

Anthropology and the Everyday, from Comfort to Terror

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RADICAL CRITIQUES OF ETHNOGRAPHY from within and outside the social sciences in the last decades¹ have not displaced from anthropology the role of intensive fieldwork, the study of some aspect of the world or human experience from within communities frequently, in some dimension, not “ours” and not “us.” In terms of location, situation, and power, these typically have been communities affected but not privileged by (and often not at all enchanted by) whatever that thing is we call “modernity.”

However romantically retrograde it may be to say so, ethnography is a liminal, visceral practice (art?), often distressingly so, insofar as it may entail learning to use a novel assortment of objects and meanings: to prepare and consume unfamiliar foods, with unfamiliar implements, framed by unfamiliar systems of thinking about food; to sit, walk, and sleep in unaccustomed postures; to act with grace (or at least without utter offensiveness) in uncomfortable gender, family, status, labor, and ritual contexts; and all of this while gaining some degree of fluency in a language of some foreignness in a conceptual universe whose particular attitudes towards the world will only slowly become apparent, and even more slowly understood.² Prior book-learning is only marginally useful, since the most powerful inscriptions of *habitus* are bodily,³ and it is the doltish, wrongly-disciplined body doing most of the initial learning in the field.

By merit of that discomfiting indoctrination, ethnographers usually feel they have a particular purchase—if clumsy and partial—on the everyday. Since the first injunction is to inscribe, describe, record, but since it is impossible to write about anything of more global interest while one is still learning to eat and defecate correctly,⁴ many ethnographers spend weeks and months trying to understand and describe the simplest (hardest?) parts of social life: the minutiae of daily life. And yet, though the trials of everyday learning may be narrated at cocktail parties or in conference corridors, and though publications may be anchored in descriptions of everyday practice, reflection on the singularity of the everyday as a spatial, temporal, and philosophical category is relatively rare.

At the same time, to a large degree, major theorists of the everyday have been absorbed with “the West”—(urban, Western) Europe and North America, only occasionally gesturing towards the cosmopolitan metropolises of Latin America and beyond and infrequently engaging non-metropolitan communities even in the West.⁵ Writing in the early 1980s, Dorothy Smith asserted this dichotomy of social types: “The everyday world is not fully understandable within its own scope. It is organized by social relations not fully apparent in it nor contained in it. . . . Earlier forms of society do not have this double character. In simpler social forms, the character and organization of the everyday world are fully visible. The ethnographic techniques of the anthropologist have depended upon this visibility.”⁶ As Michael Gardiner noted in a recent survey of theorists of the everyday, “there is a general agreement that everyday life is not a fixed or eternal feature of social life, but that it has a discernable history, and has to be understood in relation to the central experiences and dynamics of Western modernity. Premodern societies formed a relatively coherent, organic totality, and different activities and knowledges were more fully integrated into everyday life. . . .”⁷ Henri Lefebvre explicitly defines the narrow range of his project of everyday resistance. Since his “permanent cultural revolution” can only develop in dialectic with continental philosophy, it excludes Marxist USSR, Maoist-Confucian China, and even “pragmatic” America “since it is common knowledge that the culture of the United States has no solid philosophical backing.”⁸ By contrast, Michel de Certeau’s “marginal human” of everyday practice, agency, and resistance is a more universal (though far from singular) figure; notably, however, it is the (Euro-American) city-strolling/riding/reading/storytelling/television-watching bricoleur of *The Practice of Everyday Life* that is most often invoked when Certeau’s everyday is discussed.⁹ Something of a master narrative has developed around the everyday, with this character of Certeau’s and the “woman of suburbia” as its core protagonists. Illustrations of the everyday are consistently set in familiarly Western locations: bungalows, shopping centers, and backyards.

This essay is an attempt to draw some of the primary concerns of the everyday theorists into anthropology, and at the same time to foreground moments in contemporary ethnography that might breach the West-centeredness of everyday theory. Along the way, it is well to undermine the sorting of cultures into distinct and discrete types (usually, the West vs. everything else), which are associated with other persistent dualisms: primitive/modern, sophisticated/simple, “white”/non-white—the very same antinomies undergirding the classificatory logics of stratified relations *within* “Western” societies that are a key target of everyday theorists. Such characterizations also elide the vast

impacts of colonialism. If ever there were anything approaching truly “coherent,” “organic” and “integrated” societies (an idyll largely decomposed by anthropology and social history in the last fifty years), five centuries of exploitative colonial penetration have long since disrupted and disintegrated them.

Anthropologists (and many others) have chronicled and decried the increasing pace, intensity, and violence of this penetration in the past quarter century. Nowadays, modernity is everywhere: nowhere on the planet are people not sucked into the commodity production machine, entranced by electronic media; policed, prodded and homogenized (or “cleansed”) by the rationalizing technocracies of nation-states; vitally affected by the practices and outcomes of world trade, world militarism, and rituals like the World Cup. The discipline of wage labor allied with seductive consumerist distinction regimes is a globally familiar yet enormously variegated process.¹⁰ For these, and for other key reasons explored below, the conceptual everyday is pertinent within and applicable across all societies. Delimiting the fields of observation and contemplation unnecessarily restricts the horizons of both theory and revolution.

I. Prosaic Tools of Comfort: Worldkeeping

The minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture, or practice phenomenology while polishing a piece of old furniture, we sense new impressions come into being beneath this familiar domestic duty. For consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality of beginning to the most everyday actions. It even dominates memory. How wonderful it is to really become once more the inventor of a mechanical action! And so, when a poet rubs a piece of furniture—even vicariously—when he puts a little fragrant wax on his table with the woolen cloth that lends warmth to everything it touches, he creates a new object; he increases the object’s human dignity; he registers this object officially as a member of the human household.

—Gaston Bachelard¹¹

In the kitchen, *one battles against time*, the time of this life that is always heading toward death. The nourishing art has something to do with the art of loving, thus also with the art of dying.

—Luce Giard¹²

The recursive rhythms and disruptive punctuations of everyday labor and sociality are the grounding points of social structure, social reproduction, the structuration of consciousness, power and domination,

social asymmetry, conflict and cooperation, reciprocity, exchange, globalization, and, at the risk of sounding corny, the meaning of life. As Marx put it in the classic statement of materialist philosophy: “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.”¹³ In this view, those abstract categories are epiphenomena of everyday practice (labor)—however symbolically charged and multiply elaborated over time and space, with full semiotic genealogies of their own by the time persons inhabit them. The critical, even if obvious, point is that it is the local, familiar, quotidian, and quite material universe of human labor, cooperation, and consumption—wherever that exists and whether market-mediated or not—from which the vehicles of social consciousness and the consciousness of society are built, both collectively (phylogenically) and individually (ontogenically). Reciprocally, of course, our concerted, continual action upon all species of everyday things regularly renews, to rephrase Bachelard, their “membership in the human household”—as protean signifiers marking nuances of social meaning, memory, status, invention, or transformation.¹⁴

As both research and literary form, ethnography began and often still begins by cataloguing these seemingly simple things of the world’s life: the house, the hearth, the bed; the household and garden tools; the means of production and reproduction, material and social. The generic norm for much of a century was what George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman called “ethnographic realism”¹⁵—monographs opening with description of geographic, climatic, demographic, and ethno-historical setting; following with chapters on landscape, village layout, building structure, labor practices and daily life; and moving “up” to the seemingly more esoteric realms of kinship patterns, exchange, religious belief, and ritual. By the 1970s this stylistic template, with its roots in structural-functional theoretical paradigms (and colonial interests) as much as in the fieldworker’s struggles to acclimate, had been roundly challenged by the rise of structuralist, interpretative, postmodern, and postcolonial turns in theory and representation; this critique has been chronicled in several essential texts.¹⁶

The dethroning of the “encyclopedia of lifeways” meta-project did not diminish the importance of the everyday, however. Ironically, the opposite may have occurred, as the combined impacts of structuralism (via Claude Lévi-Strauss), symbolic anthropology (via Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner), Marxism (via Ernst Bloch and others), feminist theory, and especially practice theory (via Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau) brought previously undertheorized elements of everyday practice to the center of representation and theory. The mundane household tool, the routine habit, the banal occurrence, and the items

of daily production had always loomed large under anthropology's "jeweler's-eye view of the world" (AC 15), but with these major shifts in the light of theory these also loomed with new significance. One key factor in this has been rapidly growing insistence on really listening to, engaging with, and reporting local knowledge—peoples' own commentaries and theories on their own possessions, tools, practices, and behaviors, including their own communicative behaviors. (All the local theories are fluid, constantly emerging and changing, contradictory and conflictual, just as local behaviors are.) Listening is only an imperfect response to Spivak's question, "can the subaltern speak?" but it has been an essential one in the process of ethnographic self-revisioning.

Some studies of everyday culture venture only as far as surface description in their evaluation of the production and manipulation of self and social consciousness. In one prominent essay, John Fiske summarizes Brett Williams's study in an urban African-American community, noting:

The materially constrained narrowness of the conditions of everyday life are compensated for and contradicted by the density and intensity of the experiences, practices, and objects packed into them. . . . the density of apartment life is part of the conditions of oppression, yet it is also available to be turned by popular creativity and struggle, into a textured culture. . . . It is as though a density which is chosen by Lucy and Robert becomes a way of negotiating and coping with a density [of housing] that is imposed on them. . . . it is an instance of the creative use of the conditions of constraint.¹⁷

As celebratory of local experience and creativity as this text is, why does it say nothing about Williams's discussion of the *content* of the dense collage of knick-knacks, photos and decoration, and further, of the personal and social meanings inscribed therein? Fiske brings the reader to the verge: to the dense surface of meaningfulness, and stops there. This was noted by Bill Warner in his commentary on the essay: "it seemed to me that you do exactly what you accuse postmodernism of doing: reducing experience to a series of images."¹⁸ As Michael Taussig notes, such descriptions are "innocent in [their] unwinking ocularity."¹⁹ Shall we really accept a third-hand interpretation of the way Lucy and Robert decorate their apartment? Does it matter whether *they* think they are commenting on the outer social constraints they experience? Why is voice—local knowledge—so far away?

Victor Turner's classic 1967 ethnography *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* though still much under Durkheim's spell in its quest to map out the ritual bases of cultural coherence, nevertheless provided an extraordinary view of the compound intersignifications of everyday and

ritual actions, objects, and relations.²⁰ Forest and garden substances and qualities figured centrally in this conceptual universe—thus any zoological or botanical object, texture, shape, color, scent, and effect could be employed strategically in both everyday and ritual communication, to index the whole gamut of personal or societal values and qualities (as Turner's Ndembu interlocutors told him, "my liver is white"—uncorrupted; "redness acts for both good or ill"—reproduction is good, witchcraft is evil [76, 77]). As Lévi-Strauss insisted, "the universe is an object of thought at least as much as it is a means of satisfying needs."²¹ A more practice-centered view moves farther, to insist that the universe, and particularly the local domain, provides focal tools for thought, communication, and social action. Just as there is no semeiosis without the sign, so there is no society without objects for coproduction, exchange, and evaluative commentary. Interpretation without users *speaking* about the signs and objects of everyday use are pallid and shallow; Turner's ethnography is full of Ndembu voices, interpreting, explaining, and arguing over the meanings of milk-tree sap, blood, or the black fruits of the *muneku* tree.

Barbara Myerhoff's 1974 *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* chronicled an annual pilgrimage affirming the intermeshed meanings of three entities around which Huichol life revolved—deer (the link to a precolonial hunting past), maize (sustenance in a sedentary agricultural present), and peyote (access to the timeless). Following Arnold Van Gennep and Turner in the study of ritual structure, Myerhoff emphasized the dual temporalities of everyday and sacred, as interpreted for her by her Huichol teacher and guide, the *mara'akame* (shaman-priest) Ramón Medina Silva. She calls her study "my interpretation of Ramón's interpretation of the symbols, myths, and rituals that make Huichol life unique and beautiful."²² Here is Ramón speaking about the liminal time of fasting and community: "You have seen how it is when we walk for the peyote. How we go, not eating, not drinking, with much hunger, with much thirst. With much will. All of one heart, of one will. How one goes, being Huichol. That is our unity, our life. That is what we must defend" (*PH* 189). And Myerhoff's interpreting: "Without *communitas*—which must be periodic and short-lived—mundane considerations are overwhelming—tedious, trivial business, mere survival. The spirit starves. Without social structure, the body starves. Alternation between the two—between social organization and ecstasy, between the mundane and the spiritual, between the sensory and the ideological—without obliterating or neutralizing either extreme, is possible" (*PH* 247). Note the resonance of this anthropological vision with Lefebvre's dream: "The Festival rediscovered and magnified by overcoming the conflict between everyday life and festivity and

enabling these terms to harmonize in and through urban society, such is the final clause of the revolutionary plan" (*ELM* 206).

Whether it has really been possible, in the political economy of contemporary Mexico, for the Huichol or any others to sustain this counterpoise, is open to question. But achievable or not, the aim of the Huichol was clearly the same as the aim of Lefebvre and other critics of modern technocracy: to balance everyday and extraordinary, injecting the conditions of the one into the experience of the other, in both directions. As Myerhoff discloses, they did this with broad self-consciousness, lots of irony (as, for instance when they ritually inverted as many common word meanings as possible, so that the old were called children, and noses were called penises—a sneeze thus provoking uproarious laughter [*PH* 147–50]), and a penchant and capacity for theorizing the relationship between everyday life and ritual liminality which perhaps exceeds, at least in its poignancy, that of the average New Year's Eve reveler or summer RV-tripper.

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist anthropologists inserted questions of gender into the mix, emphasizing exchange practices and the production of social power. In the Trobriand Islands, Annette Weiner examined what Bronislaw Malinowski in the early twentieth century, discounting women's social roles, ignored: the complex of intergender, interclan, and intergenerational nurturance—combined with struggles for metaphysical control over people and events—which underlies much of social life. Where Malinowski characterized fathers as "strangers" to their children, Weiner found that past weaning, all of the care, feeding, and beautification of a child become the father's direct responsibility, and a person's vigor, attractiveness (elaborated with a variety of ornaments), and marriageability are testimony to a father's work.²³ What Malinowski saw as women trading huge piles of useless banana leaves, Weiner learned was the apex of a life-long cycle of reciprocity and symbolic nurturance (from males and females) in these distributions of "women's wealth" (woven banana-leaf skirts). "In the Trobriands," she writes, "where exchange is the basic framework around which formal patterns of social interaction are organized, objects become highly significant because in their manner of presentation—quality, quantity, and the like—they can be read as an objectification of desire and intent" (212). Among other things, the collaborative production and presentation of banana skirt bundles stood for and affirmed the reproduction of matrilineal kin-group vitality after the death of one of its members. Even production and storage of the most quotidian foodstuff elaborates social meaning: "Year after year, yams must be produced. The supply is always being converted into something else or eaten and therefore destroyed. The demand remains constant. A yam house, whether full or empty,

stands as a symbol of both past and future relationships with women and men, a symbol which, like a myth, aggrandizes the continuity of those relationships in the face of reality which understands thoroughly the tenuousness of all social relationships" (214–15).

Here, I have deliberately highlighted three works, on Ndembu, Huichol, and Trobriand communities, outstanding exemplars of "traditional" interpretive anthropology, which just predate the Marxist, political economic, and postmodern critiques of the 1980s. All three are focused on types of societies some (anthropologists and others) naively characterized as being "outside of time," isolated beyond the fracturing machineries of modernity. In actuality, as each of the authors noted in these and other works, none were isolated, all faced both internal conflicts and conflicts with outside forces, and they can only be called "timeless" to the extent that they consciously constructed (as the Huichol did) a "time out of time" in ritual. When these ethnographies were written, a somewhat greater degree of cultural coherence and autonomy remained for the communities of study, and in the convention of the era, it was that which each of the authors was keen to depict.

The question to pose with regard to these ethnographies is this: without (or before or outside of) wage labor, consumerism, and media, is there an everyday worth theorizing, or a methodological approach worth contemplating in relation to the more familiar provinces of everyday theory? What do such cases reveal about the symbolically charged practices which bridge the ordinary and the extraordinary; about people's critical and theoretical self-reflection on their own mundane and supramundane practices; about the invisibility of much of what is going on (to contrast representations like those of Smith and Fiske cited above, which flatten the everyday experience of "others" to the visible surface); about the sensuousness of the lived everyday as it may be embodied in milk-trees, maize, or yams? What can these sensuous-symbolic vehicles of what Taussig calls "other everydaynesses" (TD 8) tell us about everydayness everywhere?

I think what they do more than anything is herald the existential, affective, and aesthetic penumbra of nurturance, death, and loss—as three parts of one whole—in the everyday, and to position these as categories of communal more than individual experience and negotiation. In this model, the everyday is *the* preeminent temporal/spatial domain where nonalienated, culturally and existentially meaningful productivity occurs. This productivity is simultaneously habitual and creative. It always concerns putting the social/physical world in order—battling entropy, fostering growth. It is performative, symbolically overdetermined, laden with both humor and melancholy; in short, it is *juicy*. Food, that "starting place of self-artifice,"²⁴ is, not surprisingly, at the center. There are, everywhere, gendered aspects to this, but they are

neither universal, stable, or totalizing (for instance: Trobriand men are the nurturers of children, but that does not mean all Trobriand fathers enthusiastically fulfill their obligations, or that employment outmigration is not affecting this division of labor).

In cultural studies, the everyday is almost always juxtaposed against the extraordinary, as being the opposite of the “esoteric or exotic worlds,” “the miraculous, the magical or the sacred.”²⁵ Even feminist writers, like Dorothy Smith or, more recently, Rita Felski, while valiantly insisting on the profundity and sociological significance of the very habitualness and domesticity of the everyday, forget or fail to notice something fascinating about ritual (their own culture’s and that of others): almost everywhere, ritual—that realm of the extraordinary, liminal, upside-down, carnivalesque, transcendent—in fact enshrines nothing as much as the local practices of the everyday. What do most people in the U.S. fixate on (sometimes for weeks in advance) when Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, or any other holiday approaches? Not so much fireworks or parades or time out of time as *food*. The ritual meal with all its orgiastic over-nourishing exaggerates the quotidian meal, just as the Trobriand rituals around six-foot long yams and banana bundles amplify, and thus hold up for the community’s notice, all the everyday attention which nurtures the garden and the kin-group, or just as the Huichol pilgrimage focuses people’s attention on the rigorous labor and mindfulness needed to protect their vulnerable maize. In both cases, people speak directly about the way ritual celebrates everyday practices and values.

Here, I would agree with Lefebvre, Gardiner, and other theorists that certain ideologies about the everyday *are* products of capitalist modernity in a crucial respect. “We have set out from the presuppositions of political economy. We have accepted its terminology and its laws.”²⁶ Just as capitalist realism inverts causality, mystifying the source of wealth in labor, so, concomitantly, heroic realism inverts the primacy of realms of life. The everyday worlds of work—whether domestic, institutional, or social—are discursively cast as pale and burdensome in the lights of glamor, entertainment, excitement, adventure, acquisition, historical event. All of these ritual forms are constructed to be escape from the everyday (a five-minute glance at advertisements conveys that object lesson well) rather than as veneration of the socioscape of routine. And yet, paradoxically, it is exaggerations of routine practices of nurturance and sociability that organize the predominant collective rites of modernity. After the nation-exalting military parade, whether Soviet, Cuban, or American, people go home for festive food and drink, and the nation-state stays put, “out there,” out of mind, irrelevant to celebration except in times of national crisis or war (these latter so hegemonically enforced).

I turn back, for a moment, to Brett Williams’s study of largely elderly

African-Americans in a Washington, D.C. neighborhood to bring this point down to earth. In his essay in *Cultural Studies*, Fiske cites only one of the powerful, larger contexts of everyday life that Williams depicts in her ethnographic work. Brute existential realities remain invisible, while oppressive political-economic realities (in all of their variety) loom as the primary antagonists against which “resistant” practices are deployed. But as the Ndembu, Huichol, and Trobriand (and countless other) cases emphasize, alongside and often in concert with political-economic and social killers stand *literal* death and infirmity, at the same time personal, familial, and cultural. Williams makes this clear when she writes that “death is a stark reminder of everyone’s approaching death and of the death of the alley community. Johnnie Mae, a true leader in the work of death, mobilizes neighbors to bring food, go to funerals, and come to the house later, yet she finds the death rate hard too.”²⁷ Hard or not, as everywhere, quotidian productiveness and communality—gardening, nurturing, covered dishes and casseroles—contradict the mortality of self and social group:

Gardening is a crucial way to socialize and incorporate new residents. . . . Gardening also complements an extraordinary concern in the alley for foodways and growth. Just as Ms. Malone feeds Pool’s dog, Mr. Garrett takes scraps to Ms. Marie’s three dogs each day and leaves a pile of crumbs for the pigeons. Mrs. Hanrohan feeds sparrows throughout the winter. People share food at birthdays and funerals. The alley is truly a dramatic stage for celebrating the annual cycle, the repetition of seasons, the return of perennials like roses and iris, the promise each year of new growth. (182)

Surely the everyday is a refuge from history, even from time itself. And alongside power, history and time are those things that most violate the everyday.

II. Prosaic Tools of Power: World Desecration

If the study of a society requires a study of its pain, then so far as there is an absence of languages of pain in the social sciences . . . social science participates in the silence, and so it extends the violence it studies.

—Stanley Cavell²⁸

And violence, when examined at close range, interrupts the coherence of a master narrative.²⁹

—E. Valentine Daniel

In the last half-century, the Ndembu have been increasingly affected by Christian missionizing, Zambian nationbuilding, an influx of mi-

grants from neighboring Angola, the adoption of IMF/Worldbank Structural Adjustment policies, and AIDS. But the metaphysical logics of their ritual and symbolic universe may be powerful enough to absorb many changes.³⁰ Some Huichol still go on their annual pilgrimage, although the building of roads into their territories have brought logging and deforestation, settlements, government prohibitions against peyote gathering, outmigration for labor on pesticide-thick tobacco plantations, growing alcoholism, and “cultural tourism,” all diminishing their ability to sustain their preferred ways of life. The Trobrianders may be better off: unlike other parts of Papua New Guinea, no oil or gold has been found on their islands; they struggle to manage the influx of tourists and art traders and the seductive trade goods to the benefit of cultural survival.³¹ So far, perhaps, it is manageable. In the scheme of things, these peoples have been “lucky.”

But what of Ogoni (Nigeria), Yanomami (Brazil/Venezuela), Waorani (Ecuador), and thousands of other so-called “indigenous peoples” on whose lands oil and gold and other minerals are mined, bringing roads, poisoned soils and waters, denuded forests, epidemics, military repression, and ecological and social catastrophe?³² What of postcolonial Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Kashmir, Punjab, Vietnam, and Cambodia, to name just a very few nations and regions where conflicts over lands, resources, and political power have brought genocide, the “cleansing” of populations or social groups, sexualized violence, ecocide, mass dislocation and impoverishment, militarization, and/or cultural destruction? What of Afghanistan, Argentina, Bosnia, Chechnya, Columbia, East Timor, Guatemala, Iraq, Kosovo, Myanmar, North Korea, Palestine—a veritable alphabet of state terror and terror-warfare (with a complex overlay of great power and multinational involvement)?³³ Going back into the earlier twentieth century: what of Stalinist terror, Nazi occupation in Europe and the Soviet Union, Japan’s occupations in East Asia and the Pacific, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Even a partial litany is long, and awful.

There are many questions still to ask about human atrocity in the modern world, but I want to pose only two here: Where does the everyday fit in to considering cultures, communities, families in extremis? And, reciprocally, how does pondering these events inflect our theorizing of the everyday? Instead of answers, I offer mostly questions and a few glimpses into the logics of everyday terror.

Thousands of Tamils were brought from South Indian villages to colonial Ceylon to develop tea plantations in the nineteenth century; gradually, over a century, Ceylon/Sri Lanka became a home, the plantation villages the setting of communities and livelihoods and

concomitant metaphysics. Then came the anti-Tamil riots of the 1970s and 1980s, in which thousands were spurred to brutalize and kill, and communities across the island were terrorized; events (arising in global shifts of political economy) changed the sense of place as home, and many estate Tamils strove to “return” to India—“for most of them as alien as Italy is to most Italian Americans,” a place they knew as “a land of great hardship, harsh climate, and chronic poverty” which made their hard plantation lives seem luxurious.³⁴ Many were (and are) stuck in between, unable to go to India, or able to go but then victimized in India, and revictimized if they attempt to return to Sri Lanka—a dreadful conundrum familiar to refugees and displaced persons everywhere. With great hesitation at the impossibility of representing the multiple violences of social “cleansing,” in *Charred Lullabies* E. Valentine Daniel nevertheless brought forward critical voices from the frontlines of suffering.

A girl left the tea plantation at twenty to work as a servant in the capital city. Driven out by the terror of riots, she found herself at home neither in Colombo, nor in the estates, nor, of course, in an India she had never seen. To paternal relatives scorning this girl’s tragic life trajectory, her widowed mother (to whom Daniel gives the pseudonym Selvi) delivered a long, highly poeticized, harangue, every phrase invoking the now accursed intricacies of tea:

Damn the third leaf . . . and damn the stemlets. . . . Why don’t you who are losing your luster . . . suck on the . . . stem? This sucking . . . and this hell . . . suits this land just fine. What business does a widow . . . have with a young virgin . . . and a tender sprout? . . . Cursed saturnine course leaf! . . . Perish here. Go on, eat in silence [also, in secret], kilo loads of squeezed rice from the Sinhala man’s . . . hand. The foreign land . . . where we . . . are bound for, there are none of these tea sprouts [looks at daughter while she says this] and kilos. . . . Once I board that ship . . . I shall not even lift my eyes to look back at these rowdy asses . . . or this evil eye of a jungle. (96)³⁵

The ethnographer interprets this very rooted curse, where tea provides the trope for the experience of postcolonial and now postterror servitude and labor: “Selvi finds everything about the tea bush damnable. A bush that these Tamils had treated as a deity had now become a vehicle by means of which she could express obscenities. The piece of protruding stem is no longer a test of her care and attention for the tea bush, a blemish that beckons her to trim it away with her knife. Instead, it has become a withered penis that only her worst and most contempt-worthy enemy would suck (*ūmpal*) on” (98). Already alienated, a lifetime of labor is further embittered by the transformation of homeland into

horrorland, and this Selvi declares by obscenely excoriating the tea bush. This is only one instance out of many that Daniel cites, of people speaking about their own, their children's and their parents' lives, and their loss of nation through the everyday trope of tea harvesting. Considering this world of loss and bitterness, I am struck by both its contrast with and its connection to the more privileged moments and spaces in the trade in luxury comestibles—for instance, the tea ceremony in Japan, a similarly overdetermined commentary on existence, materially dependent on the productive labor in places like Selvi's.

Carolyn Nordstrom's monograph *A Different Kind of War Story* comes out of fieldwork in Mozambique from 1988 to 1996, and its ultimate focus is the myriad ways people's deployment of everyday skills, including ubiquitous healing practices, sustained a social fabric through the fifteen-year war which killed over a million people, the vast majority of them civilians. An essential point of context is this: the war was not a "local conflict" as so many terror-wars are characterized. Nordstrom forcefully reminds us of the "blackmarketeers, the arms merchants, the civilian collaborators, the roving predatory bands of quasi-soldiers and ex-militia, the mercenaries, the jackal profiteers who sell information to both sides, the private militias, the foreign strategists"³⁶ including, crucially, those from Johannesburg, Geneva, Washington.

The fundamental strategy of terror-war wherever it occurs is to undermine the rhythms and small securities of everyday practice, and by so doing, to destroy the very grounds of society and culture. This is done by deliberately employing the objects and rituals of daily life as tools of terror, so that "the normal and the life sustaining become deadly weapons" (*DK* 167). Nordstrom reports the story (recorded by Lina Magaia) of a family turned out of bed at night by soldiers, who, in full view of the entire community, forced a man to take an axe to the neck of his brother-in-law, held over the family's stone mortar. Nordstrom writes: "When the familiar and the everyday are turned into implements of torture and murder, the familiar everyday world is rendered grotesque—not merely by the fact of the present terror and repression, but by the enduring nature of associations. Will Julieta, her family and the community that were present ever be able to see or use a simple mortar to pound grain without having the drama and the terror of Julieta's husband's murder flash into their minds? . . . Long after the soldiers are gone, their presence is invoked with each glance at a mortar" (*DK* 168).

Surviving *desaparecidos* interviewed by Margeurite Feitlowitz after Argentina's Dirty War (1976–1983) tell story after story of how objects of daily life were made permanently horrific through the deployment of a "lexicon of terror." Two words associated with everyday cooking are made to name torture and death. *Parilla*, "a traditional Argentine grill

for cooking meat” was the torturers’ nickname for the metal table to which people were strapped for electric shock sessions;³⁷ and *asado*—barbeque—was their word for the burning of corpses (53). More dreadful because of their associations with children are *submarino* and *capucha*. The former is a “traditional Argentine children’s treat consisting of a chocolate bar slowly melting in a cup of warm milk.” In the torturers’ language, *submarino* means holding a prisoner’s head under water in a toilet or bathtub filled with urine and feces. Even years later, everyday life is a culturescape mined with associations. Feitlowitz notes that “in Argentina, kids are served *submarinos* most every day after school; it is still on the menu of any café” (59).³⁸ *Capucha* is a hood, as on a raincoat; used in torture camps it denoted the hoods, covering their entire heads and tied at the neck, that many *desaparecidos* wore for days, weeks, months, an unbearable torture. The sister of one *desaparecido* told Feitlowitz that she could not bring herself to tell her children “put up your hoods” as they were running out to school, because of the lingering horror of that word. “To those who were subjected to such things as *el submarino* and *la parilla*, it must have seemed that one’s whole life had been ‘leading to’ this; that torture was *always* already inscribed, and in the most ‘normal’ communal pleasures” (61).

In testimonies like these, clearly it is not the individuality of subjects that is targeted, not the politically resistant, heterogeneous expression of personhood (beloved of Certeau) that torturers drag out to destroy the self; it is instead the mundane object of *collective* meaning which becomes the tool of power when its own prior significance is flipped back upon itself. Common commodities are useful in this—exactly because of their ubiquity in daily life. Witness narratives spread the horror widely through and between communities, encumbering objects far and wide with the double meanings inflicted on them by power.

Few have theorized this destruction of cultural meaning more scrupulously than Elaine Scarry. She details how torturers everywhere (acting as agents for the political forces behind them) turn ontology itself against their victims, in a conspiracy to “unmake” civilization. The most homely objects of industrial production morph into the instruments of torment: “The room, both in its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed” (*BP* 41). (One wonders if that gentle philosopher of human space, Gaston Bachelard, could write about this.)

For those who escape the most direct, bodily acts of brutalization, terror-war still works, quite consciously, through a public, almost *theatri-*

cal disruption of the shared signifiers of community and humanness. As occurred in Sarajevo during the siege, so too in Mozambique: people burying their dead or performing other funerary rites were deliberately targeted, their rituals disrupted by gunfire or marauding gangs, so that dead family members and ancestors went unattended (*DK* 127, 158). Communities were attacked at night, so that people (already prohibited from sleep) would scatter in the dark in all directions, often unable to regroup once the village space was occupied. Basic forms of health care and cleanliness were prevented (doctors and healers were targeted to be killed). As in Bosnia, Kashmir, Punjab, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, East Timor, Chechnya, and many other places, young women and girls were raped and mutilated, not in individual crimes (although these are of course also crimes against individuals) but in public, performative, *ritualistic* ways: to destroy a community's sense of the future, of normal kinship and nurturance, of religious propriety.

In less obvious ways, terror-war attacks culture by prohibiting everyday solace. As one Mozambican told Carolyn Nordstrom: "But you want to know what I think is the worst thing about this war, the worst violence I suffer? It is sleeping in the bush at night. . . . Animals live in the bush, not humans. . . . My marriage bed is the center of all the things I hold dear. It is the center of my family, my home, my link with the ancestors and the future. The war, these soldiers, have broken my marriage bed, and with that they try to break my spirit, break what makes me who I am. This is the worst violence you can subject someone to" (*DK* 125).³⁹ If, as Gardiner suggests, "everyday activities always express transcendental elements of the imaginary and the utopian" (*CE* 17) (a sense clearly conveyed in the testimony above), what happens to the transcendental when the most time- and mortality-transcending elements of the everyday are destroyed, demeaned, defiled? How can terror be, as Veena Das asks, "transformed into a world in which one can dwell again, in full awareness of a life that has to be lived in loss"?⁴⁰ Is it possible to recover everyday meanings, to reverse the valences from horrific to blessedly banal, and if it is, what are the means by which people facilitate this?

More and more often, anthropologists are forced to ask these questions in the field. They have no choice, because the places they work are sites of increasing misery, trauma, and destruction. These processes are not unrelated to those confronting theorists looking at commodification, alienation, and rationalization in industrialized nations; indeed, they are intimately related. Jeffrey Sluka notes that "there appears to be a direct correlation between the increasing power and wealth of the elite, the steadily increasing gap between rich and poor, and the growth of state terror, perhaps the three most obvious global characteristics of the last quarter of the twentieth century."⁴¹ Wherever

we look, we find everyday atrocity and atrocity against the everyday as a concomitant of globalizing capitalism. Terror—so well hidden from the view of end consumers—clears the way for and maintains the possibility of oil exploration, mining, the gobbling up of forest, riverine, ocean, and labor resources across the planet, the replacement of localized production and consumption systems with multinational ones. More room might be made in theory for considering how and why this terror machine targets the ordinary, as if the everyday were the place where the most powerfully important things in life occur.

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NOTES

1 Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), in particular, had an enormous impact. For a sharp assessment from within anthropology of the practice of ethnographic emplacement, see the essays in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham, 1997) and *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, ed. Gupta and Ferguson (Berkeley, 1997).

2 This learning process, and all of these discomforts of everyday unfamiliarity, are not, it must be emphasized, the product of "stepping outside of the 'West'" but are common to any fieldwork in unfamiliar contexts, even sometimes in contexts of the "defamiliarized familiar."

3 "The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, *made* body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as 'stand up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand.'" Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977), p. 94.

4 After seventeen years of regular visits and much fieldwork, I have yet to fully embody either proper eating or toilet behavior in Russia, as much as I may grasp the principles intellectually.

5 This parallels Cultural Studies' clear emphasis on the popular, and particularly the *media* cultures of these same geographic spaces.

6 Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston, 1987), p. 92.

7 Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London, 2000), p. 10; hereafter cited in text as *CE*.

8 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, tr. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York, 1971), p. 204; hereafter cited in text as *ELM*.

9 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984).

10 For two singular studies, see Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany, 1987) on the former and Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, 1996) on the latter.

11 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, tr. Maria Jolas (Boston, 1964), p. 67.

- 12 Luce Giard, "The Nourishing Arts" in Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 2: Living and Cooking*, tr. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis, 1998), p. 169.
- 13 Karl Marx, "The Materialist Conception of History" from *The German Ideology*, in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York, 1983), p. 169.
- 14 See Dorothy Smith's application of Marx to the ontology of things and subjects, *The Everyday World as Problematic*, pp. 122–40.
- 15 George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman, "Ethnographies as Texts," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11 (1982), 29.
- 16 See especially Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26 (1984), 126–66 and George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986); hereafter cited in text as *AC*.
- 17 John Fiske, "Cultural Studies and The Culture of Everyday Life," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York, 1992), pp. 155–56.
- 18 Bill Warner, "Commentary" in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, p. 169.
- 19 Michael Taussig, "Tactility and Distraction," in *Rereading Cultural Anthropology*, ed. George Marcus (Durham, 1992), p. 9; hereafter cited in text as *TD*.
- 20 Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, 1967); hereafter cited in text.
- 21 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, tr. George Weidenfeld (Chicago, 1966), p. 3.
- 22 Barbara Myerhoff, *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* (Ithaca, 1974), p. 16; hereafter cited in text as *PH*.
- 23 Annette Weiner, *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives on Trobriand Exchange* (Austin, 1976), pp. 121–30; hereafter cited in text.
- 24 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985), p. 251; hereafter cited in text as *BP*.
- 25 Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York, 2000), pp. 77, 79.
- 26 Karl Marx, *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York, 1983), p. 131.
- 27 Brett Williams, "Reinventing the South," in *Situated Lives: Gender and Culture in Everyday Life*, ed. Louise Lamphere, Helena Ragoné, and Patricia Zavella (Routledge, 1997), p. 179; hereafter cited in text.
- 28 Stanley Cavell, "Comments on Veena Das' Essay 'Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain'" in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley, 1997), p. 94.
- 29 E. Valentine Daniel, "Mood, Moment, and Mind," in *Violence and Subjectivity*, ed. Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Edwards (Berkeley, 2000), p. 362.
- 30 James A. Pritchett, *The Lundu-Ndembu: Style, Change, and Social Transformation in South Central Africa* (Madison, 2001).
- 31 A recent Coca-Cola Annual Report featured a cover photograph of a grinning Trobriand islander in banana-leaf skirts and face make-up, drinking a Coke.
- 32 See *State of the Peoples: A Global Human Rights Report on Societies in Danger* (Boston, 1993).
- 33 *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, ed. Jeffrey A. Sluka (Philadelphia, 2000) presents in-depth case studies which outline a range of ethnographic approaches to state terror and dirty war.

34 E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies, Chapters in the Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton, 1996), p. 97; hereafter cited in text.

35 For brevity, I have left out the original language terms that Daniel includes.

36 Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia, 1997), p. 46; hereafter cited in text as *DK*.

37 Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (Oxford, 1998), p. 57; hereafter cited in text.

38 Feitlowitz notes (p. 59) that the “dry submarine”—one variation—was used by the French in Indochina and Algeria and by the U.S. in Vietnam. As Nordstrom also makes clear, techniques of terror and torture are rarely local or original inventions, but are part of the cross-cultural toolkit of power, applied for local repression when and where needed.

39 This well echoes what Felski writes in *Doing Time*, “habit is not opposed to individuality but intermeshed with it; our identity is formed out of a distinctive blend of behavioral and emotional patterns, repeated over time. To be suddenly deprived of the rhythm of one’s personal routines, as often happens to those admitted to hospitals, prisons, retirement homes, or other large institutions, can be a source of profound disorientation and distress” (p. 92). Terror-war strategically deprives people of their habits—not by isolating the individual from their routine but by contaminating the routine itself in multiple ways.

40 Veena Das, “Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain,” in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley, 1997), p. 69.

41 Jeffery A. Sluka, “Introduction: State Terror and Anthropology,” in *Death Squad*, p. 32.