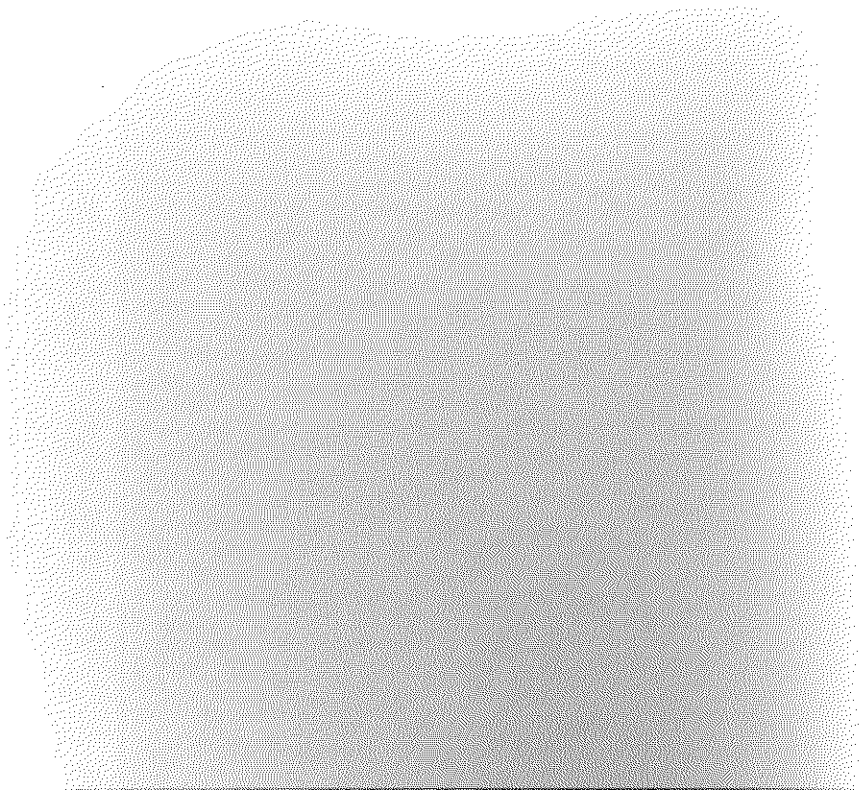

The Ground Between

ANTHROPOLOGISTS ENGAGE PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER **4**

Ethnography in the Way of Theory

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SUBTRACTION

■ Fragment of a conversation with Clifford Geertz at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, May 2003:

"I am so tired of hearing the question 'What is your contribution to theory?'" I told Geertz. "How would you respond?"

Geertz replied without missing a beat: "Subtraction."

TRANSIENCE

Let me begin by quoting at length from 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 splendor 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."

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 [1915] 2005: 216).

The year is 1915, and Sigmund Freud is recalling an "ordinary affect" (as Kathleen Stewart [2007] would put it) that led him to ponder 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 ([1915] 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. According to the psychoanalyst, libido "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 continues, "the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties." Destroying natural beauty, works of art, pride in civilizational achievements, and faith in philosophy, art, and science, the war "revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits which we thought had been tamed. . . . It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless." 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" ([1915] 2005: 218).

Freud's insight here is that the precarity of our lives is not merely happy or sad happenstance; it is part and parcel of small- and large-scale constellations and historical shifts and colors our every experience. The Oedipal archaeology is not enough. Libido follows world-historical trajectories. And here is where ethnographic work comes into the picture. As ethnographers we are challenged to attend at once to the political, economic, and material transience of worlds and truths *and* to the journeys people take through milieus in transit while pursuing needs, desires, and curiosities or simply trying to find room to breathe beneath intolerable constraints.

UNFINISHEDNESS

To capture these trajectories and milieus, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze has argued for a cartographic rather than an archaeological analytic of the subject (Biehl and Locke 2010). Archaeologies assume the subject as dependent on past traumas and unconscious complexes, as in Freud (1957), or overdetermined by regimes of power and knowledge, as in Foucault (1980a). In arguing for life's immanence and its horizontal transcendence, Deleuze (1997b : 61) writes, "The trajectory merges not only with the sub-

jectivity 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."

Nearly a century of critical theory, including feminist and postcolonial critiques, has indeed dislodged the sway of crude universals to attend more closely to the specificity and the world-historical significance of people's everyday experience (Berlant 2011; Morris 2010; Scott 2011). The anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007, 2011), for instance, has argued for the plurality of ways in which ethnographic rendering can open up new attention to people's arts of existence and the political stakes that make up the ordinary. The slow, granular excavations that ethnography renders visible highlight how affects, raw 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 (Biehl and McKay 2012; Biehl and Petryna 2013).

The disparate registers of precarity engaged by anthropologists can thus hold off what Stewart (2011) 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 Void but of "live forms."

How can we ethnographically apprehend these worldly fabrications and the lives therein, constituted as they are by that which is unresolved, and bring this unfinishedness into our storytelling?

How are long-standing theoretical approaches able to illuminate these political, economic, and affective realities on the ground?

How can the lives of our informants and collaborators, and the counterknowledges that they fashion, become alternative figures of thought that might animate comparative work, political critique, and anthropology to come?

In this essay I explore these questions by returning to my engagements with people in the field (Biehl 2005). I return to the ethnographic not only to address the specific circumstances and trajectories I encountered therein, but to make a case for allowing our engagement with Others to determine the course of our thinking about them and to reflect more broadly upon the agonistic and reflexive relations between anthropology and philosophy (Jackson 1998, 2009). I do so in order to suggest that through ethnographic rendering, people's own theorizing of their conditions may leak into, animate, and challenge present-day regimes of veridiction, including philosophical universals and anthropological subjugation to philosophy. This is not to naïvely assume the ethnographic to be metonymic with a bounded ethnos, but rather to consider what is at stake in the ways that we as anthropologists chronicle and write about the knowledge emerging from our engagement with people.

I am interested in how ethnographic realities find their way into theoretical work. Using the mutual influence between the anthropologist Pierre Clastres and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as a case study, I argue against reducing ethnography to proto-philosophy. The relationship in fact may be more productively seen as one of creative tension and cross-pollination. This sense of ethnography in the way *of* (instead of *to*) theory—like art—aims at keeping interrelatedness, precariousness, uncertainty, and curiosity in focus. In resisting synthetic ends and making openings rather than final truths, ethnographic practice allows for an emancipatory reflexivity and a more empowering critique of the rationalities, interventions, and moral issues of our times. I conclude with a literal return to the field and reflect on how the story of lives continues.

"I WANT TO KNOW WHAT THEY WROTE OF ME"

"When will you come back?" asked Catarina, seated on a wheelchair in Vita, an asylum in southern Brazil where the mad and the ill, the unproductive and unwanted, are left to die.

Tomorrow, I said—but why do you ask?

"I like to respond to what you ask. . . . You know how to ask questions. Many people write, but they don't know how to get to what matters . . . and you know how to make the account."

I thanked her for her trust and told her that in order to make the account, I would try to find her medical records in the psychiatric hospitals where she said she had been treated.

Catarina agreed and said, "I want to know what they wrote of me."

After many frustrating calls to Hospital Espírita, I got hold of a social worker who was kind enough to search the medical files thoroughly. When I anxiously called back, she told me, "Catarina had several admissions here. She has a history of mental illness in the family. A maternal uncle committed suicide." That was supposed to explain Catarina's condition: a madness that ran in her blood. "More I cannot tell you," she added.

The hospital would release the records only if Catarina requested them in person. She was brave enough to come along. On the way back to Vita,

Catarina was quiet. When asked why, she admitted, "I was a little afraid." Of what? "That you would leave me there."

I had retrieved some intriguing notes on Catarina's last hospitalization.

The doctor wrote that you were hearing voices.

"That's true," said Catarina.

Which voices?

"I heard cries, and I was always sad."

Where did the voices come from?

"I think they came from the cemetery. All those dead bodies. They had nicknamed me Catacomb. . . . Once I read in a book that there was a catacomb and that the dead ones were in there, closed up. And I put that into my head. One mummy wanted to get hold of another one, who was suffering too much at the hands of the bandits."

And how did the story end?

"They imprisoned her there too."

How did you think these voices got into your head?

"I escaped and read the book. I was sad. I was separated from my ex-husband. He went to live with the other woman, and I went to live alone. Then my house was set on fire."

Dead in name, buried alive, looking for a story line in a book found as she escaped from home.

Was it then, when the house burned down, that you began hearing voices?

"No, it was much earlier—immediately after I separated."

The split of the I. "Separated." Catarina was no longer the person she had struggled to become. The ex-husband, the ex-home, the ex-human she now was.

THE RETURN OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SUBJECT

"Why does he not let Catarina finally rest?" a leading anthropologist recently asked at a conference, after hearing an abridged first draft of this essay. As anthropologists, I suggested, we are challenged to listen to people—their self-understandings, their storytelling, their own concept-work—with deliberate openness to life in all its refractions.

I was taken off guard and felt my colleague's question as an epistemic violence.

Being referred to in the third person—"Why does he not . . ."—rather than addressed directly and cast as repeating myself did, of course, create some anxiety. But these were not the only reasons for my discomfort. I knew that such provocations were part of academic theater. What bothered me most deeply was the implication that Catarina and her thinking had been exhausted and that this visceral ethnographic encounter and the events it precipitated no longer had any creative relevance.

Catarina most certainly would not want to be put to rest, I told myself. And she loved to hear how her story was reaching broader audiences. This moot moment (or academic nonconversation) did nonetheless push me to think even more rigorously about why I continue to return—why I must and will return—to our dialogues and to the difficult questions Catarina's life and abandonment compelled me to reckon with over a decade ago.

Ethnographic subjects allow us to return to the places where thought is born.

Catarina refused her own erasure, and she anticipated an exit from Vita. It was as difficult as it was important to sustain this anticipation: to find ways to support Catarina's search for ties to people and the world and her demand for continuity, or at least its possibility. Attempting to grasp the intricate infrastructural and intersubjective tensions at the core of Vita and Catarina's life not only revealed the present as embattled and unfinished; it also displaced dominant analytical frameworks, thus marking the ethnographic work as a birthplace of sorts, out of which a mode of inquiry and a method of narration as well as the possibility of a distinct public came into existence. I say *public*, for ours is a practice that also begs for the emergence of a third, a reader, a community of sorts, that is neither the character nor the writer, which will manifest and carry forward anthropology's potential to become a mobilizing force in this world.

Significantly the ethnographic work also made it possible for the anthropologist to return to this other "home" and to know it, through the workings of time, anew. "And the end of all exploring," in the words of T. S. Eliot (1968), "will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Put in more scholarly language, I think I return to Catarina, in and out of Vita, much as a field of discourse refers back to its founder or founding moment at each step of its testing and evolution. In his lecture "What Is an Author?" Foucault (1999: 219) reminded his audience that "the return to" is not merely a historical supplement or ornament: "on the contrary, it

constitutes an effective and necessary task of transforming the discursive practice itself."

As I am drawn back to Catarina—and as new, variably positioned cohorts of readers and students are affected by her thinking and struggles in different ways—both the force and the meaning of her life and thinking and the anthropologies it has generated remain open and in flux, forbidding any false sense of closure or certainty.

I feel that I owe these returns, and the unfinishedness they sustain, to Catarina. For me this raises the question of what distinguishes the subject of anthropology from that of science. "The fact is that science, if one looks at it closely, has no memory," states Lacan (1989: 18). "Once constituted, it forgets the circuitous path by which it came into being." Is it, in part, this form of forgetting that permits the sense of certainty in scientific claims to truth?

In science (and in philosophy, for that matter) human subjects appear, by and large, as sharply bounded, generic, and overdetermined, if they are present at all. But ethnography allows other pathways and potentials for its subjects—and for itself. In our returns to the encounters that shaped us and the knowledge of human conditions we produced, we can learn from our experiences anew, live them differently, acknowledging an inexhaustible richness and mystery at the core of the people we learn from. In contrast to the subjects of statistical studies and the figures of philosophy, our ethnographic subjects have a future—and we become a part of it, in unexpected ways.

IN THE MIDDLE WAY

One thinks of what allowed Lévi-Strauss ([1955] 1992: 44) to write *Tristes Tropiques*: "Time, in an unexpected way, has extended its isthmus between life and myself," he recalls. "Twenty years of forgetfulness were required before I could establish communion with my earlier experience, which I had sought the world over without understanding its significance or appreciating its essence."

Lévi-Strauss also spoke of the physical objects and sensations that can help us to feel and think through the precarity of the people and worlds that become a part of us. He opens *Saudades do Brasil* (Nostalgia for Brazil), a collection of photographs, with this beautiful moment of Proustian precarity, the curious memory of an odor: "When I barely open my notebooks, I still smell the creosote with which, before setting off on an expedition, I used to saturate my canteens to protect them from termites and mildew. . . . 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 . . . 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 may not incite this same return to lived experience. "Photographs leave me with the impression of a void, a lack of something the lens is inherently unable to capture," Lévi-Strauss laments (1995: 9). They exhibit the deadly force of modern times, the evisceration of the diversity of humans, animals, plants. The anthropologist gives us both forms of memory together, the hollow clarity of the photographic anthology and the tantalizing whiff of distilled tar inviting anew the imagination of what lies between these images.

Ethnography always begins in the midst of social life, and so it is with our writing—we are always "in the middle way," as Eliot (1968) puts it, "trying to learn to use words," painfully aware that "every attempt is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure. . . . And so each venture is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate."

There are of course many different ways, both figurative and literal, of returning to our ethnographic sites and subjects or of reengaging notes, memories, and visual archives. Revisiting earlier work, we might bring into view the broader academic drama in which the ethnographic account and critique were imbricated (as in Paul Rabinow's [2007] pioneering *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*) or highlight the potential of photography to capture the singular against the generalizing mandates of sociological study (as in the case of Paul Hyman, explored by Rabinow [2011] in *The Accompaniment*).

I recall the time I returned to Vita with my collaborator and friend, the photographer Torben Eskerod. It was December 2001, and Torben was finding it quite difficult to make a portrait of Catarina. She was constantly moving her head and trying to pose like a model. Torben asked me to tell her to try to stay still, to look straight into the camera, and "just be natural," which I did. I then added that, as an artist, Torben wanted to capture her singularity, that he did not stop till he found the person's soul, so to speak. To which Catarina replied, "But what if in the end, he only finds his own?" The smile that ensued is what we see in Torben's portrait.

It is the artist's greatest gift, as Stephen Greenblatt (2009: 8) reminds us, to insist on the uniqueness of each one of us, fated to walk the earth at a particular place and time, at times alone and at times carving out a home

Fig 4.1. Catarina. © Torben Eskerod.

or a story with another "irreplaceable being." And to register the human struggle and inexorable loss in the face of Time that Shakespeare so beautifully captured when he said to a youth (in his fifteenth sonnet): "And all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new."

Literally returning to our ethnographic sites—to say more honestly what we saw or to rectify misrenderings and face the pain one's interpretations and texts have caused (as Nancy Scheper-Hughes [2001] has done for *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics*), or to understand what war and merciless political economies have done to generations (as in Michael D. Jackson's [2004] poignant *In Sierra Leone*)—causes a distinctive longitudinal perspective to emerge, allowing insight not only into how time works on our own senses and sensibilities but also (and perhaps most important) into how the world itself shifts.

Such literal returns enable us to trace the tissues connecting then and now, opening up a critical space for examining what happens in the *meantime*: how destinies have been avoided or passed on, what makes change possible, and what sustains the intractability of intolerable conditions.

DETACHING ONESELF FROM WHAT IS ACCEPTED AS TRUE

Abandoned in Vita, Catarina ceaselessly wrote and demanded another chance at life. The drug Akineton, which is used to control the side effects of antipsychotic medication, is literally part of the new name she gave herself in the notebooks: Catkine. As I engaged the "it" Catarina had become—"What I was in the past does not matter"—I was in my own way becoming something else back home: an anthropologist. Yes, a pedagogy of fieldwork is hierarchical, but it is also mutually formative, as Rabinow (2003: 90) notes: "As it is hierarchical, it requires care; as it is a process, it requires time; and as it is a practice of inquiry, it requires conceptual work."

In my engagement with Catarina, I was particularly concerned with relating her own ideas and writing to the theories that institutions applied to her (as they operationalized concepts of pathology, normality, subjectivity, and rights) and to the commonsensical knowledge people had of her. Rationalities play a part in the reality of which they speak, and this dramaturgy of the real becomes integral to how people value life and relationships and enact the possibilities they envision for themselves and others. The psychiatric process required that the plurality, instability, and flux that composed Catarina's environment and experience be ignored and that her inner life be restrained, annulled, even beaten out of her. Ethnography can capture this active embroilment of reason, life, and ethics, and the anthropologist can learn to think with the theories, however articulate or inarticulate they may be, created by people like Catarina concerning both their condition and their hope.

Comprehension was involved. The work we began was not about the person of my thoughts and the impossibility of representation or of becoming a figure for Catarina's psychic forms. It was about human contact enabled by contingency and a disciplined listening that gave each one of us something to look for. "I lived kind of hidden, an animal," Catarina told me, "but then I began to draw the steps and to disentangle the facts with you." In speaking of herself as an animal, Catarina was engaging the human possibilities foreclosed for her. "I began to disentangle the science and the wisdom. It is good to disentangle oneself, and thought as well."

For all of his exploration of the subject as a function of discourse, Foucault (1997: 327) saw this work of detaching oneself "from what is accepted as true" and seeking "other rules" as "philosophy in activity": "The displacement and transformation of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is—that, too, is philosophy."

By way of her speech, the unconscious, and the many knowledges and powers whose histories she embodied, there was plasticity at the heart of Catarina's existence. Facing changing social and medical realities, she dealt with a multiplicity of bodily symptoms and desperately tried to articulate a symbolic function that had been lost, searching for words and identifications that might make life newly possible.

Symptoms are born and die with time. They take form at the most personal juncture between the subject, her biology, and interpersonal and technical recordings of "normal" ways of being in local worlds. Hence symptoms implicate those people, institutions, and things standing for common sense and reason in the unfolding of such disorders. Symptoms are also, at times, a necessary condition for the afflicted to articulate a new relationship to the world and to others. Ethnography, I believe, can help us resituate and rethink pathology within these various circuits and concrete struggles over recognition, belonging, and care.

PHILOSOPHY IN THE FIELD

The problem for an anthropology of the contemporary, Rabinow (2007: xxiii) says, "is to inquire into what is taking place without deducing it beforehand. And that requires sustained research, patience, and new concepts, or modified old ones."

While in the field, I read some of Deleuze's work with the psycho- or schizoanalyst Guattari. Their ideas about the powers and potentials of desire (both creative and destructive), the ways social fields leak and transform (power and knowledge notwithstanding), and the in-between, plastic, and ever-unfinished nature of *a* life struck me as refreshingly ethnographic. Deleuze (1995: 170) was particularly concerned with the idea of becoming: those individual and collective struggles to come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and to shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions—"to grow both young and old [in them] at once." Becoming is not a part of history, he wrote: "History amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become,' that is, to create something new" (171).

Thinking about Catarina's abandonment and subsequent struggles through the lens of becoming rather than bare life, for example, has allowed me to learn from her writing and her desires in a way I might not have been able to otherwise. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998: 4) has significantly informed contemporary biopolitical debates with his evocation of the *Homo sacer* and the assertion that "life exposed to death" is the original element of Western democracies. This "bare life" appears in Agamben as a kind of historical-ontological destiny—something presupposed as nonrelational and desubjectified. A number of anthropologists have critiqued Agamben's apocalyptic take on the contemporary human condition and the dehumanization that accompanies such melancholic, if poignant, ways of thinking (Das and Poole 2004; Rabinow and Rose 2006).

Whether in social abandonment, addiction, or homelessness, life that no longer has any value for society is hardly synonymous with a life that no longer has any value for the person living it (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Garcia 2010). Language and desire meaningfully continue even in circumstances of profound abjection. Against all odds, people keep searching for connection and for ways to endure (Biehl and Moran-Thomas 2009).

"Dead alive. Dead outside. Alive inside," Catarina wrote. "I give you what is missing. João Biehl, Reality, CATKINE."

There was something in the way Catarina moved things from one register to the other—the past, life in Vita, and desire for an exit and a tie—that eluded my understanding. This movement was her own evolving language for abandonment, I thought, and it forced my conceptual work to remain tuned to the precariousness and unfinishedness of life even in its most overmedicated and depersonalized state.

When I was beginning to write the book *Vita* (2005) I remember telling my editor Stan Holwitz about reading Deleuze in the field. He replied, "I don't care what Deleuze thinks. I want to know what Catarina thinks!"

I got the point. Perhaps anthropologists have been too enamored with philosophy as the power of "reflecting on." And people and the social worlds they navigate are more complicated and unfinished than philosophical schemes tend to account for. The editor as reader was rightly concerned with the conceptual fecundity of people's practical knowledge. Or as Catarina wrote, "I am like this because of life."

Certainly, to carry out our analyses, we need models, types, theories—abstractions of various kinds. But what if we broadened our sense of what counts as theoretical and methodological innovation and left aside, even if for a moment, the need for central discursive engines—the modus operandi that shaped much of anthropology in the twentieth century? Amid the lure of formalizing the new via "designed spaces of experiment and intervention" (Marcus 2012: 432), what becomes of local, situated, subjugated knowledges?

Epistemological breakthroughs do not belong only to experts and analysts. Simply engaging with the complexity of people's lives and desires—their constraints, subjectivities, projects—in ever-changing social, economic, and technological worlds constantly necessitates rethinking. So what would it mean for our research methodologies and ways of writing to consistently embrace unfinishedness, seeking ways to analyze the general, the structural, and the processual while maintaining an acute awareness of the tentativeness of our reflective efforts?

As anthropologists we can strive to do more than simply mobilize real-world messiness to complicate—or serve—ordered philosophy, reductive medical diagnostics, and statistics-centered policy approaches. Both the evidentiary force and theoretical contribution of our discipline are intimately linked to attunement to the relations and improvised landscapes through which lives unfold and to trying to give form to people's arts of living. At stake is finding creative ways of not letting the ethnographic die in our accounts of actuality. And attending to life as it is lived and adjudicated by people in their realities produces a multiplicity of approaches, theoretical moves and countermoves, an array of interpretive angles as various as the individuals drawn to practice anthropology.

The point is not to move our interlocutors in the field up to our level in the hierarchy of epistemological authority—or to that of the European White Male Philosopher—but to argue for an equality of intelligences and to find novel public and scholarly ways to harness the creative conceptual and relational work activated in the field. Accounting for "tragedies generated in life" (as Catarina would put it), social determinants, and institutional and human heterogeneities may not be new or easy, much less the key to an ultimate critical theory, but it never gets old or less valuable.

"One does not have an idea in general," Deleuze (1998: 14) argues in the lovely essay "Having an Idea in Cinema": "Ideas are potentials that are already engaged in this or that mode of expression and inseparable from them." Thus, according to Deleuze, philosophers *try* (trying is a crucial tentative verb here) to invent concepts, filmmakers invent "blocks of movement/duration," and scientists "invent and create functions" (15).

So what does having an idea in anthropology today entail?

Given that we work with people and are concerned with knowledge of the human condition, it would seem to me that our ideas should come out of that engagement: life bricolage, what people make, often agonizingly, out of whatever is available to them to endure, understand, and desire against all odds. Our characters are those who might otherwise remain forgotten, and they want to be represented, as Catarina did: to be part of a matrix in which there is someone else to see and to think with and through their travails. Our characters are those who might otherwise remain forgotten, and they want to be represented, to be part of a matrix in which there is someone else to see and to think with and through their travails.

In the contemporary politics of knowledge, anthropologists defer too readily to philosophers, seeking authorization in their pronouncements, but as Deleuze (1998: 14) himself stated, "No one needs philosophy for reflecting."

So do we need philosophy to reflect on our fieldwork?

If our business is not to do what philosophy does—"creating or even inventing concepts"—what is it that we make?

Can philosophy—really—transform the characters and realities we engage and the stories we tell (if this is what we do) into figures of thought?

This set of questions frames the problem as one of clarifying the distinctions between separate styles of thought, knowing, and creativity. But overlaps, entanglements, two-way exchanges may be what is at stake here: social fields always leak, intermingle, deterritorialize—and that goes for academic disciplines too. Meanings and concepts flow freely across fuzzy boundaries and change in the process.

In fretting that anthropologists are too subservient to philosophers, we forget how much philosophical concept-work has been stimulated by ethnographers. Who remembers that Deleuze and Guattari ([1980] 1987) owe their notion of "plateau" to Gregory Bateson's (1976: 113) work on Bali?

Bateson, they wrote, "uses the word plateau to designate a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end" ([1980] 1987: 22). The plateau is about people's plasticity. It is a kind of intersubjective medium—a "bizarre intensive stabilization"—for finding footholds in the flux of social life.

"Flux" too is a concept Deleuze and Guattari owe to an ethnographer—in this case, Pierre Clastres, whose thinking found its way into *Anti-Oedipus* ([1972] 1983, the work that preceded *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1980] 1987). Nomadism, the encoding of fluxes, the war machine: all of these key insights come from Clastres's attempt to theorize "primitive society" as a social form constantly at war against the emergence of the state.

"As for ethnography, Pierre Clastres said it all or, in any case, the best for us," Deleuze and Guattari stated in a 1972 debate about *Anti-Oedipus*. "What are the flows of a society, what are the fluxes capable of subverting it, and what is the position of desire in all of this? Something always happens to the libido, and it comes from far off on the horizon, not from inside" (in Guattari 2008: 89).

Clastres, who was there at the debate, said that Deleuze and Guattari were far beyond tedious comparativism: "They show how things work differently. . . . It seems to me that ethnologists should feel at home in *Anti-Oedipus*" (in Guattari 2008: 85).

What precisely ethnologists did was still a matter of debate for each of them. For Clastres (2007: 20), ethnology is an encounter that exceeds the conditions of its existence: "When the mirror does not reflect our own likeness, it does not prove there is nothing to perceive."

For Deleuze and Guattari, the ethnologist can best be seen as an act of art in life. Fascinated by Bateson, they view him as the living pursuit of flows (see Jensen and Rödje 2012). Bateson-*cum*-ethnographer himself becomes the figure of their own philosophy, his career retold in their fantastic terminology: "Gregory Bateson begins by fleeing the civilized world, by becoming an ethnologist and following the primitive codes and savage flows; then he turns in the direction of flows that are more and more decoded. . . . But where does the dolphin flux end, if not with the basic research projects of the American army?" (Deleuze and Guattari [1972] 1983: 236).

According to Deleuze, creation comes out of necessity. What is it that we anthropologists need to do? What necessitates our work?

For Clastres, the answer is not straightforward. He was already engaged in high-stakes theoretical debates before his encounter with the Guayaki, and his desire—his *necessity*—to dismantle the evolutionism and economic determinism of Hegelian Marxist thinking motivated and shaped his fieldwork. The intellectual historian Samuel Moyn (2004: 58) goes so far as to say that "hoping to find an extra-European point of view on European society, Clastres made up at home those whom he claimed to discover someplace else." But I would say that Clastres's experiences in Paraguay actually added a new need: to find a channel for grief and moral outrage at the death of the Guayaki.

MUTUAL BECOMINGS

Clastres fought the erasure of "primitive society" both in theory and in reality. As Clifford Geertz (1998: 2) poignantly noted in his review of Clastres's *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, "The threnodic first-person voice, breaking every now and again into moral rage, suggests that there may be more going on than mere reporting of distant oddities." Indeed the text written is always so much more than the sum of its sentences—other meanings, histories, and contexts proliferate between and beneath the lines.

Later, in the same review, titled "Deep Hanging Out," Geertz wrote that Clastres believed in total field immersion as "the royal road to recovering" what is socially elemental. By not doing a lineage of ideas, Geertz casts Clastres as drawing near a confident empiricism—as opposed to the work of James Clifford, with his hanging back and "lucid uncertainty" (1998: 9). Geertz took a stab at *Writing Culture*: "There is very little in what the partisans of an anthropology in which fieldwork plays a much reduced or transformed role . . . have so far done that would suggest they represent the wave of the future" (10).

So it might be a nemesis that compels us to work: the politics of writing-against (on all generational sides). From Malinowski's (1927) critique of the universalizing claims of Western psychoanalytic and economic theories to Geertz's (1983, 1995, 2000) suspicion of functionalist and structuralist approaches, anthropologists are always fighting reductionist hegemonic analytical frames, even as we struggle to articulate and theorize the conditions of our subjects' becomings. The enemy is in the titles: *Society against the State. Anti-Oedipus. Anti-antirelativism.*

Academic debates can become suffocatingly polarizing. In writing-against, do we not risk being consumed by the nemesis, risk producing more monstrous abstractions—the socially elemental and society without a state for Clastres, or revolutionary society and the outside without an inside for Deleuze and Guattari? But then can the person and the social actually be

accessed or created without the framework of a preexisting theoretical disagreement?

Affinities and antagonisms, exchanges and indebtedness abound in the anthropology-philosophy interface (or face-off). Having created crucial evidence for Deleuze and Guattari's concept-work, Clastres praised them for not taking ethnographers lightly: "They ask them real questions, questions that require reflection" (in Guattari 2008: 85). And yet he remained worried about the primacy of debt over exchange in their general theory of society and whether their idea of earth did not "somewhat crush that of territory" (in Guattari 2008: 85).

Clastres (1998: 97) insisted on radical alterity throughout his career, viewing even his own ethnographic work with the Guayaki to have been possible only through *his* world having wounded their own so violently: "The society of the Atchei *Iroiangi* was so healthy that it could not enter into a dialogue with me, with another world. . . . We would begin to talk only when they became sick."

Scribbled a few days before his untimely death, "Marxists and Their Anthropology" is Clastres's most antagonistic essay. He named structuralism "a godless theology: it is a sociology without society" ([1980] 2010a: 224) and denounced the "radical nullity" of Marxist ethnology, "a homogenous whole equal to zero" (221) that reduces the social body to economic infrastructure (234). In the logic of Marxist discourse, primitive society or the Guayaki "quite simply cannot exist, they do not have the right to autonomous existence, their being is only determined according to that which will come much later, their necessary future" (234–35).

But one could also ask whether the "primitive" Guayaki do not work in Clastres as the precursor of the theory of civil society he was advocating at the time, against a feared and condemned state. Ethnography is always engaged in its own politics-of-critique (Biehl and McKay 2012), and there is an instructive irony in the fact that Clastres named his movement *political anthropology* even as he argued that the Guayaki did not practice politics as we know it. At any rate, in his final text Clastres ([1980] 2010a: 227) gets back to Deleuze and Guattari only to leave the cryptic note that, after all, what he identifies under the category desire "has very little to do with how [they] use it."

Clastres's post-fieldwork theoretical moves and entanglements—from his affinities with and swerves from Deleuze and Guattari to his frustration with Marxist anthropology—throw into relief how epistemological hierarchies constantly push ethnographers to harness their evidence to

the philosophical and political debates of the day. I sense a profound wisdom in Geertz's seemingly flippant, grouchy answer—"subtraction"—to the question of his "contribution to theory" that opened this essay. If theory is one way that ethnographers establish the connectedness of the things they describe, theory also circumscribes the ethnographic view. At times, this circumscription importantly allows for the analytical pauses that make alternative knowledge viable; at others, it risks reifying ethnographic moments, sacrificing the sense of the unfinishedness of everyday life that makes ethnography so exciting to begin with.

I am reminded of Bateson's (1958: 257) epilogue to *Naven*, in which he makes very clear that the complexity and force of his ethnographic materials would always exceed the conceptual frames he invented to think about them: "My fieldwork was scrappy and disconnected. . . . My own theoretical approaches proved too vague to be of any use in the field." In their shared ambivalence toward theory, Clastres, Geertz, and Bateson all pose the problem of how to maintain integrity to the mutual becomings activated in the field upon return to the academic milieu as well as the question of conceptual innovation via writing. As Bateson put it, "The writing of this book has been an experiment, or rather a series of experiments, in methods of thinking about anthropological material" (257).

People must come first in our work (Biehl and Petryna 2013). Insular academic language and debates and impenetrable prose should not be allowed to strip people's lives, knowledge, and struggles of their vitality—analytical, political, and ethical. Like literature and documentary filmmaking (Rouch 2003), ethnographic writing can push the limits of language and imagination as it seeks to bear witness to life in a manner that does not bound, reduce, or make caricatures of people but liberates, if always only partially, some of the epistemological force and authority of their travails and stories that might break open alternative styles of reasoning. In Clastres's ([1980] 2010b: 92) words, "Each is refused the ruse of knowledge, which in becoming absolute, abolishes itself in silence."

REREADING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC AS PHILOSOPHICAL

In his imaginative introduction ("The Untimely, Again") to Clastres's posthumous collection of essays *Archaeology of Violence*, the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2010: 17) calls for a rereading of the anthropologist: "*Resisting* Clastres, but not stopping to read him; and resisting *with* Clastres, too: confronting with and in his thought what remains alive

and unsettling." A resourceful anachronism is unleashed as Clastres is reread today: "If it is worth doing, it is because something of the era in which these texts were written, or better, against which they were written . . . remains in ours, something of the problems of then continue with us today. . . . What happens when we reintroduce in another context concepts elaborated in very specific circumstances? What effects do they produce when they resurface?" (17, 18).

Clastres was writing against Marxism and ethnocentric European social philosophies that privileged economic rationality over political intentionality, and as Viveiros de Castro (2010: 13) explains, "Clastres discerned, in his 'primitive societies,' both the political control of the economy and the social control of the political."

According to Viveiros de Castro (2010: 15), "Alterity and multiplicity define both how anthropology constitutes itself in relation with its object and this object constitutes itself. 'Primitive society' is the name that Clastres gave to that object, and to his own encounter with multiplicity. And if the State has always existed, as Deleuze and Guattari (1981/1987: 397) argue in their insightful commentary on Clastres, then primitive society also will always exist: as the immanent exterior of the State . . . as a multiplicity that is non-interiorizable by the planetary mega-machines."

As "The Untimely, Again" unfolds, Clastres's ethnography acquires its meaning in retrospect, mediated by Viveiros de Castro's interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari. And perhaps because Viveiros de Castro takes such great care to avoid fetishizing the ethnographic encounter, his critical rereading of Clastres begins to sketch the lines of a theory-ethnography binary. This dichotomy is particularly noticeable when he takes Clastres's work as defining "an indigenous cosmopraxis of immanent alterity, which is tantamount to a counter-anthropology . . . located in the precarious space between silence and dialogue" (2010: 41). In this rendering, one could argue, Clastres's own ethnographic approach is so subservient to the theorists who read him (or the concept-work through which he is read) that he is portrayed as writing against anthropology itself.

Viveiros de Castro (2010: 34) praises Deleuze and Guattari for having identified the "philosophical richness" in Clastres: "[They] completed Clastres's work, fleshing out the philosophical richness that lay in potential form therein." Both Clastres and (later) Deleuze and Guattari argued against the notion that exchange is a "founding principle of sociality." However, "at the same time that they take on board one of Clastres's fundamental theses, when they affirm that the State, rather than supposing a

mode of production, is the very entity that makes production a 'mode,' Deleuze and Guattari blur the overdrawn distinction made by Clastres between the political and economic" (37). Occupying the privileged epistemic position of philosophers, Deleuze and Guattari thus appear as distilling and perfecting Clastres's apparently crude (ethnographic) insights.

The erudition and insight of Viveiros de Castro's analytical work is indisputable. I am only suggesting that in this moment of his rereading, the creative exchange that existed between Clastres and Deleuze and Guattari is markedly unidirectional. Clastres's ideas thus sound "Deleuzian" (where did Guattari go?), and the force of Clastres's ethnography is either muted or evaluated as philosophy in potential. Clearly, if we read anthropologists in the terms of their philosopher-interlocutors, the ethnography seems brittle and unneeded once the philosophy has been written.

Viveiros de Castro, of course, reads Clastres not merely as an affirmation of a philosophy but also in a more generous mode. Herein Clastres's humanism and sense of the political are newly unleashed: " 'Primitive society . . .' is one of the conceptual embodiments of the thesis that another world is possible: that there is life beyond capitalism, as there is society outside of the State. There always was—and for this we struggle—there always will be" (Viveiros de Castro 2010: 15).

Yet taken as an anthropology of the contemporary, this project certainly begs for critique or at least deeper specificity: What about life *inside* capitalism? Why this investment in a counterideology to capitalism that rests on the imaginary of a capital's *outside*? How to make sense of contemporary realities of society inside the state and people who mobilize to use the state, forging novel, tenuous links between themselves, the state, and the marketplace?

The concept of "primitive society" was born out of Clastres's ethnographic work, moral outrage, and critical engagement with social philosophy, but it was also a way of articulating a political anthropology for the times. There are two key challenges here: to assess Clastres in light of contemporary ethnography rather than by how his ideas measure up to the often vacuous concepts of critical political theory and to let the unfolding of the ethnographic present—in all its repetitions, singularities, and ambiguities—guide our imagination of what is socially possible and desirable.

Such work is ongoing. Lucas Bessire, for example, has been chronicling the postcontact travails of one of the world's last voluntarily isolated group of hunter-gatherers, who walked out of the forest in northern Paraguay

about a decade ago. Using multiple genres of engagement—deep ethnography, film, and concept-work—Bessire (2006, 2011) shows how the Aroyeo new people are not a society against the state but rather "ex-primitives" struggling to survive and make a future in a context shaped by deforestation, humanitarianism, and neoliberal economic policies. They self-objectify their objectification to unexpected ends, both vital and deadly.

In the essay "Savage Ethnography," Clastres's ([1980] 2010b: 90) own words point to the force of the ethnographic encounter that, while rejecting pure positivism—"the academicism of simple description (a perspective close to and complicitous with the most tiresome exoticism)"—is certainly not dependent on the theories of philosophers: "In reality," Clastres writes, "the meager categories of ethnological thought hardly appear capable of measuring the depth and density, or even the difference, of indigenous thought" (88–89).

Are we really to believe that theory can so easily answer the questions that left "ethnological thought" so thoroughly baffled? Clastres ([1980] 2010b: 89) continues, "Anthropology uncovers, in the name of who knows what pallid certainties, a field to which it remains blind (like the ostrich, perhaps?), one that fails to limit concepts such as mind, soul, body, and ecstasy but at the center of which Death mockingly poses its question."

Ethnography is not just proto-philosophy but a way of staying connected to open-ended, even mysterious social processes and uncertainties—a way of counterbalancing the generation of certainties and foreclosures by other disciplines.

This ethnographic vision carries both a hermeneutics and an ethics of intersubjectivity. As Catarina told me, "There is so much that comes with time . . . the words . . . and the signification, you will not find in the book. . . . Nobody will decipher the words for me. I will not exchange my head with you, and neither will you exchange yours with mine. One must have a science, a light conscience. One needs to put one's mind in place. . . . I am writing for myself to understand, but, of course, if you all understand, I will be very content."

Catarina's openness to the existence of a third, so to speak—neither I nor You, an It, an indefinite, neither text-performer nor reader-spectator, but something that, in coming about in the provisional encounter between them, generates new fields of understanding and possibility—is exactly what I long to see more often in interactions among anthropologists as well as between anthropologists and their interlocutors in the field. Along with "the anecdote, the vignette, the ethnographic incident, the organic local theorist," as Michael M. J. Fischer (2010a: 338) beautifully puts it, this third field—fundamentally relational, the exclusive property of no single individual—can also act as "pebbles and labyrinths in the way of theory."

EVERYTHING HAS A STORY

Philosophers tell stories with concepts. Filmmakers tell stories with blocks of movements and duration. Anthropologists, I would say, tell stories with instances of human becomings: people learning to live, living on, not learning to accept death, resisting death in all possible forms.

What does anthropology's storytelling with ethnographic materials invent?

Inventing something is a very solitary act—Deleuze does not believe in giving voice; in creating we are thrown back to ourselves. "But it is in the name of my creation that I have something to say to someone" (1998: 16).

Consider the following statement: "If all the disciplines communicate together, it is on the level of that which never emerges for itself, but which is, as it were, engaged in every creative discipline, and this is the constitution of space-times" (Deleuze 1998: 16).

What we engage with will never emerge for itself. Our creative work, the necessity we address, the mode of expression we are familiar with speaks to this real, reducible neither to time nor to space (nor the Unconscious or History, the Social or the Scientific Function). "Deserted ground is the only thing that can be seen, but this deserted ground is heavy with what lies beneath" (Deleuze 1998: 16–17).

Like a poet, Deleuze speaks of things that are irreducible to any form of communication, bringing a word of caution to our own ideological and humanitarian impulses to communicate the "true" truth of the human condition. Such impulses issue order-words and ultimately partake in systems of control.

So should we be mute? Not engage, not represent?

For Deleuze, we are not just left to an endless self-reflexive and paralyzing mode of inquiry. Our works should rather stand "in contrast" to the "order-words" of the control systems we inhabit: "Only the act of resistance resists death, whether the act is in the form of a work of art or in the form of a human struggle" (1998: 19). Resisting death in all possible forms:

historical oblivion, social abjection or immobility, biological life. And the act of resistance has two sides: it is human, political; and it is also the act of art.

"Medical records, ready to go to heaven," Catarina wrote. "When men throw me into the air, I am already far away." "I am a free woman, to fly, bionic woman, separated." According to Deleuze (1997b: 4), "The ultimate aim of literature is to set free, in the delirium, this creation of a health or this invention of a people, that is, a possibility of life." This vision for literature can also inspire anthropologists: listening more as readers and writers than as diagnosticians or theorists, our own sensibility and openness become instrumental in spurring social recognition of the ways ordinary people think through their conditions amid new rational-technical and politico-economic machineries.

As Catarina put it: "Die death, medication is no more." "I will leave the door of the cage open. You can fly wherever you want to." The fact that such efforts often falter or even fail to change material constraints does not negate the intrinsic force of this struggle to connect and the human resilience it reveals.

In sum, as ethnographers we must attend to the ways that people's own struggles and visions of themselves and others create holes in dominant theories and interventions and unleash a vital plurality: being in motion, ambiguous and contradictory, not reducible to a single narrative, projected into the future, transformed by recognition, and thus the very fabric of alternative world-making.

With our empirical lanterns we can capture elements of this ongoing—agonistic and inventive—conversation between the plasticity of life and the plasticity of death. I say *agonistic* because people struggle to manage time and meaning and find a plateau in the face of impossible choices; I mean *inventive* in the sense of desiring and trying to make things otherwise.

Just as Catarina refused to be stratified out of existence and anticipated an exit from Vita, I would not want her and her story to be confined to a book. Life stories do not simply begin and end. They are stories of transformation: they link the present to the past and to a possible future and create lasting ties between subject, scribe, and reader.

THE AFTERLIFE OF A STORY

It was eerie to return to southern Brazil in August 2005 knowing that Catarina would not be there. (She passed away in September 2003, a few

Fig 4.2. Catarina's headstone. © Torben Eskerod.

weeks after I last saw her.) I wanted to make a headstone for Catarina's grave and decided to visit Tamara and Urbano, the adoptive parents of her youngest daughter, Ana. The couple had helped to organize Catarina's burial in Novo Hamburgo's public cemetery.

Quiet, Ana was helping at the family's restaurant when I arrived. At thirteen years old, she had a face and gaze that were indeed extensions of Catarina's. Tamara did most of the talking. She lambasted every single member of Catarina's family, saying how "fake" they had all behaved during the funeral. Only Nilson, the ex-husband, had shown "respect" by offering to help to defray some of the funeral's costs.

It was striking how Catarina's story continued to shift in the years following her death. In recollections she was no longer referred to as "the mad woman." Both Tamara and the relatives I saw later that week now spoke of

Catarina as having "suffered a lot." As true as this was, such renderings left unaddressed the everyday practices that compounded her intractability—most obviously, the cold detachment that accompanied care conceived as technological intervention rather than relational practice. Indeed the plot of a life story is never securely in the possession of its subject. It is part of the ongoing moral work of those who live on.

One morning that August, Tamara and I drove to the cemetery. I used to visit this place as a child with Vó Minda, my maternal grandmother. We would make the hour-long walk uphill, time and time again, to wash the white pebbles adorning her son's grave and to leave flowers from our backyard. Nowadays the cemetery covers the whole hill, overlooking a city that has also changed beyond recognition. It now has become a site of pillage. Anything on the graves that might have had some monetary value, from the metallic letters spelling out the deceased's names to religious icons, had been looted. So much for the value of memory, I told Tamara. She shrugged, not knowing how to respond. I was not sure what I intended by my comment either, beyond giving voice to mourning.

The story of a life is always also the story of a death. And it is up to us to project it into the future, helping to shape its afterlife. Catarina had been buried in a crypt together with her mother's remains. I made sure that the crypt was fully paid for, so that in the future their remains would not be thrown into the mass grave at the edge of the cemetery. And Tamara was going to oversee the making of a marble headstone with Catarina's name engraved, along with a photo taken by Torben: the beautiful image of Catarina smiling that no one could take away.

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