Happy Holidays!

Allegra
December, 2020

This year, 2020.

… the less we speak of it, the better, right? Still, it needs to be said that:

In the face of this unabated crisis, we stand in solidarity with all colleagues worldwide who are precariously employed or who lost their jobs, with those who are struggling to cover their health and social insurances, and those who find it challenging to take care of themselves and their loved ones in these trying times.

Despite the challenges faced by everyone in this weird field, Allegra saw

incredibly diverse and creative submissions this year, and we are much encouraged by the many authors who approached us (with a much increased regional spread!), by the efforts of our beloved "care reviewers" who did such wonderful and generous work to help the posts to publication, and by the trust and commitment of our engaged guest editors and other cooperation partners. Hooray for our Allies!

Our final team meeting of the year reminded us that Allegra would not be Allegra if it were not for our positive spirit. After many attempts, we managed to cast this into words that you will find on our website now, a slogan to get ready for 2021:

> ***Allegra: Anthropology for Radical Optimism***

This is who we are, this is what we do. All you other radical, subversive, insurgent optimists are invited to join.

But now we feel tired, drained even, and in need of a winter break. "Hibernation", somebody said. Sounds great. So we'll eat a cup of pine needles to pad our stomachs, and see you on the flip side:

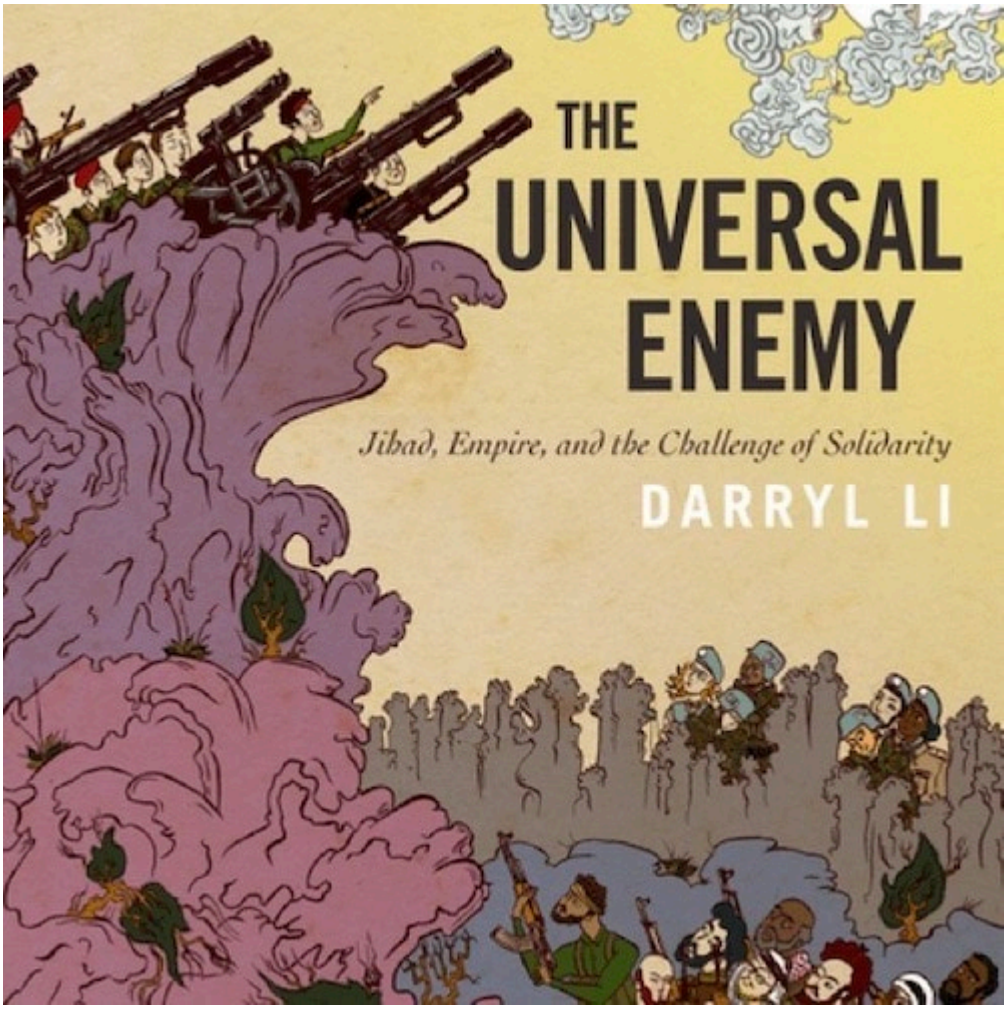
We will reconvene from January 8th, 2021 onwards.

Until next year – and remember: stay safe, stay sane, stay prudent.

Featured image by Annie Spratt (Courtesy of Unsplash)

Jihad, universalism, and the Left: A conversation with Darryl Li

Matan Kaminer
December, 2020



Since its publication in 2019, Darryl Li's *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity* (Stanford University Press) has been the focus of a great deal of attention and debate. This historical ethnography of jihad fighters in 1990s Bosnia touches on some of the central questions of our era, using the plural concept of "universalisms" to bring many of the historical forces in this conflict into conversation with one another. Drawing on the author's legal background and work as well as his anthropological training, the dense narrative connects

Bosnia to the far-flung homes of the mujahideen, from North Africa to Southeast Asia, and to the carceral archipelago constructed by the US in its war on terror. Delving into the little-explored, everyday universalisms of Third World students and UN peacekeepers as well as jihad participants, Li demonstrates a wealth of empathy which can be as unsettling for radical readers as it is for liberals. Matan Kaminer of LeftEast and Dr. Li held the following exchange about the book and its lessons last month. The following is an abridged version of the conversation; the full piece has been published on LeftEast.

On personal universalisms

MK: Thank you so much for agreeing to this conversation, Darryl. The Universal Enemy *was fantastic to think with, and has brought up a wide variety of questions for me. I'm an activist on the Israeli left and a PhD graduate in anthropology from the University of Michigan. I'm also a member of the LeftEast collective, the bulk of whose members are Eastern European. The way LeftEast has challenged me to question stale regionalizations is reflected in a piece I wrote trying to think Israel as an Eastern European country. This background is pertinent to the way I'm interpellating you: both as a fellow foreigner in the Balkans (though a much more knowledgeable one), and as a participant in the particular kind of universalism known as the Left. Hence, I'd like to begin with your background. How did your personal history of activism and research bring you to this project, and what effect did that history have?*

DL: During the early 1990s, the crises in the former Yugoslavia attracted enormous visibility and the region therefore became a space of fantasy projection for people coming from different parts of the world. The book shows how transnational jihad activism was a part of this common global story, in which you and I also take part of course.

> *It's Bosnia in particular that strikes a chord with all these Americans who are simultaneously immersed in Holocaust commemoration.*

With the Cold War having recently ended, the US was trying to make sense of and justify its unprecedented global hegemony. At the same time, the 50th anniversary commemorations of the end of World War II and the Holocaust provided a backdrop for making sense of mass atrocities occurring in the world. This moment is crystallized by the opening of the US Holocaust Museum in 1993 (which by the way is also the year *Schindler's List* was released). At this event, Elie Wiesel turns to President Clinton and implores him to do something about the atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. It's Bosnia in particular that strikes a chord with all these Americans who are simultaneously immersed in Holocaust commemoration – Bosnia much more than sites of mass violence in Africa, which of course has a lot to do with race.

Coming from a middle-class Asian-American immigrant family, I was assimilating into a normatively white American public culture at this time. The wars in ex-Yugoslavia were among my earliest memories of world events and I was shaped by that prevailing feeling of optimism, leavened by uncertainty, in American elite discourse. My own assimilation experience was also a search for something more universal as expressed by this sense of an international-community space. To the extent Asian-Americans had become part of the foreign policy world of the United States, it was often in the mold of the anti-communist émigré, something that held little appeal for me ideologically (despite my family's own historical affiliation with the Kuomintang). Instead, I had ideas of working for the UN or for human rights organizations, but because of my own differently racialized immigrant position, my identification with this project was shaky and contingent. I could never identify with white saviors but never dreamed of speaking for the oppressed – Cathy Park Hong has written evocatively about middle-class Asian-American subjectivities in a liminal space in U.S. racial hierarchies and how this can give rise to intense self-abnegation, of feeling like a "urinal cake of shame." In any event, my commitment to liberal humanitarianism basically fell apart around the early 2000s, with the Second Intifada and the events of 9/11. That's where I kind of got off that train.

MK: You were in college?

DL: Yes, it was my final year of college, the Second Intifada broke out, and I discovered new things about liberalism. When I graduated, I went to Palestine to work for a local NGO and on 9/11 I was living in the Gaza Strip, so I was already exploring alternatives to mainline liberal humanitarianism.

As a person of Chinese origin I've always understood my role in these projects to be necessarily peripheral but I've tried to make my best out of the particular advantages that position has afforded. For my interlocutors, both in Palestine and in Bosnia when I did my fieldwork there some years later, China was primarily an object of curiosity, seen as important and powerful enough to be respected, but not encountered directly enough to be resented. In most of these situations, I was the first Chinese person they were encountering in the role that I was playing, and that always creates a moment of slight confusion, hesitation and surprise. Now, because of what's been happening in Xinjiang/East Turkestan, those attitudes might have changed.

On a daily level, of course, I experienced public space in Bosnia as a gantlet of racial harassment, taunts, and so on. But even that is not disconnected from political economy, because that was a moment of expansion of commercial ties with China in the region. Mostly with Serbia, but every medium-sized or large town in Bosnia also has a Chinese retail outlet that provides cheaply produced commercial goods, and as with "middleman minorities" anywhere, that produces resentment and backlash.

MK: The layperson's view of the Cold War is very bipolar: the US vs. the USSR. But actually, China was playing an independent role starting in the 1950s, and remembering that is useful to rethinking what that conflict was about.

DL: There's also a temporal rethinking that's needed here. Recently Adam Tooze published an article which argues that it's premature to talk about the Cold War as having ended. The so-called democratic revolutions of 1989 started with Tiananmen, which led to a massive consolidation of state authority rather than

the collapse of state socialism. So instead of talking about the "post-Cold War" era, we might talk of a shift from a U.S.-Soviet bipolarity to a U.S.-China bipolarity of intertwined neoliberal projects.

In the chapter on the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), I tried to bring in a broader set of research interests, to get anthropologists and social historians in there, because what I had read was so focused on summitry and meetings between great men. While that's very important, there's something frustrating and limiting about it. A slightly broader scholarly outlook studies public discourse and cultural production, but still often looks at texts in this sort of vacuum. Trying to figure out the connective tissue of these things is really a different endeavor.

MK: I think that's one of the book's strong points. Conversely, you might say that anthropologists have also been remiss in our duties because we haven't been looking at much at the world-system aspect; we've become kind of myopic. In the 1990s, anthropologists were talking about ethnographies of the world-system. Some people are still doing that, but it's not very prevalent among my generation.

DL: Well it is difficult, so we could cut people a bit of a break. But I agree that the discipline tends to reward those who have micro data and very macro claims. Meso-level reconstruction – which is often where one can say more interesting and concrete things about politics – is not as much in evidence, and I think we need a lot more of that. It's funny because so-called transnational, multi-sited anthropology has been fashionable for a while, but there's still often something lacking in the connection to political questions. Usually there's a very generic claim about something like governmentality or neoliberalism, and then a leap to the micro, and back. Which is fine, but different from what we're talking about here.

On Internationalism

MK: Multiple universalisms play a role in The Universal Enemy. *My next question is about the kind of universalism known as internationalism. In the contexts of the*

NAM and peacekeeping, you characterize internationalism as a logic which "treats the state as the basic unit" for the deployment of universal sentiments and practices (p. 172), but this leaves out left-wing understandings of the term, which date back at least to the Communist Manifesto*. Internationalism was the cry of the volunteers of the Spanish Civil War, but it was also the ideology of the Yugoslav partisans of World War II. Can you help fill in this space by talking a bit about the legacy of the partisans in Bosnia? Has that legacy been present in Bosnian politics?*

DL: That's a great question. You're absolutely correct that my heuristic use of internationalism in the book does not engage with the actual histories of capital-I Internationalism, and that's an oversight. In the modern period, it's very difficult to escape the organizing logic of nationalism, in pan-Islamic movements as well as on the left. As you pointed out, transnational left activities are often organized along national lines. The International Brigades in Spain were organized on a national basis, and named for national figures like Abraham Lincoln.

Yugoslavia is a major example of how the left has been challenged by the category of nationalism. This was a multi-national federation that also tried to create a new kind of nationalism. Although Tito was successful in forging his project at a particular moment, there was always constitutional recognition of the disparate national projects within the federation – Serb and Croat ones in particular. Your question reminds me of one of the characters in the book, Mehmud, a Bosnian mujahid who shows up in Chapter 2. He's a strong supporter of the SDA, which is the major Bosniak nationalist political party, but his uncle was a partisan. They have lots of arguments, but he loves his uncle quite dearly. So even within one family there are competing ideas about how commitments to nationalism branch out and reach toward other potential points of connection and allegiance outside the country.

But structurally it's also a different kind of war. It's not a guerrilla war; that makes it different from the partisan project, and also from a lot of other jihad projects. You have trenches, front lines, infantry charges. In that sense, it's quite

conventional. Even there, I'm sure the partisan experience is invoked at some level, but I don't know how you would see any kind of embodied practice of that coming out, for example. Political education maybe, the fact that they had religious education going on parallel with the fighting, but I can't say that that was done with the partisan example in mind.

MK: That clarifies a few things for me, as I did have more of a guerilla scenario in mind. This brings up more geographical questions, since Bosnia is a pretty mountainous place, much like Afghanistan, and partisan warfare is in part about taking advantage of locals' knowledge of that terrain. That, I think, was very important to partisan strategy in World War II. Do you see any sort of connections between questions of military strategy and the ideological questions that are more salient in the book?

DL: Bosnia's terrain is less mountainous than Afghanistan's, but you're right that there are high elevations – this had the effect of making the war quite static. The front lines were mostly established in the early months, when the Serb and Croat forces grabbed territory and ethnically cleansed a lot of people, and they didn't change terribly much until the last segment of the war. The Bosnian Serbs' possession of heavy artillery and command of high-elevation areas enabled them to exert force in ways that compensated for their smaller numbers of troops. And this created a problem for the Bosnian army, which needed to take these mountaintops that had cannons on them, but it was difficult to do that, especially when you factor in weather and the lack of air support.

> *The particular attack that the cover illustrates was postponed several times over the course of a year, in part because the weather was not on the side of the mujahideen.*

MK: That's very apparent from Omar Khouri's fabulous cover for the book. I don't know if this was intentional, but the topography is clear there as well.

DL: The particular attack that the cover illustrates was postponed several times

over the course of a year, in part because the weather was not on the side of the mujahideen. They didn't have their own air support until the angels intervened, as their story and the cover recount. There was actually a lot of waiting around in the war.

On cosmopolitanism

MK: The second universalism I wanted to discuss with you is cosmopolitanism, which I would venture to define as an attitude which values the intermingling of people of different origins and cultural interaction as an end in itself, opposing the elision of cultural difference. Unlike internationalism, cosmopolitanism was a fraught term under socialism, even a derogatory one at times. Whereas internationalism can be squared with ideologies of autochthony – we can all be in solidarity if everyone stays in their place, or at least goes home when the war is over – this is not the case with cosmopolitanism. "Rootlessness" is always implicated in the idea that people might be more comfortable among those different from themselves than at "home." In this sense your repeated documentation of perceptions of the mujahideen as "rootless" seems very important. Can you say more on this aspect?

DL: That's a really helpful distinction, between internationalism as good, rooted solidarity and cosmopolitanism as bad, rootless solidarity. I'm less familiar with how this might have played out during the socialist era, but it was very much in evidence during the war. The argument of certain Croatian and Serbian nationalists about Bosniaks was not simply that they're different, but that they're *Turks*, they don't even belong in the area, they are essentially settlers. And that is essentially connected to the "Muslim question," not just in Yugoslavia but in Eastern Europe, as well as in South Asia.

MK: Right. Cosmopolitanism is also associated with nostalgia for the multi-ethnic empires of the pre-World War I period, and especially the Ottoman Empire. How are attitudes in Bosnia inflected by the Ottoman past?

DL: In multi-confessional imperial polities like the Mughal or the Ottoman Empires, Muslimness by itself wasn't an obvious basis for creating a strong national or even communal identity. While the ruling dynasts are themselves Muslim, that doesn't decide their relation to subjects who are Muslim but also cross-cut by various other factors like region, language, class, and so on. Belonging to empires gave people – including non-Muslims – a broad range of potential identities and connections, such that it wasn't clear to them that re-organizing along national lines necessarily made sense.

> *Their greater enjoyment of cosmopolitan privileges now becomes reason for regarding them as "backward" in the developing national consciousness.*

With the rise of nationalism, the status of these groups suddenly becomes more questionable. For Bosniaks, Muslimness is what allegedly sets them apart from Serbs and Croats; but even that is an open question. What was in an earlier moment their arguably greater enjoyment of cosmopolitan privileges now becomes reason for regarding them as "backward" in developing national consciousness. Hence the idea is that Bosniaks are not really a nation (and therefore they are just Serbs and Croats in denial), and it's only a short distance from there to saying that they're rootless and don't belong here. Edin Hajdparasic calls this dynamic that of the (br)other, who is precariously situated as both Brother and Other.

So there's a kind of cosmopolitanism charge, but insofar as cosmopolitanism is correlated with elitism, it's usually a question of numbers. The classic cosmopolitan groups are minorities, like Jews or Parsis; I'm thinking of that old Parsi story of the local potentate who says "my kingdom is like this cup of milk that's already full, I have no room for your people." Then the Parsis add sugar to the milk and say, "see, we're not taking up space, we're just making it sweeter." That notion of cosmopolitanism is harder to square with the Bosnian Muslim presence, because they have demographic bulk. They are in that messy spot on the border between the categories of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, which

may help explain why things got so fraught and violent.

MK: You've given this historical exposition of Islamic polities and cosmopolitanism, but I'd also be interested to hear more about how you think the mujahideen worked through the question of cosmopolitanism, and especially how they imagined being seen themselves. Your use of the term is very situated and quotidian, as when the English mujahideen fantasize about fish and chips (p. 11), but as we have seen, cosmopolitanism is politically overdetermined. How did the mujahideen imagine that the Bosnians were seeing them? Were they suspected of attempting to bring back the Ottoman polity?

DL: You're absolutely right that there's a discourse of cosmopolitanism in the jihad, with statements like "*mashallah*, there's brothers from so many different countries who are here, from so many different backgrounds." That's not structurally dissimilar from a UN press release that boasts about the number of countries contributing troops to peacekeeping operations somewhere.

MK: Or from an imperial procession where you see subjects of different ethnicities, each displaying their particularities…

DL: Oh yes, of course. That said, a lot of this is experienced through a marginalization of difference: "oh, we're all Muslims." There is some discomfort around talking about difference between Muslims. Not a complete rejection, but you can't just talk about it on the first interview, because there is an emphasis on commonality.

As for the Ottoman legacy, this is very tricky. The dominant discourse of the jihad is Salafi, and Salafis are no fans of the Ottomans. The Ottoman Empire fought wars against the followers of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in what is now Saudi Arabia, and the Ottomans are seen as incorrect or deviant in creed and religious practice. On the other hand, the jihad's entire justification is to defend Muslims in Bosnia and that requires some accommodation with the Bosnian Muslim nationalist project. So they're in this strange place where they don't really endorse the Ottomans, but have to operate in a space whose Muslimness is very Ottoman-

inflected.

However, outsiders often tend to discount the very important role of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarians also had to organize religious practice in Bosnia, in the same way that colonial powers did in so many other places. It was the Austro-Hungarians who actually created a centralized institution which delineated religion, and specifically Islam, as a self-contained domain of activity. And they built a lot of mosques and other buildings. They had this kind of neo-Moorish, Orientalist architectural style not unlike what you find in some former British colonies. After Abu 'Abd al-'Aziz visits Travnik, which is a center of Islamic learning for many centuries, he meets with Muhammad Nasr al-Din al-Albani, one of the biggest Salafi scholars of the century. He tells him, "look, Bosnia has a rich Muslim heritage, when I was in Travnik I saw this beautiful mosque and this beautiful *madrasa*." He doesn't realize that the *madrasa* building that he's extolling was built under the Austro-Hungarians and designed by a Catholic architect! That doesn't nullify his sentiments, but the irony here shows if we just gloss Islam in this region as an "Ottoman legacy," we miss out on a lot.

MK: One thing that this dialogue has brought up is the question of the relation between regionality and universalism. It seems that imperial formations and imperial universalisms play a role in the way we think about regions.

DL: Regions and trans-regionalism are extremely important building blocks for the more successful universalist projects and are analytically important for this book, but in the context of this jihad their role and importance are often necessarily denied or suppressed; they don't have to play a role at the discursive level. The idea that Muslims of all these different nationalities just rose up and went to Bosnia and Afghanistan to fight serves both the liberal security state narrative and that of the participants themselves. The idea is that the commitment is so strong that you're going to go no matter what.

MK: That's a really important point about how universalisms tend to disavow their

own regionality. I'm thinking about the Soviet bloc: in the West it was thought of as the Eastern *bloc, and this brings in connotations of Oriental despotism etc. But the Soviets would have rejected that framing, at least in an official capacity. The Soviet bloc is defined by its ideological commitments and its economic system,* not *by its culture, much less race or religion. Where these things happen to coincide, it's supposedly a coincidence, whether fortunate or unfortunate. You can say very similar things about Islam, right? Muslims do happen to be concentrated in particular parts of the world.*

DL: Right. Yes. That absolutely makes sense.

… and on the Left

MK: Finally, a question that I imagine you must have faced already. You end the book's introduction on a provocative political note, arguing that "[f]or all their commitments to […] reactionary politics, those mobilizing in the name of jihad have been among the few actors in recent decades to have taken seriously the challenges of organizing political violence across borders in the face of American empire" (p. 26). Can you expand on what we can learn from the mujahideen about a "grounded and reflexive approach to violence" in the face of empire? I think you're saying what leftists might be interested in taking from mujahideen are lessons about organization and structure, not ideology. Because, now speaking totally as a leftist, I'd really like to know what we can learn from the mujahideen. That isn't a rhetorical question!

DL: I think your interpretation is correct. As I've said in other contexts, the bumper-sticker version is: sure, there's all sorts of things you can say about these people and their "problematic" orientations, and you can accept all those arguments and still say, "well, if they're so problematic but they're taking on these very difficult challenges that we are not, then what does that say about the left?"

> *A lot of our received notions about the relationship between the left and Islamic*

movements also need to be rethought.

Even having this conversation about jihad is already a significant step forward, not just from liberal and academic discourses, but even for a lot of people on the left that have not really reckoned with these questions. This is where I think we need more empirical research, because a lot of our received notions about the relationship between the left and Islamic movements also need to be rethought. The story is one of antagonism as well as overlap. I know Timothy Nunan is doing some interesting research on this at the moment.

MK: In what geographical context is that?

DL: I'm not exactly sure, but it's about left and Islamic internationalisms in the '60s and '70s. We think of 1979 as the year of an Islamic revolution in Iran, following a communist revolution in '76 in Afghanistan that gives way to an Islamic resurgence. But this story cuts out the rich tradition of left and Islamic interaction leading up to that point. We can think of the Islamic revolution as part of a whole series of insurrections on both sides of the Gulf throughout the 1960s and '70s. On the west side of the Gulf, you have the revolution in Dhofar, and labor militancy in Bahrain and Kuwait. Nasserism is also very much in evidence. And of course, communists played a significant role in the 1979 revolution in Iran.

The history of Soviet rule in Central Asia also has to be revisited, because there are stereotypes on both ends, about regressive gender politics as well as about coercive violence, things like forcible de-veiling. All these things should be revisited and re-explored. Of course there are going to be genuine disagreements and antagonisms, but research can help to build out a broader sense of the possibilities, of the range of interaction. Politically as well, because we are in a moment where those tensions are apparent in anti-war and anti-militarist organizing in many spaces.

MK: All that is well taken. Empirically, though, in Bosnia the mujahedin are entering a country that has been socialist until recently, and many of them are

coming from Afghanistan, where they were fighting against a socialist regime. What was their attitude towards these questions of socialism vs. capitalism, left vs. right?

DL: This is a little difficult to answer, because my interviews take place many years after the fact. Anti-communism is just not a strong theme in my interviews because at that point it was mainly irrelevant, and even in the contemporary discourse communism is mentioned primarily as one of the reasons why Bosnians have not been allowed to practice their faith correctly. But the Cold War is over! So they're updating their discourses. Also, a lot of the folks I spoke to are very comfortable with broadly social-democratic politics, welfare states and the like. Islamist political projects are not at all incompatible with social welfare orientations; the Islamic Republic of Iran is the biggest example of that.

If I had spoken to more Gulfies, I might have gotten more anti-communism, but even in the Gulf anti-communism is related to specific political antagonisms. For example, in the Hadrami diaspora that I write about, many feel aggrieved by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, due to concrete antagonisms around their property getting nationalized. And again, geopolitics is interesting here: in the 1980s the Saudis are supporting jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, but also low-key supporting the socialist PDRY to undermine North Yemen. Fighting communism at their front doorstep is somehow less of a priority than in Afghanistan.

MK: This is starting to sound a lot like Southeast Asia in the 1980s, where Thailand, China and the US are supporting the Khmer Rouge against Vietnam and the USSR…

DL: Exactly, and I think that complexity matters. Not in the endless way that some anthropologists use the term, as a way to dodge having commitments, but as a way of recognizing that there are multiple axes of antagonism that cross-cut each other. And southeast Europe is definitely one place where this comes out, because historically it has not been securely in the camp of any major power: it has been a

site of contestation. That's why left discussions about Palestine and Central America look very different from left conversations about Syria and ex-Yugoslavia.

MK: I think I understand your statement now as an even stronger one. You're actually talking about needing to approach the question of commonalities between the left and political Islam with fresh eyes.

DL: Yes. The book is really written for folks who are trying to dwell in that space of connection between the left and Islam.

MK: Well, I'm definitely in the target audience! And I believe a few others will also find it interesting. Thank you so much for your time.

Casting Out the Disabled and Ill Immigrant: The Legacies of Australia's Immigration Restriction Act of 1901

Helena Zeweri
December, 2020

Collectively, immigration policies function to perform national sovereignty by reinforcing the division between citizen and migrant, usually conflated with ‘native’ and ‘outsider.’ While the work of preserving sovereignty is an exclusionary act, in certain contexts it rests on particularly totalitarian governance practices. Such practices have their roots in longstanding racial and social hierarchies whose legacies continue to haunt the immigration policies of even liberal nation-states today. In Australia, for instance, immigration policies for several decades have excluded disabled and ill migrants by rendering them as biologically inferior and as economic burdens. I do not suggest here that Australia is a totalitarian state or that its approach to immigration fits neatly into a totalitarian framework. Rather, I posit that Australia’s approach to managing the entry of disabled and ill migrants into the nation-state contains the ingredients for totalitarian tendencies and should be subject to close examination.

Australian policies toward disabled and chronically ill migrants have resonances with pre-World War II Europe. As political theorist Hannah Arendt has argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973), the refusal to accept minorities reflected how emerging totalitarian regimes privileged nativism and national identity over human rights and legal protections. Excluding physically and mentally ill minority populations—many of whom had already been cast out as racialized others—was a key way European states cemented the idea that fulfilling physiological and biological 'norms' was a premise of one's capacity to assimilate. This mode of exclusion was taken to its logical extreme during the Nazi regime's establishment of German Eugenics science, which introduced ideas of racial and physiological purity in order to cultivate a genetically fit society. In this racialized utopia, the differently abled and the chronically ill were represented as inherently 'degenerate', less evolved beings, and an economic and cultural burden 'to the greater German 'Aryan' race."

While it is important not to create a false equivalence between pre-World War II Europe and Australia, there are analogous ideas at play that render differently abled and ill migrants as apriori threats to the nation—both its present and its future. Australia's immigration policies make it virtually impossible for immigrants with a disability or illness to receive visas. Section 60 of the currently active Migration Act of 1958 states that applicants must demonstrate they will not pose a significant cost to the community or prevent Australian citizens and permanent residents from accessing healthcare or community services regardless of whether or not they would use such services (Section c(ii), Section 60, Migration Act of 1958). Thus, baked into entry requirements is the assumption that disabled immigrants always already pose a threat to citizens' health and wellbeing—that the entry of the 'other' takes something away from the able-bodied citizen. This cost threshold is calculated through the state's "hypothetical person test." This test consists of the individual applicant's projected healthcare costs over the course of their life span, based on standard metrics predetermined for different disabilities and health conditions. According to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection website, the following diseases or conditions

could result in significant costs and result in an application rejection, based on the number of projected medical tests, doctors' visits, pharmaceutical drugs and other adaptive and rehabilitative technologies the patient would require: intellectual impairment; HIV infection; functional impairment; renal disease or failure; and cancer. People with other diseases such as Tuberculosis are rendered ineligible for a visa until they can prove they have received treatment. Those who do have HIV and who plan to work as a doctor, dentist, nurse, or paramedic are also considered potential risks to public health.[i]

> *Baked into entry requirements is the assumption that the entry of the 'other' takes something away from the able-bodied citizen.*

In 2012, Australia introduced another element to its policy toward disabled immigrants. Immigration Minister Chris Bowen announced that under a new "net benefit" approach, the benefits that disabled migrants and their families brought to Australia would now be considered against the cost of their healthcare. An example of the fallout of this test is when Angelo Fonseka, a Sri Lankan man who was given a temporary work visa in Australia appealed to the Australian federal government to grant his 9-year old daughter, Eliza, who had Down Syndrome, a chance at legal entry into Australia. Angelo Fonseka was a Christian missionary working in Western Australia with the Shark Bay Christian Fellowship. His application for permanent residence for his family was rejected because of Eliza's Down Syndrome, leaving his wife Shanoline and Eliza back in Sri Lanka (Holland 2015). Part of the government's initial decision to deny her entry was based on the failure to meet the new "net benefit" policy. In this case, and in many other documented cases[ii], disabled migrants are represented as potential leeches on Australia's social welfare system. Here, containing invasive peoples means containing what will inevitably be parasitic behavior.

Why is the state so concerned with how disabled and chronically ill immigrants could impact the lives of its resident population? As El Gibbs has recently written in *The Guardian*: "We don't count other potential costs like this; we don't ask

migrants to tally up their potential road use and reject them on the basis they will be too much of a burden on our road supply. Nor do we make potential immigrants estimate a possible future cost to our family court system in case of future divorce, or the possible cost of a potential childbirth" (2019). According to Brandon Ah Tong, staff member of Vision Australia, the country's largest provider of blindness and low vision services, Australia's migration policies, since the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, have always been focused on making judgments about the "fitness and desirableness of would-be Aussies" (Tong 2011).

The history of Australia's 'discriminatory cost' justification goes back to the origins of Australian nationhood itself with its Australia's Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. Also known as the White Australia Policy, its explicit refusal to accept non-European migrants constituted an effort to create a racially insulated white able-bodied society. As a result, several of its sections take inspiration from eugenicist ideas on mental and physical health. According to historian Allison Bashford, the 1901 Act explicitly refused entry to immigrants who had been in insane asylums or had been diagnosed with Syphilis or Epilepsy. At the time, such migrants were seen as burdens on the social and economic system, but also as threats to the genetic makeup of the country itself; it was feared they would pass down undesirable traits to their offspring. In fact, eugenicist promoters globally saw the White Australia Policy as one of the greatest legally codified acts of eugenics at the time.

> *Known as the White Australia Policy, its explicit refusal to accept non-European migrants constituted an effort to create a racially insulated white able-bodied society.*

The spirit of the policy itself is deeply tied to Australia's settler colonial origins, namely the idea among British settlers that Australia is where they could 'breed a whole new type of person from 'the stock of Mother England,' who was healthy and fit" (Bashford 2004). Such ideas of racial and physiological superiority were formed in conjunction with settler colonial attitudes toward Aboriginal

communities who were deemed less evolved beings. Settlers saw Australia as a place where the evolutionary process could be manipulated to support the creation of a new society. It was thought that engineering a racially pure and physiologically advanced nation required the reproduction of higher-level humans (read white British immigrants).

Looking at totalitarian practices in Australia might be jarring, given the extent to which the country has served as a global example of progressive multicultural policies. While the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act is no longer in effect, the spirit of the Act has not been entirely shaken off. In fact, the attitudinal ingredients that see non-normative bodies as inherent threats are very much present and alive. Eugenicist ideas have served as the bedrock of the immigration policies of many nation-states. While policy language may have shifted from racial and physiological purity to cost efficiency, the core principle that certain bodies and capacities are preferable over others—whether for the purposes of fostering a productive labor economy or preserving cultural homogeneity–has remained. The language of cost efficiency allows the Australian state to deny that its policies are ableist by design—it is no coincidence that t*he currently operative Migration Act of 1958 is exempt* from the *Disability* Discrimination Act of 1992. Refusing to dismantle such ideas could lead to the further cementing of totalitarian practices in social policies well within the border of the nation-state.

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Featured image by Alexandre Saraiva Carniato (Courtesy of Pexels)

Escape, Exposure, and Life on the Pacific Crest Trail

Emily Chambers
December, 2020

An act of walking into the wilderness implies an act of walking out of somewhere or something. The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), which extends over the US states of California, Oregon and Washington, and connects Mexico to Canada, has long represented an escape from the monotony and materialism of mainstream western society (Fletcher 2014). However, the construction of the PCT as an untouched and thoroughly wild space is only made possible by the systemic erasure of violent social policies and migrant bodies (Kafer 2005). Purported divisions between the "real world" and "wilderness" are increasingly porous as technologies, politics, and materialities seep into the lives of both hikers and migrants. Inviting a folding together of person, place, and thing, the lives and afterlives of the vibrant objects, subjectivities, and landscapes, which inform life on the Pacific Crest Trail, complicate the notion of what it means to walk out of "our" world and into the world of the wild.

> *Divisions between the "real world" and "wilderness" are increasingly porous as technologies, politics, and materialities seep into the lives of both hikers and migrants.*

Beginning at the US-Mexico border, the monument marking the southern terminus of the PCT is dwarfed by The Wall. Each year, this long-distance hiking trail witnesses hundreds of individuals attempting to walk from border to border, as well as thousands of migrants attempting to walk from one country to another. For migrants seeking to enter the US, the trail is both an escape from poverty, famine, and violence, and an exposure to those very things (De Leon, Gokee and Schubert 2015). The fact that the PCT coincides with many of the trails undocumented migrants may take across the border reifies the constructedness of divisions between citizenship and state. Migrants may take the national trail in an effort to reach some form of quasi-nationality.

The PCT materializes not as a place set apart, but a place entwined (Ness 2016), animating the technologies, politics, and materialities that seep into the lives of both hikers and migrants. Rather than exploring the PCT and the US-Mexico borderlands as liminal spaces, I am interested in the ways these spaces bleed into one other, complicating the meaning of both "real" and "life." While hikers seek to escape American society via the desert, migrants struggle to become a part of American society via that same desert. The tensions between borderland and national land are punctuated by the lives and afterlives of the specific objects that accompany individuals into the wild. From water bottles carried and discarded along the trail by migrants to the water caches left by "trail angels" for thirsty hikers, differences of liveability are brought to matter, revealing a much more entangled world of exposure, violence, and life on the trail.

> *The tensions between borderland and national land are punctuated by the lives and afterlives of the specific objects that accompany individuals into the wild.*

While conducting fieldwork for my master's research project, I had the privilege

of hiking several sections of the PCT in Washington and British Columbia. Upon approaching the Canadian frontier, I was unnerved by how easily I was able to move across the border. While there were no barriers, checkpoints, or people at the US-Canada border on the PCT, the southern terminus of the trail commands multi-million dollar “security measures” to deter migrants at the US-Mexico border. I was unsettled by the juxtaposition of these two landmarks and its implications for the treatment of its disparate migrants. The Wall transforms the act of walking from a personal into a political endeavor. Embodying a collection of disparate meanings, which hinge upon a person’s connection to the place, the steel structure ties together discourses of soil and sovereignty, of suffering and solace. At the southern trailhead of the PCT, it is the crossers, and not the border, who are rendered nearly invisible against the backdrop of the California desert. The power and privilege packed into the ability to walk both in and out of the wilderness become animated by the objects that expedite, enable or infringe upon the movement of particular persons on the trail.

> *The Wall transforms the act of walking from a personal into a political endeavor.*

Although the Pacific Crest Trail and the migrant trails encompass the same landscapes within the US-Mexico borderlands, nature on the national trail emerges as a haven, while on the migrant trail it is deployed as a weapon. In his 2015 ethnography *The Land of Open Graves*, Jason De Leon exposes the agenda of the US government in its implementation of the Prevention Through Deterrence Program. By heightening security in densely populated areas, border patrol agents force undocumented migrants to cross through the desert. Under the guise of this program, government policies exploit the wilderness and its actants, resulting in a production of mass migrant death, rather than deterrence (De Leon 2015). In 2019, the PCT claimed the life of one prospective hiker (Halfway Anywhere 2020). In that same year, over 800 migrants died attempting to cross the US-Mexico borderlands (UN News 2019).

In June of 2013, when asked to comment on several decomposing bodies found in the wilderness of the US-Mexico borderlands, Tucson Sector Chief Manuel Padilla Jr. dismissively stated, “the desert does not discriminate” (De Leon 2015, 43). But while the desert, may not consciously discriminate as an active, agentic force amongst its victims, the collision of persons, places, things, and powers along the US-Mexico border enables the desert to systematically pick up and discard migrant lives, while simultaneously allowing hikers to walk through the migrant graveyard undeterred, and often unaware. Despite bearing witness to the persecution of innocent individuals, the PCT works to obscure the blood implicit in its soil and preserve the fiction of a natural wilderness journey (Fletcher 2014). Obscuring the lives and afterlives of migrants and their materials, maps encourage thru-hikers to avoid undocumented migrants by outlining precautionary measures such as refraining from hiking at night (Quinn 2015, 19). While the Pacific Crest Trail is monitored by governmental agencies to ensure the safety of its thru-hikers, the migrant trail is monitored to ensure the disappearance of its travelers. Frailty is distributed differently across each trail and the power of the place shifts in accordance with the positionality of the person.

> *The PCT works to obscure the blood implicit in its soil and preserve the fiction of a natural wilderness journey.*

The various objects that accompany hikers and migrants into the wilderness reveal discrepancies in access to money, power, and opportunity. While the popularization of ultralight backpacking has created a culture of hikers that enlist high-tech and often expensive gear to produce packs with the lowest possible base weight, migrants take the ultralight mantra to a new level, out of necessity rather than expediency, typically entering the desert without enough food or water to survive for more than a few days. Differences of power increasingly *matter* when the matter of modern materialities, although not living, give life, providing individuals with the shelter, sustenance, and strength required to keep on walking. Foucault’s biopower (1978) becomes reworked within the body of the

thing, prompting these objects to assume a type of agency (Bennett 2010), through which they possess the power to make hikers live or let them die.

Since the early 2000s, a majority of thru-hikers have become reliant upon the life-giving abilities of modern technologies, such as Emergency SPOT GPS locators (Miller 2014). These machines afford hikers the luxury of choice, as well as the reassurance of rescue. They are imbued with the ultimate power to make hikers live: one only has to press a button to be whisked out of the wilderness. Equipped with an exit strategy, hikers expose the stakes inherent in processes of mattering and unmattering. While the presence of a GPS in a hikers' pack has the potential to save a life, the same technology on the body of an undocumented migrant has the capacity to stunt a life. Border crossers caught with navigational tools may be charged with smuggling and face jail time, rather than deportation (De Leon 2015). While the operation of a GPS by a hiker in the wild is construed as a personal affair, the possession of that same GPS by a migrant hiking through the wild becomes a potent, political issue.

> *Frailty is distributed differently across each trail and the power of the place shifts in accordance with the positionality of the person.*

Although undocumented migrants are often devoid of the money or power required to access the high-tech gear that thru-hikers employ, migrant technologies enact the power to make live or let die to an even greater degree. A matter of leisure becomes a matter of life (or death). Further emphasizing the politics behind making matter appear natural in the wild, trail angels on the PCT emerge as unsung heroes, leaving caches of food, water, and cold beer on the trail. Increasingly ingrained into the fabric of the PCT, trail magic emerges as a crucial experience for many long-distance hikers, providing them with the motivation and the materials to keep on walking. In contrast to the caches left for thru-hikers, water caches left for migrants are considered a federal offense. Often condemned, tampered with or destroyed, the politicization of migrant matter marks these caches as unnatural and unsavory, degrading both a nation and its

nature (De Leon 2015).

When place and thing fail the person, migrants and their matter become folded into the desert landscape. “Natural” processes of decay and decomposition disappear the person, and his or her things, from the social world. Deceased migrants and their discarded matter are reduced, by the American public, to migrant “trash” (Soto 2018). Sidestepping the detrimental environmental impacts of the Border Patrol, border crossers are scapegoated, even in death, for the desecration of the desert (De Leon, Gokee and Schubert 2015). In an effort to preserve the wilderness, “the material signature of migration” has become a focus of desert cleanup projects (Soto 2018), which supplement the power of the desert in making migrant matter un-matter. These projects erase the historical evidence of racialized persecution in the desert with the conflation of artifact and trash (Soto 2018). The agency of place and thing remain highly dependent on the agency, or lack thereof, of the person. Structures of power become enmeshed within the world of the wild, making or unmaking materials and migrants appear as natural or detrimental to the environment.

In line with this process of un-mattering, the bodies and materials of migrants are made to disappear in the desert. Conservation efforts encompassed by the “Leave no Trace” mantra, which is unfailingly recited along the miles of the PCT, are violently replicated along the coinciding miles of the migrant trail. The Prevention Through Deterrence program weaponizes the desert in an effort to “leave no trace” of its undocumented migrants. Signifying a rigid adherence to preservation policies, the moniker “Leave no Trace Nazi” is often assigned to hikers on the PCT as an ironic, yet esteemed, badge of honor (Forestell 2017). This reappropriation of the term “Nazi” is indicative of the processes of modification, sanitization, and extermination that have made the outdoors inhabitable, and the wilderness explorable for white individuals and affluent hikers. In the US-Mexico Borderlands and along the Pacific Crest Trail, the preservation of the environment appears to supersede the preservation of (particular) lives (De Leon 2015).

Equipped with an exit strategy, hikers expose the stakes inherent in processes

of mattering and unmattering.

The person relies on the functioning of the body, as well as its materialities, to survive the place. Insisting upon the vitality of modern matter, the things that are carried into the borderlands and across the PCT become twisted in the wilderness, often detaching from the particular regimes for which they are made to insist upon in the "real" world. This act of "unbracketing", as Annemarie Mol describes it, reveals the multiplicity of corporeal, extracorporeal and relational objects that "hang together" (2002, 84) in the consolidation of a singular person, a singular place, or a singular thing (2002, 70). Tying person to place, the vitality of the material objects (which both recreational hikers and undocumented migrants rely upon for sustenance, shelter, and strength) become imbued with the power to make live or let die (Bennett 2010; Foucault 1978), as the "real world" becomes inextricably entangled with the world of the wild.

A year has passed since I walked across the US-Canada border, and much has changed, but not in the ways one would hope. PCT hikers who chose to complete the trail by crossing into Canada are now considered illegal migrants. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all Canada-US land borders have been closed to non-essential travel since late March of 2020. However, this has not stopped the flow of recreational hikers from moving across the western United States, and across the border into Canada. Many members of the hiking community, including the Facebook group, *Still Hiking the PCT*, denounce public health measures that restrict movement and travel. These hikers emphasize their need to walk, albeit for much less essential reasons than those of the migrants at the US-Mexico border. Despite these new regulations, security measures at the northern border remain exceptionally lax in comparison to those at its southern counterpart, calling into question entanglements of soil, sovereignty, and security, and pointing to the hypocrisy of the Prevention Through Deterrence Program. Increasingly, it is clear that only certain lives matter, and un-matter, in the American borderlands. I am uncertain of how one moves forward in a world that encourages only a powerful few to move forward. I am uncertain of how one

moves forward in a world where a pandemic requires us to stay still. Here lies the paradox of a trail that possesses the power to make hikers live, and a government that overrides this power to let migrants die.

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On unsolicited nostalgia and Tinder frustrations

Leah Junck
December, 2020

‘I’ve been here before’ – the feeling of the present being firmly rooted in the past can be intense and disorienting. It is difficult to trace, like a déjà vu: an experience in which eery familiarity is produced seemingly out of thin air. Suddenly sparked memories are somewhat ‘out of place’; they don’t seem to quite fit the context but may, nevertheless, have real emotional weight to them.

It is this mismatch of background and bodily response that I feel every time my phone provides me with short, musically underlined video animations. These consist of a selection of pictures. In my case, they usually depict myself in the company of family or friends visiting me in Cape Town, South Africa, where I have lived for the past ten years. Similarly, Facebook makes clips to celebrate my ‘friendaversary’ with fellow Facebook users. Since very few pictures of me are available on Facebook, the creations feel somewhat random and do not have the

same effect than the clips created with access to my much richer phone archive. The latter also tend to be accompanied by a piece of more melancholic music and thus seem to poke at a particular kind of sentiment.

> *In recent years, digital reminders have become more pervasive. I have found myself sharing a lot of old photos with relevant people and this adds a slight giddiness and feeling of contentment. Yet, with the next reminder replacing the former on the phone screen a few days later, it soon becomes a memory hard to recollect.*

In recent years, digital reminders have become more pervasive. I have found myself sharing a lot of the photos that pop up at the very top of my phone archive titled ‘one year ago’, ‘two years ago’ or ‘five years ago’. Thanks to cloud storage, all of these are still available even after multiple phone losses/breakages and are archived according to date – more meticulously than I would ever have done myself. Living far away from my family in Germany and associating the moments I am regularly reminded of by my phone with happy reunions (the joyful moments being the ones to stick with me in retrospective), my response to them resembles a wholehearted inner sigh, creeping through my body and warming it up from chest to toes and fingertips. The reactions I receive to sharing them with the relevant person add a slight giddiness and feeling of contentment. In the moment, it feels as though the experience is now complete: it has run full circle and I am satisfied knowing that it is firmly rooted in my own and the other person’s memory. Yet, with the next reminder replacing the former on the phone screen a few days later, it soon becomes a memory hard to collect.

> *There is no intentionality beyond the algorithms involved, no knowledge of the context by the digital initiator. Still, looking at the audio-visual creations can be touching and invoke a feeling of nostalgia – an unsolicited but not necessarily unwelcome one.*

What is new about this manner of remembering is that, while it does reflect an

interaction of a social nature, it is re-designed as an emotional moment not by any of the people involved in the shared experience, but by a digital mechanism. There is no intentionality beyond the algorithms involved, no knowledge of the context by the digital initiator. Still, looking at the audio-visual creations can be touching and invoke a feeling of nostalgia – an unsolicited but not necessarily unwelcome one. The returning pictures are memory props and, as such, they may but do not revive memories, which they, in my case, often do.

Frozen moments?

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (2004) said 'it is a singular feeling when, in the midst of enjoyment, one looks at it in order to recollect it'. In the age of smartphones, this often takes the form of us interrupting a moment in order to take pictures, freezing it into a certain format. This has become part of an embodied habitual repertoire for many of us whether in the form of a group or landscape snapshot, a short video clip, a selfie, or an impermanent (?) Snapchat image with additional design elements. The practice marks special occasions but is also part of the everyday humdrum. Within it, unsolicited nostalgia of this kind could be seen as having an adaptive function. It can facilitate a sense of rootedness, of perspective and connectedness. It can counterweigh loneliness and meaninglessness in re-connecting with former experiences, their textures and smells. Nevertheless, they are not born out of an inner narrative, but are – ready or not- placed upon oneself. What is more, instead of embedding experiences in one's memory and documenting it for posterity, their presence is not designed to be of permanence but to evoke a momentary response soon to be exchanged for another.

Like a ritual, the interaction with my phone I initially described involves knowledge (on my part), imagery and a shared memory but it is not the result of a desire to link the present with the past in this specific way and with this particular image. It is different for me digitally scanning an old photograph with continuity in mind. It also relies on my momentary oblivion to the structures guiding what appears to be a spontaneously triggered phenomenological state.

After all, most social media strategies many of us are exposed to daily serve to steer, market and sell – also with the help of algorithms. As such, many of the thoughts we have are strategically guided by advertisers who profit from a decrease of face-to-face contact and an increase in time being spent online.

> *As a result of a decrease in analogue human interaction, many rituals that serve to cultivate memory and identity will likely change in the era of the digital and involve either imagined communities (Anderson 1991) or individuals rather than shared habitus and collective practice.*

As a result of a decrease in analogue human interaction, many rituals that serve to cultivate memory and identity will likely change in the era of the digital and involve either imagined communities (Anderson 1991) or individuals rather than shared habitus and collective practice. Some of them may be limited to interchanges between individuals and machines. What matters here is whether these rituals consist of mere recollections or if they serve cultural reproduction and feel consequential. In the face of a fundamental fear of meaninglessness, Marcus Gabriel (2019) says, a lot of human cultural work is invested into reducing the impression that we are exposed to factors that are completely beyond our control. As an example for this, he refers to the immortality fantasy of silicon valley which involved the embedding of minds into technology, thus preserving them for eternity.

Simulating agency

Thinking about this throws me back to my own research on the use of the GPS-coordinated dating application (app) Tinder in Cape Town (South Africa). Following 25 people on their dating journeys for two years, one thing became very clear and that is a shared sense of frustration. Even though it was not always easy to pinpoint why, everyone I interviewed insisted that they were often so dissatisfied using the (in)famous and widely used app, so much so that they would frequently delete it. Notably, this had to do with the disassociation of app-

facilitated experiences from a sense of realness and authenticity.

> *Thinking about this throws me back to my own research on the use of the GPS-coordinated dating application (app) Tinder in Cape Town (South Africa). Following 25 people on their dating journeys for two years, one thing became very clear and that is a shared sense of frustration*

This is interesting, considering that smartphones have been so integrated into daily routines that many of us feel naked not having them within reach, whether it is for a quick picture or a session of swiping left and right for a suitable date while waiting for the bus. Yet, Tinder was not only deleted time and time again, it was also repeatedly re-downloaded because having numerous dating options constantly available at one's fingertip feels freeing. One can decide how much or little to share with others on the app. Choices can be made at any given time with a simple swipe to the right. And whether a physical meeting actually happens and for what purpose can still be decided. Dating, friendship and even business connections are, according to advertisements, an option. But instead of being invigorating, using the app frequently led to a tindering fatigue. While most of my study participants had been in 'Tinder relationships' at some point, the most prominent association with the app was a lack of enchantment that reached beyond unimaginative profiles. What was romanticised as a more worthwhile experience, on the other hand, was the chance encounter, like meeting someone while both are grabbing for the last cucumber at the supermarket while locking eyes.

One of the main aspects that appealed to Tinder users and had them re-downloading the app time and time again was the desire to create a sense of agency. However, instead on making good on hedonist promises, the relatively new social space accommodating a wide range of desires but offering very little guidance in how to navigate them often produced more insecurity. The result was avoidance (also see Illouz, 2018) but also attempt to establish a sense of control. Every download was an opportunity to change one's profile and use a different

approach to improve dating experiences and reduce chances of disappointment – just like every time we pick our phones unnecessarily it is in the hopes of a positive new experience. It is a way of creating symbolic order in the chaos of the online jungle. Apart from changes in the profile, some people would opt to look for relationships that did not fit narrow romantic ideas of dating and rather cautiously look for what I call 'add-on friendships', that is friendships with the potential for more, which I interpret to be an attempt to curtail disappointment.

> *Instead of being invigorating, using the app frequently led to a tindering fatigue. While most of my study participants had been in 'Tinder relationships' at some point, the most prominent association with the app was a lack of enchantment that reached beyond unimaginative profiles.*

Perhaps, then, the unsolicited, momentary nostalgia triggered by cell-phone functions and the ways in which persistent-yet-disillusioned tinderers manoeuvre the dating game can be read as reimagining connectivity and grappling with an accelerated sense of impermanence. There is a nostalgic note to these practices, finding expression in a desire to meet 'organically' or otherwise embrace the past while hesitantly moving towards what is yet to come.

Digitally facilitated reminders of moments with people we care about reach us at a time when face-to-face encounters become rarer, especially with Covid19 raging on a global scale. At the same time, relationships with smartphones and other digital assortments become tighter, opening up vast new spaces to navigate. This produces not only freedom but also opens up room for unknowns and plenty of insecurities. Still, for the time being, Tinder and other social media platforms – for better or worse – remain the go-to for many of us when looking for intimacy. In seeking contact beyond revived and idealised distant memories, distinguishing between what is staged, what is self-protection, what is fake and what is genuine becomes something that must be learned anew without resorting to a categorical romantisation of the past.

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A Possible Anthropology with Anand Pandian

Ian M. Cook
December, 2020
https://soundcloud.com/allegra_lab/a-possible-anthropology-with-anand-pandian

Anand Pandian speaks to Allegra editor Ian M. Cook about his latest book A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times (Duke, 2019). Special guests Penelope Papailias and Laura Kunreuther send in their questions, generated from an 'experimental humanities' reading group they were part of last summer! You can listen to Anand speak to Ian about one of his previous books *Reel World: An Anthropology of Creation* here.

Music credit: The Barren Sea
Audio co-editing: Laura Isabel de los Reyes Walker-Beaven.

Heeding anthropological mottos in the study of law

Marie-Benedicte Dembour
December, 2020

When: 11 December 2020 / 2-3.30 pm CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616...

ID: 93210372616

Password: 4JzWZ6

Abstract

Even though I have been based in a school of law for thirty years, my scholarly contributions do not come across as legally conventional. This is no doubt due to my doctoral training, which was in social anthropology. This will have given my work an anthropological edge. My contribution to the volume Research Methods for International Human Rights Law Beyond the Traditional Paradigm (Gonzalez-Salzberg and Hodson eds, 2020) tries to explain what such an edge entails. Four 'anthropological mottos' are identified: #1 Aim at establishing how the small nitty-gritty stuff of social life connects with the big picture; #2 Pay attention to the gap between theory and practice; #3 Be aware of power relations and their framing and silencing effects; #4 Do not stop at surface level but always dig deeper. Whilst these mottos are not specific to anthropology, it would be hard to meet an anthropologist who does not today abide by them. Once I had formulated them, I could retrospectively see that they had guided my research all along. I had always been aware that my point of departure in research is first and foremost empirical, and that this led me to ponder elements of legal data fellow academic lawyers do not necessarily stop to consider and to delve into issues they would tend not to address. Going further, one could say that what makes my approach distinctively anthropological is that I understand law to be a social field in and of itself (as opposed to a normative construct, even one which lends itself to be studied 'in context').

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.

The Ethnographer's Catch 22

Magnus Godvik Ekeland
December, 2020

Did I hear a knock at my door? I stopped what I was doing, listening more attentively. South Africa had been on lockdown for over a week, so I wasn't expecting visitors. Especially since the rural townships in the Sundays River Valley (SRV), Eastern Cape, where I was carrying out my fieldwork, were half an hour's walk from my house. I ruled out the possibility it could be a neighbour. Apart from the monkeys that every night jumped on the roof, my only neighbours were the owners of the Bed and Breakfast, who stayed down the road; I doubted it was them. When there was another knock, I got up and went to the door. Outside were Mary and Anni, my closest friends from the township. Since my house was across the highway at the edge of town, they had completed quite a journey: to reach me, they had to walk along railway tracks by the edge of the township, pass the crumbling train station, scale a barbed wire fence, cross the highway, walking

the last stretch through a snake-infested underbrush.

“We promised we would come to check up on you”, they told me, laughing. We enjoyed a couple of hours with good food and my last bottle of Amarula. When they got up to leave, I followed them to the edge of the highway where I stopped to see them off. They gave a dumbfounded look in return. Couldn’t I at least walk with them through town before turning back? I professed how I thought the risk too high, stuttering about how my visa would be revoked if the police caught me. They sighed, but assured me how they understood my concerns, while doing little to disguise the frustrated resignation in their voice. Walking back to my house, I felt a nagging guilt. The next morning I had made a decision with far-reaching consequences. I got in my car, took a less frequented road into the township and turned up at Mary and Anni’s house. Starting from that day, I would violate the curfew on a fairly regular basis, traveling into the township or hosting people at my place. My initial strategy was to pretend I was going to dump my garbage. The

route to the dumping site happened to go through the township. Soon, I was disposing garbage bags every second day.

> *To reach me, they had to walk along railway tracks by the edge of the township, pass the crumbling train station, scale a barbed wire fence, cross the highway, walking the last stretch through a snake-infested underbrush.*

As part of the national lockdown in South Africa, announced on the 23rd of March, a curfew was implemented, which only permitted trips outside the home to buy households essentials, visit a pharmacy or to seek medical assistance. In the townships in SRV, movement outside the home was only allowed between 10 am and 16 pm. If strictly implemented, this new regulation would turn the townships on their head. I hardly knew about a single household where the members over the course of a day didn't venture out of their house for some type of errand or received visitors. When I discussed the upcoming lockdown with informants, I was struck by how hardly anyone opposed it, although they were concerned if the state really would provide relief for those who would be hardest hit by the new regulations. At the time, politicians, experts and journalists all shared their concerns about the ramifications of the lockdown for the formal economy. I, on the other hand, wondered more about the impact on informal economic activity in the townships, where a substantial number of residents got by through doing everything from piece work to lending money. Officially, the restrictions would be in place for three weeks, but it was never a secret that residents right from the onset violated the curfew fairly regularly.

I had been in the field since September 2019, on a project studying survival strategies in the townships located close by some of the country's largest game reserves, paying particular attention to the impact and use of social grants. Part of what drew me to this project was the opportunity to investigate what the exchange of money and resources within and between households could teach us about how notions of well-being were reproduced, or resisted. Although people increasingly had begun to take my presence for granted, I worried if the relationships with my informants were strong enough to endure prolonged periods without face-to-face encounters. Since President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the nation on a Tuesday, I was left with a small window of three days to draft a plan for the following three weeks, before the country would officially close on the subsequent Friday. My most pressing concern was of course that I wouldn't be able to talk to my informants on a regular basis. Several of them didn't have phones, with those who had frequently running out of WhatsApp data. My 'ingenious' last minute solution was to buy up piles of small notebooks and

pens at the local supermarket, and then distribute them around, asking people to record their impressions and daily activities during lockdown.

> *The perceived threat of the virus faded in comparison with these immediate concerns.*

Despite the police vans regularly patrolling the streets, movement in the township didn’t cease. A major issue was water access. Typically, running water was limited to a couple of hours each day, but sometimes several days could pass without so much as a drop falling from the tap. Sometimes only a handful of the houses would have water in their taps. As a result, residents were dependent on getting water from those households that either had managed to save up water in a tank, or were fortunate to have running water that day. In Anni’s street, only the house at the very end had an outside tap that only rarely went dry. Then there were those who depended on borrowing small amounts of cash to buy food and electricity. The perceived threat of the virus faded in comparison with these immediate concerns. Such transgressions were easy to fathom, given how the anticipated relief provisions from the state never materialised.

Unlike in Europe, I never encountered anyone who described their actions as a form of political protest. Informants told me numerous times how they appreciated the intention behind the lockdown, but when the state failed them, the population should be allowed to break the curfew if it was necessary for their survival. However, I struggled to get my head around why seemingly trivial visits continued. Those who used to spend parts of their day at the house of a family member or a friend, for company and dinner, continued doing so. For many of my friends, the fines they would be forced to pay if the police caught them were higher than their household's collected monthly income. Why take that risk?

It didn't take many days following the official start of the lockdown before I began to feel the effect of being barred from social interaction. Since we were allowed to visit shops to buy essentials, I made daily trips to town. I tried to coordinate meetings with informants during these trips, the only way of meeting them face-to-face. As the days went by, I began to notice a pattern in our conversations. They expressed a deep concern for my social and physical well-being. Daniel, for example, checked in on me to make sure I hadn't stepped on a snake or been

ambushed by a rogue baboon. However, like everyone else, he would inquire about how I was dealing with the isolation, if I was eating all right and so on. Sometimes informants would surprise me with prepared dinner dishes when we met by the stores. Other days I received invitations to stop by to pick up a dinner plate, and when I declined, they insisted on visiting me, which I also said no to – until they decided enough was enough, and turned up by my door.

> *They expressed a deep concern for my social and physical well-being.*

The visit by Anni and Mary changed everything. I found myself in a type of Catch 22 dilemma: I had a responsibility for the well-being of my friends and informants, which included an expectation that I, too, would visit them. But to accomplish this I would violate the lockdown, thereby potentially exposing them to the risk of fines and/or the virus. However, if I chose to stay at home, I suspected they would continue to stop by, risking being hauled off by the police, while we also would be at risk of infecting each other. In the end, the guilt over how my indecision was causing my informants to risk the possible repercussions of breaking the law became the tipping factor that led me to break the curfew instead.

During these weeks, concerns about infecting others were not particularly strong among my informants. As long as no one was infected locally, the virus remained an abstract threat, which paled in comparison to more immediate concerns. Since the threat was perceived as coming from the outside, few considered it likely that they could be at risk as long as they only socialised with others in the townships. I knew about a few who decided to avoid everyone except close family and friends, but complete withdrawal from social interaction was rare, as the weight of moral obligations, routine and boredom was keenly felt, especially given how the threat of the infection was perceived.

> *The guilt over how my indecision was causing my informants to risk the possible repercussions of breaking the law became the tipping factor that led me to break the curfew instead.*

This decision proved to have positive long-term effects on my fieldwork: meeting informants face-to-face and just being visible in the township built trust. Most expected me to flee back home on the onset of the pandemic. Those who knew I was staying assumed I would wait out the first phase of lockdown in the comfort of my grotesquely oversized house. That I instead violated the curfew did intensify the bonding that came from living together through the hardship of the lockdown and the overhanging threat of pandemic.

However, there is a certain audacity in being privileged enough to even find oneself in this position in the first place. Being a white male from northern Europe, informants correctly assessed I was in less danger of being accosted by the police. Moreover, I would find myself in a much more advantageous position should I catch the virus, with my European health insurance and a rental car at my disposal. Even other anthropologists might not have been so fortunate.

There is, however, another lesson, about empathy, which would have far broader ramifications for both my research and personal well-being. Before lockdown I had become fixated on following the money. This drove me to anticipate that

established reciprocal relationships would suffer when an external shock, such as the pandemic, significantly reduced opportunities for wealth accumulation. When so many households lost their main sources of income, I was quick to look for any signs of reciprocal relationships being adversely affected, and to discover whether this would create more tension in and outside of the household. But while tensions ran high, especially within households, most relationships endured. My mistake had been to overlook how participation in these reciprocal relationships also encompassed a broader responsibility for each other's well-being, one that went beyond financial assistance. The significance of acts such as letting a friend spend the day in your house, or visiting someone who lives alone, is clearer when the prevalence of chronic diseases and rampant substance abuse is taken into account**.** Some people are dependent on assistance in the home, with chores such as washing or cooking. For others, spending the day outside their house with a close friend is a necessary break to rest their weary mind and body. These relationships seemed more attuned to their members' mental well-being than the participants might recognise, as mental issues are little talked about.

> *The significance of acts such as letting a friend spend the day in your house, is clearer when the prevalence of chronic diseases and rampant substance abuse is taken into account.*

Reciprocal relationships encompass several dimensions, the financial being but one. When my key informants confessed how they had to prioritise their own household's survival, the boundaries of financial support contracted, but the relationships themselves endured – partly since they showed a remarkable understanding of each other's financial situation, partly because these relationships encompassed a wider dimension of caring. These were insights I doubt I would have arrived at if my informants hadn't gone to such lengths to care for *my* well-being.

Idols that ring hollow

Saumya Pandey
December, 2020

For the occasion of this year's Durga Puja festival in Kolkata, the likeness of a migrant woman was chosen for a much-celebrated idol of the Hindu goddess Durga. Dressed in plain saree and with a *toda* (anklet) around her feet, she carried one of her children in her arms. The other two were beside her as the scene evoked the long journey she embarked on in search of food and shelter.

The figure symbolized the hunger and poverty of migrant workers in India that

had received global attention due to the pandemic-driven lockdown, which was declared by the Indian government on March 24, 2020 – with only a 4-hour notice. The figure was also a celebration of the goddess as the woman "who braved the scorching sun and hunger and penury along with her children," explained the artist. Hunger was the 'Demon' that she fought in this year's portrayal.

A similar scene played out on Indian television. After the suspension of public transport services due to the curfew-style lockdown, over 10 million migrant workers were forced to travel — mostly on foot — hundreds of kilometers to reach their places of origin. "I want to see my wife and kids," a construction worker from Bihar who was working in the tech city of Bangalore told a journalist. A news channel reported this as a matter of national pride: "Look how strong and brave the migrant workers from our villages are," the anchor exclaimed during an episode of a news hour I happened to watch during those days. When Jyoti Kumari Paswan, a young 15-year-old girl, cycled 1,200 km with her ailing father in the back seat to their home village, the Indian press was ablaze with news about the "'Lionhearted' Girl [who] Bike[d] Dad across India, Inspiring a Nation."

These scenes framed economic hardships of migrant workers in India as signs of their individualised feats of strength more so than the misery and destitution, which is embedded in institutional violence; bringing their sufferings to light through art, media and politics. The assumption being that they have been unrecognized so far. What occasioned such romantic translations?

> *Their invisible labour is eked out to extend infrastructural modernity in big cities.*

In her 2018 book *Nightmarch*, Alpa Shah, a scholar of political and economic anthropology studying inequality and poverty in the tribal belts of India, describes how numerous people migrate from the tribal regions of India to work at construction sites in the underbellies of metropolitan spaces like Kolkata. Their jobs entail long periods of stay away from home, dependence on exploitative contractors, with only meagre earnings and savings from precarious livelihoods.

Their invisible labour is eked out to extend infrastructural modernity in big cities.

Yet it's not like they are completely invisible from urban spaces. Sometimes they 'dare' enter the private realm of educated urban middle and upper classes in Kolkata, where they are indeed spoken about in *our* personal conversations: "My Uber driver from so-and-so place spoke in a weird accent; he didn't understand a word of what I was saying", and "my maid wanted a holiday for Diwali and Durga *puja*, she expected my house to remain unclean — [impure?] — during the festival season!" By identifying migrant labourers as people who speak something akin to a different language, and who do not understand urban 'culture', we perform *our* biases against migrant workers in everyday interactions, and that is also how *we* unrecognise and 'other' them.

Meanwhile, on social media, and in the commentary section of digital media, some were upset about this profane choice of likeness for Durga, considering it "de-Hinduised" and generally inappropriate. But others were in turn dismayed by such a failure to appreciate the local culture of Bengal of celebrating festivals of goddesses. Why were people unable (or unwilling?) to appreciate artistic expressions? "Those outraging over the idol's depiction must educate themselves about [West] Bengal's culture of celebrating Durga Puja," read an article. What does this reference to 'culture' signify?

> *Wild legitimacy lies in the term, culture. Conversations reach an impasse under its claim.*

Wild legitimacy lies in the term, *culture*. Conversations reach an impasse under its claim. As though there's one self-explanatory meaning of the word that naturally commands respect, evades further scrutiny, and is so rich and deep that others have to be 'educated' into it. I believe this understanding about culture becomes particularly relevant in the context of caste Hindus in cities such as Kolkata wherein the upper castes benefit from an on-going colonial and postcolonial legacy of knowledge and power production to mark their putatively innate cultural superiority, while suppressing questions about their entitlements.

When people insist that their culture is special and are tone-deaf to any criticism against it, they feed into a form of ideology that selectively excludes some of the realities of its political and economic practices. The arrogance that allows someone to be romantic about the image of a migrant woman as a goddess in the name of performing *our* culture, I imagine, emerges from this unproblematic and depoliticized definition of culture.

So what to make of this framing of migrant women through a festival which draws huge capital for the celebration? In recent years, it has attracted many influential artists, and corporate brands, with a lot of money at stake. It is a festival that soaks in the consumerist extravagance of food and apparel — flexible capitalism — and indulges in unimaginable wastage of electricity. An expression rather than an indictment of an alienating, exploiting, and dehumanizing system, it transports the notion that the relentless pursuit of profits can be counterbalanced with benevolent art.

> *It is also in the non-consumptive, leisurely dimensions of culture that unequal division of labour and oppressive modes of productions reaffirm their presence.*

Even the attempt to think critically about culture, then, is limited to a moral ideology. Some people lament the loss of traditional celebration of Durga *puja* and its fading appeal among the youth. Modern theme-based celebrations made popular since the 2000s, as well as club-sponsored *pujo* in *paras* (localities) of Kolkata, are sometimes criticized for being only geared towards money, competition, awards and advertisements. These distinctions between traditional and modern, religious and non-religious, and ritual and commercial aspects of 'culture' presume that capitalism is generated only when consumption is excessive, seldom realizing, as anthropologist Sam Dubal (borrowing from Karl Marx) argues in the context of 'play', that it is also in the non-consumptive, leisurely dimensions of culture that unequal division of labour and oppressive modes of productions reaffirm their presence.

The romanticization of poverty

Moreover, I read this visual imagery of putting underprivileged women on a pedestal, and its celebration especially by the middle-upper-class elites, as an extension of the institutionally internalized savior syndrome directed towards poor brown women, which feminist anthropologists of postcolonial studies warned us about. The artist did not add colour to the idol because he "did not want her to look like a doll," he wanted to keep his Durga "as real as possible", and through this soft image-making, and through what anthropologist Liisa Malkki calls the spectacle of "raw," "bare" humanity, he evoked the notion of a simple rural woman to be worshipped. This form of humanity is possible by the depiction of women and children as *helpless*, writes Malkki in her 1996 essay on speechless emissaries, anything else would defeat the purpose of a universal apolitical empathy towards humanitarian crisis.

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The Telegraph online

Home / West-bengal / Calcutta / Migrant Mother as the goddess at Barisha Club in Behala

Migrant Mother as the goddess at Barisha Club in Behala

Artist inspired by 'indomitable spirit' of women workers hit by lockdown

The idol of a migrant worker mother, a shirtless toddler (Kartick) in her arms, that will be worshipped as Goddess Durga at Barisha Club in Behala this year

In such a depiction of humanitarianism, there is always an element of creating knowledge about the oppression of women in 'other' communities. It rings hollow, and diminishes material struggles of marginalized communities. Missing in the discussions about the plight of migrant women is a critical recognition that evoking pity, sympathy, benevolence and awareness about migrant women or treating them as goddesses does not automatically solve the problem of poverty and hunger, but it certainly undermines critical politicization of power relations.

It is important to ask if this recognition is any different from banging utensils for and showering flower petals on frontline health workers during the pandemic to

appreciate their work? True, numerous Indians participated in this campaign by the central government. But many others were also critical of the gesture at a time when these workers urgently needed better protective equipment to safeguard themselves from the Coronavirus infection.

When news platforms say, "migrant workers brave heat, battle hunger as they walk to their hometowns," or "migrants brave sun, walk on highway to reach home", what are they implying then? Are poverty and hunger naturally occurring situations that migrants 'fight'? Where lies the blame; what led to the 'crisis'; who must be held accountable for it?

Are poverty and hunger naturally occurring situations that migrants 'fight'? Where lies the blame; what led to the 'crisis'; who must be held accountable for it?

How do we then speak about poverty and migrant women without expressing ourselves in the language of those who we do not agree with? Certainly not by using hunger and poverty as abstract 'Demons' but acknowledging them as human-made structural inequalities.

India ranked 94 among 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2020. The pandemic-related large-scale migration in search of shelter and food is not overnight responsible for this score. After the complete clampdown on the economy, it became evident that there are millions of lives which painstakingly live from hand to mouth. They rely on their daily wages. Losing even a day's income can be devastating under these circumstances, wherein there is no savings to fall back. And here they were left without earnings or work for 3 long months due to the elite expectation that everyone should stay at home and maintain distance during the pandemic, without any health care or financial benefits from the government.

Treating hunger as the 'Demon' is a political dead end.

Therefore, treating hunger as the ‘Demon’, as though it is an objective parameter devoid of ideological standpoint of the current political realm is a political dead end. It ignores the most crucial argument against inequality that it is through the making of categorical distinctions between the impoverished conditions and the agency of the actors who created it that poverty generates as a vicious cycle.

Next time Goddess Durga can be the man who broke down in the middle of the road on hearing about his son’s death. The onlooking police and media can be the reckless children who are too self-involved to care. The politicians who shut down the state borders to prevent migrant workers from entering can be the roadblocking demons. The power of the goddess will not be about braving the strenuous journey to fight hunger — for which she hardly has a choice — but in pausing to shed tears and grieve about her sorrows, her losses. The idol of this goddess should make us angry for the system that *we* are.

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Images

Image by Rajesh Balouria from Pixabay

Today’s Totalitarian Menace

Today's Totalitarianism Editorial Collective
December, 2020

Wherever one looks across the globe today democracy is in decline and trends towards what was once called “totalitarianism” are on the rise. In China 1,000,000 Uighurs are detained in what Chinese state media calls “counter extremism training centers”. Hong Kong’s June 2020 security law has removed basic democratic freedoms and granted extra-legal power to the mainland government. Saudi Arabian authorities are gathering large amounts of data on Saudi citizens abroad by exploiting weaknesses in cell phone tracking location systems. In Russia Putin’s regime orchestrates an assassination attempt on opposition leader Alexei Navalny using the nerve agent Novichok. Belarus’s President Lukashenko cracks down on mass protests against a rigged election on August 9 th, 2020. In Modi’s India, the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) openly discriminates on the grounds of religion, and state authorities have arrested protesters under draconian anti-terror laws. In the Philippines President Duterte

instructs police and vigilantes to kill anyone believed to be connected to the drug trade. In the United States, supported by Fox News and alt-right media platforms, President Trump wages daily assaults against the institutions of liberal democracy including measures to suppress voting in the 2020 election.

Hungary's President Viktor Orbán openly calls for "illiberal democracy" and passes emergency legislation, under the pretext of fighting Covid-19, allowing him to bypass Parliament and govern unchallenged. In Brazil, three decades after liberal democracy replaced military dictatorship, President Jair Bolsonaro leads a far-right coalition supported by the military, evangelical groups and agri-business that deploys judicial measures against anyone deemed left-wing. In Britain, Boris Johnson's government in 2019 suspends Parliament in an unconstitutional attempt to prevent scrutiny of its controversial Brexit plans in the weeks before the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. In all these examples, heads of government and their supporters systematically deploy lies and misleading statements to create false realities.

What makes these trends "totalitarian" rather than "authoritarian" or "tyrannical" is the aspiration to control three key facets of a person's daily life. The first is the outer life of public interaction, often called "public safety". This features prominently in authoritarian regimes, and even liberal democracies, seeking to ensure a politically docile and economically productive society. It usually entails marking "others" as enemies who threaten mainstream society: "Mexican rapists" in the US, "poison" refugees in Hungary, or "drug dealers" in the Philippines. The second is government intrusion into people's private lives. The unparalleled growth in surveillance capabilities exposes private relationships to ever-tighter state scrutiny, eradicating public-private distinctions under the guise of combatting sedition and moral transgressions. In totalitarian regimes such as Erich Honeker's German Democratic Republic, children would report their parents' transgressions to the authorities and family members, friends, and lovers sometimes informed on each other. In today's China, Han officials are dispatched to live in Uighur homes in Xinjiang, a move referred to as "becoming kin." Hosts are pressured to enthusiastically welcome them, or face repercussions.

What makes these trends "totalitarian" rather than "authoritarian" or "tyrannical" is the aspiration to control three key facets of a person's daily life.

The third is the inner life of mind, seemingly a space where no one else can enter. This is where we reason, understand ourselves as political beings, and interpret the world we inhabit. George Orwell's 1984 provided a powerful illustration of totalitarian intrusion into the mind: It wasn't enough for Winston Smith to simply agree that 2+2=5 to stop O'Brien's torture. To be a trustworthy citizen, Smith had to genuinely believe it to avoid committing a "thoughtcrime". Intensified media environments make our interior lives an increasingly viable target of control as alt-right outlets and the algorithmic governance of social media seek to interpolate our own self-understanding. These situations facilitate spreading false histories that present the struggles of the national community in deceptively narrow ways: the revival of the Turkish age-old resistance against Byzantium and westernization, the controversial Polish memorial law rendering accusations of the country's complicity in the Holocaust a civil offence, the political use of Hindu religious myths as historical evidence to target the country's Muslims.

Conditions for totalitarianism

To resist or avoid these totalitarian trends we must first understand the historical conditions that enable them. The similarities between the former colonial powers and the formerly colonized are as important as their differences given that both are premised on the nation-
state form and are linked together through transnational public cultures and global institutions of finance, trade, and governance. The formation of mass society, in which people are encouraged to regard themselves as an essentialized, collective, and national whole, began with the French Revolution of 1789. Alongside positive contributions, it also rendered society vulnerable to the demagoguery of charismatic leaders who reframe the reasonable frustrations of citizens into symptoms of existential threats to nation perpetrated by political enemies. Tocqueville warned in Democracy in America (1835), that even liberal

societies are not immune because the majority's sheer force of numbers renders them prone to intellectual hubris, moral conformity, and uniformity in thought. This situation encourages hostility toward minorities.

Advances in early twentieth century communication technologies, particularly radio, enabled the "Cults of Personality" in the totalitarian systems of Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Personality cults made it easy for people to identify with leaders who cast themselves as independent of the lethargic, bureaucratic state, hamstrung by its need for compromise and cooperation among different social groups and political parties. The twenty-first century also has its personality cults, from President Trump's "Make America Great Again" Movement and Putin's displays of Russian machismo to the leader-for-life aspirations of China's President Xi Jinping and Turkey's Recep Erdoğan. Relying on social media, these cults similarly deploy essentialist notions of racial, cultural, or national purity supposedly under assault from foreign and domestic threats. While these notions are European inventions, they also condition politics in the former colonies because Europeans institutionalized ethnic categories through their imperial administrations. Post-colonial ethnic leaders could then rely on similar tropes of existential threat in their struggle to control state bureaucracies following the withdrawal of Empire. The tendency to conceive of people as essentialized groups manipulable through demagoguery recalls Herman Göring's unsettling insight:

Naturally, the common people don't want war, but after all, it is the leaders of a country who determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag people along whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. […] All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.

> *Tocqueville warned in Democracy in America (1835), that even liberal societies are not immune because the majority's sheer force of numbers renders them prone to intellectual hubris, moral conformity, and uniformity in thought. This situation encourages hostility toward minorities.*

Alongside issues of politics and identity, widening inequalities and massive wealth creation since the 1980s have fuelled a growing sense of disempowerment that feeds today's totalitarianism. In the traditional industrial countries, former leftists feel betrayed by their parties' accommodation of neoliberalism and embrace alt-right parties believing they will protect their nation. The rise of the precariat has left millions anxious and suspicious of globalization, particularly of finance capitalism and immigration. In post-colonial countries, the shift from 1960s high-modernist development priorities to 1980s Structural Adjustment Programs has exacerbated socio-economic inequality, allowing a small class of capitalists to throw their weight behind right-wing leaders who capitalize on anxieties about a growing un(der)employment crisis and fuel a cultural essentialism that scapegoats "Others" and "outsiders".

Struggles and resistance

Resistance is everywhere, sometimes manifesting in efforts to restore or expand traditional freedoms of representative democracy (voting rights, impartial judiciaries, racial equality, gender equality etc.) and at other times, calling for a reimagining and restructuring of a social order, which enables exclusion and denials of citizenship. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought these issues to the forefront in the United States, constructing a broad coalition across axes of difference. In India, Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh united thousands across religious, class and caste lines against the CAA and other exclusionary policies of the Modi government. Both these movements model how people can spontaneously organize spaces of direct democratic participation.

The diversity of responses to today's totalitarianism is an asset. Despite

differences among its critics, all agree that these trends must be called out and challenged. Moreover, we must not assume the totality of totalitarianism. While Orwell's insights will take us far into
understanding today's disturbing trends, we must recall what Solzhenitsyn, no stranger to totalitarian terrors, allegedly concluded about him: "The man is clever, but he does not understand that there is life even under Big Brother's heel."

Today's Totalitarianism seeks accessible, op-ed style essays that address the broad parameters in our program statement (https://allegralaboratory.net/todays-totalitarianism/) . Essays should not exceed 1500 words and will be single-blind reviewed. Please
contact Greg Feldman (greg@allegralaboratory.net) for queries and submissions.

Featured image by John Cameron on Unsplash.

Connected by extension – How paying connects old regimes and new isolations

Benedict Mette-Starke
December, 2020

The situation in Myanmar during and shortly after my fieldwork in March 2020 reminded me of the uncertainty of knowledge and call for prudence which started the Allegra corona thread. In the face of possible contagion, my attention was drawn to my own technologically mediated connectedness: In the context of COVID-19, everyday techniques such as payment methods, potentially relevant for transmission, both isolate and connect people. Techniques, understood as 'effective' and 'traditional' action (Mauss 1973), are crucial to understanding how people are in touch through isolation.

Myanmar in March

In the beginning of March, as COVID-19 began to affect North America and Europe, Myanmar seemed relatively calm. The Myanmar government hadn't reported any cases yet. Taxi drivers told me the hot climate and high exposure to various bugs kept COVID-19 away. In religious contexts, people praised the prayers of Myanmar's population for keeping the virus out. Those with friends in the northern states of the country closest to China wondered if the virus had already come and gone in some regions of Myanmar. Many anxiously wondered how it was possible and if it was really true that there were no cases in Myanmar. The Asia Times called the Myanmar government "in denial" and a social media meme ridiculed Myanmar's lack of tests.

The WHO declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. The same day, people in Yangon started stocking up on dry goods, an indication of growing anxiety. The first of my friends went out less, carried disinfectant and talked about social distancing more. They followed global and local news, knew about the measures advocated in several Asian, European and North American countries and by the WHO. They tried to propagate the measures on social media and in their families and sought to re-affirm a semblance of order thrown into doubt by the disease. Two things felt particularly difficult: getting their elders to listen and getting trustworthy information. A friend who remembered the onslaught of cyclone Nargis in 2008 and ensuing empty shelves urged me to stock up as well. Another friend, who feared that unreliable news would spread, promoted a dashboard of social media news on COVID-19 in Myanmar. As we were sitting in an open-air restaurant one night, someone started speculating whether a COVID-19 emergency would lead to a state of emergency. Many I worked with, as well as I, were finding social distancing hard – just as US officials telling people to stop touching their faces had a hard time following their own advice.

On 23 March, the Myanmar Ministry of Health confirmed the first two COVID-19 cases in Myanmar, returnees from the USA and the UK. I decided I had to leave or risk being stranded. I met with friends on the eve of my flight. When I

mentioned that the cases so far had been imported, they hesitantly told me about a meme: a picture of a former military leader roughly reading “See, that is why we were xenophobic”. As Myanmar’s head of state, Than Shwe oversaw two decades of isolationism between 1992 and 2011 while maintaining relations with Myanmar’s immediate neighbours (Egreteau and Jagan 2018). There have been speculative arguments whether disaffection for foreign involvement shows in the 2008 constitution’s section 59(f), barring anyone who has immediate foreign relatives from becoming president (Crouch 2020: 117-8), and in the reluctance to accept relief assistance in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis (Stover & Vinck 2008: 730, Seekins 2009: 727). Now, with cases of COVID-19 infections in Euro-America on the rise, another kind of foreign influence, of viruses from abroad using humans as conduits, needed to be stopped.

Grasping what it takes to pay

On 13 March, during the uncertain times described above, the director-general of the Ministry of the Office of the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi’s main ministry as the de-facto leader of Myanmar, gave a press conference (Kyaw Hpone Hma 2020; MNA 2020). The government was preparing for COVID-19 and those spreading ‘fake news’ would be prosecuted, the director-general was quoted.

The director-general’s remarks on payment techniques, reported in the government newspapers above, particularly struck me as they contradicted Euro-American articulations. The UK, Germany and allegedly even the WHO assumed contactless payment to be more efficacious in slowing the spread. The director-general was arguing to the contrary. Whereas the Guardian and an international human rights organisation interpreted this as further evidence of the

government's denial of COVID realities, I turn to examining the director-general's reported remarks from a point of view informed by the anthropology of techniques (see Coupaye and Douny 2009).

> *The government was preparing for COVID-19 and those spreading 'fake news' would be prosecuted, the director-general was quoted.*

The anthropology of techniques examines techniques as social. Originating in Marcel Mauss' work, it understands a technique broadly as "an action which is *effective* and *traditional* (and you will see that in this it is no different from a magical, religious or symbolic action)" (Mauss 1973: 75, emphasis in original). Calling a technique traditional, Mauss emphasises that techniques are not solely a matter of individual practice. They are learned and necessitate the involvement of several actors, human and other-than-human (compare Leroi-Gourhan 1993: 25–60). Arguing that efficacy is a quality of techniques, "magical, religious or symbolic" (Mauss 1973: 75), implies that the efficacy of a technique is an open question with various, *emic* and *etic*, answers (compare Warnier 2009: 467-8). Jean-Pierre Warnier took the articulation between bodies and persons further, arguing that techniques act upon both subjects and objects (Warnier 2009) as people-as-bodies relate to themselves. Techniques, insofar as they involve bodies, bodily enact who somebody is. As hands touch faces, bodies and other matter, techniques make people.

While anthropological engagement with techniques and bodies is far broader, the literature referenced allows suspending the assumption that credit cards are objectively better than cash for keeping the virus at bay as merely one *emic* articulation. Linking subjects and objects, the anthropology of techniques allows us further to bridge the gap between manual action, e.g. handling money, and technology, e.g. credit cards and credit card readers. Why could cash be more efficacious in preventing the spread of COVID-19 than card payment, according to the director-general? Which techniques might have cashiers be in particularly "close contact with hundred [*sic*] of different people" (MNA 2020) in card

payments, but not with cash? His remarks are sparse and I will have to compliment them with my own observations, illustrated by *chaînes opératoires*, visualised operational sequences of techniques (compare Lemonnier 1992).

To my initial surprise, when paying by card in Yangon supermarkets, the cashiers usually took the credit card out of my hand over the counter (in *chaîne*

opératoire 1). After typing the amount into the reader, they put the card on or into it (in *chaîne opératoire 1*), prompted me to enter my PIN or, more often, handed me back my card with a receipt and pen (in *chaîne opératoire 1*). I would then sign the receipt and hand it back (in *chaîne opératoire 1*; receipt version depicted only). If I paid in cash, however, I would give money to the cashier (in *chaîne opératoire 2*). They would check the amount (in *chaîne opératoire 2*), take the change out of the register (in *chaîne opératoire 2*) and hand it over in a neat pile, touching their right arm above the elbow with their left hand, holding the money on the small side, sometimes creasing it in the middle (in *chaîne opératoire 2*). I would take the return (in *chaîne opératoire 2*) while the cash given would remain with the cashier.

Taking touch as an index of proximity, the customer and the cashier touch the same thing more often when paying by card than when paying by cash, three times against twice. Additionally, items which change hands in cash payments do not return to the giver. These two factors could qualify the director-general's description of paying by credit card as closer contact.

> *As hands touch faces, bodies and other matter, techniques make people.*

It is important to note that my articulation is one among many. At the time, I was texting with two local friends and interlocutors. When I wrote that I felt both anxious and that "my lifestyle and diet will protect me", one said they were also "feeling both. And a bit feverish", affirming shared anxiety and confidence.

As I spoke with the second interlocutor a few months later, he told me he understood the director-general to have meant that a) the number of contacts in credit card payment was higher because transactions were faster and b) the number of interactions in small local stores which operated by cash would be lower. He further thought the director-general said this to calm people down, not because it was true. My interlocutor thus focused on the supposed effects of the director-general's words rather those of the actions described. We further diverged on our respective interpretations of what the director-general called

‘close contact’. While the director-general’s words likely did have effects, I delve a bit deeper into physical techniques and contact.

If we apply a similar perspective to another, ‘contactless’ way of paying by card

(as in *chaînes opératoires 3* & *4*), we see two things happen to the contact between customer and cashier. First, points of physical contact are reduced but not eliminated. There still is physical, at least electronic, contact between reader and card (in *chaînes opératoires 3* & *4*) so that something from the card can be transferred to the reader and *vice versa* (in *chaîne opératoire 3* and in *chaîne opératoire 4*), not to mention shared breathed air. If the customer enters a PIN (in *chaîne opératoire 4*) or takes a receipt (in *chaîne opératoire 4*), contact becomes manual. Secondly, contact increasingly happens at a distance as the cue for the card is verbal or visual, given remotely by the cashier (in *chaînes opératoires 3* & *4* and in *chaîne opératoire 4*). 'Contactless' payment is therefore not without contact. Contact, however, is mediated.

Hands off!

The director-general alerts us to a crucial technical issue: How are we in contact with each other and ourselves? We work on ourselves as we wash our hands or refrain from touching our faces. Despite disagreement on its efficacies as examined above, the arguments for and against using credit card payments share a similar aim: Keeping people's hands off each other. People ought not touch their faces or a stranger's body. Ideally, in isolating and individuating bodies, those censored acts keep bodies and populations healthy. It seems the time for isolation has come again and many, both locally and internationally, agree now that isolation is necessary to keep germs out. Fears of foreign influence, this time the influx of a virus, is not just a Myanmar issue. Remote contact, like contactless payment, however, increases as contact between potentially-virus-bearing-bodies is reduced. Payment cues become visual and verbal. People use techniques to distribute themselves beyond their bounded bodies (compare Gell 1998: 96–154), like the cashier typing the amount owed into the register connected to the card reader. We read news online or hold video calls. We find ways to stay in touch but are convinced we are not touching. 'Contactless' payment requires at least electronic contact between the card and the reader. Yet, its opacity convinces us

of its efficacy in keeping us apart (compare Coupaye and Douny 2009: 22).

> *We find ways to stay in touch but are convinced we are not touching.*

If we see ourselves as bodies-with-tools (compare Leroi-Gourhan 1993: 240–42), we realise the ways in which we are connected through what we thought kept us apart. In times when people try to isolate, tools are a vector of danger, potential conduits of germs, as well as means to keep in touch. It is time to grasp who is at our extended fingertips as we touch our cards to the reader, as we hand money to the cashier and to see eye to eye, miles apart.

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ဦးဇော်ဌေး သတင်းမီဒီယာများနှင့်တွေ့ဆုံပြီး CoVID-19 ရောဂါနှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ ကြိုတင်ပြင်ဆင် ဆောင်ရွက်နေမှုအခြေအနေများကို ရှင်းလင်းပြောကြား'. *Myanmar Alinn Daily*, March 14.

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Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Me

Alice Beck Kehoe
December, 2020

In the depths of the Depression, two girls were born to Jewish parents in New York City. One, in 1933, was Ruth Bader, later Mrs. Ginsburg. The other, a year later, was me. The U.S. Census classified us as Hebrew Race. Ivy League colleges limited Jews to 15% of admitted students. Hotels could refuse accommodations to persons with “Jewish names” or who looked Jewish. Landlords and real estate agents denied Jewish clients; towns had restrictive clauses excluding Jews. My mother, Lena Rosenstock, interviewing for a teacher position in Bronxville, a New York suburb, was told that Jews were not hired. A group of summer cottages built for Jews on a lake near Milwaukee was burned to keep them out.

Ruth Bader and I just escaped the colleges' Jewish quota, quietly removed in 1951. We didn't escape the postwar pressure on girls to marry young and bear children. In 1957-58, we both were married, mothers of babies, enrolled in graduate programs at Harvard along with our husbands. We each were among less than a dozen women students in our graduate cohort, for her starkly few among several hundred men, for me not so stark because the Anthropology program was much smaller. She transferred to Columbia when her husband obtained a job with a New York law firm. More than fifty years later, Ginsburg remembered the unexpected helpfulness of fellow students in Harvard Law. I recall my cohort of women at Peabody (Anthropology was housed in that building), we were close friends in the face of dominating patriarchy. One of the women, incidentally, was African-American. None of us women in that cohort was mentored or given opportunities; we were spared professors' promises of career assistance in exchange for sex, since women would not have careers. We were beneficiaries of "benign neglect".

> *We were beneficiaries of "benign neglect".*

Our paths diverged, Mrs. Ginsburg and Mrs. Kehoe, hers to change the world for everyone discriminated against on the basis of sex. For me, anthropology opened opportunities to work against Manifest Destiny ideology. I was able to change textbooks on North American Indians (as Native Americans were then called) to ethnohistory instead of vignettes from classic 19th-century ethnographies (Kehoe 1981). In the 1970s, counterculture romanticism made American Indians popular, creating a market for textbooks on them. A publisher's rep told her editor that I taught the course at Marquette University, he phoned asking me to write a textbook for them. With my first sabbatical coming up and no possibility of traveling for research, three young boys at home, I agreed, provided I could write it differently from its competitors. Four manuscript reviewers who taught the course in their universities recommended rejection, saying they taught cultures, not history. The editor took a gamble (his words). North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account opens with Paleoamericans coming into the country

15,000 years ago, continuing in each culture-area chapter seamlessly to the present. The book sold well (in its limited market) and since it appeared, newer texts on American First Nations have used its ethnohistorical model.

Law, in the hands of a brilliant, very hardworking person, can substantially change the lives of millions of Americans. Anthropology seems small potatoes in comparison. But small potatoes are nourishing––when I was working in a village near Lake Titicaca, small potatoes were what we ate, day in and day out. The project, directed by my former undergrad student Alan Kolata (University of Chicago), rebuilt what Kolata, and Clark Erickson across the Lake, interpreted were raised fields that would have fed the Tiwanaku state. After a very successful trial, the next year, 1988, Kolata expected the villagers to continue rebuilding and planting the ridged fields, but they were reluctant to do so without wages. Seed potatoes, shovels and pick-mattocks were not enough, they said, they needed money. The project was a spin-off from Kolata's excavations at Tiwanaku, its only funding a small grant. I volunteered to live in one of the villages and try to learn why bounteous harvests of potatoes were not enough incentive. As I chopped up the clods on the ridges along with the other women, I learned of the desperation of these Aymara farmers for money, explained that Doctor Alan did not have cash, and near the end of the planting season, the villagers agreed to put in his seed potatoes. Now comes the real-world part of the story: the Bolivian government was told of the promise of rehabbing ancient fields and made it a national project, introducing ridge-and-ditch agriculture all over the country. The system was designed for the marshy borders of Lake Titicaca and failed in other environments. State politics screwed up an anthropological endeavor to do good.

Anthropology is a humanist science. Unlike mainstream History, it doesn't Make America Great (Kehoe 1990), unlike Psychology, it doesn't generalize about individuals, in the framework of possessive individualism. Unlike Sociology and Political Science, it doesn't rely on quantifiable surveys. Few students take our courses, compared to the numbers in those American-culture fields. (Silver lining is that those few are often remarkably bright and thoughtful.) American politics militate against us. The National Science Foundation was developed by men who

had worked at Los Alamos on the Manhattan Project; their mission to keep America militarily strong shaped its policies and version of science (Reisch 2005, Solovey 2013, 2020). Anthropology did contribute substantially to many beneficial programs (Kehoe and Doughty 2012), without changing most Americans' notion that anthropologists wear pith helmets.

Get Up! Stand Up! Don't Give Up the Fight! shout yard signs in my pleasant middle-class White neighborhood in the country's most segregated city, Milwaukee. As an anthropologist, it bothers me that it's three imperatives. Not "We Must Get Up!", but orders: Get Up! You! Echoes of the slaves' overseer's commands. In my neighbors' manicured lawns maintained with petrochemicals, it's the tiniest evidence of Americans' deafness to the nuances we anthropologists treasure. The signs make me think, yes, we as anthropologists do get up and go to a huge and rich variety of communities; we do stand up to tell the worth of all humankind, and of its diversity. Many do not give up struggling for social justice. We saw, for eight years, how one anthropologist's teachings formed a President, her son, who didn't give up the fight. We have seen the horrifying backlash.

From Franz Boas' decades of traveling to Black colleges to fight with them for opportunities, of his nurturing of not only Zora Hurston but also of other Black anthropologists such as William S. Willis, Jr., and his consistent support of W. E. B. DuBois, that anthropologists were standing up for Black Lives Matter. Boas also nurtured Ella Deloria, Lakota, and Archie Phinney, Niimipuu, and worked collaboratively with a number of Northwest Coast First Nations leaders. Among the first generation of Boas's students were Frank Speck, who steadfastly worked with remnant First Nations in the East, and Alanson Skinner who partnered with Amos Oneroad, a Dakota, to record histories and material and intellectual cultures of Midwestern and Eastern First Nations, and, yes, Alfred Kroeber who may not have seemed "woke" but worked to build encyclopedic descriptions of California nations. Sol Tax's Action Anthropology presaged today's calls to listen to disadvantaged communities and follow their voiced needs, humbly (Stapp 2012). Anthropology has never had the numbers nor the political ties to wield power. It's foolish to suppose that will change. We can stand up, witness, and

assist as we can in the struggles to preserve our planet and ameliorate the living conditions of the less fortunate within our species.

> *We can stand up, witness, and assist as we can in the struggles to preserve our planet and ameliorate the living conditions of the less fortunate within our species.*

Was Mrs. Ginsburg one of the other mothers in the little park at the foot of Divinity Avenue, sitting beside their babies in the prams borrowed from the Harvard Wives Club? Reading textbooks as our babies slept? I shall never know. All I need to know is that America is great because one of those young mothers earned a J.D. and persisted in her quest for justice to all. I have been a worker bee, with my fellow anthropologists flying around to gather minuscule bits that put together, may nourish all of us. The good we've done is small, but real. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a lodestar shining over us. Risen, I'm thinking, from that circle of young parents at Divinity Avenue.

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