Indigenous Water Ontologies, Plurilegal Encounters and Interlegal Translation

Lieselotte Viaene
April, 2021

Lieselotte Viaene (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid) will talk about “Indigenous water ontologies, plurilegal encounters and interlegal translation: some reflections from the field”. Andrea Ballestero (Rice University) will be the discussant.

When: 23 April 2021 / 2.00-3.30 pm CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...

ID: 93210372616
Password: 4JzWZ6

Abstract

Aiming to strengthen the universality of human rights as a concrete good in peoples' lives – as opposed to merely a theoretical construct – a global consensus has emerged among legal scholars that: 1) the accommodation of cultural diversity and a plurality of legal orders should not been seen as a threat to the human rights paradigm, but rather as an enriching input for it; and 2) human rights should be decolonised by integrating locally-grounded views rooted in other forms of knowledge belonging to those groups systematically excluded and silenced by colonialism and capitalism. However, these theoretical breakthroughs have not been matched by equal success in human rights practice.

Moreover, water conflicts across the globe in indigenous territories are foregrounding the internal limits of the hegemonic universal human rights paradigm such as its colonial origins and anthropocentric dogma. But, these water controversies also bring to the fore competing views about how the world is made creating legal and anthropological discomfort. Grounded in reflections derived from collaborative and long-term ethnographic research among indigenous peoples in Latin America confronted with systematic human rights violations as a result of colonisation, internal armed conflicts and extractive projects, I will explore competing political and legal water realities that interrogate dominant understandings of the modern world. I will focus on the contributions, constraints, challenges of interlegal translation and the role of

indigenous knowledge brokers at the local, domestic and international level in interpreting and negotiating different ways of knowing water, nature and the human.

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Immerse Yourselves!

Verena Niepel
April, 2021

Imagine Gustav Klimt's tender motifs, with their gleaming, golden elements, projected onto huge concrete walls. This fascinating vision has become an immersive exhibition at the new 'Les Bassin de Lumières,' a digital art centre by CULTURESPACES, housed in a former submarine base in Bordeaux, France. Soon after its opening in June 2020, images of the digital show with video-projections of works by great artists, such as Gustav Klimt or Paul Klee, spread like wildfire around the world, prompting curiosity in contemporary methods of exhibiting

classic artworks. Methods like those employed in Bordeaux go beyond traditional formats, such as salon-style displays, to absorb the viewer into the artwork through the use of technological tools. But what opportunities can be offered by immersive exhibitions like 'Les Bassin de Lumières'?

In this article, we examine how the relation with the viewer has changed compared to the experience in a classical museum, then we investigate how the artwork fits into this new understanding. By looking at the relevance of immersive experiences, we underline its potential as a place of education, particularly for young people, for whom technology may play a key role in their ability to learn about and make sense of art. As we will show, the pedagogical value of immersive exhibitions is of great importance for museums using traditional methods to display visual arts or artefacts, even though there are practical challenges in bringing them to fruition.

> *Interactive exhibitions challenge the linear relation between spectator and art by engaging the viewer.*

For several centuries, industry professionals and scholars have considered museums and art spaces as places of education and critical engagement. The typical exhibition, with static displays and often analysed as a discursive formation in theory, presents objects in a way that Bal describes as implying 'Look! […] That's how it is,' exuding a sense of epistemic authority. Interactive exhibitions, on the other hand, challenge the linear relation between spectator and art by engaging the viewer, whereas recent immersive exhibitions even go one step further. Such tech-based exhibitions trigger a sensual *experience* of art, encouraging new ways of contemplating our perception of art – an active experience in and of itself – through their use of sound and movement. This concept not only calls the hierarchical structure of discursive exhibitions into question but also shows how important it is to think about the creation of meaning and learning through digital art.

Given that many people have learned to appreciate art through traditional

exhibitions, one could ask ‘Why pay to see a digital copy of artwork X, Y, or Z when visitors know it is not the real thing?’ Or perhaps even more importantly, ‘Is it right to market an exhibition that displays a digital copy of artwork X, Y, or Z with the same significance as an exhibition of the real works themselves?’ Such questions are misguided, however. A digital copy of an artwork will never be the artwork itself, and the curators of immersive exhibitions know as much. Comparing the two is a fruitless endeavour because the video projections are not intended to be stand-ins for the originals. Simone Mazzarelli, CEO of the Italian marketing agency Ninetynine, expressed this difference in his talk at the 2017 conference ‘Museum Digital Transformation,’ saying, “You’re not [visiting] to look at Klimt’s paintings. It is new content […] you are surrounded by the world of Klimt, by his content, by the power of this atmosphere […] you are only *inside* an atmosphere that’s based *on* the artist” (Mazzarelli 2017).

> *The main value … is ‘its ability to provide a better explanation of the value and significance of art and to explain ways in which people actually think and talk about it.’*

Mazarrelli’s comments strike at the heart of what visitors to immersive exhibitions are looking for. Black examined the needs of the future’s largest demographic, today’s under-35s, noting that they ‘appear to be more demanding, seek more active experiences, have higher expectations from what is on offer and are less willing to accept poor quality […] Research suggests many do not like traditional museums. They do not want to ‘”learn” through traditional static displays but rather respond increasingly to a more sensual/emotional experience’. This echoes what Graham described as ‘aesthetic cognitivism,’ the main value of which, he maintains, is ‘its ability to provide a better explanation of the value and significance of art and to explain ways in which people actually think and talk about it.’ (Graham, 1995) In this regard, digital exhibitions fit the bill to a tee, with atmospheres that have the potential to mentally engage visitors in their experiences and perception of the meaning of art. This is done by way of matching visitors’ capacity of attention with their spectacular moving images,

immersive installations, and sounds. We call this the spectacle, which Apor considers to be of use of in exhibitions as a bid to “maintain interest and attract the young”.

> *This explains why people are triggered to share content of immersive exhibitions on their social media channels: it is a concrete form of producing narration and a form of memory work.*

This interest is increased by the shareability of immersive exhibitions, like the one at Les Bassin de Lumières, which has its own social media accounts and encourages visitors to share their pictures of the virtual artworks. Indeed, much of the immersive exhibition experience is as much about taking pictures for social media as they are about enjoying the artworks, ultimately increasing the total engagement with exhibited content. This focus on getting the perfect picture to share, however, does not necessarily detract from the visitor’s ability to engage with or learn from the exhibition. Indeed, Sitzia explains this trend by referring to our thinking ‘through narratives’ and the natural process to ‘remember in narratives’. It is through this, she contends, that the viewer seeks to create meaning in the museum.

This explains why people are triggered to share content of immersive exhibitions on their social media channels: it is a concrete form of producing narration and a form of memory work. Young people, in particular, are ‘more comfortable with new media than with traditional communication means,’ according to Carrozzino and Bergamasco, and some of the leading producers of immersive exhibitions have been careful to recognize this.

The Florence-based production company Crossmedia has demonstrated mastery of the need to make immersive exhibitions shareable, implementing opportunities

for sharing into their exhibition designs. Tommaso Mattei, director of communication and marketing, described the inclusion of the Mirror Room in Crossmedia's exhibitions – or rather, *experiences*, as they like the call them – in a bid to get visitors to take out their smartphones: 'We introduced the famous Mirror Room for the beauty of its content, but also with an eye towards social media […] A room made entirely of mirrors where images of the artworks are projected onto the walls, floor, ceiling and your body. You go in there and you're going to take a selfie'. Such a design choice can ultimately increase the overall engagement with these contemporary visual representations of classical works and artefacts, inviting visitors to create meanings as they 'think through narratives,' as Sitzia says.

Not all museum staff are as open to the idea of immersive exhibitions as Crossmedia and Les Bassin de Lumières, however, not least because of the high costs associated with them. As they grapple with the need to bring in more money due to decreases in funding, professionals also need to evaluate if costly technology, which might need rigorous maintenance and trained staff, will offer enough benefits in terms of higher visitor numbers – and by extension, greater revenue – and more positive visitor experiences.

> *By looking at the digital copy of an artwork, the viewer can reject 'naive realism' of art…*

Such positive experiences have historically been measured in terms of learning, and proponents of immersive exhibitions see art spaces as 'informal places of education' which can map out the opportunities that advanced technological tools provide while creating a satisfactory, entertaining experience for the recipient. As we have moved into the era of new museology, many scholars have come to view immersive exhibitions as places of intuitive learning, while conventional or discursively-designed exhibitions are for reflective learning, which, according to Sitzia, allows a '[…] generalization of the experience, leading to the abstract conceptualization phase'. Considering that immersive exhibitions are in and of

themselves a technical abstraction of the world, is it not possible that recipients can engage with digital art on a meta-level level as well? Antonetti and Cantoia suggest that by looking at the digital copy of an artwork, the viewer can reject 'naive realism' of art since virtual reality can stimulate abstraction and imagination (ibid.: 222). The implication, as Antonetti and Cantoia emphasize, thus becomes that 'we give a sense to our experience by referring to what we know and to what we can interact with' in a sensorial way, as it is the case with digital displays of classical art. This level of free-choice and multi-form learning, key features of immersive exhibitions, are important aspects in museology.

The popularity of immersive exhibitions might have traditionalists wondering if this is really what we have come to, seeking satisfaction by sharing a picture in the hopes that it will rack up likes. This thinking might be justified in some measure, but recent research has shown the potential of digital art forms. Far from being gimmicky, immersive exhibitions can actually be educational and allow for critical engagement. These kinds of shows can also introduce the arts to entire segments of visitors who would otherwise show little interest in the museum. Moreover, for the demanding audience that Black identified, exhibitions that are immersive in part or in their entirety can be the very thing that appeals to visitors looking for sensual or emotional experiences. For this reason alone, skeptical museum professionals may very well find themselves making space for immersive elements in their displays in near future.

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Animal Displacement from Syria: A Story Yet to be Written

Estella Carpi
April, 2021

During the Syrian war, which has now raged for a decade, the attention of scholars, media commentators and activists has primarily focused on human displacement. More than 60% of the world's refugee population – over 30% of which are victims of internal displacement – reside in the Middle East, mainly due to large-scale armed conflicts. The Syrian war, which began following a popular uprising in spring 2011, has led to half a million deaths (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), nearly seven million displaced people – 70% of whom still live in the Middle East – and 14 million in need of assistance.

Due to the tragically large scale of human loss, the destiny of fauna during the war in Syria has been under-explored, and any emphasis on it has often been frowned upon in informal conversations I had throughout the years with international researchers and opinion-makers working on this geographic area.

With this post, I encourage readers to reason beyond inter-species hierarchies, which instil unproductive ways of thinking, such as that a species per se is more or less important than another. The haste to set up such existential hierarchies between animals and human beings derives from a human-focused understanding of animals that share our natural habitat as well as our built environment. In this sense, animal care becomes either 'good' or 'bad' in response to our personal habits, our everyday culture and, importantly, our social and economic capacity of care. Indeed, in Western societies, the care for animals – especially pets – has widely been associated with the lifestyle of global middle and upper classes, who are able and keen to feed, care and cater for animals. So to speak, the "bourgeoisization" of animal care – where the latter is frequently viewed as the care provided by wealthy people equipped with time and resources that enable them to think *beyond* human survival – and the critical reactions to it have ended up influencing our external gaze on human conflict and migration and have dangerously legitimated the exclusivity of human care. To look at the entirety of this multi-species ecosystem of war and forced migration reveals a complexity that goes unheeded as a result of an anthropocentric gaze.

> *I encourage readers to reason beyond inter-species hierarchies, which instil unproductive ways of thinking.*

Animals affected by war have mainly been discussed in terms of human survival and sustainability, but with pointed exceptions. For example, in 2012, Reuters news agency dedicated a photo gallery to animals, such as turtles and cats, that were trying to survive bombings, seeking food in almost depopulated areas and, sometimes, receiving it from armed groups who lived, occupied or briefly stopped in these neighbourhoods destroyed by war. To expand on such snippet views, I focus on the animals' fate during the Syrian conflict and the discursive and logistic use of animal-fare in war narratives.

The omission of animals' fate in today's journalism and academic scholarship on armed conflict has led to ignoring a fundamental element in the lives of refugees

who had to leave Syria: the incurable existential harm caused by the need to abandon their pets or, for those who had a rural lifestyle, their livestock, as it has been noted in forced migration history. In many cases that I have witnessed throughout years of research on Syrian displacement in the Levantine region, the abandonment of their animals – even a cow kept for milk or poultry kept for eggs – has generated pain and emotional disorientation in the lives of the displaced. Such abandonments are experienced as an inevitable sacrifice when leaving the war-torn country and building a life elsewhere. Indeed, most of the Syrian refugees I have met in northern Lebanon's villages – and who often work in Lebanese farms – have a rural background. They often remember the cattle they owned and how they looked after them when they lived in Syria. Many of them say they regularly ask their neighbours about the fate of these abandoned animals; most of those who were not resold died of dehydration, starvation and disease.

> *The abandonment of their animals has generated pain and emotional disorientation in the lives of the displaced.*

Despite this, animal displacement has been approached from the angle of the survival and proliferation of humans and the importance of exhuming Syrian agricultural production, which used to rely on the export of livestock before the conflict, making up 15% of the internal agricultural workforce. But what was the fate of these animals? Domestic, pack and farm animals alike were often killed as spoils of war, smuggled into the neighbouring countries, or were stolen, displaced, bombed or sold. As a consequence, the rate of private ownership of livestock within the country has dropped to 60% since the beginning of the conflict. Many breeders have had to abandon their profession and lifestyle and leave the country or migrate to other locations in Syria in search of new livelihoods.

Animals and animal violence have been widely discussed as a soft power strategy for shaping relations between political actors, and as a tool for gaining credibility

in local and international communities while morally discrediting political enemies. For example, there is some Arabic media material illustrating this trend, with videos showing the leaders of the *shabbiha* – thugs loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – throw a 'thoroughbred' Arab horse to their lions for food, as written in the Tweet of a Syrian political opponent included in an *al-Quds* article. Many of these videos, accessible on YouTube, show the killing of livestock by armed groups or the theft of livestock in some Syrian regions. Some accusations are not expressly aimed at either government militias or opposition groups, but they are used as such for political propaganda. Beyond the authenticity of this type of media material, which is continually the subject of journalistic debate, the treatment of animals plays a fundamental role in shaping the political rhetoric of each of the parties in conflict. The same happens with the recent government decree, No. 221, through which Bashar al-Assad assigns the Ministry of Education to the directorship of the 'Animal Protection in Syria' project.

> *Animals and animal violence have been widely discussed as a soft power strategy for shaping relations between political actors, and as a tool for gaining credibility while morally discrediting political enemies.*

As I wrote with Samira Usman in the past, the humanitarian mantra of 'human dignity', according to which every human life must be respected and protected, has indeed shed light on the importance of ensuring legal and social protection for refugees. However slow this has been to materialise on a global level, it has emphasized the importance for refugees to have their dignity recognized. In this vein, the rhetoric of human dignity, over-used by the international community as well as by activist groups, ended up ignoring the historical fact that war causes dramatic consequences to other species too. It is emblematic that only a small number of humanitarian projects (for example, *Animals Lebanon*) approach human beings as part of an entire ecosystem that is being destroyed by conflict, therefore actively subverting anthropocentrism.

Animals have also long been an object of debates among Muslim communities

worldwide. There is a longstanding belief that Muslim-majority societies have little respect for animals, which has led scholars to speak of Islamic environmentalism only in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, namely, in the so-called 'Global North'. In this regard, some *fatawa* (plural of *fatwa*) in the Sunni Muslim world have warned Syrian internally displaced people and refugees not to kill or eat cats, donkeys and dogs, even in situations of famine and hardship. Such *fatawa* generate extensive internet discussions focussing on the precepts of Islam and serve as a spiritual, legal and social consultation space for believers. Some religious authorities have denounced the act of killing and eating animals without a valid reason, while others have allowed the act of eating them provided that these animals have already been killed by bombing. Yet, this has at times become a practice in today's Syria, owing to the famines and hardships that the conflict itself has caused. At the same time, the care and provision of food to animals, such as cats, is indeed praised and appreciated by God. The topic remains an element of animated discussion within the Muslim world.

> *Only a small number of humanitarian projects approach human beings as part of an entire ecosystem that is being destroyed by conflict.*

The animals that have accompanied human beings during their flight and that have shared their conditions of forced migration are often unspoken; for instance, many refugees crossing the Syrian–Lebanese border brought along sheep, goats and cows, which had not been vaccinated due to their sudden departure to flee war, violence and the resulting poverty. Since 2011, some Syrian refugees in Wadi Khaled (north-east Lebanon) have told me that they crossed the al-Kabeer river connecting the two borders on the back of a donkey. They later had to abandon the animal because it fell ill and they did not have the means to maintain it, having paid a large amount of money to smugglers.

However, the ethical discourse underlying human displacement has sometimes been at odds with environmental and animal ethics. The areas where refugees are

resettling are taken from the local fauna; human settlement and methods of mass-producing food often lead to deforestation and erosion of the surrounding habitat. As in such paradoxical situations, only either of the two vulnerable conditions can be protected within the ecosystem, the defenders of environmental and animal rights find themselves in tension with those who advocate for human rights. This was the case of one million Rwandan Hutu refugees, who, in 1994, relocated to the Virunga National Park of neighbouring Congo, where ten gorillas were killed after the territory was plundered. Similar to what is happening in Syria, in the case of Virunga National Park, the refugees who went to live in the protected area, considered a heritage site of humanity, were accused of committing violence against the territory. It is instead the refugees' presence that becomes a favourable source of chaos, and some people take advantage of such chaos to carry out raids, using the refugees' presence for dissimulation.*

> *The defenders of environmental and animal rights find themselves in tension with those who advocate for human rights.*

In the context of the Syrian conflict, animal displacement is still a history yet to be written. I consider it important to highlight not only the anthropocentric and violent use of animals in conditions of forced migration but also the emotional bond that some refugees had with the animals they had to abandon, due to protracted political, economic, social and political instability. Remembering animals is often part of the stories told by refugees themselves; in some cases, animals explain refugee and internally displaced people's attachment to their home back in Syria. In order to fully understand the effects of conflict, violence and deprivation on mobile ecosystems, it is indeed inevitable to unravel these important inter-species relationships.

Crisis discourse traditionally omits the relational history with animals in forced migration narratives, while human beings – both refugees and political actors, as mentioned above – often remember, thrive on, or instrumentalize animals in the real world. As long as the biodiversity of crisis goes unheeded, our knowledge of

the ‘politics of living’ in displacement also remains maimed. In this sense, disrupting anthropocentric understandings of human-made crisis is not only an ethical issue, as animal-rights activists remind us through campaigns, but also an intellectual and epistemological one.

Remembering animals is often part of the stories told by refugees themselves.

Notes

This research has been conducted in the framework of the project “Analysing South-South Humanitarian Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey,” funded by the European Research Council under the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation agreement no. 715582.

*Others use the presence of refugees in these territories as an instrument for political negotiation. This is also the case for some Syrian archaeological sites; the ruins of Idlib, a cultural heritage site, have become temporary shelters for local displaced people, who could not find alternative places for protection and survival. The Antiquities Center of Idlib is in charge of this issue.

Featured image by Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0 (via Wikimedia Commons)

Kaleidoscope of truth

Sandhya Fuchs
April, 2021

Sandhya I. Fuchs (LSE and University of Bern) will talk about “Kaleidoscope of truth: Legal fictions, real cases and controversial proof in the production of the Prevention of Atrocities Act in Rajasthan”. Natasha Raheja (Cornell University) will be the discussant.

When: 9 April 2021 / 2.00-3.30 pm CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...

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Abstract

The experiences and narratives that define my reality as a Dalit usually amount to lies in the eyes of the law!" This declaration, articulated by one of my fieldwork interlocutors in Rajasthan (India), who hailed from a family that occupies the lowest rank of 'untouchable' (Dalit) within the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy, highlights a tension between the perceptions and practices of truth and restitution that characterize marginalized lifeworlds, and legal understandings of proof and justice. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Rajasthan, India, which explored the social life of the 1989 Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (PoA) – one of the most ambitious antidiscrimination laws worldwide – my presentation explores the relationship between legal proof and social testimonies of casteist violence. Against the backdrop of a 2018 judgement by the Indian Supreme Court, which declared that most complaints filed under the PoA amount to "false accusations," I argue that socially narratives, experiences and 'facts' of discrimination and casteist prejudice are often incompatible with legal 'truth' (Latour 2010; Fuchs 2020). This incompatibility results in the fact that the development of legal cases relies on abstracting precisely those socio-historical particulars (Cheng 2017) that define discriminatory action as such. Hence, I argue that the discourse of "false cases" that has come to the forefront around the Prevention of Atrocities Act in India, forces us to ask new questions about the different forms of truth that compete when law takes up the fight for equality.

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#AisforAnthropology: In Conversation with Nika Dubrovsky (II)

Nika Dubrovsky
April, 2021

This is the second part of the conversation our assistant editor Emilie Thévenoz had with Nika Dubrovsky (Read part 1 here). They chatted about some of the workshops Nika organised, and how children sometimes just need a framework through which to think the changes in their society, and the importance of fostering pushbacks. They also talked about how children, their parents and the institutions involved sometimes reacted to the A4Kids workshops.

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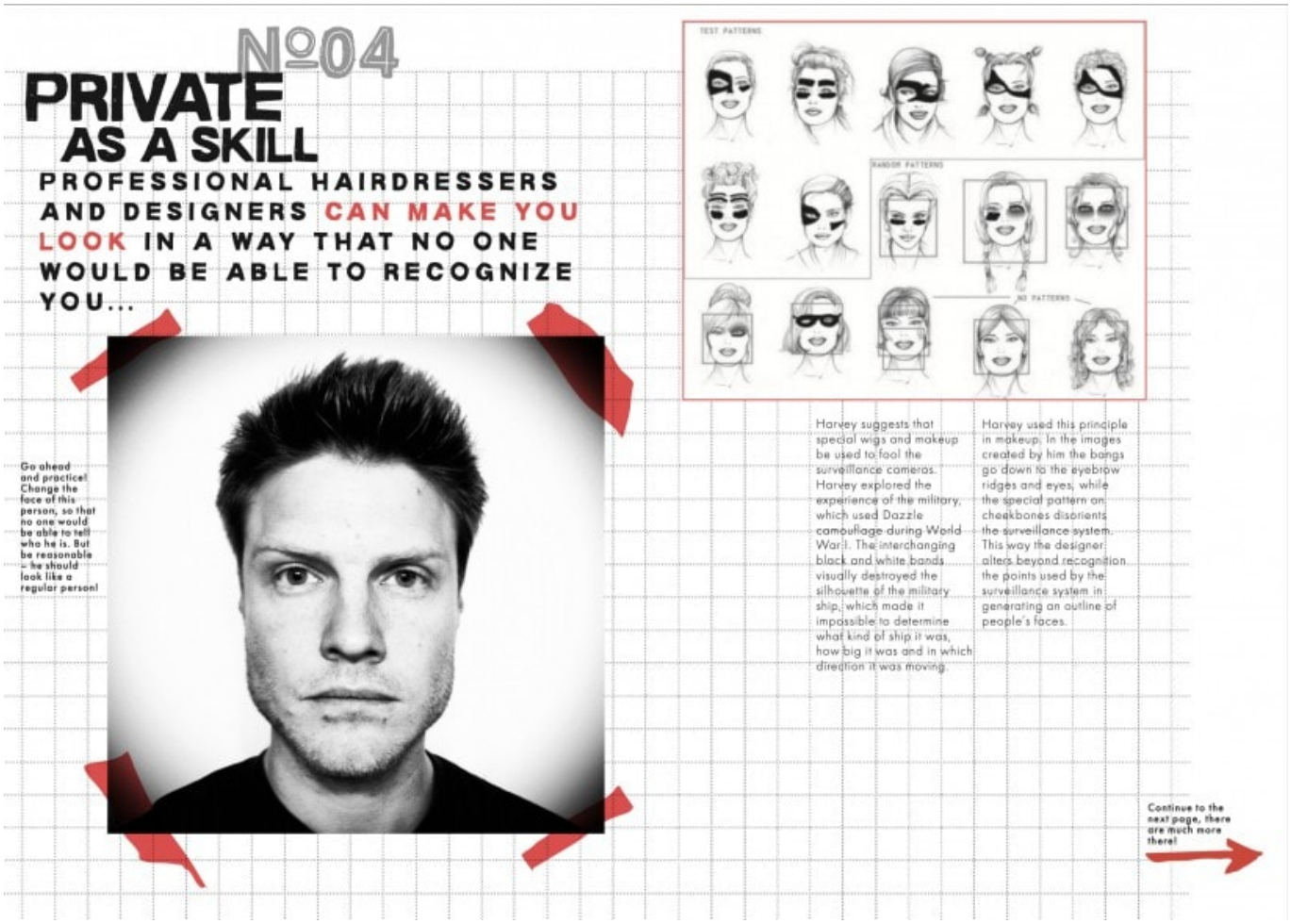
ET: *When I was looking through the material that you have online, I was really struck by the fact that it confronts children with the idea that there's perhaps no universal objective truth out there, that there's no right or wrong answer. I think this is a core lesson of anthropology. I come from a family with a lot of kids and teens, and I noticed that it's something really hard for kids to grasp: we're taught that there's good and bad guys good and bad decisions, good and bad ideas, and also that there's a scientific, objective, quantifiable truth out there. And so I was wondering, how did children respond to this sort of ambiguity or uncertainty?*

ND: I don't really like moral relativism. I do believe that there are right and wrong ideas, you know. I think it's more about *how* you form what is right and wrong. It's as you said – is there a quantifiable truth that just could be implanted? I think kids in general don't accept the quantifiable truth that others try to implant in their heads. They resist as much as they can, but they are also trained that "resistance is futile ". So every time I would do A4kids workshop, I would encounter a kind of mistrust that you have to overcome at the beginning. For example, I was doing a workshop in a London public School based on a book about "What is Privacy?".

> *I think kids in general don't accept the quantifiable truth that others try to implant in their heads.*

The London's institution organized the workshop called the Showroom. It was based on the book "What is Privacy?", a collection of notes about different ideas of what is public and what is private.

Since it was an art project initiated by the wonderful art collective from Zagreb WHW (for Whom What and How), there were many examples of the art from ex-Yugoslavia in the book.



So we came to the regular London public school full of working-class kids, mostly with a migrant background, to talk to them about privacy – although we knew that upon entering the school, the students have to give up all their privacy rights. These kids are practically adults, 16 and 17 year-olds. They have their own opinion and life experiences, but the school's infrastructure and how students are treated there reminded me in some ways of a prison ward or of a psychiatric facility. There were security cameras in every corner of the school that recorded students' every move and gesture and a strict hierarchy was enforced between students and teachers.

So, it took a long time for us to gain their trust. But once we did, we had some very interesting conversations.

There were pretty radical examples in the Privacy book. Contemporary artists

used their own nude bodies to show the vulnerability of the artist and the human being in general. It was interesting to see how the kids, who may never have seen contemporary art before, related to these artistic gestures.

There are funny examples in the book of how, just 100 years ago, American police officers went around to measure the length of women's skirts to punish those whose skirts were too short. This really amused the students, for whom the United States has always been an example of freedom in every possible way.

There's a story about Snowden in the book, who is being persecuted for telling the world about American surveillance on its own citizens. The children had a heated debate about whether citizens deserve Snowden's sacrifice and how to protect him.

It is said that in some cultures, people don't allow others to photograph them because they believe that someone is stealing their image along with the photograph. This page was a real success. It sparked a conversation about how today, you can take someone's picture and Photoshop it to really "steal" the identity, with life-altering consequences for that person.

> *So I think society's changing, and it would be strange if the children were not a part of that. Yeah, and they just need to find a framework through which they would be able to discuss it in public.*

***ET**: This brings me to my next question. Your books often deconstruct or question notions that many societies, many groups of people hold very dear, such as power, money, the nation. And, you know, some people would say that these notions are maybe even the glue of the society that we live in. And so maybe your books are very unsettling for some of the students, right, like, suddenly a lot of things that they've been taught to hold as important truths are being deconstructed. Do you notice this effect? And have you had any pushback from teachers, parents, or even the children themselves?*

ND: You know, my books are not mandatory. So if you don't like them, or you don't feel like they're for you, don't' read it.

But of course, it's presenting all points of view.

The books never say that one point of view is more valuable or more right than another. But yes, when we were doing an exhibition on the book 'What is family' in Moscow, Russian, in the country where the government had passed the law that punished if you distribute –specifically among children – any 'non-traditional family values', so, basically, a law directed against gay people. And of course, this book showed that humans arrange families in so many different ways: it could be one mother, one father and a couple of kids. It could be an extended family. It could be two mothers and kids, and it could be two fathers, so on so forth, you know, for example, Tibetan families often consisted of one mother who had several husbands. The husbands were brothers among themselves and raised all the children together. Yeah, so that exhibition was closed.

> *A4kids is an emancipatory and political project, so of course, it questions authority by challenging the conventional wisdom, which is often just an outdated belief system.*

A lot of preconditioning is implanted by society – in Russia, it's called *skrepa* (a brace), an old word that's now used for propaganda of what it called "traditional values." So in this sense, we have traditional *skrepa* which refers to the things that are holding us together, something that's holding the community and country together. The Russian government is saying that what is holding us together, of course, is our Russian Orthodox religion, although there are many other religions, too; and it's our family traditions, and so on so forth. And it's the same in the US. Trump was a very good example of that type of values, like 'the American values'. This is everywhere, but so is a counterculture. And anthropology itself, it's in between.

But I think childhood is the right time; there's much more resistance from adults,

not the kids, because childhood is a time when we are still open.

A4kids is an emancipatory and political project, so of course, it questions authority by challenging the conventional wisdom, which is often just an outdated belief system. In this process, discord is really useful. After all, this is how any culture develops and lives, redefining itself through such terms as “us” and “them” and moving these borders.

***ET**: And the kids, they don’t push back against all the work that you’re doing?*

ND: They can push back because there is space for them to push back. These are workbooks you know, and if it’s a workshop, it’s even easier to push back. The books pose questions. We had a workshop about the wealth book with homeless kids in Berlin. A boy was there who was originally from Russia, from Samara. And he was telling us how rich he and his family was there, and through his description, he was saying ‘everything is wrong in this book’ and ‘the richest place is Samarra’, with his wooden house and a big garden full of apples with his grandmother, who always invited him to eat and… and so on. He wrote so much about this, a truly poetic text. And I, you know, I, I cannot disagree with him. This is truly a description of happiness and richness…

Together with the teens from a homeless shelter, we asked questions and looked for answers, by sharing our very different life experiences.

The idea is to create values together, not impose values on each other.

The idea is to create values together, not impose values on each other.

***ET**: That’s also not something that children are used to. Normally, you know, especially in a school setting, they’re being taught, this is what you should know, this is the knowledge that we’re imparting upon you. So how do they react to this liberty, to this ability to think on their own?*

ND: As I said, it’s very difficult in the beginning just to gain trust. And there are a

lot of tricks on how to do that. For example, if you do the workshops, I can guarantee that one of the kids or a group of kids will be disruptive and distrustful; and that person or group will likely be the key for the whole project. They will often cause a confrontation, and this is what often sparks the debate.

For instance, in Iceland, when Kolbeinn Hugi and I were doing the workshop based on the book, 'What is a nation?', we gave the kids a huge piece of paper to collectively draw an imaginary country.

The boys in a specific group decided that girls would have no rights in their imaginary country at all. The girls would obey the boys. So the girls got together to draw in one corner of this country what they called 'the woman corner'. They said, "the women will not be giving birth to the kids anymore. So if you want to have a next generation, you have to figure out how to do it by yourself." Then, the girls started to develop a plan for a feminist city, writing down numerous rules and then entering into negotiations with the boys.

Lots of kids from other groups surrounded this map to listen to their negotiations.

And the pictures turned out great, too!

So here, they were really testing the ground. They were asking, "Can we do really anything we want or not really?" And once they understood that they could, they just put what's really going on out in the open. This was in Iceland, in a small town, mostly fisherman villages. I believe they live in this very tough community, maybe very patriarchal. Iceland also the first country in the world where a woman was elected prime minister and it has some strong feminist traditions. So I think society's changing, and it would be strange if the children were not a part of that. Yeah, and they just need to find a framework through which they would be able to discuss it in public.

That's what we provided for them.

***ET**: and what new projects are you working on at the moment?*

ND: So now, this summer, we'll do the project called Visual Assembly that is coming from part of the workshops of Anthropology for All (as we now call it). With David, we did this visual assembly in the first lockdown, which was about 'city of care'.

Visual Assembly was born out of workshops based on the book 'What is a Nation', where children invented and drew in large groups a map of an imaginary country. David and I decided: we would like to be kids too! Let us grab some chalks, go to the main square, and come up with a map of the 'City of Care.' So we did exactly that with our friends from Extinction Rebellion – who joined via zoom.

Now we are continuing this project at the Museum of Care.

Next year on David's Memorial Day, October 11, 2021, we plan to create a public art project with chalks on the idea of the Museum of Care in one of the squares of some big city.

There would be no colonial treasures in our museum, no guards, and the main value would be the human relationships themselves and what derives out of this:

maybe dreams, maybe friendships, maybe discords?

But we also don’t know how it will turn out: a collective art project is always full of surprises.

Featured photo by Leonardo Burgos on Unsplash.

All other images curtesy of Nika Dubrovsky.

Vernacularizing Bureaucracy and Quantifying Violence

Allegra
April, 2021

Omri Grinberg (Hebrew University of Jerusalem and University of Haifa) will talk about “Vernacularizing Bureaucracy and Quantifying Violence: The Writing of Palestinians’ Testimonies in Israeli Human Rights NGOs”. Sylvie Bodineau (York University) will be the discussant.

When: 25 March 2021 / 2.00-3.30 pm CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...

ID: 93210372616
Password: 4JzWZ6

Abstract

This paper examines the writing of Palestinians' testimonies by Israeli NGOs documenting the violence of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Its analytical framework is based on two of Sally Engle Merry's main theoretical and thematic contributions to the study of human rights (HR) and NGOs: NGOs' vernacularization of HR, and quantification of violence.
Since the first anti-occupation Israeli NGOs were founded in the late 1980s, they have relied on the same methodology for gathering data, and use the same main mode of representation: Palestinian witnesses' narrations and their iterations as written testimony documents. In my dissertation research about the everyday bureaucracies of such NGOs, I found that this testimony-axis was shaped by two distinct activists groups who formed these NGOs: one of lawyers, and the other includes NGO activists and would-be professionals who were not legal experts, yet adamantly propagated legal-professionalism as the ideal mode for promoting HR.
Using data from participant-observation fieldwork in Israeli NGOs (2015-2016), I will highlight the bureaucratization of testimony-writing, and NGOs' processes of classifying, listing and quantifying Palestinians' experiences of Israel's violence as HR violations. As I suggest, the primary (though not exclusive) designation of these HR vernacularizations, is not making HR speak to and for Palestinians vis-à-vis Israel and transnational institutions and audiences. Rather, the dominant element vernacularized is the bureaucracy of HR writing: Palestinians' testimonies about the violence of Israel's occupation is still bound by the 1980s vernacular of HR, which was shaped through NGOs' ideological imperatives of the time.

See you on Zoom!

Here is the full schedule of the webinar series.
You can also access the webinar videos on Allegra's YouTube channel.

A4Kids: A space for experimentation

Nika Dubrovsky
April, 2021

The Anthropology 4 Kids book “What is a nation?” begins like this:

This book is a game. We are going to invent a new nation together and, at the same time, we will think why in different countries and at different times people have thought so differently about what [a?] “nation” is?

After all, isn’t this what anthropology promises us, demonstrating how people in different countries and times can live in radically different ways while remaining

humans?

During the workshop in Iceland in 2019, it was fascinating to observe how children encountered various social possibilities as they moved from page to page, and even more importantly, as they encountered lots of free space for them to draw, write, and invent their own ways to interact with the book. As a result, by the end of the workshop, each participant had effectively created their own book, with their own version of what a "nation" ("country") might be.

And here's the thing to notice: often we write diaries and read books alone. But a nation, a country, a community is necessarily a collective project. How can we actually imagine such a thing collectively? Here we cannot limit ourselves to a book—this is only the starting point. So after distributing the books, the next step was to introduce the Tablecloths as the focus for what we called 'Visual Assemblies'.

> *After all, isn't this what anthropology promises us, demonstrating how people in different countries and times can live in radically different ways while remain human?*

Here's how it worked. First, we prepared city plans in advance on large (2×2 meters) sheets of paper. The plans were intentionally unfinished. As with the books, there was plenty of space for kids to draw and write. Next, the tablecloths were spread on tables. The children would gather around, and Kolbeinn Hugi and I acted as mediators for the improvised Visual Assembly, in which participants had to agree on how they would live together in a newly invented imaginary city/country/community, and in doing so, filling in the empty spaces with a magic marker.

It was a challenge for these modern schoolchildren, who rarely work together, are often pushed to compete with each other for better grades and seldom have the opportunity to exercise their own free will even individually, let alone collectively during school hours.

We were continually being asked: “Can we really draw whatever we want?”, “What kind of laws are we allowed to pass?” ,”Do we need to ask you if what we’re doing is ok?”. Their teachers, hovering nearby, seemed to reinforce the impression that kids should not be allowed to implement their own imagination without obtaining approval, for fear of failure. Instead we answered:

“What kind of laws would they be if you had to ask permission to make them? You can invent whatever laws you want!”

“We aren’t your bosses. All we do is hand out pencils and help to arrange the tablecloths for you.”

“We are not here to control and check, just to help and support.”

Many participants were genuinely shocked. We had to devote a considerable amount of the time allotted for our workshops to un-schooling them. We first had to ensure the kids truly believed us when we reassured them that we genuinely were interested in learning what they thought and weren’t using the exercise as a trick to test them in some way.

Here it is worth applauding the talent and skills of Kolbeinn Hugi, who used his professional experience as a rock band member to coordinate more than a hundred children. Let me describe how one of the sessions proceeded.

> *The ambitious goal of A4kids is to create a space for experimentation in which it is possible to seriously discuss issues to which no one has the final answers.*

Imagine dozens of tables in a huge hall, with 12-15 children sitting at each. They draw, write, invent, and therefore negotiate with each other, squabble, and make up. They need to decide among themselves what to put in their city center: a shopping district, a government building, a giant playground, a rocket launch pad or a huge prison? How will the people of this new world live together: will they be divided into poor and rich? Will they have bosses? How will they treat visitors, the elderly, and what rights would children have in their world?

The children wrote down their laws on small cards, and after negotiating among themselves, drew and changed the plan of their city on the tablecloth. At one of the tables, boys and girls split into two hostile camps. The boys voted for laws that deprived the girls of all rights. The girls immediately built a wall separating the city into female and male districts, where in the female territory boys would have no rights either. Girls passed a law that required boys to give birth to all children.


Þorsteinn

In the women's part of the city the girls initiated an indefinite protest (all of this was colorfully depicted in their plan).

On another Tablecloth, the whole city was overgrown with flowers, and wild animals roamed among them. There were cities where shopping malls occupied all the free space, and there was a society where people's main occupation was sport.

Lastly, we – the mediators – who did not intervene in the creation of city plans, arranged a new game: every twenty minutes, we asked the participants to swap tables with their neighbors, rewriting their laws and redrawing their plans.

For children who had gone to the same school all their life and lived in a small Icelandic village of 50 people (for this workshop we brought children from many villages and towns by special buses), this was a veritably anthropological experience; they divided themselves into tribes, then confronted each other's newly created cultures as outsiders.

The ambitious goal of A4kids is to create a space for experimentation in which it is possible to seriously discuss issues to which no one has the final answers. However, we know sincere discussions are only possible in the space of freedom and that freedom often starts with play.

I started the game with myself, before going to Iceland, by remembering my own childhood in Leningrad in the late 80s.

I grew up in a dormitory suburb of Soviet Leningrad (5 000 000 people) in a house where some 5000 people lived in 1000 apartments. The population of our district Moskovsky (350,000 people) is comparable to that of Iceland (360,000 people). We dreamed of going to the city center on weekends, going to museums, theatres or parks. But why did we, as residents of the Moskovsky district, aspire to study and work in the 'center'? Why didn't we dream of building our own Museum of Modern Art to contain the artwork of our neighbors and friends, a museum of national pride in the Moskovsky district, a Moskovsky district

parliament and park, and send our own ambassadors around the world? Why didn't we organize to discuss our own local constitution and choose our own president and parliament (or maybe invent some other political forms of co-existing with each other)? Why did it never occur to us?

> *Why didn't we dream of building our own Museum of Modern Art to contain the artwork of our neighbors and friends?*

These are the questions that originally inspired the doodle book *What is a Nation?* that we used as the primary text in these exercises. As in all the books in the A4kids series, it tries to balance the fine line between the very personal experiences of participants and academic discourse. *What is a Nation?* is based on interviews with Keith Hart, David Graeber, and other anthropologists. But it's also meant to draw scholarly topics of debate out to the public. These cornerstone subjects are often monopolised for debate by elitist universities and museums, and not easily accessible to the general public – let alone schoolchildren. Our project's goal is to bridge this gap through art and play, making connections that allow us artists, academics, parents, adults, and children, to collectively ask the questions which none of us can answer alone.

In a way, *Anthropology for Kids* is indirectly inspired by Alexander Bogdanov's project *Proletkult*, which existed in the early years of the Soviet Union. Bogdanov invented and managed to implement a fairly large and complex infrastructural project. Grounded in the completely new and revolutionary principle that each person is an artist, and communism is not only the public control of means of production – communism is also a society which can radically transform the boundaries between production and consumption, creator and consumer, teacher and student.

Long before the creation of Wikipedia, Bogdanov and his comrades imagined and began to create a new infrastructure for the reproduction of knowledge, one that would destroy the traditional hierarchies between "students" and "teachers", and supplant them with horizontal networks in which anyone could find themselves in

each role in different situation: readers become writers, spectators become artists.

> *Long before the creation of Wikipedia, Bogdanov and his comrades imagined and began to create a new infrastructure for the reproduction of knowledge.*

Alexander Bogdanov aspired to build a new type of cultural relations. And despite his quick removal, the years of authoritarianism that ensued in the USSR, and the subsequent destruction and privatization after Perestroika in the 90s in those countries – remarkably much of this infrastructure is still in place. It was so well-designed and effective that it remains as permanent as a well-constructed building or well-planned neighborhood.

Having lived in East Berlin for a long time, I know that not much has changed: children can have music and art classes there almost free of charge, while kindergartens stay open until late at night. In St. Petersburg, in the heart of the city one can find a magnificent palace, the Palace of Pioneers. Its doors are still open to every child who wants to learn anything from a vast variety of subjects from science to art.

Bogdanov's ideas – like a well-written computer code- turned out to be so tightly sewn into the social body that it is almost impossible to uproot them.

In every district of the city, there are houses of culture, where children (from all social strata) can come – for symbolic payment or free of charge – to practice aikido, music, ballet, puppet theater, chess or the Chinese game Go. After the October Revolution all over the territory of the USSR, completely new but very sustainable behavioral practices were created (and in many ways, we have to thank Bogdanov for this) which made childhood and education an integral part of the adult world in a very specific way.

The main responsibility of adults was not to censor the surrounding world, preserve children's naiveté or provide financial support, but rather, first and

foremost, to allow access to numerous, diverse and developed cultural and creative practices which every child was entitled to.

Everything was privatized in Russia during Perestroika, but to privatize the premises of children's enlightenment, one would need to break the spell cast by the Russian Revolution – a spell no one in their right mind would dare to break.

Similarly, *Anthropology for Kids* is designed to challenge the division between the production and consumption of knowledge. It may seem insanely ambitious, and perhaps it is – but I'd like to recreate some of the cultural habits born out of the early years of the revolution, and make these tools available to everyone willing to engage with them anew.

Featured photo by Leonardo Burgos on Unsplash.

All other images curtesy of Nika Dubrovsky.

A4Kids: how it all started

Nika Dubrovsky
April, 2021

“Anthropology for kids” as a research project

I spent most of my life doing two things – raising children and moving from country to country. I’m an eternal immigrant. England, where I live now, is my eighth relocation.

My husband, who is an anthropologist, once told me that he thinks that all

immigrants are anthropologists. After all, our work is much the same as that of the anthropological fieldworker: to study an alien culture through immersion, to decode new cultural concepts, and learn new languages. But where fieldworkers try to gain knowledge for academic purposes, for immigrants the stakes are higher – they have to recreate a life in a new place. A failed adaptation can end tragically.

I've often heard it said that women adapt better in new situations, acquire working language skills and establish connections with unfamiliar environments faster than men. As a female migrant, I have observed how women's practical approaches to adaptation are often more effective in achieving the desired results: coordinating with neighbors for help with children, learning local recipes or the dos and don'ts of shopping, rather than enrolling in formal education or entering employment in the new place of settlement.

> *All immigrants are anthropologists. We study an alien culture through immersion, decode new cultural concepts, and learn new languages.*

Anthropology for Kids feels like a natural extension of what I have been doing all my life. Originally, it was born out of an attempt to find books for my 6-year-old son that would be accessible and clear in broaching the "grown-up" issues which truly interested him, such as power and servitude, death and immortality, beauty and ugliness.

Children's literature in the West (at the time I was living in New York) is the most regimented and censored area in publishing. Children's books are big sellers – along with toys – as they're one of the last things consumers are willing to scrimp on. All kinds of authorities and censors, parents included, lay claim to this territory and try to shape it: from the book's contents, to the size of the font. Not only is children's literature supposed to be radically different from so-called adult literature, allegedly "age-appropriate" markers further compartmentalize the category. This mirrors the current schooling system, which separates kids by age (and sometimes by gender still now). What is appropriate for children in the "5-8"

age group, according to these regulations, would not interest those from eight to twelve years of age. The content is also of course scrutinized: moral conformity, political correctness, and all that fake etiquette I remember so well from late Soviet times. Who now remembers the tons of children's books describing happy collective farmers and small boys dreaming of joining the police force, which were published in the time of my childhood?

In every culture, in one form or another, any significant texts had to once break through the shadow of conformism. Sometimes breakthroughs come from revolutions in the literal sense of the word, as was the case in the Soviet Union, where the October Revolution led to the emergence of brilliant children's literature – which was later unfortunately quelled by the conservative counter-revolutionary Stalinist cultural policy.

> *Children's literature in the West is the most regimented and censored area in publishing.*

Often, breakthroughs arise from going beyond the canon and reaching out to practices from the margins: folklore, absurdity, and various forms of buffoonery. The first edition of *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss was withdrawn from libraries across the USA for its inappropriate content. Many American readers were unsettled by the presence of strange Freudian Things: One and Two, and the irresponsible mother who went away leaving the poor children and fish, was also simply outrageous. Another icon of American children's literature, Maurice Sendak, met a similar fate. The surrealistic hero of his first book *In the Night Kitchen*, the three-year-old Mickey, is shown naked in some illustrations. In some states, librarians concerned with the moral integrity of their young readers glued paper panties to the relevant pages to cover Mickey's shameful nudity, while others demanded the book be removed. Sendak himself spent his life concealing his homosexuality.

Today, the world's ruling powers have largely come to a consensus that childhood must somehow be protected from potential harm. what this means in practice is

unclear – we adults haven't even yet come to an agreement on what exactly defines a "child". In modern Germany, for example, anyone under the age of 26 is considered a child in one way or another. If, for example, a young person is engaged in university studies, both their parents and the state are obliged to provide him or her with a minimum maintenance stipend and health insurance. If the parents refuse to pay, their child has the right to take them to court.

In modern Russia on the other hand, compulsory education ends at the age of fourteen and all family obligations towards the child are terminated, hence demarcating the end of childhood. A fourteen-year-old in Russia bears criminal liability and could end up behind bars (as well as in the USA).

We can't be certain what a child is, nor can we say with assurance what an adult is or what a human being is.

> *Kids are, in a way, the radical Others that we compare ourselves to as adults. (…) They are our yet unrealized Utopia.*

Kids are, in a way, the radical Others that we compare ourselves to as adults. Children embody the very possibility of another world and another future for all of us – a future in which almost anything is possible: a world of peace, flying cars, interstellar travel and a long, happy life for everybody – that is, if only they manage to accomplish it when they grow up.

Children are our yet unrealized Utopia.

Here's the paradox: on the one hand, children need to be protected as bearers of hope for a better future; but often this well-meaning "care" results in them being stifled. They are ascribed a (quite imaginary) angelic naivety, bordering on stupidity, which results in reams of children's books full of fluffy puppies and squirrels – a façade of political correctness.

At the same time, this concern and aspiration for a better future is realized through a contrasting approach: urging them to look at the world realistically, not

through rose-tinted glasses, and to be prepared to accept the rules of the game, wherever they might end up.

Having recently gone through quarantine, we could draw an analogy between education and vaccination. During the recent lockdown, many countries imposed penalties for quarantine violations, while others launched public relief and education programs for all residents, emphasizing that we are all one big social body and equally dependent on each other.

But let's imagine for a moment what would happen if vaccines were available only to those that could afford them… So long as a certain percentage of the population remains unvaccinated, we'll never be rid of the virus for good. We would never have gotten rid of smallpox, leprosy, and plague if most people hadn't been duly vaccinated. And whereas we can all agree how disastrous the effects can be in terms of health, this very different when it comes to education. We understand it as entailing the task to shield "children" from things they are somehow not ready for.

Some children study philosophy and liberal arts, while others only have arithmetic and writing. It is clear that poorer children are at a disadvantage: in most of the countries of the world, there are no philosophy and anthropology, music and algebra for them. But this is accepted as the status quo, even if that divide continually reproduces a violent and sick society. In the end, even the privileged beneficiaries of a precious and diverse education will suffer, too, because they will have to live in a world that is unfair, ugly and inhumane. Education is an expression of the human desire to understand the world, but it also shapes the society we are trying to understand.

> *Education is an expression of the human desire to understand the world, but it also shapes the society we are trying to understand.*

My son was born in the USA, but his first language was my mother tongue – Russian. Only slowly did I realize that all my efforts to share a language (and

culture) with him would be wasted, since the Russian language itself has been changing so much while I've been living abroad.

Russian children's literature during the years of neoliberal reforms that followed Perestroika, were dominated by commercial publishers disseminating tasteless Disney-style forgeries. My first real encounter with colonialism was when I lived in the Dominican Republic for a year, where shocking poverty is combined with corruption and the domination of Western corporations in all areas of life.

When I went into to a children's bookshop in Santo Domingo, I understood the real meaning of "Can the Subaltern *Speak?*" (by Gavatri Spivak). Although the Dominican Republic has its own vibrant cultural traditions, a culture of social resistance and the interweaves several national cultures, there, on the bookshelves, I found only Disney books about Mickey Mouse and Snow White, badly translated into surrogate Spanish. The souvenir vomit from the American mass-market filled the bookshelves like the terrible substance from Ridley Scott's *Alien* filled the bodies of humans that the aliens attacked. I was horrified! How will Dominican kids learn Spanish from these books?

Later I learned that in schools, Dominican kids are told that Christopher Columbus brought "real culture" to the island, and so forth…

Living in an expat paradise – the Dominican Republic – I understood how complex colonialism is, how it destroys us from within. And how it begins with cultural appropriation, which nowadays manifests itself to a large extent in children's literature.

After Perestroyka, Russia, and most post-Soviet countries, were in a similar situation, and, naturally, I wanted to change it.

I spent quite some time and energy on publishing Dr. Seuss' books in Russian. I don't know how much this publishing project influenced the shape of contemporary Russian culture, but I tried to do what I could to nudge it in a more Dr. Seussian direction. In fact, at the same time, many young Russian-speaking

moms, many of whom, like me, had lived abroad, started to organize small children's publishing houses, creating a real publishing boom. Today, new children's literature has appeared in Russia, new authors, new artists, and great Soviet children's books are being re-printed.

> *Anthropology for Kids is one of many projects experimenting with a new set of educational tools that attempt to change the status quo in education and the way it shapes our society.*

Anthropology for Kids is one of many projects experimenting with a new set of educational tools that attempt to change the status quo in education and the way it shapes our society. It is an open-source methodology and toolkit for academics, teachers, children and artists inspired by the democratic Soviet children's literature of the 1920s. This particular genre was invented as a means of communicating with the general population in a language that could be shared by everyone. The idea was to build horizontal connections between all participants, and to turn the process of production, reading and distribution of books into a continuous cycle.

My son is now turned 18, so I've been working on this project for 12 years – very gradually and intermittently. But most of all I enjoyed our project in Iceland, where in 2019 together with the Icelandic artist and musician Kolbein Hughes we held a series of workshops with children based on the A4kids book *What is a Nation*. This book was used as our starting point for this open-source collective project, a set of building blocks encouraging those who engage with it to doodle all over it and reimagine their basic ideas of the meaning of "nation" but also – family, school, home, hospital, and so on.

Read Part II of this essay on Thursday….

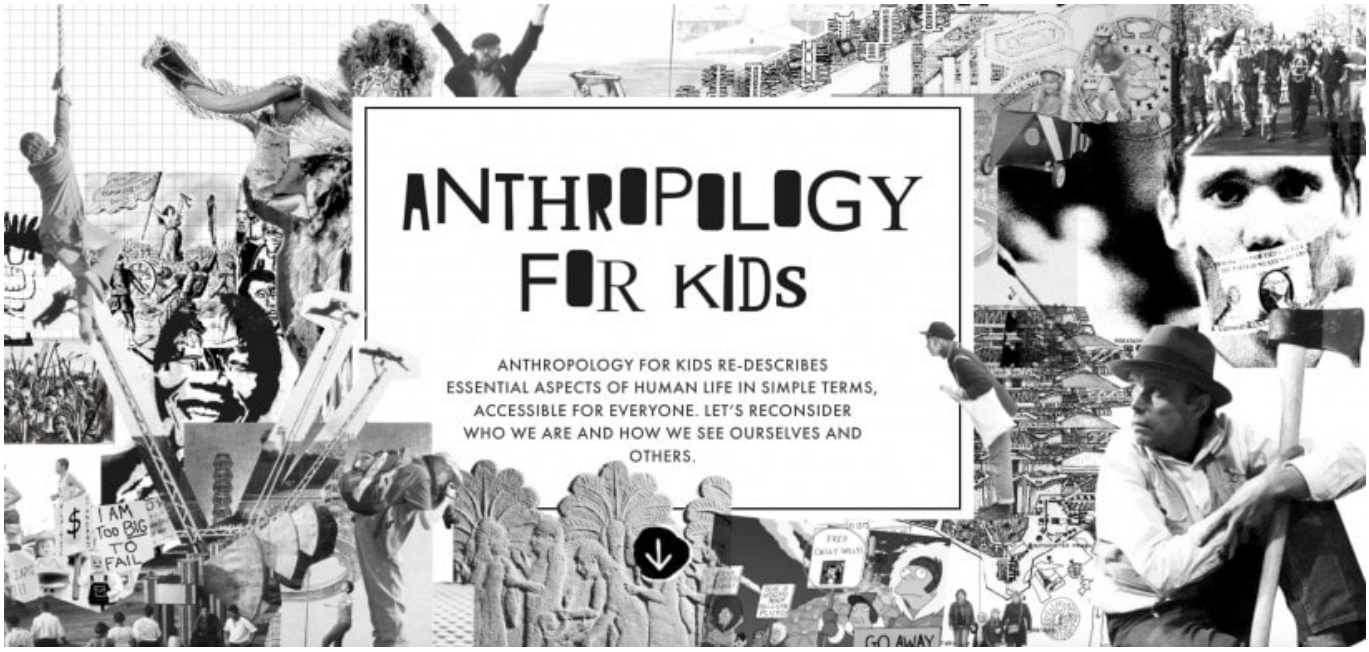
Featured photo by Leonardo Burgos on Unsplash.

#AisforAnthropology: In Conversation with Nika Dubrovsky (I)

Emilie Thévenoz
April, 2021

On a February Thursday afternoon, Nika Dubrovsky and Allegra assistant editor Emilie Thevenoz sat down together over Zoom. The chat covered the pedagogical concepts and ideas that guide Nika's work, the ways anthropology can help children question the value systems they inherited and why that's important, the way publishing houses are not quite ready yet for more open-sourced ways of sharing information, and the importance of asking the right questions.

This is the first half of their conversation – the second half is available here.



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***ET**: You know, to me, anthropology seems to have this great and unique capacity to highlight the complexity of human experience. But children (and adults) often find clear answers easier to deal with. How do you deal with the tension between making anthropology accessible to children but also the need to render these complexities and not just gloss over them or over-simplify?*

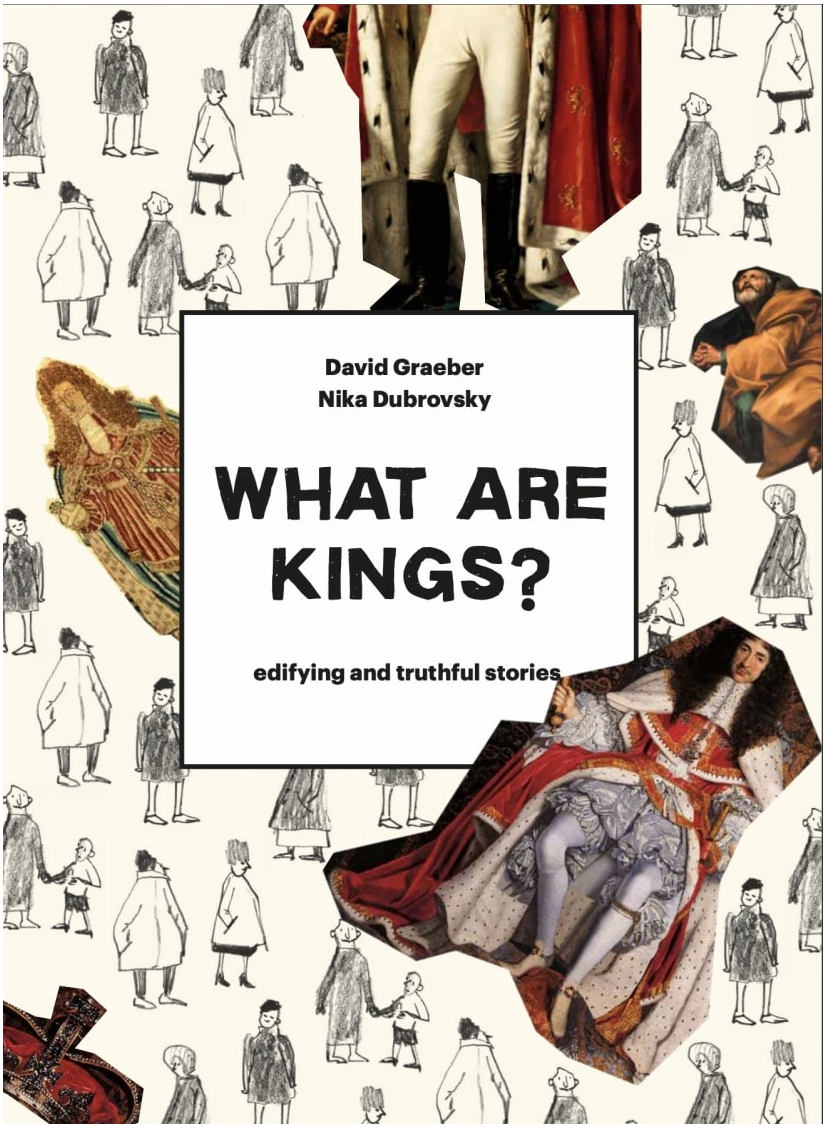
ND: I don't know if I succeeded in that. I think it's different across the books. And I hope they develop and become better.

> *The book is here to create a conversation between the authors and readers.*

An important source [of inspiration] is Dostoevsky's notion of 'cursed questions' (**проклятые вопросы**). Those are questions about life and meaning that every human being will ask themselves. We all figure out our own opinion about what is beauty, or what being rich means, and stuff like that. And at the same time, anthropology as an academic discipline pursues research exactly on how different societies and different humans have related to those major questions. So that's how the project was born. And I just tried to understand it myself. So I play the

role of the child. And I am a child in this situation. I'm trying to figure out the answers to key questions such: Who and what is considered beautiful? Where do the rich come from? What is death? But also, we have to wonder what are the limitations and preconditions to formulate these answers that are automatically given to us by our society? Now I'm off collecting materials and friendships for the book about death. Yeah, unsurprisingly.

Consider this book that we did with David about kings. It's like an offspring of his book with Marshall Sahlins, *On kings*. And so it contains really, really complex questions, you know, like "what is sovereignty?". I understood so much for myself during the time when we were working on it.



I don’t know if what I am trying to do is working well, but the methodology I’m trying to use is typical of the open source community.

> *I understand art and the author as a facilitator, whose job it is to bring the materials together so children can think through the answer to the question themselves.*

So it’s not that we are enforcing statements, it’s not a textbook which states something like “kinship is this and that”. It’s a working book. The book is here to create a conversation between the authors and readers, who are encouraged to become writers and thinkers themselves – because everyone should. And every book was built in a way that it could be changed in many ways. So those books, they just never put the last dot.

***ET**: Would you consider that your books are frameworks? Would that be a good description for what you do, that you provide frameworks for children to think through things?*

ND: Exactly. Totally. It’s a framework. And in this case, I understand art and the author as a facilitator, whose job it is to bring the materials [so children can think through the answer to the question themselves], but who does not necessarily need to be a major scientific mind or artist themselves.

***ET:** You mention that you find yourself in the role of the child and try to see how a child would understand what’s going on?*

ND: No, I’m not trying to put myself in the position of the child, I think that would be very difficult. I am a child in the way that I don’t know much, but I try to figure it out.

I am always asking: what does it mean? In a sense, this is usually the role of the parents: when kids learn something, parents often relive their own childhood with them in a new way. To accompany their child, parents start studying math or Japanese martial arts or something else. They even often say, “we are learning to

read” or “we have taken up music”.

This “we” is a key to everything. I believe that most parents are the best teacher and facilitators.

> *I am a child in the way that I don’t know much, but I try to figure it out. I am always asking: what does it mean?*

Unfortunately, an adult who is indifferent to the children in their care is a bad teacher – besides obviously causing emotional damages. This shows just how limited value there is in abstract knowledge and skills, and how important collaboration, care, interest, and, in the end, friendship with the child, are.

I have two kids, and when they were growing, we were moving a lot from country to country, so I kind of naturally researched the different ways of how schools were organized in different places – Russia, and the US and the Dominican Republic, and France, and Germany, and so on. Then, I was part of this wonderful social movement called “Free and Democratic education”. Their main ideas is that every child has the right to choose with whom, when, and what they want to learn.

I think I learned a lot about education through them.

Of course, I should mention that I grew up in Leningrad, USSR. Despite the totalitarian regime that took over the revolution, the huge educational infrastructure -which had been established during the early Soviet years – was still functioning very well.

This structure, called Proletkult, was set up by Alexander Bogdanov. It essentially ensured that, even though the Soviet Union had a shortage of chewing gum, sausages, and jeans, almost every family had their own piano, and every kid was able to take a wide array of free after-school classes -from chess to painting, from history to biology.

The idea that everyone could and should learn, create, and change the world, that people were born and lived for this very purpose, was an integral part of the Soviet educational project.

And I try my best to keep it alive in Anthropologie for Kids.

> *Children's literature is a really good framework for being public because if you can explain something to a 7-year-old, you can explain it to a 55-year-old.*

ET: *How could anthropology, in your opinion, be more widely included in the mainstream curriculum, even if the teachers don't have a background in anthropology?*

ND: Yeah, it's a very good question. We should solve it as soon as possible because that alone would solve so many problems in our society (laughs). Hmm. I only can say what I can do. I don't know what society should be doing. But I'm trying to invent more and more frameworks such as this book and projects that will be widely available so that people could pick them up more easily.

As any academic subject, anthropology is limited because it's designed not to be public. It's very rare that people like Graeber exist, who is at the same time a very serious scientist and produces content that is accessible for many. And children's literature is a really good framework for being public because if you can explain something to a 7-year-old, you can explain it to a 55-year-old as well.

ET*: Why do you think it's so important that children have access to anthropology?*

ND: Yeah, because nowadays anthropology is the most emancipated discipline. It's just showing us very clearly that whatever we think is just because our value system is *our* value system, and many other societies could think very differently from us. And just to know that for sure, to actually experience this, to have some proof that this is how we humans are built – all of that is taking away so many horrible preconditions that lead to war, to hate, to other stuff. I think our real education is when we meet people from other cultures, and we compare that to

the culture that we have inherited, seemingly naturally.

When you leave [your country] to live with people, you understand that they are also people – they are like you, but with a totally different reference system. I think everybody should experience this – it's the most important thing that every child can encounter, the sense that other people exist who understand the same words but these words have different meanings for them. When they talk about poetry, they have a different idea, when they talk about democracy, they have a different idea.

> *The most important thing that every child can encounter is the sense that other people exist who understand the same words but these words have different meanings for them.*

But still, there are right and wrong ideas, because we're all humans, we are not dolphins, we are not alien to each other. So when we kill each other, for example, or when we torture each other because somebody else understands the word democracy differently to us, we clearly do something wrong.

And now our education is built in a way that some unknown people in some ministry shape a curriculum, feeding it to the kids, and then check to see if the kids memorized that or not, and how well they memorize it. And all of this curriculum is very questionable in the first place.

Education is political. Especially now, it's important because we live in times of climate change, which necessitates us to come together. And it's only solvable if we are able to talk to each other. We don't have a good way of talking because, our educational systems stem from the 19th century, from these industrial times when kids were trained to become either workers on the assembly line or somebody who manages the assembly line. It's not that useful now, but something else is very much needed.

ET: *What are the challenges that you've been facing in creating these books and*

disseminating them?

ND: Oh, don't even ask (laugh) that…

It's not possible to fit into anywhere, you know. And I would say that, yes, David is famous, very famous. And he was working with top literary agents and publishing houses. And none of them would help us. None. It's always started the same. They would say, 'Oh my god, this is such a great idea. It's amazing. Oh, I know so many people who would love it … blah, blah, blah'; and then, they would say, 'Oh, yes, it's so good. But you know, children's literature is very, very regulated territory. So, can you tell us which age range is that book for? (…), and then it started an endless chain of changes: you have to put more texts or less text, the drawing should be less harsh, no empty spaces…. And then I remember David was like, so furious, he would just ask them, 'Hey, can you tell us? What did you like in the first place?' (laughter) 'You change it until there's nothing left from the original, so what *did* you like?', yeah, so it's very very difficult. Children's books are basically censored. Everybody's censoring them. Government, businesses, parents themselves, you know. So that's an almost impossible task for this for this project, to survive.

For now, this [A4All] exists parallel, there's the website with workshops organized by other people, and the publishing project, which so far was not a huge success because there's no publishing house. Maybe it's the structure of the whole publishing industry: they want to work with one big book in which there's a lot of investment and which is sold once it is finished, once and done. Whereas our work is constant work. (…) And many people are proposing to translate the books into different languages, like Japanese, Spanish, Polish, Finnish… So, it looks like a lot of grassroots people want to work with that, but maybe we simply cannot fit it into a traditional publishing system. Or, maybe we have to wait longer.

ET: *Which one of the A4Kids books do you enjoy the most and why?*

ND: Well, the 'Kings' book, because that was my major work with David, and then we were working on the Pirate book, which is what I'm still working on. The

‘Kings’ book was a lot of work, it took two years in the making.

Read the second half of this conversation here.

Featured photo by Leonardo Burgos on Unsplash.

All other images curtesy of Nika Dubrovsky.

#AisforAnthropology: Introduction

Felix Girke
April, 2021

To kick-off our #AisforAnthropology thread, Nika Dubrovsky will be talking to us throughout the week about her project, A4Kids.

Our hope is that this thread and Nika's work will inspire thoughts and conversations on whether and how anthropology can be made accessible to children.

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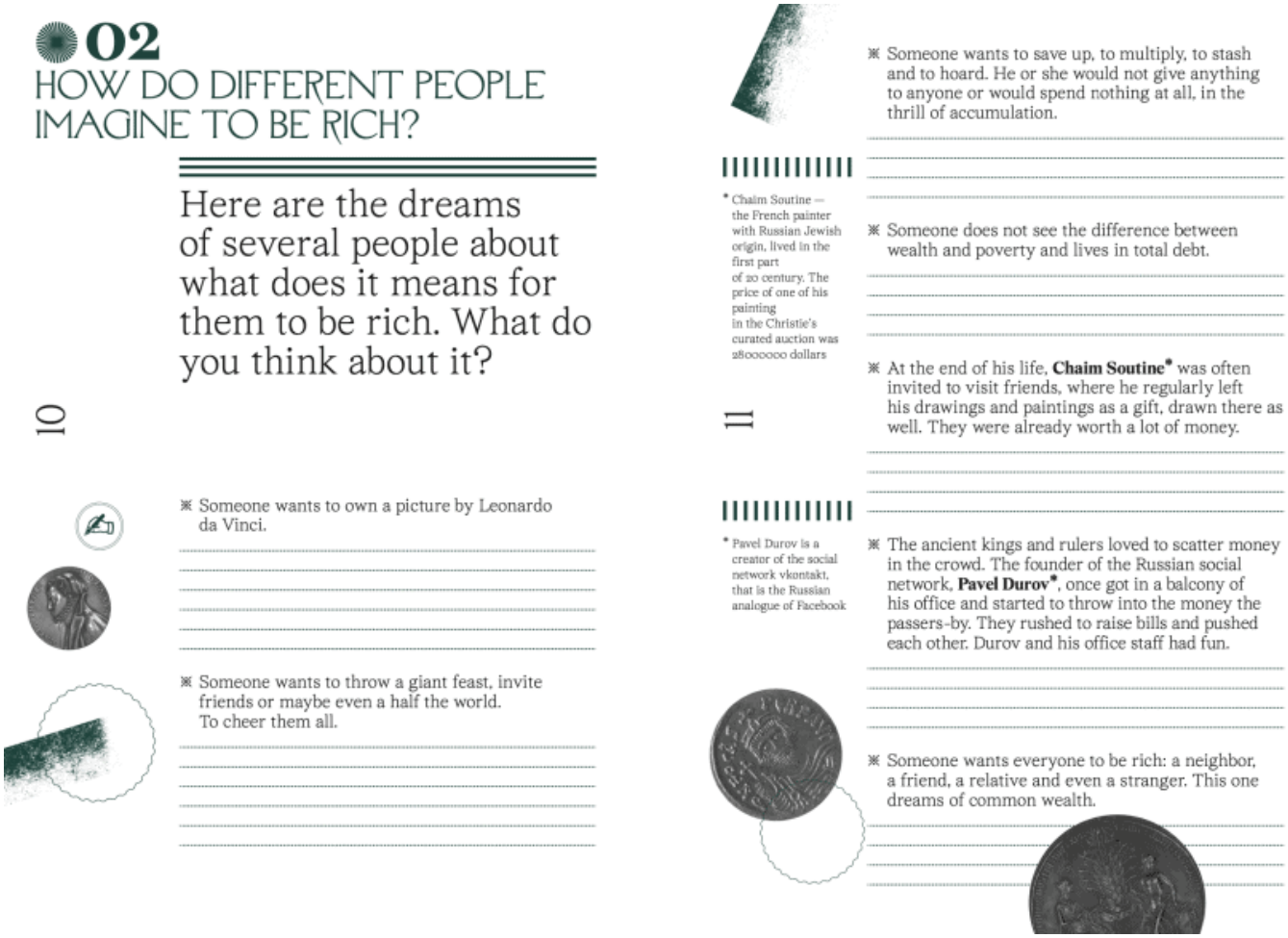
A4Kids is a project developed and run by Nika Dubrovsky. It aims to bring the anthropological lens to children by way of (free) downloadable interactive books and workshops.



02
HOW DO DIFFERENT PEOPLE IMAGINE TO BE RICH?

Here are the dreams of several people about what does it means for them to be rich. What do you think about it?

10

Someone wants to own a picture by Leonardo da Vinci.

Someone wants to throw a giant feast, invite friends or maybe even a half the world. To cheer them all.

Someone wants to save up, to multiply, to stash and to hoard. He or she would not give anything to anyone or would spend nothing at all, in the thrill of accumulation.

* Chaim Soutine — the French painter with Russian Jewish origin, lived in the first part of 20 century. The price of one of his painting in the Christie's curated auction was 28000000 dollars

Someone does not see the difference between wealth and poverty and lives in total debt.

At the end of his life, **Chaim Soutine*** was often invited to visit friends, where he regularly left his drawings and paintings as a gift, drawn there as well. They were already worth a lot of money.

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* Pavel Durov is a creator of the social network vkontakt, that is the Russian analogue of Facebook

The ancient kings and rulers loved to scatter money in the crowd. The founder of the Russian social network, **Pavel Durov***, once got in a balcony of his office and started to throw into the money the passers-by. They rushed to raise bills and pushed each other. Durov and his office staff had fun.

Someone wants everyone to be rich: a neighbor, a friend, a relative and even a stranger. This one dreams of common wealth.

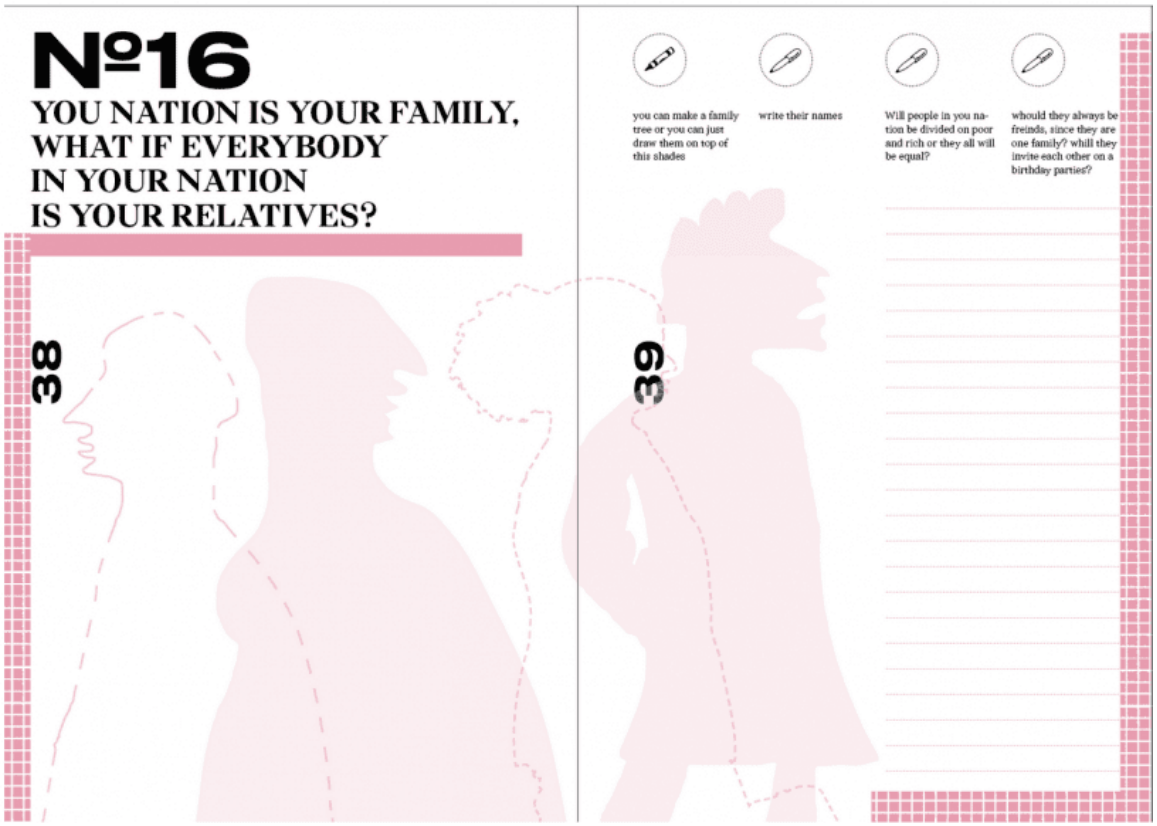
In Nika's words, the project "started partly by way of in-between conversations – emails mostly – and Skype talks with David [Graeber] (…) It bridges two worlds: academia, and children. We are not supposed to talk to children about the questions accademia asks itself – such as what death is, what money is, or just even what is family. Rather, the parents tell their children what these things are, hence reproducing their own models. But anthropology is about something else."

> *A4Kids provides a framework for children to think through what Dostoevsky's calls the 'cursed questions'.*

Through children's workbooks and workshops, A4Kids provides a framework for children to think through what Dostoevsky's calls the 'cursed questions' (**проклятые вопросы**) – questions about life and its meaning we all ask

ourselves during our lifetime. We all come to form our own understandings of wealth, death, sovereignty, nations – and more often than not, these are shaped by the cultural biases we inherit.

The A4Kids workshops and workbooks are designed to create conversations on these subjects – by “re-describing essential aspects of human life in simple terms”, by leaving questions open-ended, by presenting examples from various cultures across time and space, by giving space for critical thinking.



The aim is twofold: to show children that the value systems we inherit are far from natural, and to encourage them to jointly reflect over values – and dare to come up with alternatives.

The 14 workbooks, aimed at children of all ages, are the results of collaborations between artists such as Nika and scholars. They were conceived to function in a somewhat more open format then is habitual. Nika sees her role and that of the authors, scholars and artists who contributed as ‘facilitators’: their job is to put together the questions and bring ‘whatever materials we have right now in order to answer these’. But the resulting workbooks should never ‘put the final dot’: rather, their format makes it easy for anyone – parents and children included- to revisit, amend, add to and customize them.

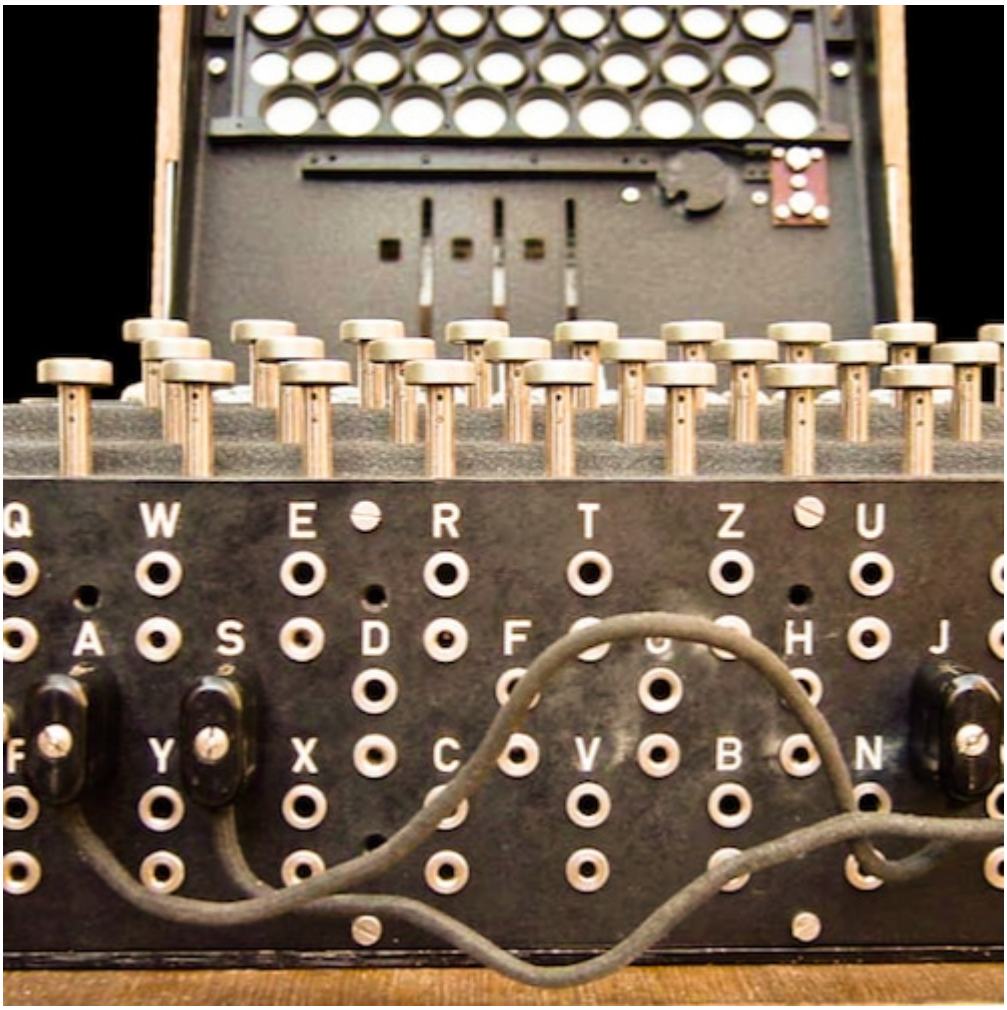
> *A4Kids shows children that the value systems we inherit are far from natural and encourages them to dare to come up with alternatives.*

This week, we'll be sharing with you a two-part interview with Nika, as well as two articles written by Nika about her work, the philosophy and methodologies behind it, how she was inspired to start it, the challenges she ran into, and why she thinks it's so important to bring anthropology to children.

Featured photo (cropped) by Leonardo Burgos on Unsplash.

Whose Life Is Worth More?

Maria Pujol Fernández
April, 2021



During the Second World War, the British government, with the invaluable assistance of Alan Turing, deciphered Enigma (the Nazi code war machine) and thus gained access to key information that helped win the war. In fact, it is calculated this reduced the war period by two years. But this discovery meant pretending not to know about some of the attacks the Nazis were planning, so the latter would not suspect anything. The moral dilemma this created, i.e. the sacrifice of some lives for the greater good, is still studied in numerous universities and philosophy classrooms.

In his book *"Whose Life is worth more? Hierarchies of risk and death in contemporary wars"*, Yagil Levi makes the point that this dilemma is no longer a

matter of discussion. In contemporary wars, it is widely held to be acceptable to kill a few for the greater good, especially if the justifications are good enough. In fact, Levi demonstrates that today, the sacrifice of the lives of combatants or non-combatants alike is no longer a matter of ethics or morals, but of legitimization. Using examples from the war politics of the United States, Britain and Israel in recent conflicts like the Yugoslavian Wars, Iraq War, or the Al-Aqsa Intifada (among others), Levi creates a complex, detailed and enlightening account of how the economy of lives works and changes in contemporary wars, and how these hierarchies are decided, justified and legitimized.

> *Levi creates a complex, detailed and enlightening account of how the economy of lives works and changes in contemporary wars, and how these hierarchies are decided, justified and legitimized.*

Few authors would be brave enough to write this book. It is widely known that Israel and the United States do not take criticism of their military system lightly and respond to accusations of violating Human Rights with harsh claims of antipatriotism, and even terrorism. But who could be more legitimate to talk about what Israel and its historical allies have done than Yagil Levy? As the Vice-President of the Israeli Sociological Society and professor at The Open University of Israel, his work brings to the readers a new understanding of Israeli policies, and offers a clear view of the actions of the United States and Britain in the Middle East.

Levy’s book has unsurprisingly been called provocative and his objective honesty could be considered brutal, especially by those who are still convinced that wars can be heroic or that the military is an honourable institution. His methodological and empirical approach sheds light on the crude reality of how democratic states make decisions, directly affecting people’s chances of survival, in times of war. It also highlights their disturbing resemblance with global corporate companies, such as how employees who are considered as “non-vital” -generally the ones in lower-down positions- are the first to be fired (sacrificed) when the company is

going through a crisis. Thanks to Levy's thorough research and the vast quantity of official and non-refutable data he draws on, his reasoning is easy to follow and authoritatively undermines official narratives about war. Levi draws on the concepts of legitimacy, sacrifice, risk transfer and hierarchies to analyse detailed quantitative and qualitative informations. He shows how decisions made in the offices of politicians have a deep impact on the lives of those on the field, and highlights how little importance the loss of these lives seem to have in our contemporary world.

> *To read of how a soldier makes clinical decisions on which lives are worth sacrificing to legitimize a war operation is more frightening and eye opening than conventional war narratives which rely on pathos.*

The book, mostly drawing on interviews and accounts of combatants involved in the conflicts, centers on those directly part of the strategic decision-making processes. This contrasts with the approach scholarship on war usually takes, which consists in focusing on soldiers or the civil population. Levy's attempt to step away from what we could call sentimentalism is perfectly in tune with the spirit of the book. To read of how a soldier makes clinical decisions on which lives are worth sacrificing to legitimize a war operation, of how everything is reduced to the mathematics of power, is more frightening and eye-opening than conventional war narratives which rely on pathos.

Another remarkable point the book makes is how deaths are categorised and set in complex hierarchies. Often these hierarchies are overglossed and instead presented as a uniform mass: combatants and non-combatants. But Levi reveals the intricacies that underlie these classifications and denounces two key factors that directly affect the risk of death: racism and classism. The reader is made privy to how Black and Hispanic US soldiers coming from a poor background are more likely to be placed in a platoon that runs dangerous operations, or how Israel takes care not to expose the soldiers who come from a middle or upper-class background, or how the bombs fired by Hamas are more likely to hit the

poorest Israelis, as they tend to live on the “frontier”. Levy also shows how Israel uses cultural notions and ethnonationalism to justify its actions against Palestinians – hence pointing to the importance of identity in death hierarchies. In fact, the book highlights how the (false) dichotomy between ‘us’ and the ‘others’ is mobilised alongside nationalism as one of the most powerful ways to justify armed conflicts.

> *Military tactics change and adapt to gain legitimization not only in the eyes of the military hierarchy but also in the public imagination.*

Finally, Levi shows how legitimation works beyond the political or military world, and is articulated through many different external factors. The media, the families of the combatants, and public opinion (among others) play a big part in influencing which war policies will be devised. This gives the reader a deep understanding of how the “democratic” machine works and how military tactics change and adapt to gain legitimization not only in the eyes of the military hierarchy but also in the public imagination. One good example of this are the justifications given by the democratic party in the United State for their involvement in the Yugoslavian, the Afghan, and the Iraq Wars. Knowing that public opinion, especially their voter base, was against armed conflict, Clinton and Obama both justified these interventions as necessary humanitarian acts. Regarding the US involvement in Afghanistan, General McChrystal is quoted in the book saying: ‘*Furthermore, the commitment was not only to defeat the Taliban but also to rebuild the Afghan state.’ (pp 204)* and that *‘therefore, the goal was to separate insurgents from the people by reducing their capabilities and physically evicting many of them to protect key population centers and then expand the authority of the Afghan government’. (pp 205).* The deployment of US troops in Afghanistan was hence presented as necessary to help Afghans defend themselves from the Taliban and gain their freedom. A freedom which is, and will likely remain for the foreseeable future, supervised by the United States military.

But the welfare of civilians and the establishment of democratic governments are

not the only key arguments in legitimising wars. Technology has been gaining relevance as a method of validation. Levi highlights how the modernization of the armament is a key factor in the general public's perception that contemporary wars are more humane than those of the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the fact that precise targeting can avoid innocent civil casualties – which also makes the legitimization of conflicts easier.

> *The modernization of the armament is a key factor in the general public's perception that contemporary wars are more humane.*

"Whose Life is Worth More'" is an exceptional tool for anyone looking to understand how hierarchies of life are at work in political conflicts and its resulting death tolls. But it is also a must-read manual for scholars interested in studying the consequences of war on civilians, specifically in the case of civil wars which are no longer raging but still impact society (for example, the Spanish Civil War). Understanding the narratives used to legitimate wars, their principal actors and the real numbers of casualties they leave behind can help us analyse the deep scars conflicts leave in the immediate and future social, cultural and psychological contexts.

Levy's brilliant work forces us to ponder the mechanisms surrounding war, but more importantly, the mechanisms justifying death. As suggested by the image on the book's cover, war is less far from a game of chess then we would probably like to think.

Levy, Yagil (2019). Whose Life is Worth More? Hierarchies of risk and death in contemporary wars. Stanford, California. Stanford University Press.

Featured Image: Enigma machine by Bob Lorde (cropped), found on Wikimedia

Commons.

The Kiss of Death

Kristin Gupta
April, 2021

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage many places in the world, it is hard to imagine a book that is more timely or prescient than Andrea Kitta's *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore*. The winner of the 2020 Brian McConnell Book Award and Chicago Folklore Prize, the author's study of contemporary North American folklore begins with a somewhat unconventional question: what can beliefs in the supernatural, conspiracy theories, or anti-vaccination narratives tell medical and scientific institutions about how to meet their communities' health needs in the wake of a contagious disease? It turns out, quite a lot.

Interested in bridging the gaps between popular and medical assumptions about risk, *The Kiss of Death* seriously takes up epidemiological outbreak myths, legends, and rumors as modes of relating that help us understand the fears and doubts that can crop up in response to a disease. Kitta preempts any incredulousness that might emerge in the reader, arguing that these narratives powerfully shape perceptions, modify behavior, and in doing so, become "more than just folklore" as they move through the world (135). Mixing ethnographic and mixed media methods in a way accessible to both expert and lay audiences, Kitta dives into the ways disease, virus transmission, and death are social issues as much as medical ones. This approach, coupled with the diversity of her data, elegantly reveals over six chapters how many understandings of contagion are fundamentally about privilege and power.

> *What can beliefs in the supernatural, conspiracy theories, or anti-vaccination narratives tell us about how to meet our communities' health needs in the wake of a contagious disease?*

The book is structured in a somewhat linear fashion, tracing the various stages of a disease from first known infection to ultimate death. Each chapter centers around a different legend tied to the epidemiological—not just vampires or zombies, but also more mundane ones such as the act of killing someone with a severe allergy by kissing them after having eaten peanuts. In particular, Kitta is interested in exploring the ubiquity of these legends—which increasingly rival the information produced by medical and scientific institutions—and narrowing in on the forms of systemic discrimination like racism, misogyny, and homophobia at their core. In Chapter 2, "The Disease Is Coming from Inside the House! Contagious Disease, Immigration, and Patient Zero," Kitta begins with the first known case of a disease, deftly contextualizing how outbreaks often result in attempts to place blame and stigmatize certain people, animals, and places. This can happen on both individual and structural levels. She discusses how "Patient Zero" does not necessarily actually designate the first person to be infected, but the first person who is traceable. Nonetheless, "Patient Zero" becomes a sense-making device in that their behavior is heavily scrutinized: this creates the impression that we know the source of the disease, giving us a false sense of control. Although it is less explicit in the assignment of blame, Kitta also speaks to the shifting spatiality of disease and how we emplace viruses within persons or specific places. Focusing on immigrants and those from other countries as figures of "diseased outsiders" in the H1N1, SARS, and 2015 Disneyland measles outbreaks, Kitta points to how common social media narratives and memes demonstrate how bodies are both racialized and made to be perpetrators or Patient Zero. This process notably occurs through systematic discourse that envisions white bodies as healthy and nonwhite bodies as inherently diseased. Hinting at a global mapping of disease, she cites characterizations of Ebola as an African disease on Twitter and Facebook as a particularly insidious example of this xenophobia, even though it only spread in a handful of countries and the number of those who contracted it were relatively low as compared to the continental population. Inversely, Kitta methodically traces how white bodies are Othered only through their behavior or by traveling to places perceived as the "third world", where being infected is imagined as a punishment for social

transgressions.

> *Kitta is interested in narrowing in on the forms of systemic discrimination like racism, misogyny, and homophobia at these legends' core.*

Readers will powerfully connect these discussions about who and what is made "risky" with their own recent lived experiences. *The Kiss of Death*, while published five months before the onset of COVID-19, takes on an almost medium-like quality in its ability to describe ongoing events. Kitta's framing of the way disease is understood in North American culture as originating elsewhere immediately harkens to Donald Trump's repeated labeling of COVID-19 as the "China disease" and the ensuing hate and discrimination directed at Asian-Americans.

Particularly concerned with the medical outcomes of these damaging social narratives, Kitta underlines the need for medical providers and scientific communities to take these beliefs—no matter how easily we might dismiss or belittle them—into consideration. This is especially true in an environment where people are much more likely to come across a xenophobic Facebook post or anti-vaccination Tweet than peer-reviewed information from organizations like the CDC. She asks, "How can medical institutions more effectively treat patients in areas perceived as dangerous and underserved? What can those in positions of power and authority do to improve health in all populations?" (44). Some proposed solutions include making cultural sensitivity a more integral part of science communication, addressing the paternalism of narratives aimed at dispelling medical disinformation (rather than labelling adherents as "stupid"), and renaming existing diseases to uncouple them from specific people, occupations, places, or species (which currently is the policy of the World Health Organization, but only for new diseases).

> *Kitta underlines the need for medical providers and scientific communities to take these beliefs into consideration.*

As *The Kiss of Death* shows, blame is continually directed in ways that "takes the onus away from us" as a society to make changes about who gets sick or is subjected to violence (130). Moving to more-than-human monsters as figures that reflect these contemporary ideas of contagion, Kitta looks at two legends associated with suicide: Slender Man, the mysterious Internet legend who is conjured via thought, and a Lakota suicide spirit named Walking Sam spotted on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Kitta argues that some media outlets like *The Daily Beast* and social media commentators stigmatize mental illness by focusing on the mention of monsters rather than contextualizing these deaths within cyberbullying and systemic racism and poverty. Diving into the circumstances and Internet ephemera surrounding these deaths, she notes, "Folklore is often the target of action in such cases and, like video games or violence on television, provides an easy and convenient scapegoat" for broader social problems (53). Thoughts, rumors, and even violence may be contagious in ways that feel analogous to an infectious illness, and these stories certainly reveal certain truths about those who partake in them. However, as Kitta importantly underlines, treating folklore as something that takes on a life of its own furthers the idea that we have no agency or control over the stories we tell.

Kitta explores similar themes of virality by looking at anti-vaccination narratives, moralization, and what are considered "risky lifestyles" in Chapter 5, "Why Buy the Cow When the Milk Has HPV?". Well-known controversies over the safety and efficacy of vaccines are woven throughout *The Kiss of Death*, reflecting that a significant number of North Americans cite folkloric narratives in their decisions to forgo medically recommended immunization schedules. In chapter 5, she describes specifically widespread rumors online and in celebrity discourses that the HPV vaccine is only for promiscuous women and gay men, citing an instance of even hearing this in a conversation with a family member who worried her son might be homosexual after a pediatrician recommended the vaccine. Illustrating how ubiquitous and close these narratives can be to readers' lives, these discussions vividly document how ideas of risk exist within a much broader ecosystem of cultural knowledge and power. Whether it is opting out of a cancer-

preventing vaccine or refusing to wear a face mask because it could be perceived as unmanly and weak, folklore plays a critical role in how those with privilege can come to make medical decisions in their attempts to distance themselves from identities or behaviors that society deems unacceptable.

> *These discussions vividly document how ideas of risk exist within a much broader ecosystem of cultural knowledge and power.*

Overall, death and dying experiences and their roles in North American culture are comparatively less explicitly elaborated in this book. Kitta's writing, alongside the evocative cover image and title, largely frames death as the ultimate risk outcome or endpoint of disease. Perhaps this merely reflects broader attitudes towards mortality in many Western societies, where death tends to be disavowed and hidden from view. However, a deeper articulation of the kinds of death featured in various chapters (which are both spectacular and mundane depending on disease and context) could have provided further contextualization to some of Kitta's arguments. Nevertheless, throughout the book, Kitta weaves rich tales of intimacy, anxiety, and the very human need to explain and emplace disease and death. Gesturing towards questions of neocolonialism and the ways future diseases will be related to intensive global capitalism, *The Kiss of Death* invites us to interrogate our most deeply held cultural assumptions that the call is coming from *outside* the house, and makes persuasive assertions about why anthropologists, public health officials, and science communicators should take folklore and the structural inequalities they point to into more consideration.

Andrea Kitta, 2019. *Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore*. Utah State University Press.

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