

Life and Words

VIOLENCE AND THE DESCENT INTO THE ORDINARY

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Foreword by Stanley Cavell



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Revisiting Trauma, Testimony, and Political Community

TOWARD THE END OF CHAPTER 3, I alluded to the feeling that I was not able to name that which died when the citizens of the newly inaugurated nation in reclaiming their honor as husbands and fathers were simultaneously born as monsters—or at least that is how the literary figures I read saw the matter. I would like to imagine that this was not a straightforward assimilation of notions of trauma into the historical record in the sense that an unassimilated experience was coming to haunt the nation. I am not saying that there is nothing to be gained from such an understanding of history, but it seems to me that notions of ghostly repetitions, spectral presences, and all those tropes that have become sedimented into our ordinary language from trauma theory are often evoked too soon—as if the processes that constitute the way everyday life is engaged in the present have little to say on how violence is produced or lived with.

If the process of naming the violence presents a challenge, it is because such naming has large political stakes, and not only because language falters in the face of violence. The complex knotting of several kinds of social actors in any event of collective violence makes it difficult to determine whether the event should be named as an instance of “sectarian,” “communal,” or “state-sponsored” violence. Is it described appropriately in the framework of “riots,” “pogroms,” “civil disturbances,” “genocide,” or a combination of these? As Deepak Mehta has shown in meticulous detail,

the term *riot* itself emerges in late nineteenth century as part of the colonial government's technology of control, and every kind of conflict that involved the imagination of unruly crowds is fitted within this protocol in official discourse, academic writing, and even individual testimony.¹

The political scientist Paul Brass argues that neither *riot* nor *pogrom* effectively captures the dynamics of most violent occurrences involving large crowds.² Though the presumption is, he says, that riots are spontaneous acts of violence in response to a provocative event directed against an ethnic, religious, or linguistic group whereas pogroms are organized events of violence carried out through the agencies of the state, the boundaries between these are increasingly blurred. Naming the violence does not reflect semantic struggles alone—it reflects the point at which the body of language becomes indistinguishable from that of the world; the act of naming constitutes a performative utterance.

We can see the enormous stakes in these terms even in the structures of anticipation. For instance, in the wake of the recent violence (March 2002) against the Muslim minority in Gujarat in India, the prime minister at the time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, is said to have warned the opposition in Parliament that they should not use the word *genocide* to describe the violence. “You should not forget,” he said, “that the use of such expressions brings a bad name to the country, and it could be used against India in international platforms.”³ On the other hand, a group of legal activists in India were engaged in forming legal strategies to see if on the basis of arguments advanced in the international tribunals on Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia it was possible to argue in Indian courts that even though the Indian Constitution does not name genocide, such a crime can be read in the Constitution—hence the perpetrators of the violence should be tried for the crime of genocide. Others have tried different legal strategies, and though the outcomes remain to be seen in the face of great intimidation faced by survivors, it is clear that the struggle over naming reflects serious political and legal struggles. Allow me to reflect on these issues by recapitulating the experiences on which I base my observations.

I consider 1984 to be a major marker in the understanding of communal violence in India and the role of civil society in contesting the received pictures of what constitutes collective violence. This is not because academic studies were lacking earlier, but because the relation between the production of knowledge and the needs of immediacy was articulated in important ways for salvaging the democratic project in India in 1984. The reports prepared by civil rights organizations such as the People's Union

for Democratic Rights and the People's Union for Civil Liberties were particularly important for their impact on popular opinion.⁴ While the forms of action developed then were important for expanding the forms of mobilization, did this have any implication for our understanding of what constitutes ethnography?

In reflecting back, my own understanding of how to do an ethnography of the state evolved in entirely unexpected ways. This was because as members of the Delhi University Relief and Rehabilitation Team that was supported by *The Indian Express* but otherwise had a very ambiguous position, we had to operate within the cracks and schisms we could find in the state to be able to muster enough resources to carry out our work in the affected localities. In that sense, it was clear that even as many agents of the state were themselves engaged in breaking the law, it was still possible to use certain resources of the state because norms of secularism and democracy had been internalized by many actors in the system. I also found myself reflecting for years afterwards on what it meant for anthropological knowledge to be responsive to suffering—a point that is woven within the fabric of this book. On both these questions the issue was not that one divided one's activities into neat spheres to correspond to a division between academic and activist work, as Scheper-Hughes conceptualizes the issue⁵—but rather that the form of doing anthropology itself was shaped by the needs of immediacy or activism.

One important point was established about communal riots in India by the labors of various civil rights groups, lawyer activists, and university teachers (including myself) in 1984, namely that far from the state's being a neutral actor whose job was to mediate between already constituted social groups and their factional interests, several functionaries of the state were, in fact, actively involved as perpetrators of violence or, at the very least, were complicit with the violence against the Sikhs. In the process of writing this violence, however, it became evident to me that unless one understood the everyday life of the localities within which the riots occurred, it would be impossible to see how diffused feelings of anger and hate could be translated into the actual acts of killing. Because I brought the anthropologist's eye to the situation, I was able to show that the spatial pattern of the riots in the localities showed an intricate relation between local-level factors and the sense of national crisis created through the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. Thus, while the official representation of communal violence in India continues to be dominated by the picture of crowds having gone insane in a natural reaction to some provocative action

on the part of one group or another, the academic understanding of riots has changed considerably.

Unfortunately, though, there is still a tendency to work with models of clear binary opposites in the understanding of violence—state versus civil society, Hindus versus Muslims, global versus local, etc. Our involvement in 1984 with the actual practices of collecting data for purposes of rehabilitation, however, made me realize how complicated the divisions and connections between these binary entities were. There was a certain splitting in my own understanding of the state as we recognized that the various state actors were aligned differently in relation to the violence. For instance, while one faction of the Congress Party was actively engaged in abetting the riots in hopes of mobilizing support for their own leaders within the party hierarchy, others equally located within the state structures were appalled at the events. Thus, we were able to mobilize help from senior bureaucrats, police officers, and retired officials to create an aura of authority within the locality to undertake relief and rehabilitation. As in many other situations, dissimulation was an important part of our strategy to confuse the perpetrators of the violence, who had the support of local police officers and thus thought that they were above the law. The survivors as well as civil rights workers faced considerable threats and harassment from them. How, then, to function within that environment, except through camouflage?

To give an example of the strategies of dissimulation we deployed: a recently retired director of the Central Reserve Police Force helped us to organize the distribution of rations of food within a few days of the riots to the affected families who were not moved to relief camps.⁶ He arrived with us in a truck accompanied by six policemen of the Reserve Force who were in uniform, and we set up appropriate procedures for identifying the affected families and getting rations to them while the police officers from the local stations watched.⁷ Thus, when we subsequently did other kinds of work in the locality, the local police officers and many of the perpetrators could not decipher our social position. Were we part of an approved official machinery or part of some kind of opposition? Perhaps we were able to work and move around in the locality because it was not clear to anyone what risks it would entail to attack us. The dissimulation of our position, inserted into the uncertainty of relations in the locality, constituted the very conditions of the possibility for both rehabilitation work and the work of gathering evidence. Take another example: the mediation of a senior Home Ministry official resulted in our getting a police presence

placed in the locality with personnel drawn from other police precincts. This ensured our security while we engaged in the distribution of compensation; it protected us from intimidation by local-level perpetrators; it allowed us to rebuild the houses of the victims; and it enabled freedom of movement within certain defined microspaces over which these selected policemen were able to establish surveillance. I could understand that the civil rights organizations and the lawyers needed to define themselves in purely oppositional terms to the state. My own position, however, constantly shifted between the need to gather evidence that could help in the legal processes and the processes of rehabilitation, on the one hand, and the broader understanding of the complex ways in which questions of agency and moral responsibility were implicated, on the other. This is the question faced by anthropologists, for they are professionally committed to a complex understanding of local context and yet must bring certain values to bear on the events they witness and record.⁸ This question has serious implications for the public role that anthropology can play: the struggles around this are worth revisiting in thinking of this issue. They raise the question of how we, as anthropologists, inhabit the world with regard to contemporary events that elicit strong ethical concerns—yet we bring a certain ambiguity to the situation because of our commitment to understanding the local context that situates actions in ways that may seem incomprehensible from the outside.

It is twenty years now since the riots in 1984. In terms of events that I have felt compelled to respond to, there has been the terrible destruction of the Babri mosque, followed by riots in Bombay in 1992, the assassination of an extremely close friend in Colombo in 1999, the attacks in the United States of September 11, 2001, and then the atrocities against Muslims in Gujarat in March 2002. Surely there were other events of equal importance, but I can speak more easily about events that were significant in my own worlds.

I recognized with a sense of shock that many of the young persons, prominent and not so prominent, who struggled against the officially proclaimed narratives of the sectarian violence in Gujarat in 2002 were drawing on the repertoire of social action that had evolved in the organizations that were just getting established in 1984. Several newspaper editors and journalists in the print medium had taken considerable risks then to expose the complicity of prominent politicians and the police in the riots. In 2002, similarly, Barkha Dutt and Rajdeep Sardesai (of NDTV) exposed the lies of the state government by covering the riots, televising the mobs

and the looting, thus facing enormous risks to their lives in the process.⁹ In 1984 I brought the two young daughters of Shanti (whose husband and three sons were burned alive in the riots and who subsequently committed suicide) to live with me until we could make other arrangements for them. Her younger daughter would communicate only with my youngest son (Sanmay), who was then a little over four years old. Recently I read an account by Sanmay's childhood friend Bhriгу on some remarkable work he did with children in a camp for survivors in the area of Aman Chowk, in Ahmadabad.¹⁰ I imagine that many of the young men who participated in the riots in March in Gujarat were similarly children in 1984. It is as if the various divides in forms of participation in the polity in India—one on the side of violence and one on the side of addressing this violence—take place through such initiations by fire. Does anthropology have any special role to play in this scene, apart from lending itself to the larger projects through which testimony for legal indictments is gathered, the work of rehabilitation is undertaken, and the victims and survivors are given some succor? Is it even important that there be any boundaries between disciplines or between professions, or between activism and scholarship? What I offer here is profoundly shaped by my own biography—I want to state clearly that it is not more or less virtuous to be engaged in doing anthropology in this manner. Nevertheless, when faced with the kind of trauma that violence visits on us, we have to be engaged in decisions that shape the way that we come to understand our place in the world. The relation between anthropology and the making of the public sphere can result from different kinds of intersections. It is only by being attentive to these different projects that we can escape a complete instrumentalization of knowledge, alternately demanded by the state and the market—and yet keep the demands of immediacy and the demands of the long term in some balance. There is also the matter of too much being at stake in speaking carelessly or without tact on these matters. The boundaries between doing and saying, implicit in the division of labor between what Kant called the “higher” faculties of theology, law, and medicine and the “lower” faculty of philosophy, are not so easily maintained.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. In the first section, I consider the criticism that concentrating on trauma results in the creation of communities of resentment. It is not clear to me whether the claim is that emphasis on the suffering of victims within a popular wound culture makes it difficult to acknowledge the past and hence to engage in self-creation in the present—or whether this resentment is seen as the inevitable

fate of an attempt to address the issue of suffering and recovery. I do not deny that there is plenty of evidence of stories of victims and survivors that hook into a popular culture in which the trope of the “innocent” victim provides the cover to engage in voyeurism. At the very least, this has the potential to open up suspect spaces in which stories of suffering are deployed in the dividing practices of separating “innocent” victims from “guilty” ones. But I still ask whether a different picture of victims and survivors is possible in which time is not frozen but is allowed to do its work. In the second section, I consider what it means to engage in an ethic of responsibility or to speak responsibly within the anthropological discourse. I try to defend a picture of anthropological knowledge in relation to suffering as that which is wakeful to violence wherever it occurs in the weave of life, and the body of the anthropological text as that which refuses complicity with violence by opening itself to the pain of the other.

VICTIMHOOD, TESTIMONY, AND COMMUNITIES OF RESENTMENT

A good place for me to enter the debate on the different ways in which the idea of suffering and testimony is placed in the making of political community is to evoke the contrast between prophetic and diagnostic modes of criticism as developed by Reinhart Koselleck.¹¹ I wish then to use this contrast to engage with some important arguments made by Achille Mbembe on the issue of suffering and self-creation.¹² I take Mbembe because he represents an important break from the kind of scholarship on violence and suffering that has remained content with explanations couched in terms of inherent properties of a particular culture to produce violence. What is notable in the latter kinds of explanations is that they are completely oblivious of work in literary criticism that looks at the production of violence for consumption in the public sphere in the Western countries as a sign of a *pathological public sphere*—yet when cultural productions such as cartoons or advertisements appear in newspapers in Burundi or Rwanda or Sri Lanka that are embedded in notions of kingship or demons, this is quickly taken as a sign of the normal development of a cultural repertoire in the age of mechanical reproduction. How is criticism to be articulated in the context of such ideas of the normal and the pathological? How is one to distinguish between the normal and the normative—how to recognize that normalization might provide a lens to the pathological rather than the normative? Throughout this book I have tried

to remain attentive to the idea of suffering as a concern with life and not with either the given and ready-made ideas of culture or a matter of law or norms alone.

To return to Koselleck, as I understand it, the prophetic mode of criticism is anchored to the genre of a dramatic denunciation of the present since the prophet (in contrast to the priest) speaks on behalf of the future community. In contrast we speak of a critical state in medical diagnosis when the disease takes a turn for the better or the worse—it requires careful reading of signs and symptoms and a watchful relation to the minutiae through which the disease manifests itself. I submit that communities of resentment are much more likely to be created when the stance toward suffering is a prophetic one, though prophecy is often masked as if it were diagnosis based upon the close reading of symptoms. With this framing of the question, I turn to Mbembe's recent provocative enunciation of what he calls the failure of the collective *imaginaire* of Africa to arrive at a distinctly African mode of writing the self. Mbembe's formulation of the issues obviously takes inspiration from the recent concern with questions of reading social relations and the self through a certain kind of aesthetic. How do pictures of disintegration, violence, and impossibility of a future fold into this aesthetic? Meditating on the experience of Africa, I hope, will allow me to bring some of my own questions into play with scholars who see the self as increasingly the site of hallucinatory writing.

Mbembe refers to the fateful descriptions of Africa as a site of failed states, of wars and new epidemics, and faults current social theory as being completely out of its depth in conceptualizing these crises. My concern is not so much to save social theory as to be as attentive as I can to the diagnosis offered. Mbembe contends that writing of a collective subject in Africa that could be considered "authentic" or true to experience has been blocked by the way in which the discourse of victimhood has been deployed to make the historical experience of slavery, colonization, and apartheid count. He argues that genuine philosophical inquiries have been neglected in African criticism and that the neglect is responsible for the fact that unlike the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, which has yielded genuine philosophical inquiry, African criticism has not been able to address suffering in history in a manner that could lead to the birth of the subject. In Mbembe's words:

The first question that should be identified concerns the status of suffering in history—the various ways in which historical forces inflict

psychic harm on collective bodies and the ways in which violence shapes subjectivity. It is here that a comparison with other historical experiences has been deemed appropriate. The Jewish Holocaust furnishes one such comparative experience. Indeed, the Holocaust, slavery, and apartheid all represent forms of originary suffering. They are all characterized by an expropriation of the self by unnamable forces. . . . *Indeed, at their ultimate foundation, the three events bear witness against life itself. . . . Whence the question: How can life be redeemed, that is, rescued from this incessant operation of the negative?*¹³

Despite the reference Mbembe makes to the events of the Holocaust, slavery, and apartheid as bearing witness against life, the figure of life is left relatively unexplored. Instead, Mbembe creates a discourse in which the obstacles to the recovery of the self in the collective imaginaire of Africa are traced to a series of denials. The most powerful of these denials for him is the African inability of self-representation, itself based on a ritualistic reiteration of such terms as “speaking in one’s own voice” or recovering an authentic “African” identity based upon one or another version of nativism. Mbembe offers three critiques of the African attempts at self-recovery, of which I take up only the last for discussion here: “In the critique that follows, I will be arguing that . . . their privileging of victimhood over subjecthood is derived, ultimately, from a distinctively nativist understanding of history—one of history as sorcery.” For Mbembe, history as sorcery is premised on the further notion that unlike the Jewish memory of the Holocaust, there is properly speaking no African memory of slavery, which at best is experienced as a wound whose meaning belongs to the domain of the unconscious, more in the realm of witchcraft than history.¹⁴

Among the reasons for the difficulty in the project of recuperating the memory of slavery, Mbembe identifies the shadowy zone in which the memory of slavery between African Americans and continental Africans hides a rift. For the Africans this is a silence of guilt and the refusal of Africans to face up to the troubling aspect of the crime that engages their own responsibility in the state of affairs. He argues further that the erasure of this aspect of the suffering of modern Black slavery manages to create the fiction (or illusion) that the temporalities of servitude and misery were the same on both sides of the Atlantic: “This is not true. And it is this distance that prevents the trauma, the absence, and the loss from ever being the same on the two sides of the Atlantic. As long as continental Africans neglect to rethink slavery—not merely as a catastrophe of which they were

but the victims, but as the product of a history that they have played an active part in shaping—the appeal to race as the moral and political basis of solidarity will depend, to some extent, on a mirage of consciousness.”

There are several important assumptions here about the obligation to render the originary meaning of memory for forging collective identity that have relevance for our understanding of what unites and what divides anthropology from the scenes of recovery in these terms. First, it is clear that the Holocaust is cast as a model with reference to which the “failure” of the African project of self-writing is posed, and with this Mbembe introduces all the assumptions of trauma theory about unclaimed experience that awaits belated completion. Thus it is assumed that the making of collective identity is closely tied with the task of recovery of memory that constructs one’s role in it as agent rather than victim. Third, self-creation is conceptualized as a form of writing. Though Mbembe does not state this explicitly, I imagine that writing the self points to a promise—the creation of a future community. He seems to reject any notions of the self in terms of other metaphors such as those of finding or founding, or finding *as* founding, because of his suspicion of models of the self located in a discovery of the past. Yet one is also left with a suspicion that Mbembe’s notions of the past are located in a linear conception of time since he seems to refuse the possibility that one could occupy the space of devastation by making it one’s own not through a gesture of escape, but by occupying it as the present in a gesture of mourning. If writing the self refers to the making of a future community, then its meaning both in the literal and in the figurative sense is left unexplored.¹⁵ Finally, new forms of the self are said to emerge in the practices of war that in the African scene are now part of everyday reality rather than constituting a state of exception. These new forms of writing the self are related, for Mbembe, in failed projects of recovering memory. The last seems evident, for example, in the statement that follows: “Trembling with drunkenness, he or she becomes a sort of work of art shaped and sculpted by cruelty. It is in this sense that the state of war becomes part of the new African practices of the self. Through sacrifice, the African subject transforms his or her own subjectivity and produces something new—something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all costs be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented.” And further on, “there emerges an original imaginaire of sovereignty whose field of exercise is nothing less than life in its generality. That latter may be subject to an

empirical, that is, biological death. But it can also be seen to be mortgaged in the same way that objects are, in a general economy whose terms are furnished by massacres and carnage, in the manner of capital and labor and surplus value as is posed in the classical Marxist model.”

The figure of life again makes an appearance, but this time it is mortgaged in the attempt to “write” the self through practices of war and cruelty.¹⁶ Earlier in this essay I had drawn attention to the concern with “how can life be redeemed, that is, rescued from this incessant operation of the negative”—but apart from a reference to the “thickness” of the African present and the stylization of conduct and life, we get no analysis of how the figure of *life* is to be distinguished from the doomed projects of recovery of identity.

It is not my intention to carry the argument with Mbembe further in the register in which he has chosen to write, because I am unclear about the project of *writing the African self* and especially because of Mbembe’s earlier evocation of writing as a hallucinatory project.¹⁷ Nevertheless, I am very interested in his question of how one would address violence that is seen as a witness against life itself (rather than, say, against a particular kind of identity). Are there other paths on which self-creation may take place, through occupying the same place of devastation yet again, by embracing the signs of injury and turning them into ways of becoming subjects? Instead of the register of the prophetic pronouncement, let me turn to the register of the everyday through which one may attempt to redeem life. What is it to take up this challenge, writing within the genre of anthropological inquiry? I simply take this as an opportunity to lay out the different way in which I see the issues that are at stake in the project of anthropology in relation to violence and suffering. As I hope to show, it is not that ghosts stand expelled in the scenes of violence I describe, but rather that everyday life is not expelled.

In the first chapter of this book, I tried to define the way that my own relation to questions of violence and recovery was framed by the ethnographic context so that the violence of the Partition as part of people’s lives dawned upon me, whereas in the case of the violence in 1984, I was propelled into it. For women such as Asha and Manjit, I became an unwitting collaborator, perhaps an alternate self, through whom the past could be visited while retaining a proximity to the projects of the present. While the events of the Partition formed a field of force within which the stories moved even as these were not explicitly articulated, I do not think that I could speak of the Partition as a spectral presence. In the case of 1984, the immediacy of the

violence meant that what constituted the work of ethnography was located in the concrete issues of ensuring that the survivors could inhabit that space again, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. There is no pretense here at some grand project of recovery but simply the question of how everyday tasks of surviving—having a roof over your head, being able to send your children to school, being able to do the work of the everyday without constant fear of being attacked—could be accomplished. I found that the making of the self was located, not in the shadow of some ghostly past, but in the context of making the everyday inhabitable. Thus, I would suggest that the anthropological mode of knowing the subject defines it in terms of the conditions under which it becomes possible to speak of experience. Hence there is no unitary collective subject (such as the African self or the Indian self) but forms of inhabiting the world in which one tries to make the world one's own, or to find one's voice both within and outside the genres that become available in the descent into the everyday. Thus, testimony of the survivors as those who spoke because the victims could not was best conceptualized for me, not through the metaphor of writing, but rather through the contrast between saying and showing.

For one brief moment, let us go back to the picture of women sitting in stillness in the street of Sultanpuri, refusing to provide the spectacle of an ordered body and ordered space through which normality was to be staged for visiting dignitaries such as Mother Teresa. Recall that the women who had been sitting in mourning did not engage in any discussion—they simply refused to present a clean facade. As I argued, to one schooled in the cultural grammar of mourning, the women were presenting their bodies as evidence of their grievous loss. On the one hand, they could not make their bodies speak to bring forth the traditional laments. Yet, on the other hand, the pollution they insisted on embodying was “showing” the loss, the death, and the destruction. As I said, I was reminded of the powerful figure of Draupadi in the Mahabharata, who had been disrobed in the court of the King Duryodhana when she was menstruating because her husband staked her in a gamble with the king. The text has it that for fourteen years she wore the same cloth stained by her blood and left her hair wild and uncombed.

Clearly, the women were not embodying pollution as a direct act of mimesis of the figure of Draupadi, nor were they engaged in an act of “showing” after any reasoned engagement with the question of how to contest the denial in the official narrative that a large number of Sikhs had been killed. Yet their testimony can be constructed from the new way in

which they occupied the space of symbolic representations in the collective imaginaire. It seems to me that this form of creating oneself as a subject by embracing the signs of subjection gives a very different direction to the meaning of being a victim compared to what Mbembe suggests. For what the women were able to “show” was not a standardized narrative of loss and suffering but a project that can be understood only in the singular through the image of reinhabiting the space of devastation *again*. Thus far, from the opposition between the experience of violence as a victim/survivor and that of the subject, it was the ability to recraft the symbols and genres of mourning that made them active in the highly contested domain of politics. This gave the women and us (in their company) the ability to engage a wider public on the meaning of this violence. Anthropologists have been accused of making the social so complex as to make it useless for any policy purposes that demand some reduction of complexity. However, in my experience it is precisely when anthropologists are able to convey the meaning of an event in terms of its location in the everyday, assuming that social action is not simply a direct materialization of cultural scripts but bears the traces of how these shared symbols are worked through, that it can be most effective. Now, Mbembe is surely right to insist that the transformation of war in many African countries has made it concomitant with the social itself rather than something set apart from the social. Yet his description has a unitary character—nothing is broken in that smooth flow of moment of sculpting oneself in cruelty because there is no temporality to this creation of the self. But even more fundamental is the fact that in rendering the “truth” of the African self writing in these terms, Mbembe also seems to strip the actors of a certain form of concealment, call it their separateness—whereas my own sense of understanding of ethnography is that it is at its very best a record of our having reached the kind of limit that allows us to say that my spade is turned.

Anthropologists have deployed the idea of narrativization as a mode through which experience is given shape, but stories, like other social phenomena, have unanticipated consequences. In an earlier paper I wrote with Arthur Kleinman that “The social space occupied by scarred populations may enable stories to break through routine cultural codes to express counterdiscourse that assaults and even perhaps undermines the taken-for-granted meaning of things as they are. Out of such desperate and defeated experiences stories may emerge that call for and at times may bring about change that alters utterly the commonplace—both at the level of collective experience and at the level of individual subjectivity.”¹⁸ As opposed to the

dramatic potential of stories in the media that are successful in focusing attention on a catastrophic event, the potential of anthropology lies in showing both (a) how it is that something can build into a crisis and (b) how events can be carried forward and backward in time. This is, in turn, related to the capacity of seeing and documenting the eventfulness of the everyday. In our thoughts on the experience of communities devastated by violence, as well as the soft knife of everyday oppressions, Kleinman and I wrote the following:

Clearly a double movement seems necessary for communities to be able to contain the harm that has been documented in these accounts: at the macrolevel of the political system it requires the creation of a public space that gives recognition to the suffering of survivors and restores some faith in the democratic process, and at the microlevels of community and family survivors it demands opportunities of everyday life to be resumed. This does not mean that success would be achieved in separating the guilty from the innocent through the working of the criminal justice system, for in most cases described here it is not easy to separate the guilty and to pinpoint the legal responsibility, but it does mean that in the life of a community, justice is neither everything nor nothing—that the very setting-into-process of public acknowledgement of hurt can allow new opportunities to be created for resumption of everyday life.

In other words, I am suggesting that self-creation on the register of the everyday is a careful putting together of life—a concrete engagement with the tasks of remaking that is mindful of both terms of the compound expression: *everyday* and *life*. It points to the eventfulness of the everyday and the attempt to forge oneself into an ethical subject within this scene of the ordinary.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY

In his essay on “Science as Vocation,” Max Weber named the type of ethics that marks the pursuit of science as the ethics of responsibility.¹⁹ But the question of responsibility in relation to anthropology is not easy to define in terms of the contrast between doing and saying. In the *Current Anthropology* forum on anthropology in public, Charles Hale put the matter in the following way: “We must make our way among highly charged accounts of what happened producing versions of our own that are inevitably partial and situated. Alternately, by choosing not to delve into

that recent history we run the risk of complicity with powerful interests that are well served by official amnesia."²⁰ Hale is right on target that to expose the official lies is both an act of saying and an act of doing. In such heroic moments when the anthropologist has the resources to expose the official lies, the ethical imperative seems clearer than when one follows the trajectory of what happens to victims or perpetrators over time. I refer not simply to the transformation when victims become killers as Mahmood Mamdani has argued in his recent book,²¹ but when violence becomes so embedded into the fabric of the social that it becomes indistinguishable from the social. I referred earlier to Mbembe's argument that wars in Africa have become part of the everyday life but was hesitant to accept his formulation that this was the result of the past that is not mastered and hence comes to haunt the living.

There is an interesting lead given by Diane Nelson on this point in some of her recent work on Guatemala when she asks how it is that the same state that was experienced as the agent of massacres and the scorched-earth policy could now be viewed as the object of desire.²² The state, she argues, comes to be understood as two-faced, bamboozling, desirable, deceptive, and dangerous. Thus turning on its head the stereotypical image of the masked mimicry of the state by cunning two-faced natives, Nelson's ethnography of the state puts it on a highly mobile trajectory in which it is both feared and desired. After twenty years of the worst of the counterinsurgency politics, the work of time seems to obliterate the strict divisions between the state as oppressor and the people as oppressed. To take one such event: General Rios Montt was named a party to genocide in the Guatemalan civil war by the United Nations Truth Commission in 1999. After taking power in the 1982 coup d'état his government oversaw scorched-earth campaigns and massacres throughout the country. Yet, a few months after the Truth Commission's findings, Rios Montt's political party was elected, and he became the elected head of Congress. What should have been a fixed position (resentful victims) became uncannily mobile. Rather than clarity of the picture of the state as oppressor that stands apart from innocent victims, we encounter the idea that nothing is as it seems. The fighters of yesterday are the collaborators of state projects today. These are typically the sites of rumor, gossip, and a pervading sense of corruption by both those who embody the state and those who are presented as the ones offering resistance to it.

Perhaps one can get an idea of the distance between a theoretical stance that locates questions of sovereignty in some version of the idea of consent

and truth-telling practices around it and the ethnographic take on this. In their general formulation of what they call the general passage from a paradigm of modern sovereignty toward a paradigm of imperial sovereignty, Hardt and Negri have commented upon the limitations of a perspective that criticizes Enlightenment notions of truth in the following terms:

In the context of state terror and mystification, clinging to the primacy of the concept of truth can be a powerful and necessary form of resistance. Establishing and making public the truth of the recent past—attributing responsibility to state officials for specific acts and in some cases exacting retribution—appears here as ineluctable precondition for any democratic future. The master narratives of the Enlightenment do not seem particularly repressive here, and the concept of truth is not fluid or unstable—on the contrary! The truth is that this general ordered the torture and assassination of that union leader, and this colonel led the massacre of that village. Making public such truths is an exemplary Enlightenment project of modernist politics, and the critique of it in these contexts could serve only to aid the mystificatory and repressive powers of the regime under attack.²³

Unlike the nostalgia for a public space marked by the clear separation of the perpetrators and victims, most close studies of truth commissions have shown how much the notion of testimony excluded certain other models of testimony and remembrance.²⁴ Thus, truth-telling practices may emerge not as the exemplary Enlightenment project with the emphasis on Truth with a capital *T*, but simply as a way for local communities caught between the violence of the state and the guerrillas to carve out a public space for themselves. If the commitment to Enlightenment rationality is the condition for building democracies in societies steeped in long-term wars and insurgency/counterinsurgency operations, then we are in effect denying the attempts to build democracies in the messy worlds in which transformations of this kind are taking place.

Anthropologists cannot take comfort in any simple notion of innocent victims or the work of culture as a pre-given script. Culture pertains not only to a conventionalized or contractual sense of agreement among members of a society, but also refers to a mutual absorption of the social and the natural. Violence of the kind that was witnessed in the Partition riots in India calls into question the very idea of life—we reach not the end of some intellectual agreement but the end of criteria. Consider the production of bodies through violence in which women were stripped and

marched naked in the streets, or the fantasy of writing political slogans on their private parts, and most recently in Gujarat, the stories of tearing open the womb of a pregnant woman to rip apart the fetus in the act of killing.

Manjit taught me that while the violence that lived within the kinship universe was sayable, other forms of violence, such as that of the Partition riots, was such that any claim over culture became impossible. She taught me that one could utter words to describe it, but “it was as if one’s touch with these words and hence with life itself had been burned or numbed.” Manjit also taught me that there is deep moral energy in the refusal to represent certain violations of the human body. In allowing her pain to happen to me, she taught me that to redeem life from the violations to which she had been subjected was an act of lifelong engagement with poisonous knowledge; in digesting this poison in the acts of attending to the ordinary, she had been able to teach me how to respect the boundaries between saying and showing. This is how I see the public role of anthropology: acting on the double register in which we offer evidence that contests the official amnesia and systematic acts of making evidence disappear, but also witnessing the descent into the everyday through which victims and survivors affirm the possibility of life by removing it from the circulation of words gone wild—leading words home, so to speak. My sense of indebtedness to the work of Cavell in these matters comes from a confidence that perhaps Manjit did not utter anything that we would recognize as philosophical in the kind of environments in which philosophy is done . . . but Cavell’s work shows us that there is no real distance between the spiritual exercises she undertakes in her world and the spiritual exercises we can see in every word he has ever written. To hold these types of words together and to sense the connection of these lives has been my anthropological kind of devotion to the world.