



A Possible
Anthropology
Methods for
Uneasy Times

ANAND PANDIAN

A Possible
Anthropology

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For Don, Lawrence,
Stefania, Paul,
teachers in
anthropology

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among the
Anthropologists

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Introduction

An Ethnographer
among the
Anthropologists

Should I stay or should I go? In the spring of 2018, the indigenous Métis scholar Zoe Todd posted a pained reflection on the state of affairs in anthropology. She had trained in the discipline and served in a university department for several years. The experience, she found, had been exhausting: “To be honest, this work wears away at my cells, my fibres, my bones.”¹

It wasn't just the pressures of an academic job that Todd had in mind. There were also the uncomfortable realities of a field that prided itself on its commitment to social critique. The subtle racism that treated people from elsewhere as objects of study, rather than thinkers and theorists in their own right. The persistence of colonial relations of power and knowledge in the formal structures of the discipline. An impatience with creative and experimental efforts to confound its elitism and hierarchy. “When your body,

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and your body of work, do not fit neatly into the categories provided, you become a problem,” the young anthropologist noted. Who could blame her for thinking to go?

I found myself vexed by Todd’s reflections when I encountered them that spring on the blog *Anthro{dendum}*. Like her and many others, I was drawn into anthropology some years ago by a desire for social transformation. I too had come to see, over the years, how easily this ambition could be reduced to a vehicle for personal advancement. Still, I couldn’t shake the sense of anthropology’s radical promise. I could hardly think of a more profound way of opening up the space of human possibility. This was a prospect that seemed to keep surfacing, wherever the field’s lessons drifted about in the world. In fact, I had seen firsthand how Todd’s own work could make this happen.

There was a paper she gave at the 2016 meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). It was a somber and unsettled gathering, clouded by the recent presidential election in the United States. The typical lightness of corridor chatter among old friends and colleagues had given way to expressions of grief and disbelief. I remember stepping into a bathroom stall at the convention center in Minneapolis. On the floor below the toilet was a rainbow-colored flyer printed with just one word, *Sapiens*. The tableau seemed to capture the state or perhaps the fate of the species at that moment, as many here saw it. You could feel it in the hallways, the sense of aspirations to flush and bid goodbye.

Around the corner, Todd was speaking at a session on indigenous ontology. The hall was packed that afternoon, a basket passing from row to row to gather contributions for the Dakota Access Pipeline struggle. Todd also spoke of oil, but in a highly unusual and moving manner. She talked about her home territory in Alberta, the rivers of the Lake Winnipeg watershed and the threats they faced from petroleum pollution. Could one meet such destructive developments with a spirit of kindness? Calling on the Cree idea of *wahkohtowin*, an enveloping relatedness, Todd claimed a kinship with the ancient and forgotten beings whose remains had since become that oil. “The bones of dinosaurs and the traces of flora and fauna from millions of years ago,” she said, “act as teachers for us, reminding us of the life that once teemed here.”²

Who was this “us” that the anthropologist invoked? Perhaps it was her Métis people alone. And yet, by asserting these responsibilities for human, piscine, and even petroleum kin, by sketching an ethic of tenderness to meet them all with care, she seemed to be calling on all of us in that crowded hall

to deepen and nurture our moral sensibilities. Her words conveyed the sense that even in a most disturbing moment, this spirit of kinship could be ours to share, that it could make for a kind of response. It was an unexpected opening, this horizon of possibility, something palpable and present in the room that day. To me, it felt like an instance of genuine hope, even in the face of dispiriting circumstance.

“I think it would be a real tragedy for our discipline if we lost your voice,” I told Zoe in the summer of 2018, when we had the chance to converse about that paper, about anthropology, about the frustrations on her mind of late. She told me about her ill-fated undergraduate adventures in biology, and the scientist who first suggested she pursue anthropology: “You seem to really care about people.” She talked about her love of teaching, the indigenous thinkers who inspired her practice, and the hardships faced by women of color in the academy.

“I was attracted to anthropology because I thought of it as a very expansive and plural space,” Zoe said. “In its best iterations, anthropology is a space of being in the world together, allowing for different understandings of our being. Can we find a way to be kinder and gentler toward one another, at a time when everything is pushing us to be harder and sharper?”

“What would make you want to stay?” I asked. “What do you think would make anthropology more habitable, more hospitable?”

“The possibility of it being more collaborative,” she replied, “a space that’s willing to break down walls, that’s willing to play. We’re in the middle of what could be a very serious ending, the end of what we know as human existence. If there’s ever been a time for us to play, to be fearless, it’s now. The trouble is that the old structures are just clinging for dear life. You can feel the bony white hands of the forefathers trying to claw us back. How do we break that grasp and allow ourselves to float into the wide blue ocean?”

What is possible is never easy to discern. But this is a task all the more imperative now, in this time of hard lines, stubborn limits, and spiraling questions about the future of that being to whom we devote ourselves in anthropology, the human. In the effort to think beyond the impasses of the present, I argue in this book, the discipline has essential resources to contribute. Anthropology teaches us to seek out unseen faces of the world at hand, to confront its openness through experience and encounter, and to take these openings as seeds of a humanity to come. These are methods both ethical and practical, ways of being as much as ways of doing. They are the elements that sustain the critical promise of the field.

To fully realize this promise, though, we have to do more than to accept the field as it is given. For when we think and work in anthropology, we take in its problems as well as its prospects. And as scholars on the edges of the discipline—courageous individuals like Todd and many others—have attested in recent years, the colonial and racist violence that gave rise to the field remains with us even now. What to do in the face of this ambiguous heritage? As with any social field, dominant tendencies in anthropology are always crosscut by residual and emergent elements, to borrow terms from Raymond Williams.³ The challenge lies in identifying and expanding the scope for what remains on the threshold of possibility.

As anthropologists, we have a method to do just this: ethnography, a practice of critical observation and imagination, an endeavor to trace the outlines of a possible world within the seams of this one. I am an anthropologist; this is the world where I spend much of my time. Some time ago, however, it struck me that I didn't have the best sense of this milieu, of either its serious pitfalls or its real potential. I began to look at this familiar intellectual scene with an ethnographic eye. Eventually, a book took shape, one that grew from avid conversation and collaborative exploration.

Take what follows as an ethnographic encounter with anthropology, an effort to grasp what this field does in the world, with an eye to what it might yet be. This book pursues the vision of a possible anthropology, one to meet the challenge of uneasy times, one willing to set sail with its most imaginative kin.

“SOMETIMES IT IS the truth of the possible as opposed to the actual that needs to be conveyed,” Lisa Stevenson writes in a luminous meditation on life and death in the Canadian Arctic.⁴ The insight is one that anthropology ought to know well. Every so often, the discipline passes through another moment of radical reinvention, turning away from what lies at hand with an eye to the promise of a distant horizon. This is much more than the symptom of a fickle disposition. There are few intellectual enterprises as profoundly committed to addressing the acute and ever-changing challenges of the world in which we find ourselves. And there is also the slippery and elusive nature of that being at the heart of our inquiries, that creature we call *anthropos*. How could we possibly find an end to its pondering?

For anthropology is the endeavor to conceive a humanity yet to come. To be sure, we work closely and carefully with people lodged in concrete

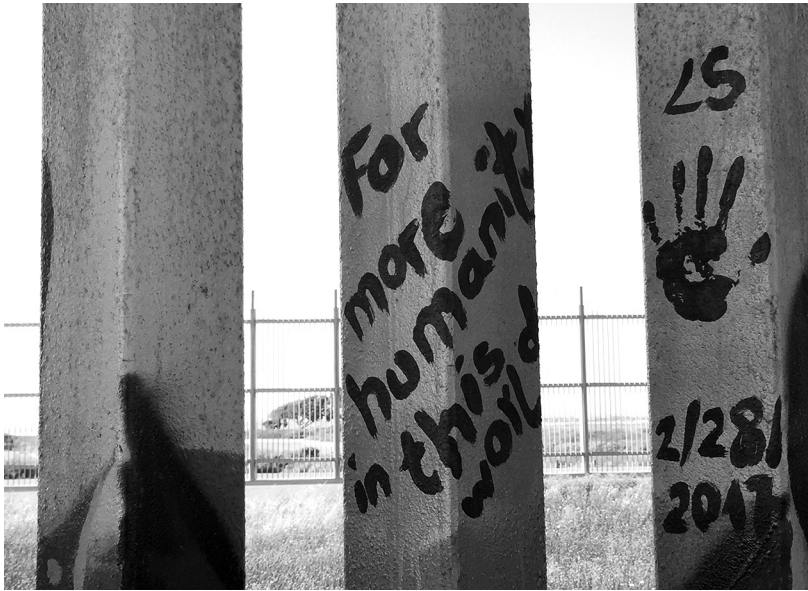
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circumstances, with refugees and migrants stranded at international borders, with farmers struggling against the expropriation and contamination of their lands, with scientists and technicians putting experimental infrastructure into motion. And yet, wherever we go and whomever we seek out in curiosity or solidarity, the stories we bring back are only worth telling when they complicate the humanity of those we share them with. “In the act of inventing another culture, the anthropologist invents his own,” the late Roy Wagner wrote.⁵ Anthropology is a venture in cultural transformation as much as cultural representation, an effort to unsettle and remake what would seem to be given in human being. Humanity is less our object than our medium, a quality we work on and with.

This is, no doubt, a uniquely difficult time to embrace the human as a mode of being and a locus of inquiry. On the one hand, we see a surge of nativist politics around the globe, the repudiation of appeals to a common humanity and the defense instead of racial and national boundaries. On the other hand, the quickening tempo of ecological crises calls us to think beyond the human as a species, and to confront instead our entanglement with the countless other living beings we share this planet with. Like so many other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, anthropology has been swept of late into diverse currents of posthumanist criticism, rightly devoted to challenging the idea of *Homo sapiens* as the perfection of terrestrial life.

And yet, it is worth remembering that the human in anthropology has never been a marker of species alone. Humanity is also a horizon of moral aspiration, an impetus to conceive and pursue a common life in profoundly expansive—albeit often controversial—terms. For Johann Gottfried Herder, an eighteenth-century thinker crucial to the origins of anthropology, the *Humanität* of humans lies in their capacity for sympathizing with the condition of beings unlike themselves; as he wrote in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, “Nature has formed man most of all living creatures for participating in the fate of others.”⁶

What would it take to pursue such sympathy as a real possibility—for us, for those we learn from, those for whom we write and teach? This precisely is the promise of experience in anthropology, a promise I explore in this book as an anthropologist but also as an ethnographer in the company of my peers. I rely on “the connection, intellectual and emotional, between observer and observed,” essential to the ethnographic enterprise, as Ruth Behar has described it.⁷ Think through things as they erupt and evolve, wa-



Border fence between the United States and Mexico, Playas de Tijuana.

gering they will land you in the midst of novel ideas; attune yourself to the travails of others, with the faith that such exposure will bring new lessons; give yourself over to the circumstances of some other life, hoping to find yourself taken beyond the limits of your own. These methods are essential to anthropology's pursuit of humanity as a field of transformative possibility, and they shape, in the pages that follow, how I engage with the discipline and the working lives of its practitioners.

Such aspirations cannot help but unsettle and displace. We dwell, as Anna Tsing suggests, in a "strange new world" of precarious prospects and disturbed settings for life, one that asks us to "stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours."⁸ Anthropology can help with this task, for this is an enterprise both deeply empirical and highly speculative, tacking between close attention to what is and sweeping imagination of what else might also be. It is no accident that ethnography, our signal form of practice and expression, shares so much with literary genres like fiction, memoir, and travelogue. Like those endeavors, our stories can also lead far from the confines of some way of life somewhere, trailing individuals, deeds, and their consequences from one world into another, yielding visions of a possible life held unexpectedly in common.

Everything turns, therefore, on how we think between the various forms of encounter that make for anthropology: fieldwork to be sure, as we will see, but also other domains of tangible experience like the ethnographic text and classroom, or the public world of politics and cultural expression, all of which are implicated in the protean force of good description. Occult powers of metamorphosis pulse through these realms, let loose in the form of vivid stories, images, and sounds. Think of how Zora Neale Hurston recalls a white Voodoo priest of Port-au-Prince in her 1938 memoir of the Caribbean, *Tell My Horse*: “As he spoke,” she writes, “he moved farther and farther from known land and into the territory of myths and mists. Before our very eyes, he walked out of his nordic body and changed. Whatever the stuff of which the soul of Haiti is made, he was that. You could see the snake god of Dahomey hovering about him. Africa was in his tones. He throbbed and glowed. He used English words but he talked to me from another continent. He was dancing before his gods and the fire of Shango played about him.”⁹

Why tarry with such spirits? It matters, what they can do to us and those we introduce them to. The stakes of expression in anthropology verge on the ontological, beckoning toward a recasting of reality as such. Worries abound now regarding the dangers posed by “alternative facts” and “post-truth” fictions in the halls of official power. But let us acknowledge that the plane of the real can tilt far more wildly and profoundly with any good story of ours. “Full-bored ethnographic writing,” as Kathleen Stewart observes, “tries to let the otherwise break through, to keep it alive, to tend it.”¹⁰ An ethnography is magical by nature, founded on the power of words to arrest and remake, to reach across daunting gulfs of physical and mental being, to rob the proud of their surety and amplify voices otherwise inaudible. Now more than ever, it would seem, we will need these dark arts of expression.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I had the chance to work on a book together with my grandfather, the story of his century of life.¹¹ The day after we released the book in the southern Indian city of Madurai, I was invited to give a talk about anthropology to local members of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association. More than a hundred amateur folklorists and anthropologists—teachers, shopkeepers, activists, and party workers by trade—crowded into that stifling hall, posing questions of great acuity. What did anthropology owe to folklore? How did our work differ from that of novelists or psychologists? “You are a professor at an American university, but we see you as a

researcher hailing from the traditions of this Tamil soil,” one man stood up to say, asking whether we ought to understand anthropological knowledge to begin with modern science, or instead with the customs of ordinary people. Unaccustomed to formal lecturing in Tamil, I tried to make sense of the discipline’s methods as best as I could. Listening to these exchanges, the Tamil writer I had worked with on my grandfather’s story put the lessons of my talk into far more concise and elegant terms than I could have managed. *Alaiyanum, tholaiyanum*, Kamalalayan concluded: “One must wander, one must get lost.”

Anthropology today is a much more diverse enterprise than the scholarly discipline that took shape within elite universities in Europe and North America.¹² Acknowledging this broader global trajectory is essential to what Faye Harrison has described as the “larger project for decolonizing and democratizing anthropology.”¹³ In India, as with so many other places in the modern world, anthropological knowledge played a role in the machinations of colonial power.¹⁴ Given the discipline’s birth in the crucible of empire, it is no surprise that many have tried to expose the “mythos of fieldwork”—to borrow a phrase from George Marcus—as a cover for the abuse of vulnerable others, a shameful heritage to overcome.¹⁵ And yet there is too much to lose in disavowing this heritage altogether, for the techniques of anthropology are also widely seen to sustain contrary ways of imagining and inhabiting the contemporary world. What would it take to nurture an anthropology founded on receptivity to difference—the inevitability, indeed, of wandering, of getting lost—rather than its mastery? How to conceive the history of the discipline, the legacy of its patriarchs and past masters, on less despotic terms?

This is a small book of essays on problems of method in anthropology. The essay is an ambulatory form of writing, a walk along a meandering course of ideas.¹⁶ Taken together, these essays follow a path of reflections: on the distant past of anthropology and a way of recovering its contemporary relevance; on the present of our efforts and the practices that orient them; on the futures that motivate anthropological inquiry in moral and political terms. When it comes to matters of method in anthropology, deep histories of inheritance remain essential, as are neglected and forgotten resources for reinvention.¹⁷ In what follows, therefore, I try to think between the apparently brutal empiricism of early anthropology and the most *au courant* of its contemporary speculative turns, between the stodgy old men of structuralism and their feminist critics, between an emergent posthumanism in

anthropology and the discipline's Enlightenment heritage. I work against the periodizing impulse that shapes our imagination of the past, against the fantasy that we might finally and fully—if belatedly still—come into presence with the present. For as Nietzsche pointed out long ago, there is a value to being untimely.¹⁸

These essays draw on what experience I've had in anthropology, gleaned through years spent in the company of Indian farmers, merchants, filmmakers, and others. But their focus lies in the experience of others: a pair of notable figures from the early years of the discipline, a handful of inventive and influential contemporary anthropologists, and a few activists, artists, and writers who work with the powers of anthropological imagination. I tarry among them as an ethnographer of anthropological practice, trying to rely more on the observations of a studied apprentice than on the authoritative voice of judgment.¹⁹ I pursue points of resonance between anthropological works and the lives of their makers, the practical philosophies at stake in the discipline's habits and concerns, and the cultural afterlife of some of its essential ideas. I rely on the power of ethnography to decenter and dissolve the sovereign self, to convey that, as the poet Arthur Rimbaud once put it, *je est un autre*, "I" as only and ever another.²⁰ What surfaces in these essays is less "the anthropologist as hero," as in Susan Sontag's famous sketch, than the anthropologist as medium in a wider world of thought and implication.²¹

In a recent book, *Reversed Gaze*, the Kenyan anthropologist Mwenda Ntarangwi takes an ethnographic look at the professional life of American anthropology. "I became very much aware of the reality of being such an outsider in anthropology," he writes, describing the experience of gazing out at the people massed at an AAA annual conference. "The noise level took me aback. Everyone was talking at the same time. But above all there was a sea of Whiteness in front of me."²² Ntarangwi brings into focus hierarchies of race, gender, and privilege that run through this academic field, insights borne out by recent public reflections on precarious employment in academic anthropology, the exploitation of graduate student labor, and other ways that a profession manifestly devoted to social justice manages still to reproduce inequality in many of its fundamental modes of operation.²³

Vivid accounts of such dynamics at work have provoked serious debates about the future of the profession, and my efforts here are indebted to the lessons of these essential conversations. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that the ethnographic orientation I follow here is a slightly different one. Written in the spirit of an affirmative critique—an approach spelled

out most fully in the coda—this book is based on engagements with more unconventional characters and experimental moments, drawing on hopeful encounters and unusual perspectives to try to grasp the field's enduring potential. This can also be put another way: this is an effort to engage ethnographically with the discipline, rather than the profession, of anthropology.²⁴ Many of the individuals who surface in these pages have places in the profession, while many others present in the book have nurtured affinities with anthropology from beyond its professional bounds. In what follows, I try to bring anthropology's critical promise into focus by thinking back and forth between such positions, between canonical and marginal figures.

The first of these essays explores the practice of empiricism in anthropology, our way of engaging the world at hand. These days, of course, the world at hand is literally in hand, with no more than a casual tap or swipe on a mobile digital portal to whisk yourself immediately elsewhere. It can be confounding, what this proliferation of streams and platforms can do to the sense of a shared reality. And yet, arguably, anthropology too is devoted to such a perspective on the real: to an empirical world more elusive than the givenness of the here and now, its actuality always open to critical shades of virtual presence and possibility. I develop this argument with close attention to two important figures in early anthropology: Bronisław Malinowski and Zora Neale Hurston. Their respective practices of fieldwork and writing reveal unexpected forms of kinship between a founding father of a manifestly scientific anthropology and a renegade African American writer, consigned to turning her studies of black folklore into fiction. What their work brings into focus, I argue, is ethnography's commitment to the expressive powers of magic, myth, and metaphor, to the conjure of realities otherwise unseen.

The second essay argues that anthropology is founded on a method of experience. Clarity regarding method has been a notoriously difficult matter in the discipline. These challenges have much to do with the inclination to think and work amid the flux of circumstance, which is often seen to compromise any effort to secure a sense of how exactly we do what we do. Here, as a way of tackling this problem, I devote ethnographic attention to four domains of practice essential to the doing of anthropology: reading, writing, teaching, and fieldwork. I explore these practices in the company of four anthropologists with diverse intellectual lineages and empirical interests: the structuralist and mythographer Claude Lévi-Strauss; the phenomenologist and writer Michael Jackson; the economic anthropologist of Africa

Jane Guyer; and the scholar of science and ecology Natasha Myers. Linger- ing in their studies and offices, passing with them in and out of classrooms and field sites, I trace shared ways of working with the unexpected and its lessons. I examine how the transformative force of encounter can pass onward from domain to domain, carrying the metamorphic charge of the unknown through diverse forms of activity and expression. Anthropology works through such experience of a field, I argue, as a means of working on the experience of those who encounter it. What distinguishes the discipline is this unity of process and endpoint, method and object, means and ends.

The third essay returns to the theme of a humanity yet to come. The essay considers the moral and political stakes of anthropology in this time of grave concerns regarding the human as such, in this era increasingly known by the name of the Anthropocene. I ask whether recent calls for anthropological attention beyond the human have forfeited too quickly the idea of humanity as a horizon of moral and political transformation. Anthropology has long had resources, I argue, to think of nature and culture in nondualistic terms. The abiding relevance of this heritage can be seen in the way that anthro- pological imagination is exercised in fields beyond the proper limits of the profession. The essay takes up three such fields—politics, art, and fiction— for ethnographic examination, tracking the pursuit of a more expansive sense of humanity by indigenous activists at the 2016 World Conservation Congress; in the efforts of two American artists to conjure the future im- print of our plastic obsessions; and in the modes of being and expression in- spired by the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin. By looking back at anthropology through the mirror of such extrapolations, I argue, we may grasp something new in the pragmatic value of that now-vexed idea of ours, culture. Anthro- pology is less the study of culture as an object of understanding, than the culture or cultivation of humanity as a method of change.

EACH OF THE expressive practices examined in this third essay unfolds in the wake of some catastrophe, a tragic apotheosis of human conceit: in the aftermath of the colonial dispossession of native land and livelihood, or in an earth of the distant future, long past the toxic bustle of the present. What does it mean, in the face of such historical or speculative evidence, to stay with humanity as a horizon of aspiration? We may find the imprint here of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism . . . the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object,” a bind that anthropol-

ogy also shares in its persistent attention to a vexing humanity.²⁵ Anthropologists do their work now in the midst of many rival claims about the scope of human possibility: the “radical humanism” of antiracist or anti-imperialist critics calling for the belated fulfillment of a promise of freedom; the “posthumanism” of those who find machines and their networks engulfing the domain of human agency; the “compostism” of ecological thinkers like Donna Haraway, who suggests that the human finds its greatest potential as humus, fermenting alongside countless other living beings.²⁶ In the face of such diverse concerns, can the stubborn humanism of anthropology be understood as anything other than retrograde?

These questions came up one afternoon in a discussion of an early draft of this book at the University of California, Berkeley.²⁷ “What is there to glorify in anthropology?” one student asked pointedly. Another participant, Fatima Mojaddedi, rightly challenged the buoyancy of what she’d read here, recounting the circumstances of her own fieldwork in Kabul:

What does it mean to privilege metaphor, or the magic of words in ethnography, in a place where people can die for speaking metaphorically? Or for using forms of speech considered dangerously irrational? This is a place where America has been engaged in warfare now for over fifteen years, where devastation ranges from the cultural and linguistic to the infrastructural and corporeal. A place where, for some people, the failure of the political and the imposition of a liberal democracy that champions the human is both a crisis of imagination and a crisis of language.

What Mojaddedi said of life in Kabul was moving and profound, and it took time to take in the force of her description, to try to imagine, as she encouraged us to do, the arguments I had made from the wrenching perspective of that scene. Much later, it struck me that she had spoken in a spirit deeply resonant with the idea of anthropology that this book tries to put forward. She had sketched the conditions of a starkly different form of human existence, and she asked what it would take for anthropology to respond to this difference, in all its troubling particularity. She brought the conversation into the register of an ethnographic encounter. Her words put the limits of our humanity at stake, those of us gathered around that seminar table in California. There was no obvious reply to make, only a renewed impetus for attention and reflection.

“We must not conclude that everything which has ever been linked with

humanism is to be rejected,” Michel Foucault reflected, “but that the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection.”²⁸ Writing as a philosopher and historian, weighing various ways of grasping the relevance of the Enlightenment for the present, Foucault proposed “critique” as an alternative principle of thought, the effort “to separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.”²⁹ Anthropology too involves such critique, I argue in the coda to this book: critique of humanity, pursuit of humanity as axis of reflection, “a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over.”³⁰ The uniqueness of anthropology lies in its insistence on the openness of the human, an idea pursued in the discipline with greater consistency and tenacity than in any other field of inquiry. Humanism in anthropology can only be “interminable,” as Patrice Maniglier has put it, for this is a practice of thought propelled by the singular conviction that “one does not know yet what the human could be.”³¹

Admittedly, the scope of this idea may be difficult to sustain in a time of pressing attacks on the academy as a space of free inquiry, the imposition of ever stricter standards for profitable knowledge, and the erosion of conditions that support such endeavors as means of intellectual and professional livelihood. The future of anthropology as a scholarly vocation is charged with uncertainty, and in such an environment, the eclectic and improvisational nature of the discipline’s ways may meet with understandable skepticism. “Employers, legislators, parents, and students demand ‘relevant’ and ‘useful’ college degrees,” while “industries seek informed and skilled graduates to strengthen our economy,” Kathryn Kozaitis notes of the pressures faced by public universities, such as her U.S. campus, Georgia State. She adds, though, that while “the engaged university may be a symptom of neo-liberal policies,” it can also yield space for the “investigation and amelioration of social problems” through creative anthropological projects.³²

More than half of the graduate students who responded to a recent survey by the AAA said that they were considering careers in advocacy, human rights, and social justice.³³ Most of them, by some combination of necessity and inclination, will have to take their lessons from the field into careers beyond the academy.³⁴ Could we approach the “impact factor” of anthropological work—to take just one implacable measure—as a matter not simply of citation, but instead of the social life of the ideas the field puts into motion?³⁵ A recent study by Felix Stein of anthropologists in Britain found their work

motivated indeed by “a desire for social efficacy” more than any other kind of “impact” in the world.³⁶ And the sense of such public consequence that anthropologists carry, as Didier Fassin has noted, is anchored in the peculiarity of ethnography as a proximate, lively, and immersive form, “the sort of truth that is produced, established, and, in the end, told.”³⁷

Such ambitions, and the tenuous promise of their realization, make it all the more imperative to convey, as tangibly as possible, the critical value of anthropology as a mode of practical and transformative inquiry, rooted in attentive engagements with the world at hand. In these pages, I take up this challenge as a matter of both argument and narration, seeking to write through a series of unfolding encounters with anthropology at work in the world. Such an effort takes what Angela Garcia calls “writing with care,” that is, a form of expression that embraces “the possibility of letting things be vulnerable and uncertain.”³⁸ Ideas are worked out here in the company of others at work, taking shape through immersion in experience and storytelling, leaving some of their dimensions necessarily speculative and conjectural. This way of thinking and writing may be prone to charges of inadequate reason and completion. And yet I can’t think of a way to engage more faithfully with a discipline devoted to the value of circumstances as we find them, to the significance of incipient and emergent things.

These essays grow from an aspiration for a creative anthropology, one that shares in the transformative powers of experience and the genesis of worlds. For our discipline can indeed help to nurture what Elizabeth Povinelli has called “the will to be otherwise,” the fraught effort to pursue knowledge as a project of ethical transformation, thought as “experiment on the self in the world,” method as a way of attuning oneself to “the future already among us.”³⁹ In what follows, I pursue the vision of a possible anthropology, one that may be adequate to the challenge of seeing and thinking beyond the profound fissures and limits of the present. These are times that call for anthropological faith and existential generosity, ways of cultivating sympathy, openness, and care as livable realities.

For the humanity yet to come—now, as always, we will need such anthropology.

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1. See Todd, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"
2. Todd, "Re-situating Alberta as a 'Fish-Place.'"
3. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 121–27.
4. Stevenson, *Life beside Itself*, 14.
5. Wagner, *Invention of Culture*, 4.
6. Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 99.
7. Behar, *Vulnerable Observer*, 14.
8. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 19, 3.
9. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 530.
10. Stewart, "Epilogue," in Pandian and McLean, *Crumpled Paper Boat*, 227, 230.
11. Pandian and Mariappan, *Ayya's Accounts*, first published in Tamil as *Mitcham Meethi* in 2012.
12. See Ribeiro, "World Anthropologies," and Boskovic, *Other People's Anthropologies*.
13. Harrison, *Outsider Within*, 8.
14. See Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.
15. Marcus, "Notes toward an Ethnographic Memoir," 27.
16. Forsdick, "*De la plume comme des pieds*."
17. This project shares in the same spirit of engagement with the history of the discipline as the "joyful history of anthropology" pursued by Bhrigupati Singh and Jane Guyer: "a kind of fullness and intensity of engagement that may include tragic possibilities, and the reemergence of the old as the new, or at least as fodder for the new" ("Joyful History of Anthropology," 201).
18. For a discussion of these ideas, see Pandian, "Time of Anthropology."
19. The subtitle of this introduction gestures toward the classic essay by Bernard S. Cohn, "An Anthropologist among the Historians," put forward as a "field study" that playfully contrasts the ways and views of two different peoples, historians and anthro-

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pologists. For an ethnographic perspective on American anthropology, see Ntarangwi, *Reversed Gaze*.

20. See Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”

21. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*.

22. Ntarangwi, *Reversed Gaze*, 130.

23. I have in mind, among other things, the *Cultural Anthropology* online forum around the essay “Academic Precarity in American Anthropology” by David Platzter and Anne Allison, and the vibrant #hautalk exchanges online precipitated by a spiraling scandal involving the journal *Hau*, most especially Allegra Lab’s forum, “Situating #hautalk: A Polyphonic Intervention.” Zoe Todd’s “The Decolonial Turn 2.0” was a crucial intervention in these debates in the summer of 2018. I also wrote “Open Access, Open Minds,” an online reflection for *Cultural Anthropology*.

24. I am grateful to Michael Jackson for this distinction between discipline and profession.

25. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.

26. See, respectively, Wilder, “Radical Humanism and Black Atlantic Criticism”; Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*; and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. See also Connolly, *Facing the Planetary*, for a recent articulation of “entangled humanism” as a critical and political project.

27. I am most grateful to Samuele Collu and Ned Dostaler for organizing this conversation.

28. Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 314.

29. Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 315–16.

30. Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 315.

31. Maniglier, “L’humanisme interminable de Claude Lévi-Strauss,” 241.

32. Kozaitis, “Anthropological Praxis in Higher Education,” 133, 134.

33. Ginsberg, “Students Look toward the Job Market.”

34. Ginsberg, “AAA Members outside the Academy,” and Speakman et al., “Market Share and Recent Hiring Trends in Anthropology Faculty Positions.”

35. Thanks to Nate Coben for flagging the relevance here of impact factor as criterion.

36. Stein, “Anthropology’s ‘Impact,’” 13.

37. Fassin, “Introduction,” 8.

38. Garcia, *Pastoral Clinic*, 35.

39. Povinelli, “Will to Be Otherwise,” 472, 453.

Chapter One. THE WORLD AT HAND

1. Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization*, 312.

2. Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization*, 213.

3. Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization*, 3.

4. Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization*, 43.

5. Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 793.

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