpEmergency" tweeted his opponents, as sixteen states filed a lawsuit against him in a Northern California federal court, calling his action unconstitutional.⁷

The advent of emergency, then, offers no direct line to what is true and important. Many scholars choose, instead, to focus on the everyday occurrence of injury and suffering, especially at a time when humanitarian awareness and technical advance exist alongside growing levels of social, material, and ecological precarity across the globe. Yet again, anthropologists find their vocation in examining the lives of those most at risk, those on the frontiers of desiccated farmlands, plundered commons, disappearing jobs, toxic habitats. In fact, some suggest that too avid a focus on the symptoms of human hurt risks are turning the discipline into a form of morbid, sentimental witnessing. For Robbins (2013), the suffering subject has come to replace the cultural other as moral alibi for the discipline as a whole – which in the past couple of decades has traded its foundational concern with cultural difference for a preoccupation with a universally recognizable, empathetic victim. Focus on

⁷ "Democrats on Twitter cry #FakeTrumpEmergency after White House declaration," Ryan Mille, *USA TODAY*, 15 February 2019; <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/02/15/national-emergency-pelosi-schumer-democrats-faketruppemergency/2881284002/>, accessed 19 February 2019.

documenting such generic abjection, such shared vulnerability, he claims, ignores the thoroughgoing ways in which history and culture *particularize* experiences of distress. It also diverts concern away from the diverse, positive, hopeful features of people's lives, thus limiting the possibility of an "anthropology of the good" – a focus on value, morality, care, gift (Robbins 2013: 448).

This last claim strikes me as bizarre. Surely an ethnographically-based discipline, and a commitment to grounded theory-making has no place for such evangelizing? As if an "anthropology of the good," like the power of positive thinking, or the virtues of analytical optimism, were a matter of strategic – bipolar – choice, rather than a commitment to the complexities of existing modes of collective life as we observe them, "good", "bad," indifferent? Is this metaphysical commitment to "the good," despite Robbins' disclaimers, not itself built on ungrounded, universalist assumptions of the sort he condemns in the study of injury or suffering? Anthropologists exercise a certain choice of analytical vantage, to be sure. As I argue, here, the discipline has long been seen as "melancholy;"⁸ as having opted to focus, for the most part, on modernity's marginals and the relatively fragile social worlds they build – a perspective that has yielded rich, unprecedented, insight into the diversity of the human condition. In this sense, the concern with life under threat is hardly a fashionable compromise of the "last two decades;"⁹ nor is such concern adequately described as focused on unitary

⁸ "Tristes Tropiques by Claude Lévi-Strauss – melancholy anthropology," Rob McSeeney, *The Guardian*, 17 August 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/aug/17/tristes-tropiques-by-claude-levi-strauss-melancholy-anthropology>, accessed 22 February 2019.

⁹ Robbins (2013:450) uses the distasteful image of "the proverbial drunk, searching for his or her lost keys under the streetlight because that is where it is brightest" to describe how "anthropologists" settled on the "suffering subject" to replace the now the discredited "savage slot."

stereotypic figures (*the* “savage other;” *the* “suffering subject;” Robbins 2013:448); it is premised, surely, on a concern with collective organization, *intersubjective* meaning; on the dialectical interplay of constraint and action, affliction and healing. It is true that in postcolonial times, most studies have moved beyond the functionalism of their forebears, whose rich ethnographies might have been richer still had they explored in more detail the impact of empire looming over their accounts of local worlds.

Anthropology today insists on locating its fields of study within the awkward, horizons – local, regional, global – that join *and* divide us through multiple mediations. These coordinates tend to queer simple dualisms like self and other, sameness and difference. They seek to grapple less with “universals” than with globalizing forces (evangelicalism and the electronic ulama, human rights and ethno-nationalism, corporate capitalism and financialization) that may be translated into local vernaculars, but that work, simultaneously, to convert difference into sameness. To reduce the complex array of research that has engaged with such questions in recent years to a PC preoccupation with suffering without borders (Robbins 2013) is to dismiss the disproportionate burden of violence and dispossession borne by the very peoples Anthropologists claim to champion. It also reveals an alarming failure to appreciate the intrinsically generative role of vulnerability in forging human consciousness, notions of value, millennial dreams, modes of critique – all concerns notably highlighted in the very work on suffering that Robbins disparages. For it has been the study of affliction and abjection – old and new – that has generated perhaps our most profound insights about the very things he seeks to brand as an “anthropology of the good” – things like morality, well-being, empathy, care, transcendence (Evans-Pritchard 1937, Turner 1967,

Kleinman 1997; Das 2003; Garcia 2010).

It is true that the experience of suffering is always mediated by specific personal and cultural resonances, but the hazards of assuming *A priori* that the pain of one cannot be compared with that of others, that it cannot somehow be felt, comprehended or shared across social and cultural divides, are all too evident. If the sensory subject is “so determinately local,” as Brian Massumi (2002:3) puts it, it remains “boxed into its site on the cultural map.” Claims to the uniqueness of suffering are often voiced by the victims of historic violations, especially in an age sensitive to the need to right human wrongs through strategies of truth and reconciliation. Yet restorative justice relies precisely on the power of empathy, the capacity of humankind to feel the distress of others, much of it linked to events and processes with translocal resonance. Insistence on the incommensurable nature of suffering (individual or collective) precludes such identification, and forestalls the impetus to address the systemic sources of injury. Achille Mbembe has questioned the politics of pain that is central to the discourse of decolonization in South Africa and elsewhere:

Personal feelings now suffice. There is no need to mount a proper argument. Not only [it is held that] wounds and injuries can't be shared, their interpretation cannot be challenged by any known rational discourse...This kind of argument is dangerous.¹⁰

A wealth of testimony bears witness to the fact that affliction, like all acts of violence

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe on The State of South African Political Life,” *Africa is a Country*, 19 September 2015; <http://africasacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics/>, accessed 20 December 2016.

and wounding, is communicative in nature, that it always signifies beyond the bounds of individual and social specificity (Adams below); that it has a heightened capacity, in the face of difference, alienation, and the disintegration of common trust and value to prompt affective resonance, fellow feeling, even common action.

But can it offer special access to what is essential, to an elementary form of social life in confusing times? Veena Das (above) responds to this question by insisting that, in the abstract, suffering cannot, any more than any other theoretical vantage, offer access to what is “really going on” in any particular time or place. It seems clear that human beings are ever more likely to hurt each other in our world, and to harm non-humans as well. But rather than presuming the nature of such suffering from afar, she prefers to find its meaning in the framework of what she terms “an ordinary realism,” located in the minutiae of everyday life. This is harder than it seems, she cautions, for it is not merely a matter of applying preconceived concepts to a quotidian realm that then reveals itself to our gaze. The challenge is to make that reality appear in the first place – and, with it, the common concepts capable of grasping it in its vibrant complexity. These concepts, like that realism itself, emerge from run-of-the-mill struggles with life’s tangible tragedies, like death, madness, the quest for conception (Inhorn, above); dramas in which the protagonists strive to assert a form of normativity in which they, and we, can find a footing. It is this sort of grounding, she suggests, that can provide a yardstick for assessing what actually matters to social investigation.

Joao Biehl (below) similarly seeks a currently meaningful anthropology in the micro-dynamics of people’s lives, rather than in an “all-knowing,” macro-theory that he finds nihilistic, dispassionate, and depoliticizing. The task, as he sees it, is not to

“fetishize suffering” or to “rescue an essential humanity,” but to shine empirical light on the affect, the mindful action that produce tears in the fabric, openings in seemingly closed predicaments, in the unfinished business of life on the moral and physical margins of survival. From this perspective, it is the quotidian struggle against the limits of being that is the fundamental drama of existence, the alibi for what is ethical, meaningful and relevant.

In fact, as the tenor of our times becomes increasingly urgent, increasingly apocalyptic, many scholars find purpose in the tangible substance of ordinary life, rather than the more abstract forces and determinations that shape its contours. They seek the real and consequential in ethnographies of the human art of “way-finding and self-correction” (Petryna), the humble, flawed possibilities of care and return (Biehl). For Arthur Kleinman, however, care in its local moral world can give privileged access to those larger abstractions, to the very constitution of the social, *sui generis*. For him, caregiving is a gift. And following Mauss (1990), he views care is a total social fact -- a core medium of universal sociality, all the more salient in an alienating, technicist age. For our anthropological ancestors, especially those inspired by Durkheim, it was ritual practice that served as the engine of collective fellow-feeling – they referred to it as “all-purpose social glue” (Horton 1964:349). Kleinman views care likewise, as the “special human glue that holds society together.” For him, caregiving generates the “presence” that activates the potential of inter-subjectivity, and “sparks humanness.” One might say that caregiving, much of it at the hands of the marginal and exploited, is the unacknowledged labor power, the human infrastructure that reproduces what we term “everyday life.” Caring about care, then, affords a critical entrée to the study of life

itself -- including the social etiology of affliction, extraction, and the uneven availability of the means of repair and survival.

But our contemporary angst has also given rise to some rather different, avowedly 'post-humanist' responses. I think, here, of approaches triggered by the belief that we have entered the Anthropocene, an age in which cumulative human action on the earth's eco-systems has sparked irreversible processes of species extinction. From this vantage, many insist that it is high time that the existential interdependence of all species was given priority over "the foolishness of human exceptionalism" (Haraway 2008:244). This conviction has engendered a brave new worldview that many find compelling: human nature is actually an "interspecies relationship" (Tsing 2012) and what is called for are non-hierarchical alliances among different forms of life (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; cf Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). By treating all species symmetrically (Latour 2005), as equally consequential actants in a "pattern of co-becoming" (van Dooren 2014:12) we might succeed in "deprivileging" the human. For, having despoiled their birthright, mankind must revitalize and reboot through the tutelage of nature. We should recognize the importance of "listen[ing] to and learn[ing] from other species," exploring the lessons of "non-human culture," of insect sociology, and so on.¹¹

To be sure, some of the writing in this genre has a decidedly salvific quality.¹² In

¹¹"John Hartigan on Multispecies Ethnography," Jennifer Carlson, *Platypus*, 26 August, 2014; <http://blog.castac.org/2014/08/john-hartigan-on-multispecies-ethnography/>, accessed 21 December, 2016.

¹² "Love Stories, or, Multispecies Ethnography, Comparative Literature, and their Entanglements," Mara De Gennaro, *State of the Discipline Report*, 30 May,

Wild Dog Dreaming, for instance, Deborah Bird Rose (2011:146) offers “a narrative emerging from extinctions,” a lesson in relational ethics from wild dingoes and the Aboriginal people who identify with them: “Perhaps voices from the death space *will speak* to us,” she writes. Others are less concerned with advocacy than ontology, with the challenge posed to social science by those with radically different understandings of the constitution of life in all its forms. Like the thinking of those who extend to all animate beings the capacities we see as characteristic of humans, for instance -- the ability to signify or to exercise selfhood (Kohn 2007:4). Ironically, although they are often termed “post-humanist,” these multispecies ethnographers tend toward an all-purpose anthropomorphism. Rather than denaturing humanist conceptions of subjectivity, affect, agency, or narrative, they argue for expanding such qualities as love, “selfing,” and learning across the non-human world.

How might all this inform our reflections, as anthropologists, on the priorities of life and work on borrowed time? There certainly are lessons, suggestive but also cautionary, to be learned from the horizon opened up by the multispecies turn and the passions it infuses. Few would fault the commitment, shared by the various inflections of this position, to take seriously the increasingly delicate interdependence of humans and non-humans in the face of ecological fragility. Many would agree, too, that we stand to gain useful insight from searching ethnographies of what it actually means for humans to live with, not merely to “think with,” other species, especially in ecologically edgy times (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). But this too is inherent in anthropology’s

2015; <https://stateofthedisipline.acla.org/entry/love-stories-or-multispecies-ethnography-comparative-literature-and-their-entanglements>, accessed 22 December, 2016.

genealogy. Nobody can have read *The Nuer* without being made aware, in exquisite detail, of how much those peoples existed in thrall to the demands of their imperious herds and their marginal environment. The multispecies turn, though, pays much more attention to the reciprocal, open-ended, ecologically-transforming qualities of such interrelations. It also insists on unsettling the margins between species, broadening the field of actants, and significantly decentering the agency and self-determination of human beings.

In one sense, this is a provocative application of anthropology's enduring reflexivity to what has remained its most axiomatic object: humanity itself as discrete species, however diversely conceived. This reflexive stance is not unique to our discipline, of course. The multi-species turn captures a moment in which human/nonhuman boundaries have been destabilized in law, biology, ethics, and art; ¹³this at precisely the point when *all* forms of life fall under a common cloud of doom. In other respects, though, multi-species perspectives raise serious problems of theory and method. It is certainly suggestive to extend human subjectivity, agency, and affect to all forms of life, at least at the level of allegory; note that the line between story-telling and ¹⁴social analysis is often intentionally blurred in this mode of writing. But how useful *is* it in analytical, terms? After all, some much harder theoretical claims are being made for the multispecies turn. Do we want to tangle, yet again, with problems bequeathed by earlier, colonizing tendencies in anthropology – like purporting to give voice to the voiceless, to serve as the spokespeople for nonhumans (Latour

¹³ "See "Love Stories, or, Multispecies Ethnography, Comparative Literature, and their Entanglements."

¹⁴ John Hartigan on Multispecies Ethnography."

2004)? Do we really want to indulge the dangerous romance that “wild dingoes and Aboriginal peoples” share kindred sensitivities, or that the “non-human is like non-white” (cf, Kirksey and Helmreich 2010:555)? Are we ready to reduce notions of culture and society to cross-species common denominators? Or prefer “culture-as-medium” over “culture-as-meaning?” Or invoke constructs like “biosociality,” thus to disinter the kind of models we so objected to in behaviorism and sociobiology (Sahlins 1976)? Likewise, is it sensible to respond to the hubris, the wanton destructiveness, of our species by championing the notion of “symmetrical agency,” which radically reduces human power over other forms of life at a moment when our Promethean ambition and greed are propel the planet to a perilous tipping-point?

True, liberal-humanist culture can be faulted for over-valuing the determination of *homo sapiens* in the world; also for under-appreciating the degree to which history is always co-produced, in unintended ways, together with non-human forces. Let us recall, here, how Marx complicated human agency – not by giving it indiscriminately to all beings and things, but by showing how concrete abstractions, like “capital” and “labor power,” themselves the unintended effects of human action, also exercise forceful constraints on the agency of our species. We might make history, goes the cliché, but never as we please. There seems no denying the disproportionate responsibility of human action, some actions more than others, for our current social and environmental predicament. As has often been noted (Bloor 1999; Chagani 2014), approaches drawing on actor network theory point away from the ability to judge priorities, to engage in abstraction and theory-building, to encourage ethically-informed intervention, that is, to permit what Patryna terms the “art of human interference;” “interference,” here, in both

its negative and positive senses. For, by multiplying the number of putatively symmetrical agents at play in any situation – humans, non-humans, objects, technologies – and by insisting on the contingent, emergent nature of all outcomes, these approaches make it impossible to account for the elements, inequities, and a *priori* forces that *actually* make a difference in any particular eventuality in the world. Or to explain the repetitive, cumulative, non-random quality of events and processes, like those that empower or disempower people and species, that configure the field of play, and that monopolize or distribute resources that wound or heal. History may not be determined by a single hidden hand or a straightforward, unilinear telos. But it is also not lacking in multiple, discernable, determining vectors of varying scale – politico-economic, psycho-moral, techno-epistemological, bio-material – of which the Anthropocene is one palpable consequence.

Each of the suggestive papers in this volume provides a different answer to the paradoxes of our time and place, a distinctive mode of engaging the intellectual and ethical challenges that we, collectively, face. As noted, ours is an era at once familiar, yet unprecedented in the scale of threat it poses to prior social, political, and ecological formations; and to the substance of life itself in its myriad incarnations. In one respect, it is the same old story: a tale of modernity's creative destruction, of the tendency to pile up rubble, to cry wolf, to shore up illusions of permanence on what must clearly be borrowed time. In another sense, we stand on the brink of uncertain biological and geophysical thresholds, of apparently irreversible shifts that exceed existing paradigms, available algorithms, technical capabilities. How, amidst forces of such daunting complexity, such transcendent scale, such cosmic adversity, can anthropology deploy

its distinctive method, its conjectural style of theory-making, so reliant on inter-subjective insight, so humanist its sense of relevance, operation, and scope? As I have tried to suggest here, for all its humanism, the discipline has never taken the durability of *homo sapiens* for granted. It has always been preoccupied with the struggle to reproduce particular forms of life – of value and meaning, economy and polity, exploitation and repair – at the intersection of human and non-human being. Whatever determining forces might exist in the wider world, our singular expertise is directed to the manner in which our species acts in, and on, that world; this in ways that, while never self-authored, are also never a reflex of unmediated, contingent forces, animate or otherwise.

If medical anthropology has taught us one thing, it is that as lived realities, neither illness nor health -- nor even death itself -- is reducible to bio-physical facts that speak for themselves. Yet in observing how social actors intervene in what moves them most we gain privileged insight into what they prioritize; how they, and we, determine the “real.” Anthropologists have shown an acute awareness of the effects, on the phenomena we study, of how we frame our analytical fields, scale our space-time horizons, determine the range of relevant forces in play. Today, amidst pressing planetary problems, when many urge us to move beyond anthropocentrism, it might be argued that prioritizing the human is a principled commitment to a vision of the real, the ethical, the politico-economic. For these orientations are all in danger of being eclipsed in a world in which, in order to counter crude Prometheanism, or to defend the ‘facts’ of life at large, we risk ceding their ground to other post-political, post-human forces, from bio-determinism to techno-economic rationality. The same might be said of the

temptation to give undue weight to poignant allegories of “multispecies love,” or stories of natural sociability and agency, doomed, without more prosaic human intervention, to waste their sweetness on the desert air. Humanist visions of species being see it as the product of an endless process of moral self-making – of a kind of history-making that is never carried out exactly as we please, always enmeshed in labile entanglements with other beings and forces, animate and intimate, social and material. Never has it been more imperative that our species show humble awareness of its own limits and interdependencies. But never has it been more necessary, too, to recognize our unique responsibilities, and the fact that neither the real nor the human can be taken as ontologically given. Opting for the human in this context, then, is not casual anthropocentrism: it is an ethical and political commitment to care, to interfere, and to make the very best of borrowed time.

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