

Sociocultural Anthropology

On Precariousness and the Ethical Imagination: The Year 2012 in Sociocultural Anthropology

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ABSTRACT I dedicate this essay to anthropologists' heightened attunement to precarity but also to what Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who passed away last year, called our "moral optimism." As I show, much of our work is written from within and against precarity while at the same time being committed to this specifically anthropological ethic. This ethic permeates many of the articles surveyed here and can be found in all of the sections into which they are grouped: On Capital and How We Can Know It; Ethical Encounters; Politics and Protest; Religious Ethics; and Anatomies of Relatedness. I ask what the task of ethnography is now that "things are falling apart, again." This question is crucial because precarity has inserted itself into the very heart of anthropology itself. [*precarity, moral imagination, year in review, 2012, sociocultural anthropology*]

RESUMEN Dedico éste ensayo a la intensificada sensibilización de los antropólogos a la precariedad pero también a lo que Michel-Rolph Trouillot, quien falleció el año pasado, llamó nuestro "optimismo moral." Como lo demuestro, mucho de nuestro trabajo es escrito desde dentro y en contra de la precariedad mientras al mismo tiempo estando comprometido con esta ética específicamente antropológica. Esta ética permea muchos de los artículos identificados aquí y puede ser encontrada en todas las secciones en las que ellos están agrupados: Sobre capital y cómo podemos conocerlo; Encuentros éticos; Política y protesta; Ética religiosa; y Anatomías de la relacionalidad. Cuestiono cuál es la tarea de la etnografía ahora que "las cosas están desmoronándose, de nuevo." Esta pregunta es crucial desde que la precariedad se ha insertado ella misma en el corazón mismo de la antropología. [*precariedad, imaginación moral, año de revisión, 2012, antropología socio-cultural*]

In *Cultural Anthropology's* retrospective on the publication of *Writing Culture* 25 years ago, James Clifford (2012) speaks wistfully of "feeling historical" in ways distinct from how he felt in the heady days of postmodernist critique. He speaks of an emotion that is "visceral," an "awareness of a given world suddenly gone." The ground under him is shifting. He has "serious questions about our grandchildren's future." This is, Clifford insists as he speaks from his U.S. vantage point, not about "terror." The terrorist is merely a "symptomatic condensation" of generalized instabilities that are "deep and world changing." He continues, "The vulnerability to political violence and economic insecurity that many of us feel today is intensified by ecological threats that can

no longer be managed or exported. What happens when the supplies run out, when the resource wars get really desperate? Of course this feeling of exposure is a version of what most people in the world have always known. The certainty of having lived in a 'First World' bubble of security that is no more. Good riddance to that. And now?" (2012:426).

Clifford's "feeling historical" is widely shared in the precarious present. Many look back to a past that, even as one may want to rid oneself of aspects of it, nevertheless also entailed a stable horizon of expectation—a past promise of a relatively predictable futurity of which people in many parts of the world now feel dispossessed (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012; Shoshan 2012). Clifford's sense of having

been robbed of this futurity is one iteration of the many insecurities (and responses to them) that anthropologists documented in 2012: among Slovenian activists who move from within their “experiences of precarity, unemployment, and even poverty” toward direct democracy (Razsa and Kurnik 2012); among marginal workers living accident-prone lives in Bangkok’s “wild” (informal) economy (A. A. Johnson 2012); in the 2011 Wisconsin union strikes, read as reactions against “accumulation by dispossession” (Collins 2012); in Egyptians’ postrevolutionary oscillation between moral resilience and an existential frailty triggered by malnutrition, environmental toxins, and a broken healthcare system (Hamdy 2012); among Japan’s “net-café refugees,” fraught with a “psychic sense of unease, uncertainty, and a darkness about the present in a state of not becoming a future” (Allison 2012:346); in Italy’s precarious workplaces, where the melancholic ghosts of Fordist material stability, valorized toil, and labor force solidarity still linger (Molé 2012); in ruminations about the “emergent form of precarity” of the U.S. road system, four million miles of which signify many things, including the “detritus of collective dreaming” (Stewart 2012:522); in the South African countryside, where the volatility of life expresses itself through yearnings for a loving, powerful state (White 2012); or in a “phenomenology of precariousness” as witnessed in a family’s daily struggles in postinvasion Iraq, when a loved one is kidnapped, held for ransom, and then released, tortured and broken (Al-Mohammad 2012).

Of course, none of the authors argue that this structure of feeling appears the same—or is apprehended everywhere—in the world. All expertly provincialize universalizing claims about precarity by pointing to how the contemporary sensorium is culturally and historically mediated—grounded in local vernaculars of labor, family, society, wealth, desire, and loss. Yet their shared use of the term does point toward our increased attunement to how a set of factors, including increased economic uncertainty (Cho 2012; Holt Norris and Worby 2012; A. A. Johnson 2012; Prentice 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012; Sanchez 2012), the loss of state (and corporate) provisioning (Adams 2012; Hamdy 2012; Holt Norris and Worby 2012; Mains 2012), and “massive violence, marginalization, and injustice; environmental devastation and industrial recklessness; stunning hubris and shrill ignorance” (Fortun 2012:459) have eroded not just labor and the state but also the possibility of life itself. Precarity, in short, is a shorthand for those of us documenting the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails. What fuels this nightmare is a “will not to know, not to engage, not to experiment” (Fortun 2012:459)—an “age of stupid,” as Kath Weston puts it in an article on “the political ecology of the precarious” (2012:429).

What, then, is the task of ethnography today as “things [fall] apart, again”? (Fortun 2012:447). This question is crucial because precarity has inserted itself into the heart of anthropology itself. What we have seen building in the last

few years is a radically transforming discipline—or, rather, a discipline being moved into transformation by the very forces it seeks to describe. As Virginia Dominguez (2012) writes in her American Anthropological Association presidential address, the so-called economic downturn has produced hardships not just for professional anthropologists (see also Boellstorff 2012a) but especially for students and recent graduates as they are saddled with increasing tuition and fees and with the painful reality that many of them will not find positions within the professoriate, “not even with impressive resumes, appropriate work experience, scholarly publications, and teaching experience” (Dominguez 2012:399). The fact that one of the most frequently shared articles on social media in August 2012 was “The Closing of American Academia,” written by Sarah Kendzior, a Washington University anthropology graduate who argues that “the plight of adjunct professors highlights the end of higher education as a means to prosperity” (Kendzior 2012), is indicative of the levels of anxiety in our discipline and of the multiple senses of loss animating our work. Kendzior’s piece was shared on Facebook by over 13,000 people and tweeted about 2,300 times.¹¹

And yet, I want to dedicate this essay not only to our heightened attunement to precarity but also to the strength and vitality of our “better inquiries” (Richland 2009:174), many of which run contrary to the “age of stupid” precisely in their will to know, engage, and experiment.¹² Many are written from within and against precarity while at the same time remaining committed to a specifically anthropological ethic. I am here referring to what the great Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who passed away on July 5, 2012, and whose work seems remarkably prescient today, called anthropology’s “moral optimism”—one of anthropology’s core and most appealing features. This feature emerged out of anthropology speaking from within the West’s “savage slot” wherein the “savage is never an interlocutor, but evidence in an argument between two Western interlocutors about the possible futures of humankind.” The most striking example of this Western conversation with itself was Las Casas’s public brief against Sepulveda’s arguments regarding the humanity of “America’s Indians” (Trouillot 2003:133). Trouillot finds this enduring feature of anthropology both intensely problematic (I will get back to our discipline’s exclusionary tendencies in the conclusion) and appealing. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1992[1755]), after all, built an argument “on the back of the Savage” to formulate a radical skepticism vis-à-vis liberal ideologies of individualism and untrammelled progress. Rousseau thereby displayed a “generosity towards humanity as a whole” and a commitment to the idea that “humanity is essentially good, its history notwithstanding” (Trouillot 2003:135).

For Trouillot (2003), this moral optimism permeates anthropology to different degrees. It sustains our arguments against rational choice and self-interest as principles guiding all human action; against biological descent and for a “future where one race does not dominate another”; against

a hierarchy of cultures and for cultural relativism; against the invincibility of capitalism and for a future not organized around “sheer accumulation.” This archanthropological ethic permeates many of the articles surveyed here and can be found in all of the sections into which I have grouped them: On Capital and How We Can Know It; Dispossession and Ethical Encounters; Politics and Protest; Religious Ethics; and Anatomies of Relatedness. Yet what further emerges from these readings is that anthropologists are not the only ones committed to an ethical imagination. The world is also speaking to us in a heightened ethical register—in the form of corporate social responsibility, global humanitarian interventions, new forms of development, the proliferation of charismatic religions, and, perhaps most importantly, through the many political protests that anthropologists documented in 2012. I end this review by looping back to precarity and moral optimism and reflect, inspired by articles written this year, on what this might mean for our discipline at this historical juncture.

ON CAPITAL AND HOW WE CAN KNOW IT

Anthropology’s concern with the lived effects of neoliberalization continues to expand and deepen. Yet even as we explore peoples’ varied encounters with market rule, two tendencies seem to be co-occurring: one toward exploring the “human economy” (Maurer 2012), a commitment that is certainly not new to anthropology but whose importance is magnified because the stakes today seem infinitely intensified, and another toward investigating how the market’s sudden concern with poverty is giving rise to a new global ethic of benevolence (Roy 2012).

As Bill Maurer asks in a review article entitled “Occupy Economic Anthropology,” “what does it mean to ‘do’ economic anthropology, now, in the wake of the financial crisis and the reenergizing of public discussion over the nature of debt, credit, speculation, and inequality?” (2012:454). Maurer here discusses two books published in 2011, but that I reference because they represent the spirit of a number of articles published in 2012 as well. The first book, Chris Hann and Keith Hart’s *Economic Anthropology* (2011), is an experiment in reorienting anthropology “towards a more engaged practice” and in reorienting economics toward something more human, more “focused on well-being-in-the-world” (Maurer 2012:455). The second book, edited by Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Laville, and Antonio David Cattini, is called *The Human Economy* (2011) and is a “roadmap to alternatives, a ‘citizen’s guide’ to everything from NGOs to complementary currencies as well as a series of easily digestible primers on topics ranging from international organizations to social entrepreneurship” (Maurer 2012:456). The claims made in both books are neither romantic nor utopian. Instead, they are “profoundly political” in their pragmatism (the 32 chapters of *The Human Economy* are based on “actual experiments that have been made in the world”) and in their recognition that there exists a range of human needs, not just individ-

ual interests, and an array of public, not just private, goods (Maurer 2012:456).

When I speak of such visions of a “human economy” as a newer tendency, I realize of course that they draw on our discipline’s long, venerable, Maussian roots. What one might describe as new, however, is the tenor of writing as well as the stakes expressed: indeed, the importance of writing about the “human economy” in the midst of the global economy’s inhumanities cannot be overstated. This is, again, reminiscent of the moral optimism Trouillot called for when he urged anthropologists to commit to Rousseauian-style “counter-punctual arguments” and to publicly address our interlocutors—“inside and outside of anthropology, and indeed outside of academe, from rational choice theorists, historians, and cultural critics to World Bank officials and well-intentioned NGOs” (Trouillot 2003:137). For, writes Trouillot,

We owe it to ourselves and to our interlocutors to say loudly that we have seen alternative visions of humankind—indeed more than any academic discipline—and that we know that [a vision of humanity that constructs economic growth as the ultimate human value] may not be the most respectful of the planet we share, nor indeed the most accurate nor the most practical. We also owe it to ourselves to say that it is not the most beautiful nor the most optimistic. [Trouillot 2003:139]

Commitments to a human economy seem to have animated many articles last year, including a piece on the smuggling (or what communities call their right to the “free trade”) of corn (“a basic grain, not contraband”) across the Mexico–Guatemala border (Galemba 2012); an interrogation of the significance of the Ecuadorian president’s embroidered shirt and how it indexes Ecuador’s fraught attempts at “post-neoliberal” economic sovereignty (Collredo-Mansfeld et al. 2012); an exploration of the importance of “tacit knowledge” that is, contra Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, crucial to public-sector banking in Egypt and, by extension, to the imaginaries that will have to fuel the planning of our economic futures (Elyachar 2012a); and articles on Occupy already cited above (Razsa and Kurnik 2012) as well as a number of pieces on the Egyptian Revolution reviewed below. Anthropologists also discussed experiments occurring in places such as Brazil, where the government has remade social redistribution through postwelfarist cash transfers (or “investments”) to poor households. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff reflect on the *bolsa familia* (family allowance) by pointing to it as a “creative and progressive form of redistribution” that at the same time applies market idioms and potentially commodifies domestic relations (Bangstad et al. 2012:132). There is, of course, also David Graeber’s magisterial book on debt, which won the 2012 Gregory Bateson Book Prize and which represents both an attempt to write about the human economy and anthropology’s moral optimism at its best; it is an exercise in stepping out of our comfort zones, unapologetically identifying our primary interlocutors, and “addressing the Sepulvedas of our times directly” (Trouillot 2003:136).

The crux and problem is that the Sepulvedas of our times are speaking from within ethical registers as well. Indeed, if “a defining feature of contemporary capitalism is the corporate response to critique” (Benson and Kirsch 2010:462), then a “human economy” has begun to declare itself from unlikely vantage points as well. Anthropologists have critiqued these trends in accounts of how a giant open-pit mine in Indonesia (which dumps 160,000 tons of tailings into the ocean every day) sponsors Paolo Freire-inspired participatory-development projects that promote organic pesticide-based farming and composting—an absurdity not lost on its participants (Welker 2012); of how corporate claims to social responsibility (Benson 2012; Rajak 2012) and cultural and social “depth and connectedness” (Rogers 2012) are a means to forestall criticism and protect markets; of how the casualization of labor in an Indian company town is legitimized through evocations of a dwindling corporate paternalism (Sanchez 2012); and about how Nestlé’s strategy of selling cheap instant noodles to the “bottom of the pyramid” poor, some of whom are beginning to wean their babies with the product, supposedly lifts them out of “poverty and desperation” while also turning corporate profit (Errington et al. 2012).

This critique of corporate attempts at “humanizing” the capitalist economy has been met by a number of more ambivalent analyses as well. Ananya Roy, in the introduction to a recent special issue of *Public Culture* entitled “Poverty Markets: The New Politics of Development and Humanitarianism,” has described an emergent global ethic that is expressed in the new ways in which poverty is being encountered: through a “renewal of development through reconstruction, humanitarianism, and bottom billion capitalism” (in the form of, e.g., the global microfinance industry [Roy 2012; Elyachar 2012b]); through “the struggle to find a moral compass for the forms of market rule associated with poverty interventions” (in the search, e.g., for “responsible finance” or “consumer protection” that mitigates the exploitation of the poor); and through “zones of intimacy where poverty is encountered through volunteerism, philanthropy, and other acts of neoliberal benevolence” (Roy 2012:105–106). The latter includes the “integration of ethics into consumption” through “community-based” tourism in the global South (Baptista 2012) or the distribution of life-saving drugs and other humanitarian goods by for-profit and nonprofit organizations that “present themselves as an ethical response to failure on the part of states” (Redfield 2012a:158; see also Adams 2012; Samsky 2012). As Peter Redfield and Roy insist, many of these “ethical subjects” foreground moral and medical rather than market values. Ethics is today not an afterthought to core business (Redfield 2012a) but instead represents a “moral vision” that cannot be reduced to “crude neoliberalism” (Roy 2012:107). One might call this a moral neoliberal that has come to accompany the market neoliberal (Muehlebach 2012)—a moral neoliberal that cannot easily be read as a thinly disguised weapon wielded to mask the realities of exploitation nor as a social palliative that

“corrects socio-psychological disequilibrium” and helps individuals manage inner anxiety (Geertz 1973:201). Instead, anthropologists are detecting a shift in the social conventions that organize collective moral responsibilities, a shift that is, at least partly, shared across the political spectrum and thus points to the emergence of a new culture of feeling and action linked (but not reducible) to the intensification of market rule. One reason I highlight this is that it would be naïve to think that our students will not find employment opportunities in this sector—a point I will return to in the conclusion.

Next to our explorations of “human economies” came a number of articles that deepen our knowledge of “capital and how we can know it” (Maurer and Martin 2012:527). One cluster of articles focuses on the aesthetics (Maurer and Martin 2012), ethics (Benson 2012; Welker 2012), and signifying practices (Rogers 2012) of corporations, as well as on the (garment and oil) industry’s racial politics (Prentice 2012) and fantasy worlds (Appel 2012). A second cluster focuses on neoliberal epistemologies (Elyachar 2012a; Looser 2012; Muehlmann 2012), while a third explores the effects of monetarization (Stan 2012) and privatization (Holt Norris and Worby 2012; Mains 2012). A fourth set of articles explores piracy (the informal economies of counterfeiting, copying, smuggling, and trafficking) “as central to the neoliberal experience” (Dent 2012a, 2012b), whereas others study branding (Nakassis 2012; Shankar 2012) and the emergence of a neoliberal “organicist aesthetics” (Fehérváry 2012). One article on the psychological styles practiced among Russia’s new elite shows that its “ethic of psychological self-work” helps stabilize class difference while also emphasizing new modes of healing, empathy, and care (Matza 2012). In the following section, I dwell on this fact—that our era of increased inequality is accompanied by a structure of feeling that privileges empathy, care, and compassion.

DISPOSSESSION AND ETHICAL ENCOUNTERS

The violence of dispossession comes with attempts to manage and mitigate its effects. Anthropologists have for a while now documented how the global North is encountering extreme forms of poverty through its “compassion economy” (James 2012). This last year was no exception. These articles deepen anthropology’s critical explorations of the humanitarian regime and include studies of how the global North manages migrants and refugees as they beat down its barricaded borders (Kelly 2012; Rozakou 2012), as well as how humanitarianism seems to have shifted from temporary, “restless” (Redfield 2012b:359) interventions toward various forms of tension-filled entrenchment. Here, Ramah McKay (2012a) shows how refugees in Mozambiquean camps critically and nostalgically compare past experiences of relatively abundant forms of humanitarian intervention with the more limited, means-tested humanitarianism of the current era, whereas Nell Gabiam (2012) looks at how the United Nation’s shift from

relief-centered humanitarianism toward a developmentalist ethos unsettles Palestinian aid recipients' political subjectivities and narratives. Entrenchments and tensions were further documented among Médecins Sans Frontières as it moves from short-term emergency relief toward a lengthy presence in some areas in the world (Redfield 2012b), in Lutheran charitable assistance as its humanitarian missions become more "efficient" (Halvorson 2012), and in the unintended consequences of humanitarian and developmental "bureaucraft" (James 2012).

Beyond humanitarianism's entrenchment came articles that look at extensions of humanitarian registers and practices into other realms of transnational engagement. One article looks at how two pharmaceutical companies sponsor humanitarian drug-donation programs, thus integrating themselves as "scientific sovereigns" into a highly discretionary global health regime (Samsky 2012). Another focuses on volunteer care (or "custodial") labor provided by Western tourists in a Malaysian wildlife-rehabilitation center—tourists who yearn for meaning and purpose and whose affect helps fuel their labor and monetary investment (Parreñas 2012). Both articles link emergent transnational care regimes and the humanitarian corporation to emergent forms of neoliberal benevolence. They highlight how global forms of gifting, "human economies" promoted by well-meaning individuals and corporations, reproduce the unequal distribution of risk and vulnerability (Parreñas 2012) and emphasize the subaltern position of the recipient (Samsky 2012). Such affect-laden encounters between privilege and poverty are of course not neatly arranged along global North–South divides. They are fostered and cultivated in the global North as well, such as when Chicago liberals plan a National Public Housing Museum where the poor can be contemplated and experienced, viscerally and sympathetically, in their "dogged resilience" (Fennell 2012). Here, it is not just the tropes of poverty and sympathy but also that of "resilience" that perform a kind of violence as those with the privilege of detecting "resilience" in others seem to be telling themselves a soothing story: the poor are strong (no matter how often we batter them); they can withstand (no matter how much we exploit them); they will bend and rebound (but not rise up).

POLITICS AND PROTEST

But rise up they did. As Christopher Dole (2012) anticipated in his review last year, anthropologists have a universe of reflections to offer on the global uprisings that shook and captivated the world in the last two years. Let me start with David Nugent's reflections on the series of articles on the Occupy movements that were published in tandem in *American Ethnologist* (Juris 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012) and on the *Cultural Anthropology* website. "What stands out," writes Nugent, "is a sense of the new, the unprecedented. This sense of a powerful break with the past is in part temporal. But it is equally social structural and moral–ethical" (2012:281). To Nugent, the "moral imaginaries" expressed in these radical

democratic experiments address both the interrelated crisis of global capitalism and representative democracy—a point that can, of course, also be made about the Arab Spring, the Greek protests, and beyond. We are thus witnessing "more than the birth of a new era of politics. We are also seeing the actualization of entirely new social relations and ethical practices, through which new forms of personhood and politics are being created" (Nugent 2012:281).

But it was not just new ethical imaginaries to which we were drawn. We encountered these practices through our specifically anthropological ethic as well. As Danilyn Rutherford (2012) writes, our empiricism distinguishes itself from others by the fact that it is ethical (Lambek 2012). Our methods, after all, create "obligations that compel those who seek knowledge to put themselves on the line by making truth claims that they know will intervene within the settings and among the people they describe" (Rutherford 2012:465). The articles published last year both in *American Ethnologist* and on the *Cultural Anthropology* website on Occupy, the Arab Spring, and beyond are in this sense ethnographies of, in, and for revolution. Many of them were, in the best anthropological spirit, at once richly empirical and deeply committed.

What is novel here is not only the coordinated simultaneity with which two flagship journals of our discipline have organized their publishing. I am struck also by the publicity of these interventions, particularly on *Cultural Anthropology's* website, beautifully expanding under the editorship of Anne Allison and Charles Piot. What I mean here is the "Hot Spots" and "Theorizing the Contemporary" features' commitment to public form—catapulting anthropological writing out from its narrower academic confines and placing it alongside journalistic interventions, opinion pieces, unpublished snippets of manuscripts and AAA papers, links to blogs, political pamphlets, and video clips authored by citizen journalists such as those of the Mosireen Collective, who documented unspeakable acts of violence by the Egyptian army and police, or images of the 35 Tibetans who set themselves on fire in the last year alone. The publicity of these interventions is marked also by the fact that some of the pieces are collectively authored and by the fact that all of this material (including academic articles) is freely available. It is thus part of an emergent "ecology" of knowledge production that "favors 'commons' of various sorts" (Marcus 2012:428). This publicity resonates with former *American Anthropologist* editor-in-chief Tom Boellstorff's impassioned plea (2012b) that all of our academic work should be freely available and that we should break our contract with Wiley-Blackwell by 2018. All of this might be seen as a mirroring of the very spirit of the uprisings themselves (as Diane Nelson put it in her contribution to *Cultural Anthropology's* online Occupy feature, "Occupy is so IN THE DOING, the ecstasis of 'things stirring,' the pitching in and getting it done, the TAKING IT UPON ONESELF" (Nelson 2012).

This is an early glimpse, perhaps, of a more general shift in the discipline as it turns away from a more

traditional anthropological “civic duty” (Trouillot 2003:137). “The time has gone,” Trouillot wrote more than a decade ago, “when anthropologists could find solace in the claim that our main civic duty . . . was the constant reaffirmation that the BongoBongo are ‘humans just like us.’ Every single term of that phrase is now publicly contested terrain.” Instead, “relevance will likely depend on the extent to which the discipline rids itself of some of its shyness and spells out its stakes for a wider audience” (2003:137). The *Cultural Anthropology* website is a key example of these shifts in “civic duty” as it eschews institutionalized anthropology’s gentle, comfortable humanisms and its tendency to hesitate at making counterpunctual arguments. Rather than “masking the relevance of [anthropology’s] debates and positions and avoiding a public role” (Trouillot 2003:137), we see anthropology appearing in unapologetically political form, explicitly committed to intervening in contemporary debates from within its tradition of ethnographic inquiry.

This emergent public form has been accompanied by ruminations about the shifting role of ethnography as well: its temporalities, ethics, and capacities to discern the emergent. It is relevant that the two editors of the Egyptian Revolution “Hot Spot” on the *Cultural Anthropology* website, Julia Elyachar and Jessica Winegar (2012), thank the contributors “who took the time to dare to write about so much that is so uncertain.” Indeed, rapid response as a genre and temporal orientation is unusual, even painful, for many of us who spend years learning languages, conducting research, and then even more years mulling over data. From this perspective, it would appear “daring” to take written stances so soon after the event in question. Angelique Haugerud similarly began her new editorship of *American Ethnologist* in early 2012 by insisting that “momentous events invite instant analysis of the kind anthropologists are trained to question” and by pushing her contributors to “adopt experimental formats rather than conform to the genre of full-length research articles” (Haugerud 2012:1).

What does “working on and in the temporality of emergence” look like? What is the fate of ethnographic work if the ethnographic present ceases to be a “captured present” and instead orients itself toward a “near future” (Marcus 2012:435)? Both George Marcus and Kim Fortun propose collaborative experiments with form (Marcus 2012:435) and insist on the necessity to “stage encounters—in texts, online, in the street, in conference rooms—that are productively creative, creating space for something new to emerge, engineering imaginations and idioms for different futures, mindful of how very hard it is to think outside and beyond what we know presently” (Fortun 2012:459). The goal is to be open to new knowledge forms, a newness that the anthropologist is especially attuned to “because she knows how to listen, how to discern discursive gaps and risks, how to tolerate truly not knowing where one is headed. We are trained and positioned, funnily, to tolerate the unknown, we have an affordance for unimaginable futures” (Fortun 2012:458). Ethnography staged in such ways,

writes Fortun, now perhaps “does the work of ‘theory’” (2012:458).

I am interested in how the open question of the future of ethnography has given rise to questions about theory as well. Gone are the days where Trouillot warned against our discipline’s basking in “the aestheticization of theory”—that is to say, in a kind of theory that “spends its life spinning in a proselytical circle, the main purpose of which is to verify its own beauty” (2003:137–138).¹³ I saw no solipsisms in the pieces reviewed, nor a tendency (following George Marcus) toward “anti-theory” or an “exaggerated pragmatism.” Instead, theory tends to appear as reflexive, “recursive,” and “transitive,” posing “arguments out of the places where they are usually made, heard, and reacted to” and in ways “political, normative, and sometimes provocative.” We increasingly ask questions among our constituencies (“activists, social movements, jurists, humanitarian interventions, international organizations, and for that matter, corporations, agencies, and labs as well” [Marcus 2012:432]) who engage with our work and have thus become internal to it (Marcus 2012:434).

The articles on Occupy (Juris 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012) and Egypt (Abu-Lughod 2012; Agrama 2012; Ghanam 2012; Hafez 2012; Hamdy 2012; Hirschkind 2012; Mahmood 2012; Saad 2012; Winegar 2012) were joined by others similarly concerned with political and moral transformation, such as among communities in Costa Rica, where the establishment of transgenic-free territories articulates itself through local and national sovereignty as well as a “defense of life itself” (Pearson 2012:90); among a globally circulating video game that was created by a Serbian student resistance movement and that encodes a logic of nonviolent revolution (Greenberg 2012); among hackers for whom hacking is a technical, aesthetic, and ethical project (Coleman 2012); among an indigenous group that has charted an inspiring course for environmental politics in the 21st century (Cepek 2012); and among the “hidden,” progressive, black, media-tized counterpublic in the United States (Di Leonardo 2012) and among queer activists in India (Dave 2012). Two articles by Claire Wendland (2012a, 2012b) are similarly noteworthy because they detail the quiet cultivation of dissent among Malawian medical students as they articulate their own moral economies of healing through encounters with both their vastly more privileged Western counterparts and the local poor. All of this work displays a moral optimism that never slips into “social optimism, . . . teleology, or worse, . . . political naïveté” (Trouillot 2003:135). Instead, these explorations are, in Rutherford’s words, both ethical and skeptical. After all, an ethical question “cannot be answered according to a prescription or program. Uncertainty and justice go hand in hand in those moments that force us to choose among contending ways of doing the right thing. The empiricism that characterizes anthropology at its best is both skeptical and committed” (Rutherford 2012:472). Much of the work cited above beautifully maneuvers across such ethical-skeptical terrains.

Beyond work on revolutionary protest and radical politics are studies that, equally importantly, document the complex sedimentation of power and inequality through an array of governmental practices and actors (including state, media, and biomedical regimes). One set of articles raises the question of how dissent comes to be thwarted (Cho 2012; Harms 2012), individualized (Junge 2012), or pathologized (Weiss 2012). A second set explores the violence and exclusion that accompany the “ambivalent inclusion” (Rogozen-Soltar 2012a:633) of immigrants in diverse parts of the globe (Ameeriar 2012; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Rogozen-Soltar 2012a, 2012b; Rozakou 2012), whereas one article explores how Australian Aboriginals struggle over how to inhabit white settler colonial public space (Fisher 2012). A third set of articles deals with state and other forms of governmental bureaucracy (Hull 2012; Kravel-Tovi 2012; Lavie 2012; McKay 2012b; Thedvall 2012), whereas a fourth represents media landscapes as battlegrounds over normative forms of reflexivity (Tambar 2012), over infrastructures and visual representation (Gürsel 2012), and over “the local” (Udupa 2012). Finally, anthropologists have explored biopolitical power in the form of the U.S. “war on fat” (Greenhalgh 2012); the biopolitics of life, death, and suicide among Inuit youth in the Canadian Arctic (Stevenson 2012); and the “biopolitical economy of security” as expressed in infectious-disease research (Caduff 2012:352). In the latter, a growing anxiety over the public dissemination (and iterability) of sensitive information has fueled intense concern over the unpredictable “precarious body” and, indeed, over life itself.

RELIGIOUS ETHICS

If the precarious world is speaking to us in heightened ethical registers, anthropologists were further interested in its proliferating Christian charismatic religious forms. Although a number of articles focus on a variety of religious practices ranging from Islamic (Adely 2012; Clarke 2012; Henig 2012; Mittermaier 2012) to indigenized Catholic (Tassi 2012), Siberian Buddhist (Bernstein 2012; BuckQuijada 2012), and popular Hindu (Singh 2012), the biggest cluster focuses on evangelical Christianity both far (Chua 2012; Eriksen 2012) and near (in the United States and England; see Brahinsky 2012; Engelke 2012; Jones 2012; Lührman 2012; McGovern 2012a). Two articles in particular speak to some of the themes raised in this review. Mike McGovern, looking at the “political economy of evangelical Christianity” as it connects the Côte d’Ivoire and the Christian Right in the United States, explores how an ultranationalist evangelical ethos allows impoverished Ivorians to approach shrinking economic prospects by violently “liberating” the body politic of strangers (2012a:247–248). The elective affinity that connects the Côte d’Ivoire to the U.S. Christian Right is in part animated by Islamophobia and, crucially, by a shared fantasy structure of “punctuated time” that aligns both with free-market theology (2012a:250). Punctuated time—that is, the unpredictable isolation of actions and talk in time—

further intersects with the radical discontinuities and crises that characterize West African cities today (2012a:251), just as they presumably characterize life at the bottom of the social ladder in the United States as well.

But what happens to the frenetic promises of lavish wealth made by Pentecostal prosperity-gospel preachers if that wealth never or only very differentially materializes? A second article explores the changing nature of the prosperity gospel as believers in the Zambian Copperbelt begin to alter their understanding of divinely authored economic success in the absence of this very success (Haynes 2012). Located in a town “in the heart of an extraction economy” (2012:124), this piece shows how believers excluded from the “heavenly economy of superabundance” (2012:124) adjust their expectations through exchanges that span households of unequal material means. Both articles describe yet additional variants of the “human economy”: one exclusionary, as it attempts to regain a romanticized past Ivorian prosperity through violence, and the other inclusionary, as it allows for novel social and political relationships to unfold across materially unequal households.

ANATOMIES OF RELATEDNESS

Such “anatomies of relatedness” (Glaskin 2012) as they unfold across households in Zambia have of course long been the main purview of anthropologists. Anthropology is thus exceptionally well placed to document not just “the lived experience of real people everywhere . . . especially amongst those who happen to be the ones most disposable from the viewpoint of capital” (Trouillot 2003:138) but also the opposite of disposability: namely, the human investment in the reproduction, valuation, and cultivation of relations. It is from this vantage point that the “newness” that David Nugent ascribes to movements such as Occupy is perhaps not new but really just another iteration of the practices that anthropologists beginning with Marcel Mauss have documented all along—tendencies that can be summarized under the (often-ambivalent) reciprocities that organize the ethics of kinship, friendship, and hospitality.

Anthropologists in 2012 built on this disciplinary strength through studies of kinship and mobility (Gay Y Blasco 2012; Olwig 2012; Rytter 2012); interspecies relationality (Shir-Vertesh 2012; Nading 2012; Napier 2012); and friendship (Ho 2012). Marshall Sahlins takes us back to an archanthropological point in his witty critique of Warren Shapiro’s thesis that kinship extends outward “from the position of the Ego” and his or her “primary,” “elementary,” or “true” kin toward forms of secondary relationality (Sahlins 2012:673). What interests me here is Sahlins’s moral optimism as he takes us through the intricacies of cross-cultural kinship back into the heart of “the West” itself. After all, if kinship is analyzed through Shapiro’s decontextualized “biologism,” “abstract individualism,” and “egocentrism,” then our analyses would represent little more than the reproduction of dominant liberal ideologies of self and society. “Welcome to America,” as Sahlins writes (2012:673).

Indeed, “unlike the Robinsonades of the Economists, we are not dealing with a lone man and woman copulating on a desert island and thus producing a society” (2012:674). Instead, we understand even the fetus, often conceptualized as disembodied individual and thus as “neoliberal subject par excellence” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:306), as an expression not of biological but of social relations (Sahlins 2012:674).

Anthropologists were further concerned with the topic of happiness. Unlike economists, who themselves have discovered happiness only to measure and quantify it (Wali 2012), the anthropological take distinguishes itself in its refusal to do just that (Johnston et al. 2012). Anthropologists also dedicated an entire journal issue to hospitality (Candea and da Col 2012a). And again, unlike economists’ fetishization of self-interest and rational choice, anthropologists explored hospitality as a medium for “reciprocity and mediated otherness” (Candea and da Col 2012b:S1). The point was not to naively celebrate generosity but to carefully consider how the stranger is potentially dangerous as well. Guest–host relations, “like gift-giving, involve reciprocity, a tension between spontaneity and calculation, generosity and parasitism, friendship and enmity, improvisation and rule” (Candea and da Col 2012b:S1). They also “often threaten to collapse into enmity” and thus must be studied in their range of ambivalences (see also Rozakou 2012).

A number of articles written in 2012 similarly dealt with the ambivalence of relatedness as they explored kinship and violence (Apter 2012; Borneman 2012; Marcelin 2012); the absence of motherly love and its social effects (Mayblin 2012); and the circumscribed accommodation of excombatants into postwar Sierra Leonian society (Bolton 2012). Mike McGovern (2012b) proposes a rereading of the institution of the avunculate as not only a product of past marriage alliances and relations of descent but instead as part of a “toolkit” that may have allowed the displaced and dispossessed to manage and negotiate recurrent insecurity and unpredictability over many centuries. Set among the displaced populations inhabiting the region where modern-day Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d’Ivoire converge, McGovern shows how the avunculate might be a vehicle through which the uprooted and the rooted, the weak and the powerful, establish hierarchical but binding links with each other and grant each other symbolic legitimacy. Kinship, in short, is here presented as an “aspirational and negotiable” mode through which hosts and strangers cooperate and reciprocate (McGovern 2012b:739). McGovern thus takes us back to the themes organizing this review: how people have managed and countered intense precarity through “the actualization of entirely new social relations and ethical practices, through which new forms of personhood and politics are created” (Nugent 2012:281).

OUR MORAL OPTIMISM

Trouillot’s calls for an anthropology cognizant that its public obligations are being heeded. The politically fraught arenas

within which we often tread “require us to write and speak authoritatively on issues that matter to the people we have studied” (Rutherford 2012:466). As Rutherford—also with Trouillot in mind—writes, “we have to learn to inhabit the ethical quandaries built into our kinky empiricism more creatively by building alliances across some of the barriers we have built around cultural anthropology. I have in mind those that divide us from policy work and the more quantitative social sciences” (Rutherford 2012:473). Citing Philippe Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg’s *Righteous Dopefiend* (2012) as an example of this kind of engagement, Rutherford (2012:475) commends the book’s intense, long-term ethnographic dedication to the lived realities of heroin addicts while at the same time opening and closing as a policy study as well. This work’s “bravery” lies in its building of alliances “with anthropology’s disciplinary rivals in the social sciences but to do so on our own terms” (Rutherford 2012:475). This is an anthropology that, like *Cultural Anthropology*’s “Hot Spots” series, dares to move beyond institutionalized anthropology’s comfort zones and take stances on issues that matter. Byron Good (2012) makes a similar point in his Marett Memorial Lecture at Oxford University when he argues for “intervention as a mode of inquiry.” Although we should not “privilege intervention as the only ethical position from which to investigate and write,” we should nevertheless “recognize involvement in intervention [in Good’s case, a long-standing activism in the mental health care field in Indonesia] as one critical site for anthropological inquiry” (2012:531). Of course, institutionalized anthropology’s explorations of a more vocal publicity may take on other forms as well. It expresses itself in the eclecticism and creativity of the quickly assembled ethnographic responses to global social uprisings that can be found in two of our flagship journals. It expresses itself in Boellstorff’s insistence that anthropology “needs Gold Open Access.” It expresses itself in our teaching, possibly one of the most important vehicles through which we articulate and disseminate “alternative forms of value.” As David Graeber points out in an interview with *Boston Review* in early 2012, this mode of teacher–student engagement is increasingly under fire and therefore all the more important: after all,

the first thing they do after the Great Crash [in 2008] is to go directly against higher education and try to create a system whereby education only exists to reproduce economic value . . . Traditionally universities are the one space where you’re supposed to think about other forms of value, where you’re supposed to experiment in other ways of existing; of thinking; of art, philosophy; pursue truth, understanding . . . It’s concentrated into one place. And also to think about other ways of organizing things and other possibilities. So once these guys have completely delegitimated themselves, what else is there to do but to go directly against this sort of institution which traditionally would provide alternative ways of thinking about value, alternative ways of thinking about history and society? [D. V. Johnson 2012]

Yet in all of this being or becoming more publicly obligated, it is important to take note of what many will recognize as the elephant in the room: that anthropology already

is a public discipline and is rapidly becoming even more so. This was a point that Trouillot, writing from within the academic context of the late 1990s, could not have anticipated: the fact that many more graduates (from both master's and Ph.D. programs) than ever before are taking full-time positions outside of academia as practicing anthropologists (Brondo and Bennett 2012); the fact that this trend will rapidly increase because the number of anthropology Ph.D.s produced in the last decade increased while the market for full-time academic positions continues to tighten; the fact that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011) surprisingly predicts overall employment for anthropologists to grow by 28 percent from 2008 to 2018, much faster than the average for all occupations.¹⁴ This job growth will occur outside the academy, in sectors such as management, scientific services, and technical consulting (Brondo and Bennett 2012; Dominguez 2012).

Keri Vacanti Brondo and Linda Bennett observe that institutionalized anthropology looks back on a long history of viewing nonacademic careers as “second best.” This hierarchization of different forms of anthropological labor is magnified by the fact that the “nonacademic other” is marginalized by her gender and racial-ethnic minority status as well (Brondo and Bennett 2012:599). This extends into academe, where “women of racial-ethnic minority groups in particular are more likely to identify as applied or practicing anthropologists” (2012:602). Our discipline’s already discouraging record with race and racism, recently (re)identified by the AAA’s Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology but met with a resounding silence by a profession that consists of many thousands (Dominguez 2012), clearly intersects with our undervaluing of applied and practicing anthropology. Anthropology might have contested “the savage slot” (Rutherford [2012] writes that there has been “no shortage of anthropologists seeking ‘new points of reentry by questioning the symbolic world upon which “nativeness” is presumed’”), but on at least these two levels it remains a dismayingly exclusionary conversation.

At the same time, it seems that a “sea change” is occurring in the discipline, led by precisely these “non-university-based practitioners and a subset of departments (often with a commitment to applied anthropology) that produces and links practitioners with students and faculty in their programs” (Brondo and Bennett 2012:598). Many of us first took note of this when *American Anthropologist* launched the public anthropology end-of-year review in 2010. There also exists a growing attention to the “place of practice” in anthropology at our meetings, in publications, and in the media. We further seem to be experiencing a “growing vision of a unified anthropology, where academics inform practice and practice informs academics” (Brondo and Bennett 2012:605).

One major challenge is the jarring disconnect between graduate education and the realities of the anthropological job market, a disconnect that the Center for Ethnography at the University of California, Irvine, has sought to bridge

since its founding in 2005. George Marcus’s reflections offer insight into the kinds of topics that graduate teaching and mentoring today ought to broach, including a sustained reflection on ethnographic form (whereby the classic ethnography is accompanied by more experimental, “middle range forms of collaborative articulations” [2012:432]); on collaboration (with anthropology revising its “ethos of participant-observation towards explicit but ambiguous collaboration” [2012:433]); on tools of translation, mediation, and messaging (because “our distinct culture of research” has an often “ill-fitting relationship to the demands and analytic language-in-use of larger institutional structures” [2012:433]); and on its growing publicity (where responses to a project become part of its data set and the basis for its reception and assessment, thus making anthropological knowledge *both* public *and* authoritative [2012:434]). We also ought to equip our students with more “compelling ways of describing what anthropologists can—and can’t—do better than economists, psychologists, or political scientists.” Indeed, the time is “ripe for what Trouillot called for: ‘an epistemology and semiology of all anthropology has done and can do’” (Rutherford 2012:476).

I end this review with some reflections on ethics. If anthropology is held together by its moral optimism, a generosity toward humanity that ideally articulates itself through provocative, counterpunctual arguments, then we need to consider how and to what effect our moral optimism and counterpunctualism travel along and across academic and nonacademic routes. Many—most—anthropologists will not be speaking from within the safe zones of tenured positions but more precariously from the perspective of untenured faculty or from locations where we might be working in close and ambiguous proximity to the Sepulvedas of our time. The “facilitators” involved in a participatory development project sponsored by a mining corporation in rural Indonesia used ethnographic methods and could very well have been anthropologists (Welker 2012). Likewise, the “human economies” proliferating from within the “new politics of development and humanitarianism” will also likely be staffed by people who might have anthropology degrees. Anthropologists will thus be drawn into complicated terrains where our own ethical imagination intersects and rubs up against the ethical imagination of others. I imagine that students would benefit from seriously exploring the kinds of conundrums that many of them will face, the “ambiguous collaborations” they might be entering, the tools of mediation and translation they will require, and the kinds of ethical stances they want to explicitly inhabit. These are all vital tools that ought to be mainstreamed into graduate education.

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NOTES

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1. I thank Sarah Kendzior for this information.
2. My review is based on articles published in five major general anthropology journals (*American Anthropologist*, *American Ethnologist*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology*, and the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*), although I also mention pieces published elsewhere (*Anthropological Quarterly* and *Public Culture* in particular). As was the case with previous reviews, I also take into account several online sources such as Kendzior's article (above) and materials from the *Cultural Anthropology* website.
3. Although I realize that so-called useless theory is also a radical act in this age of instrumentalist knowledge (see Engelhart 2012).
4. In 2009, 503 anthropology Ph.D.s were granted, down from a peak number of 699 in 2007 (Brondo and Bennett 2012). Significantly, the number of anthropology B.A.s and especially M.A.s is rising; in fact, the number of master's degrees awarded each year in the United States is approximately three times the number of Ph.D.s, and this number continues to grow. Master's graduates thus represent the "face" of anthropology. Many are employed in government/public-sector jobs (federal, state, and local), nonprofit, and private sectors including consulting firms and small businesses, bringing them face to face with the public on an everyday basis (Brondo and Bennett 2012).

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