

Epilogue

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This volume skids into view against the doldrums of the usual ethnographic writing conversation. Against the endless incantations of the difference between fact and fiction. Against the, by now, anachronistic, and even odd, habit of detouring into a tired critique-of-representation mode. The writing here is not an evaluative critique weighed down by its own assumptions and deposited into something like big-box stores of the good and the bad. Instead, like experience itself, writing here is an experiment of being in some kind of world. It is an effort to attune to, to respond to, actualities and potentialities, enclosures and excesses. It sits in a pause against the usual nervous gestures to foreclose the problematic of writing ethnographically with an empty recitation of mantras of ethical decontamination or a quick surge to find a high ground.

Here, instead, writing is a mode of approaching ethnographic scenes that are both solid and flighty, variegated and scripted. Scenes the ethnographic writer has to follow as they seep into human and nonhuman labors and split off in tendrils of their own. Scenes that buoy people and weigh on them in ways that give pause. These scenes of ethnographic attention are speculative objects; their poesis calls for a response. Writing aimed at bringing generative, moving objects into view takes care and skill.

So, for example, we enter the scene of a Cuba where the dead provoke. A *bembé* starts as a party, a participatory theater of impersonations of the dead jammed into music, song, and dance. The event described becomes a rolling threshold of self and other, inside and outside, a running helix of multiplying surfaces. The pleats of forces fan out and fold back up again. People

ruminating on it are hit by thoughts and reactions; a woman lets a fleeting look of surprise cross her eye, seems surprised by the informality, asks basic orienting questions: “Does it have books?”

Or we are driving on a Connecticut parkway suddenly peppered with roadkill. Talk radio is onto the topic of hunting because New Jersey has just begun a sanctioned bear kill. The now hypervisible roadkill consists of formless lumps of flesh on the side of the road, the strangest hues of purple and red. The conversation unfolding on the radio has its own strange cadences of outrage and pleasure, an insider’s vocabulary. Some questions of hunting ethics are foregrounded. Something about the experience of human/nonhuman existence itself emerges. Then the essay pulls into a border zone of what is deliberate, what is unavoidable. It raises the specter and possibility of efforts to fill the lonely state of being-in-a-world with lines of some kind—some line of action, some encounter, some purpose. Meanwhile, the cars on the parkway keep slowing down to take a look at the deer carcasses as if magnetized to the horror and fascination of death and life. A speculative state of being in a speculative world. Some kind of autonomic divergence from the encounter of death in life that is also a little bit of dwelling in death for a minute, like a salting of food. In the chromatically multiple potency of things, there is also a sheer, flat, empty distraction without motive or intention. Wow! No wonder roadkill is surprising.

In this little volume, ethnographic writing gets a moment to pull itself into the compositional variations of form and event, word and world. It slows to home in on the barely legible or the submerged, what’s pleasurable and painful in what happens. The writing has the presence of mind to stop at the murky pooling-up of things. Or it speeds to perform the condensation of a pile of elements in a scene. Or it flattens itself and spreads out to follow the prismatic lines of a node folding and unfolding, expanding and contracting. It follows its objects, which are not adequately described as simply ethnographic encounters but have the qualities of refrains registering across a field, or thresholds of expressivity appearing, cuts that throw a trajectory off-course, or forms of attunement or disorientation that come of being somehow in, or proximate to, or aware of a coming or receding situation.

The essays gathered here register the tunes on which people venture out, a worlding captured in a shared gesture or a kind of haircut, or the arc of a threat resonating in a routine. It matters to note the way that bodies are

situated and splayed around a Thanksgiving dinner table and the sounding of an Inuit *kataq* in the corner of the room: two women, their bodies almost touching, a wordless almost growling, buzzing, panting, a rhythmic plucking, teasing. Or the suddenly unbearable ordinariness of sound right after someone dies: “She’s gone.”

Voice gets foregrounded here. The power of a voice in itself; the connection people feel to the recorded voice of a missing person, the qualities of a voice made silvery from smoking or one that giggles on the side. Ethnographic writing steals voices, betrays them, tries to become and remain true to them, stops and starts and starts again, homes in on the act of saying something when one beat before there was a kind of nothing. Language is always already a beginning again, borrowed language doubly so, doubling back on the charges it carries. A voice is so literally and materially of a body, a family, a place, some vast array of fictions, some grooves of imagined somethings scored into saliva and the sound of waves.

There is room in this writing for voices to come and go. Room made by the writing buckling back on itself, hamstringing its own first anthropological impulse to lose itself in a hardline narrative and explanatory context. Necessarily recursive, it fashions itself like a tuning fork that learns its note through small, incremental experiments made in fits and starts. It lurches or sails into some kind of capacity to be with matter-practice-thought-feelings that stretch beyond the representational register of signification to etch uses and forms, frictions, constraints, motions, and lines leading out onto a landscape of sociality and dream.

Full-bored ethnographic writing tries to let the otherwise break through, to keep it alive, to tend it. Worlds and lives unsettle what social science has considered settled, and they open a path into what science has left unexplored and unspoken. There are returns, through the language of literature and poetry, to the compositions of reals. Ethnographic writing can be a portal into a weird, swollen realism far from the deadness of the literal. A side angle onto the telling details, the horrors and beauties, of affective-material-social-political registers of living. We see a refugee get off a plane. “The church ladies took him to a store, bought him fresh sneakers soft and white as wedding cake. The next day he walked through whole aisles of dog food.” Then, in another moment, after the fanfare and fractured expectations have passed and his situation is still dangerous and abandoned in new ways, he “sits inside his apartment, heat cranked up to 80, curtains closed,

a pile of chicken boiling on the stove, slides another Kung Fu movie into the VCR, settles back into the smelly, swaybacked couch, a Budweiser between his legs. He giggles.”

Ethnography thinks and writes at the limit of what it is possible to say. This means it has to be nimble, patient, but jumpy. In some cases it might turn itself into a viscosity like the deliberate opacity or muddiness of poems moving “blindly, but well-intentioned, amidst the irresistible mud” of a Vermont pond. The writing might become a kind of catchment area. In Chennai, on a film shoot, “everywhere else . . . the sun rises in the morning and sets at night, but not here, things here, they suddenly happen, all at once,” and “there is rain more rain and even more rain in Chennai, drowning out their plans for another scene, and by the time the rain lets up the actor is gone, the director’s back to editing another project, and the actress who knows as they’ve hardly let me speak to her for more than a minute at a time . . .” As if to keep up with all of this, the writing in this volume becomes an ambient atmosphere with tempo, tone, and mood. It propels into the affordances of a situation, the characteristics of a thought-ecology, a sociality-pause, or a state of matter. It is itself a path on which things amass and accrete; it arrives at stalemates, speeding shoots, a shady spot, a treacherous impasse, an unwilling audience.

Each essay pulls into alignment with the consubstantiality of subject-object-world relations: mud, a drug world, the deep sea, the rolling thresholds of rituals, filmmaking, a hypervalent performativity, a childhood memory, a poetic rumination, a hunt, a game of make-believe, an apparatus of rules and restrictions that enthralls. These are not just images in a representational order of things but modes of copresencing. Visceral imaginaries that make demands on the sensorium. Materialities that swell into modes of address, thought feelings venturing into an incipency.

Like the objects it pulls into relief, ethnographic writing is lodged as much in bodies, circulations, and the shock of a sensory recognition as it is in words. The essays gathered here approach this situation of writing through sharply precise but careful, gentle engagements with questions of experience, what it means to be a person in a world and writing of a world, how ethnography can render other and unfamiliar the everyday world, how a person caught up in a speculative poesis can imagine emergent events, can size up in a glance what’s blowing through a scene or be transported back to another scene at a sound or a quality of the air, can recognize an-

other's copresence to events or the possibility of events as a limited connection, a gesture at connecting.

Writing, here, is pictured as a passage, an interval, a bridge, a transitional space, a holding environment for a scene that surrounds and presses but is not only for the writer's eyes or ears. It has a fidelity to what is overheard from a solitary perch in the attic window or read in a letter from prison, to the limits of connection or to the discontinuity of experience, to the inability to reach a settled state. It dreams; it is language almost in trance, a story that cannot be told completely in a state of waking.

The writer is taken to a moment of startling unexpectedness. Or the rhythm of writing becomes the rhythm of mourning, absence. The writer tries to speak to those who spoke with her or it becomes impossible not to write in a certain way. There is always the sense that much more could be said, that things could be said differently and that that would matter, that everything we do is on the side of someone or something else. Description is so freighted by positing a palpable relation to an otherness. "There's the old man selling watermelons blessed by Jesus, the old woman with the live chickens squawking in their metal cages. Heat bounces off the black tarmac." Or, "I heard the muffled *cor coro coo* of a ringdove and declared aloud, 'My God, it's the south of France!'"

Pushed to perform scenes and objects that preexist and exceed it, ethnographic writing can become a condensation that brings out a real: the knot of a something else that swells with expressivity, that could be conveyed in so many ways, and that remains partially undisclosed in what gets said and what gets done. The real of the ethnographic object here exists in mixed material-aesthetic registers that are at once emerging and deflating. It tries to pull forms into partial view, gives them textures, makes them sensate or dreamy or abstract, gives them density to show how the actual is not simply there, flatly coincident with its notion, and the language aimed at approaching it is a bit of bark, a sliver of rock.

Writing, in these essays, is a flickering resource used to reopen subject-object-world ontologies. The essays lean into their objects, sidle up to other people's attunements, hardenings, iron-clad investments, and failures to endure. They look to the engagements and distractions of living through something as if they're lessons in effort. They try to move in the manner of things slipping in and out of an existence. The artful complicity of ethnography with its objects and scenes becomes an impetus for thought and

action, a prism of projects and momentarily might-have-beens throwing together and falling apart.

The essays collected here present a series of differing and linked accounts of ethnographic writing's familiarity with and estrangement in the singularities of worlds. They make a method out of ontologically curious writing. Far from a writerly excess that obscures the real, as such efforts are sometimes taken, this is a speculative performance of the qualities of subjects, ecologies, and force fields in the things that happen. It functions as a hinge, a magnet, a diffuser, or a detour as it follows what pushes matters and subjects into energetic states of being and what begins to take place, what folds back on itself and recombines, what goes nowhere and is lost.

The authors, using sensate, ontologically mixed modes of transformative encounter, turn these essays into a problematic of what writing does to thought. They note that writing is the materiality of ethnography, both in the field and in the process of writing up or cooking down field notes. The movement of life-into-text-into-life is foregrounded as a visceral and energetic mode that impels us, works on us.

In mobilizing the materialities and motions of ethnographic writing we learn something about the creative energy of worlds. We also learn about kinds of excess and expenditure, kinds of surrender, or denial or hypervigilance, the possibilities and threats of building conceptual bridges between phenomena and scales, or the importance of remembering that actuality is never just coincident with itself and the real is always a relation of difference.

We might learn to fly under the radar of categorical knowledge. We might imagine dissolving into the matter of the world or a landscape littered with words hardened into rock or trash. In the unresolved relationship between being and thought, in the active effort to do justice to lived experience with conceptual thought and perception, there are costs, betrayals, pleasures, violence, returns, alternatives, a commingling, a gesture, an unexpected collective energy.