Between Biography and Ethnography

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My point of departure in this essay is Davíd Carrasco's Convocation Address at the Harvard Divinity School in September 2006. Speaking of the borderlands between Mexico and the United States, Carrasco projects an image of a vexed and ambiguous zone that is not merely geographic or political; it defines an existential situation of being betwixt and between, of struggle and suffering, that Karl Jaspers sums up in the term *Grenzsituationen* (borders/limit situations).[1] The frontier throws up images of borderline experiences, of a destabilized and transgressive consciousness in which "dreams, repressed memories, psychological transferences and associations" possess greater presence than they do in ordinary waking life, and religious experiences emerge from the unconscious like apparitions.[2] This interplay between borderlands and borderline phenomena—between "the differences we have with others and the conflicts within ourselves"[3] also finds expression in the work of

[1] Jaspers contrasts *Grenzsituationen* with *Alltagssituationen* (everyday situations). While we are able to "gain an overview" of our everyday situations and get beyond them, limit situations "possess finality"; "they are like a wall against which we butt, against which we founder." Karl Jaspers, *Existenzerhellung* (vol. 2 of *Philosophie*; 3 vols.; Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1932) 178–79. For an account of *Grenzsituationen* in English, see Karl Jaspers: *Basic Philosophical Writings* (ed., trans., and intro. Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper; New York: Humanity Books, 2000) 97. Though Adorno treats the term "frontier-situations" as part of a jargon of authenticity—on a par with "being-in-the-world," "individual existence," and "heroic endurance"—a way of "usurping religious-authoritarian pathos without the least religious content," I see it as a way of escaping from the two dominant discourses of our time, the first that reduces all meaning to political economy, the second to religious belief or doctrine. In my view, it is precisely this tendency to politicize or intellectualize religious experience that the existential concept of Situation helps us to overcome. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (trans. E. F. N. Jephcott; London: Verso, 1978) 152.

[2] Davíd Carrasco, "Desire and the Frontier: Apparitions from the Unconscious in The Old Gringo," in *The Novel in the Americas* (ed. Raymond Leslie Williams; Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1992) 102.

[3] Ibid., 106.

HTR 101:3–4 (2008) 377–97

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gloria Anzaldúa. "*Mestiza* consciousness," she observes, may be identified with a "juncture … where phenomena collide."[4] This implies "a shock culture, a border culture, a third country" where migrants find themselves at the limits of what they can endure, border patrol agents are stretched beyond the limits of what they can control, and intellectuals find that orthodox ways of describing and analyzing the world do not do justice to the experiences involved.

These images of the borderlands reinforce, for me, a conviction that *all* lives and lifeworlds are more complex and variable than is suggested by the paradigmatic discourses of both the academy and the popular media. To do greater justice to lived experience we need to put ourselves quite literally in the place of the other, seeing the world from his or her standpoint, bringing together insider and outsider perspectives. But the ethnographic method of participant-observation is, in itself, not enough; we need novel forms of academic writing and interdisciplinary thought *that place non-European and European epistemologies and theologies on the same footing*. That is to say that borderlands suggest sites of intransitive, unstable, and intersubjective meanings that call into question the kinds of reductive and essentializing language that make human *experience* appear to be coterminous with the conventional categories of religious, cultural or social *identity* that people use in *representing* their experience to themselves and others.

Borders and Borderlands in the History of Anthropology

For much of its history, sociocultural anthropology typically conflated singular and collective identities. One read about "the" Trobriand Islanders or "the" Tallensi as though a people living in the same place, participating in the same economy, and having roughly similar views about boat building or begetting, sorcery or sociality seldom if ever called their lifeways into question and only changed their ways of thinking and acting when the outside world forced itself upon them. Though anthropologists like Raymond Firth showed that structure does not preclude the exercise of choice in the organization of everyday life, the general tendency was not to focus on the relative conviction with which customary beliefs were held, the competence with which roles were performed, the strategies whereby marriages were made, or the singular stories people might tell, but on the rules people followed, the roles they filled, and the integrity and continuity of the social systems of which they were a part. One consequence of this way of doing anthropology was to create discursive boundaries between various human polities and perpetuate the popular illusion that non-Western peoples were essentially *unlike* us. Few anthropologists reflected publicly on what "we" might have in common with "them," or how "they" might differ amongst themselves. Thus, totemism, animism, anthropomorphism, witchcraft, and sorcery were all assumed to be *sui generis* phenomena typical of pre-modern societies, and until Lévi-Strauss demonstrated the illusory and ideological

[4] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999) 101.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

character of these terms[5] few anthropologists acknowledged either the empirical diversity of the phenomena that were spuriously assembled under these headings, or the obvious similarity of certain modes of thought that were labelled quite differently in different parts of the world. Rather than deepen our understanding of the ways in which the human mind creates systems of identification (as in "totemic belief"), or how human beings express ambivalence toward outsiders (in witchcraft accusations, xenophobia, scapegoating, and the institutions of homeland security), these exoticizing terms served mainly to distance the rational subject—the anthropologist—from the supposedly irrational other—the object of his or her observations.

My own assumption is that societies differ not in their essences but in the ways in which they manage universally identical existential issues—keeping body and soul alive, bringing new life into the world, coping with separation and loss, creating ontological security. These coping strategies are, I believe, variations on ubiquitous themes that are grounded in the evolutionary history of our species. Each and every one of us, Kiwi or Kiriwinian, is simultaneously the same as *and* different from everyone else "who ever lived, lives, or will live."[6] In other words, our humanity is both shared *and* singular, and our identity consists in both being identical or the same (*idem*) *and* uniquely ourselves in contrast to others (*ipse*).[7] For Hannah Arendt, however, human distinction does not automatically imply otherness. Although all human beings are distinctive, she argues, none is absolutely other, for we share the same capacity for interacting and communicating with one another, based on a common evolutionary heritage and vague perceptions of a common humanity. A striking example of this is Bob Connolly's and Robin Anderson's film, *First Contact*. At first sight, the New Guinea highlanders see Leahy, Dwyer, and their Papuan bearers, as reincarnations of their own ancestral dead—"like people you see in a dream." But as curiosity overcomes fear, people see that these are not spirit beings, but variants of themselves. As Kirupano Eza'e observed, years after the event: "One of our people hid, and watched them [the white men] going to excrete. He came back and said, 'Those men from heaven went to excrete over there.' When they had left many men went to take a look. When they saw that it smelt bad, they said, 'Their skin might be different, but their shit smells bad like ours.'"[8] To make a person other, one arrogates Being entirely to oneself, and makes of the other a mere object of one's actions, one's judgment, one's compassion or one's theorising. Sameness is played down—"sacrificed" one might say—and difference played up

[5] Claude Lévi Strauss, *Totemism* (trans. Rodney Needham; Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

[6] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 8.

[7] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 2–3, 116.

[8] Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, *First Contact: New Guinea's Highlanders Encounter the Outside World* (New York: Viking, 1987) 44.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

until a radical alterity, a pseudo speciation, an essential incompatibility defines relations between self and not-self.

While the anthropology I encountered as a student at Auckland and Cambridge tended to focus on differences—matrilineal/patrilineal, centralized/uncentralized, dionysian/apollonian—and anthropologists made their careers on the basis of being specialists in specific cultural areas, spokesmen for "their" people, and rarely committing themselves, except in seminars, to serious reflection on human plurality, the advent of structuralism and sociobiology brought universals back into vogue. Then globalization became the catchword, with diffusion, diaspora, and hybridization defining the postmodern condition and notions of systematicity and boundedness, both ethnic and discursive, rendered passé. Yet this same period saw a proliferation of life stories and life histories as well as an ongoing interest in regional ethnography so that we seem to be caught, as much as ever, between the Scylla of particularism and the Charybdis of universalism.

A Singular Universal

My aim in this essay is to suggest ways in which we can overcome this antinomy between the particular and the universal by exploring what Sartre refers to as the "singular universal"[9] and Michael Herzfeld calls "ethnographic biography"[10]—in which individual lives and cultural circumstances are neither ontologized, nor polarized, but seen as mutually arising and contrapuntal aspects of our continually shifting sense of ourselves as being both uniquely a "you" or a "me" and members of a class or a culture, as in "We, the Tikopia."

Let me begin with a critique of our tendency to see the singular and the collective, the individual and the group, the local and the global as designating ontologically discrete domains. The problem here is akin to the longstanding philosophical problem of unravelling the relationship between percepts and concepts—the relationship, for example, between our empirical experience on the one hand, and our theorizing, rationalizing, narrativatizing, and interpreting on the other. As long as these dichotomies are substantivized we are going to get into trouble. But if we bracket out the question as to what in the world these terms actually stand for, we are free to see them phenomenologically, as appearances and effects. Our interest thus shifts from questions as to what the terms refer to "in reality" to questions as to how they serve our interests, and how they may be used to affect the way we *experience* the world, not simply the way we behave.

[9] "A man is never an individual. It would be better to call him a singular universal; totalized and thereby universalized by his period, he retotalizes it by reproducing himself in it as a singularity. Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects, he demands to be studied from both sides." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert 1821–1857* (trans. Carol Cosman; 5 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981–1993) 1:7–8.

[10] Michael Herzfeld, *Portrait of a Greek Imagination: An Ethnographic Biography of Andreas Nenedakis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As a methodological first principle we focus not on relata—whether individuals *or* societies—but on what Hannah Arendt called "the subjective in-between"[11] and on that which comes into being in this intermediate space of human interest and interaction. Bypassing both the individual subject and culture as *sui generis* phenomena, we seek to explore the space of appearances—where that which is *in potentia* becomes *in presentia*—disclosed, drawn out, brought forth, given presence or embodied. Object-relations theory is particularly helpful in making critical events central to ethnographic analysis. Culture, writes D. W. Winnicott, is "in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality."[12] Comparing culture with transitional phenomena and play, Winnicott goes on to argue that culture is a "common pool . . . into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw *if we have somewhere to put what we find*."[13] This means, for Winnicott, that culture is not some kind of ready-made, omnipresent composite of habits, meanings and practices that are located *in* the individual or *in* the environment, but a *potentiality*, aspects of which will be realized and experienced variously in the course of our interactions with others, as well as our relationships to the everyday environments and events in which we find ourselves. What is foregrounded one moment will be backgrounded the next while what is focal for one person may be peripheral for another.

Duty and Blessings

Early in my first fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone (1969–1970), I became familiar with two crucial Kuranko concepts—that of duty (*wale*) and that of blessings (*duwe*). One's duty is "that which you have to do"—the actions, obligations, and demeanour that come with one's role as a chief, a praise-singer, a wife, a farmer, or whatever. This is why *wale* is also work—the work one does in order to enact one's role, uphold custom, and play one's part in the order of things. A common phrase, used in greeting a person and in acknowledging a gift, approving words well spoken, or behavior that conforms to the ideal, is "*i n wale*" (literally "you and work," meaning, you are doing the right thing by your forebears, you are doing the right thing by your wife, husband, brothers, subjects, etc.). But while *wale* emphasizes a person's agency—his savoir-faire, his social *nous*, his personal conduct—the notion of *duwe* denotes the *outcome* of working well, which is *baraka*,[14] the state of being blessed. Thus, the exemplary conduct of a paternal ancestor bestows good fortune, or blessings, on his descendants. However, these blessings come to a person through his or her mother. If she is a hard-working, faithful and dutiful wife to her

[11] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 183.

[12] Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 113.

[13] Ibid., 116 [emphasis in text].

[14] *Baraka*, from the Arabic, is often used as a synonym for *duwe*, but the conventional way of accepting a gift is to say either "*i n wale*", or "*n ko baraka*" (I say blessedness), in order to approve or bless the person or party who has symbolically affirmed the value of your life.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

husband, then her children will receive the blessings of their patrilineal forebears, who become *duwe dannu* (blessed children). If she fails in her duty by being lazy, unfaithful, or disobedient, the path along which the patrilineal blessings flow will become blocked, and her children will be cursed. This is why Kuranko say one's destiny is in one's mother's hands and cite several adages in support of this idea: *ke l dan sia; muse don den; ke l den wo bolo* ("A man has many children; a woman raises them; his children are in her hands"), and *i na l kedi sebene, i wole karantine kedi* ("The book your mother wrote is what you are reading now")—which is to say that one's actions and disposition are direct reflections of one's mother's actions and disposition.

Ideally, there is a complementarity between work and blessings. A person who is blessed is disposed to work hard and do his or her duty. A person who works hard and does his or her duty, brings blessings to his or her family. But in practice people may give very different existential *emphases* to these cultural ideas.

Consider the relationship between what is pre-given, culturally or genetically, and what emerges in the course of a relationship over time. There is a Kuranko adage: bearing a child is not hard; raising a child is (*dan soron ma gbele, koni a ma kole*). The irony here is that nothing would seem to be more difficult (*gbele* means hard, difficult, or problematic) than bringing a child into the world, especially when infant mortality is high and many women die in childbirth; but the fact remains that the labor of nursing a child through its earliest years, caring for a child through times of famine and illness, protecting a child from the pitfalls of a politically unstable world, and working hard for a hard-hearted or indifferent husband so that one's child is blessed by its patrilineal ancestors amounts to greater hardship than the labor of giving birth. At the same time, this adage implies that although the bond between mother and child *begins* with birth, it is actually born of the intimate interactions and critical events that characterize primary intersubjectivity. In other words, it is the intense protolinguistic relationship between mother and infant, mediated by synchronous movement and affect attunement, including smell, touch, gaze, sympathetic laughter and tears, cradling, lulling embraces, interactive play and the rhythmic interchanges of motherese that creates the primary bond. To speak of kinship as a "natural" bond, or to invoke images of shared substances—blood (consanguinity), breast milk, semen, placenta, genes—or of common parentage, names, place and ancestry, *seems* to explain the strength of kinship ties. But such figurative language is a way of *retrospectively* and *selectively* acknowledging those experiences of a relationship that have confirmed a moral ideal. This is what William James meant when he says that, "Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process; the process of verifying itself."[15]

Indeed, the very idea of kinship is an idealization, the lived reality of which is never covered or predicated by the terms with which it is conceptualized and

[15] William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978) 97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

imagined. Accordingly, "natural" symbols such as of blood and bone, or "moral" terms such as amity and love are not axioms; they are what we talk about when we talk about life. They are ways we express our sense of the depth, intensity and binding power of what emerges in the course of any intimate relationship that weathers life's vicissitudes over time. In truth, what we call moral bonds are often habits we have formed by living with others; but the virtue we assign to familiar routines and our attachment to significant others is largely a way of dignifying relationships that simply grew—possessing a life and inertia that was greater than the work we actively put into them. Contrary to what we often believe, our symbolic constructs and moral or jural concepts do not necessarily explain why we do what we do; rather, they are *ex post facto* ways in which we evaluate and systematize what has, often as not, taken place without their mediation.

I now turn to the question of birth and worth. Despite a worldview that makes human worth relative to birth order, estate, caste membership, and rank, individual dispositions such as intelligence, courage, or moral fibre do not, in practice, conform to the ideal. My key informant, Keti Ferenke Koroma, explained this to me by punning on the word *kina* that, depending on a subtle inflection, can mean either "beehive" or "elder." Just as the word *kina* can have very different meanings depending on how it is pronounced, so a nominal elder can, depending on his behavior, fulfil or fall short of the expectations associated with his position. Keti Ferenke's argument was that an elder could forfeit the right to be considered superior if he behaved unjustly or idiotically. "A person might be designated an elder, a status superior," he said, "but if he acted like a child he was a child." "Superiority," he observed, "derived not only from being born first, or from being big and powerful; it also stemmed from one's social *nous*, one's moral courage, or one's cleverness." Not surprisingly, Keti Ferenke was a brilliant storyteller and astute informant, but not the first-born of the first-born!

A second example, again drawn from my earlier Kuranko ethnography, is equally telling. Kuranko traditional medicine is conventionally divided into three categories—curative, prophylactic and protective, and lethal[16] and during his apprenticeship any medicine-master (*besetigi*) becomes adept in all three. But what defines a practitioner's duty or work? Is it to draw on both his curative and lethal powers if public consensus gives him the right to do so? Or is his "duty" partly a question of his own individual judgement? Here, we need to have recourse to both ethnography and biography if we are to understand why a particular medicine-master should decide, as did my key informant Saran Salia Sano, to devote his energy and expertise to protecting the vulnerable and curing the sick rather than selling his services to the envious and aggrieved, or using his powers to prosecute private vendettas through sorcery.[17] And not only do we need methods for moving between

[16] Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 24.

[17] Ibid., 24–25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cultural and idiosyncratic fields of experience, encompassing both intrapsychic reality (*idion*) as well as the reality of that which is held in common (*koinon*); we need ways of writing ethnography that do justice to both the singular and the shared, and ground-rules for deciding when it is more parsimonious to focus on nature or nurture, the cultural or the personal.[18]

I now explore the indeterminate relationship between duty and blessings, power and influence, through a biographical comparison between two brothers that I knew for more than thirty years—Sewa and Noah Marah.[19]

Noah was my field assistant during my early fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone between 1969 and 1972. His brother, who had been a member of parliament in the first post-independence government, was out of politics at this time, and managing the Alitalia agency in Freetown. Although I became a close friend with each of the men, they were never, themselves, at all close, and I was always disconcerted by the way Noah would diligently keep his distance from his elder brother, circumspect, deferential, and taciturn, or how Sewa would, despite being aware of how fond I was of her younger brother, deride him as an idler and wastrel, always looking to others to rescue him from difficulties, rather than assume responsibility for himself.

One afternoon in January 2002, I was walking down a steep road in Freetown when a heavy lorry, belching black smoke, lumbered up the hill toward me. Painted in large letters above the windshield were the words "Hard Work." No sooner had the lorry passed, than a red poda poda appeared. Its logo was "Blessings." This coincidence set me to thinking about the very different ways in which Sewa and Noah explained the forces that shape a person's destiny. For while both brothers shared the view that the course of any person's life is influenced by the decisions and efforts he or she makes as well as by luck and contingency, Sewa and Noah placed very different emphases on the importance of hard work and blessings.

"You are what you make of yourself," was Sewa's constant refrain, when upbraiding the young men who fetched his bath water in the mornings, washed and ironed his clothes, helped him dress, carried his bags, and attended him. "If you don't work hard you'll get nothing in this world. You must be honest and straightforward. Young people today want something for nothing. They are not serious. Even my own children," Sewa confided; "I often think about them all night long. I don't sleep for thinking of them." And Sewa told me how much he wanted his sons to "do well," to be men of substance, status, and influence. That they were waiters in London filled him with shame. "Would I want people to know my sons are servants?" he asked. "These useless jobs. Living underground because they do not have residence visas." When I pointed out to him that Abu and Chelmanseh were doing courses in hotel management in London, and were not simply waiters, Sewa said he wanted to be proud of them, he didn't want his sons to disappoint him. "These things weigh

[18] George Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978) 118.

[19] Sewa and Noah died within a few months of each other in 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on my mind," he said. "After I am dead, what will happen? I wish Rose [Sewa's wife] would speak to them, urge them, tell them these things."

One evening, as we drove past the amputee camp in Murraytown, where I had been spending some of my time, Sewa made a strange comment. "They sell everything they are given," he said, as if to suggest that I should not pity the amputees, since they were very capable of fending for themselves.

Noah, like me, found such opinions difficult to accept. "It's painful," he said, "when people tell you that you are not serious. Because often there is no work; often people have nothing, and they have no connections. I bear Sewa no grudge, but it pains me when he makes these remarks about my not being serious, for if I were not serious I would not have gone all out to support him in his campaigns in 1957 and 1962, and when he contested the Paramount Chieftaincy in Nieni in 1964."

Where Sewa invoked the Kuranko notion of *wale*—"What you have to do," as Sewa put it; "doing your duty by others"—Noah spoke of the overriding importance of *duwe*, or blessings. But for Noah, the emphasis was not on the blessings he might earn through his own hard work, or his dutiful acceptance of his role as younger brother, but on the blessings that simply came to one, by virtue of being the child of blessed parents, or through one's association with a benefactor. You might be wealthy, well-educated, or well-born, Noah explained, but if you lack blessings, nothing will work out well for you in life. In the old days, it wasn't easy to command respect, to have people heed your words at a public gathering. If you were not blessed, you would not be able to impose your will on people, to speak with authority, or command respect, and you would be called *danka dan* (accursed child). But if you were blessed, this would make up for what you lacked in wealth, education, or social standing. "Thus," said Noah, "I tell my children that though I am not educated and am poor, I have blessings, and this is why people listen to me, heed my advice, and respect my opinions".

When I asked Noah if education, wealth, and hard work could compensate for not having blessings, he said, "No," and cited the Kuranko adage, *latege saraka saa*—no sacrifice can cut fate; nothing a person does can alter his destiny.

Noah's fatalism undoubtedly explained his formidable patience. Paradoxically, it also explained his tendency to place his hope in others, to look for rescuers, benefactors, and saviors. And it underlay his habit of complaining bitterly about the people who had disappointed him in life, or shut him out. Indeed, his entire life had been a search for a mentor, a benefactor, a lucky break that would change the odds that seemed so stacked against him.

During my visit to Sierra Leone in early 2003, revising my first draft of Sewa's lifestory[20] and listening to Noah recount his experiences during the war, I became increasingly fascinated with the struggle for power and presence in these men's lives. Both had been born into a chiefly lineage, and from an early age had imagined themselves to be worthy successors to their powerful forebears. Indeed, when I first

[20] Michael Jackson, *In Sierra Leone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

met Noah, his interest was in secular, not occult, power, and his ambition was to follow his elder brother, Sewa into national politics. But instead of striking out on his own, he found himself at his elder brother's beck and call. In his own account of his early life, a series of entwined critical events defined his destiny. As a small boy, he was pledged to a Mende trader in the south by his elder brother, presumably in lieu of payment of a debt. Of these years of exile, Noah would recall bitterly that his elder brother had "sold him into slavery." In 1957, only a few years after finding his way home, Noah's father died.

"Since my father's death I have been paddling my own canoe," he once told me, and went on to recount what it had been like in the years after Tina Kome died, when he went to live with his married sisters in Kabala and attend school.

"It was not an easy time I had then. I remember one time my sister Mantene remarked that my father had petted me; now that my father was dead I would have to look after myself. So I was there, struggling—going to find food, laundering, doing everything in the morning before going to school. I had to take care of myself."

But if Noah felt times were difficult, there was always rescue at hand.

"I remember one Lebanese, Mr. Hassan Mansour, who took pity on me at one time and told me I could always go to him when I needed help. As a small boy I often went to Hassan Mansour."

In 1959 Noah passed his selective entrance exam and went to high school in Magburaka. But in 1962, in the run-up to the first general elections after Independence, Noah was obliged to travel the length and breadth of *ferensola* (Kuranko country), canvassing votes for his elder brother. When he returned to school, the principal warned him that further absenteeism would not be tolerated. So, when his elder brother summoned him in 1964 to help with another political campaign, Noah's school career came to an end.

"l couldn't go on because of hardship. I had to leave school and return to Kabala."

"I was there in Kabala for some time, struggling. One day I went to Lansana Kamara's shop to buy kerosene, and met Wing Commander Macdonald, the then district officer. We talked for a while and he asked me whether I would like to work. I told him I would, but there were no jobs. He asked me to find him in his office the next morning. I went to the office and found him. He offered me work as a native administration court clerk. But I had nothing of my own. He had to give me twenty leones to buy some soap and clothes.

"After I had been there for some time, he posted me to Musaia in the Fula Saba Dembelia chiefdom. I was there doing the work. Then I decided to leave the native administration work because I felt I was deteriorating educationally. I then decided to pick up teaching. I was given an appointment in the District Council school, the same school I had earlier attended as a pupil. So I was there fighting hard. At this time, while my contemporaries were still at school, I was struggling hard to earn my living.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Then I came into contact with Dr. Michael Jackson, who had come from Cambridge to do his research."

Of his earlier life in Kabala, Noah spoke of being under his brother's thumb, describing this period as one of domestic servitude. Despite the possibilities of being rescued from his situation by benefactors, his life was reduced to "sweeping, cleaning, fetching wood and water. Virtual slavery."

A turning point seemed to arrive with the general election of 1967 when Noah decided to run as a candidate for the opposition APC [All People's Congress]. His ambition was quickly frustrated. Not only did Sir Albert Margai [the leader of the SLPP, Sierra Leone People's Party, and Prime Minister] request him not to run, but his mother refused to countenance any public competitiveness between her two sons. "She began to pester me, crying to me all the time that she would be blamed, and people would mock us if I ran against my brother. She said, 'People will laugh at us and say, Oh, these two brothers fighting each other!' You see. So, mindful of all this, I dropped out."

It so happened that the SLPP lost the 1967 elections, and the APC came to power. "From this moment on," Noah said, "my life became very difficult. I was harassed. At one time I was detained. I had met a man called Babande in the village of Koba, who asked if I could help him find a cure for his sickness. My cousin Dr. Osayon Kamara was then at the Kabala hospital. So I told Babande to come to Kabala, and promised I would take him to my cousin. What I did not know was that Babande was a *juju* man (sorcerer). The APC people in Kabala knew this, and when they found out that I had sponsored Babande's trip from Koba to Kabala they had him arrested, and accused me of hiring him to kill the prime minister, who was then Siaka Stevens, as well as Dr. Forna [Minister of Finance] and S. I. Koroma [the deputy prime minister]. The police came to my house that same night and arrested me. I was charged with sorcery. But the case against me failed, and I was discharged. But District Officer Gorvie, and the then Paramount Chief Baruwa Mansaray, decided I should be tried in the Native Court. This time I was fined fifty leones. I immediately came to Freetown to hire a lawyer and file an appeal against my conviction. Cyrus Rogers-Wright was willing to help me, but when I told S. B. what I planned to do he ordered me to drop the case."

Let me try to spell out the implications of this critical moment in Noah's life, when he was forced to renounce his political ambitions and was accused of sorcery. To do so it is useful to recall Winnicott's notion of culture as a kind of potential space in which certain elements are foregrounded and others backgrounded at any one moment in time. Transposed to the field of individual consciousness, this contrast is one between focal and peripheral frames of awareness. "Lived experience," observes Sartre, "is always simultaneously present to itself and absent from itself."[21] Although, at any given moment, we have a fair idea as to who we are

[21] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (trans. John Matthews; London: Verso, 1983) 42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and what we might become, we tend to be blind to who we are for others and to the many unknown forces that may bear upon our fate. In Noah's case, he knows himself solely in terms of his desire to become a man of substance and influence. His consciousness is fixed upon a specific objective, and set upon a specific course—the assumption of political office. He recognizes no other possible form of being for himself. But when thwarted in his desire to realize himself politically, his ambition fastens on an image that has, until that moment, lain dormant in his mind—the image of occult power.

Such transformations seldom occur painlessly; they are the outcomes of crisis. Accused of sorcery, this alternative form of power suddenly presents itself to Noah as another way of seeing himself—an *analogue*, as Sartre calls it, because this new identity is initially mere potentiality, an object that is still absent and irreal.[22] In an act of what Sartre refers to as "provocative impotence,"[23] Noah now imagines himself, not as someone who will simply follow in his brother's footsteps but as someone potentially capable of accessing higher powers and possessing great influence. Moreover, he now becomes free. For in beginning to imagine he might actively become the person that he has been accused of being, he turns a stigmatizing identification to his own advantage, liberates himself from the humiliating position of existing in his brother's shadow, and acquires powers that, while marginal, nonetheless have a legitimate place in the social order.

The youngest in a family of eight, Noah's acute sense of being "shut out," as he put it, was, I suppose, a factor in drawing him toward the world of the occult. Thwarted in his more youthful ambition to enter politics and become a man of means, Noah became increasingly attracted to what James Fernandez calls "the occult search for capacity."[24] In a country where the gap between expectations and opportunity is so great, "wild" powers such as witchcraft, sorcery, banditry, and religious zealotry have become increasingly alluring as avenues to recognition—ways of symbolically compensating for one's sense of exclusion and insignificance. During our last conversation, sitting together in the downstairs parlor at Sewa's house in Freeetown, the daylight fading, Noah spoke to me of his occult gifts.

There was a certain Dr. Kawa, Noah said, a senior consultant surgeon at Connaught hospital. Kawa's sister had borne a grudge against her brother from early childhood, jealous of his successes in life and his prestigious social position. So she bewitched him. He began to suffer dizzy spells and blackouts, sometimes during surgery. When several patients died, Kawa was suspended. He became known as Killer Kawa. Noah, who had acquired the powers of an alpha or moriman, "cleansed" the doctor. The sister died not long afterward, punished, according

[22] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire. Psychologie-phénoménologique de l'imagination* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940).

[23] Sartre, *Family Idiot*, 2:174.

[24] James Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 215.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to Noah, for her evil-doing. Kawa was reinstated, and Noah submitted to an appendectomy and hernia operation under him, confident in the surgeon's skill now that he was free from his sister's baleful influence.

Can one explain the difference between Sewa and Noah? Sewa saw that one's salvation lay within, in one's ability to endure hardships, to do one's duty, to be worthy of one's father's example; Noah saw his salvation in external powers and miraculous transformations, and waited for a miracle to occur. Can such differences be satisfactorily explained sociologically, in terms of cultural norms? Can they be reduced to any one defining moment in a person's life, any one factor? I suspect that Kuranko might theorize this as a dialectic between town and bush—the first term covering the domain of commonplace sociality, received wisdom and normative morality—the second conjuring antinomian images of occult power, spiritual influence, and capricious emotions. While the town is the domain of secular power and chieftaincy, the bush is the domain of wild powers and supernatural mystery. Those that seek their fortunes in the wild are typically those whose avenues to power are blocked in the village—orphan children, junior co-wives, younger sons. Sewa and Noah thus embody a contrast that pervades Kuranko life. But I would hesitate to describe them simply as exemplars of a worldview whose parameters are fixed, for there have been so many factors involved in the shaping of their destinies—personal, cultural, historical, and contingent—that I consider the most interesting task as being one that tries to describe these lives in such ways as to disclose the curious alchemy that is at work in them, the conflicts that emerge, the struggle for existence that is always at stake. In this respect phenomenology shares with pragmatism an emphasis not on antecedent causes but on consequences and effects: what becomes of ideas, whatever their origins, cultural or historical, in the lives of those who struggle to create a worthwhile life with them and whatever else comes to hand. For this one needs detailed descriptions of life as lived, and the ways in which various concepts appear and disappear, combine and permute, within human lives—far more, perhaps, than one needs conceptual summaries, which cut into, arrest, and prioritize one moment of the whole in order to create the impression that one grasps its essence, and may name it.

The Struggle for Being

I have sketched here what I describe elsewhere as the "struggle for being"[25]—the largely pre-reflective and amorphous desire, yearning or will to be present-in-the-world, not as an object that simply suffers the actions of others but as an acting subject whose existence is recognized by others, and makes a difference to their existence. But this will-to-be typically and successively fastens on *numerous* external objects, projects, and others—sometimes real and sometimes imagined—in

[25] Michael Jackson, *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its unceasing and opportunistic search for a form of realization that takes one beyond oneself, into the world.

One of the most compelling anthropological accounts of this struggle for being is Michael Young's study of Kalauna narratives.[26] In Kalauna (Papua New Guinea), every lineage possesses its own corpus of myths (*neineya*), which are inherited and jealousy guarded by Kalauna male leaders. But what intrigues Michael Young is the way in which these myths enable their custodians to simultaneously express and legitimize both collective values *and* personal preoccupations. When Young first sat down with Iyahalina and asked for "the story" of his life, the old man spoke into the tape recorder for two hours without interruption. But on playing back this soliloquy Young discerned not a single autobiographic detail in what was seemingly a sequence of familiar myths, interspersed with details about Iyahalina's duties as a "ritual expert" (*toitavealata*). When Young teasingly took the old man to task for having recounted nothing of his childhood, marriage, or work experience abroad, Iyahalina grinned and said "Yes, like that," implying that the myths he had told and the events of his life were in effect one and the same,[27] for he clearly identified with the ancestral figures in the myths, and his own personal quest for legitimacy as the leader of his hamlet found precedent in their actions. Clearly, men like Iyahalina both *introject* the dramatic structure of the myth and *project* their personal preoccupations onto it. As Young puts it, "Men such as Iyahalina, who internalize their myths to a marked extent, such that they perceive their lives in terms of the idioms and ideals that the myths promote, *appear to submit to them while yet exerting their own purposes through them. They thereby unwittingly modify their myths quite subtly in the process*."[28]

While Kalauna men articulate their biographies in myth, the Kodi of Sumba (Eastern Indonesia) give oblique expression to their biographies through valued personal possessions, often a container such as a betel pouch, a hollow drum, a porcelain vessel, a funeral shroud. Moreover, subjects that may not be spoken of publicly—such as sexual politics—will often find oblique expression in the accounts people give of objects. Writes Janet Hoskins: "A young girl I knew well never confessed her feelings of romantic longing and later disappointment to me directly, but she was fascinated by the story of a magic spindle that flew through the air to snare a beloved. When later her own hopes were cut off, she sent a message to her lost lover through the secret gift of the object. A famous singer and healer who also wanted a female companion composed long ballads to his drum, introducing each ritual session with a history of efforts to cover the drum properly so it could be pierced by a male voice and travel up to the heavens. . . . Another man, famed as a storyteller and bard, said he received his "gift of words" in the simple, woven

[26] Michael Young, *Magicians of Manumanua: Living Myth in Kalauna* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[27] Ibid., 177–78.

[28] Ibid., 19 [emphasis added].

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

betel bag he carried with him at all times."[29] That objects are surrogates for people, metaphors for social relationships, and serve as objective correlatives of subjective moods and states, may, Hoskins suggests, have a lot to do with the fact that in Kodi ritual life, objects often substitute for persons. Thus, in life-crisis rituals, a spindle or knife can substitute for a man, a cotton board or gold pendant can take the place of a woman, and a betel bag be buried in lieu of a person.

As in Kalauna, people do not tell life-stories or autobiographies explicitly or directly. They tell them obliquely through "public commodities" such as myths, everyday objects, and even animals. Thus, a woman—a second wife "who had to live many of her days in the shadow of an accomplished and well-established first wife" and, unlike the senior wife, had produced no male child—expressed her resentment through a "fable of protest" in which the female protagonist is identified with a water buffalo—i.e., an animal that is abused, mute, and subjugated.[30]

It is, however, important to note that though Janet Hoskins and Michael Young bring to light a dynamic interplay between "public commodities" and individual lives, Kalauna, Kodi and, indeed, Kuranko typically play down the role of the individual in shaping his or her own destiny, and disavow the very notion of autobiography. In other words, it is our Eurocentric bias that leads us to foreground and publicize what is, in the cultures we study, often kept in the background and unspoken. But the aim of anthropology is not to represent the other solely from his or her own point of view, but rather to problematize all points of view, including the ethnographer's, and show that every dominant leitmotif in any culture coexists with sub-dominant themes that, on certain occasions, or in certain persons, come into focus. The significance of ethnographic biography thus lies in its ability to explore the contexts in which personal lives are mythologized, and mythologies take on the lineaments of personal experience.

Writing Ethnographic Biography

"In writing an ethnographic biography," notes Michael Herzfeld, referring to his "Portrait" of the Cretan-born Greek novelist, Andreas Nenedakis, "I hope to balance the advantages of the usual anthropological focus on collective phenomena against the complicating presence of an individual who is himself engaged in exploring issues, conjunctures, and places that have interested anthropologists, as well as many phenomena that have hitherto seemed beyond their locally focused perspective."[31] But having recourse to narrative, to contextualization, and to radical empiricism to flesh out and make vivid the encounters, events, and detail of a life is not a pretext for invention; rather, it is encouragement to make our accounts of the lives of others do justice to their reality, what is at stake for them, as well as

[29] Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 3.

[30] Ibid., ch. 3.

[31] Herzfeld, *Portrait*, 15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

render those lives readable. Many experienced ethnographers share with novelists a strong sense of the unpredictable, complicated, often incoherent character of a life, as well as its indeterminate relationship with cultural patternings and ideals. Something of this vision is captured under the rubric "life course studies,"[32] though, sadly, many of these studies lack the verisimilitude that I regard as a primary measure of discursive integrity.

Rather than trace the developmental cycle of allegedly typical lives, or focus wholly on life crisis rituals, the ostensive aim of life course analysis is to encompass the entire course of individual lives, exploring the diverse experiences (everyday as well as critical, sacred as well as mundane), the various social environments (both local and extralocal) and the many significant others (precursors and successors; contemporaries and consociates) that shape any biography, so disclosing the interweave of the conventional and the contingent, the shared and the idiosyncratic, the practical and the ideological in human lives. I take it as axiomatic that human relationships cannot be reduced to the terms that are conventionally ascribed to them but depend on what happens in *the course of a relationship over time, and how this reflects changing external circumstances* and *variable subjective capacities*. In other words, rather than simply identify the general conditions governing the possibility of a particular human relationship, or risk reducing the complexities of lived relationships to determinate causes, cultural rules, or classificatory categories, one seeks to explore the experiences that transpire in the transitional spaces of intersubjectivity—experiences that often confound our formal descriptions and overflow our conceptual frameworks.

Inevitably this broaches the question as to how one understands the relationship between objective and subjective models of truth. Whereas the classical empiricist approaches human bonds with an eye to underlying patterns and explanatory principles, the radical empiricist shares with the creative writer a fascination for the mysterious, emergent, and conflicted character of all human relationships. Consider classical dilemma tales of Africa, for instance, where moral, intellectual or legal clarity is defied by the impossible situations in which people so often find themselves thrown. Your canoe capsizes in the middle of a wide river, and your mother, your daughter, your sister, your wife, and your mother-in-law find themselves floundering in the deep water and swift current. It is physically impossible for you to rescue more than one of these drowning women, all of whom you are duty-bound to respect, and on whom your own life in one way or another depends. What do you

[32] For anthropological treatments of the life course, see Vincent Crapanzano, "Life Histories," *American Anthropologist* 86 (1984) 953–60. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks, "On the Limits of Life Stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctures," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002) 865–80. For sociological surveys of the subject, see Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Social Identities Across the Life Course* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) or Stephen Hunt, *The Life Course: A Sociological Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

do?[33] The call is not for fixed or final answers and, in any case, one can invoke no hierarchy of values that implies that the life of one of these individuals can be set unequivocally above the others. The point of the riddle is to provoke palaver, to provide an opportunity for people to discuss and debate the impossible quandaries of existence, and to foster an acceptance of multiple points of view as the only way of coping with life's bewildering contingencies and double-binds. Here, we can find no consolation in notions of adaptive advantage, rational choice, or moral codifications of what is right or wrong; life confounds reason and is refractory to explanation. At most one can say, "God only knows," and accept the limits of what any human being may know, do, or endure.

Mindful of the sceptical tenor of these African tales, I want to resist explaining away the indeterminate relationship that seems to exist, on the one hand, between the conditions that frame our fate, set our course and determine our identity and, on the other, the unforeseen events, adventitious encounters and improbable developments that characterize the course of an actual life. As the writer A. M. Homes understates it, "I have often felt the difference between who I arrived as and who I've become."[34] This difference may be especially difficult to come to terms with if one was adopted, and denied any knowledge of, or any relationship with, one's birth parents, for in such cases one remains in the dark about who one "arrived as," and fills the void with excessive imaginings that cannot be tested against any reality. If one has a chance of doing so, as A. M. Homes did, and as many of Australia's "stolen" Aboriginal children did, years after the original separation, the gap between what one has imagined and what one actually encounters may be impossible to cross. Of her first meeting with her biological mother, A. M. Homes writes, "I am not who I thought I was, and neither is she the queen of queens that I imagined."[35] These are mysteries: how a shadowy, unrealized, or imagined relationship can hold a person in thrall, eclipsing the relationship he or she is presently involved in; how our relationship with ourselves blurs into relationships with significant others; how what is given, in biology or by fate, connects with what we become, by dint of experiences undergone, vicissitudes weathered, situations encountered, crises worked through, and, above, all experiences dreamt, fantasized, and imagined. Such existential situations simply cannot be reduced or referred to evolutionary struggles or single issues—of mating, finding food, defending territory, lighting the darkness.

[33] William R. Bascom cites Kono, Bete, Lamba, Ila and Dyula examples in *African Dilemma Tales* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) 93–94.

[34] A. M. Homes, *The Mistress's Daughter: A Memoir* (New York: Viking, 2007) 7.

[35] Ibid., 28.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

On Romantic Science

A. R. Luria's work exemplifies the ethnographic phenomenology that I sought to exemplify in my own work. Like his teacher and mentor, Lev Vygotsky, and his disciple, Oliver Sacks, Luria's approach to neuropsychology was informed by the conviction "that even the most elemental functions of brain and mind were not wholly biological in nature but conditioned by the experiences, the interactions, the culture, of the individual."[36] Luria's view that "human faculties could not be studied or understood in isolation, but always had to be understood in relation *to living and formative influences*,"[37] is echoed by many physicians who readily speak of medicine as both a science and an art, demanding of the practitioner biomedical competency as well as an attentiveness to the subjectivity of the patient and his or her narrative experience[38] and a recognition that healing is as much an outcome of care, trust and cooperation as it is of pharmacological interventions and surgical procedures. Luria also invokes Goethe's view that theory is gray, whereas the tree of life is green, in outlining what he calls a "romantic science" that refuses to reduce the "wealth of living reality" to "abstract models that lose the properties of the phenomena themselves."[39] In his case studies of the "mind of a mnemonist" and a "man with a shattered world" Luria describes in compelling detail what it was for these men—the first afflicted, like Borges's Funes "the Memorious," with an inability to forget; the second oppressed by an inability to remember—to live within the limits of their social and psychological situations. Instead of reducing Zazetsky to his brain injury, Luria reveals Zazetsky's dynamic *relationship* with his condition over time, his struggle to make good what he had lost. Re-reading this remarkable book recalls, for me, a section in my mother's journals headed "My Life with Arthritis" in which she refers to her "illness" as "my ever constant companion for over fifty years." Like Zazetsky, my mother's humanity consists in what she made of what she had been made[40] and brings home to me the extent to which all human beings, in all societies, experience existence as a struggle between limitations and expectations. This existential view has a methodological corollary, succinctly captured in Niels Bohr's *Abtötungsprinzip*, which warns against destroying the subject of our investigations through the techniques with which we carry them out, as well as an epistemological corollary, best articulated in the phenomenological view that the truths we live by and the truths with which

[36] Oliver Sacks, foreword to *The Man With a Shattered World: The History of a Brain Wound*, by A. R. Luria (trans. Lynn Solotaroff; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987) viii.

[37] Ibid., viii. (emphasis added).

[38] Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

[39] Cited in Sacks, "Foreword," x.

[40] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (trans. Bernard Frechtman; New York: George Braziller, 1963) 49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

life may be explained are seldom congruent, and that the latter should not be used to subvert the former or vice versa.

We come here to the limits of social science. To understand in depth and detail what transpires within intersubjectivity we draw upon work by social scientists, psychologists and ethologists to be sure, but it is to the work of artists, fiction writers, and biographers that we turn for techniques that help us do greatest justice to lived experience. In venturing beyond the borders of orthodox science, we may be accused of departing from empirical truth or worse, of pure invention and wild surmise. But there may be a middle ground, where anecdote and biography enrich rather than invalidate our work.

Let me elaborate by referring to a largely forgotten essay by Lionel Trilling, introducing a 1952 American edition of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Trilling begins by observing how rare it is that a writer's personal identity is fully acknowledged or fully felt in his or her writing. Indeed, both literature and science tend, conventionally, to background or occlude the author's own biography in order to give his or her characters, concepts and conclusions greater presence and weight. But like Mark Twain and William James, Orwell "presides" over his work, eschewing any false authority and focusing on "fronting the world with nothing more that one's simple, direct, undeceived intelligence, and respect for the powers one does not have, and the work one undertakes to do."[41] Trilling goes on to speak against an etherealizing tradition, dating from the enlightenment, that privileges abstract, rational thought over the commonplace bodily, emotional, and mental realities or our everyday lives. There are overtones of John Dewey's empirical naturalism and Bakhtin's grotesque realism in Trilling's argument against reification.

The prototypical act of the modern intellectual is his abstracting himself from the life of the family. We have yet to understand the thaumaturgical way in which we conceive of intellectuality. By intellectuality we are freed from the thralldom to the familiar commonplace, from the materiality and concreteness by which it exists, the hardness of the cash and the hardness of getting it, the inelegance and intractability of family things. It gives us power over intangibles, such as Beauty and Justice, and it permits us to escape the cosmic ridicule which in our youth we suppose is inevitably directed at those who take seriously the small concerns of the world, which we know to be inadequate and doomed by the very fact that it is so absurdly conditioned—by things, habits, local and temporary customs, and the foolish errors and solemn absurdities of the men of the past.[42]

Inevitably, a mode of address that remains faithful to the facts of experience—pedestrian, unsystematic, ill-focused, and inchoate though they often are—resists the intellectual's demand for analytical coherence and the conventional expectation of

[41] Lionel Trilling, introduction to *Homage to Catalonia*, by George Orwell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952) xi–x.

[42] Ibid., xvi.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narrative closure. In this risky endeavour, I take consolation from Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, which I re-read after a trip from Boston to New Bedford with an old friend from Denmark, Hans Lucht, who shared my admiration of Melville.

It was a late winter day, the streets deserted, a cold wind off the sea, not unlike the day that Ishmael entered the Whaleman's Chapel (the Seamen's Bethel) and heard Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah. When we failed to find a door into the chapel, and after peering through windows into the gloomy and ghostly interior, Hans and I crossed the street to the Whaling Museum where we were the only visitors. We spent several hours there, separately meditating on the seamen's paraphernalia, the reconstructed fo'c'sle, the photographs and scrimshaw work that enabled one to piece together a picture of the lives of whalers in mid-nineteenth century New England, and their relationship with the sea.

The following lines from Billy Budd had special relevance to me:

> The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narrative is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.[43]

Melville's ambiguous, inconsistent, chameleon-like characters, his concern with the instability of trust and identity, and his "quarrel with fiction"[44] are all in evidence in *The Confidence-Man*[45] where he describes the paradoxical nature of truth in these words:

> That fiction, where every character can, by reason of its consistency, be comprehended at a glance, either exhibits but sections of character, making them appear for wholes, or else is very untrue to reality; while, on the other hand, that author who draws a character, even though to common view incongruous in its parts, as the flying-squirrel, and, at different periods, as much at variance with itself as the caterpillar is with the butterfly into which it changes, may yet, in so doing, be not false but faithful to the facts.[46]

If nature is replete with incongruities, who can fault a writer for creating incongruous characters? Human nature is as various and full of contradictions as

[43] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (Hertfordshire, U.K.: Wordsworth Editions, 1998) 296.

[44] The title of Nina Baym's renowned essay, "Melville's Quarrel with Fiction," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 94 (1979) 909–23.

[45] The term was coined by the New York Herald in 1849 to describe the activities of a certain "William Hudson" and later became associated with the showman P. T. Barnum, whose signature phrase "there's a sucker born every minute" was in fact put into circulation by one George Hull who unearthed a fake giant near Cardiff, New York in 1859 and made a small fortune from the thousands, who flocked to see it.

[46] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) 84–85.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816008001910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the natural world itself.[47] But is Melville seeking to justify the liberties he took with the "facts" of his youthful voyages in the South Seas? Or do his reflections on the inconsistency of character spring from a struggle to bring together two seemingly antithetical notions of truth, the first respecting "objective" fact, the second respecting the way the world appears to a person, regardless of how absurd and ill-informed this may seem to others? *Moby Dick* juxtaposes treatises on cetology with sermons, short stories, and metaphysical speculations as though no single voice, no one genre could do justice to the complexity and inconclusiveness of Melville's theme. By locating oneself in this borderland between conventional certainties and vigorous innovation, a writer may be taken to task for playing fast and loose with the facts—as Melville was—when, in fact, truth itself is mercurial in this domain where what rings true to experience or works in practice may be scientifically unproven, and what is empirically true falls short of what we need to believe if we are to live.

Coda

One evening, on my last visit to Sierra Leone, I wandered along Freetown's Lumley beach at low tide, my bare feet on the hard, ribbed sand, recalling an experimental art work that I had seen in New Zealand some years ago. The artist had taken a series of photographs that documented the same stretch of beach sand at low tide at the same time over a period of thirty days. What this series of snapshots revealed was that no two tides were ever the same. Although we have the impression that a beach is a beach is a beach, the ribbed patterns, interlacings, and shallow depressions that the ebbing tide leaves behind are always slightly different. You simply need to be curious, and to have a means of satisfying your curiosity, to bring this phenomenon to light. And I also thought of something Leslie White wrote many years ago about Pueblo biographies: "the autobiography of a Pueblo Indian is about as personal as the life history of an automobile tire.[48] For when I was doing fieldwork in Central Australia it was borne home to me day after day, as Warlpiri tracked the imprint of tires on dusty desert roads with the same assiduousness that they tracked human footprints, that though all tires appear alike to the unobservant eye, each has an idiosyncratic tread and unique pattern of wear and tear that make it readily identifiable as belonging *to a particular vehicle, a particular person.*

[47] When writing *The Confidence Man*, Melville may have had Montaigne's observations in mind: "We are all framed of flaps and patches and of so shapelesse and diverse a contexture, that every peece and every moment playeth his part. And there is as much difference found betweene us and our selves, as there is between our selves and other." (Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Montaigne* [trans. John Florio; New York: Modern Library, 1948] 298). Certainly, in *Billy Budd*, Melville reveals a debt to Montaigne as a writer skilled in "treating actual men and events . . . free from cant and convention" and able to "philosophize upon realities" (ibid., 244).

[48] Leslie White, "Autobiography of an Acoma Indian," in *New Material from Acoma* (Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 136; Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1943) 301–59.

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