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WHAT ENDS WITH THE END OF ANTHROPOLOGY?

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What ends with the end of anthropology? The spirit in which my own question is posed is as follows: Let us take the provocative challenge that informs the question 'the end of anthropology?' at face-value and answer it affirmatively. Anthropology as a discipline, and even more importantly, I would argue, as a practice, is coming to an end. But does this really matter in the larger scale of things? Is this something we should worry about? And, if so, how or what should we worry about? To say that anthropology ends is really, in other words, to say what? What ends or comes to an end with the end of anthropology?

Would the end of anthropology correspond to the end of otherness as we know it? Or does such otherness rather proliferate today as it spills out of the niches to which it has thus far been more or less comfortably confined? What happens when the major force in peoples' lives is change and not continuity, as so often seems to be the case under contemporary conditions? What continued value can anthropology have vis-à-vis the novel, the unfamiliar, the uncanny? How does one even recognise the sites of such revamped and released otherness? What is the fate in such a world of hard sociological notions such as race, class and gender, or, for that matter, of such anthropologically canonical ones as tradition, religion, culture and kinship? What becomes of these when the others to which we long have grown accustomed themselves make the world, crafting not only their own possibilities but ours as well, as, for instance, in the amazing phenomenon of an African-American president being in the White House? For all of its terrible on-going continuities, race will never be the same – indeed, this important instance suggests that it already is not.

When I asked myself 'What ends with the end of anthropology?' I came up with more than just a few things. I consider several of these here. First, I offer a brief overview of some of the more familiar, often celebrated aspects of the anthropological stock-in-trade; subsequently I single out one salient dimension of our practice that nonetheless is considered a bit infrequently. But first, our more familiar stock-in-trade. To begin with, there is the critical transformative power that is often ascribed to the anthropological encounter, or at least to the quest for transformation with all the implications thereof for knowledge production and the mutual understanding of different persons and collectivities.[1] Countless examples of such valued and often explicitly enjoined transforma-

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1 The concomitant defamiliarization of the familiar is also referred to by Jebens in the present collection.

tion abound in the anthropological literature. In the recent ethnography "Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject" (2004), for instance, Saba Mahmood describes the intellectual and personal benefits that issue from such transformations as follows:

> Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another world-view, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we took the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other (Mahmood 2004:36).

Or as James Siegel puts it in his book "Naming the witch", foregrounding the challenge and thrill that such an encounter can bring with it, 'without the frisson that comes to the anthropologist, and that, in my experience, is one of the pleasures of ethnography, when one has to take seriously that which one cannot accept, anthropology, as the study of the other, would change its nature' (Siegel 2006:17). Taking seriously what one cannot accept is one version – albeit a somewhat more radical one – of anthropology's canonically sought-after engagement with otherness. The difference here, as Siegel intimates and as I elaborate below, is that any attempt to domesticate such otherness by either explaining it away or reducing it to something already known and commonsensical is eschewed.

In more general terms, though, this sought-after engagement along with the frisson that comes with an encounter with otherness pertains, of course, to the very oldest of the anthropological stock-in-trade. At the same time, I believe that such an open stance towards engaging with other lifeways and being potentially remade in the process assumes an even more urgent value in our current age of globalised flows and m o d e r n i t y a t l a r g e, the latter, of course, being Arjun Appadurai's felicitous formulation (1996). Being 'remade' through encounter today and offering generosity and hospitality towards one's others seems, if anything, more pressing than before. To be sure, nowadays, such potentially transformative and literally unsettling encounters are perhaps less explicitly sought after than in previous times. Less and less, at any rate, do they inhabit the realm of choice. Lest I be misunderstood here, what I have in mind are those anthropologists and others of similar persuasion who, for whatever reason, actively sought out encounters with otherness or, conversely, those inhabiting such privileged places and circumstances that they could or could at least imagine that they might opt out of unwanted confrontations with one or another other.

Today, by contrast, such encounters – variously violent, devastating, unsettling, transformative, creative, or indifferent – are frequently flung in one's face. They press in upon one's lifeworld, inflect, encroach upon or enhance one's existence, regardless of whether one welcomes and seeks them out or aims to cancel or avoid them. This, to be sure, is a situation that increasingly applies more generally to persons and populations scattered around the globe, including those who, until recently, could by and large shield themselves from unwanted otherness. One consequence, it would seem, of such

potentially devastating collisions is either submission or wholesale violence, as so many trouble spots in the world unfortunately remind us. The main difference today is not that such devastating collisions did not transpire before or that situations of submission or wholesale violence were either unknown or uncommon – think only of the many colonial situations, including their often devastating aftermaths – but that now these are more generalised, less restricted in their ramifications or, in short, delocalised and more at large than ever before, neoliberalism's ravaging inroads being a prime example.

Call it, on a more celebratory note, as the conveners of the Jensen Memorial Lecture series do, 'the dazzle of the new heterogeneity' that marks our contemporary world. Or call it, as they also do, 'the crisis of anthropology',[2] a discipline both founded within and constitutive of a Western episteme that turned upon the radical distinction between the West and the Rest, an episteme that in recent years has fallen into crisis and crumbled in correspondence with a world, as Clifford Geertz would have it, 'in pieces', which, more often than not, are antagonistically interlocked and juxtaposed (Geertz 1998). Anthropology's crisis, in short, is not simply the result of internal critique on the part of its own practitioners or of academic turf warfare waged amongst ourselves and our colleagues in cultural studies nor even of the rising competition between anthropologists and journalists or NGO activists, as anthropology's current emphasis on contemporaneity and internet-driven up-to-dateness replaces the discipline's former predilection for locating its subject matter in 'out-of-the-way' places as well as out of time.[3]

But what else ends with the end of anthropology? Related to the inclination to be remade in the process of ethnographically engaging the lifeworlds of others are at least two additional dimensions that I want to note here as constitutive of the disciplinary stock-in-trade. The first is the very ability or even propensity to engage and think other lifeworlds and lifeways. Bronislaw Malinowski's evocative opening to his "Argonauts of the Western Pacific" 'imagine yourself suddenly set down [...] alone on a tropical island' is a foundational example (Malinowski 1922:4). To be sure, this 'heraldic arrival scene' has all the trappings of the heroic individualism that underwrites anthropological fieldwork (Visweswaran 1994:15). At the same time, the scene from the veranda signals a departure from something known and an opening onto the imagining and partial inhabitation of something radically different. As we all know, this ability not simply to observe or study difference but to participate in the lives of others and thus ideally at least, to come to inhabit this otherness partially over time, constitutes the very core of anthropology. As the linking of the term for the key disciplinary method of anthropology, 'participant observation' intimates, such a subject position is inherently unstable, far from easy, and allows for both provisional engagement and privileged withdrawal. This is a delicate arrangement, as all the cautionary tales about 'going native' warn, since the anthropologist should also not emerge from the encounter untouched or unsettled:

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2 On the 'crisis of anthropology', see also the contribution by Jebens in the present collection.

3 Tsing (1993). See also Fabian (1983).

at this engagement's core remains the much valued possibility that we might be remade – though crucially not undone – through the serious entertainment of otherness.

Secondly, I would argue that, at its very best, the anthropological encounter entails the ability to l i s t e n rather than simply u n d e r s t a n d, in which understanding, following the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, would aim to r e c o n s t r u c t in the sense of defining and thereby circumscribing and p l a c i n g the 'object' of study. Listening, by contrast, would engage otherness without trying to subsume or tame it (Nancy 2007). Notwithstanding its deservedly celebrated merits, an example of the former, of the taming of ontological otherness, would be Edward Evans-Pritchard's interpretation of Azande witchcraft (1976), following James Siegel's incisive reading of it. In "Naming the witch", Siegel returns to the famous granary scene in Evans-Pritchard's work and to the latter's argument that witchcraft serves the Azande as a natural philosophy that domesticates what lies beyond reason – namely, the granary's collapse at a certain moment when certain people are sitting under it.[4] This philosophy, Evans-Pritchard argues, provides stereotypical ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and accident or the occurrence of singular events. It offers an answer to the 'why me' question, or to why this singular event happened to m e and not to someone else. Evans-Pritchard, according to Siegel, introduces the witch via the Azande to rob such singularity of its excessive, unfathomable dimensions, as condensed in the figure of the witch. Yet in doing so he turns the witch into a purely logical cipher, disregarding the incalculable, disruptive force that he or she is. In Siegel's words,

> this cheerful understanding of the witch follows (or perhaps established) the anthropological tendency to avoid thinking both the violence of witchcraft and the fear it inspires. The anthropological predilection to explain in local terms, which I share, risks losing sight of certain aspects of witchcraft. The contextualising of it risks its denaturing. One glides over the killings that often accompany witch hunts and the extreme fear they can produce as one unravels the logic of the beliefs and the reasons one might have to murder. Furthermore, this logic, unacceptable to the anthropologist him or herself – we do not ordinarily end up practicing witchcraft or protecting ourselves against it – becomes merely the beliefs of others in a place where everyone, it seems, believes in witches (Siegel 2006: 17).

Although I will not pursue this line of argument, I offer it here as a new, less colonially inspired, and more nuanced approach to otherness, and therefore as one intimation of how anthropology might productively revamp parts of its classical heritage and methodology to meet the challenges presented by today's 'dazzling heterogeneity'.

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4 In his book, "Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande" (1937), Edward Evans-Pritchard refers to the collapse of a granary on raised pillars onto a man sleeping under it. Although the Azande recognise that the pillars had been eaten away by termites, only witchcraft could explain why the granary collapsed at that particular moment with that particular person under it. Witchcraft therefore and not the termites or the weight of the granary was the cause of death.

Siegel's example suggests a novel opening inspired more by 'listening' than by conventional 'understanding' in Nancy's sense of these terms and, as such, it can be seen as one crucial dimension within a possible refigured future social terrain. In contrast to this example, however, and before moving on to my main topic, I note in passing two additional longstanding aspects of anthropological practice that would end with anthropology's coming to an end. The two final aspects I single out here are the discipline's characteristic privileging of everyday nitty-grittiness – in the sense of finding virtue and instruction in it – and the tendency to make visible what is invisible, in particular with respect to those life forms and lifeways that are marginalised, forgotten, downtrodden or exploited. But, equally importantly, in anthropology's newer terrains such as the "Media worlds" documented in the book of this title edited by Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (2002), our particular way of doing things often brings to light practices and understandings that remain hidden from the representatives of other disciplines. As the editors observe in the book's introduction,

> the kind of alternative circuits that we routinely encounter in our work – the spread of illegal cable networks or the widespread presence of pirate videos as a means of media exhibition outside the West – are rarely counted in the statistics about the U.S. or global media industries on which many accounts of transnational media are based. Indeed, it is one of our arguments that the construction of media theory in the West, with rare exceptions, has established a cultural grid of media theory with the effect of bringing into visibility only certain types of media technologies and practices.[5]

Anthropology, in short, in no small measure due to the combination of the open, reflective stance that is an explicit part of the discipline's constitution and methods tends to come across and entertain dimensions of distinctive lifeways through which the future unexpectedly arrives.

Rather than focus on any of the topics I have touched upon thus far, however – all of which have been amply discussed by anthropologists in the context of the discipline's internal critiques of itself, as well as by its intellectual interlocutors – I turn now to what will be the focus of the remainder of this essay, namely one aspect of our anthropological methods that I have always found especially illuminating as well as crucial to how we go about our work. It is also something that has received less attention than the other aspects of our practice named here and that, at least in the context of my own work, has been a recurrent source of the frisson invoked above that makes doing anthropology not just an on-going intellectual challenge but also a continual source of pleasure. To put it simply, this is the role of 'accident' in ethnography – yet, importantly, 'accident' of a very particular kind, and as something that, while forming a crucial component of sound ethnographic research, has not exactly been banished from our writing, but nor

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[5] Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin (2002:2). See Larkin (2008) for an original analysis of video piracy's complicated infrastructure in contemporary Nigeria.

has it, to my knowledge, explicitly been developed as a constitutive element of a good deal of what we do.[6]

What I have in mind here is a very fortuitous kind of 'accident', enabled and in part prepared by the intimate ethnographic engagement with the everyday nitty-gritty and by the 'deep hanging out' (Clifford 1997:90) and extended fieldwork that, to this day, continues to characterise much of our practice and that allows or, more strongly yet, m a k e s f o r the often happenstance and serendipitous nature of our findings. These aspects of our practice, I argue – and I will offer examples from my own fieldwork experience – enable encounters and i n s i g h t s that often remain beyond the purview of other disciplines and knowledge practices. I also propose that, in comparison to other disciplines, and as a result of its particular methodology and open stance towards the objects of its intellectual inquiries – in short, as a discipline in principle surrendered to the other – anthropology is characterised by a surplus of serendipitous insights. As long as we regularly assess and reinvent what lies at the core of anthropology's 'classical approach' and methodology, I suggest that this kind of serendipity, as a crucial component of the ethnographic imagination, can serve us as well today, within current globalised conditions, as it did during the earlier years of our discipline. And this, I argue, is a good thing.

Coined by Horace Walpole in 1754 in a letter he wrote to a friend living in Florence, the term 'serendipity' refers to instances of what he described as 'accidental sagacity', subsuming 'n o discovery of a thing you a r e [actually] looking for'[7] but only those things that bump up against you inadvertently or that cross your path while you are looking for something else. Besides serendipity (*sérendicipité* or *sérendipité*), the French call such occurrences 'heureux hasard' (happy or fortunate chance). Absolutely crucial, when it comes to such 'happy chance', is that you can spot and recognise its value when you run across it or, as the case may be, it runs across you. Regarding such occurrences, the French scientist Louis Pasteur once famously opined, 'in the fields of observation, chance favours only the prepared mind'. Another, often neglected dimension of serendipitous discovery, following Horace Walpole's original formulation, is the requisite 'sagacity' or wisdom that allows a person 'to link together apparently innocuous facts to come to a valuable conclusion' (Merton and Barber 2004:22). As I hope you will agree, this statement could serve as a description of the best ethnography that our discipline has to offer. For, if anything, what good ethnography does is to lift out and trace the connections among apparently incongruous domains of life from religion and bureaucracy to food and sex or kinship and ecology, and so on, and so on ad infinitum.

To be sure, serendipitous discovery plays a part in the advancement of science generally, where it often establishes the foundation of important leaps of scientific un-

6 On the importance of serendipidity, see also the contribution by Crapanzano in the present collection.

7 Cited in Merton and Barber (2004:2; emphasis in the original).

derstanding and intellectual insight.[8] Much more could obviously be said about serendipity's felicitous, creative place in intellectual production. This, however, is not my particular take on the topic. I refer you instead to the long-awaited book authored in the 1950s by the sociologist Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber, "The travels and adventures of serendipity: a study in the sociological semantics and the sociology of science" (2004). What I do want to insist on is that while anthropology has no special claim on serendipity, our methods and approach vis-à-vis our objects of study – in which, at least ideally, we surrender ourselves to others – make us especially prone to serendipitous encounters. As anthropologists, I suggest, we are more likely to run up against and learn from serendipity. I turn now to substantiate this claim through ethnographic examples drawn from my own career as an anthropologist.

I begin at the beginning – my own, at least. In 1984, as a young graduate student, I made my first trip to Indonesia, where I have worked since as an anthropologist, concentrating primarily on the Moluccas or that eastern part of the archipelago featured in Adolf Ellegard Jensen's book "Die drei Ströme" (1984) about the religious life, among other aspects, of Seram Island's Wemale peoples. 1984 was also the year in which I first travelled to the Southeast Moluccas in the context of a preliminary survey trip to the Aru Islands, where, between 1986 and 1988, I spent close to two years conducting the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation. As a student of Valerio Valeri, who, following in Jensen's footsteps, carried out extensive fieldwork in Seram, but also of Marshall Sahlins, Nancy Munn and Barney Cohn, I arrived in Aru attuned to the traffic in material things, to issues of exchange and circulation, but also to history, colonialism, commerce and communication. Armed with this orienting background, I set foot in the first village I visited on Aru's eastern pearl-diving shores to discover, a day or so after my arrival, an elephant tusk and gong carved in the centre of the village space. Although, as I have already suggested, I was certainly disposed by my training to find value in material things, nothing had prepared me for these objects, which jumped out, as it were, from their silhouettes so prominently outlined in the rocky cliff on which the village was built. Exorbitant even with respect to any expectations I already had, this highly serendipitous encounter with the privileged objects of multiple local transactions was not to be repeated again in such an explicitly foregrounded and objectified form. In no other village, among the many I spent time in thereafter in Aru, did I see these socially central things thus amplified and celebrated in communal space. No mere graffiti or casual carving, as I already knew from my study of the colonial sources on Aru, elephant tusks and gongs were not only among the most highly prized of trade goods that had been imported into the islands during the nineteenth century (if not earlier), they were valued precisely because of their productive agency within the marriage transactions that created and consolidated the most privileged of bonds among large groups of kin both within and

[8] For an interesting piece on the workings of insight – scientific and otherwise – from the perspective of a cognitive neuroscientist, see Lehrer (2008).

across Aruese communities. Since such ties, in turn, formed the building blocks of other social exchanges and lifecycle performances, from the launching of new sailboats and the appeasement of the sea spirits to the ceremonies surrounding death, it was indeed a revelation to run across them so explicitly monumentalised in public space.

This early instance of 'happy chance' or serendipity in my career as an anthropologist served subsequently to orient my proposal for doctoral research, which, taking off from the importance of material things, prefigured in many respects – though, to be sure, in a much less sophisticated fashion – some of Arjun Appadurai's insights in "The social life of things" (1988). This was hardly surprising, since Nancy Munn's groundbreaking work on the *kula* exchanges of Papua New Guinea's Massim region (Munn 1986) was a major inspiration for both of us. What this serendipitous encounter did was not simply to highlight the need to take such things seriously, but to underscore their absolute centrality to the very enablement and contouring of social life. Thus, the encounter with tusk and gong pushed me to put into practice what Appadurai, in his seminal work on commodities and circulation, terms a certain 'methodological fetishism' (1988:5). In my subsequent writings on Aru, for instance, I repeatedly situate distinct things in motion – pearl oysters and store-bought white plates, for example – in relation to each other, following comparisons made by Aruese themselves. Also, I systematically track how these objects circulate between the trade stores on land, run by and large by Chinese-Indonesian merchants, and the undersea transactions between male Aruese divers and their sea-spirit wives. In following the Aruese cue to fetishise things, I was able to nuance and complicate the crass distinction that is so frequently asserted between the pragmatic realm of economics and, in Aru too, the debt relations that bind divers to traders on the one hand, and the more elevated domain of ritual and native belief on the other. This was hardly original since, as mentioned earlier, tracing such incongruous connections has long been part of the anthropological stock-in-trade: of relevance here, for instance, would be Malinowski's foundational work on the *kula*. Yet by homing in on the complex entanglements between a gendered undersea of seductive 'sea wives' who provide their diver husbands with pearl oysters and, in turn, demand store-bought goods (especially fake gold jewellery), thereby contributing to the indebting of divers to the traders a n d via their own beautification producing the surplus desire that animates commodities, I also undermined prevailing assumptions about global and local, central and remote, and the like, which, at least at the time, appeared a worthwhile contribution. All of this, however, only followed from both fetishising and pursuing the thing in motion and thus at least can be understood, at least in part, as an outcome of my early encounter with a tusk and gong in an Aruese village centre. Regarding these insights, I write in "The memory of trade":

> Analytically, the sea wife personifies what might be called the paradox of trade in Aru – the fact that in the context of debt relations wealth is inevitably drained in the same move that it is gained. But if the undersea spirit woman subsumes or even collapses what in actual-

> ity are often moments in a more drawn-out process, she also embodies the promise of a surplus that transcends the double bind that debt commonly describes. The seductive side of things surfaces prominently in divers' descriptions of their undersea consorts when they linger over their alien richness, getting caught up in the excess that [...] constitutes in Aru the origin of trade itself. Nor surprisingly, while Barakai men and women speak in many ways alike in general terms of these figures as 'female', as 'wives', and as coupled with a diver in what more often than not is construed as a monogamous relation analogous to a man's marriage on land, conversations with Barakai men about their sightings and transactions with sea wives summons forth a more diverse gallery of women. Across a variety of settings and situations, men's talk about 'sea wives' ranges from highly eroticized fixations on the oyster itself in which the trade product assumes an active, seductive role – its opening move, as it were, read as an invitation extended by a woman to a man – [or as one diver put it]: 'when pearl oysters open up like that, men go crazy for them, because these oysters are women, women with reddish hair' – to somewhat more fleshed out portraits that tend to focus on the flowing coppery red hair with which these figures cloak themselves as they float about the undersea on their pearl oyster perches, to – less frequently – more sober fishwives who only, and then rarely, appear to their diver husbands in the guise of a fish – usually something a bit out of the ordinary (not to mention potentially dangerous) like a stingray.
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> But whatever specific form their apparition assumes for individual Barakai divers, sea wives, at least in good times, provision their men with the most prized of trade products destined to pay off debts in island stores [the oysters, in other words]. By the same token, these spirit women are themselves credited with a desire for things of the 'splendid and trifling' kind: in addition to generic white plates, the sea wives covet 'gold' jewelry. If, then, sea wives can be seen as entangled in the networks productive of debt in Aru, they are also (in)vested – at times quite literally – with an aura of alluring wealth. The varying investments of islanders in the figures of the undersea spirit women, the tantalizing, often eroticized influence that sea wives exert sporadically on land as they enter the homes of divers and into the relations between Barakai women and men with a range of repercussions, and the promise of surplus they embody makes these figures much more than a sanction that serves to enforce a certain system of debt or simply a form of false consciousness reproductive of exploitation (Spyer 2000:144–145).

In subsequent passages of the book, I go on to show how much more is both at stake and imagined with regard to these undersea transactions. To be sure, many other experiences in these islands, including those of learning a local language (Barakai) and of interacting intimately and over an extended period of time with Aruese men and women, with traders and a host of others – in short, the myriad, complicated relations, exchanges, conversations, events, insights, doubts, troubles and joys that we subsume under the rubric of fieldwork – all of this, along with a Ph.D., a postdoctoral position, a first job, a return to Aru, and the turning of a way-too-long dissertation into a published book – all of this mediated my first visit to the archipelago and my serendipitous confrontation with the gong and tusk pair that jumped out at me from a pearl-diving village's rocky centre.

You may object, perhaps, that, even without this initial encounter, I would have arrived at many of the same conclusions. Perhaps. At the same time, in my career as an anthropologist, some serendipitous event seems often to mediate, dramatically reorient or refine the terms of my ethnographic engagement vis-à-vis a particular problem in a particular place. Such serendipity, crossing my path in this way, may not only provide an initial framing of the problems pursued and the questions asked – more often than not, it offers a sense of that crucial frisson, which, as Siegel puts it, is one of the great pleasures of ethnography, 'when one has to take seriously that which one cannot accept' or that, at any rate, seriously confounds one.

I turn now to a more clear-cut instance of this, of 'taking seriously that which one cannot accept' and of l i s t e n i n g that is more along the lines of Jean Luc Nancy's understanding of that term, mentioned earlier. To be sure, in the previous example, for me to discern an elephant tusk and gong in their bare if symbolically potent outlines meant that someone had to show me the way. I only came to recognise these objects – and it was only then that they 'jumped out' at me – when, in answering my questions, some of the village's inhabitants helped me see what they themselves saw.

When I returned to Aru in 1994 for a visit of two months, a great deal had transpired since I last left the islands in 1988 upon concluding the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation. Of relevance here is especially the combination of overfishing of the oyster beds, the effects of shrimp trawling and shark fishing in these same areas, and the turning of the Chinese-Indonesian traders to the employment of divers from elsewhere, the so-called *deba-deba*, who in contrast to the majority of Aruese would dive with 'bottles' and ventured therefore deeper and further from shore where, notwithstanding the increasingly depleted circumstances, shells could more easily be found. Complicating all of this was a disease that had struck and ravaged the oyster beds, further depleting an already diminishing supply. Many explanations for this combined disaster circulated among the islands' pearl-diving populations. A popular one was the claim that the large-scale 'disappearance' (as it was termed) of shells was a temporary affair, even something that they had experienced before, if less dramatically.

> 'One year', explained an older man recalling his own pleasured encounter with the resurfaced shells, 'there are almost none; but then another year – hey, these things are here again!' Still others, confronted with the massive devastation of their oyster beds in the early 1990s ensuing, as noted above, from a deadly combination of disease, overfishing and the incursions of especially the *deba-deba* teams employed by their own traders into Barakai community diving areas, denied the shells' 'disappearance' altogether. Introducing some local initiative into this dismal process, many of these women and men saw the oyster depletion as disappearing a c t s or willed protests on the part of undersea spirits against the reckless trespasses into their territory by unauthorised persons who ventured there without heed to the etiquette and claims that regulate its entry and use' (Spyer 2000:115).

My return, incidentally, in the context of these dramatic events wreaking havoc in Aru's pearl-diving communities also hints at how the particular moment of field research,

the 'ethnographic present', is itself in a sense serendipitous. Unlike historians, who may choose the periods in which they work, anthropologists enjoy no such luxury, constrained as we are not only by the times which we and our coeval others inhabit, but also by the happenstances of our own biographies that put us in particular places at particular times.

Returning now to the attitude of many Aruese regarding the oysters' decline, this suggests how pearl diving's shifting contours are creatively and variously construed by Barakai peoples. At the same time, however, the prevailing attitude at the time also suggests some of the limits that this particular discourse runs up against. These limits were driven home to me – forcefully, poignantly, but also serendipitously – by the adamant objection of a diver, a close friend and ritual specialist, whose daughter was also my research assistant. This arose when I proposed – indeed, even insisted, driven by my own fears about the impending ecological exhaustion and the general Aruese' refusal to entertain it – that the valued shells might not just disappear, but more dramatically and conclusively, die out. Contrary to local expectations, they might, I argued, never return again. I still recall my friend's response, equally vehement, in the face of my assertions, as one of the most moving exchanges of my fieldwork. 'How could these pearl oysters disappear', he reasoned, 'if this is what we live off?'

It took some days for me to realise that what he had articulated was not only an existential investment in a particular order of things – days, incidentally, that were the only time in our long, enjoyable and fruitful collaboration when he avoided and did not address me. What my friend voiced with his protest against my assertions was also the extreme limit of a way of understanding beyond which it becomes impossible to think – a limit, in some respects, like that of the Azande witch, following Siegel's critical reading thereof. In short, the imaginative field in which the sea wife enjoys such prominence has its own limitations. The same reason that allows the figures of divers' undersea consorts to subsume and do so much symbolic work in the lives of Barakai islanders – namely, that they are crucial embodiments of surplus – forecloses for Aruese any idea of ecological exhaustion insofar as the sea wives stand in the way of admitting that even 'surplus' can sometimes end.

My next and last two examples of serendipity are taken from my current book project on the mediations of violence and what I call post-violence in the aftermath of the murderous conflict that racked the provincial Moluccan capital of Ambon from early 1999 until official peace in 2002, with sporadic violence continuing thereafter. When the war broke out in this Indonesian city, less than a year after former President Suharto stepping down and the tumultuous series of crises that precipitated this event, scholars from Indonesia, the Netherlands, Australia and elsewhere quickly weighed in with arguments explaining why the conflict, defined rapidly in religious terms as Muslim versus Christian, had been inevitable. Without the opportunity, given the circumstances, to visit Ambon, I took in these writings and commentaries, but found myself little satisfied with the kinds of explanations the majority of them had to offer. This is

not the place to detail my dissatisfactions, which I discuss elsewhere (Spyer 2006). Suffice it to say here that, while many of these writings marshalled a slew of enabling backgrounds that allegedly explained the conflict – things like the former colonial situation, increasing land shortages on the island, population pressure, rising numbers of Muslim migrants in the city, the skewing of the former numerical balance between Muslims and Christians or the recent arrival in Ambon of a hundred or so thugs in the wake of a battle surrounding a Jakarta gambling den – these were all explanations of why the conflict s h o u l d have happened, not necessarily of why or how it in fact did happen. I tried instead to discern the precise conditions that might help clarify why and how the conflict d i d happen at that particular time, in January 1999, and in the particular way it did. In other words, much like Evans-Pritchard's example of the Azande granary, I was interested in contingency and particularity, in the nitty-gritty of a particular place and circumstances at a particular moment in time.

Starting from what I could glean from the perspectives of ordinary Ambonese, I homed in on the creation of and conditions for 'the climate' that helped to produce the violence and, crucially as well, how the sedimentation or consolidation of violence in the city in turn provoked additional violence. In so doing, and for reasons that I can only gloss here, I came to understand the violence, in many respects, as emerging out of what I characterised as a situation of blindness or a mobile, dense and murky terrain in which something that is waiting to happen does, in fact, happen. I described this terrain as built out of spirals of information, misinformation and disinformation, the revamping of criteria of credibility, customs of trust and accountability, and knowledge forms that blur that boundary between what is seen and what is heard, what is known and what is suspected, what is feared and what is fantasised, what is fact and what is fiction. This is what I meant in taking the word 'climate' – often invoked, but not further specified in the literature on violence – as an analytical point of departure. I came to understand this 'climate's' composition as an infrastructure comprising the overt and covert representations and mobilisations of both mass and smaller scale, politically-driven 'tactical' media, the circulation of ideologically potent images and hard-edged reified positions, in addition to rumours, graffiti, some unknowables and even unmentionables. These, I argued, haunted the terrain in which various Big Men, regular folk and the shadowy characters of war moved, and in which these structured – equally but differently – their varied perceptions and actions. I also went on to detail what I call anticipatory practices as part and parcel of a larger 'aesthetics of depth', since these practices home in on the disguises and deceptive identities that are held to be prevalent during the war and the counter-moves such surface disimulations would, in turn, have provoked to penetrate the treacherous appearances of persons and things. What the discourse makes clear is that, while difference may be something you can see – the assumption of many Ambonese, especially since the war, that you can spot not only a fellow Christian or Muslim, as the case may be, but recognise the Other at face-value as well – what you see cannot necessarily be trusted. This is a fine line that can make all the difference – indeed, as

some found out brutally during the war, even between life and death. In some respects, then, at this early stage of my research, I was already attuned to seeing Ambon's violence as made up of blindness and uncertainty or as a predicament in which the sense of unseen and faceless danger prevailed, in which the familiar became unfamiliar, and where everyday appearances concealed unknown horrors.

Still, I was in no way prepared for what I encountered in Ambon's streets on my first trip back to the city since the war's conclusion. In this first visit since the mid-nineties, in 2003, I was amazed to see murals of Christ surrounded by Roman soldiers stretching out on public walls, a monumental replica of his face after a Warner Sallman original in front of the city's Maranatha Church, a Christ mural opposite a motorbike taxi stand with an Israeli flag as backdrop, and a billboard showing a tearful Jesus overlooking over a globe oriented to Ambon Island at a Christian neighbourhood gateway where none of these had ever been before.[9] Later trips revealed more such productions. They range from the billboard of Christ under a crown of thorns, which greets the visitor on the highway running from the island airport into Ambon, to others dispersed across the city, commonly marking entrances to Christian neighbourhoods and flanked by murals with scenes from Jesus' life and Christian symbols (cf. Spyer 2008).

Though especially striking in the city's postwar public space, painted Christs recently began rising up behind Protestant church altars, and not just those of the colonial-derived Protestant Church of the Moluccas or Gereja Protestan Maluku (GPM), but also, for instance, the Salvation Army. Domestic space is also being transformed as painted prayer niches and even small prayer rooms are carved out in some Ambonese Protestant homes. These are modelled on or draw inspiration from print examples taken from Christian calendars and the occasional Last Supper posters that were the main religious embellishments in such homes until the recent war. Remarkably, the pictures and painted spaces fly in the face of the aniconic Dutch reformed Calvinist tradition from which Ambon's mainstream Protestant church, the GPM, historically derives.[10] Equally remarkable is the fact that the paintings in the streets are neither organised, supported or encouraged by any centralised authority, including the Church. And while they differ in certain respects ethnographically from those in churches in the general import of Christ's depiction, the diverse painted sites scattered across the city share a common origin in violence and fear. In an immediate sense, as I have argued elsewhere

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9 Quite a number of Ambon's billboards and murals draw upon calendars and illustrated books that feature the world of Warner Sallman, whose paintings of Christ were a crucial component of popular religiosity and Christian visual culture from the mid-twentieth century, especially in the United States. In Ambon, for instance, I have seen such Sallman classics as "Head of Christ" (1940), "Christ at heart's door" (1940), "The Lord is my shepherd" (1943) and "Christ in Gethsemane' (1941), reproduced both accurately and more approximately. See Morgan (2005).

10 This is the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church or Nederlands Hervormde Kerk, not to be confused with its later, nineteenth-century orthodox offshoot, the Reformed Church or De Gereformeerde Kerken.

(Spyer 2006), they register the sense of a community not only under extreme duress but also, generally speaking, seeing itself at risk of annihilation.

In terms of my larger project, this totally unexpected and, in light of Calvinist Protestantism's aniconic tradition, unlikely encounter with the pictures – which only proliferated as I tracked down the painters and their productions in the city and on surrounding islands – was highly serendipitous. The pictures, and the various ways in which I have come to understand them, clinched my earlier argument about blindness and, more generally, made me see how Ambon's postwar situation provides an especially pregnant site for thinking the place and diversified manifestations of the 'visual' today. The turn to picturing in the city – or what I analyse more theoretically, beyond the simple emergence of billboards and murals, as a wider process of b e c o m i n g i m a g e – brought home to me, via the 'happy chance' encounter with Ambon's huge multiplying Jesuses, how visibility emerges in sharpest relief within conditions that I have already described as those of a generalised blindness, much as in a situation where seeing is prohibited and invisibility enforced (Mitchell 2005). From this perspective, the city's novel Christian pictures are simply the most literal manifestation of a much wider thematisation of the visual on the part of segments of Ambon's traditional Christian population. Suffice it to say here that the enabling factors of the thematisation of the visual range from those that are more immediately rooted to globally inflected processes that were amplified and aggravated during the recent war. Among such factors are the growing presence in Ambon, as elsewhere, of a highly public Islam, the relative withdrawal of the Indonesian state and the partial revamping of modes of governmentality in post-Suharto Indonesia, which many Christians perceive as their general abandonment during the war not only by their own government, but by other imagined potential sources of support as well, like the United Nations, the Dutch government and European Union and, last but not least, the effects of the mediation of the city's 'crisis' by the wider humanitarian aid industry and national and international mass media. Taken together, along with other influences and ingredients too complex and numerous to go into here, these prepared the wider valorisation and, by extension, thematisation of the visual and the visible in relation to issues of authority, community and futurity among some of Ambon's Christians.

If in this case serendipity was, at least in the first instance, visual – my own startled encounter with the city's new pictures on the ruins of recent war – my final example again follows Jean-Luc Nancy's invitation to l i s t e n in the sense of engaging otherness without aiming to domesticate or tame it. In other words, this example is less circumscribed by prior 'sagacity' than the way in which my qualification of Ambon's violence as a blindness had in a sense already prepared me to see the new Christian pictures in a particular way. This last example of serendipity surfaced in an interview I conducted with a Protestant minister of the GPM, a man who also headed the church's Pastoral Counseling Office. He spoke of Ambon's new street paintings as, among other things,

a direct counter to what scholars increasingly describe as a burgeoning 'public Islam'.[11] In Ambon, as across Indonesia generally, Islam's growing public presence registers visibly and audibly in the many new mosques being built, as well as the popularity of Qur'anic reading sessions and typical Muslim fashions. To this can be added the rise in the number of Indonesians performing the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca, the resurgence of Islamic print media, the development of new forms of *da'wa* or proselytising like cyber-*da'wa* and cellular *da'wa,* and the rise in new Islamic economic institutions. As the minister put it, invoking an oppositional logic that defines the Christian pictures as a kind of counter-public to the dominant one in Indonesia of Islam: 'It's the same. They don't make pictures much, but they wear headscarves as their own kind of special characteristic. To show that "we are Muslims". Yes, that's what stands out'.

Like others I conversed with in Ambon, his comments drew a stark contrast between Muslims and Christians on multiple fronts, including their post-war territories in the city, their general behaviour, their respective misdeeds or martyrdom, but also their alleged appearance, inherent characteristics and even, according to many Christians, the presence of light rays or illumination enhancing their own faces as opposed to what the minister, like others, described as the dark illegibility of the Muslim. To be sure, one way of understanding the new Christian pictures would be to uphold this rigid understanding of the main terms of relations between the two religiously defined populations. Rising up along the highways leading into the city, or monumentally at the entrances to Christian neighbourhoods, the billboards and their companion murals brand particular neighbourhoods as Christian, gate them against outsiders and appear as amulets to ward off the Muslim Other. Yet, when the minister turned to relate the story of a spate of possessions that had afflicted some among the city's Christian population in the very midst of war, I caught a serendipitous glimpse of how things might in fact be much more complicated.

To make a long story short, the possessions began in a Christian prayer group of five persons when the protagonist of the story – a Javanese convert to Christianity and city resident – introduced its members to a small stone that had been given her by a Muslim woman clad solely in black. The convert obtained the stone from the Muslim following a fight between them in the city's Ahuru neighbourhood. When the Javanese prevailed, the Muslim leader surrendered the stone to her opponent. Once it began to circulate within the Christian prayer group – like others of its size formed during the war, along with multiple extra prayer sessions convened in churches, homes and even in Ambon's streets – strange things began to happen. Whoever held the stone fell ill. More unsettling, though, was the fact that whenever the group sat down to pray they found that they could not, or felt themselves lifted out of place, or prayed as Muslims with their hands held out flat and open in front of them as if they were holding the Qur'an.

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[11] See, for instance, Hasan (2007).

The first to be possessed was the Javanese convert at the refugee camp, where she had fled as the latest in a series of displacements; the other group members quickly followed suit. Exorcism conducted by two ministers at the GPM's head Maranatha church – including the one who disclosed these events to me – and backed by the congregation's alternate singing and praying revealed that the possessed convert was not only possessed by the Muslim woman she had defeated in battle but by the Muslim daughter of the Sultan of the North Moluccan city of Ternate.

Relevant here, briefly, is how Ambon's possession appears to lay bare the fault lines of a highly fraught, religiously mixed urban society under radical revision. It came via a Muslim convert to Christianity, turned a Christian prayer group into a Qur'anic reading session and introduced the formerly powerful, ancient North Moluccan sultanate of Ternate – in 2001 the new capital of an almost wholly Muslim province – into the core of Christian worship.

One part of this story unfolds into a larger account of this societal revision, comprising, among other things, the changing status and location of religion today, not just in Ambon, but more broadly in Indonesia and beyond. The source of this instance of serendipity, however, is foregrounded in the scene of possession itself – its revelation of the permeable, wavering fault line between Ambon's Muslim and Christian communities against the backdrop, as it were, that was so insistently conjured up in post-war conversations of the stark and absolute contrast between them. For me, this serendipitous encounter provoked the following questions: what does it mean when a Muslim spirit – a force that cannot be ignored – seizes upon and usurps the place of a Christian subject? What kinds of concerns might be at stake when such Muslim agency can interrupt the space not only of an individual Christian but of the larger Ambonese Christian community by hollowing out its most intimate sites of worship? How does the status of the event's protagonist – a Muslim convert to Christianity, and thus a split subject from the start – complicate the character of possession? What might these multiple layerings and porous co- and inhabitations tell us about the interfacings and entanglements of the city's Muslim and Christian populations as these have evolved both historically and in recent years, and as they were shaped and aggravated in the context of war? Crucially, what claim of a Muslim Other is being articulated vis-à-vis a Christian Self? And lastly, if most urgently, what might we take from all of this to suggest how the inhabitation of possession might contain or not contain possibilities for the cohabitation or future living together of Christians and Muslims?

Using these four examples from my ethnographic fieldwork, I hope I have not only shown how productive a serendipitous encounter can be and how central to anthropological practice such encounters are, but also offered some sense of anthropology's relevance to the challenges and problems that correspond to the 'dazzling heterogeneity' that marks our contemporary world. I also hope that the serendipitous encounters I describe here may offer insights into how a previously privileged population, in this case Christian Ambonese, confront their fears of marginalisation and even physical oblitera-

tion, yet aim to insert themselves via the Christ pictures – let it be said, in many respects, conservatively and dangerously – back on to the Indonesian national stage and into the international spotlight that makes or breaks the media 'hot spots' and fleeting foci of international attention and thus potential opportunity around the globe. Similarly, I hope that the example from Aru may indicate the complexities that can afflict the coming together of different perspectives on ecological disaster, a pressing concern of our time and especially fraught, too, since, as we all know, the environment acknowledges no borders. And finally, my last example – call it if you like the construction of difference in conflict – may suggest how, alongside the hard-edged enmities of war, other constructions of otherness, however strange and oblique, may be at work as well, and, if in a complicated fashion, offering an alternative to figuring what otherwise may appear to be an intractable situation.

In choosing to emphasise what would end with anthropology's ending, I have concentrated on what I consider to be of continued relevance and value in our discipline. Although I have not addressed the discipline's diminishing public role, or even its widespread institutional troubles, I hope I have suggested how there is much that we, as anthropologists, still have to offer. To be sure, there is a great deal in today's world – as, indeed, in previous times – alternately to 'dazzle' or dismay and confound one. Yet anthropology's particular ability, at least in the very best of the tradition, to take 'that which one cannot accept' seriously as a point of principle and *modus operandi* describes an increasingly urgent position that should be assumed – politically as much as, if not more than, academically. Seen in this light, serendipity, so central if not so celebrated within the discipline, can at times provide a point of entry into this position. From 'accident', *heureux hasard* or intimations of the future arising in the most unexpected places, to taking seriously what one cannot accept, anthropology offers strategies, forms of knowledge and methodologies for inhabiting and cohabiting in our fraught, dazzingly heterogeneous world.

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