

ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRANSIENCE

Comments on “Sensing Precarity”

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I want to thank Anne Allison and Lauren Berlant for the kind invitation to participate in this terrific session and to the panelists for their thought-provoking presentations. As part of a division of labor that Stuart McLean, the other discussant, and I agreed on, my remarks will focus on the papers presented by Kathleen Stewart, Angela Garcia, and S. Lochlann Jain. Hopefully, my remarks will also speak to Anne’s and Lauren’s overall concern with placing the precarity of both institutions and people’s arts of existence at the center of critique and politics to come. Let me begin with an unexpectedly anthropological text:

“Not long ago I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet. The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom.”

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A pause. And the author continues: "I could not see my way to dispute the transience of all things ... But I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth" (Freud 2005:216).

The year is 1915. And Sigmund Freud is here recalling an "ordinary affect" (as Katie Stewart would put it, 2007) which led him to ponder about the different impulses in the mind that the proneness to decay, or precarity, of all that is beautiful and perfect can give rise to. "What spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning," Freud argues (2005:217). "Mourning is a great riddle, one of those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained but to which other obscurities can be traced back." An affect that helps to map obscurities... the one in question being the human capacity for love. Libido, Freud states, "clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning" (218).

Yet Freud also realizes that what looms above any attempt to produce a universal theory of the libido vis-à-vis the poet's encounter with transience is the historical moment, the milieu—*war on its way*. "A year later," Freud writes, "the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countrysides through which it passed and the works of art which it met with on its path, but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for many philosophers and artists... It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed... It made our country small again and made the rest of the world far remote. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless" (2005:218).

Because the war had made so plain the transience of things, the "libido, thus bereft of so many of its objects, has clung with all the greater intensity to what is left to us" (2005:218). Freud's insight here is that the quotidian precarities of a life are not merely happy or sad happenstance; they are engaged with the small and large-scale milieus and historical shifts that color our every experience. The oedipal archeology is not enough. The libido follows world-historical trajectories. We are challenged here to attend at once, as if were, to the political economic and material transience of worlds and truths and to the journeys people take through milieus in transit as they pursue needs, desires, and curiosities or simply try to find room to breathe beneath intolerable constraints.

Gilles Deleuze has argued for a cartographic rather than an archeological analytic of the subject (Biehl and Locke 2010). Archaeologies assume the subject as dependent on past traumas and unconscious complexes, as in Sigmund Freud (1957), or overdetermined by regimes of power and knowledge as in Michel Foucault (1980). In arguing for life's immanence and its horizontal transcendence, Deleuze writes: "The trajectory merges not only with the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the subjectivity of the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it" (1997:61).

The papers by Katie, Angela and Lochlann attend to the generative force of precarities of all kinds—structural, biological, interpersonal—to redirect senses, practices, universals. What can today's precarities tell us about the interface of market and state institutions and the social realities with which we contend? How can they become part of our very idea of anthropology today? Anthropology's plasticity to adjust itself to contemporary lives and worlds is thus also beautifully and powerfully mobilized by papers.

The disparate registers of precarity engaged by each one of these anthropologist hold off what Katie calls “the quick jump from concept to world – that precarious habit of academic thought.” She incites us to develop a distinct perceptual capacity out of what is in flux, to become part and parcel not of Life or the Lost but of “live forms.” Angela brings us close to people made of real losses and probes the currency of writing for the purchase of intimacy or the fabrication of a home. In restoring uncertainty to oncological knowledge, Lochlann identifies other ways of telling one’s experience of disease and reimagining care for self and others. In what follows I briefly engage each paper and *try*—tentativeness is key—to compose a question or two.

Katie recalls forgotten forms of precarity—regional memories; unnoticed, creeping frailty; the rich emptiness of the road; the muted excitement of Barton Springs. Poetically captured, these moments testify to the depth of the quintessentially human experience of world-making: “Precarity can take the form of a sea change, a darkening atmosphere, a hard fall, or the barely perceptible sense of a reprieve.” Precarity is not tragedy; it is something more elusive, a “live composition.” How can we ethnographically apprehend these worldly fabrication and lives therein, constituted as they are by that which is unresolved, and to bring unfinishedness into our story-telling?

As I mentioned earlier, when Freud takes up the question of transience, he initially gives a characteristically universalizing response. Nearly a century of social critique, including feminist and postcolonial critiques, has dislodged the sway of crude universals. Katie’s project to explore *precarity’s form* -- like Anna L. Tsing’s notion of *friction*, for example -- seem to work in the wake of this dislocation. In Tsing’s work (2005), fragmentation and points of friction

illuminate the situatedness of macro processes, but are also entry points for a distinct (post) humanism and politics vis-à-vis the Forest so to speak. For Katie, the slow, fragmented excavations that ethnography renders visible, highlight how affects, fragmentary concepts and mundane details make up the friction-filled *para-infrastructures of everyday living* that are articulated against the background of institutional decays and rifts that deepen (as we vividly saw in Lauren's presentation). "Precarity raises the question of how to approach composed, live forms that are more than representations and other than obvious objects of moralizing."

Katie's creative approach to fragments and world-making certainly invites debate about the public force of anthropological voice and the politics of the descriptions through which ethnography is crafted (Biehl and McKay forthcoming). But what is most viscerally at stake here, at least for me, is the distinct ethical presence that comes into view through her storytelling. So in the spirit of the unfinishedness that Katie materializes in words: no questions ...

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I find Deleuze's insights on "Literature and Life" especially illuminating as I read Angela's paper based on an "archive" she was entrusted: the prison correspondence that Bernadette, a thirty year-old woman she met in a heroin detox clinic in New Mexico, maintained with her aging mother, also a drug user, and her young daughter. "Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived" (Deleuze 1997:1). The letters represent an intricate affective history—

Bernadette's struggle to cope with precarious family ties—and speak to the fraught institutional parameters of her present condition. Narrative, writes Angela, "is always double-narrative, and the relation between writing, emotion and history is entangled."

While Deleuze draws from Kafka, we as anthropologists have a distinct task: Our curiosity can meet what remains to be known as we bring back into public view the everyday travails, affective tissues and writings of characters such as Bernadette that might otherwise remain forgotten (Biehl and Moran-Thomas 2009). Observing and listening as readers and writers, rather than diagnosticians and theoreticians, our own sensibility and openness become instrumental in spurring recognition of the ways ordinary people make sense of their social destiny while painstakingly trying to singularize themselves out of aggregates and open up to a future that definitions of all kinds (be they clinical, legal, ethnic, economic, familial or gendered) would tend to foreclose.

"But what are the costs, really, of writing and what are the costs of not?" Angela asks. "How does connection and narration coexist with dislocation and silence? In what ways do Bernadette's letters sustain these equivalences and reframe our understanding of the relationship between incarceration, human interiority, relationality and narratability?"

The letters certainly do important work for Bernadette and for her anthropologist, but we must be wary of the risk of fetishizing writing. Neither the ultimate analytical key to the subject, nor the vehicle for transcending social symptoms, writing seems to make even more real the imprisonment of her life, in the sense that things could have been otherwise. So, to what uses did Bernadette hope to put the product of her writing labor? What can this prison/family writing or minor literature actually accomplish or unleash?

Bernadette's potent desire for the letters was “the possibility of inhabiting the future—of being read, remembered and perhaps even understood, not necessarily by you or me but, hopefully, by the loved ones,” Angela concludes. Yet, given the sensorial understanding that Bernadette had of the biology and economy of drug dependence, I wonder if her writing could also not be read as a most visceral marker of all stillborn futures. Seen from this perspective, the exchange of letters (with the mother whose daughter she had only precariously been and with the daughter whose mother she herself had only precariously been) might well be minimally protecting strategy against this most impossible sense that nothing will actually be otherwise, that one is captured by something that not even love can sever.

On one occasion, Catarina, the main character of my book *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005), became so enraged that she threw to the ground the dictionary she ceaselessly wrote and that I thought was keeping her alive. I had just told her that I had been unable to convince her family to schedule a visit. Writing, in the end, could not take her back home—what she wanted most.

In the same way—I am thinking aloud here—Bernadette's writing is invested with a vital energy because it stands for something else. After all, when Angela asked about the contents of the mysterious box which she had been entrusted, Bernadette replied, “they're just letters.” Is it the impossible homecoming, all the roles and scripts she could not inhabit? So for Angela the question remains: What is this something else the writer does to resist death?

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“Death enters into the domain of faith,” Jacques Lacan stated in a seminar in 1972. “And you do well believing that you will die,” the psychoanalyst continued. “This gives you force. And if you were not to believe this, how could you actually endure the life you live?” The belief in death enables the subject to endure the times, reasoned Lacan: “If you were not firmly based on the certainty that there is an end, would you by any chance be able to endure this history?”

In the last few decades, biotechnological advancements of all kinds have made this Lacanian truth somewhat relative. The future has broken into the present and we can now literally push life forward. The possibilities of altering the chemical course of pathologies and of technologically intervening in the beginnings and ends of life have remade the clinic and brought the laboratory home, so to speak.

Lochlann speaks of an incommensurability between cancer as it is experienced by patients, cancer as it is presented in historical and epidemiological accounts, and cancer as it is construed by medical science. “The patient lives a different version of events on a different scale than does the science or the history.” While biotechnological experimentation is normalized as care, patients are actually brought into “a system of uncertainty.” Straight to the point: “Treatment sucks in every way and you don’t even know if it’s working.”

Lochlann calls for a reordering of the discursive construction of cancer that would prioritize the phenomenology of cancer. The diseased are privy to the precarity that accompanies cancer’s biotechnical imaginary and economy of hope (DeLVecchio Good 2007). And this experimentality (Petryna 2009) and lived uncertainty are crucial to “the story of what cancer is.”

How can we facilitate a more informed debate about the uncertainties of the science, effectiveness, and true costs of therapeutic advancements? Lochlann speaks not of an imaginary death but of real deaths at the center of the life-prolonging enterprise. Unearthing the ghosts that haunt cancer clinical trials might be a way of holding basic science more accountable to its uncertainty. There is indeed a tenuous space between research and treatment, a tenuousness that might well be replaced by standardized regimens in the future. In the meantime, to what extent are desperate patients and their families aware of this experimentality? And how can we account for the role of their expectations in the normalization of scientific uncertainty?

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Before bringing these remarks to an end (if abruptly), a brief comment on the things that can help us sense and think through the precarity of the people and worlds that are part of us.

Claude Lévi-Strauss opens *Saudades do Brasil* (“Nostalgia for Brazil”) a collection of photographs, some from *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) and many more unpublished, with this beautiful moment, a kind of Proustian precarity: “When I barely open my notebooks, I still smell the creosote with which, before setting off an expedition, I used to saturate my canteens to protect them from termites and mildew” (1995:9).

How curious to begin a collection of photographs with the memory of an odor: “Almost undetectable after more than half a century, this trace instantly brings back to me the savannas

and forests of Central Brazil, inseparably bound with other smells – human, animal, and vegetable – as well as with sounds and colors. For as faint as it is now, this odor – which for me is a perfume – is the thing itself, still a real part of what I have experienced” (1995:9).

Photographs do not incite this same return to lived experience. On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss writes, “photographs leave me with the impression of a void, a lack of something the lens is inherently unable to capture” (1995:9). They capture the deadly force of modern time, the evisceration of the diversity of humans, animals, plants—an evisceration that we now do to our selves. Yet, the creosote evokes a distinct sense, just like the taste in Proust: “No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me... I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal... I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic” (Proust 1981:48).

How to sustain the magic?

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Freud ended his commentary on transience asking, “But have those other possessions, which we have now lost, really ceased to have any worth because they have proved so perishable and so unresistant?” (2005:219). And he goes on to affirm the power of transience to change us in a way that can change the worlds we live in. “We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before” (219).

A fragment from each paper: Which social forms (Lauren) and politics (Anne) can the discovery of a live composing sensibility (Katie), the desire of writing relationships (Angela), the need to repopulate science with uncertainty and mortality (Lochland) ground?

The people who are missing, including ourselves.

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