

On Ethnographic Sincerity

by John L. Jackson Jr.

This essay posits sincerity and humor as linked ways of politicizing the interactions that underpin all ethnographic encounters. This politicization is contrasted with conventional anthropological preoccupations with authenticity (and fetishizations of ethnographic writing), and it demands attention to the human bodies that constitute ethnographic intersubjectivity. Combining a discussion of Habermas's public sphere with the exploits of a nineteenth-century African American mesmerist and protoanthropologist, Paschal Randolph, I argue against one kind of "occulted anthropology" (the disembodied version attributed to Habermas) for an agential variety exemplified by Randolph's differently framed investments in the political powers of occultist possibility. Instead of being seduced by would-be objective attempts to access a disembodied (i.e., universal) subjectivity, I argue for a Paschal-like reclamation of the vulnerable ethnographic body (in all of its contingent particularity), a reclamation that fuses rational minds to laughing bodies while opening up space for a critique of potentially impoverished conceptualizations of politics and political activity.

It was anthropologist Carolyn Rouse who most recently reminded me to think more substantively about the analytical dangers that arise from downplaying the heuristic importance of humor. We were on a panel at an American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting, and she was talking about ethnographies that made her laugh, productively and profoundly, even when treating ostensibly tragic or disturbing topics. Her point resonated with many in the room. Hazards and lacunae emerge when ethnographers underestimate the extent to which humanity's existential difference is constituted, at least in part, by our uncanny ability to find the smallest incongruous comedic pathway through even the most horrific of life situations, a capacity hinted at and colloquialized in the vernacular adage about laughing to keep from crying.¹ However, this is not just laughter as a mechanism for repression and strategic amnesia, although that clearly gets bundled into what the aforementioned phrase implies. The laughter Rouse was invoking also indicates a kind of vulnerable and vernacular pleasure that ethnographic accounts can document, a pleasure that pivots on people's stubborn recognition of their own continued worth despite external threats of devaluation and marginalization—maybe even because of those threats. Antaeus, the Libyan giant of Greek mythology, epitomized a physicalization of this paradoxical endowment, seeming only the stronger in battle each time his opponent slammed his body down into the earth.

A call for the methodological utility of humor—for a mu-

tually beneficial analytics and politics of the ludic—demands that ethnographies do more than just "break your heart," a differently compelling mandate offered up by Ruth Behar (1997). Ethnographic work might also actively solicit a kind of compassionate and empathetic guffaw at the many ways in which people hold fast to a sense of robust selfhood, fending off the potentially dehumanizing slide into an anguished and pathological embrace of one-dimensional victimhood. The intersubjectivity that constitutes ethnography's experiential core is a fecund space for thematizing and recalibrating the political implications of fieldwork-based research predicated on cultivation of an intimate relatedness that is only vulgarized with apolitical euphemisms about "building rapport." What is this "rapport," which George Marcus (1998) famously conceptualized as "complicity," and what are its politics? Might that be one of the first things anthropology reexamines when assessing its own discipline-based social and political engagements?

Anthropology has become fiendishly self-reflexive, a trait heightened and refined with the "writing culture" moment of the 1980s and 1990s, when anthropologists and their critics laid bare the various rhetorical strategies used to produce certain kinds of textual authority. Even though the ramifications of these deconstructive gestures sought to engage the methodological and epistemological totality of the ethnographic experience, the discursive endgame of the finished monograph (maybe a too-easy and reified prey) was pedes-

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1. Erve Chambers (1989) compares ethnography to comedy in a fairly systematic way. His work emphasizes the formal/structural similarities between the two genres as opposed to highlighting their substantive and necessary cross-fertilizations.

talized for subsequent toppling—over and against a more sustained set of conversations about the quotidian, affect-laden, and ethical demands of working as an ethnographic data gatherer. Of course, “the field” was constantly invoked and theorized, mostly as trope and mystification, the messiness of which was deemed flattened out and papered over by the conventional narratologies of ethnographic writing. The discipline has done a sophisticated job, in my opinion, of thinking through the politics of cultural representation, and that discourse/practice continues to push the traditional limits of our writerly genre in productive, challenging, and sometimes wonderfully frustrating ways. But I want to offer up a very preliminary and schematic discussion of what I am calling “ethnographic sincerity” to suggest the ethicopolitical purchase of focusing an analytical eye on potential problems that accrue from underthematizing the substantive (seemingly extra-ethnographic) relationships forged between anthropologists and the anthropologized.² I want to begin an argument that labels such ethnographic contact a kind of epistemological ground zero for engagements with the politics of anthropological knowledge production today.

It has become cliché to invoke the politics (not to mention the ethics) of participant observation, anthropology’s quintessential methodological gesture; its inadequacies and mystifications are far too ripe for justifiable picking, especially given common stereotypes (fair or not) about the discipline’s traditional unwillingness, formally and systematically, to train graduate students in ethnographic methods. Even as late as the mid-1990s, when I was just starting graduate school, would-be cultural anthropologists were taught to envision fieldwork as a kind of trial by fire, a rite of passage you did not prepare for so much as simply endure and survive, on the fly and by the seat of your pants. We registered for mandated courses that required us to write research proposals delineating our game plan for “the field” and linking our immersion in a particular geographical locale to a set of questions, concerns, and theories that might help us to explain what about that place was important to think (and think with). But we did not really operationalize or theorize the pending methodological moment much more than that. How could we? Each student would plop down in such a decidedly distinctive political, cultural, social, and environmental landscape. The experience of fieldwork would be an unpredictable cocktail that only became the more capricious when combined with the idiosyncrasies and psychologies of all the individuals involved: dissertators conducting their research and the various research subjects asked to suffer our foolishness.

2. Fran Markowitz and Michael Ashkenazi (1999) compiled an important anthology of anthropological negotiations of sexuality in the field that speaks to one of these seemingly extra-ethnographic (because bracketed out of most monographs) themes. Bill Maurer (2005) uses the notion of “post reflexivity” to talk about a kind of ethnography that cares less about deconstructing its own authority claims and more about dealing with the field’s bounce-back/constructive powers of interpellating the anthropologist.

When my students today ask me to parse the difference between urban anthropology and qualitative sociology, especially if ethnographic researchers from those two disciplines are working in the same locations and on ostensibly comparable issues, I sometimes (purposefully provocatively) chalk the actual distinction up to discrepancies in how the two domains approach the ethnographic project itself, our respective assumptions about methodological rigor and validity. We both can “do” ethnography, but the differences are striking. And we see some of that quite conspicuously on the printed page—in the difference, say, between sociological appendixes that take us through a step-by-step unfurling of the conceptual and methodological maneuvers of the sociological researcher and an anthropological privileging of textual offerings that can sometimes make the methodological backstage (the “who,” “how many,” and “for how long” kinds of questions) tenaciously murky, a technique for both enthroning “theory” and concomitantly protesting, at least orthogonally, more obvious and positivist genuflections to the superiority of bench sciences and their representational conventions.

We can see that same sociological/anthropological difference on just about every single page of most monographs, and that presentational distinction is a valuable weapon in ongoing attempts at interdisciplinary policing. It might sound unfair, indeed even ludicrous, but I want to claim that some of these disciplinary differences are a function of the fact that anthropology is a potentially more hopeful (or, even better, more hope-filled) disciplinary formation than sociology, using “hope” in ways that lean heavily on Vincent Crapanzano’s (2003) attempt to thematize hope as a powerful analytical rubric for reimagining ethnographic possibility.

In distinguishing desire from hope, while conceding their ongoing and sloppy (if somewhat understandable) conflation in the literature, Crapanzano notes social theory’s relative underappreciation of hope. It is too cagey, protean, ephemeral, and autonomous to be domesticated into the kinds of notions that provide anthropological theorists with conventional forms of would-be certainty or predictability. “In its worldly manifestations,” he writes, “[hope] may be quite specific, edging on desire, as when a lawyer hopes to win a case or a father hopes to have a daughter. Or it may be open-ended, lacking final definition, vague . . . and subject to chance” (Crapanzano 2003:7). Its semantic expansiveness is an asset that for some only serves to spoil the anthropological project. Furthermore, there is the inescapably seductive danger of “false hope,” against which Crapanzano calculates true hope as a fusion of realism with “social change, progress, and even revolution.”

My reading of *sincerity* (and its ethnographic significances) would wire questions of realism and political possibility to Crapanzano’s ambitious reclamation of hope as a valuable anthropological rubric. It is a version of this *hope* that allows, I would argue, for that laughter in the face of calamity that Rouse demands. We are talking about the importance and

inescapable ordinariness of affect, something central to an ethnographic praxis that is always funny and traumatic, poignant and mundane—all in the selfsame instant. It emphasizes some of how anthropologists and their informants embody an equally affective subjecthood during the ethnographic encounter. “The politics of ordinary affect,” writes Kathleen Stewart, “can be anything from a split second when police decide to shoot someone because he’s black and standing in a dark doorway and has something in his hands, to a moment when someone falls in love with someone else who’s just come into view. Obviously, the differences matter. The politics of any surge depends on where it might go. What happens” (Stewart 2007:15). This might move us to examine “what happens” (and/or does not) when the ethnographic sparks start flying in the intersubjective collision that is anthropological research, an anthropology that defines its difference from most other versions of the social scientific enterprise (at least in their overly scientific iterations) as marking time between a version of ethnography seen as a transparent window into a discrete, passive, and objective social world and a contrasting variety considered something more like a black box of feedback loops, inter/subjective contaminations, and almost unteachable artistry. This is an anthropology that no longer just flies headlong into the delusional fantasy of political self-evidence and clarity. Instead, it tries to heed Virginia Dominguez’s call to rescue anthropology from its growing political irrelevance by paying particular “attention to the presence or absence of love and affection in our scholarship—at all stages in the production of our scholarship” (Dominguez 2000:388).

My too-quick leaps (of faith?) from *hope* to *affect* to *love* are all gestures in the direction of grounding a conceptual distinction between sincerity and authenticity, two related lenses for spotting “the real” and its varying implications for ethnographic research. That “writing culture” moment privileged “authenticity” as a Trojan horse for falsified renditions of ethnographic authority, which necessitates that we ask ourselves “what happens” when we move our discussion of realism’s stakes from authenticity to its “cognate ideal,” as Trilling once put it, *sincerity*. What do we gain, and what do we lose? And why does this differential potential offer a drastically newfangled commitment to “the political” in anthropology today? To begin an admittedly incomplete answer to that overly ambitious question, I am going to leave the contemporary moment, this version of the ethnographic present, for a digression through the affect-laden and hope-saturated in/sincerities of an African American protoanthropologist from the mid-nineteenth century, Paschal Randolph.³

Paschal Beverly Randolph was a self-educated African American born in downtown Manhattan in 1825. He was raised on a patch of what was then a teeming, soot-filled slum

known as Five Points, where several of the city’s most dangerous and sometimes bloody streets intersected. Not at all atypical for the time period, Randolph’s mother died of cholera when he was only 6 years old (during the epidemic of 1831), and the story of his father, of “the Virginia Randolphs,” seems to have been made up by Paschal himself out of little more than wishful dreams.

Despite his humble and poverty-stricken beginnings, by 1855 Randolph was a world-renowned transatlantic sex magician who practiced alchemy, numerology, and various forms of astral projection. He also represented an early, preinstitutionalized version of American ethnography. His mid-nineteenth-century research trips through Western Europe, Egypt, and the Turkish Empire netted him powerful fetish objects and potent talismans: magic mirrors that one magnetized for clairvoyance (to gaze into the future or the past) by carefully ejaculating on their surfaces; hashish that Randolph personally mobilized to free himself from earlier “slavery” under the negatively “vampiric” powers of spirit mediumship; a variety of crystals, magnets, and newly learned meditative techniques that allowed practiced men to engage in sexual intercourse for seemingly extraordinary amounts of time, techniques he sold through the mail as part of his “sex science” system—and for approximately five dollars a secret.

Historians of religion have characterized the rise of occultism (i.e., mesmerism, animal magnetism, etc.) in nineteenth-century America as an instantiation of “the flight from reason,” a time of increasingly irrational commitments to mysticism and superstition (as a function, at least in part—and somewhat ironically—of advances in scientific technology). But I am particularly interested in the political service to which sex magic, spiritualism, and even (to a different extent) occultism were put by the likes of Randolph, mediums who channeled historical figures such as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Martin Luther, and Socrates in aid to the abolitionist cause, these long-dead spirits deployed to rail against the injustices of racial slavery and female disenfranchisement.

Even after Randolph denounced and recanted spiritualism (which, he claimed, evacuated his soul and individual subjectivity in the name of “uncontrollably foreign forces”) and began the occultist search he would bequeath to the likes of Madame Blavatsky, of Theosophical Society fame, his continued use of magic/mediumship as a civil and political tool in debates about the future of the nation-state, law, and governance were clear examples of the extent to which “the public sphere” was soaked through and through with more than just finely sifted Habermasian hyperrationalities. According to Russ Castronovo (2001), nineteenth-century America’s far-fetched, pseudoscientific, and illogical politicking (the kind that Randolph exemplified) was actually more in line (not less) with Habermas’s irredeemably abstract definitions of civic engagement and its privileging of disembodied and passively immaterial citizen subjects—“human beings pure and simple,” as Habermas put it, without a trace of the confusingly salient social baggage that comes with actual embodied po-

3. For much of my biographical information on the under-studied Randolph, I use his own writings and the useful biography written by John Patrick Deveney (1997).

litical existence (i.e., sexualization, racialization, class-based differentiation, etc.). Indeed, Habermas's public sphere was always what Castronovo labels an "occult public sphere," demanding members to embrace a form of humanity stripped of everything that gives social intercourse its specificity and value.

The common caricatures we proffer of Habermas and the forms of sociality that he conceived as being birthed from a thoroughly modern public sphere are inadequate models of political subjectivity/possibility. We often invoke a Habermas who glimpsed the emergence of the modern public sphere in European coffee houses about a century before Randolph first journeyed there, a public sphere supposedly enabled by capital and ordered by principles of rationality and articulate debate. Habermas envisioned a civil conversation hostile to status-based authorities, immune to irrationalities and unfalsifiable claims, purged of groundlessly unexamined or superstitious beliefs. Of course, many scholars have argued that an irrational sophism and exclusionism (far more pronounced than Habermas recognized) has fundamentally overdetermined the public sphere as a discursive and political space, but Castronovo's wrinkle also emphasizes the degree to which Habermas himself constructs a public sphere that sneaks occultlike properties and priorities through the back doors of those very same eighteenth-century coffeehouses.

Randolph was a follower of more famous clairvoyants and spiritualists, such as Andrew Jackson Davis and John Murray Spear, people who combined mesmerism and Swedenborgianism into a spiritualist practice complete with séances, automatic writing, spirit channeling, crystal gazing, and other techniques for communicating with the deceased. This included spirit photography, a nineteenth-century method for documenting and capturing communiqués between the living and the dead. Indeed, technology itself was always folded into the spiritualist cause. Magnetism and electrification were usually the motifs of choice—and more than just metaphorically. Mesmerism harnessed magnetic and electrical forces, the newest discovered technologies and units of power, for access to faraway temporal (not just spatial) distances.

The process of communicating with dead spirits (whether photographed or not) was considered—according to cultural historian Jeffrey Sconce (2000)—a kind of spiritual telegraphy: the telegraph was then a new and seemingly magical device used to help Americans talk with one another across vast geographical distances. And the deployment of science (electricity, magnetism, physics, biology, etc.) served as backbone to the new media then undergirding claims for spiritualism's scientific legitimacy. It only took photography about 10 years to hitch itself to the spiritualist bandwagon, and by the mid-1880s, photography was being institutionalized in parts of Europe as a genre of transparently self-evidential fact in legal proceedings even as mesmerist, spiritualists, and magnetists used the same photochemical principles to capture the ephemeral movement of spirits and their smoky auras (Tagg 1993). And this distinction was always couched as a difference

between fact and fiction, science and hucksterism, (false) hopes and in/sincerities always dangling in the balance: spiritual photographers reduced to insincere frauds preying on the naive hopefulness of the living.

The history of photography has wended itself around this paradox between its seemingly iconic/indexical properties and its more fancifully artificial/rhetorical rendering powers. Theorist Roland Barthes (1981) offered up one of the most interesting musings on the inextricable linkages between photography and magic even as he further canonizes the medium's claim to self-evidential and transparent "proofing," of authenticating "what was there" over and against the constructedness of artistic "representation." Barthes famously distinguishes the *studium* (obvious and conspicuous aspects of what any photograph indexically and objectively captures, including cultural contexts informing the material culture depicted in the image) from the more romantic and subjective (and privileged) *punctum* of a photographic image, which he likens to a wounding and pricking of the viewer by that invisible (and repressed) ultimate signified of all photographs: death itself. This is a punctum that almost always seems to emerge, unpredictably, from the photographs themselves, as though a product of their own volition mixed with the idiosyncratic subjectivities of specific viewers. In some ways, according to Barthes, all photographs are spirit photographs. No matter what they ostensibly depict (the embrace of lovers, a tractor in a field, children playing soccer), they are really just showing us death, the dead, and ourselves as always already dead. They are little more than pictorial archives of our own existential impermanence.

Barthes actually wants to have it both ways: photographs as a magical and "private reading" (looking at a photo, he says, is always a personal viewing) as well as a factual authentication of that which was—that which has been. Even though such an assessment still traffics in realist assumptions about photography's ontological solidity, these same assumptions allow the image to signal our own pending doom. (For Barthes, it is the image of his own dead mother staring back at him as her preadolescent self.) We are already looking at a ghost, seeing death, spying a reminder of our own too-soon demise. No matter what the *studium* of the picture ostensibly showcases, it is always, simply, us watching our own obliteration, something like that time-traveling guinea pig in Chris Marker's 1963 film *La jetée*, the one who as a child witnesses himself getting killed as an adult—an image he cannot get out of his head, even before he finally deciphers its true profundity. This marking of death, according to Barthes, is an unflinching fact as inescapable and self-contained as the sixteenth-century double-ledger bookkeeping that Mary Poovey (1998) argues is equally a function of discursive force and self-delusion (not just simplistically self-evident and undisputable numerical truths about the economic world of hard and fast material items existing beyond the bounds of the ledger's carefully handled pages).

Randolph does not seem to have been an avid practitioner

of spirit photography, but he did consider his sperm-soaked magic mirrors “a sensitive surface upon which the attendant dead could, can and do, temporarily photograph whatever they choose to.” If talking to the dead was explicitly considered telegraphy, even Randolph’s magic mirrors could be understood as would-be photographic surfaces for mechanical reproduction of the spiritual realm, a space wherein the hyperagential occultist and protoanthropologist conjures up the disembodied other.

Photographs also provide a suggestive example for parsing the conceptual distance between authenticity and sincerity as analytically useful categories. For most people (other than Barthes, perhaps), it would seem odd and illogical to call a photograph sincere or insincere. They might consider the photographer or the photographed medium sincere or insincere (depending, say, on whether they genuinely believe in the veracity of their captured imagery or are more cynically exploiting trickery for monetary gain and public notoriety). However, the inanimate pictures themselves are less obviously capable of such self-conscious subterfuge. If anything, the sincerity of the people involved (photographers, photographed subjects, and even third parties sizing up the finished product) is assumed to authenticate or deauthenticate the photographs either as genuine reflections of spiritual communications, spirits leaving their photographic likeness on a rickety séance table, or as purposeful/inadvertent effects of a camera operator tampering with the celluloid.

Though tethered in some fundamental ways, the in/authenticity of the photograph and the in/sincerity of the photographer translate into a cavernous agential divide. When Paschal, for one, turns his back on spiritualism (or a version of it) in the 1850s, it is precisely because he wants to defend himself from the inanimateness of mere photographs, from being spiritually and subjectively evacuated, rendered non-conscious, left empty and open for another agential being (from another dimension) to control. In fact, he claims to have spent much of the first half of his entire life under the thumb of hostile spiritual entities, a somatic automaton unable to refuse the bidding of powerful others.⁴ As a response to that spiritual enslavement, his form of occultism emphasized the active and purposeful use of magic forces as opposed to just mediumship/self-thingification. Randolph justified renunciation of his prior spiritualist practices by maintaining that he did not want to be reduced to a receptacle for others’ subjectivities, a mere predication, a different version of Peter Schwenger’s tear-filled thing (2006), just a photographesque reflection of another’s reality.

4. Randolph was one of the first to propagate the occultist idea that there are not just dead people’s souls out there waiting to dialogue with mortals; there are other beings, he argued, “passing” for dead people, taking over mediums like Randolph, and sometimes controlling them even if the medium ostensibly is not in trance. That, Randolph says, is what happened to him during the entire first half of his career, helping to explain (he says) his infamous reputation as odd, unpredictable, and angular.

Randolph was far too proactive for that. He spent the Civil War agitating for abolition (even if he sometimes seemed to challenge more radical stances on the matter held by the likes of Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, both duly impressed by Randolph’s intellect and rhetorical abilities). The Civil War, of course, saw a major uptick in spirit photography because people wanted to speak to dead relatives—especially those soldiers killed in battle. And they also wanted to see them, to take one last look at their dead. For Randolph, the end of the Civil War was also an important watershed moment. He used the era’s newfound potential (and racial optimism) to segue from spiritualism to more mundane (and this-worldly) exploits (before his subsequent occultist turn), moving to New Orleans and teaching newly freed slaves to read and write—that is, until wealthy Creoles drummed him out of town for his odd Christianity, a version still steeped in Randolph’s desire to fend off external forces threatening to deny him agency.

To talk about the politics of ethnographic writing in terms of authenticity alone, I want to argue, is akin to dehumanizing and thingifying the ethnographic project/subject. It debases and vulgarizes the ethnographic encounter itself, concocting an occult intersubjectivity wherein the denied coevalness that characterizes our field’s traditional discursive offerings ironically functions as a more accurate temporal architecture for a form of vampirism that would deny the mutually cathected ethnographic moment its due. This reduces the people we work with—sometimes even as political allies—into political objects no less inert for their ventriloquized placeholding as reflections of others’ ethnographic and ideological interests. An attempt to remember the significance of laughter, love, and the everydayness of affect is an important methodological, epistemological, and political intervention, a differently animated ghost in the ethnographic machine. To talk about the ethnographic value of sincerity along with authenticity is to poke and prod at our field’s undertheorizing of research methods and procedures during ongoing anthropological debates about “the real.”

This is not just a way to say that “building rapport” is a euphemism for lying and misrepresentation, for dissimulation and insincerity. The stakes of sincerity rely on more than just exposing Malinowskian monographs for their bracketed-out xenophobia (Malinowski 1967). Clearly, sincerity is a multipronged aspect of Derek Freeman’s revisitation of Margaret Mead’s work in Samoa; his criticism of Mead’s findings and the scholarly challenges to his critiques are good reminders of the secrets, subterfuges, and suppressions (what Diane Nelson would call “duplicities”) that function as inescapable scaffolding for any ethnographic edifice (Freeman 1999; Mead 1973). But that is not why sincerity is key. David Stoll’s (1999) controversial exposure of Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú’s autobiographical embellishments pivot on some of the same vulnerable ground as do the accusations against Chagnon’s supposed political complicities in South America (Tierney 2000) and the exposure of Project Camelot’s cold

war efforts (Horowitz 1967; Price 2008). All of these are moments when purported sincerities (of everyone involved, including whistle-blowers and revisionists) are clearly at stake, but an emphasis on sincerity is also about recognizing that the other sees us coming and confounds us, sometimes with the very same tools ethnographers use. Indeed, the intersubjective space of ethnographic encounters today is almost always a Rilesian “inside-out” moment: the academic researcher finds research subjects that are already researching themselves and, increasingly, researching us, too (Riles 2001).

The canonized Geertzian (Geertz 1973) distinction between twitches, winks, and fake winks can be productively read as further highlighting the analytical purchase of sincerity (especially on the part of those winking and fake-winking informants). For Geertz, thick description gets us from wink to fake wink, which helps us to expose the native’s funny bone—so that the anthropologist appreciates the subtlety of a joke that might already be a “burlesqued burlesqued” wink (Boon 2000:436), something potentially lost on the humorless ethnographer. But that thickness is also a function of how multiply saturated, how affected such an encounter is for everyone—the anthropologist trying to change the world (one ethnographic landscape at a time) and the informant, sometimes attempting to do the same (while negotiating the pluses and minuses of having a seemingly well-intentioned anthropological interloper looking over her shoulder).

Anthropologists still teach their students about “primitives” who look quite skeptically (even horrifyingly) at the camera’s blinding flash, a flash that is imagined to literally “confine” the spirit of the subject being captured on film. What reclaiming a marginalized figure like Randolph demands, à la Fatimah Tobing Rony’s (1996) theory of minoritarian countervisualization, is that we look at our ethnographic practice with a “third eye”—a seeing that imagines the power of ethnography (like photography) to rely less on overcommitments to ethnography as self-evidential indexicality (one seductive way to increase our field’s political relevance and profile in a world that values the assumed hardness of science) and more on a notion of fieldwork that counters anthropology’s traditional ability to turn our interlocutors into mediums, passive receptors for the discipline’s cultural constructions. We should cultivate a healthy fear of ethnography and its too-easy obviousness, its taken-for-granted transparency. What gets devalued in our discipline when authenticity stands as the only way to spy the “real”? What deformed notion of valuation do we champion when the very nature of the ethnographic encounter is bracketed from discussions of anthropology’s political import? What “dismal science” does anthropology become when it fails to truly interrogate the political coefficients of its first-order interaction/s with “the other” in the field, when the knowledge culled (or the political structure reified or railed against) distracts ethnographers from much of what constitutes human specificity? Instead of just talking about native forms of “gift exchange,” let us also theorize (not just thematize) the many gifts that we give and

receive, ethnographic exchanges that grease the wheels of ethnographic knowledge transmission (Jackson 2005). These are gifts that produce the very possibility of data acquisition and political praxis in an ethnographic context. They are specific and tangible, categorizable and individual—like the bodies of those giving and receiving them.

Clearly, anthropologists must feel that they have bigger fish to fry in the face of the hegemon that is a global “neoliberal dispensation,” a moment when the privileged form of “political” freedom seems crammed into the singular God-given right to consume—and, for the very poor, to imagine future consumptive possibility. But just as postmodernism (somewhat counterintuitively) might be said to anticipate (and clear the way for) neoliberalism’s master narrative and hyperreductionism, so too might we consider the inconspicuous rafters of any ethnographic interaction to be a staging area for the kinds of Faustian pacts with unfreedom that allow institutionalized disciplines to have their political cake and eat it too.⁵

There is, of course, a politics to building rapport, and it implies more than just the negligible cost of doing ethnographic business as usual. The experiential practice of participant observation and its discursive congealment, the ethnographic monograph, combine to produce what Eve Sedgwick (2003) might call a “periperformative” mix that aspires to describe a social landscape while simultaneously producing a node of politically charged intercultural contact that is the enabling “ethnofiction” for anthropological attempts at political interventionism of any sort: tackling whatever aspect of “modern blackness” might account for what transforms a peaceful hillside community into a space of hyperviolence (Thomas, forthcoming); arguing for a version of Islamic subjectivity that can confound stereotypical Western conceptions of ethnic/political difference (Varzi 2006); offering an ethnographic rendition of environmental racism’s dangers and southerners’ organized responses to such threats (Checker 2005). In all of these instances and the many more anthropologists negotiate, there is a need to think through that moment of contact itself (an anthropologist and a murder victim’s widow, an anthropologist and an Iranian filmmaker-martyr, an anthropologist and a community activist, etc.), not to cultivate the kind of solipsistic and metaethnographic navel-gazing the discipline gets lampooned for producing. Instead, it is about recognizing that the anthropologist is always a political actor in the everydayness of her practice (in a way that demands unpacking and explicit articulation) each and every time she sits at a community board meeting, watches a local rally, or asks the most idle of clarifying ques-

5. This evocative connection between neoliberalism and postmodernism is compellingly marked by Graeber (2001). And bell hooks (1992) has one of the most evocative and oft-cited discussions of “eating the other” outside of anthropological engagements with the literality and metaphoricity of cannibalism.

tions. The unit of analysis is not the anthropologist but instead the collision she is a part of—whether intended or not.

Sincerity, which I have defined (in other contexts) as a category of existentially inescapable doubt only retroactively coated with too-easy certainties (a self-delusional reading of the other's purported insides/intentions), is a way to flag the kinds of potential dissimulations and duplicities that always map our fears of betrayal, uneasiness, and confusion across the ethnographic axis that links, however temporarily, informant and anthropologist. To highlight the sparks that fly from such seemingly ephemeral and quotidian (and obvious) social relations that open up space for anthropological knowledge production is usually understood as a post-modernly depoliticizing act, reflexivity as an excuse for political inactivity. What manner of irresponsibility and self-aggrandizement would allow an anthropologist to obsess over the intersubjective discomforts and disconnections hovering beneath the surface of a seemingly necessary ethnographic encounter with, say, human rights activists putting the pieces back together in Darfur? Not to mention the fact that such matters of interpersonal angst and uneasiness are considered more rightly the province of psychology. However, I want to make a case (still, admittedly, somewhat half baked) for the anthropological social critic whose engagement with the world begins by treating other subjects/informants more robustly as fully embodied and affective interlocutors even when the ostensible stakes of the fieldwork we conduct seem so urgent. Anything else risks operationalizing and institutionalizing a form of political engagement within the discipline of anthropology that would already be cut off at the experiential knees. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) makes an argument for how shallow definitions of "the political" (i.e., Western conceptions of female agency mobilized as a universalist analytic for understanding Muslim women's commitments to Islam) deprive others of true agency by dismissing their choices as ideological brainwashing operating at cross-purposes to their true interests.⁶ Of course, this is the quintessentially ethnographic move, challenging the hubris of those who would offer their peculiar cultural predilections as universal facts from a precultural realm. To be a critical citizen of a shrinking global world is to heed this deconstructionist call, especially given our increased exposure to cultural difference and to powerful claims for normativity that would dress those cultural mandates in nature's too-tight clothing.

As someone who uses anthropology to think critically about race/racism, I am also convinced that deconstruction alone will not provide us with much political traction. We can win the polite public debates about "race" and demand it be labeled a social construction (and the AAA's current traveling exhibit does quite a bit to further popularize that

position), but race continues to function as it always has—only the stronger, some might argue, for the constructionist double-talk its least generous adherents can disingenuously deploy. Karen Fields (2001) goes so far as to argue that anthropologists have double standards when it comes to race, challenging the rationality of what she calls "racecraft" (the mystical and erroneous belief that race is simply biology) while allowing "witchcraft" its cultural/rational legitimacy as a counternarrative of causal possibility. According to Fields, this is a profound contradiction at the core of the anthropological project, one that demands resolution. As others have made abundantly clear, using Stephan Palmié's (2007) provocations as their lightning rod, race (and its mobilization/recuperation in contemporary genomics) does not simply function analogously to witchcraft within the contemporary intellectual moment. As just one point of profound difference, it is deployed by many scientists and medical doctors today as a hypermaterialist/real mechanism for treating sick patients and tracing historical lineages, which exposes just some of deconstruction's political insufficiencies.

Unlike discourses of "authenticity," which seem to close off critiques of identity politics at the limits of deconstruction, "sincerity" provides a mechanism for asking how the deconstructed identity continues to powerfully/unfairly structure people's lives and life chances even after the emperor's nakedness has been noted and reported ad infinitum. There is something to be said for shifting the meta-anthropological discussion from ethnographic authenticity to ethnographic sincerity, but not as a plea for more truly sincere ethnographers. Our sincerities probably do us (and all of our many ethnographic *thems*) more harm than good, but the point is to ask what culling sociocultural knowledge through immersion-based participant observation might leave in its wake. Those remainders help to refract the central riddle of the anthropological puzzle: what makes humans human. They also demand that we see our subjects as more than just informants, even more than just too-narrowly conceptualized "political" actors, even if we cannot simplistically embrace "friends" as an unselfconscious replacement.

In such a context, the ethnographic recognition of an uncanny emic-cum-etic humor is no smoking gun, because it also implies a kind of nervous joke making, a laughing to keep from talking—or to hide otherwise awkward silences. (Lanita Jacobs-Huey [2008] writes about African American comics and their responses to 9/11, one powerful distillation of what comedic nervousness looks like in a contemporary American context.) It may demand that the anthropologist become a comedian himself, or that she study religious believers, as Marla Frederick (2003) might recommend, from the inside out, as a believer herself—and not just from some distant point of respectful exteriority, curiosity, and secular alienation. Roxanne Varzi (2006) unfurls an Iranian landscape that is very personal and intimate even as it attempts to write about the possibilities of a future Islamic democracy. These

6. Wendy Brown (1995) makes a similar kind of argument (in terms of structure and implication) about the blind spots and ethnocentrism of human rights discourse.

researchers are offering up a critical and engaged anthropology that is much more than ideological cant and ethnocentric hubris. For such scholar-activists, the personal is political—not a personalized way out of the fray, but the only safe and ethical space from which to fire off substantive ethnographic salvos.

Many anthropologists call for a more relevant anthropology, for a renewed guildwide investment in the political implications of our efforts/offering and for a greater appreciation of what can happen when cultural research and political activism meet. To achieve this (and to utilize it most humanely), we must also think about all the many ways in which the potential “political” of anthropological engagements necessitates more than just reductionism, more than abstracted and disembodied Habermasian political figures haunting the public sphere and ethnographic field site. The longing for a postracial, asexual, and universal ethnographic researcher privileges an apparition that unproductively occults the anthropological project. Indeed, our investments in ethnographic research/writing need not fall prey to that brand of occultist evacuation (no matter how popular such aspirations have become in the age of Obama). Paschal Randolph’s is still an “occult public sphere,” but it fights for a sloppy and irreducibly entified/somatic existence over abstract levelings and emptyings of any kind. It demands to be taken seriously and laughed at, productively, in the selfsame instant. We need a notion of the political that is committed to the gunk of ethnographic practice and that constructs an anthropology that will not finesse its manipulations and machinations with antiquatedly nonreflexive rhetoric about rapport as some kind of mystical mind-melding, anthropological angels communicating without the noises and distractions (of, say, race and gender/sex) caused by physical embodiment (Peters 1999). This would be the beginning of a radically engaged (in every sense of the term) anthropology disconnected from the reifications and dehumanizations that sometimes pass for politics all along the ideological spectrum. It could be an anthropology that better facilitates cultural critique and collaborative action by way of the empathetic connections that sharing a sincere laugh, even in the face of certain death, implies.

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