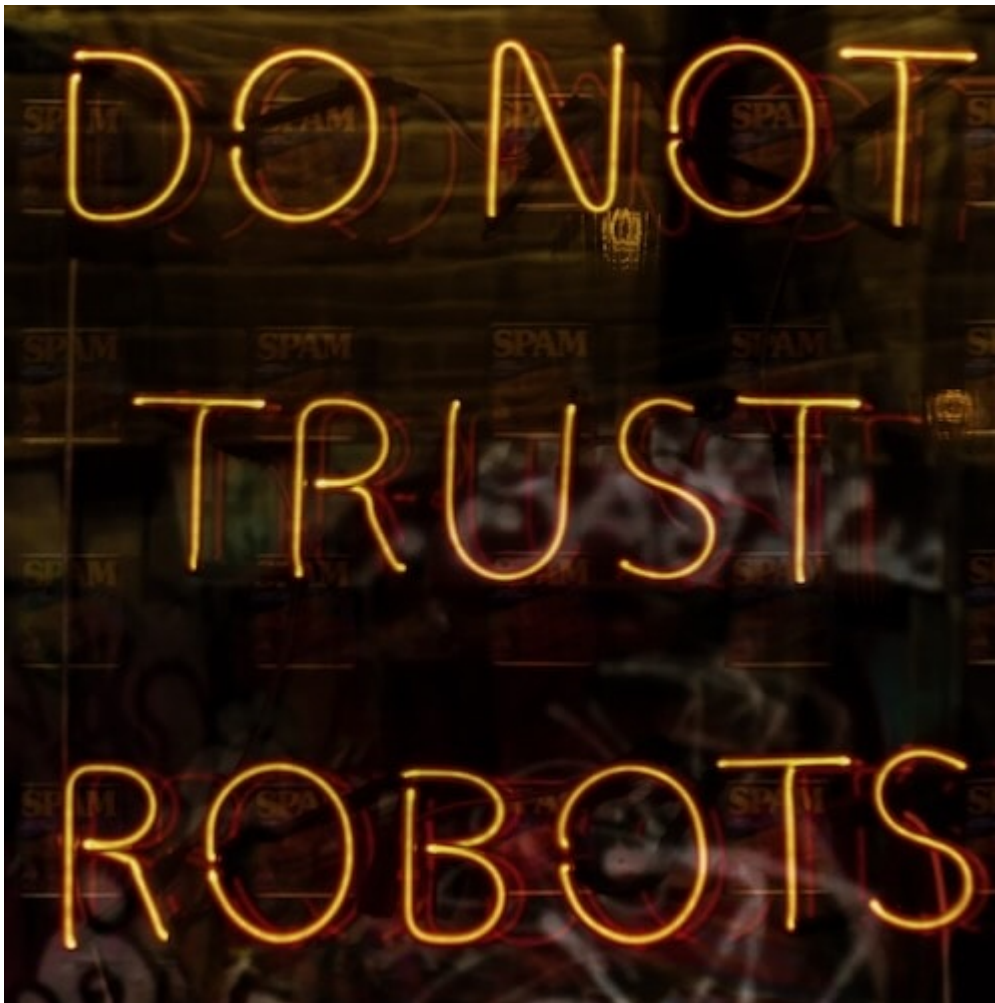




Technologies of Trust: Introduction

written by Shaila Seshia Galvin
September, 2022



This post is the introduction of our thematic thread on Trust, curated by Anna Weichselbraun (University of Vienna), Shaila Seshia Galvin (Geneva Graduate Institute) and Ramah McKay (University of Pennsylvania).

What do we mean when we talk about trust? Contemporary discourses figure trust variously as a problem, an aspiration, an object of intervention, and even



something to be dispensed with all together. An abiding social fact, trust appears to nourish not only interpersonal relations but also scales up to the social orders of governance, politics, and publics. Girlfriends and governments as much as experts and executives are concerned with inspiring, maintaining, and growing trust. To do so they implement a wide variety of measures: from communicative reassurances, to certification schemes, technologies of transparency and objectification, and legal measures of accountability and compliance. Despite all these efforts, the Edelman “Trust Barometer,” itself an instrument worthy of examination, notes that trust in government, media, NGOs, and business has dramatically declined since the beginning of the new millennium. And, we observe, blockchain technology is touted by some proponents as necessary for producing trust, while others see its virtue in permitting trustlessness. In the midst of this confusion and supposed crisis of trust we ask: what is trust and what does it do?

What is trust and what does it do?

Contemporary social, political, and economic life demands new ways of thinking about and theorizing trust. We approach trust not directly, but through technologies such as certification, verification, and inspection as well as institutional arrangements such as aid organizations and health care, which promise to be solutions to problems of suspicion, doubt, corruption, and uncertainty. These and related world-making practices constitute our objects of observation (Trouillot 2003; Galvin 2018; Weichselbraun 2019), and we track how they attempt to materialize and stabilize social relations, with the aim of producing what is often

understood or named as trust. We mobilize ethnographic inquiry to study how these technologies, and practices—not unlike more familiar forms of infrastructure (electricity grids, water networks, highways and rail lines)—constitute “dense social, material, aesthetic, and political formations” (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018, 3).



Our collaboration brings together scholars within and outside the academy, spanning junior to mid-career stages, as well as MA and PhD students. Across our different essays, we parse the qualities of trust and their modes of production, asking how material objects, bureaucratic and regulatory practices, as well as diverse kinds of technologies—from forensic testing to blockchain—work to configure and condition trust. The settings of our research vary—from the corridors of humanitarian action to the securitized perimeters of wildlife sanctuaries and sugar plantations, from Zoom calls to organic farms in Switzerland and India, and from the digital worlds of Web3 and Facebook livestreams to the clinical environments of covid testing centres.

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Across these diverse sites, trust emerges as a fragile, situated, often ambivalent and always a relational accomplishment. Sometimes it is built up through the provision of a predictable structure with familiar routines as in Hesse's analysis of the Covid testing centres in which seemingly superficial changes in the protocol can raise suspicion/doubt in the efficacy of the process. In Billaud's contribution, the ICRC's careful work of building trusting relationships in communities victimized by urban violence is undermined by efforts to formally produce "trust" at a different level of the organization through bureaucratic procedures and techniques geared to producing measurable results. And from a Malian sugar plantation, the setting for a global health workshop, Biruk reflects on the need to locate (mis)trust in global health in the material, historical, and infrastructural realities of the plantation itself.

In this regard, several essays explore the relational dimensions of trust, considering the range of human and nonhuman actants implicated in the work of trust-building. McKay asks how trust is "facilitated and foreclosed" as medicines



move across jurisdictional boundaries, from pharmaceutical importers and inspectors, to laboratory testing, to online pharmacies that fill prescriptions for overseas customers. Spurred by a Zoom call about self-managed medication abortion in the US, McKay explores ways that trust in pharmaceuticals is not generated by pharmaceutical regulation itself, but comes to encompass a wide array of human, technological, and political actants. Such an array of human and nonhuman actants are found, too, in McClellan's essay which examines how recurrent demonstrations of the efficacy of technologies of security and surveillance within a Jordanian wildlife sanctuary prove crucial to establishing and sustaining the trust of both local residents and the sanctuary's captive animals.

In a world where crises of trust are proclaimed in things as diverse as political institutions, food, pharmaceuticals, health care, and news, trust can no longer be a rarefied object of scholarly inquiry.

A spatial and relational focus on trust commonly contrasts the proximate and the distant, the personal and impersonal, distinctions that Borghi queries in his study of an organic farm and market in Geneva. Yet a number of essays in this thread foreground instead issues of mediation and immediation, which prove equally germane for understanding relations of trust and suspicion. Both Weichselbraun and Zhang's contributions highlight the role of media (semiotic) ideologies in the construal of the trustworthiness of mediated representations of reality. The promise of immediacy as a solution to problems of socially based mistrust or uncertainty informs both the use of Facebook Livestreams by Peruvian peasant leaders as well as motivates the development of blockchain-based cryptocurrencies and communities. In Galvin's essay, it is instead mediation in the form of techniques of verification—from forensic tests to certification protocols—that promises to bring organic quality into being as a tangible truth, while the question “is it really organic?” points to the underlying complex interplay of (mis)trust, truth, and a persistent desire for immediacy. Finally, Plüss demonstrates the ways that trust is commodified



through the integration of blockchain technology into food supply chains, notably IBM's Food Trust platform. Unlike the cryptocurrency developers who laud the potential of blockchain to replace or dispense with trust all together, companies such as IBM promote blockchain technology as a solution to the problem of mistrust.

In his reflection on the essays in this collection, Taylor Nelms offers a broad conceptualization of trust as a pragmatics of social life. Indeed, these essays show how technologies and tools of trust are mobilized in various ways to address intractable and practical problems of uncertainty, risk, and unknowability, among others, and so are located within, not outside of, social relations. In a world where crises of trust are proclaimed in things as diverse as political institutions, food, pharmaceuticals, health care, and news, trust can no longer be a rarefied object of scholarly inquiry. Ethnographic approaches that foreground the inescapable complexities of social relations move us closer to developing a critical anthropology of established and emergent technologies of trust.

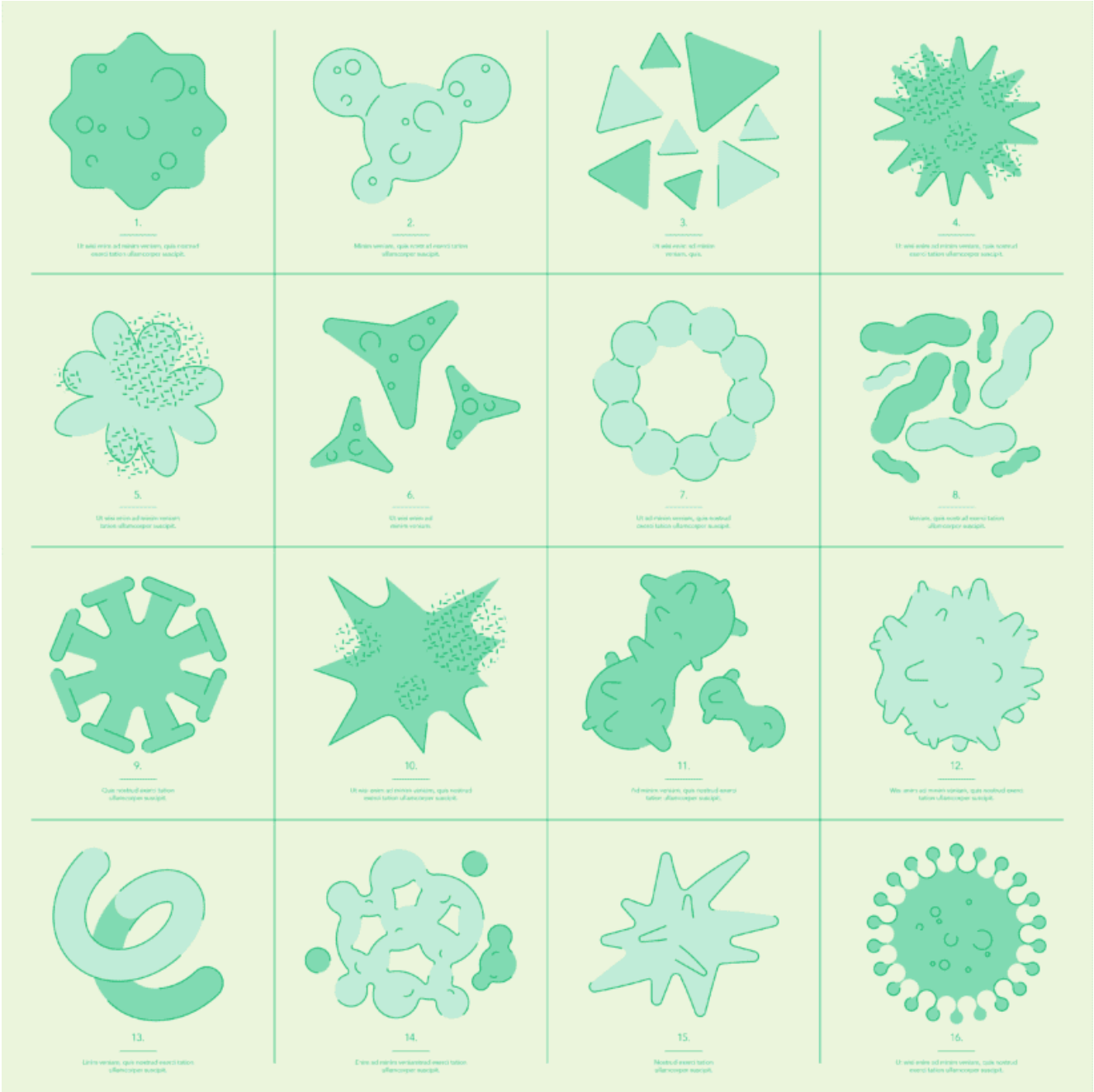
IMAGE: Photo by [Nick Fewings](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Encyclopedia of maladies in academic anthropology: counter-diagnosis for a sick working



environment

written by My Madsen
September, 2022



What you are about to read is not fiction, but neither is it fact. It is a catalogue of illnesses that do not exist, at least not in the evidence-based sense of the word. Yet, all descriptions are agglomerations of observations based in real-life



encounters with ill or borderline-ill persons.

My motivation for beginning this encyclopedia of maladies in academic anthropology came after recovering from years of stress and anxiety related to a severely damaging working environment at a university. Though I have been thankful of the diagnosis and subsequent treatments I have received on my way to recovery, there has always been a profoundly problematic bias to it: it diagnosed me as ill and treated me to become healthy. In other words, *I* got singled out and treated while the anxiety-inducing environment was only rhetorically cautioned.

This piece is a counter-diagnosis. It uses the positive traits of diagnosis [...] to point at and describe some of the toxic traits anthropologists may develop in academia [...].

This piece is a counter-diagnosis. It uses the positive traits of diagnosis, namely identification and verbalisation, to point at and describe some of the toxic traits anthropologists may develop in academia and which in sum constitute a sick working environment. As I have heard in therapy: the first step to recovery is diagnosis. Thus, I endeavour to embark upon a reciprocal quest by offering this encyclopedia to academia, my 'giving back', in the hope that it will be poignant enough to hurt but also humorous enough to initiate a language for healing.

Maladies in academic anthropology

The following sections describe the primary maladies - major groups of illnesses - that I have recorded. Cautious reading is advised as there may be significant local variations in symptoms as well as cross-infection cases involving overlaps between several maladies or symptoms.

Hyperideal heroism



The specification of this condition is a firm though often subconscious belief in an extreme version of a professional hero-ideal, regarding 'true' anthropologists as the lone hero venturing 'out there' in the wild to bring back knowledge. The delusion gains strength from the history of classic anthropology where fieldwork was done by men, alone, far away and in rough conditions. Though such work conditions are no longer the preconditions of fieldwork or indeed anthropology, persons with *hyperideal heroism* suffer from the delusion that other kinds of fieldwork are inferior or indications of a lazy/soft/loose character of the fieldworker.

As the condition is solipsistic and polemic in nature people suffering from this condition typically have very little insight into their own problem but instead consider any steps towards self-awareness or treatment as an attack that needs to be overcome, defeated or conquered. Therefore, treatment is difficult as it may further the condition. If several persons suffer from *hyperideal heroism* at the same workplace they may develop a *schismogenetic mass-psychosis* where their self-righteous, confrontational criticism spirals out of control.

Despite the gendered background of the malady, both men and women may contract *hyperideal heroism* (though the percentage of men suffering from this condition might well be higher - more research is needed).

Typical symptoms:

People with *hyperideal heroism* often express an obsessive emphasis on overcoming challenges, e.g., by turning dangerous, hard or traumatic experiences into boisterous stories of either heroic or humorous genres. The condition may also cause a further *pathological righteousness syndrome* resulting in hostile outbursts of statements such as "don't be surprised if you get divorced after fieldwork" or "interview-fieldwork"^[1] (the latter must be pronounced in a sarcastic sneer). Another known characteristic is that both positivity and negativity is expressed through fierce polemic behaviour.



Empathetic masochism

Empathetic masochism is a self-defeating disorder defined by recurrent and intense feelings of emotional pain, guilt, insufficiency, and shamefulness along with delightful moral arousal from this self-suffering. Symptomatic of this disorder is that it revolves around strong and painful empathetic emotions towards an 'empathetic object of study', typically suffering human subjects or subject positions. The disorder is based in a simultaneous affective emotional experience of the pain of the empathetic object and shame of feeling this pain as it is rationally understood by the empathetic masochist as 'secondhand' and not one's own pain.

The condition is nourished by distorted implicit ideas of science professionalism as detached, objective and separable from both body and emotions. As such, it is a dissociative disorder that causes a continuous *delirious double guilt* for subsuming others' pain while insisting that rationally the sensation of pain is not one's one - not 'real' - and therefore one should be able to separate or manage it. At the same time, this stage of continuous guilty suffering becomes to the ill person the only morally justifiable way of being and therefore the only way to feel moral arousal and (painful) comfort.

Typical symptoms:

A strong orientation towards utopian goals of giving justice, voice or rectification to the empathetic object resulting in a *chronic moral insufficiency condition*. The condition may develop into a regular *algomoralis*^[2] *syndrome* where the person dives into ever more painful conditions of the empathetic object to engage in utopian rectifying of suffering (e.g., inequality) but also to let oneself suffer even more for not suffering (and for vicarious suffering and for not being able to not suffer and for letting emotional pain cloud the objective and professional detachment, and for feeling moral arousal from self-suffering).



Compulsive opportunistic tunnel-vision disorder (COTD)

COTDers suffer from the strong delusion that the end goal they are pursuing justifies the means (any means) of getting there. The condition is primarily defined by a lack of restraint known as *compulsive professional hyperphagia* which is extreme goal-oriented opportunistic strategising, where anything and anyone may be consumed and utilised to reach the professional goal. Additionally, they attain a profound tunnel-vision that only allows them to see and engage with things and people as long as they speak to the goal.

If left untreated the condition may easily leap into the full-blown behavioural disinhibition of *ruthless phantasmatic egotism* manifested in increased disregard of social conventions, accelerating levels of opportunistic strategising without consideration for present consequences and a highly selective assessment of past learnings (e.g., critique from colleagues). In later stages people with this condition develop a reduced responsiveness to the distress they cause others (e.g., junior colleagues) along with the uncritical and very resilient delusion that they in fact help others in the process of reaching their own goals. This combination serves them to justify and accelerate their own disorder – this is also known as *the greater good hyperbolism*.

Typical symptoms:

COTDers develop a dopamine-infused limitlessness towards work. COTDers are energetic, charismatic, often visionary and not intentionally harmful, however they often show reduced inhibitory control regarding the demands they put on other people – some of whom are professionally dependent on them. Oblivious as COTDers are of their own mal-condition, they may say things like; “it’s no problem, I have done it lots of times before” when confronted with critique or restrictions questioning their behaviour.

Known infectious sequelae:



Though COTDers often reach impressive professional goals – that might indeed also benefit others – colleagues to COTDers must exercise minute attention to defending their personal limits towards work (e.g. working hours, tasks, demands, weekends/holidays, etc.). This effort may still cause colleagues to COTDers stress, frustration and fatigue.

Hermeneutic disillusion

Hermeneutic disillusion begins abruptly with a severe *double-doxic breakdown* during which the ill person loses faith in anthropology as profession after realising that anthropologists interpret and theorise the world but also theorise and interpret the conditions under which such interpretations are possible – which includes anthropology itself. Persons suffering from *Hermeneutic disillusion* may experience profound *Iconoclastic grief* – showing anger and blame towards their profession which they feel has left them with a painful epistemic non-belief.^[3]

The most prominent effect of the illness is, however, that it causes severe *professional-superiority-inferiority-complex*. Here the ill person finds anthropology to be a super-relativistic science that really can't be used for much but simultaneously holds the firm belief that anthropologists are the only professionals capable of seeing through the falsum of truth that other sciences are mindless slaves to (this may be connected to patients self-treatment of their *iconoclastic grief* by viciously lashing out at other sciences for being unaware of their own doxic nature. However this has not been fully established yet – more research needed on this aspect). If not treated, the ill person may enter a state of *professional fugue*^[4] where one loses any sense of professionalism or indeed develops a strong psychotic delusion that there can be no such things as science or knowledge.

Typical symptoms:



Even in its early stages the illness can be identified by fits of *acute relativism* where the infected person becomes momentarily incapable of having any professionally informed stance or opinion. The condition is especially known to attack students and people who didn't recover from reading the 1980s debates on representation.

Mysophobia Academicai / Academic Mysophobia^[5]

Academic Mysophobia is a paranoiac obsession with scientific purity. Ill persons show strong anal-retentive fixations with critical research of core theoretical issues within anthropology itself, along with denialism towards any prosperous cross-fertilisation outside of academia. The illness causes a *critique-cutting-core superiority complex* where the ill perceive themselves as highly experimental and cutting edge, even though their dogmatic attitude towards scientific purity forces them to reside within narrow theoretical landscapes of a few white men that cross-quote each other.

Academic Mysophobics are strongly attracted to each other and often gather in clannish intellectual circles to elate in fetishising barely accessible theory as a means of controlling the impureness outside their circle. Such groups often develop a collective *applied-taboo* where any mentions or contact with applied anthropological endeavours, professionals, or labour is perceived as highly polluting. Confrontation with the taboo may drive the ill into severe *compulsive french-philosophy seizures* characterized by repetitive cleaning of the besoiled science by showering it in ever more highly abstracted and cryptically written theories.

Typical symptoms:

Even in its early stages Academic Mysophobics may be identified by their inability to ask questions or give responses outside of their own work and theoretical topics, regardless of the content of the meeting, presentation, symposium,



workshop, etc.

Known infectious sequelae:

If not cautious, colleagues of Academic Mysophobics may come to suffer from *academic impostor syndrome* – an inferiority disorder where capable professionals start referring to themselves as not ‘proper’ or ‘real’ anthropologists.

Afterword: Do your medical check-ups

Now that you have read about the main illnesses you will be able to recognize symptoms and outbreaks within your working environment. For limiting the spread of contamination please alert any person showing symptoms by referring them to this encyclopedia. As the maladies described here often grow unnoticed for long periods of time it is recommended to do regular self-examinations by taking a long hard look in the mirror approximately once a month.

I encourage readers to contribute to the encyclopedia by writing up maladies they have experienced or come across working in, with, or around academic anthropology. Please post them here in the commentary or email them to mette.my.madsen@gmail.com.

Abstract

Though important work has been done in recent years bringing forth the implicit, biased attitudes and comportment within academic anthropology, particular unfortunate patterns of academic culture persistently resists change. By introducing an encyclopedia of maladies, this piece identifies, diagnoses and catalogues some of the toxic traits anthropologists may contract working in academic environments. By doing so I hope to deliver a poignant critique of a sick working environment, but also a humorous language for initiating healing and



change.

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^[1] A derogatory expression for describing fieldwork based primarily on interviewing as opposed to 'living with' the field.

^[2] *Algos* means pain. *Moralis* means manners of moral.

^[3] The only truth is, there is no truth.

^[4] *Fugue* is a rare psychiatric phenomenon characterized by reversible amnesia for one's identity.

^[5] *Mysophobia* is the fear of contamination. *Myso* from ancient Greek μύσος (músos) meaning uncleanness.

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Waiting for ghosts

written by Callum Pearce
September, 2022



I am walking along a road on the outskirts of Leh town, in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. It is October, just past the turn from summer to winter, and after dark. Ahead of me is a *lamsum*, a junction where three roads meet. The road to the left leads into town, while the one ahead goes to the nearby army camp. To my right, I can just make out the oblong shapes of mud-brick *romkhang* ('corpse houses') scattered across the hillside rising up from the road: hollow cremation platforms used in funerals, which mark out this spot as the local cremation ground. It is the precisely the kind of place where, people say, you might meet a ghost.

'Ghost' is the English word Ladakhis use, like the Hindi *bhūt*, to gloss the catch-all term *lhande*: 'god/demon,' a phantom, spirit, monster, any strange and unwelcome thing that has not yet been identified. 'Ghost' is used to refer both to the more specific *shinde* (a spirit of a dead person), and to the various named classes of demon and spirit known to Ladakhi ritual specialists. These beings are never deliberately invoked through ritual possession, but they are routinely implicated in accidents, cases of inexplicable illness and misfortune. When things



go wrong, the response from Buddhist Ladakhis usually involves targeting the spirits involved: when livestock fall ill, or people suffer from anxiety or low spirits, or someone has a sudden stroke, or a bus full of pilgrims veers off the road and crashes, or a village is struck by a rash of suicides.

The process of healing starts with the identification of the entities responsible, whether by diagnosing an attack by a broad category of demon or by locating and naming the shinde of a specific person.

These experiences of misfortune often begin in strange encounters. Illnesses and accidents are traced back to glimpses of odd things in the dark, inexplicable sightings or sounds that could be meetings with *lhande*. Certain places appear again and again in these accounts: isolated groups of *chorten* (Buddhist monuments, *stūpa*), cremation grounds, crossroads and *lamsum*. Not all encounters at such places lead to disaster, but strange experiences at night are marked out if they are followed by sudden accidents or illness. Nor is everyone equally susceptible to sightings of ghosts: those who are nervous or fearful, who suffer from lower *sparkha* (vitality, life-force), are more likely to see or sense such things. Ladakhis talk of *namstok*, a kind of doubt or suspicion that has material effects: eating from a dish that you fear to be dirty or polluted can make you ill, even if there is nothing wrong with the food itself. Fearing harm causes harm; fear produces monsters.

A few nights before, I was sitting in the kitchen with the family I had been staying with in Leh when they told me how their cousin had fallen victim to ghosts—or to his fear of ghosts—while driving at night outside the town. He had been on the road leading southeast through the Leh valley, passing the nearby village of Shey, when he turned a corner and came by a cremation ground off the side of the road. His car had stalled suddenly, to his horror, briefly stranding him at a place known as a haunt for *shinde*. When he had finally managed to drive back home he collapsed, waking the next day with a debilitating fever that left him bedridden for a week.



There was general consensus that *something* had happened, beyond mere coincidence, but no-one seemed sure whether he had actually encountered *lhande* or *shinde* or whether his fear had somehow affected the operation of the car and brought on the fever. The distinction seemed almost irrelevant: there is little to distinguish a real ghost from the apprehension of a ghost. This attitude may reflect Buddhist understandings of the illusory, phenomenal reality of spirits, which are characterised as little more than fleeting sense-impressions with no fundamental existence. What you fear may not be there, but it can still harm you if you sense it.

The man himself walked in halfway through the explanation of this story, and looked thoroughly embarrassed as his cousins gleefully described how his fear had made him ill. But I was left wondering:

if the existence of ghosts is bound up with the feeling of fear, and with the feeling of being in a place that might be haunted, how can you understand the role spirits play in Ladakhi society without experiencing those feelings?

Anthropologists working on similar topics have often tried to approach visionary and shamanic experiences from the inside through active participation in ritual, by becoming apprentices to healers or by inducing states of possession aided by music and hallucinogens (see Peters 1981, Pierini, Groisman and Espírito Santo (eds) 2023, Stoller and Olkes 1987, Taussig 1987). These auto-ethnographic projects have tended to privilege extraordinary experiences: trying to inhabit the perspectives of specialists who leave their bodies to bring back lost souls, or commune with spirits, or gain access to insights from another world. But what about the very ordinary experience of living with spirits? Ladakhis encounter ghosts in mundane places, while walking along the road at night. This requires no special training, no ritual or trance-state. In principle, the experience should be as accessible as any other.

So: I am walking past a cremation ground at night, not exactly trying to meet a ghost but trying to feel what it might be like to fear meeting one. I walk the way I



have been told I should walk: I keep my eyes fixed on the road ahead, watching for anyone coming in the other direction and averting my gaze from the *romkhang* to my right. I stay on the path, keep to the left of *chorten* when I pass them, and avoid looking too closely into the shadows.

But it isn't working. The night feels empty. I cannot convince myself that there might be anything there. I feel nothing following me, no sense of hidden presence. I am less worried about spirits than I am about Leh's unchecked packs of stray dogs—which take over the streets every night, barking and fighting through the early hours of the morning—and I am preoccupied by thoughts of how far I should walk before turning back. The exercise feels contrived. In Ladakhi accounts, people run across *lhande*—or things that might, later, be interpreted as *lhande*—unexpectedly, when they are rushing home in the dark or taking an unfamiliar short cut. But I am not really going anywhere. My purpose in being on the road at night is entirely unlike that of a local person:

I am seeking out something that Ladakhis try to avoid, directing attention towards a topic that is normally only relevant when things go wrong.

Others have commented on the apparent absurdity of exercises like this. Desjarlais, pursuing his own apprenticeship with a Yolmo *bombo* (a shamanic practitioner) in the Helambu region of Himalayan Nepal, describes his frustration with his attempts to understand experiences of shamanic trance from the inside. After recording his own 'trance visions,' he turned to his mentor— Meme Bombo, 'grandfather shaman'—to ask for guidance:

"Meme," I asked him one day as we basked in mountain sunshine outside his home, "these visions I have, of caves, tigers, and elfin creatures, what do they mean?"

"Nothing," came the reply, "you only see lightning flashes in the dark, as when a man is knocked on the head" (Desjarlais 1992: 16).



Desjarlais suggests that his visions are nothing but a ‘loose hodgepodge of unsystematized sensations,’ a meaningless ‘montage’ of images with no ritual relevance (*ibid.*: 15-16). He concludes that his own cultural background has shaped his experiences of trance to such an extent that meaningful Yolmo vision states are inaccessible to him; ‘one cannot adopt cultures as readily as one puts on clothes.’ The exercise may not be totally pointless—it may enable a kind of ‘conversation between cultures’ in which the ethnographer learns to confront unfamiliar patterns of embodied behaviour—but it cannot grant direct understanding of what a Yolmo *bombo* experiences (*ibid.*: 17-18). The ethnographic project is driven by the impulse to render the unfamiliar familiar, to rationalise what may initially appear irrational. This rests on an implicit faith that all topics are, in principle, amenable to translation and explanation; but grappling with spirits and visions can lead the ethnographer into confrontations with a fundamental, irresolvable absurdity.

In a sense, though, my failure to feel anything was already accounted for by Ladakhi understandings of *lhande*. Unlike encounters with the deities invoked in ritualised performances of spirit possession, a meeting with a ghost is fundamentally an unexpected event: it is a rupture in normality, not an ordinary part of everyday life. No-one normally expects to come across a ghost on the road, even if they feel a chill of fear when passing a cremation ground. People exchange stories of encounters precisely because such things are out of the ordinary, and because they only happen to certain people. From a Ladakhi perspective, I was not likely to be one of those kinds of people: the lack of fear I felt towards ghosts was taken as a sign of high *sparkha* that would protect me against harmful sensation. ‘You don’t have to worry about *lhande*,’ my hosts would tell me, ‘but we do.’

Yet even when describing their own fear of ghosts, Ladakhis treat the topic as ridiculous, even absurd: the existence of lhande is widely regarded with doubt, while those who are overtaken by their own fear—like the cousin whose car stalled outside Shey—become objects for jokes and teasing.



Ghost stories are a popular form of entertainment on winter nights in Ladakh, as in other Tibetan and Himalayan areas, but the accounts exchanged are often laden with irony: exaggerated descriptions of meetings with bizarre things (a dog the size of a horse! A man with three heads!) offered up for enthusiastically sceptical audiences. Stories are picked apart and explained away, though the possibility remains. These ghosts are essentially ambiguous: treated as both unreal and threatening, ridiculous and fearful. Their tenuous existence is grounded entirely in personal experiences, and in accounts of such experiences: in stories of things one's neighbours and relatives might have met at night, and in one's own vague apprehension of presence. But for most people, they are only known at second hand.

In a sense, then, as I walk down the road at night, there is nothing to experience. Unlike the vision states accessed by Yolmo *bombo*, the presence of *lhande* has no positive reality: ghosts are always elusive, impossible to pin down, met as things only felt or glimpsed out of the corner of one's eye. As a topic, they are laughable; it is only when they become implicated in illness or disaster that they become a serious concern. Accounts of meetings with *lhande* are always questionable, always open to contradiction. They are encountered through sightings, sounds or feelings that can invariably be explained away by others: just a dog on the road, or the wind in the trees, or the effect of an excessive fear of the dark. And for most people, they are not even that. Spirits are 'fundamentally vague entities' (Schlemmer 2009: 105). As you focus on them, they fade into nothing. They are not concepts, not graspable by thought.

To walk along the road at night trying to feel the presence of spirits—or just the possibility of presence—is, then, an absurd exercise. It is an attempt to inhabit something that barely exists for Ladakhis: a sense of suspicion, a feeling of something that disappears as soon as you focus on it. This is not, I think, simply the problem of cultural baggage identified by Desjarlais—though my background and assumptions no doubt play a major role in shaping my response to the situation—but a testament to the nature of the topic itself. Ghosts thrive on suspicion and on doubt, emerging on the edges of vision and dwelling in zones of



uncertainty. They appear only when they are unexpected, only where they are unwanted. Their presence is dispelled by attention; to seek them out is to guarantee you will find nothing at all.

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Against making sense: Appreciating absurd roundabouts in Malaysian Borneo

written by Asmus Rungby
September, 2022



In Kuching, the capital of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, I found a musical roundabout. Large loudspeakers turn this otherwise innocuous infrastructure into an absurdist mashup of techno beats and car noises. Someone found a way to get a stereo system running in tropical rain, allocated budgeting for purchasing equipment, contracted builders and scheduled musical programming for these enigmatic loudspeakers. Surely this someone had a reason.

Writing about this roundabout, my reflex is to reach for a well-worn trope about encountering what one does not understand.



Writing about this roundabout, my reflex is to reach for a well-worn trope about encountering what one does not understand. At the outset, the reader is presented with something strikingly foreign – both strange and confusing. Gradually, this encounter with strangeness will be contextualized, disassembled, and interpreted. In the third act, readers meet what was strange once again, but now made meaningful, understandable, and tame. Meaning is forcibly conscripted to pacify what was once strange and unsettling. So what else can I do? Making interpretive sense of idiosyncratic actions is what anthropologists do, right? (Geertz 1973).

To Kuchingites this baffling roundabout seems more of an aggravating reminder of wasted development dollars than a mystery in need of explanation.

I have asked friends from Kuching about this beat blasted roundabout. Inevitably, they would shrug in glib exasperation and say, “nang bodoh ah” (it’s so stupid). For them, this unlikely roadside discotheque joins other pieces of engineering prowess in Kuching that scoff at straightforward explanations. Most prominent of these is the cat museum by the north Kuching city hall, identifiable by its entrance in the likeness of a distended paper mâché maw of a Cheshire cat whose mocking grin has been replaced by a rusty turnstile admitting visitors one at a time. A second less feline example is the enormous national pétanque center (the only pétanque courts I have ever seen in Malaysia) which dominates a village of less than 1000 people half an hour’s drive from Kuching. To Kuchingites this baffling roundabout seems more of an aggravating reminder of wasted development dollars than a mystery in need of explanation.

Yet, as a survivor of doctoral training my impulse is still to brandish my scholarly bolt cutters and start forcibly breaking apart the barriers to understanding. Maybe, the techno music of this confounding roundabout is one of those things where some bit of cultural logic, so obvious and imponderable to my friends that it does not even need mention, would explain the seeming absurdity? If I had to guess along those lines, the music could be there to scare off ghosts and



witchcraft. Noise often does (Skeat 1965). Apparently, ghosts in the Malay world tend to prefer eating the livers of cheating husbands over raves in roundabouts. Or perhaps I would do better to adjust my theoretical lens? I suppose an interesting play of the ecstatic and the mundane inhabits this unintuitive roundabout. The music of raves and parties transposed onto roadside banalities could be read as a moment of questioning what is gained by distinguishing between the raucous and the routine. Do roads need to be mundane? Do raves need to be extraordinary? Perhaps this post-colonial hybridity of pathway and partying invites reconsideration not so much of why the music is there, but why we are surprised by its presence? Have cartesian dualisms and protestant ethics taught us to not only draw a sharp divide between carnival and conveyance but to wrinkle our collective noses at their inappropriate mixture? I guess I can't decisively say no. But are we really any better off for divining some poignant insight about western intellectualism through the artful application of 'Theory'?

Whatever insights are embedded within this displaced dance music, no one is actually dancing. There are no raves, no parties, nor casual enjoyers standing about, not even any aunties keeping the pounds at bay with collective jazzercise. Over iced coffees, roti canai and bawdy jokes, my friends and I just sit in the interminable techno trying to ignore the insensible and insignificant intonations of some DJ whose stylings are neither credited nor appreciated. No one even mentions it. The most acknowledgement this music gets is a slight shrug or a shaken head as we return to the car, crossing the roundabout with fingers in our ears.

Even so, would this whole thing be less strange if people were dancing to the music? The locals do not seem inclined to boogie down in this intersection. Dancing in Kuching is usually either the carefully rehearsed performance of ethnic heritage or deliberately silly gesturing in one of the restaurant backrooms that, come nighttime, transform into semi-legal dance clubs. The music DJ Roundabout puts on is too modern and the location too public to suit either purpose. It would be too hot to dance in the sun anyway. That particular cosmic disco ball is a bit too bright for the many Kuchingites who wish to avoid



heatstroke. Alas, no shade awnings shield prospective dancers from ultraviolet radiation amid the music. Roofs or no, the rain does nothing to halt the music either. Kuching's tropical downpour often disrupts traffic and occasionally sends river crocodiles into flooded homes, but it cannot stop the music.

The thing I cannot get past is why the system plays Christmas music in December. The seasonal playlist does not even switch to celebrated Christmas classics like the dulcet intonations of Mariah Carey reading aloud her single item Christmas wishlist. Instead, this roundabout's music programming sticks to the same techno-concerto as usual, except remixing Christmas music instead of Asian pop. This modulation of musical style does not correspond to a neighborhood wide celebration of Jesus Christ's birthday either. Kuching itself is a Muslim dominated city in a Muslim dominated Malaysia. So, who chooses to make this and only this minor seasonal modulation to the roundabout's music? Why does the music only shift for Christmas, not Easter, not Ramadan, not Chinese New Year? Perhaps there is some pious hacker out there who decided to update the music for Christmas, never bothering to justify themselves to anyone. Either way there is no Christmas tree to rock around.

Over Christmas I went on a road trip with Sarawakian friends. Starting early in the morning, we drove, in Sarawakian fashion, between houses sprinkled throughout Kuching and its periphery to shake hands, show face, and eat our way through the festive period. There was a clear pattern: handshakes - food - beers - jokes - watch half of an Adam Sandler movie on a stranger's couch - drive on - Repeat. It's fun. You eat too much, you meet people, you compliment the hosts' little Christmas altar in the corner and gradually get drunker. A couple of hours past midnight, you sit in the back of a pickup truck on a country road somewhere in the Bornean jungle trying to finally get someone to explain that noise polluting roundabout. But they just shrug, laugh and start calling you Kampung boy. Or maybe that's just me. Either way, I had to wake up the next morning with a hangover and find a different frame of mind.

But honestly, whose anxiety am I mitigating by tying myself in knots to



speculate about the rhyme and reason of this sonorous traffic circle?

Incongruous music played non-stop for an unappreciative roundabout does not make a lot of sense. In principle, I could have spent my days trying to figure it out, finding out whose decisions led to this and puzzling out the work involved and costs of running it round the clock. But honestly, whose anxiety am I mitigating by tying myself in knots to speculate about the rhyme and reason of this sonorous traffic circle?

I will blame a bit of it on hardwired anthropological training – A professional drive to demonstrate publicly to every doubter in the world that my second home makes just as much sense as anywhere else. I admit there is also an impulse to prove myself and show that I actually understand the place and people I purport to study. I feel the professional need to demonstrate that I can conjure the high-level mysteries of anthropological mysticism and explicate the sublime purposes of the absurd. But I will not for this particular roundabout. Even if its noisy infrastructural mundanity makes sense to an anonymous someone out there, its social life is its absurdity.

Disenchanted the strangeness that colors people's lives does not always serve an anthropology guided by empathy and sharing life.

Nietzsche observed that what he called the will to truth is often a project of pacification. Nietzsche asks why we seek to pin down the world in orderly recognizability. He then informs us that we are principally concerned with assuaging our own sense of discomfort at the inexplicable and the not yet known (Nietzsche 1999). Instead, he encourages us to rejoice when knowledge fails us because it permits us to continue to grow in our struggle. As anthropologists we sometimes find ourselves in situations where the impulse to understand and render something meaningful is misguided. At these moments we must reckon with what scholarship is when understanding itself is misleading. Susan Sontag went down a similar road in her essay 'Against interpretation' (2001). She argues



that as the critic interprets art they destroy what is important about art - its pleasures, its aesthetics and its emotionality. For Sontag, “The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (Sontag 2001, 10). Disenchanted the strangeness that colors people’s lives does not always serve an anthropology guided by empathy and sharing life.

However, anthropology is not art critique, and sometimes we do need to understand and to see the meaning in things. To resist interpretation only to otherize and problematize would impoverish the discipline. The real conundrum is not whether I need to understand, but how to discern when deeper insights require gaps of understanding. When do I need to stop myself before I spend time investigating and disenchanting issues that inflect life with ineffable particularity?

When absurdity informs, flavors or shapes life we should learn from it, savor it and dare to cut ourselves on its sharp edges.

Asking friends and interlocutors is probably the first and best move. If those who drive around musically absurd roundabouts think I am wasting my time in trying to understand the infinite infrastructural dj session then I probably am. Yet, even though I suspect this rule of thumb is a valuable bit of ethnographic pragmatism it is not wholly satisfying. In practice, asking locals or interlocutors is often intellectually indeterminate. What if locals disagree? What if disinterest in understanding reflects local ethnic differences or political faultlines? While my interlocutors’ insights are crucial, it abdicates my own intellectual responsibility to leave them the work of distinguishing between anthropologically instructive absurdity and uninformed dismissal. The crucial question is whether there is something valuable to learn by grappling with how something might not make sense? When absurdity informs, flavors or shapes life we should learn from it, savor it and dare to cut ourselves on its sharp edges.

There is a palpable peculiarity to the ever-new incongruities of Kuching and Sarawak. I would misunderstand Kuching if I tried to understand every puzzling



thing there. Life there can be weird and confusing as much as it can be joyous, challenging, painful, restful or rewarding. Knowledge, anthropological or otherwise, often requires making sense of things, but not always. We should be brave enough to be baffled.

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The sound of the absurd: Learning to listen in the Emergency Room

written by Mirko Pasquini
September, 2022



It was a crowded, freezing Monday morning in late January, in the large university hospital in northern Italy where I was leading my fieldwork between 2017 to 2018. A muscular man in his late thirties rushed through the Emergency Room (ER) entrance sliding glass doors with a swoosh. He wore a leather biker jacket on one arm and lavish black tribal tattoos on the other. The man stopped in the middle of the waiting area, a large, enclosed room with eighty plastic seats, garishly lit by neon lights and painted a pale institutional green. He waved a broken glass bottle neck in his right hand, glaring across the room at the nurses' reception area, yelling: "I want to see a psychiatrist right now or I'm going to slit my wrists!"

This threat was met with jaded good humor rather than alarm. The tattooed man, a frequent ER visitor, was well known to the staff on-duty. "Go on, do it!" Nurse Giovanni – a gruff professional who that morning was seated at the reception, typing another patient's name and symptoms into his computer – replied through the thick glass wall that divides the nurses' reception desk from the external waiting area. "We'll stitch you up. You know we can do it."



The man stared at nurse Giovanni. “Fine!”, he yelled. “Then I’ll cut my chest open and stab myself in the heart!”

Nurse Giovanni laughed. “Good luck with that! If you can manage to pierce your sternum with a piece of glass, I’ll give you a round of applause (ti faccio pure l’applauso)!”

The tattooed man muttered and looked around, clearly annoyed. Then he turned and marched out through the sliding glass door with the same purpose with which he had entered (also in Pasquini 2023a).

This is what the nurses I met during my fieldwork in an ER in northern Italy between 2017 and 2018 call a “routine encounter” with a “well-known character” (un personaggio conosciuto). Even though routine, these situations are regarded as absurd by the ER staff.

Nurses and physicians recognise that people go to the emergency service due to a lack of welfare alternatives, even though the staff thinks they are in no need of urgent treatment. In the ER, competing care goals create a sensation of futility, of loss of meaning and control: a sense of the absurd amidst care (see Vohnsen 2011). Such feeling is often met with irony by the ER staff.

An analysis of the absurd illuminates how health practitioners engage with conflicts in care in an embodied manner. For instance, in the above vignette, as he shouted toward the reception area, Valerio, as I later learned the tattooed man was called, initiated a scene that changed the rules of the usual assessment performed by nurses to determine the urgency of people’s suffering (i.e., triage).

The situation could be analysed by referring to philosopher Thomas Nagel. In his short essay “The Absurd” (1971), Nagel describes absurdity as emerging from the gap between people’s everyday expectations, and the practical circumstances they are living in. Valerio’s shouting, for example, trumped triage procedures together with nurses’ expectations to do their job (including a formal interview and a close examination), creating a context of sense-making in which a patient



could bargain for urgency with the use of violence.

Instead of trying to reason with Valerio, the nurse played along by using irony, in a new sense-making scenario that took on absurd tones.

Nurse Giovanni knew Valerio well enough to know he would never commit suicide in the ER. However, Valerio's shouting made nurse Giovanni step back from his usual positioning as a clinician. Sound made the nurse immediately realise that another approach was needed. Instead of trying to reason with Valerio, the nurse played along by using irony, in a new sense-making scenario that took on absurd tones. Here absurdity lies in the fact that clinical reasoning, that is, what nurses expect to be doing in delivering care, is partially bracketed out by practical circumstances requiring nurses to readapt medical practice to the chaotic environment of the ER.

The step back that nurse Giovanni took with his comment helped shift the context, introducing an appreciation of the absurd (Nagel 1971:718). In the ER such step back and reflexive attitude is often triggered by sound. One that brings new meaning to the context of interactions and that sparks the sensation of an existing gap between the daily value of everyday tasks and the practical circumstances in which nurses' work occur. Nurses feel trapped in an absurd situation because they are both doubting their everyday clinical practice, while they are also unable to completely abandon it.

In the soundscape of triage interactions (Samuels et al. 2010), the feeling of the absurd – as the presence of conflicting goals within care – can emerge any time amid the cacophony of sounds competing for attention.

In the soundscape of triage interactions (Samuels et al. 2010), the feeling of the absurd – as the presence of conflicting goals within care – can emerge any time amid the cacophony of sounds competing for attention. Inside the ward, someone may be desperately screaming for help. At the same time, a woman may sob in a



conversation over the phone in the waiting room. A boy will cry loudly in the triage area. The phone at the reception desk won't stop ringing. A tiny loudspeaker announces a patient's name, echoing across the inner aisles of the ward. The receptionist may be shouting, trying to make herself heard to incoming patients from her desk behind the thick glass wall. In the midst of all these sounds, everyone can hear the furious clacking of the nurse's keyboard typing - dull castanets clicking syncopated time (see Pasquini, under contract).

If sight signals the present - the touchable here and now - sound indicates the immediate future, what is about to happen, the emerging yet invisible. Nurses' capacity to anticipate and readapt care to the absurd comes with the crucial skill to discern particular sounds, some deemed as absurd (illogical, uncanny), like the shouting of the man with the broken bottle, others being serious and acute sounds, triggering immediate action.

Learned over years of practice, nurses contextualise their interactions with patients and their families in the ER through skilled listening. For instance, a nurse may question people's suffering by listening to the way an individual explains what happened. The way a person stutters, her accent, the way she struggles to catch her breath or rushes through words like a stream, the way she speaks plainly, motionless about her pain - all of these expressions are pieces of a story that nurses must put together on the spot. Listening reveals more than what is apparent. Whereas sight is an objectifying perception, listening is instead a powerful trigger of imagination. Sound can hit nurses' ears wherever they are and whatever they are doing. Rather than boundaries, listening evokes a widening possibility of interpretation. Thus, just like doubt, the sound of the absurd is contagious in the ER.

Sound introduced absurdity by making nurses realise that an unforeseen conflict was under way. Shifting nurses' possibility to judge, act, or even meet urgent suffering as usual, sound is well known by nurses to have the capacity to change the context of ER interactions.



Whenever an ambulance, for example, would brake faster than usual or, worst of all, not turn off its engine while parking in front of the red code area, nurses would know – only by listening to the engine roar – that the routine division of labor no longer applied. Ambulances in a rush meant troubles and nurses would immediately put on surgical gowns, rush to the phone to call the anesthesiologist and prepare to plunge into a bloody scenario of a traumatic injury with possibly desperate outcomes.

A lurking presence in the ER, the absurd is a constantly scrutinised possibility.

Due to this capacity to change the context of interactions, nurses said that the unexpected has a specific sound in the ER. A man's hysteric laughter breaking through the loud chattering in the waiting room. The theatrical blessing of an improvised Jesus, holding patients' hands to heal them. A lurking presence in the ER, the absurd is a constantly scrutinised possibility. The nurses strive to anticipate it by listening carefully.

On the one hand, through their skilled listening, nurses perceive the feeling of the absurd hidden within their daily task in the overcrowded ER. On the other, they capitalise on sound to anticipate, and partially counter, such feeling of powerlessness.

There are only three ways for nurses to remedy the absurd, as a sensation of futility and impotence. The first is to disengage from the situation altogether. This option is not often available to nurses who have no choice but to deal with the daily care of patients even when the situation takes on absurd tones (Pasquini 2023b). Rather, like Mol, Moser, and Pols (2010) describe, caring situations need to be tinkered with, improvising with the tools at their disposal in order to make care work. Through a recursive series of attempts, of trials and errors, nurses redefine care and change their reality according to newly emerging conditions.

This is the second way that nurses can deal with an absurd scenario, by changing the situation at hand and thus reducing the gap between practical circumstances



and expectations. Of course, this move demands considerable agency, one that nurses often lack within the chaotic environment of the ER. A relevant point here is made by Catherine Trundle (2020) who highlights the limits of tinkering in context, underscoring that care can also be associated with backlash and mistakes, and does not necessarily always build up to good. Such an idea of impotence and impossibility, of the limit of improvisation and tinkering, resembles what I have witnessed in the ER, where nurses very often realise the limits of their ability to tinker with the reality they are dealing with.

A third and final way to cope with the absurd that is frequently used by nurses in the ER is to change daily expectations in order to cope with an adverse reality. A person may be able to adjust to a new circumstance by changing how they normally produce sense. This is what happened when nurse Giovanni used irony to handle the man holding the broken glass. Irony is often used by nurses to reduce the gap between their expectation and the reality they are dealing with. Shifting their registry of interactions as soon as they identified an unusual sound, nurses constantly wondered when their capacity to improvise would reach its limit while facing the competing goals of an absurd situation.

“Wait, was it the ambulance arriving again? Did it brake quickly or turn off the engine slowly?”, a nurse asked me, listening carefully for an engine roaring outside the reception area.

With a concerned look, the nurse gestured for me to follow her. As we approached the entrance to the internal ER aisle, we could hear the engine running still. Every nurse knows: this means trouble.

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The folly of little kings

written by Ståle Wig
September, 2022



On Monday, May 25th, 2020, Cuba's new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, involuntarily found himself in the spotlight. Díaz-Canel had become the Cuban head of state two years before, and was widely seen as an uncharismatic successor to Fidel and Raúl Castro. That day, Díaz-Canel made an improvised statement during a meeting with government ministers, which will forever stick to his public image like a red nose. Seated in a leather chair on stage, the president gazed into the air and began to muse. "We have to have lemons in this country," said the leader. Government officials scribbled notes as he continued, "...Lemonade is the basis of everything. You can enhance any soda with a lemon soda base, and it becomes ... a super nice soda, super good! ... We no longer have lemons [in Cuba]. We have to look into that."

To Díaz-Canel's misfortune, [the clip](#) was broadcast as a part of Cuba's nightly news. Soon, mocking memes began circulating on Facebook and in WhatsApp



groups, poking fun at the leader's sudden nostalgia for a time when lemonade was available across the country. On one level, though, he had a point. Lemons, like other basic food items, had become scarce. (In Cuba, there are seasons not just for avocados and mangos but also "seasons" for toilet paper, matches, eggs, and just about everything else.) However, many Cubans found it twisted to witness Diaz-Canél professing his love for lemonade while vaguely suggesting, "we have to look into" ways of bringing it back. Unlike Cuban government officials, who attribute the island's shortages to the United States' economic sanctions, Cubans tend to hold their own leaders accountable for the country's problems, including the rampant food crisis. Cuba, a Caribbean island close to the equator, imports 70 to 80 percent of its domestic food requirements. Given the Cuban government's failure to secure basic food production, the president's longing for lemonade seemed outlandish, even absurd.

After Diaz-Canél's reality-defying statements, Cuban humorists wasted no time. One meme juxtaposed the leader's words, "Lemonade is the basis of everything", with quotes from ancient Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Socrates. Another showed a DNA model made with limes. A third featured a fictitious movie poster with a new, grey-haired superhero, "Captain Lemonade", who embarked on a quest to find Cuba's forgotten lemons. I was in Havana doing field research around this time. At workplaces, bus stops, and around kitchen tables, I heard chatter and jokes about Diaz-Canél and his famed *limonada*. People recited a new jingle that blended the president's now-famous words with a [reggaeton beat](#). A satirist uploaded a five-minute [video-clip](#) on YouTube of himself asking residents in his neighborhood the same question over and over, "Can you tell me, what is the basis of everything?"

Comedy as epistemology

The spectacle of *la limonada* would not be the last time Miguel Diaz-Canél provided comedians with cherished material. Yet, this kind of ridicule is far from



unique to Cuba. Around the world, political satirists engage in daily races to craft punchlines in response to the statements of politicians, using jokes, memes, or sketches to vie for audience laughter. Clever visuals and wordplay travel far and fast through social media. A memorable example came in February 2022, when the presidents of Russia and France, Vladimir Putin and Emmanuel Macron, met in Moscow to discuss the looming threat of war in Ukraine. With the prospect of another war in Europe in the balance, their somber discussion garnered massive news attention. However, what captivated the global audience was the unusually large white wooden table that kept Putin and Macron apart. It was indeed a curious sight: two world leaders separated by a six-meter-long piece of furniture. Soon, manipulated images began circulating on the internet, mocking the Russian leader's display of seriousness and power. One image showed Putin and Macron playing tennis on the massive meeting table, while another depicted ice skaters gracefully dancing on its surface. Fake video clips emerged, showing the presidents communicating through megaphones or - my personal favorite - [using the table as a seesaw](#). For a moment, absurdity took center stage in world affairs.

Comedy can serve as a way of understanding the world, especially in settings where people face censorship and self-validating discourse, be it from a Medieval king or a modern-day demagogue. Confronted with authoritarian politics, comedians can become truth-tellers.

Why do these forms of comedy appear to thrive in the realm of politics? What makes them so funny? To answer, it is helpful to recall that politics inherently involves an element of make-believe, which even politicians themselves occasionally acknowledge. During my stint as a journalist in Oslo in 2017, I had the opportunity to accompany Jonas Gahr Støre, the leader of the Norwegian Labor Party and later the Prime Minister of Norway, on the campaign trail. I had written an unauthorized book about Støre a few years earlier (Wig 2014), which may explain his frankness. On one occasion, as we were being driven with armed security to attend a pre-arranged meeting with fishermen in a village in northern Norway, Støre [described](#) how the world of politics sometimes felt to him like a



“hyperreality”, with its own laws of gravity.

However, not all politicians’ statements are equally ripe for parody. It often seems that the best jokes are cracked in the darkest of times. Arguably, the greatest political parody ever made was Charlie Chaplin’s portrayal of Adolf Hitler as a little dictator, dancing with an inflated globe-shaped balloon. Chaplin’s film was released in 1940, on the eve of the Holocaust. What made Chaplin’s work so brilliant was its ability to show that in all its brutality, fascism is also ridiculous. His comedy reached millions worldwide, exposing the symbolic underpinnings of Nazism while providing, as Mirco Göpfert (2022: 22) describes it, “unparalleled insights into the theatricality of fascism”. Such is the power of the punchline in politics.

Comedy can serve as a way of understanding the world, especially in settings where people face censorship and self-validating discourse, be it from a Medieval king or a modern-day demagogue. Confronted with authoritarian politics, comedians can become truth-tellers. Whether as meme-makers or jokesters on street corners, humorists reveal the inherent absurdity of the political spectacle.

Comedy born of silence

Satire feeds off the sanctity of politics – an atmosphere of gravity and reverence that the punchline subverts. If Hitler had not been so pompous and serious, we would not be laughing at Chaplin’s parody. Something is funny precisely because it upsets the established order. As George Orwell once put it, every joke is a “tiny revolution”, a small attempt at knocking down some authority. “The bigger the fall, the bigger the joke” (Orwell 2002: 781). Sometimes, the smallest of gestures will suffice. In H.C. Andersen’s famous folktale, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, it only takes a naïve comment from a child to alert everyone to the awkward fact that yes, the emperor is naked.



Classic late-night satire, such as *The Daily Show* in the United States, or *Striscia la notizia* in Italy, seek to create the same effect: reminding viewers of the hollowness of political discourse (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, Molé 2018). Nevertheless, while these are common characteristics of political satire, the social basis for comedy is not the same everywhere. In certain political environments, official propaganda can become so pervasive that people simply stop paying attention to the actual content of what politicians say. Alexei Yurchak (2006) has written about how, during the late Soviet era, “everyone” knew that state-propaganda was hollow. Bureaucrats and party members repeated the same tired Stalinist rhetoric, not primarily because they were afraid to speak the truth, but because the substance of their speech no longer mattered. They were more concerned about echoing the right words than with the content of their speech. Over time, the gap between official discourse and lived reality became a part of what citizens simply took for granted.

This is certainly the case in Cuba, especially among the younger generations who are acutely aware that most of the official discourse in the media is detached from reality. Thus, they tend to ignore it. Occasionally, however, party officials make statements that are so nonsensical that it grabs people’s attention, making them laugh. After all, there is not much else they can do. Leaders like Miguel Diaz-Canél are not only detached from the everyday lives of ordinary citizens but also immune to popular feedback through voting or public debate. Like the Soviet Union, Cuba largely lacks a functioning critical press that can scrutinise leaders. There are no late-night shows on national television to satirise weird statements about lemonade, or other examples of official absurdity. While mockery may thrive in private conversations and semi-anonymous online sites, the national media keeps trotting out the same nonsensical refrain, further adding to the sensation of living in an absurd political culture (see Wig, under review).



Laughing to live

While authoritarian regimes often produce absurd political declarations, these forms of official unreason also extend beyond one-party regimes. We need not look further than to the United States to find political declarations and initiatives that qualify as absurd. Many will remember former US President Donald Trump, who during the COVID-19 pandemic made the astonishing suggestion that people should drink bleach as a remedy. When Trump riffed at a press conference about how scientists should explore the health benefits of injecting bleach, reporters and virologists in the room were forced to listen to his outlandish suggestions, presumably hiding their shock. Trump's wild advice evokes parallels to H.C. Andersen's tale of the naked emperor parading through a public square – the unfortunate difference being that, at The White House press conference, there was no child present to call out this emperor's bullshit. The Trump spectacle also resembles the improvised reflections of Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canél jazzing on about lemonade being “the basis of everything” while directing his party cadres to “look into” this issue. Whether governing an authoritarian state in Havana or presiding over a broken democracy in Washington, these leaders share the privilege of presenting their views uncritically in the public domain. They are little kings surrounded by flatterers and yes-men.

In some cases, however, one can suspect that absurd gestures and statements are part of a leader's very ideological strategy. The UK's former prime minister Boris Johnson is a prime example. Known by some observers as “[the clown king](#)”, Johnson was an expert in taking the edge off an otherwise ruthless political agenda through hyperbole and ridiculous behavior.

The ability to laugh in the face of power, even when such laughter is cloaked, may be one of few means of resistance for people living under repressive regimes.

Whether resulting from cunning tactics or authoritarian hubris, the good news is that for every megalomaniac emperor out there, there must be a thousand



talented comedians and meme-makers. In the case of authoritarian Cuba, critics may hesitate to voice their concerns openly, but private comedy thrives. The ability to laugh in the face of power, even when such laughter is cloaked, may be one of few means of resistance for people living under repressive regimes. While such “tiny revolutions” are unlikely to bring down an authoritarian regime anytime soon, satire and other forms of comedy make it easier for people to understand and live in them. This was often the perspective that my friends in Havana took when the topic of political satire came up in our conversations. Alejandro, a shoe seller I worked with for my research, described Cubans as a species much like dolphins. He delivered the joke while mimicking water rising to his neck, adding, “You know, we laugh, even though we have water up to here.”

Undoubtedly, comedy is more than just a coping mechanism; it is a way of understanding and navigating the world, giving sense and direction to people’s lives. But Alejandro has a point: comedy also offers relief. At the level of everyday survival, we must make the best of a hostile situation. By cracking jokes and drawing smiles, people turn the lemons of authoritarian rulers into lemonade. In a world of naked emperors, perhaps that is the only way to maintain our sanity.

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War and its absurdities

written by Deborah Jones
September, 2022



When Nadja was evacuated from the bomb shelter in eastern Ukraine, she took her cheese with her. She took the cheese from Luhansk to Kharkiv and almost to Odesa, disposing of the last of it somewhere west of the river Dnipro. The cheese was not precious to her – quite the opposite. It was what is known in Russian as *kolbasnyj syr*, approximately ‘sausage cheese’, a rubbery, processed cheese product shaped into a cylinder and scented with fake smoke. Nadja hated it. But *kolbasnyj syr* is shelf-stable, and what she was given to eat in the basement where she spent two weeks hiding from shells. There was also bread, but mostly cheese. ‘You would have a chunk of cheese, and go to get some bread, and they would just give you more cheese. You could torture people with that cheese!’ And yet, when Nadja was evacuated, she brought the cheese with her, a decision she described as *absurd* (Ukrainian and Russian: абсурд). She even kept the cheese after being fed much better food, *nashi pomidory*, ‘our’ tomatoes in the peak of the season, that is, late summer. Late summer, 2014.



The war in Ukraine commanded global attention following the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, but the war in Donbas, in Ukraine's east, began eight years prior. The planetary stakes of what was long dismissed as a regional conflict are now impossible to ignore: the threat of nuclear disaster; the poisoning of the world's richest farmland and the weaponization of the global food supply; the soaring food and energy prices; the displacement of one-fourth of the Ukrainian population from their homes – many of them, perhaps also Nadja, for the second or third time.

There are many reasons to describe the war as 'absurd,' and numerous commentators have done so. Some have pointed out that it is 'absurd' for Russia to claim that Ukraine is run by Nazis when President Zelensky is himself Jewish (cf. Veidlinger 2022). Others have employed 'absurd' to mean paradoxical, as in it is 'absurd' for 'brother nations' Ukraine and Russia to be at war (although if one insists on using kinship tropes, there is nothing irrational about one bullied family member rising up against the other). Both Ukraine and Russia accuse the other of atrocities, and then refute the accusations as 'absurd,' meaning 'without merit.' They describe the global response to the war – both the condemnations and the under-commitments – as 'absurd,' as in 'incomprehensible' or 'outrageous.' Absurdity is of course also an art form, and a prized one in this part of the world, where dark humor pervades and socio-political critique functions by being simultaneously subtle and over-the-top (Boyer and Yurchak 2010).

In this essay, however, I explore my Ukrainian interlocutors' everyday experiences of the absurd during the war in Donbas (2014-2022) and following the full-scale Russian invasion (2022-present). It is common to define 'absurdity' as senselessness or meaninglessness. However, my interlocutors' experiences and invocations of the absurd were not at all about accepting the arbitrariness and disorder of the world, but precisely about meaning-making. Absurdity, after all, is both a feeling and an ascription. As a sensation, it is sometimes a tingle, and often a gut-punch. As a linguistic act of evaluation – this is absurd! – it involves noticing, wincing, and perhaps, laughing at the incongruities between life as it would seem to make sense and life as it is actually experienced.



Observing the absurd requires a capacity for reflexivity, to understand that the world is now one way, but that it could have, perhaps should have, been another. But absurdity also presupposes *congruities*, for what makes absurd situations so startling is that they make the familiar, the very familiar, patently strange. This is particularly evident in wartime, when life's most essential activities and relationships are upended, or simply seem impossible. Here, I give voice to Ukraine's war-affected while offering two small hypotheses about war and the absurd: first, it is in the tension between the incongruous and the uncanny that absurdity is felt; second, my interlocutors experienced absurd circumstances in part because of how states and other bureaucracies delivered aid such as food and housing. I draw on fieldwork with war-affected populations in Ukraine and with Ukrainian refugees in Germany. I also reflect on my own disorienting, or even absurd, experience of becoming an ethnographer of war.

As a linguistic act of evaluation – this is absurd! – it involves noticing, wincing, and perhaps, laughing at the incongruities between life as it would seem to make sense and life as it is actually experienced.

Early in the war in Donbas, I met a woman who had nearly died taking out the trash. Natasha was walking to the dumpster when her apartment block came under fire. She immediately dropped the trash bag and dashed back to her entryway. Once the shelling was over, she retrieved the bag, brought it to the dumpster, and continued her day. 'And that was how we lived.'

When Natasha and I met some weeks later, she was being temporarily housed in a Soviet-era sanatorium on the Black Sea. One continuity throughout the war in Ukraine is the use of aging travel and tourist infrastructure – abandoned hotels, off-season resorts, out-of-service airports – as emergency shelters, leading one of my interlocutors to describe her exile as 'some sort of absurd holiday.' Another continuity is talk about everyday routines warped by warfare. It isn't just that the simplest tasks became gambles with death, it is also that even when one isn't dodging shells, daily life is simultaneously unrecognizable and exactly the same.



“I had mango for dinner,” a friend in Kyiv texted me shortly after the Russian invasion. She had gone to the supermarket as usual, but the only produce left was exotic fruit.

War-affected people talk a lot about food. The juxtaposition between what is offered and what is needed or desired is a common trope. Sometimes this is about shortages, or how in wartime mundane goods become precious and prestige items worthless. Other times, it is about ‘the senselessness produced by the uniform application of rational procedures’ (Alexander 2009). For example, Elizabeth Dunn (2014) writes of the piles of ‘humanitarian macaroni’ the World Food Program provided displaced people in Georgia to ensure they reached the requisite 2,240 calories per day – never mind that pasta was not part of the local diet. In 2014 Odesa, the equivalent might have been buckwheat, which was at least a familiar food, though I kept meeting people in shelters with heaps of the stuff and no pots to cook it in.

In 2022 Germany, Ukrainian refugees fed bread for breakfast and bread for dinner (Germans traditionally only ‘eat warm’ once per day) longed for soup and kitchens to cook in. It wasn’t just that group shelters often lacked cooking facilities, but that in much of Germany, landlords are not required to provide tenants with kitchens. Rental apartments often have no cabinets, no countertops, no appliances, no light fixtures, sometimes not even a sink. The state offers the needy a one-time stipend for furnishings – where I live, about 700 euro per adult or 1500 per small family – but with such a budget, one must be resourceful. My Ukrainian interlocutors and I staked out secondhand shops and online platforms, fingers crossed for clean refrigerators, working stoves, and matching cabinets, and if we were exceptionally lucky, an entire set, perhaps from an estate clean-out. The refugees cracked jokes: ‘I don’t want a bed someone died in, but a kitchen is okay,’ and, ‘it’s like we’re on an absurd game show, competing against other Ukrainians for things we used to have.’

One continuity throughout the war in Ukraine is the use of aging travel and tourist infrastructure – abandoned hotels, off-season resorts, out-of-service



airports – as emergency shelters, leading one of my interlocutors to describe her exile as ‘some sort of absurd holiday.’

Because I have a small child, and because there is more than enough to do in refugee support, I have not been to Ukraine since 2019. But the war arrived at my doorstep, and in a way, I’ve been in the most intense fieldwork period of my life. In late February, 2022, my husband and I discussed the possibility of hosting friends fleeing Ukraine. Forty-eight hours later, the family arrived, instantly visible in their heavy winter coats, which were so essential when crossing into Poland on foot, but terribly sweaty by early March, when spring unexpectedly sprung. Two years later, with a change of wardrobe, access to social services, and even work permits (privileges their Syrian, Afghan, and African predecessors lack), Ukrainian refugees in Germany blend in better. But the linguistic landscape has changed notably. I hear Ukrainian, Russian, and mixed dialects at the playground, the doctor’s office, my son’s daycare, the supermarket. On public transportation, I see faces I feel I know from elsewhere, and I look twice to be sure.

At time of writing, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees estimated there were over 1 million Ukrainian refugees in Germany. However, the actual number is difficult to assess because of what Germany calls *Pendelmigration*, migrants ‘commuting’ back and forth between their homelands and host countries. One woman I know sent her teenage daughter back to Ukraine because German insurance did not cover orthodontia, and the daughter needed to have her braces adjusted. The daughter went to the orthodontist, tended to her grandparents, then returned to Germany alone, because the grandparents did not want to leave.

Some Ukrainians think it’s absurd to stay in Ukraine; others think it nonsensical to seek refuge in countries where they lack support networks, language skills, or job prospects. Although millions of Ukrainians are internally displaced, most who are eligible to leave the country stay within its borders. (Men of conscription age are legally required to stay in Ukraine, although this is unevenly enforced.) Many



perceive staying in the country as an act of defiance. Living, persisting, carrying on in the face of people who want to destroy you – this is one way of winning the war.

In some parts of Ukraine, life continues fairly normally, even ostentatiously, apart from the blare of air raid sirens and shriek of missile strikes. Friends and colleagues post photos of meals enjoyed in restaurants, bookstores rich in literary offerings, dancing in the streets. Ukraine, to quote its national anthem, has not only ‘not yet perished,’ but remains very much alive.

The line between absurdity and despair, I have learned, is a thin one. But so, too, is the line between absurdity and hope.

Vse bude Ukrajina – approximately, ‘everything will be Ukraine.’ In the first year following Russia’s full-scale invasion, some of my Ukrainian friends and interlocutors would close conversations this way, reassuring others, and perhaps themselves, that Ukraine would be victorious. Phonologically, *vse bude Ukrajina* resembles *vse bude dobre*, everything will be alright, and the replacement of ‘alright’ with ‘Ukraine’ was explained to me as meaning something akin to ‘everything will go back to normal’; ‘the Ukraine we knew will return,’ or simply, ‘Ukraine will persist.’ Taken literally, however, *vse bude Ukrajina* is a striking claim: all the territory that Russia has occupied will be returned. Even in its less literal sense, however, *vse bude Ukrajina* is ambitious because, of course, Ukraine is forever changed. It would be absurd to deny this.

As the war enters its third year, one hears this expression less and less. I confess that, when I do hear it, its optimism makes me a bit uncomfortable: the loss of life, infrastructural damage, and environmental toll in Ukraine are already monumental; international support is evaporating; prolonging the war seems suicidal. Yet, analysts predicted Ukraine would be overrun within weeks of Russia’s invasion, and somehow, the scrappy country keeps hanging on. Also, what is the alternative?



My interlocutors swing quickly between laughter and tears and back again, mocking their circumstances to manage their devastation. The line between absurdity and despair, I have learned, is a thin one. But so, too, is the line between absurdity and hope. To have faith, to wait for miracles – to some, this is also absurd. But what other choice is there?

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Photos courtesy of the author.



“Great job, mommy!” On the absurdity of teaching Ethiopian women to breastfeed

written by Sarah Howard
September, 2022



One scalding hot June day in 2014 in a remote village health post in North Shewa, Ethiopia, I attended an event intended to provide information and advice about breastfeeding and nutrition for pregnant and lactating women. This content of the event adhered to national guidelines, drawn from global standards developed by



the World Health Organisation and Unicef and adapted for the Ethiopian context by the government and its international partners (e.g. FDRE 2016a). Implementation of these guidelines is included in the ‘package’ of work for which state-employed health extension workers are ultimately responsible at community-level, as well as through a patchwork of interventions by multilateral and non-governmental organisations. This particular training, for example, was run by a British NGO and overseen by a man who I will call Dibaba, who had previously been a regional level government employee and was now the zonal coordinator for the NGO’s nutrition programme. By taking this job, he had gone down one rung in the governmental hierarchy, but no doubt up many salary grades. Middle-aged with a paternalistic manner and dressed in the palette of grey, beige and muted green favoured by the professional classes, Dibaba was well-versed in the modalities of such meetings, known as “trainings”.

As on this occasion, training usually involved an outside expert, invariably male, lecturing groups of local people about what they should be doing to improve their lives, while they listened without asking questions.

This particular occasion focused on breastfeeding and maternal nutrition, and on how to supplement breastmilk with porridge in the diets of children over the age of six months. It was accompanied by a demonstration of porridge making, as per the ‘Practical Cooking Demonstration Session’ contained in the codified national targets for nutrition services for infants and young children aged six to twenty-four months (FDRE 2016a).

Standing in front of many breastfeeding women, Dibaba urged them to feed their children porridge and not sweets. “You can also add many things to porridge to make it more nutritious,” he went on, giving the examples of tomatoes, eggs and cabbage. A handful of women listened attentively at the front. Another woman who lived in Addis Ababa but was visiting relatives in the village voluntarily joined in with the porridge cooking, adding to my impression that there was some social cachet involved in novel ideas about how best to nourish children and their



mothers. From my position at the back, however, I could see that most of the women were unimpressed. I overheard (not very quiet) comments, such as: “You don’t put tomatoes in porridge! *Ay chewata!* (what a joke!).” One woman fished a dirty lollipop out of her pocket for her toddler while Dibaba was exhorting them not to feed children sugar, in what was either unthinking coincidence or deliberate defiance. When he advised a pregnant woman to eat healthy food such as papaya and avocado – neither of which were grown locally or sold at the market – she openly scorned his suggestion.

The women present at the event were vocal about the absurdity of Dibaba’s irrelevant, unwanted or impractical advice.

Their response was echoed in the reception to other interventions by the state and its global counterparts, such as inappropriate sanitation programmes that prompted local people to construct fake latrines in an effort to avoid state surveillance (Howard, under review). This particular episode focused on infant nutrition also poses questions about priorities, power and perceptions of tradition. As the pioneering anthropologist of birth Brigitte Jordan writes, the consensus about what counts as ‘authoritative knowledge’ in a particular domain – or, how one system of knowledge gains legitimacy over other competing systems – is often ‘associated with a stronger power base’ (1997:36). A consequence of the ascendancy of one kind of knowledge is the ‘devaluation, often the dismissal, of all other kinds of knowing’ (ibid.).

Ethiopia has extremely high rates of both exclusive (Bhattacharjee et al 2019) and continued breastfeeding. Data from UNICEF (2021) show that 81.1% of women continue to breastfeed their children aged 12 – 23 months, echoing older research that shows very high rates of breastfeeding in rural areas (e.g. Knutsson and Melbin 1969). As elsewhere in Africa, overall rates of breastfeeding in Ethiopia are many times higher than in the Global North. For example, data from the UK that show that only between 0.5% and 10% of mothers are breastfeeding by the time their child is 12 months old (Victora et al 2016). In 2016, [the BBC called the](#)



[UK 'the world's worst' at breastfeeding.](#)

In the years following the training event I attended in North Shewa, I had two children of my own while living in both Britain and Ethiopia. In Ethiopia women angrily hissed at me “t’ut’ inde!” – an expression of surprise, often disapproving – when I failed to placate my crying toddler son on a rural bus trip a long time after I had stopped breastfeeding him for good. Meanwhile, in Britain, there was plenty of NHS material available highlighting the advantages of breastmilk for children’s growth and development and encouraging me to breastfeed, but no-one showed me how to make porridge. Unlike in rural Ethiopia, multiple varieties of formula milk are sold everywhere and public facilities for babies are marked with the symbol of a bottle.

I found certain aspects of my breastfeeding experience in Britain entirely absent in Ethiopia, for instance the way that breastfeeding in public could act as a subtle marker of class privilege, the angst many women in the UK experienced over their infant feeding choices, and lingering elements of shame. In a rare case of direct disapproval, a family friend told me he found the sight of me breastfeeding “disgusting”. Similarly, while breastfeeding my daughter in the corridors of a conference organised by the American Anthropological Association, several female attendees verbally toasted me as they walked past with “great job mommy!” – a level of attention and approval that casts breastfeeding as a moral act rather than, as in across Ethiopia, a literally unremarkable one.

These personal experiences led me to reflect on the child nutrition event that summer in North Shewa and to cast it in a retrospectively absurd light.

How could it be, I wondered, that breastfeeding in particular was the focus of global funding and attention when almost all Ethiopian women already breastfeed for extended periods? In a rural area with no clean water, electricity or all-weather road, how was this issue construed as a priority for intervention? Why are mothers being advised to eat healthy food they cannot buy or do not like? In light of the massive disparities in breastfeeding rates between Ethiopia and, for



example, the UK (as both the ‘world’s worst’ and by chance, the funder and organiser of the event I attended), why were Ethiopian women not being invited to advise British women on the secret to their success in this regard? And why does this latter rhetorical question itself read as absurd, in the sense that it would never happen?

The absurdity here does not relate to the serious subject of maternal and child nutrition in Ethiopia – an issue that has particularly come to the forefront [link: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-situation-report-7-sep-2023>] since widespread and continuing conflict across the country that has intensified since 2021. Nor does the absurdity relate to the laudable aims of the government and others to improve this situation. It is also obvious that there are many reasons why the Ethiopian context does not map onto the British context in a way that would make transferable advice straightforward. Rates of female formal employment and access to contraception diverge markedly, to mention just two relevant factors.

But are there other considerations that inform how and why Ethiopian mothers are the subject of absurd advice on how to nourish their babies, rather than models of maternal feeding practice?

Perhaps one answer is in the word that used to describe these events as ‘trainings’ in English; *silt’ena* in Amharic. The verb “to train” in Amharic – አሰልጠኑ – can also be translated as “to civilise”, indicating an orientation to behavioural change that draws on assumptions of not just junior but inferior status, and of the need to provide guidance for people on how to conduct their lives. As the trainer Dibaba spoke during the event I attended, as well as in a subsequent conversation with me, it was clear that one part of the rationale for intervening to correct the way women practised breastfeeding, fed their children, or ate while pregnant was based on disapproval of so-called ‘harmful traditional practices’. In this area of Ethiopia, these apparently included rejecting the early milk, or colostrum, and the belief that pregnant women should not eat bananas, milk or porridge in the last



trimester as they are too heavy for the foetus - ‘apparently’ because some local women denied to me that these practices occurred. As written into national policy, ‘harmful traditional practices’ such as these are said to ‘contribute... to the poor nutritional status of the majority of infants, young children and women in Ethiopia’ (FDRE 2016b:69). Prevalent attitudes towards all kinds of ‘harmful traditions’ that affect women’s bodies, from female circumcision to scarification practices, often map onto existing fault lines in a multi-ethnic state that has historically been dominated by highland- and Orthodox Christian-dominated polities. They also echo wider colonial histories of reforming maternal practices in the global South, which were often premised on the characterisation of tradition and custom as problematic (e.g. Saha 2017; Hunt 1988), in particular where they were seen as threatening to the structure of the nuclear family through practices of distributed mothering (Whyte 2020).

Critically however, the training conducted by Dibaba did not acknowledge the many norms, values and practices that support the practice of longterm breastfeeding and therefore help to place Ethiopia in the global forefront of extended breastfeeding practice. These include the exemption of breastmilk from religious precepts about the polluting nature of bodily fluids in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, the majority religion in the area where the training took place.

Norms about bodily exposure are suspended during breastfeeding, while the period of *aras bet*, or seclusion of post-partum women, during which time they do not leave the compound or do any housework and are fed rich food, is also an opportunity for mothers to firmly establish a pattern of on-demand breastfeeding. Furthermore, mothers expressed a strong sense of maternal identity, in which providing breastmilk for their children is both a crucial part of their loving and caring role while also being seen by my interlocutors as entirely routine and unproblematic.

The absurdity here, then, arises from the mismatch between local realities and standardised advice that focused on women’s individual (‘harmful’) behaviour



while ignoring supportive norms and practices, and which at the same time did not address questions of access, structural barriers or local priorities. As such, ethnographic attention to the absurd reveals the longstanding hierarchies of power and value in the construction of 'authoritative knowledge' around women's bodies and intimate practices of feeding.

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Of rails and rubbish: critique and the absurdity of cleaning days

written by Charline Kopf
September, 2022



In January 2020, the Senegalese President Macky Sall announced a nation-wide 'Cleaning Day'. Together with a 'Zero waste' campaign and followed by monthly 'Cleaning Days', he invited citizens to contribute to the de-cluttering and cleaning of public spaces. The employees of the suburban train service called *Petit Train de Banlieue* would form an integral part of the cleaning campaign. Their national train service usually brought commuters from the capital Dakar to the suburbs



and the neighbouring city Thiès. Since 2019, however, the trains had been suspended due to the construction of a new Express train and their salaries regularly postponed. Even though the trains had ceased to run, the railway management always found new and, according to the workers, senseless tasks to occupy them with. ‘This is absurd’, remarked Cheikh, one of the railway workers, when they were told to repaint the old dysfunctional trains. They were not able to engage in the actual repairs that the train needed as the budget did not suffice. ‘Why are we supposed to repaint the outer shell, when the inner body doesn’t work?’ Cheikh asked. And yet, they meticulously engaged in the repainting of the wagons using the colours of the Senegalese flag – green, yellow, and red with a green star in the middle. When they were done, the workers were told that they had used the incorrect shade of yellow. A couple of months later, the colours of the flag were deemed wrong all together. It was too bright and looked unsophisticated – not serious enough for a national railway line according to the management. This time, the workers were asked to use grey and a muted green colour. They were furious, frustrated and ‘demoralised’ (Rajković 2018), but continued with these pointless chores.

At the same time, I propose that the workers’ engagement in the very practices they called absurd testified to multiple layers of critique.

Homing in on the railway workers’ Cleaning Day – as another task that they would refer to as useless –, I suggest that these absurd assignments were used to keep the workers busy as their service was slowly discontinued. At the same time, I propose that the workers’ engagement in the very practices they called absurd testified to multiple layers of critique. “Cleaning” has a rich history in Senegal and has been mobilised for critique from various angles. I show how it moves between a public stance by the government directed to a global, environmental-friendly audience; an imposition by the authorities on its civil servants and citizens; to a morally-laden and civilising discourse by the railway management. In doing so, it coopts the history of an older youth movement called *Set Setal* which used cleaning as a critique against authorities (Poleykett 2021), and most



importantly here, crystallises the workers' discontent and own shifting positions towards this cleaning action.

For the cleaning day, the employees of the little suburban railway in Rufisque, Senegal were given a full-day schedule and tasks for the following week. They were first told to clean their depot in Rufisque. A week later, they would join other governmental institutions to remove rubbish from the centre of Dakar between the *place de l'indépendance* (independence square) and the central railway station. The latter had been a thorn in the railway workers' side since the suburban trains were neither allowed to depart from nor enter the main station in Dakar anymore. It was being refurbished for the new regional express train, which was going to replace their suburban one, and thereby also probably render them jobless.

Senegal was not the first country to establish such a cleaning routine, which historically has also carried strong connotations of political violence in colonial regimes and dictatorships.

Senegal was not the first country to establish such a cleaning routine, which historically has also carried strong connotations of political violence in colonial regimes and dictatorships.^[1] Internationally, clean-up and environmental campaigns have recently proliferated across the world, calling for volunteers to clean beaches, for example, whether in the Arctic or on the West African coast. While such initiatives testify to an increasing awareness of pollution and environmental degradation, sometimes instigated by environmental activists themselves (see [Modou Fall, the Plastic Man](#)), they have also become a way for heads of state to position themselves and their nation as environmentally, educationally and safety friendly. As a contemporary comparative case, the announced Senegalese cleaning routines resembled the President of Rwanda's day of community cleaning called Umuganda, and Nigeria's Environmental Sanitation Day (Manton 2013), both scheduled on the last Saturday of every month.



Yet, the cleaning movement had also a longer history in Senegal which was erased in the newly launched Cleaning Days: the well-established Set Setal narrative and popular ecology movement meaning ‘Clean and be clean’ in Wolof, had been initiated by young people as a response to the contested elections in Dakar in 1988 and in protest against political corruption and the insalubrious state of many places in Dakar (Poleykett 2021). The Set Setal members started cleaning their neighbourhoods and spraying political messages on the wall to ‘clean’, purify and improve sanitary conditions, but also political norms (Benga 2001; Fredericks 2018; Diouf 1992). This more popular and ‘subaltern’ history was however largely coopted in the context of Macky Sall’s social and economic programme of ‘emergence’ (*Plan Sénégal émergent*) that aims to increase annual per capita growth (Poleykett 2021).

Cleaning in the railway depot of Rufisque took on another layer, becoming a morally charged discourse about discipline and development directed towards the railway workers.

Cleaning in the railway depot of Rufisque took on another layer, becoming a morally charged discourse about discipline and development directed towards the railway workers. The manager of the suburban railway, a lawyer by trade, was quickly surrounded by cameras and employees when he arrived at the depot. Standing in the middle of the crowd of workers, the freshly painted wagons and accompanied by the employees from the hygiene service of the Ministry of Health and Social Action, he started his speech by welcoming everyone and introducing what he thought were the fundamental values of the Cleaning Days:

‘Look around us, especially at the Western countries: They have values. They get up early, they work hard and they clean up their surroundings. I think that whatever we want to do, it only makes sense if good working conditions, hygiene, and mutual respect are guaranteed... things have to change, it’s not acceptable that people during working hours are chatting and making tea. We have to work. You have to impose working hours on yourselves. We have



to be models of correctness... Once again, lets congratulate the president whose *Plan Emergent* is putting Senegal on the irreversible path of development.'

In his value-laden address, cleanliness became a marker of progress, civilisation and growth compared with an imagined 'western world' and that the *Plan Senegal Emergent* was striving towards. Clean spaces, but also clean workers, represented for the manager European values of modernity and honourable work, which contrasted with the image he painted of his personnel: he pictured the PTB staff and their workspace as unclean, uncivilised and unhygienic, thereby also socially and economically backward.

While not directly apparent after the speech, the workers gradually became more annoyed as the day passed. Initially meeting the initiative with enthusiasm, the workers had formed groups and allocated different tasks. Equipped only with some brooms, and a couple of masks for some, the workers of the PTB had started by picking up rubbish all over the depot's premises and cleaning the inside of the wagons. This included almost dismantling the inside of the wagons, taking out the seats and disassembling the ventilation system to remove the dust and dirt that had settled and built up over time. Others were marching along the tracks and picking up litter from underneath and next to the trains, until piles of rubbish accumulated throughout the depot and outside. Here, the discontent became louder, and the workers' initial eagerness was overshadowed by the speech that had been deemed disrespectful; it was further tainted by the tediousness of the activity and lack of cleaning gear. In the workers' eyes, this was emblematic of their general situation. Fatou, the only woman working in the depot and responsible for refuelling the trains, complained:

'It's like that always. They talk about cleaning days and then they come along without shovels, rakes or gloves, and we have to do all of this with our bare hands. And it doesn't make sense to clean these wagons if we don't use them.'



Old electrical litter was thrown on a pile with weeds that had been pulled out, and then burnt together. Fatou was shaking her head. She didn't come to the depot often now, a couple of times a week. The rest of the week she was at another station. But the trains did not need much fuel, in fact no fuel as they were not regularly - almost never - running.

Some groups of workers picking up the rubbish had fallen silent, visibly tired of the strenuous activities. Here, condemning the senseless cleaning of the trains led to a larger critique of the national cleaning discourse, their working situation but also the racialised discourse of the manager: 'Are we only here to clean up the rubbish? And then, they criticise us for not working? But what are we supposed to do if the train service is always interrupted and doesn't work?' Another one added: 'This dream of *émergence* is all well and fine, but we are not part of it.' How could they even be given a chance to do their work correctly and safely when the most basic tools and resources were missing? Fatou had asked. In their protestations, the difficult circumstances, and conflicting emotions highlighted their daily predicament: 'We are told we have to clean but we don't have the means to do it well. *It doesn't make sense*. It's always the same thing.'

This feeling of being tasked with useless cleaning chores that do not contribute to the actual improvement of the railway system, was accompanied by frustration and a sense of absurdity.

This feeling of being tasked with useless cleaning chores that do not contribute to the actual improvement of the railway system, was accompanied by frustration and a sense of absurdity. Here, the linking of individual responsibility, the moral image of a good citizen and a clean worker, stood in stark contrast to the lack of resources that the workers had to clean their workplace and the trains with, also hurting their dignity. The workers' shifting attitudes towards the initially enthusiastic engagement in cleaning that they had gradually become disillusioned with - along with the shifting meaning of cleaning itself - gestures to how 'cleaning' and the discussions around it can be mobilised from different vantage



points as critique. It sheds light on the longer genealogies of protest against politics in Senegal, but also expresses here locally the workers' sense of exclusion and of being treated as less worthy.

Notes

[1] Across colonial and postcolonial countries, sanitation and cleaning practices were used in the context of colonial zoning programmes, fast urban expansion in postcolonial times, and amidst the drastic cut of public services from the 1980s onwards, see for example Bigon (2016); Manton (2013). For an example on how discourses on cleanliness are used in dictatorships and specifically in the context of trains, see for example the case of Chile under Pinochet: Tomic, Trumper, and Dattwyler, 'Manufacturing Modernity: Cleaning, Dirt, and Neoliberalism in Chile', 518-22.

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The violent face of bureaucracy

written by Stefano Pontiggia
September, 2022



Whenever I meet Merule, a 42-year-old Nigerian citizen living undocumented in Milan, Italy, I am struck by the number of people he knows. Merule's social network unfolds throughout San Siro, a square-shaped, public housing project in Milan's northwestern area. Walking through San Siro's long two-way boulevards or taking one of its side streets unravelling from the central square, Merule always greets someone. For each of them, he has a story to tell: a man who sold him his bike, another who sustained him financially in the past, a third who provided a short-term, informal job. Merule is always grateful for the help he receives; he says more than once that the people he meets are 'gifts from God'. The district is an island of marginalisation in a rich and vibrant urban context (Grassi 2022), serving as a hub for migrants who enter Italy without a visa. The area is marked by widespread unemployment and great inequality (Codici Ricerche 2020). Nevertheless, San Siro is also a place where NGOs, associations, civic committees, and volunteers give birth to forms of sociability that maintain local welfare services for the poor and the most marginalised.



San Siro is a 'super-diverse' district, hosting migrants from 85 countries. People have different legal statuses; many have a work-related residence permit, while others, like Merule, remain undocumented. Six apartments host people who have been granted political asylum.

It is the feeling of being trapped in a bureaucratic chaos that produces absurdity.

It was in this neighbourhood, in 2019, that I first met Merule – a fictional name he chose – as he swam into the depths of Italy's state bureaucracy, seeking legal status. Since then, Merule and I have realised that the Italian migration system is so laden with opacity, requirements, and internal contradictions that it deserves to be labelled an absurd institution. It is the feeling of being trapped in a bureaucratic chaos that produces absurdity. To make any headway in a system that combines complexity with rigidity, most people resort to informal means. Without such informality, people risk being stuck in limbo for years without any chance of obtaining or regaining legal status, especially once lost. Paperwork, whether linked to work or housing, enhances the sense of absurdity, given the number of documents produced and the blatant inconsistency of their content. The inconsistencies and 'functional dysfunctionality' of border regimes are widely recognised in anthropology (see, for instance, DeGenova 2002; Fassin 2011); here, my focus is on the link between the Italian immigration system and Merule's subjective experience.

Merule's story unfolds between Milan and Lagos, the Nigerian city he comes from. However, the 'multi-scalar space' he used to inhabit (Glick Schiller 2015) has gradually diminished to the point that Merule now barely moves out of San Siro. In this sense, his condition is similar to many low-income working families living there. I am aware that many migrants try to resist structural limitations by continuing to cross borders illegally. Nevertheless, Merule's case is different. He wished to regularise his position in Italy and, in this attempt to conform, he experienced the absurdity of being forced into illegality.



The reduction of Merule's mobility is directly connected to his legal status. He entered Italy with an invitation letter from an aunt living in a small town southeast of Milan, who hosted him and made him work at a newsstand she ran with her husband. Merule recounts the moment he received the invitation letter:

When I got this letter in 2009, they said they needed me in Italy... My mom talked to me; we had nothing. We had no money to buy anything. So, my mom went to some associations that could lend her money. We borrowed money, started this process, bought the ticket ... all the procedures to come to Italy.

Until 2011, Merule moved between Italy and Nigeria thanks to his working visa, but in 2012, things shifted drastically. After having a disagreement with his aunt's husband, he moved to the southern side of San Siro to another relative's apartment. He planned to start a new life there, but his situation with the Italian migration system changed with the expiration of his work visa. At the end of July 2012, he filed a request to renew his work visa. In March 2013, a communication from the Milan Immigration Office rejected his application, stating that, after consideration, he "[had] never received income from lawful sources, so, in fact, [he] had already largely benefited from the possibility of residing in the national territory for reasons of pending employment."

Merule asked an attorney based in Milan for help understanding the reason behind the rejection. In July of the same year, the attorney sent a communication to the Immigration Office stating that Merule had been living in a difficult situation due to the difficulties of securing a job. The letter asked the Immigration Office to grant him more time to seek stable employment. In September 2013, they received a negative response. The Immigration Office stated that, upon further inspection, Merule had failed to pay income tax and file his tax returns. These acts constituted a possible felony. Merule was then ordered to "report within 15 working days of the notification of this order to the Border Police of Malpensa [airport] to leave the Italian territory." Merule fell into despair and anguish.



During one of our meetings, I tried to understand why Merule was denied a new residence permit. At the time, I thought he had been legally hired to work at the newsstand, but his documents told a different story. Merule's aunt had registered Merule as a domestic helper even though she had given him work at her newsstand. Unbeknownst to Merule, she had never paid income tax. Moreover, I was shocked when I read the contract's expiration date: February 31, 2010! I was amazed by this blatant inconsistency, as the contract had been submitted to the Social Provision Institute's web portal and, as such, had been recognised as valid for an extra two years.

A common migration story

Ethnographic literature has long demonstrated how migrants navigate (Tuckett 2016) national immigration regimes to maximise their chances of obtaining legal status through informal and sometimes illegal practices (Calavita 2005; Düvell 2008; Menjivar 2006; Tuckett 2018). People resort to informal brokers and licit organisations to move through the inconsistencies of the migration apparatus (Feldman 2011). Merule's aunt had the necessary know-how to create a fictional story through paperwork.

When his renewal application was rejected, Merule's social and physical mobility collapsed. He started residing in San Siro after realising he could no longer rely on his aunt and uncle. There, he started looking for informal jobs and sending letters to *Questura* and *Prefettura* (the local Police and Home Department headquarters), leaving San Siro only to look for work or attorneys willing to help him out. In theory, the police could deport him at any time. Gradually, Merule became one of those undocumented migrants that the internal border control system manages through regular arrests and identity checks (Fabini 2017). Merule did not really belong to the host society, nor was he entirely excluded. He expressed the feeling of being trapped in this limbo with words I found poetic: "Unfortunately, I was left like this. Stuck," he told me. "I am like someone in



between heaven and earth!” Between 2012 and 2019, he received two expulsion decrees for living in Italy without legal status; years later, after an ID control, he was arrested and taken to the local police station, where he spent the night but was later released. In addition, his quest for a secure shelter put him in precarious and potentially dangerous situations.

I met someone there who took me to a house, like a squatter house. I met someone who – it was some guys who were occupying a house. They were Egyptians. It was risky to stay there because I know it’s a squatter house, but at least it was a place to camp, to be able to do my thing. I went in, saw that it was full of garbage cans, and did everything: washed, cleaned, and everything. They were messing around. They wouldn’t let me sleep. They were going back and forth. They were also doing drugs, drinking at night, dealing... I thought I couldn’t stay in that situation.

Squatting is a well-known phenomenon in San Siro and, more broadly, across Milan. Informal networks of migrants and Italians break into the many empty apartments of the public housing blocks and collect money to let people stay there. Others start squatting to solve their troubles, because the Regional Public Housing Stock Agency (ALER) have registered them as ‘irregular,’ after breaking the administrative rules (Cancellieri 2018). I had heard rumours about people squatting in cellars and attics. That was the temporary solution Merule had found.

Someone told me, “If you want a place, go in this cellar...” I would rather stay below, in the cellar. I couldn’t get on with them. I went into the courtyard, in courtyard number 3. There’s a cellar at each entrance of the gate. I was directed there, “There is such and such a place; if you look there, you’ll find a cellar that is a little warm so that even when it is cold, you feel it less.” And I went in there, into that cellar. I saw it was pretty clean, so I cleaned it up nicely and stayed there.

After weeks of squatting in the cellar and secretly showering in the temporary



bathroom of a construction site, Merule was found by a middle-aged Italian man who hosted him in his apartment in exchange for some cleaning and care work. When the man died, Merule stayed in the condo and resisted eviction from the public housing agency representatives. When I first met him in 2019, he was still looking for a legal pathway to obtain a residence permit; he would finally do so by enrolling in a regularisation process that opened in the Spring of 2020 (Pontiggia, forthcoming).

Trapped by the law

Merule's story indicates how Italian migration management works in practice. The first dimension that creates absurdity is how the law often traps migrants in informal or illegal situations during their stay in the country. In this sense, the material dimension of bureaucracy (Gupta 2012; Hull 2012; Riles 2006) can produce fear, anxiety, and despair in those trying to make a living in Italy. Merule recounts his experience with the Italian immigration regime with words that describe the illegibility he found in the regime's enforcement:

We listened to different lawyers, I went to the Police at that time. Rather than do the right thing for me, those guys wrote me a deportation decree. But these are crazy, these people. Around, the Police checked me, and I got the deportation decree almost three times. What have I done? I'm not a criminal, I didn't come in a criminal way here. I came as one who has to enter Europe, I paid, what do you want, that I still pay? I had to pay with my soul, I had to die. Hell no!

The result is an absurdity that resonates at the level of national politics: rules established to promote legal immigration to Italy result in social suffering, informality, and exclusion from the host society.

The second dimension is related to social and physical mobility. Once again,



Merule's fate serves as an illustration. The state of undocumentedness and the rigidity of norms that neither tolerate mistakes nor the lack of information hinder people from obtaining legal employment, housing, and a socially recognised identity. They also limit the mobility of undocumented migrants. Merule increasingly concealed himself from local and national authorities, begged for money, and relied on formal and informal networks to survive for more than ten years. The result is an absurdity that resonates at the level of national politics: rules established to promote legal immigration to Italy result in social suffering, informality, and exclusion from the host society.

Merule is still waiting for a positive resolution as of the time of writing. Meanwhile, he resorts to my aid and that of some local associations for food and clothes. He fears that he will someday be evicted from the apartment where he continues to squat.

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Anthropology and absurdity: Introduction

written by Ståle Wig
September, 2022



Anthropology is often seen as the discipline that makes “the strange familiar and the familiar strange”. Here, however, we are staying with the strange in the form of people’s experiences and articulations of absurdity. This focus allows us to account for what it is like to live in a runaway world (Leach 1968), where the ethics and rules of the game seem absent or unintelligible (Durkheim 1951), and normative expectations of social life have been disappointed. In many of these instances, calling something absurd is a way to express the sense that things are out of kilter, generating bemusement while often blending despair and comedy.



The experience of absurdity can take the form of momentary flashes of the perspective afforded by self-reflection (Vohnsen 2017), or a prolonged sense of an endemic condition. But anthropologists may also reflect on their own practice, asking if sometimes the will to empathise and explain might itself be absurd.

In many of these instances, calling something absurd is a way to express the sense that things are out of kilter, generating bemusement while often blending despair and comedy.

Ethnographic attention to the various forms of absurdity reveals relations and routines that people long for in their work and daily lives. By describing an experience as “absurd,” people often implicitly refer to a standard of seriousness and normality that their situation fails to meet (Nagel 1971, 718). Ridiculing irrational, disproportionate and paradoxical authority, for instance, can conjure up ideals of how governments or administrations *should* behave, as well as highlighting the senseless nature of political power, or moral considerations of what is right or wrong (Göpfert 2022; Klumbyté 2014). Indeed, labeling something as absurd often indicates disillusionment and a sense of injustice.

For instance, [Stefano Pontiggia](#) describes a migrant’s despair on being confronted with the Sisyphean bureaucratic circularity underpinning Italy’s migration regime. The migrant’s enduring wait is repetitive and tiring, continually returning him to the same point without ever resolving his status. The situation is absurd because his position is at once legal and illegal, and he can only meet bureaucratic demands by creating fake documents or seeking the help of acquaintances who masquerade as employers.

[Charline Kopf](#) shows how Senegalese railway workers use notions of “absurdity” to critique patronizingly inappropriate government propaganda on the moral and social discipline of cleaning public infrastructure. Such injunctions are woefully out of step with widespread unemployment that demands political attention. Homing in on the nation-wide Cleaning Day in a railway depot, she shows how the workers considered such tidying assignments useless and just a way to keep them



occupied as their jobs were phased out.

A similar disjuncture appears in the case examined by [Sarah Howard](#), in which a British NGO gave public health advice to Ethiopian mothers, which was irrelevant to local conditions and needs. By examining this absurdity through an ethnographic lens, as well as reflecting on her own experiences at “home”, Howard exposes the power and value hierarchies associated with women’s bodies and their breast-feeding practices.

As [Deborah Jones](#) vividly describes, war generates the most immediately violent dislocation of everyday sensemaking, as seen among Ukrainian refugees trying to re-settle in Germany. Examining daily life among her Ukrainian interlocutors amid the Donbas war (2014-2022), and during the ongoing Russian invasion, Jones shows how absurd circumstances arose from the disjuncture between what was and was not provided by state aid: buckwheat without cooking pots or ovens.

Experiencing absurdity can be frustrating and frightening. However, absurdity can often mesh fear and fun, terror and comedy—sometimes through subversive humor (see also Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Molé 2013, Boyer 2013). Laughing together at absurd jokes can also allow marginalized groups to regain a sense of agency and control when they are confronted with unintelligible politics. [Ståle Wig](#) describes a genre of ridiculous political statements from authoritarian leaders in Cuba, Russia, and the United States, which trigger a flurry of memes and jokes, letting marginalized groups feel they have the last word in the face of senseless displays of power.

Yet, absurdity can easily shift from ambiguous comedy to outright tragedy. Examining absurdity via performative acts of denial from political leaders in Egypt, Karin Ahlberg argues that absurdity is common in authoritarian regime settings where truth and transparency are disconnected from political life. While Ahlberg shows how denial can be a rather ordinary act, she argues that denials become absurd when they are scaled up and used by authorities. In Egypt, denials of publicly known actions contribute to an atmosphere of uncertainty, deepening



people's sense of living in a polity that defies explanation.

The ordinariness of absurdity also comes to the fore in Mirko Pasquini's piece. Here it is part of his interlocutors' everyday jobs. Pasquini shows how, even in an emergency ward's heightened atmosphere, staff are attuned to what he calls the sound of absurdity: listening for signals that a patient might fly into a rage, for no apparent reason, unless countered by pragmatic adaptations of conventional medical care.

As Albert Camus wrote: "At any street corner, the feeling of absurdity can strike any person in the face" (2013 [1942], 13). Anthropologists are not exempt. Ethnographic fieldwork often creates absurd experiences for researchers. Through his ethnography of urban Malaysia, Asmus Rungby argues that anthropologists must sometimes resist the urge to explain away inexplicable instances they come across, instead accepting that they may just not make sense.

Meanwhile, drawing on his fieldwork in the Indian mountain plateau of Ladakh, where spirit encounters are commonplace, Callum Pearce describes his attempts to search for ghosts in the night, demonstrating how the impulse to experience what others sense or describe may lead to behaviours that feel absurd to the ethnographer. Both texts grapple with a classic question within the discipline: how much can we truly understand about another person's thoughts and feelings?

Focusing on the absurd when ordinary life no longer makes sense helps us understand precisely what those expectations of meaningful work and lives are.

Together, these essays reflect upon how people carry on with their lives and work amidst experiences that challenge familiar logics and moral orders, whether migrants, hospital staff, or citizens confronted with ridiculous or irrelevant politics. Focusing on the absurd when ordinary life no longer makes sense helps us understand precisely what those expectations of meaningful work and lives are. At the same time, to study absurdity raises questions about the limits of ethnographic empathy and explanation.



Absurdity can produce terror and confusion as well as comedy and clarity in the face of senseless politics. Whether people deal with the absurd through humor, critique or existential despair, these are deeply human responses to the shared predicament of living in a world that does not always make sense.

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Featured image: [Conflict \[1935\] by Walter Quirt](#), courtesy of the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

Trolley homes and hopes for the future

written by Nidhin Donald
September, 2022

This year, once again, the national capital of India is witnessing a farmer's protest, [amidst state repression, media blackout and disinformation](#). We are witnessing similar protests by farmers across the globe. As [Pritam Singh notes](#), all of them are fighting against flawed visions of economic growth and urban apathy towards agricultural policies.

This illustration of trolley homes reminds us why farmers and agricultural workers need to be at the heart of sustainable agricultural futures.

In April 2021, I made this monochrome illustration with a black liner pen for the *Trolley Times*, the mouthpiece of the farmer's protest. It shows two young Indian farmers attending online classes from their trolley homes during the [year-long farmer's protest of 2020-21](#) in the outskirts of New Delhi. During the protest, farmers had ingeniously converted their tractor trolleys into makeshift homes to survive the extreme weather conditions of North India and continue their fight against the anti-farmer, pro-capitalist policies of the Indian state. These trolley homes became sites of care, resistance and critical consciousness.



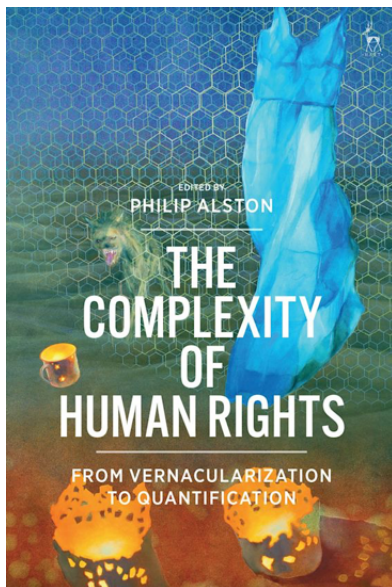
The Complexity of Human Rights: A Discussion of Sally Engle Merry's Work

written by Allegra
September, 2022



**Webinar
Series**
in honour of
**Sally
Engle
Merry**
(1944-2020)





Human rights are avowedly universal but must be translated by local activists to make sense in specific contexts, a process Sally Engle Merry called vernacularization. Human rights progress is conventionally measured through global quantitative indicators which give the illusion of control and comparability, but radically oversimplify social and political processes. How can we avoid “the seductions of quantification” and understand how human rights are materialized, appropriated, and implemented in everyday social justice activism? In her decades-long research on human rights, Sally Engle Merry brought

to light the complex social dynamics in which human rights are embedded and demonstrated how their presentation as single, universal, and immutable elides their flexibility and many strengths.

To celebrate a new book in her honour, [*The Complexity of Human Rights: From Vernacularization to Quantification*](#), leading human rights scholars come together to discuss how the concepts Merry pioneered help us to understand current human rights challenges and crises.

Where: Online with Allegra Lab

Who: Philip Alston, Julie Billaud, Jane Cowan, Meg Davis, Mark Goodale, César Rodríguez-Garavito, Jack Snyder, Richard Wilson with Sridhar Venkatapuram as discussant.

When: 16 May, 4 PM (CEST), 3 PM (UK), 11 AM (EDT)

Registration

link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZwoc-CqpjMqH9QTdKLQnjb25Ax6w3mFCUZJ>